

Baha'i Mage: The Extraordinary Life and Work of Robert Felkin

Lil Osborn

Abstract

In investigating the relationship between the Baha'is and the Western Esoteric Tradition several individuals emerge as important in both circles; however, none are as prominent in as many fields as Robert Felkin. Felkin was notable as a physician, a missionary, an Anglican, a magician and a Baha'i. The purpose of this paper is to examine his life and work in the context of his search for Ascended Masters and the multiplicity of identities and roles he assumed.

Keywords

Robert Felkin
 Stella Matutina
 Western Esoteric
 Tradition
 occult
 religious identity

Introduction

The junction of all times, people and places are unique, but Edwardian England was a time and place where technology, education, politics and religion combined to create people who were literate, had access to information, could travel and had time enough to indulge their passions as never before. In the early years of the 20th century, if you were young, British and rich, the world, or at least the large part of it contained within the British Empire was yours to explore and exploit or to serve and administer.

There had been significant challenges to the traditional Christian beliefs; Charles Darwin had published his *Origin of the Species* in 1859, causing an intellectual revolution that would filter down into the wider population. George MacDonald's *The Golden Bough* (1890) attempted to rationalize the relationship between religion and magic, using the evolutionary ideas of Darwin to argue that magic had evolved into religion, which would in turn be replaced by science. The Empire had brought India closer and with it Theosophy and Liberal Christianity, which attempted to syncretize eastern and western belief systems. The emergence of archaeology as a serious academic discipline had allowed the public to view the treasures of past societies in the cathedral-like museums which were the centre piece of every large town, whilst folklorists attempted to catalogue the survival of more localized ancient communities.

Perhaps one of the most interesting developments in spiritual life at the turn of the 19th century was the resurgence of occultism and the consequent growth in membership of occult and esoteric orders amongst the educated classes. The most important of the occult orders was the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn which was founded in 1888 by William Robert Woodman, William Wynn Westcott and Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers: all three were Freemasons and members of Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia (SRIA) a Masonic esoteric Christian order formed by Robert Wentworth Little in 1865.¹ The Golden Dawn was a magical order,

the purpose of which was spiritual development. Membership was open to both men and women and the system of spiritual development was based on hierarchy and initiation similar to that of Masonic Lodges. There were three orders within the Golden Dawn; the First Order taught esoteric philosophy based on the Hermetic Qabalah and personal development through study and awareness of the four classical elements as well as the basics of astrology, tarot divination, and geomancy. The Second or 'Inner' Order, the *Rosae Rubrae et Aureae Crucis* (the Ruby Rose and Cross of Gold), taught proper magic, including scrying, astral travel and alchemy. The Third Order was that of the 'Secret Chiefs', who were said to be highly spiritually developed beings; they supposedly directed the activities of the lower two orders by spirit communication with the Chiefs of the Second Order.

The Secret Chiefs was the name given to these highly developed beings in the Golden Dawn system; they were believed to be the source of the esoteric knowledge entrusted to the Order. They are similar in concept to the Bodhisattva in Buddhism, enlightened beings who seek to enlighten others. The earliest western source on their activities is entities is Karl von Eckartshausen, whose *The Cloud Upon The Sanctuary*, published in 1802, explained in some detail their character and motivations. Their names and descriptions have varied through time, being dependent upon those who reflected their experience of contact with them. Several 19th- and 20th-century occultists claimed to belong to or to have contacted these Secret Chiefs and made these communications known to others. It was important for esoteric orders to have access to such beings in order to claim their teachings were authentic pathways to spiritual development. The nature of the Secret Chiefs would bedevil the Golden Dawn and ultimately rip it apart. Felkin would spend his life seeking to meet them in flesh and blood, whilst others would defend their elusiveness by arguing they were not of this world and communicated only in the spirit form.

Felkin

Robert William Felkin (13 March 1853–28 December 1926) was born in Beeston, Nottinghamshire, the son of Robert Felkin (1828–99), a Nonconformist lace manufacturer. His grandfather, William Felkin (1795–1874), was the son of a Baptist minister who remains one of the best-known names in the Victorian lace industry. He was mayor of Nottingham in 1851, when he exhibited at the Great Exhibition. In 1864, Felkin's lace business failed and he retired to write about the lace and hosiery trades.² His son and partner Robert Felkin moved to Wolverhampton to take up a position as manager of the home department of Mander Brothers, varnish manufacturers. His son, also called Robert, was educated at Wolverhampton Grammar School, where he met the explorer David Livingstone, who inspired him to become a medical missionary.² The young Robert spent some time in Chemnitz in Germany with an uncle and learned German, and Germany was in some ways to be an abiding motif in his spiritual life, the home of Christian Rosenkreuz, the possibly allegorical founder of the Rosicrucian Order, of Karl von Eckartshausen and Anna Sprengel, the name of the alleged source of the Golden Dawn system.

