The “Wonderment” of *Oz*: Theosophy and Religious Leadership in *Oz*

The absence of critical conversation in regards to spiritualism and *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (*Oz*) shows a lack of thought towards this important aspect of L. Frank Baum’s life. Much has been said in regards to *Oz* being connected with the Populist Party, as in Henry M. Littlefield’s article. Others have argued against the idea of Populism being the driving force behind the story and opted to view the book in their own political light, such as John Funchion and Gretchen Ritter. While giving an interesting slant to the book, these critics ignore the confirmed spiritual beliefs of L. Frank Baum and his family, as well as his disapproval of organized religion. This view on *Oz* also overlooks the personal growth found in the characters throughout the book. When viewed with Baum’s Theosophical background and his thoughts on religion, *Oz* seems to be imbued with Theosophical ideals designed to show that one cannot rely on corrupt religious authorities and must have a personal connection with spiritualism in order to reach one’s full potential.

The elements of Theosophy found in *Oz* help to enhance the “wonderment” that Baum envisioned his book to inspire in its readers (Baum 3). Some aspects of Theosophy, like the idea of reincarnation, seem fantastic to the mind and often led to theosophists being seen as “mysterious” and even caused some residents near the American Theosophy headquarters to fear “that both they and the town would be hexed” (“Cult” 67). Earlier in the days of modern Theosophy the founder, H. P. Blavatsky, was both censured and curiously scrutinized by English
society (“Madame” 80). Although this may seem like a daunting reputation to anyone not familiar with Theosophy, the beliefs of this society – such as all things being connected to each other and the idea that the result of one’s actions will eventually come back to affect them – help one to reach a higher level of spirituality. Baum himself was said to embody the Theosophical ideal of positive thinking and “caused others to see the best in themselves and their circumstances” (Rogers 15). In Oz these beliefs are shown throughout the text in a simple way that allow for an understanding of Theosophy; in return, the fantastic aspect of Theosophy helps to bring the “wonderment” that can be found in the text.

Baum’s interest in Theosophy – beginning long before Oz was published – shows that it had a noticeable effect on the fantastic aspect of his various works. One explanation Baum gave of Theosophy in The Aberdeen Saturday Pioneer was that it “is not a religion” and that those who follow it are seeking for truth (qtd. in Parker, “Utopia”). In his newspaper he also wrote about the popularity of authors who used Theosophy in their writing; specifically mentioning that, although many of the public would only find “mere sensationalism” in the writing, others would be led “to higher and nobler and bolder thought” because of it (qtd. in Algeo, “Quest”). Whether Baum intentionally or unintentionally employed Theosophical teachings in Oz, it has been recognized that there is a layer of spirituality in the novel. A friend of Baum’s is quoted by Hearn as saying that Baum “had a gospel of his own and he preached it through his book” (“Skeptic”).

Part of this “gospel” Baum’s friend saw is found in how Baum uses physical similarities, emotional connections, and narration to denote oneness and unity in the story. This oneness made astonishing characters able to relate to Dorothy – and therefore the reader as well. After being carried to a land completely foreign to her, one of the first sights that met Dorothy’s eyes
were the Munchkins (Baum 22). Baum could have described these people in any manner, and yet he chose to relate them to the girl by saying that they “were as tall as Dorothy” (23). Not only were they the same height, the Munchkins also connected on an emotional level with Dorothy; when Dorothy was told she would have to live in Oz she started crying and all the Munchkins “immediately…began to weep also” (Baum 26). The Munchkins seemed to understand the Theosophical principal that, even though one must reach their potential through their own efforts, all of nature is linked together. Because of this, despite there being no way for them to completely understand how Dorothy was feeling, the unity between all things channeled Dorothy’s homesick reaction to the Munchkins and allowed them to be able to help her.

The Scarecrow is another prominent wonder in the story that demonstrates this unity and shows that a person can achieve spiritual growth no matter the circumstances. Unlike the Tin Woodman, the Scarecrow never lived as a being of flesh and blood. He was made entirely from normally inanimate objects, and yet he is described in the novel as being a man even before he reveals his ability to think and act to anyone (Baum 44). As the group travels through the Land of Oz no one is surprised by a living scarecrow since oneness affects more than just what is viewed as living, it “pervades and sustains the whole universe” (“Ideas”). A sign that he is fully accepted into society is that he receives a position of high authority with the only reference to his unusual origin being that the people of Oz were proud of being “ruled by a stuffed man” (Baum 173). Even when referencing the fact that he is a scarecrow the populace still uses the term man. Because of this fantastic oneness, the Scarecrow gains authority and is literally alive in Oz and figuratively lives and is accepted as living in the mind of the reader.

It is not enough to merely recognize the oneness between all things, in order to personally grow from this connection it is necessary to understand the effect it has. This effect is termed
karma by theosophists. Karma is based on the belief that the intent of one’s actions will eventually return to them (“FAQ”), an example of this is found in the interactions between Dorothy and the Scarecrow. Dorothy’s act of helping the Scarecrow early on in the novel prompts the Scarecrow to later remark that his “good luck [was] all due to her” and that he would not leave her until she returned to Kansas (Baum 177). Dorothy’s good action not only resulted positively for her, it also opened the way for the Scarecrow to exercise selflessness and reach some of his potential.

