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Fantastic Borderlands and Masonic Meta-Religion in Rudyard Kipling's "The Man Who Would Be King" --Manuscript Draft--

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Corresponding Author:	Lucas Kwong, Ph. D New York City College of Technology Brooklyn, NY UNITED STATES
Corresponding Author's Institution:	New York City College of Technology
First Author:	Lucas Kwong, Ph. D
Order of Authors:	Lucas Kwong, Ph. D
Abstract:	<p>This article examines Kipling's "The Man Who Would Be King" through the lens of Freemasonry's interreligious ideology. In British India, members of "The Craft" offered what scholar James Laine calls a meta-religion, a fraternity whose emphasis on interreligious tolerance masks power relations between colonizers and colonized. When he became a Freemason, Kipling's lifelong fascination with India's religious diversity translated into enthusiasm for the sect's unifying aspirations. In this context, "The Man Who Would Be King" stands out for how sharply it contests that enthusiasm. The story's Masonic protagonists determine to find glory and riches in Kafiristan, a borderland region known for its idiosyncratic polytheism. Initially offering an ideal staging ground for Masonic triumphalism, the region ultimately upends Freemasonry's goal of unifying imperial subjects under a metareligious banner: Kipling's deployment of the fantastic frames Kafiristan as a borderland, not only between Empire and wilderness, but also between incommensurable visions of reality.</p>
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Lucas Kwong is an assistant professor of English at New York City College of Technology. His scholarship on fantastic fiction, religion, and colonialism has been published in *Victorian Literature and Culture*, *Religion and Literature*, and *Journal of Narrative Theory*. He also serves as the assistant editor for *New American Notes Online*, an online interdisciplinary scholarly journal, and as editor for *City Tech Writer*, a journal of outstanding student writing. He lives in Brooklyn with his wife.

Fantastic Borderlands and Masonic Meta-Religion in Rudyard Kipling's "The Man Who Would Be King"

Lucas Kwong
Assistant Professor of English
New York City College of Technology

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8 The name “Rudyard Kipling” continues to conjure, for many, a false ideal, the impossible
9 dream of Empire. Yet “idealistic” — that is, ungrounded in reality — was hardly the first adjective
10 that his initial readers, admiring or critical, would have applied to him. “Mr. Kipling achieves the
11 feat of making Anglo-Indian society flirt and intrigue visibly before our eyes,” writes Sir William
12 Hunter in an 1888 review, noting that, “if Mr. Kipling makes his little Simla folk rather silly, he
13 also makes them very real” (38). Indeed, the charge most often leveled against Kipling was an
14 overzealousness for his own brand of realism, prizing journalistic immediacy over style. “The
15 man’s style has commonly so rich and curious a savour of newspaperese and is...unworthy of the
16 matter it conveys,” writes W.E. Henley, before going on to clarify that the “matter” in question
17 indicates “the gift...of so creating and so realising character that the emotion it expresses appears
18 the living and unalterable truth” (57). When novelist S.R. Crockett proclaimed Kipling the “avatar
19 of Vishnu-Land,” his Orientalist praise did not center, for example, on the vision of the gods
20 experienced by the protagonist of “The Bridge Builders”; tellingly, Crockett instead highlights
21 “the acrid whiff of wood smoke...the true Himalaya smell...the pinewoods of Simla...[the] ill-
22 favoured and treacherous men with long hair from the hills of the horse thieves on the North-
23 Western frontier” (182). By Crockett’s account, Kipling offers the reader an India more real than
24 India itself, a world so exactly rendered that one can literally take his word for it.¹
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55 ¹ See also Sir William Hunter’s 1888 comment that “Mr. Kipling achieves the feat of making Anglo-
56 Indian society flirt and intrigue visibly before our eyes...[I]f Mr. Kipling makes his little Simla folk rather
57 silly, he also makes them very real” (38); also W.E. Henley’s praise of Kipling as “so creating and so
58 realising character that the emotion it expresses appears the living and unalterable truth” (57).
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4 For those familiar with Kipling's phantom rickshaws, marks of the beast, and Madonnas
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6 of the trenches, such praise threatens to oversimplify a multifaceted author. The hallucinatory
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8 vision of "The Bridge Builders," or the ghostly visitation of "The Phantom Rickshaw," interrupt
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10 verisimilar portraits of Anglo-Indian society with the fantastic, defined by what theorist Tzvetan
11
12 Todorov calls "the hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature,
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14 confronting an apparently supernatural event" (25). I want to suggest that, in their perceptual flux,
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16 these more *outré* fictions emblemize the experience of an author raised amidst Raj's many
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18 creeds, each proclaiming its own vision of nature and supernature. Kipling's need to make sense
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20 of such religious diversity partially explains his devotion to Freemasonry, which claimed the
21
22 ability to bond colonizer and colonized in a common vision of divinity. As outlined below, this
23
24 ecumenical vision found uncritical affirmation in much of Kipling's fiction. However, "The Man
25
26 Who Would Be King" sees the Masonic metareligion disintegrate at the edge of British India, a
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28 collapse so profound that, for Kipling, it provokes the fantastic's crisis of the Real. Attempting to
29
30 found their own empire of ecumenical brotherhood, the story's protagonists bring multiple models
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32 of reality--the "newspaperese" quotidian of the colonial establishment, the larger-than-life
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34 romance of Masonic ideology, and the lifeworld of the indigenous populace--into conflict, with
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36 results that breach the border between the mundane and the marvellous.

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39 "The Man Who Would Be King," which recounts how vagabonds Peachey Carnehan and
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41 Daniel Dravot conquer (and lose) the uncolonized territory of Kafiristan, has been described
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43 alternately as a sincere and satirical take on Masonic ideals.² The plausibility of both
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56 ² Nagai takes for granted the idea that Masonic knowledge here ultimately serves to connect men from
57 disparate ethnic and national backgrounds, in a realization of its universalist aspirations ("God and His
58 Doubles" 97). Alternately, Fussell argues that the story offers a burlesque sendup of Masonic history
59 ("Irony, Freemasonry and Humane Ethics"). For their part, Masons tend merely to play up Kipling's
60 allusions to the Craft without sorting out the ideological implications of those allusions: a prototypical
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4 interpretations points to the ambiguous politics of Kipling’s fiction. Critics have lately departed
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6 from familiar depictions of a uniformly imperialist author — a reputation, as the editors of the
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8 2010 essay collection *Kipling and Beyond* write, that continues to pervade readings of Kipling in
9
10 “popular culture and journalism,” particularly during the most intense period of the second Iraq
11
12 War. In contrast to Kipling-as-jingoist, postcolonial studies has often recast Kipling as an ideal
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14 hybrid subject, somehow both “Indian” and “British,” uniquely positioned to comment on the costs
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16 that imperialism extracts from colonizer and colonial subject alike. Questioning this consensus,
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18 *Kipling and Beyond*’s editors go on to write, “We might ask whether something in our
19
20 ‘postcolonial’ ease with Kipling implies [a] knowingness and complacency” paralleling the
21
22 decisiveness with which an earlier generation dismissed him as a mere jingoist (2). If Kipling’s
23
24 political commitments are forever shifting--from poet of Empire, to voice of “colonial ambivalence
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26 and hybridity” (ibid), and back again — then such flux mirrors the oscillations of his experience
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28 with religious pluralism, to say nothing of his periodic movement between “journalistic
29
30 immediacy” and mystical dreamworlds. In this article, I want to examine how Kipling’s formal,
31
32 political, and theological vacillations converge in “The Man Who Would Be King”’s depiction of
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34 a metareligion that promised to wed reality and myth, subject and master, god and God.
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44 I read Kipling’s story against the backdrop of the nineteenth century Masonic lodge’s
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46 aspiration to offer microcosm of Empire, in which men of disparate races, ranks, and religions
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48 united under a single ideal. Kipling, who became a member in 1885, prized both its pro-imperial
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50 objectives and its ecumenical underpinnings, its call for men of all creeds to recognize the “Grand
51
52 Architect of the Universe.” “The Craft,” as Masons frequently referred to their organization,
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54 purported to safeguard an ancient universal religion that had (d)evolved into the world’s myriad
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59 article on a website called *Pietre Stones Review of Freemasonry* notes that the characters are Masons that
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61 become undone by “human frailty” (“Rudyard Kipling and His Masonic Career”).
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4 creeds. In light of this history, “Craftsmen” considered themselves an ecumenical Brotherhood of
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6 Man, custodians of a universal “Law” that suited Empire better than Christianity’s divisive
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8 conversionism. In India especially, Masons replaced conversionism with restorationism, arguing
9
10 that Masonry held the power to return Indians to the original practice of Hinduism, recovering its
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12 origins while expelling its “idolatrous” elements. In arrogating to itself the ability to safeguard the
13
14 universal core of Hinduism, or any other faith, Freemasonry thus aspired to become what James
15
16 Laine calls a “metareligion,” an ideological “basis for dealing with multiple religions in the context
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18 of a common political community, in other words in a world where religion is more than private
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20 individual opinions about abstract metaphysical problems” (7). Since metareligion offers a “shared
21
22 acceptance of something above religion, something with the power to set the political conditions
23
24 of shared community,” Laine argues that it has historically served as the justification for empire:
25
26 “If one is to exercise military and political power over a large area, one must encourage and
27
28 promote values that are consistent with one’s political agenda. And since often such populations
29
30 are committed to multiple religions, and therefore are committed to what might be incommensurate
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32 worldviews, one must offer a vision of something that transcends and supersedes these religions”
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41 (5).