In 1875 Felkin became a medical student at Edinburgh University, although the Golden Dawn had a very eclectic membership base, the

medical profession was well represented and this may be a reflection of the Rosicrucian linking of healing with spiritual development. After a meeting in 1877 with Alexander Murdoch Mackay (1849–90), a Scottish missionary, Felkin interrupted his medical studies and in 1878 joined a Church Mission Society mission to Central Africa. His experiences in Africa were recounted in his obituary in the *British Medical Journal*:

At Khartoum he first met Gordon, and further on Emin Pasha, whose knowledge of natives and local conditions was later to prove so helpful to the band of missionaries. The journey from the Nile to the Great Lakes was fraught with danger and hardship, but eventually Felkin and his companions reached Uganda. In February 1879, he was presented to King M'tesa, whose personal physician he then became. Soon afterwards an anti-missionary movement commenced, and Felkin and his party went in great danger of their lives. His pluck and ready wit did not desert him, and he issued a warning to the king that should any harm come to the missionaries a great disaster would befall the tribes. As a sign that this should be so he foretold that the sun should be darkened; the eclipse duly occurred at the expected time, and Felkin was established as a 'great medicine man'. Much of his time in Uganda was spent in the study of local diseases, and he also made anthropological measurements of the pygmies. He left Uganda with the envoys of King M'tesa to Queen Victoria, and returned with them safely to the Nile, thus destroying an old superstition that no white man could journey to the Great Lakes and back without losing his life. His next expedition was to Zanzibar, where he lived for three years and worked with the explorers Schweinfurth, Buschta, Junker, and Sir Harry Johnston. His interest in the welfare of the natives made him a strong opponent of the slave trade, and he became a very active member of the Anti-Slavery Society.²

Clearly his missionary activities were adventurous; however, the story of Felkin using the eclipse to suggest shamanic powers is interesting in that it foreshadows his career as a magician, and it is possible that it was a story he liked to recount to impress later audiences with his apparent intuitive use of the elements.

In 1881 Felkin returned to Edinburgh to complete his medical studies and a year later married Mary 'Polly' Mander, the daughter of his father's employer at Mander Brothers. His African adventures had broadened his outlook as a medical practitioner, on 9 January 1884 as a final-year student he gave a lecture to the Edinburgh Obstetrical Society entitled 'Notes on Labour in Central Africa'. This lecture was recalled in full in a paper written in 1999, Felkin's genuine admiration for the African obstetrician is remarkable in the colonial era, as is the fact that his publications are still available:

So far as I know, Uganda is the only country in Central Africa where abdominal section is practised with the hope of saving both mother and child. The operation is performed by men, and is sometimes successful; at any rate, one case came under my observation in which both survived. It was performed in 1879 at Kahura. The patient was a fine healthy-looking young woman of about twenty years of age. This was her first pregnancy ... The woman lay upon an inclined bed, the head of which was placed against the side of the hut. She was liberally