This ability to draw closer to one’s potential is a significant aspect of Oz and Theosophy and is enabled by the “progress of consciousness” or spiritual journey one needs to take (“FAQ”). As mentioned earlier, some Theosophical beliefs are often considered unorthodox; one such belief that helps propel the characters’ journeys is that of there being different incarnations. In Oz, this belief lays the groundwork for the desires and fantastic attributes of Dorothy’s three companions. As one goes through different incarnations there are three traits that are supposed to be improved: “the thinking mind, the…emotional psyche, and the physical organism through which the other two function” (Algeo, “Quest”). When studying the Scarecrow, Tin Woodman, and Lion they match perfectly to each of these. Even more significant is how Algeo states that these are developed in the specific order of “mind, emotions, [and] body” (“Quest”). The Scarecrow, in search of a brain, was the first to appear on the Yellow Brick Road; the Tin Woodman, in search of a heart, was the second; and the Lion, in search of courage, was the last.

Through their quest for “mind, emotions, [and] body” (Algeo, “Quest”); the Scarecrow, Tin Woodman, and Lion show what improvement is necessary before one can begin to progress towards their full potential. The Scarecrow, who was just recently created when Dorothy meets
him, is in search of a mind. He does not have any of the other attributes yet and is not interested in them as the time will come for him to improve them later. The Tin Woodman already possesses a brain as his lack of interest in a brain and Glinda’s comment on how he is “brighter than [the Scarecrow]” attest (Baum 208). He has not yet moved on to the body and is improving his emotional psyche. The Lion is farther along than his friends on his journey and possesses both a brain and a heart. When questioned by the Scarecrow as to whether he had a brain he replies “I suppose so” (Baum 62), showing that he has moved beyond the mind and is focused on other things. Both the Lion and the Tin Woodman agreed that the Lion had a heart as he would “not be a coward” if he did not (Baum 62). These all cause reflection about what one might need improvement on and leads into Dorothy’s place in this spiritual journey.

Dorothy, who already possesses these three attributes, is in her final incarnation and is in search of her highest potential (Algeo, “Journey”). Although it may seem counter-intuitive for Dorothy, the child of the group, to be the furthest in her spiritual journey, when reincarnation is taken into account it is understandable. Theosophists believe that “the core of an individual’s identity” is preserved through death and is a part of their next incarnation (Algeo, “Quest”). With this in mind, even though Dorothy is one of the youngest physically, she could have had more time in past incarnations to develop needed attributes. The thought of reincarnation can be comforting as Hearn states that Baum “believed that he and his wife had been together in many past states and would be together in future reincarnations” (72). Reincarnation can also explain why Dorothy was only briefly scared during the moments she was faced with the possibility of death because she would have another chance to continue improving during her next incarnation. This leads one to connect with oneself and others, develop a positive outlook, and view negative situations in a better light.
Being calm throughout ongoing danger is more than just a result of belief in reincarnation; it is an aspect of Theosophy that can help an individual to have a more stress free life. Arnold quotes William James as saying that a “feature of Theosophy was its emphasis on ‘healthy-mindedness’ or positive thinking” (100). Parker quotes Norman Vincent Peale as saying that, when one is a positive thinker, many negative feelings from life are farther removed—such as “fear, worry, and anxiety” (qtd. in “Rise”). Baum’s introduction to Oz is a clear wish for this positive thinking to be understood by his readers. In it Baum says he leaves out “the heartaches and nightmares” (3). Throughout the book there are many instances where it could be taken as nightmarish and the thought of Aunt Em never seeing Dorothy again is heart wrenching, yet if one understands that everything will end happily, no matter the gravity of a situation, one will not feel those negative emotions as strongly.

Even though Dorothy has progressed farther in her consciousness than her companions there are still opportunities to continue developing herself. One of these opportunities comes as she travels through the Land of Oz with her friends. In the beginning of her journey she displayed a lack of caring for her friends, thinking that “it did not matter” if they obtained their desires as long as she could go home (Baum 55). Even Aunt Em is secondary to Dorothy’s own discomfort for the first half of Oz, as evidenced by her stating to the Wizard, “I don’t like your country” before she spoke about how Aunt Em was worrying (Baum 108). Soon Dorothy’s thought patterns began changing to think more of others and she began to put her aunt and uncle before herself (Baum 112). Her apparent lack of caring from earlier was replaced with concern for her friends, so much so that she was glad to have stayed and helped them. Even saying that since “each is happy” she would like “to go back” (Baum 210), whereas before their happiness did not really matter to her. When her journey began the only wish occupying her was to go
home, the farther along she got on her journey the more her wish for the happiness of others expanded and the closer she came to her goal.