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43 As I will show, however, “The Man Who Would Be King” stands in contrast to much of
44
45 Kipling’s oeuvre, subverting the Masonic metareligion where other texts herald it. In texts such as
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47 “The Incarnation of Krishna Mulvaney” and *Kim*, Kipling implicitly celebrate the Masonic ideals
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49 of interreligious harmony, glorifying colonial agents who expertly manage, but stand apart from,
50
51 India’s panoply of gods and gurus. For reasons described below, the region of Kafiristan initially
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53 provides an ideal setting for Peachey and Dravot to realize Masonic ideology, in a quest that
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55 Kipling imbues with his signature “savour of newspaperese.” Yet verisimilitude only casts into
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4 relief the unreal violence unleashed when Peachey and Dravot fail to assimilate the local populace
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6 in the name of Freemasonry. In the wake of that failure, “The Man Who Would Be King”
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8 completes its transformation from journalistic realism into the fantastic. Ultimately, this article
9
10 aims to show how Kipling articulates ambivalence about Masonic metareligion through what Jean
11
12 Bellamin-Noel calls the fantastic’s “lack of meaningful signification” (quoted in Jackson 38), a
13
14 lingering sense of the marvellous pervading reality. A locus of unreality, the borderland exports
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16 this lack of signification back to the heart of British India, drawing narrator and reader into the
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18 experience of believing, and then disbelieving in, Freemasonry’s theology of Empire.
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26 II.

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28 In “The Man Who Would Be King,” Masonic affiliation propels the story’s inciting
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30 incident. Having met the unnamed narrator on a train ride, Peachey asks him to relay a message to
31
32 his partner Dravot, “for the sake of my Mother as well as your own.” A veiled allusion to their
33
34 respective Mother Lodges, the appeal suggests that Peachey has somehow recognized the
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36 befuddled narrator as a fellow Freemason. This prompts the narrator to comply, drawing him into
37
38 the schemes of two strangers who, for all their differences, share with him a devotion to “the
39
40 Craft.” At first glance, this depiction of Freemasonry as a source of ironclad camaraderie is borne
41
42 out by the rest of the story, in which Peachey and Dravot discover a surviving Masonic heritage
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44 amongst the indigenous peoples of Kafiristan. Even after their consequent attempt to found an
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46 empire of Freemasonry ends in disaster, Peachey’s subsequent return to the colonial center, and
47
48 bittersweet reunion with the narrator before his death, seem to underscore the Masonic
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50 brotherhood’s persistence amidst the flux of circumstance.³ⁱ Indeed, the narrator’s enduring loyalty
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59 ³ While Kipling never names the city where the narrator lives (and to which Peachey returns), David Page
60 argues that the story includes a coded reference to Lahore (“Letters on Leave” Notes on the Text). Now
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4 to the story’s main protagonists is part of what allows Freemasons, such as the writers for the *Pietre*
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6
7 *Stones Review of Freemasonry*, to ascribe the downfall of Peachey and Dravot’s kingdom to
8
9 “human frailty,” not Freemasonry itself (“Rudyard Kipling and His Masonic Career”).

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11 Yet a careful reading of the story’s first paragraph casts Freemasonry in a rather different
12
13 light. The opening epigraph, “Brother to a Prince and fellow to a beggar if he be found worthy,”
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15 paraphrases Kipling’s own Masonic-themed poem “Banquet Night”; following the Masonic
16
17 tradition of identifying King Solomon as a Freemason, the poem finds Solomon calling his fellow
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19 “craftsmen,” whether they be “beggars” or “princes,” to “banquet together beneath [his] throne”
20
21 (776) and to “forget these things” — not only the duties that they must abandon to dine with
22
23 Solomon, but also the distinctions that cease to matter within the confines of the Lodge. In the
24
25 paragraph that follows, however, the fraternity of beggars and princes occasions uncertainty rather
26
27 than celebration. Musing that the Masonic “Law,” with its exhortation to forget rank, is “not easy
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29 to follow,” the narrator implies that he himself is a Freemason; however, he also states that he has
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31 been “brother to a beggar again and again under circumstances which prevented either of us finding
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33 out whether the other was worthy” (244). Such a statement casts the Law’s sole condition for
34
35 fraternity as inaccessible. As for the first part of the epigraph, the narrator laments that he “has still
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37 to be brother to a prince,” foreshadowing the following account by noting how he “once came near
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39 to kinship with what might have been a veritable King...[though] to-day, I greatly fear my King is
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41 dead” (ibid). The succession of qualifications contrasts sharply with the epigraph’s relative
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43 pithiness, an indication of how the following tale serves to qualify and complicate the ideals of
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53 “the Craft.”

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58 part of Pakistan, Lahore was a key site of commerce and exchange during the Raj; Kipling worked as
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60 assistant editor for a local newspaper there between 1882 and 1887 (“Lahore as Kipling Knew It”). See
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62 also Talbot and Kamran, *Lahore In The Time of the Raj*.

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4 Such marked diffidence about Masonic principles might surprise those who know Kipling
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7 as a committed Freemason, for whom membership satiated a lifelong need to resolve questions of
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9 religious difference and similarity. In his autobiography *Something of Myself*, published
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11 posthumously in 1936, Kipling describes his “first impressions” of childhood as shot through with
12
13 an awareness of the religious plurality that marked the landscape. His ayah, or wet-nurse, was a
14
15 “Portuguese Roman Catholic who would pray — I beside her — at a wayside Cross”; Meeta, his
16
17 Hindu “bearer,” sometimes took young Rudyard to temples where “I held [Meeta’s] hand and
18
19 looked at the dimly seen, friendly Gods” (3). Kipling’s childhood recollections was also marked
20
21 by the sight of “Parsees wading out [in the ocean] to worship the sunset,” though he notes, “Of
22
23 their creed I knew nothing” (4). Kipling’s semi-autobiographical story “Baa Baa Black Sheep”
24
25 may offer insight into the effect these experiences had on the young Kipling’s grasp of his family’s
26
27 Christianity; in the story, Punch, Kipling’s fictional alter ego, is chastised for “weld[ing] the story
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29 of the Creation onto what he could recollect of his Indian fairy tales” (38). As James Whitlark
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31 points out, Kipling’s interest in comparative religion further developed during his boarding school
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33 days at Westward Ho!; there, one of his favorite books was Edwin Arnold’s *Light of Asia*, (1879),
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35 a biography of the Buddha that compared the Bible with the Buddhist sutras (Whitlark 28).
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43 Kipling’s interest in comparative religion made him a natural fit for Freemasonry, which,
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45 as Charles Carrington writes, provided “a system which gratified [Kipling’s] desire for a world-
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47 religion” (quote in Thrall 57). In his autobiography, Kipling describes his 1885 initiation into the
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49 “Lodge Hope and Perseverance 782 E.C.,” the Masonic Lodge in Lahore, highlighting the religious
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51 diversity to which Masonry exposed him: “Here I met Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, members of the
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53 Arya and Brahma Samaj [contemporaneous Hindu reform movements], and a Jew tyler...So
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55 another world opened to me, which I needed.” (32). That Kipling may have remembered the Lodge
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4 as being more diverse than it actually was — and, indeed, Marie Roberts offers proof that he did
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6 — only testifies to how smitten Kipling was with its interreligious vision.⁴ When asked by a
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8 correspondent about his history with the Masons in 1925, Kipling stressed the ecumenical aspect
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10 of his experiences, marveling at how the Masons allowed Hindus, Muslims and Christians to sit at
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12 table as equals, “the only difference [being] that...some of the Brethren, who were debarred by
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14 caste rules from eating food not ceremonially prepared, sat over empty plates” (“Letter to
15
16 Unidentified Recipient,” 201); he goes on to note his “good fortune” at being able to arrange a
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18 “series of informal lectures by Brethren of various faiths, on the baptismal ceremonies of their
19
20 religions” (ibid). This romanticization of Freemasonry as a means of ecumenical encounter
21
22 arguably finds its purest expression in the poem “The Mother Lodge.” “There ain’t such thing as
23
24 infidels/Excep’, per’aps, it’s us,” the Masonic narrator muses, before launching into a fond
25
26 recollection of how, after official Lodge proceedings, his brothers used to linger at their meetings,
27
28 to hear “man on man [talk]...of the God he knew the best” (197). Spellbound by each man’s
29
30 description of their own religion, the brothers arrive at a dim awareness of their doctrines’
31
32 interchangeability, departing at daybreak “With Mo’Ammed, God and Shiva/Changing pickets in
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34 our ’ead.” The Lodge’s members derive solidarity not from common allegiance to the queen, but
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36 from common indifference to dogma.⁵
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49 ⁴ Roberts observes that, despite Kipling’s recollections, “there were only four non-Europeans recorded on
50 the lodge register for that period while the quota per lodge averaged around thirty members.”