supplied with banana wine, and was in a state of semi-intoxication. She was perfectly naked. A band of mbuga or bark cloth fastened her thorax to the bed, another band of cloth fastened down her thighs, and a man held her ankles. Another man, standing on her right side, steadied her abdomen. The operator stood, as I entered the hut, on her left side, holding his knife aloft with his right hand, and muttering an incantation. This being done, he washed his hands and the patient's abdomen, first with banana wine and then with water. Then, having uttered a shrill cry, which was taken up by a small crowd assembled outside the hut, he proceeded to make a rapid cut in the middle line, commencing a little above the pubes, and ending just below the umbilicus. The whole abdominal wall and part of the uterine wall were severed by this incision, and the liquor amnii escaped; a few bleeding-points in the abdominal wall were touched with a red-hot iron by an assistant. The operator next rapidly finished the incision in the uterine wall; his assistant held the abdominal walls apart with both hands, and as soon as the uterine wall was divided he hooked it up also with two fingers. The child was next rapidly removed, and given to another assistant after the cord had been cut, and then the operator, dropping his knife, seized the contracting uterus with both hands and gave it a squeeze or two. He next put his right hand into the uterine cavity through the incision, and with two or three fingers dilated the cervix uteri from within outwards. He then cleared the uterus of clots and the placenta, which had by this time become detached, removing it through the abdominal wound. His assistant endeavoured, but not very successfully, to prevent the escape of the intestines through the wound. The red-hot iron was next used to check some further haemorrhage from the abdominal wound, but I noticed that it was very sparingly applied. All this time the chief 'surgeon' was keeping up firm pressure on the uterus, which he continued to do till it was firmly contracted. No sutures were put into the uterine wall. The assistant who had held the abdominal walls now slipped his hands to each extremity of the wound, and a porous grass mat was placed over the wound and secured there. The bands which fastened the woman down were cut, and she was gently turned to the edge of the bed, and then over into the arms of assistants, so that the fluid in the abdominal cavity could drain away on to the floor. She was then replaced in her former position, and the mat having been removed, the edges of the wound, i.e. the peritoneum, were brought into close apposition, seven thin iron spikes, well polished, like acupuncture needles, being used for the purpose, and fastened by string made from bark cloth. A paste prepared by chewing two divergent roots and spitting the pulp into a bowl was then thickly plastered over the wound, a banana leaf warmed over the fire being placed on the top of that, and, finally, a firm bandage of mbugu cloth completed the operation. Until the pins were placed in position the patient had uttered no cry, and an hour after the operation she appeared to be quite comfortable.³

His interest in tropical medicine dominated his medical career; his publications include the *Geographical Distribution of Tropical Disease* and an article on the climate of the Egyptian Soudan. He was joint author of *Uganda and the Egyptian Soudan*, published in 1882. In 1884 he obtained the diplomas LRCP and LRCS from Edinburgh University, the following year he received a MD degree from Marburg University.

In 1886, he delivered his first lecture on tropical medicine at Minto House, Edinburgh, and from 1886 to 1896 he held the post of lecturer in

tropical diseases at the Edinburgh Medical School. He also carried out private practice in the city; during this time he took up the study of psychotherapy, translating Hiuger's work and writing a book on hypnotism. It was also in 1886 that the Felkins joined the Theosophical Society, they may have come into contact with Theosophy through a Bible study group they were involved with, which introduced them to Hindu literature.⁴

It would appear that the Theosophical Society did not fulfil the spiritual needs of the Felkins and in March 1894 Dr Felkin and Mrs Felkin were initiated into the Amen-Ra temple of the Golden Dawn in Edinburgh, he took the motto *Finem Respice* ('Have regard to the end').

In 1896 the Felkins moved to London where Robert Felkin undertook specialist work in nervous diseases and gynaecology, at the same time being consulting physician to various companies with tropical interests. The move might have been precipitated by Felkin's involvement in the Golden Dawn, because in December of the same year he became a 5=6 member of the second order, taking the motto *Aur Mem Meearab* ('Light, Water, West'), unusually a Hebrew rather than the usual Latin motto.

By 1900 the tensions which would eventually tear the Golden Dawn apart were coming to a head. Within the order was a group founded by Florence Farr called the Sphere Group, this seems to have represented a mystical rather than magical current. In a long and detailed document entitled 'Instruction issued by S.S.D.D. to Members of the Sphere Group. March 1901' Farr explains a complex process of visualization involving astral travel through an expanding sequence of spheres; the purpose of this was to 'transmute evil into good'. She explained that there was:

no connection with any Egyptian Adept ... We are to consider the axis of our globe as consisting of the following symbols: The Cup of the Stolistes⁵ containing a burning heart. This emblem is to be considered as occupying the central axis and the intermediate spaces of the globe between the axis and the surface.

It will be seen in practice that when the operation of gradual enlargement is being carried out, each Sephiroth widens out like a ray from a central Tiphareth for, in a sense, all operations are commenced from the Sephirothic globe of Tiphareth or the absolute Centre – the centre of the Heart.⁶

Farr went on to outline the way in which each globe should be formulated, the first sphere was to be 'formed astrally over the Headquarters of the Order', while successive spheres were to be nine miles, 2,700 miles, 8,100 miles and so on until the solar system itself is visualized. The motifs of cups, hearts and the heart centre would be important for Felkin and his colleagues in the work they would later undertake.