Along this journey, in order to reach one’s full potential there exists a balance between one’s connection with others and the need for a personal connection with spirituality. Without the interactions between Dorothy and her friends she would not have progressed very far on her journey because their assistance was indispensable to it and the further development of her attributes. In spite of this unity between all things, one’s full potential is something that can only be reached on one’s own (Algeo, “Journey”). Baum shows this by Dorothy’s friends being able to “do nothing to help her” when it came time to actually return Dorothy to Kansas (109). It is very telling that even when there was a balloon to convey Dorothy home she was not able to take it; the balloon was meant for the Wizard alone (Baum 169). Even Dorothy partially understood this because she said “she was glad she had not gone up in [the] balloon” (Baum 173). It was not until she visited Glinda that she learned she had the power with her to return home throughout her whole journey (Baum 210). Her journey had brought her awareness of this potential she always possessed and the knowledge of how to use it.

The necessity of some guidance to direct Dorothy on her path shows that, when correctly exercised, religious leadership can be good. Even though Baum did not have a high opinion of religious leaders (Rogers 34), this does not mean he automatically cast them aside. One way the good aspects of religious leaders could be affirmed is through the examples of Glinda and the Witch of the North. Glinda is portrayed as someone that is wise and good (Baum 176), she is what Baum might term a “great religious teacher” (Hearn 73). From a theosophist viewpoint Glinda could be compared to “Buddha, Mohammed, Confucius, and Christ,” all of whom Baum “wrote sympathetically of” (Algeo, “Notable”). Glinda’s assistance was invaluable to showing
Dorothy the way to return home and although good religious leaders cannot act for someone to make them reach their goal – like Glinda could not work the shoes for Dorothy (Baum 210) – they are able to help them along their way. The Witch of the North is another example of this, she is not as powerful as Glinda, but she is the initial guide that points Dorothy in the direction she should take (Baum 26), showing that there are many good influences that one can follow.

Whereas Glinda and the Witch of the North represent the virtuous leaders, “Oz, the Great and Terrible” represents much of what Baum found wrong with religious leaders (Baum 106). Algeo states that the Wizard “is a satire on all authority and particularly on religious authority (“Journey”). A warning from Baum is that “a priest should not think all is well just because his church is filled, his salary is forthcoming, and his congregation do not protest against his precepts” (Rogers 34). The Wizard was in need of this warning, although he appeared to be the brilliant leader (Baum 103-4), he was unable to help anyone (Baum 154). Adding to the Wizard’s flaws was that he could never acknowledge his fallibility, something that Baum felt a religious leader needed to do in order to be credible (Rogers 34). Although Dorothy and her friends found the Wizard to be a sham (Baum 150), he maintains his cover as a great wizard in front of the rest of Oz even after he leaves them all behind (Baum 169-70).

Though Baum’s distaste of religious leaders gave him a basis for the Wizard, he did not find many fantastic elements in religion. One complaint he wrote about was the need for religion to “let people think for themselves” (qtd. in Rogers 34). This lack of wonder he felt organized religion presented was shown in Oz at the only part in the book that a church is mentioned – during the characters exit from the china country. When leaving, the Lion smashed a church with his tail and no sadness was felt by the group about the destruction (Baum 192). In fact, Dorothy’s response to this was to emphatically exclaim how they were “brittle” (Baum 192).
That the church was shattered into pieces shows Baum’s thoughts on the rigidness of religion and the need to “abolish superstition, intolerance and bigotry” (qtd. in Rogers 34).

To Baum, the structure of church attendance contributes to lack of spirituality and fosters negative characteristics. Those that attend organized religions are heavily criticized by Baum in his newspaper; he states that it is a “fallacious belief that a church goer is a good citizen” (qtd. in Rogers 34). This signifies that the church goer is not bettered by their attendance. Baum also states that businessmen go to church “to sell [their] wares or attract clients” and that “women go to maintain their position in society” (qtd. in Rogers 34). These ulterior motives incorporated into the religion ultimately detract from the spiritual progress that one might otherwise obtain and show that to obtain a spiritual connection one needs to remove all ulterior motives. Where Dorothy was able to elevate her thoughts and look beyond herself to those around her, church goers in Baum’s view were “insincere and indifferent…and unthinking” (qtd. in Rogers 34). This shows that in every part of one’s life one needs to be honest, open-minded, and thoughtful in order to truly grow spiritually.

As Dorothy became more open-minded and thoughtful she formed a spiritual connection and an awareness of the needs of others that she would not have otherwise had. This connection saved her from succumbing, like the Wizard, to the adoration and power given to her when she was mistaken as a “noble Sorceress” and then repeatedly thought of as a good witch throughout OZ (Baum 22). The “wonderment” creating aspects of Theosophy that shaped Dorothy and her journey allowed “all disagreeable incidents” to be left out (Baum 3). Baum accomplished this not by refusing to put in wicked characters, bad leaders, and dangerous situations; he accomplished it by showing a way to reach inner tranquility and our full potential through the personal spirituality he believed was found in Theosophy. Through the use of the fantastic
Theosophical ideals Baum helps one see a way to reach higher levels of thought and understanding about oneself and the world.