51 ⁵ To be sure, Kipling’s preoccupation with gods “changing pickets” did not necessarily
52 amount to a consistent belief in the equality of all faiths. Through most of his career, he praised
53 Islam for the simplicity of its creed and its correlation with “comprehensible civilization”; at the
54 same time, as Charles Allen observes, he could be markedly contemptuous of Hinduism, as
55 evidenced by his 1888 characterization of Benares as a “city of monstrous creeds,” in which the
56 Hindu pantheon is reduced to an endless succession of “lewd gods [that] grinned and mouthed
57 [at every turn]” (quoted in Allen 29). Allen goes on to note that Kipling’s disdain for Hindu religion
58 abated somewhat later in life, “long after he had left India and, crucially, after he had come to know the
59 joys of fatherhood.”
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4 From a certain perspective, then, the disillusionment implicit in “The Man Who Would Be
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6 King”’s opening paragraph might frame the story as offering a pro-imperial critique of
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8 Freemasonry, on the grounds that its brotherhood undercuts the religious and racial hierarchies on
9
10 which Empire depended. Indeed, readers of Kipling have long celebrated Masonic universalism as
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12 a counterweight to any chauvinism that might taint his work. As early as 1899, W.B. Parker noted
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14 that, rather than relying on any specific theology, “[Kipling’s] faith itself springs up from the broad
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16 base of human feeling, unexplained and undefended” (8). The ground of faith is shared human
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18 experience, the “broad sense of feeling” common to Kipling, his characters and his readership; in
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20 celebrating that common feeling, Parker writes, Kipling exhibits “a freemasonry of daring
21
22 that...overleaps the barriers of race” (14), a claim that seems to defensively head off the charges of
23
24 racism that 20th century critics would later level. Affirming this reading, James Thrall offers a
25
26 similar account of Kipling’s religious pluralism; noting the aforementioned links between his
27
28 Masonic affiliation and theological interests, Thrall argues that the 1900 novel *Kim* distills the
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30 vision of religion that emerged from such experiences: “a universal, humanistic celebration of the
31
32 binding ties of...brotherly love” (46).⁶ Even Kaori Nagai, who critiques “The Man Who Would Be
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34 King” as purveying a widespread “colonial fantasy, in which the ‘white man’ assumes the role of
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36 king/god among the natives,” treats this fantasy as separate from Freemasonry’s aspiration to
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50 ⁶ Scholars writing on religion and Rudyard Kipling often valorize him as an exponent of all-embracing
51 spirituality, which ultimately trumps the particularism of either his own cultural prejudices or the dogma
52 characterizing specific traditions he encountered. In addition to Carrington's discussion of Kipling's
53 "desire for a world religion," Charles Allen frames Kipling as a kind of tourist of Christianity, Islam,
54 Hinduism, and Buddhism, arriving at a "Christian Atheism" sympathetic to Buddhism's account of
55 suffering (35). See also Ozturk on Kipling's "eclectic religious identity," and Kuhlman's argument that
56 Kim's "religious hybridity," premised on a Buddhist "Middle Way" that also appeals to Christians,
57 "assist[s] modern readers to see beyond Kipling's imperialistic stereotypes to the greater, nondualistic
58 message of interconnectedness and love" ("Literature In The Gap"). This pan-religious impulse is
59 typically portrayed neutrally or positively; that it might complement "imperialistic stereotypes," rather
60 than superseding them, mostly goes unremarked.
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4 provide a “missing link” between races (97). Yet for both real Freemasons and Kipling’s fictional
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6 ones, the imposition of rule and universal brotherhood hardly competed with one another. To the
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8 contrary, the latter provided the ideological basis for the former.
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11 In her study of Freemasonry and the British Empire, Jessica Harland-Jacobs notes that, in
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13 the early nineteenth century, each imperial regiment was accompanied by at least one Masonic
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15 lodge.⁷ Ardent Freemasons, however, harbored ambitions far beyond helping soldiers fraternize.
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17 Hence, James Burnes, who founded the Bombay Masonic Lodge in 1840, argued that the world’s
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19 faiths constituted variations on Freemasonry’s *ur*-narrative, the sacrificial death of mason Hiram
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21 Abif. Burnes posits that the story of Abif, a servant of Solomon murdered by rivals, typifies “an
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23 allegory...practiced in the religious mysteries of almost every early nation,” involving a “great and
24
25 noble being...subjected to the most grievous trials...but finally raised from [death] to bliss and
26
27 Glory.” (qtd. in Fozdar 506). Citing not only Christ, but also “Ramdeo, the [Hindu] God of Love,”
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29 as a version of this myth, Burnes then asserts the contiguity of Hinduism, Freemasonry, and by
30
31 extension, Christianity: “no one who has studied history can doubt [Freemasonry’s] connection,
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33 *or rather identity*, with the ancient mysteries of the Hindoos” (ibid). As head of Bombay’s Lodge,
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35 Burnes made it a primary goal to realize this connection, “enroll[ing] natives, particularly those
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37 employed by the government” (94).⁸ As more of the colonial establishment became Freemasons,
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39 Freemasons became embedded in the establishment. Colonial Freemasons successfully
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41 promulgated the Craft as a source of “civil religion,” performing rituals at government-sponsored
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43 stone-laying ceremonies that “encouraged loyalty to the British monarch and to the empire”
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55 ⁷ This meant that the British Army’s establishment around the globe effectively ensured Freemasonry’s
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57 expansion into the colonies. There, Freemasonry provided a “variety of needs—ranging from homosocial
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59 association to easing men’s transition from one colonial society to another--belonging to the fraternity
60
61 made life easier for Britons who ran, defended, and lived in the empire” (4).

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63 ⁸ The upshot of this evangelism program, Chopra observes, was “an additional expansion of Masons in
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65 the Bombay government” (94).

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4 (Chopra 120). Such a civil religion, emblemized in the stone-laying ceremony for Bombay's
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6 Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy Hospital in 1843, enabled the ritual consolidation of ties between the local
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8 authorities, both British and Indian, and the monarchy: when Prince Edward, Grand Master of
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10 English Freemasonry, visited Bombay in 1877, he oversaw a Masonic ceremony to found a new
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12 Prince's dock, at which he greeted the "governor, several 'Native Chiefs,' and local officials"
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15 (Harland-Jacobs 257).⁹
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19 The Masonic embrace of all creeds became especially important in India after the 1857
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21 Sepoy Uprising, sparked by British policies running roughshod over Hindu and Muslim beliefs. In
22
23 response, Queen Victoria threw her official support behind religious noninterference, in the form
24
25 of the 1858 Indian Proclamation; in 1863, the Religious Endowments Act officially divested all
26
27 government officers from the responsibility of superintending religious and charitable
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29 endowments (Divanji 1).¹⁰ In such an environment, as Wahid Fozdar writes, Freemasons in India
30
31 took the opportunity to cast their organization as "more religious and inclusive than Christianity
32
33 could ever be...an 'imperial' religion that could support the political and social integration of the
34
35 British Indian Empire by fostering bonds of sentiment between rulers and ruled" (520). Masons
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37 made a powerful argument for their superiority, as a handmaiden of colonial policy, to Christian
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39 missionaries. Fozdar points out that such arguments crystallize in an 1869 article titled "Masonry
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47 ⁹ Wahid Fozdar also points out that Freemasonry's emphasis on egalitarianism eventually laid the seeds
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49 for the nationalist movement by giving Indians a chance at positions of power. Yet he nonetheless argues
50
51 that, for the bulk of imperial history, Freemasonry served the Empire's interests by functioning as
52
53 something akin to Robert Bellah's concept of a civil religion, a form of nonsectarian devotion that serves
54
55 the interests of the State. He goes on to concede that Masonry's highly institutionalized nature does not
56
57 quite match Bellah's diffuse and amorphous aggregation of
58
59 beliefs and practices (Fozdar, 498). I am indebted to Fozdar for his research on Freemasonry as a civil
60
61 religion in India.

62 ¹⁰ As Gauri Viswanathan notes, the East India Trading Company had pursued a policy of religious
63
64 neutrality since at least 1806, "refrain[ing] from interfering with indigenous religions" in order to "protect
65
66 the Company's commercial interests" ("Colonialism and the Construction of Hinduism" 34). Nonetheless,
67
68 the Queen's official 1858 neutrality proclamation indicates the extent to which the Uprising marked a
69
70 turning point in the Raj's commitment to religious noninterference.