In 1903 when the Golden Dawn finally tore itself apart, Felkin was amongst those who formed the *Ordo Stella Matutina*. The choice of the name of the order was important and symbolic as Richardson and Hughes point out:

The Stella Matutina is, of course, the Morning Star, or Venus, which happens to be both a morning and evening star. When it precedes the Sun before the dawn it is known as Lucifer, the Lightbearer; when it follows the Sun at dusk, it is known as Hesperus. Either way it brackets the impulse of the original

Golden Dawn and can be glimpsed above the horizon when the Sun itself can no longer be seen.⁷

The sun would also be a motif in Felkin's work; for now he was in contact with entities he called the Sun Masters. One of these was known as teacher Ara Ben Shemesh (abbreviated as ABS), the 'Arab Teacher'. In fact Felkin's guides take on a particularly eastern and solar aspect from this point onwards. He was not, however, content with meeting higher beings on the astral plane and yearned to meet them in the flesh. Between 1906 and 1914 became increasingly occupied with meeting the Secret Chiefs and travelled Europe looking for them.

1903 was a year of many changes for Felkin: his wife Mary died and this seems to have caused him to reaffirm his commitment to esoteric Christianity through involvement with the Community of the Resurrection, with whom he spent some time in retreat. The Community had been founded in 1892 by Charles Gore, later a prominent bishop. The Community was one of Anglican priests, who took a vow of celibacy and lived communally. The Community of the Resurrection still exists and is based in Mirfield, Yorkshire, a brief perusal of their website gives no suggestion that they currently espouse esoteric doctrines; however, in the 1900s a number of the Community were interested in Rosicrucianism, in particular one Father Fitzgerald who was instrumental in Felkin's decision to emigrate to New Zealand.

In 1906 Felkin married Harriet Miller, a clairvoyant with the motto, *Quaestor Lucis*, seeker of the Light (QL).

According to King in 1906, Felkin believed he had found what he was looking for: a professor, his adopted daughter and another gentleman, all who he believed were in fact Rosicrucians. The professor's adopted daughter had claimed to be the niece of Anna Sprengel (the Secret Chief who authorized the founding of the original Golden Dawn), and also claimed that her aunt was a member of the same organization as herself.⁸

The following year Felkin was initiated into several new paths. In January he joined an Edinburgh lodge of the Freemasons, by March he was a Master Mason. On 11 April 1907 Felkin was initiated into the Societas Rosicruciana by the Supreme Magus William Wynn Westcott.

It was in 1910 that Felkin met Rudolf Steiner and was genuinely impressed by him: he perceived Steiner as the link to the German Rosicrucian orders and consequently confirming Felkin's beliefs about the Secret Chiefs of the Third Order. In late 1910 Felkin, not being able to personally attend the instruction of Steiner, consulted ABS about his choice of representative – Nevill Meakin. Meakin was approved by ABS and soon was sent to Berlin as Felkin's emissary. Prior to his departure he was conferred the Grade of Adeptus Minor, in a ceremony where A. E. Waite himself acted as Chief Adept.

Neville Gauntlett Tudor Meakin (c. 1876–1912), was a member of the Stella Matutina: he had met the Felkins in 1909, through a mutual friend.⁹ Meakin is a somewhat shadowy figure; he was born in Ambleside, his baptism is recorded as taking place in Ambleside on 1 June 1876 and his father is named as Henry Meyers Meakin. In 1881 he was living with his mother, Roberta Meakin in the St George's Cottage Home Orphanage,

in Ocle Pritchard,¹⁰ where she was the manager of the establishment. The 1891 census lists him as a scholar of Fettes College in Edinburgh. According to Bentham, when he was 21 Meakin's stepfather, a Rev. Meakin, told him that his real name was Tudor and gave him some family papers, which showed him to be the rightful heir to the Grand Mastership of the Order of the Table Round.¹¹ This order had, according to Meakin, been in existence since the time of King Arthur and had passed through generations of his family, admittedly with a break of three hundred years; it was then revived by Meakin's grandfather. This seems unlikely to be anything more than a fanciful explanation of the origins of the order. Meakin's mother died on 1 May 1909; she is described as the wife of Henry Meyers Meakin, there does not seem to have been any stepfather and the name 'Tudor' does not appear on any record. However, Meakin's grandfather was the Rev. John Alexander Deverill Meakin (1805–73). He obtained a BA degree from St John's College, Cambridge and was ordained in Norwich Cathedral on 8 June 1828. After spending a few years as a curate in East Anglia, he became vicar of St Mary's, Speenhamland (a suburb of Newbury, Berkshire) in 1834 and remained the incumbent until his death in 1873. As yet there is no evidence to suggest he was the source of his grandson's claim. Neville Meakin co-authored with Hugh Tempest Sheringham two books, one entitled *The Court of Sacharissa*, which was published by Heineman in 1904, and *The Enemy's Camp*. He also wrote an article called 'The Dream', which was published in the *Occult Review*; he is credited for the revision of the Portal Grade ritual of the Stella Matutina. He wrote *The Assassins – A Romance of the Crusades* under the name Neville Myers Meakin, this is the only example of his using his father's middle name as his own.

On 18 June 1910 Meakin met Wellesley Tudor Pole (1884–1968). Meakin feared he would die without an heir, for he was suffering from tuberculosis, and was actively seeking a possible replacement for the Grand Mastership of the Order of the Table Round. Finding Wellesley Tudor Pole was the fulfilment of his best hopes, for Pole not only also claimed Welsh royal blood, but also was intimately linked with the grail legends. Pole and three female friends had discovered a blue bowl in a well at Glastonbury; the bowl was of mystical significance to Pole and his circle, which included the famous playwright and educator, Alice Buckton. The bowl and the well would resonate with Felkin as the cup and water motif from the Sphere group. Meakin was drawn into Pole's circle and incorporated some of his ideas about the reopening of the Celtic sites into his Arthurian scheme within his Order. Meakin visited the Oratory in September 1910 and soon after began to initiate Pole into the Order of the Table Round.

In the meantime, Meakin had other interests: Edward Waite commented in his notebook:

March 16, 1911: EOL gone to Cairo, largely on Bahai business, but has had 3rd Order papers on Tree of Life. These to be transcribed and shown to SR.¹²

What Baha'i business might Meakin have been on in Cairo? 'Abdu'l-Baha was due to visit the British Isles later that year and it seems reasonable to suppose that Meakin was finalizing travel arrangements. It would seem that

'Abdu'l-Baha was also impressed with Meakin, as Louis Gregory records in his pilgrim's notes:

Pleasure was expressed at seeing 'Abdu'l-Baha look so well. He replied that He felt well. I am glad that you overlook my shortcomings and receive me so cordially. His beautiful face became illumined by a smile and He answered: 'You are welcome, very welcome! I have waited for your coming and (indicating Mr Meakin) have a special guide to take you around.'¹³

So what relevance were Felkin and his circle inferring in the Baha'i teachings? Felkin's astral guides were now solar and this is reflected in the mottoes of Meakin, *Ex Oriente Lux* (The light from the East) (EOL) and of Andrew Cattanach, *Esto Sol Testis* (Be a witness to the Sun) (EST). Andrew Cattanach was a Baha'i from at least 1913¹⁴ and appears on voting lists into the 1920s, he was a member of Stella Matutina, but little is known about him. Their primary contact with the Baha'is may have been Wellesley Tudor Pole, who had first encountered the Baha'i teachings in Constantinople in 1908,¹⁵ possibly through the American Baha'i Stanwood Cobb (1881–1982) who was working at the university in Constantinople at the time. There is solar imagery in the Baha'i writings, indeed, Baha'u'llah refers to himself as the 'Sun of the Iqan' (*shams al-Iqan*). However, there may be a simpler inference, 'Abdu'l-Baha may have been supposed by Felkin to be one of the elusive Secret Chiefs, perhaps an earthly embodiment of Ara Ben Shemesh. Certainly the Baha'i teachings on the unity of East and West would have resonated with *Aur Mem Meeerab* and *Ex Oriente Lux*, underpinned by Pole and his Grail quest, with all the symbolism that entailed.

In September 1911 Felkin met 'Abdu'l-Baha in London at the home of Lady Blomfield.¹⁶ Felkin was given two ringstones; he would later pass these on to Maurice Chambers, one ring was subsequently lost in Egypt but the other was later passed to a Baha'i family in New Zealand. No record of the meeting remains; however, a letter exists written to Maurice Chambers from 'Abdu'l-Baha when Chambers was in Egypt at the end of the First World War waiting to go home, but trying also to get to Palestine to see Abdu'l-Baha. In this letter 'Abdu'l-Baha remarks on Maurice's 'teacher', mentioning that he had met him, 'the honoured Dr Felkin', in London.