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4 is a Divine Institution,” originally published in London-based periodical *The Freemason*, and
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6 republished in Bombay’s *Masonic Record for Western India*. “We do not find all men of one faith,
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8 nor do we find in any dogma that magnetic-like gravitation which draws all men together,” the
9
10 article’s author declares; nonetheless, Freemasonry offered a means by which “the representatives
11
12 of all sects, all beliefs, and all dogmas may gravitate towards the common centre of all religions,
13
14 God” (quoted in Fozdar 503)...The essence of this belief manifested in the inscription that
15
16 Jeejeebhoy read aloud at the 1843 stone-laying ceremony, which “commended the hospital to “the
17
18 Father in Heaven of the Christian — the Hindoo — the Mahomedan — the Parsee” (“Ceremony”
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20 47).

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26 Jeejeebhoy’s pan-theological dedication illustrates the longstanding political utility of
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28 metareligions like Freemasonry. As James Laine explains, proclamations of a Truth “‘above’ the
29
30 many religions, or their ‘common ground’” (231), have offered a route to imperial power since
31
32 Alexander the Great’s military campaign. Setting precedent for empire builders to come,
33
34 Alexander embraced a “cosmopolitan religious world in which he did not think of himself as...the
35
36 proselytizer of a superior Greek culture, but rather as the recipient of a more universal divine
37
38 approbation” (28), accordingly “sacrific[ing] reverently to local deities” and assuming a “single
39
40 set of universal deities worshipped under numerous names” (29).¹¹ Little wonder that, centuries
41
42 later, Freemasons would speculate about Alexander’s membership in “the Craft,” thereby inspiring
43
44 a key plot point in “The Man Who Would Be King”: as Laine writes, the metareligion Alexander
45
46 pioneered not only proclaims tolerance, but also provides the basis for “distinguish[ing] the
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48 persons and religions that deserve approval...from those that are out of bounds...good religion from
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58 ¹¹ See also Veselin Kesich’s discussion of how Alexander’s empire enabled “the expansion of new
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60 religions to the cities he founded,” such that, for example, “the Greek Zeus became Zeus-Amon-Re” in
61
62 Egypt” (60).

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4 bad religion, true religion from false” (237).¹² In other words, claiming the higher ground of
5
6 tolerance is exactly what allows metareligions to justify the imposition of power over religions
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8 deemed provincial, dogmatic, “intolerant.” By claiming privileged access to the antecedent of both
9
10 Christianity and ancient Hinduism, Freemasons strengthened their claim to provide the definitive
11
12 bridge between West and East, offering a “Masonic love story” (Fozdar, 508) in which Indian and
13
14 British discover their shared religious heritage.¹³ Yet this “love story” was predicated on
15
16 “[Masons] arrogat[ing] to themselves the authority to correctly interpret the religious symbols and
17
18 myths that the practitioners of these other religions had either forgotten or imperfectly understood”
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20 (Fozdar, 512).
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26 Thus, Freemasons like Col. Alexander Greenlaw advocated a mission not simply of
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28 ecumenical dialogue, but of theological restoration. In Lodge lectures and Masonic publications,
29
30 Masons reiterated Greenlaw’s conviction that Masonry could restore “the original pure worship”
31
32 of the world’s primitive populations, specifically reforming Hinduism in the process. Along with
33
34 such figures as W. Burroughs, editor of the Masonic Journal of Calcutta, Greenlaw aspired to
35
36 “uncover Hinduism’s ancient ‘Masonic’ wisdom so as to restore it to its pristine state” (quote in
37
38 ibid). By this logic, the theological speculation of “The Mother Lodge” amounted, at best, to a
39
40 necessary-but-insufficient condition of interreligious harmony: the “primeval and fundamental
41
42 religion” could only prevail when such speculation was guided by the sure hand of Masonry, which
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44 alone provided the key to restoring the original meaning of religion in general, Hinduism in
45
46 particular. Such accounts of Hinduism’s degeneration certainly echoed widespread narratives
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55 ¹² Laine’s book examines the degree to which “the language of [religious] tolerance” has supplemented
56
57 the goals of empires throughout history, beginning with Alexander and Indian emperor Ashoka the Great.
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59 In this context, “The Man Who Would Be King” offers an examination not simply of Freemasonry, but of
60
61 empire’s longstanding aspiration to unite disparate creeds under its umbrella.

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63 ¹³ This “love story” was by no means unique to Freemasonry; Madame Blavatsky also pitched Theosophy
64
65 as the missing link between Western religion and philosophy and the wisdom of the Orient.

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4 about Indian cultural decline, which implicitly celebrated British rule as the way for India to regain
5
6 the “correct” understanding of its own tradition.¹⁴ Even as Freemasons in India claimed to reveal
7
8 the interchangeability of the world’s major religious archetypes, they positioned themselves as the
9
10 unique custodians of the Key to all Mythologies, upon whose shoulders the hope of purified local
11
12 religion ultimately rested.
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16
17 Freemasonry’s paternalistic approach to Hindu religion, predicated on Masonry’s unique
18
19 authority in correctly interpreting local creeds, particularly resonated with Kipling. In the Punjab,
20
21 site of Kipling’s formative years as a both a prose stylist and a political thinker, Sir John
22
23 Lawrence’s tenure as Chief Commissioner had bequeathed a longstanding affinity for colonial
24
25 governance as based on “direct experience,” and *ad hoc* interpretation, of local religious culture.¹⁵
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28 As such, throughout his fiction, Kipling shows himself besotted with a kind of idealized
29
30 Lawrentian administrator, the professional expert in local religious affairs, whose strategic
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39 ¹⁴ See Robert Yelle’s *The Language of Disenchantment: Protestant Literalism and*
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41 *Colonial Discourse in British India*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.
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45 ¹⁵ In a dispatch to the Governor General, Lawrence advises that, while “Government
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47 officers should not be called upon to take the smallest part, official or otherwise, in any Idolatrous or
48
49 Mohammedan ceremony,” the administration should nonetheless continue to
50
51 provide land grants “for the purpose of carrying on idolatrous worship,” since to do otherwise
52
53 would be “impracticable as well as unjust” (“Despatches” 876). On the subject of local religious
54
55 festivals, Lawrence both refused to disallow native holidays and prohibited religious processions
56
57 in public (*ibid*). In placing private observance above public piety as the “better” form of religiosity, such a
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59 policy put into practice the logic of Masonry’s call to restore the “correct”
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61 meaning of Hinduism, albeit on different ideological grounds. For more on Lawrence’s influence on
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63 Kipling, see Andrew St. John’s article “In The Year ‘57’: Historiography, Power and Politics in Kipling’s
64
65 Punjab.” *The Review of English Studies* 51.201 (2000): 62-80.

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4 interventions ensure stability amongst the populace.¹⁶ Meanwhile, his fascination with the
5
6 interchangeability of religious traditions surfaces throughout texts such as *The Jungle Book*, *Kim*,
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8 “Puck of Pook’s Hill,” and “The Sending of Dana Da.”¹⁷ “The Man Who Would Be King” finds
9
10 these motifs converging: in order to gain safe passage to Kafiristan, Dravot dons the guise of a
11
12 mad priest, and casts Peachey as his servant, in order to gain safe passage through the Khaiber. 67
13
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16 “’Tisn’t for nothing that I’ve been knocking about the country for fourteen years. Didn’t I do that
17
18 talk neat?” Dravot privately boasts to the narrator (256), referring to the religious patter he adopts
19
20 to convince bemused traders of his spiritual authority. It is this performance that enables Dravot
21
22 and Peachey’s eventual discovery of the Kafirs’s unwitting incorporation of Freemasonry into their
23
24 religion. By weaving his archetypal religious expert/colonial administrator into one of his riffs on
25
26 Masonic syncretism, Kipling effectively stages a version of Alexander Greenlaw’s vision, via an
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35 ¹⁶ See, for example, the eponymous hero of “The Incarnation of Krishna Mulvaney,” who
36 impersonates the god Krishna to avoid censure for trespassing a temple; Charles Chinn in “The
37 Tomb of His Ancestors,” who pretends to be a deity for the sake of a tribe that worships him; and
38 Strickland “of the Police,” a recurring character, who gains notoriety in the Civil Service for his
39 expertise in Indian religious practices; and *Kim*’s titular protagonist, who acquaints himself with
40 Buddhist, Catholic, and Muslim doctrines over the course of his maturation.

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42 ¹⁷ James Whitlark observes that Kipling borrows from both Masonic and Christian symbolism in
43 his Mowgli stories, using “Christly parallels” to describe the boy hero, while depicting “his
44 abilities as builder (or Mason)” as the envy of the monkeys (26-27). Both Messiah and Master
45 Mason, capable of “mak[ing] little huts of fallen branches without thinking how he came to do
46 it” (*The Jungle Book*, 56), Mowgli exemplifies one manifestation of the universal allegory
47 identified by Masonic comparativists. Meanwhile, “The Sending of Dana Da” (1888), a thinly
48 veiled send-up of Theosophy, features a “Teacup Creed” that incorporates Rosicrucianism,
49 Egyptian philosophy, the Vedas, and “pieces of everything that medicine men of all ages have
50 manufactured” (271). Finally, “Puck of Pook’s Hill” features a Roman soldier named Parnesius
51 who, while a Mithraist himself, accepts the equivalence Puck draws between the Mithraic temple
52 and the Christian church. At the same time, Parnesius’ Mithraism recalls Kipling’s Freemasonry,
53 insofar as he holds a “sacralized” view of friendship and describes himself as “raised to the
54 degree of Gryphon” (qtd. in Burton 44), a Masonic sounding distinction if there ever was one.
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4 “expert” who eventually secures his kingdom through the Masonic reinterpretation of local
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6 religious practices.
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9 In what follows, I want to examine how Kipling initially frames the two protagonists as
10 heralds of hyperreality, befitting Freemasonry’s promise to harmonize the perspectives of “all
11 sects, all beliefs, and all dogmas” via a transcendent truth. Appropriately, Dravot and Peachey
12 attempt this harmonization at the limits of the British Empire’s jurisdiction in India. Through the
13 careful deployment of both verisimilar and fantastical detail, Kipling broaches the possibility that
14 Dravot and Peachey are Freemasonry’s messiahs, for whom the borderland offers the unreal
15 opportunity to synthesize the disparate epistemes of British imperialism, Masonic mysticism, and
16 indigenous belief. Yet this fantasy quickly gives way to a darker variety of the fantastic, casting
17 into relief metareligion’s climactic collapse amidst the reassertion of religious difference.
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33 II. Kafiristan, the borderlands, and the fulfillment of Masonic prophecy 34

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36 Even before arriving in Kafiristan, Dravot and Peachey demonstrate an ability to subsume
37 the space around them into their fantastical ambitions, beginning with the narrator himself. Shortly
38 after meeting his two fellow Masons on the train, the narrator describes the usual cycle of events
39 that his job as a journalist requires him to cover. “Zenana-mission ladies arrive, and beg that the
40 Editor will instantly abandon all his duties to describe a Christian prize-giving in a back-slum of a
41 perfectly inaccessible village; Colonels who have been overpassed for commands sit down and
42 sketch the outline of a series of ten, twelve, or twenty-four leading articles on Seniority *versus*
43 Selection; missionaries wish to know why they have not been permitted to escape from their
44 regular vehicles of abuse...tea-companies enter and elaborate their prospectuses with the office
45 pens” (248-249). Here, Kipling’s fluency in “newspaperese” conveys an insider’s cynical
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4 condensation of reportage. The habitual present tense frames even death as just another predictable
5 news item: the narrator's litany culminates in the summer months, rife with outbreaks of disease,
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7 when "the telephone becomes a tinkling terror...[telling] you of the sudden deaths of men and
8
9 women you knew intimately" (249). In this milieu, religious figures such as the missionaries and
10
11 mission-ladies exhibit exactly as much venality, not to mention mortality, as their military and
12
13 entrepreneurial counterparts.
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19 Disrupting the rhythms of colonial administration, Peachey and Dravot burst into this
20 summer routine in the manner of a visitation. "Drows[ing]" at his desk during a late night of work,
21
22 the narrator is brought to attention by "two men in white clothes," a sly echo of the white-clad
23
24 pairs of angels who attend the Resurrection and Ascension in John 20:12 and Acts 1:10. In contrast
25
26 with the shrunken ambitions of missionaries, these unearthly messengers declare their intent to
27
28 conquer Kafiristan together, enlisting their fellow Freemason to provide further information about
29
30 the territory. As Peachey declares that "India isn't big enough for such as us," the narrator strikes
31
32 the first surreal note in the tale: "They certainly were too big for the office. Dravot's beard seemed
33
34 to fill half the room and Carnehan's shoulders the other half" (252). Dravot's and Carnehan's
35
36 ambitions literally warp the space around them, banishing the dreary realities of the news cycle.
37
38 To be sure, the narrator expresses more irritation than reverence at his visitors' combination of
39
40 grandiosity and ignorance, calling them "fools" set on an "idiotic adventure." Yet because the
41
42 narrator presents himself as thoroughly immersed in the status quo he disdains, such
43
44 dismissiveness highlights the gap between conventional wisdom and Peachey's and Dravot's
45
46 aspirations. Watching the pair venture towards the outer limits of the British Empire's jurisdiction,
47
48 the narrator finds himself equivocating over whether they really are idiots, expressing "wonder"
49
50 at Dravot's aforementioned priestly disguise while speculating that "awful death" awaits them.
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4 The choice of adjective in this last quote hints that the narrator’s “brothers,” however foolish,
5 might nonetheless merit more than a little awe.
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9 Indeed, Kipling’s chosen setting for Dravot and Peachey’s subsequent quest only heightens
10 their stature as adventurers of the Craft. Kafiristan occupies the northeastern border of what is now
11 Afghanistan, and what would have been the northwest border of British India; the region inspired
12 about missing links between Europe and India—a topic about which Masons had much to say—
13
14 by virtue of the rumor that it harbored descendants of Alexander The Great.¹⁸ Even without
15 pursuing Burnes’ esoteric interests, theologically minded Freemasons would have gravitated
16 towards the region’s mysterious religious practices. As Edward Marx has observed, British
17 fascination with Kafiristan’s religion surfaces in an account consulted by Kipling’s protagonists,
18 by Major Henry Bellew, an expert on Afghanistan. Bellew writes, “Of the religion of the Kafirs,
19 we know very little. They believe in a supreme God...but they worship idols of which they have
20 a great number” (23-24). (In the story, the local god is referred to as Imbra, after Major John
21 Buddulph’s account of the Kafirs’s “one Supreme Being” (130).) Despite this offense to Christian
22 doctrine, their putatively white heritage would motivate jingoists like General R. Gordon to insist
23 that the British identify as the Kafirs’ “European brethren” and ally with them against the “hated
24 Afghan [Muslim] foes, who find a religious delight in murdering them as infidels or profit in
25 kidnapping and selling them for slaves, they being white like Europeans” (quoted in Marx 51-52).
26 What better way to cement that alliance than by providing a forum for Christian and Kafir gods to
27 “change pickets,” in the words of “The Mother Lodge”?
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53 The imperial borderland initially promises to offer just such a dreamlike playground, where
54 Freemasonry’s impossible ambition—to realize a universal brotherhood beyond religious
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59 ¹⁸ For more on Mason Alexander Burnes’ attempts to find a link between Kafiristan and Alexander the Great, see
60 Murray, Craig, *Sikunder Burnes: Master of the Great Game*, Birlinn Ltd, 2016.
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4 particularity--finds empirical validation. Indeed, Kipling heightens expectations that Dravot and
5
6 Peachey have encountered the unreal in Kafiristan when the latter returns to the narrator's
7
8 newspaper room, alone, two summers later. Peachey's reappearance, on "a hot night ...exactly as
9
10 had happened before," replicates the uncanny aura of his first visit to the office: not man but "what
11
12 was left of a man," with feet that shuffle "like a bear['s]" and a hand "twisted like a bird's
13
14 claw...[bearing] upon the back...a red, diamond-shaped scar" (258), Peachey comes off less as
15
16 angel than as a kind of beggar-Christ. The evocation of Christ's crucifixion, coupled with
17
18 Peachey's declaration that he was a "King of Kafiristan," offsets intimations of disaster; despite
19
20 whatever misfortunes he may have endured, Peachey seems to embody the "great and noble being"
21
22 who, in James Burnes' estimation, traverses death and glory in various "religious mysteries"
23
24 around the world.
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31 Indeed, Peachey's subsequent narration, which reveals what transpired at the borderlands,
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33 confirms Masonic theology's centrality to the conquest of Kafiristan. Initially, the two embark on
34
35 a campaign of shock and awe, identifying with the gods of the various villages they conquer at
36
37 gunpoint; copying Alexander the Great's practice of reverencing local deities, Dravot locates the
38
39 statue of Imbra, "lays a rifle and a cartridge at his feet," and pretends to be a fellow divinity.
40
41 However, neither military force, nor claims to godhood, nor the discovery of racial similarity
42
43 ("they was so hairy and white and fair") provide the ideological foundation of Dravot and
44
45 Peachey's empire. Only when they discover the local priests' rudimentary knowledge of Masonic
46
47 ritual do they find the impetus to unite Kafiristan: "We don't want to fight no more. The Craft's
48
49 the trick, so help me!" Dravot exclaims (265). In Peachey's words, however, "the most amazing
50
51 miracle" occurs once he and Dravot accordingly convert the temple of Imbra into a "Lodge-room,"
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53 replete with a "square stone for the master's chair" and "little stones for the officer's chairs" (266),
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4 that slyly images Freemasonry's ambition to convert all religions into miniature versions of itself.
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6 Subtext becomes text when a priest overturns the sacred stone in the temple's center, uncovering
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8 Peachey's "amazing miracle": the Masonic "Master's mark," emblazoned on Dravot's apron, is
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10 identical to a sign carved into the stone's bottom, known to the locals as "The Mark of Imbra"
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14 (267).

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16 Here, then, is eyewitness proof of Masonry's syncretic master narrative, visual evidence
17
18 that indigenous religions amount to dilapidated vestiges of Masonry's ancient perennial
19
20 philosophy. Peachey's emphasis on the Mark as a miraculous object of vision also casts it as the
21
22 long awaited key to uniting Kafiristan and England, Greenlaw's theological "missing link." As
23
24 Peachey tells it, "the priests [learned Masonic ritual] almost without telling, as if the memory was
25
26 coming back to them" (ibid), only to yearn for more instruction from their masters. Exploiting this
27
28 desire by limiting access to the upper degrees of Masonry, so that "they [i.e., the priests] was
29
30 clamoring to be raised" to higher knowledge (ibid), Dravot and Peachey seem to fulfill the
31
32 fantastical ambitions foreshadowed in their visitation to the narrator's office; the ease and speed
33
34 with which they indoctrinate the populace dares the reader to believe in Freemasonry's uncanny
35
36 powers of ideological interpellation. The Mark's providential appearance also takes on added
37
38 meaning in light of the fact that, immediately before the priest overturns the stone chair, his
39
40 "whoop and a howl" convinces Peachey of impending punishment for "meddling in the Craft
41
42 without warrant" (266). Instead, the subsequent revelation signals a kind of absolution, from the
43
44 Masons' "Great Architect of the Universe," for Dravot's and Peachey's claim to be "gods and Past
45
46 Grand Masters" (a title reserved for historic figures like King Solomon) and for opening a Lodge
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48 without official dispensation. Having scorned the letter of Masonic law, the two nonetheless fulfill
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58 its spirit.

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4 The “amazing miracle” of Imbra’s mark thus invests Dravot and Peachey with Messianic
5
6 significance: the chosen ones of the Masonic restorationist mission, and by extension, the British
7
8 Empire’s designs against Kafiristan’s Muslims. Indeed, despite his white skin, it is only after
9
10 Dravot appropriates the Mark of Imbra that he gains the authority to induct the fair-haired natives
11
12 into Bellew’s intraracial coalition. As “Grand-Master of all Freemasonry in Kafiristan,” Dravot
13
14 embraces his neophytes as “sons of Alexander,” fellow whites to whom he promises protection
15
16 from the “Mohammedans” who periodically raid their territory (269). Specifically excluding the
17
18 very “Mohammedans” Dravot relied on to reach Kafiristan in the first place, this pronouncement
19
20 may appear to contradict Freemasonry’s proclamations of universal tolerance; in fact, it illustrates
21
22 James Laine’s observation that metareligion often justifies distinguishing “good” from “bad”
23
24 religion. Insisting that his new subjects are more trustworthy than “common, black
25
26 Mohammedans,” Dravot articulates the racist subtext of Greenlaw’s “theological restorationism”:
27
28 the authority to reinterpret local religion means the authority to designate “Mohammedanism” as
29
30 tainted by a racial propensity for treachery, and therefore inimical to Masonic brotherhood.
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38 Conversely, for Dravot, the Kafirs’ privileged bloodline renders them spiritual kin, not only
39
40 to the English, but to the ancient Israelites. Hailing the Kafirs as “sons of Alexander,” Dravot goes
41
42 on to speculate that they might be “the Lost Tribes, or something like it,” echoing Anglo-Israelite
43
44 theories that identified the British Isles as home to the lost descendants of Israel. Gaining steam as
45
46 an “identifiable religious force” (Wilson, 41) in the 1880’s, Anglo-Israelism resonated with the
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48 Masonic impulse to uncover occult histories linking disparate religious traditions: unsurprisingly,
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4 the ancient Hebrews, and now to the British, the Freemasons thus “conduct[ed] the Lost Ten Tribes
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6 throughout their career to the present day” (Holland 96). Whether or not Kipling knew of Holland’s
7
8 theory is unclear; however, Dravot’s ecstatic theorizing signals his keen awareness of how the
9
10 Kafirs’s legendary whiteness could buttress myths of Britain’s Israelite ancestry, and consequent
11
12 proximity to the “Great Architect of the Universe.” Already bearing a privileged relationship to
13
14 the Craft’s ancient history, one that “Mohammedans” simply do not possess, the “sons of
15
16 Alexander” accrue even more mystical cache as the “Lost Tribes.” To the extent that he becomes
17
18 “best of friends with the priests and Chiefs,” Dravot appears to fulfill Freemasonry’s divine destiny
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20 as a shepherd and decoder of “good religion,” under the literal sign of metareligious unity.
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29 III. "Not Gods But Men": Disillusionment, Downfall, and Reverse Restorationism 30

31 Thus far, “The Man Who Would Be King” appears to offer a dreamlike celebration of
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33 Freemasonry’s capacity to absorb local dogma into its totalizing mythology, while fulfilling
34
35 metareligion’s prerogative of protecting “good” (white) religion from forces inimical to universal
36
37 brotherhood. Yet in a text so fascinated with competing accounts of reality, the status of the Kafirs
38
39 as a theological and ethnological “missing link”--over and against the irreducible foreignness of
40
41 “common black Mohammedans”--is by no means stable. The whiteness of the “natives” in this
42
43 particular text--unusual in an era when colonial narratives hinged on the difference between white
44
45 colonizers and non-white subjects--has produced readings that presume such stability: as Mondal
46
47 observes, Bidisha Banerjee casts the Kafirs’s whiteness as precluding “the construction of the other
48
49 as an object of derision,” while Edward Marx finds a win-win calculation that “allows white
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51 ‘Englishmen’ (Kafirs) to triumph...even though the other white Englishmen...lose their kingdom”
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4 (Mondal, 735).¹⁹ Mondal herself reads the Kafirs' whiteness as "impure" owing to "miscegenation
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6 between ancestors who were not racially proximate 'types'" (736), with the text therefore
7
8 functioning as a warning against "mixing" with even natives of deceptively fair complexion.
9
10 Ventriloquizing this warning when he contests Dravot's intention to marry a Kafir woman, a plan
11
12 on which the latter half of the story turns, Peachey offers a cautionary description of his "Bengali
13
14 mistress and the half-caste she brought to [Peachey] after their affair ended" (743); in Mondal's
15
16 reading, this anecdote carries the story's moral, foreshadowing the animalistic "reversion" that
17
18 occurs when Dravot's bride incites rebellion by biting him during the ceremony.
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24 While Mondal is more attentive than either Banerjee or Marx to the socially constructed
25
26 nature of whiteness, and the ways that the Kafirs' ambiguous relationship to Anglo-Saxon blood
27
28 evokes contemporaneous anxiety about the "mixed-race subject who appeared 'white'" (736), I
29
30 want to suggest that her reading, as well as Banerjee's and Marx's, underestimates the
31
32 ramifications of Kipling's narratorial gamesmanship. The bulk of the text, after all, comprises a
33
34 story-within-a-story: Peachey relays his account to the narrator, who relays it to the reader.
35
36 Moreover, the central narrative occupies the borderland, not merely between empire and enemy
37
38 territory, but also between history and Masonic fantasy, with Bellew's assiduously observed Kafirs
39
40 collapsing into the legendary peoples of Holland's and Burnes' speculations. The Kafirs' skin
41
42 color, like the "mountainous country" of the land they occupy (260), thus images the limits of
43
44 efforts to assimilate them into a univocal narrative of whiteness. For if the Kafirs appear to validate
45
46 Greenlaw's theological restorationism, insofar as their shared ancestry with Peachey and Dravot
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48 authorizes the latter to illuminate the formers' traditions, they also, as the mirror image of their
49
50 conquerors, threaten to enact a kind of reverse restorationism: the Kafirs themselves harbor the
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59 ¹⁹ For more on the depiction of race and colonialism in late Victorian narratives, see Patrick Brantlinger's
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61 *Taming Cannibals: Race and the Victorians*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011.
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4 potential to illuminate the secret meaning of Freemasonry's own metareligion, absorbing it into
5
6 their own mythos. That secret meaning comes to the surface at the story's climax, the locals'
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8 (re)interpretation of the Craft--specifically, their recasting it as the very tribal belief Freemasonry
9
10 sought to transcend--dooms Peachey and Dravot's would-be empire.
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14 To be sure, Dravot has made plans to join the local pantheon, rather than point to a unifying
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16 Truth beyond it, since the beginning of the story. "They have two and thirty heathen idols there,
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18 and we'll be the thirty-third," Dravot declares when he and Peachey explain their plans to the
19
20 narrator. After revealing the congruence between the Master's Mark and the Mark of Imbra,
21
22 however, Dravot switches tactics, emphasizing his status as "Grand-Master" and leveraging his
23
24 knowledge of the higher degrees of Freemasonry. Yet for the natives, that congruence only
25
26 reinforces the claim of divinity that Dravot no longer finds useful. When Dravot demands a wife,
27
28 the kings' adviser Billy Fish chides him by saying, "How can daughters of men marry gods or
29
30 devils? It's not proper...you two know the Mark cut in the stone. Only the gods know that. We
31
32 thought you were men till you showed the sign of the Master" (272). Far from assimilating their
33
34 long-lost racial brethren into the Masonic mythos, then, Dravot and Peachey find their racial
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36 doubles assimilating Masonic ideology into their own preexisting polytheism. The "amazing
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38 miracle" of Imbra's Mark has confirmed the latter, not the former.
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45 Indeed, Kipling frames this deification as the consequence, not merely of Dravot's self-
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47 identification as a god, but also of a policy of religious non-interference. Where Dravot initially
48
49 encouraged the Kafirs' belief in his divinity, Peachey passively allows this belief to flourish,
50
51 hewing to a live-and-let-live philosophy echoing the speaker of "The Mother Lodge": internally
52
53 responding to Billy Fish's presumption of their divinity, Peachey muses, "If, after seeing us as
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55 long as they had, they still believed we were gods, it wasn't for me to undeceive them...I wish then
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4 we had explained about the loss of the secrets of a Master Mason from the first go-off; but I said
5 nothing” (272). Peachey’s acceptance of local religiosity mirrors arguments that posited
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we had explained about the loss of the secrets of a Master Mason from the first go-off; but I said nothing” (272). Peachey’s acceptance of local religiosity mirrors arguments that posited Freemasonry as a liberal alternative to Christianity; it also encourages him to remain silent at a critical juncture, even affirming Billy Fish’s belief by assuring him, “If [Dravot]’s a god, he’ll not let her die” (ibid). Far from merely illustrating the dangers of “*misusing* the staircase of Masonic affiliation,” as Paul Rich argues (329), the scene exposes Masonic metareligion’s inherent liability to misuse, its tendency to produce self-aggrandizement in the guise of accommodation. Peachey’s continued elevation of Dravot as a god, after all, issues from the false modesty with which he deems it “not his place” to disabuse his subjects.

This paradoxical policy of consent-based coercion--enforcing Dravot’s demands by appealing to, rather than contesting, the natives’ “freely chosen” beliefs--thus finds literal representation in Dravot's "marriage": a voluntaristic ritual that, as Mondal observes, disguises the sexual violence with which he intends to subdue his new wife. Mondal points out that this aspect of the story receives scant treatment in readings that frame the story as a depiction of Masonic brotherhood (746). Such oversight overlooks the fact that the marriage encapsulates the ethos of Masonic metareligion, a ritualistic show of unity that masks the asymmetrical relations between colonizer and colonial subject. While George Grella frames Dravot’s marriage as a “[betrayal of] his bonds of friendship and brotherhood with Carnehan” (quoted in Mondal 746), one might read Dravot as attempting to realize the Masonic brotherhood’s highest aspirations, overriding Peachey’s fears of miscegenation in order to complete the Kafirs’ induction into the Mother Lodge. However, Dravot’s attempted embrace founders, in a revelation that mirrors the “amazing miracle” of Imbra’s Mark. The request arouses the suspicion of the priests, who “offer” Dravot a girl with

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4 directions to bite him on the neck; when she draws blood, the outraged onlookers denounce their
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6 would-be kings as charlatans, kill Dravot, and crucify Peachey.
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9 The Craft's reign in Kafirstan, then, dissolves in an instant of disillusionment, one that
10 proves Dravot's mortality as irrefutably as Imbra's Mark seemed to prove his divine authority. If
11 the bite can be read as a sign of "reversion" to a racially degenerate state (Mondal, 744), or the
12 trigger for Dravot's transfiguration into a tragic avatar of "sacred knowledge" (Nagai, 99), it also
13
14 "restores" to view the occult truth at the heart of Masonry's metareligious theology: not a universal
15 divinity, but an overweening yen for power, no less treacherous than the "gods and devils" who,
16 according to Billy Fish, routinely snatch Kafir women to their mountain hideaways. Reversing the
17 Masonic impulse to "restore" Hinduism to an originary state of grace, the bite, and subsequent
18 rebellion, recasts the colonized as the colonizers' doubles: in the end, it is the Kafirs who brutally
19 shed light on the Masonic metareligion's status, hidden by ideological mystification, as a solvent
20 of the equality and fraternity it claimed to guarantee. Unable to process this revelation, Dravot and
21 Peachey fall back on an incoherent farrago of responses, variously doubling down on their imperial
22 authority ("An Emperor am I" (275)), likening the Kafirs to the non-white insurgents of the 1857
23 Indian uprising ("This business is our Fifty-Seven" (ibid)), and hailing their victorious opponents
24 as countrymen ("We're done for...They are Englishmen, these people" (276)). Like the
25 superstitious natives of the colonial imagination, Dravot and Peachey cling to myths of national
26 and racial glory, unable to countenance their destruction, to the bitter end.
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53 III. Fantastic Ambivalence and Metareligion's Collapse 54

55 Defying Freemasonry's ambitions to provide the Key To All Mythologies, Kipling's
56 borderland thus reveals itself as a liminal space between overlapping mythologies. Having
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4 introduced Kafiristan via the encyclopedias and historiographies that the narrator keeps in his
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6 office, Kipling gradually recasts it as a region suspended between perception and illusion: a place
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8 where the Mark of Imbra can appear to vindicate Masonic metareligion from one perspective,
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10 traditional polytheism from another; where local acolytes can assimilate Masonic practice into
11
12 their indigenous beliefs, while giving the reverse impression; where the appearance of racial
13
14 kinship belies the strength of religious difference. Meanwhile, the text's emphasis on repetitions,
15
16 coincidences, and miracles--Peachey's return to the narrator's office on a night like his first visit,
17
18 the Mark of Imbra, even the chance encounter that begins the story--compound the interpretive
19
20 ambiguities. In suggesting the miraculous without definitively establishing its presence, Kipling
21
22 encourages the "hesitation" that Tzvetan Todorov identifies as germane to the fantastic, that
23
24 vacillation between conflicting interpretations of reality: "The fantastic is that hesitation
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26 experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently
27
28 supernatural event...occupy[ing] the duration of uncertainty" (25). Rosemary Jackson's definition
29
30 of the fantastic, a "*mode...[placed] between the opposite modes of the marvellous (the world of
31
32 fairy story, romance, magic, supernaturalism) and the mimetic (narratives which
33
34 claim...equivalence between the represented fictional world and the 'real' world outside the text),*"
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36 also helps make sense of the text's epistemological lacunae (32, 33, 34). Just as the Kafirs find
37
38 themselves caught between defying their kings as men and venerating them as gods, readers find
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40 themselves caught between nature and supernature, between the narrator's mimetic instincts and
41
42 his tale-within-a-tale's miraculous undercurrents.
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53 The ambivalences of the fantastic, in other words, offer the antithesis of Freemasonry's
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55 claim to resolve the Empire's religious diversity in one fell swoop, to unite its competing visions
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57 into a seamless monomyth of Masonic exceptionalism. To borrow Jean Bellamin-Noel's definition
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4 of the fantastic, the "lack of meaningful signification," of a decisively mimetic or miraculous
5 explanation, operates on multiple levels throughout the story. The natives don't know whether
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7 Dravot and Peachey are gods; Dravot and Peachey can't tell whether the natives believe they're
8
9 gods or Master Masons; the narrator doesn't know whether Peachey, who prefaces his incredible
10
11 account by saying "I ain't mad—yet" (259), has simply gone insane; the reader doesn't know
12
13 whether this incredible string of incidents is, in fact, the fruit of hidden supernatural forces, be they
14
15 divine or demonic. As Peachey finishes telling his story to the narrator, Kipling catapults even
16
17 further into fantastic territory, suggesting that Peachey has imported, back to the colonial center,
18
19 the incommensurability of experience that metareligion seeks to erase.
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26 Upon consigning Dravot to death by falling from a bridge, Peachey says, the Kafirs
27
28 crucified him; at this point, Peachey extends to the narrator his "nail-scarred hands," already
29
30 described at the outset of Peachey's account. The ongoing debate about whether Peachey's
31
32 crucifixion constitutes a Christian or Masonic allusion is perhaps a red herring, particularly in light
33
34 of Burnes' aforementioned comments about the allegory "practiced in every nation," involving a
35
36 "noble being" subjected to "grievous trials." Peachey's crucifixion thus comes across as a tacit
37
38 nod to that Masonic proto- allegory, rehearsing both the passion of Christ and the *ur*-myth from
39
40 which Christ's passion is derived. Kipling's language impels the reader to experience this
41
42 reassertion of religious difference as a fantastic event: insisting that his crucifixion really did take
43
44 place ("as Peachey's hands will show" (277)), Peachey nonetheless acknowledges that his
45
46 surviving such a trial beggars belief, mentioning that the Kafiristani natives "said it was a miracle
47
48 [I] wasn't dead" after taking him down (ibid). Indeed, he further intimates that his survival has
49
50 sown the seed for a new local myth, superseding the "amazing miracle" of Imbra's Mark, since
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4 “they said [I] was more of a god than old Daniel that was a man” (277). Peachey’s scarred hands
5
6 thus offer ironic proof that the universal allegory is, indeed, “practiced” in every nation.
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10 However, lest we read the crucifixion as straightforwardly framing Peachey as a
11 quintessential Masonic “noble being,” Kipling undermines his singular Messianic status by casting
12 Dravot as a second Christ figure. After Peachey miraculously survives, he “came home in about a
13
14 year...for Daniel Dravot he walked before and said: — ‘Come along, Peachey. It’s a big thing
15
16 we’re doing.’ The mountains they danced at night, and the mountains they tried to fall on Peachey’s
17
18 head, but Dan he held up his hand, and Peachey came along bent double” (325). In other words,
19
20 Dravot’s spirit returns as a mystical guide, echoing Evangelicalism’s emphasis on a personal
21
22 relationship with Jesus. The Evangelical subtext of Dravot’s return is compounded by the fact that
23
24 Peachey has, in retrospect, been conflating Dravot’s fate with his own: early in the story, he says
25
26 that “a party named Peachey Taliaferro Carnehan...[who] died out there in the cold. Slap from the
27
28 bridge fell old Peachey” (260); later in the account, Peachey again refers proleptically to the bridge
29
30 incident, only this time saying that “we tumbled from the bridge.” While critics such as Larry
31
32 Kreitzer have interpreted this identification as merely realizing “the article within [their] ‘Contract’
33
34 that the two will stand by each other, come thick or thin” (110), the resemblance to
35
36 Evangelical theology, with its emphasis on a private relationship with Jesus and full identification
37
38 with his atoning sacrifice, is unmistakable. The physical proof of Dravot’s saving grace, however,
39
40 comes in the form of a severed head, not nail-scarred hands: as the ultimate token of his story’s
41
42 veracity, Peachey proudly brandishes Dravot’s “withered head,” crowning it with a “heavy circlet
43
44 of gold” as he proclaims, “You knew Dravot, sir! You knew Right Worshipful Brother Dravot!
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46 Look at him now!”
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4 Naming Dravot as “Right Worshipful Brother” while effectively treating him as personal
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6 Savior, Peachey displays the degree to which Masonic solidarity, in this story, has survived only
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8 by morphing into the very Evangelical zeal that Kipling detested.²⁰ Instead of forging unity in
9
10 diversity, Freemasonry’s metareligious project has thus given rise to theological splintering, a
11
12 proliferation of Messiahs. The story’s fantastic status prevents the reader from reducing such
13
14 proliferation to a mere symptom of Peachey’s insanity: in a text laden with visitations and
15
16 revelations, the “naturalistic” explanation of Peachey’s “miraculous” survival, or Dravot’s
17
18 Christological haunting, must contend with the possibility of the unearthly. In the story’s final
19
20 lines, Kipling implies that the theological splintering will only continue. After finishing his tale,
21
22 Peachey wanders into the streets, where the narrator later finds him singing the first verse of the
23
24 popular hymn “The Son of God Goes Forth To War.” However, Peachey makes two alterations
25
26 to the lyrics. First, he replaces the term “Son of God” with “Son of Man,” which more plausibly
27
28 evokes the “great and noble being” that Freemasonry ascribes to every religion (Kipling, 279). In
29
30 swapping Christ for a generic Masonic hero, Peachey’s version satirizes Freemasonry’s interest in
31
32 “Mohammed, God, and Shiva changing pickets.” Given that Peachey is singing this line on a
33
34 deserted street, literally for no one, the altered hymn suggests that Masonry is “interchangeable”
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36 with Christianity after all: both are capable of fomenting division over brotherhood, pitting savior
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38 against savior.
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50 ²⁰ In *Something of Myself*, Kipling recounts how, at the age of six, he was sent away from India to live in
51 Southsea with the Evangelical Mrs. Holloway. Referred to only as “The Woman” in Kipling’s account,
52 Mrs. Holloway ruled her household with “the full vigour of the Evangelical,” beating Kipling for
53 presumed disobedience and teaching him the doctrine of Hell “in all its terrors” (6). Moreover, in “Baa
54 Baa Black Sheep,” Kipling reveals that he was specifically punished for his aforementioned “grievous
55 sin” of mingling Christianity and Hindu myth. His proxy Punch remembers this as the moment at which
56 he began to see God as “the only thing in the world more awful” than his aunt (39). Kipling’s rejection of
57 Evangelicalism thus can be seen as coextensive with his interest in syncretism: it was his aunt’s intense
58 hostility toward the intermingling of religious traditions, manifest in her abuse, that provoked Kipling’s
59 reciprocal distaste for the God she worshipped.
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4 Read as a kind of subversive hymn to Masonry, then, Peachey's song subverts the Masonic
5 grand narrative no less than it does the Christian one. The alteration from "kingly" to "golden," in
6 particular, focalizes the way that the story undermines the Masonic preoccupation with kingship,
7 evident in a founding myth that would have been recited at Kipling's initiation (Roberts): King
8 Solomon and King Hiram of Tyre were considered the respective Grand Masters of Jerusalem and
9 Tyre, with Hiram being the King who sent Hiram Abif to construct the Temple. Fussell further
10 notes that Kipling would have been familiar with Mason James Anderson's *The Constitutions of*
11 *the Freemasons*, a copy of which was given to each new initiate, and which especially "attribut[es]
12 Masonic knowledge and virtues to the Hebraic kings" (227). Replacing "kingly crown" with
13 "golden crown" suggests that the quest for treasure has overridden Freemasonry's traditional
14 veneration of kingship as a virtuous calling. Likewise, where the "blood-red banner" originally
15 denotes the blood of Christ and the martyrs of the Church, the line here suggests the violence on
16 display in the story, a violence unleashed by Freemasonry: both Dravot's militant attempts to lead
17 his Lost Tribe to glory, and the natives' brutal rejection of that ambition, issue directly from his
18 institution of Masonic practice. Finally, the question "who follows in his train?" suggests not the
19 martyrs who emulate Christ's sacrifice, but all those who may follow in Dravot's footsteps,
20 pursuing kingship--that quintessentially Masonic ambition--through ideological dissemination and
21 military force.

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48 This last question becomes important when we circle back to the opening paragraphs, and
49 find the narrator, himself a Freemason, musing, "If I want a crown I must go and hunt for it myself"
50 (244). One gets the sense that the narrator is prepared to "follow in his train," to find an untamed
51 region where he can embody yet another variant on Dravot and Peachey's power-hungry "Son of
52 Man." In this gesture towards a recapitulation of Dravot and Peachey's adventures, one can only
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4 hear Peachey's hymn reverberating, the Son of Man going forth to war once more, masters of
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6 empire swapping pickets in our heads. Indeed, even if we treat the paragraph as an exercise in
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8 irony, rather than sincere expression, our sense of the narrator's isolation from the Brotherhood
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10 only compounds: his allegiance to Masonic ideals seems to appear and then fade from view, like
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12 a mirage in the desert.
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16 Of course, we can't be sure. We can't be sure whether the narrator "really" intends to find
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18 his own Kafiristan, just as we can't be sure whether Peachey's tale, with its array of miraculous
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20 incidents, "really" took place. But this fantastical indeterminacy is integral to the story's
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22 commentary on the borderlands. Through Peachey, Kafiristan's contradictions travel back to the
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24 colonial center, stranding narrator and reader alike amongst a variety of competing interpretations
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26 of truth, the very variety that Freemasonry purports to resolve. In Kipling's telling, however, this
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28 variety is less the fault of India's religious diversity than of its would-be conquerors: it's the latter's
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30 drive for self-deification that dooms Freemasonry's dream of universal fraternity. Kipling's
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32 Kafiristan, then, ultimately offers a synecdoche for the Empire's perpetual attempts, and failures,
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34 to achieve interreligious reconciliation. "The Man Who Would Be King" frames British
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36 imperialism as the interplay of men who would be king, each religiously devoted to building their
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38 own private realities, oblivious to their kingdoms' fraying borders.
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