Meakin's premonition of his death before he could secure the succession of the Order came true; shortly before he was due to initiate Pole and Felkin, he died on 4 October 1912. His address at the time of his death is recorded as 47 Bassett Road, North Kensington; the National Probate Calendar names the executor of his will as Hugh Tempest Sheringham, with whom he had written two books. Sheringham would later become editor of *The Field* magazine and a noted authority on fishing; however, he does not seem to have shared Meakin's interest in the esoteric.

Felkin consulted Arthur Edward Waite (1857–1942) another Golden Dawn practitioner about the matter of the Grand Mastership of the Order of the Table Round and eventually, when Felkin settled in New Zealand he took all the signs, symbols and rituals of the Order with him. Wellesley Tudor Pole no longer gave the matter serious consideration.¹⁷ Pole wrote¹⁸ to Harriet Felkin arguing the impossibility of Felkin becoming head of the Order of the Table Round when he was not a member of the family, despite

attempts of the last Grand Master, Neville Meakin, to invest him, this suggests Pole was at least open-minded about the claims which Meakin made to the antiquity of the Order. Indeed, perhaps the most extraordinary thing about Meakin is that Steiner, Felkin and Pole, all intelligent men, took him so seriously, and that 'Abdu'l-Baha entrusted him to be the guide of Louis Gregory, there must have been more to him and the Order of the Table Round than the existent records show.

In 1912 Felkin and his second wife Harriet and his daughter Ethel visited New Zealand for the first time. Felkin had been recommended to a group calling themselves the Society of the Southern Cross, based in Havelock North, by Father Fitzgerald of the Community of the Resurrection. This first visit lasted three months and saw the foundation of the Whare Ra Temple.

Felkin was in Germany when war broke out in 1914; he returned to England and joined the Home Guard, two years later his health broke down and in 1916 he settled permanently in New Zealand. Felkin's activities are described by Pat Zalewski:

During the ten years Felkin lived at Whare Ra he ran the temple like a military operation. Classes were held on week nights for Outer Order members in which esoteric philosophy and ritual were taught. On weekends he held classes for Inner Order members to hone their knowledge to a fine point. These included ritual, Enochian pronunciation and meditative exercises in the vault. By 1926, the year of Felkin's death, the Inner Order had grown to over 100 members, with an unspecified number in the Outer Order. The Inner Order group was an extremely wealthy one and had members in many of the key local bodies throughout the Havelock North and Hastings area and collectively wielded a tremendous amount of power ...¹⁹

He continued with his medical and esoteric work until his death on 28 December 1926. He was buried facing Whare Ra, dressed in the robes of a grand master of the Order of the Table Round.

Conclusions

Felkin was clearly a gifted man, with many facets to his life and work but what does his life mean in terms of the relationship between magic and religion in the 21st century? Modern thinking neatly divides up religions, leaving little room for multiple religious identities. This is partly because of the treatment of Religious Education in schools, where children are taught that there are six major world religions and because of time constraints, these are reduced almost to caricatures, with little consideration that some experiences, for example mysticism, might cut across several traditions at once. The concept that religions are distinct from each other reinforces the concept of rivalries and individual choice: personal choice is of course a modern phenomenon. The Internet allows a seeker to access arcane knowledge in seconds; the slow pace of religious tradition has been speeded up so that there is no longer room for inference, ambiguity and relevance, now that direct information can be obtained from Haifa, Rome or Mecca. Whilst it is true that small fringe groups within mainstream faiths can have a disproportionate presence on the Internet, it has never been easier to obtain accurate information and in a multicultural nation actually meet with people of different faiths, sample

their beliefs and cultures before making decisions about them. A further change has been the decline of Christianity and the cultural supremacy of the Church of England. Felkin, along with most of his contemporaries was an Anglican; furthermore, he was a practising Anglican, a missionary and collaborator with the Community of the Resurrection, yet he saw no conflict between Anglicanism and his occult work; indeed, he saw them as complementary. This is because his understanding of Christianity was not entirely orthodox. In the passage quoted below, which is taken from a talk he gave to the sira in New Zealand in February 1921 describing the history of the Rosicrucian Society and the life of its founder Christian Rosenkreutz:

Now these twelve were possessed or imbued by the idea that the Christianity of that period was only a distorted image. They were filled with the greatness of Christianity, yet they were forced at times to appear to be inimical to it as then practised. Their great aim was to procure a synthesis of all religions, not merely as a fraction, but also as a result of practical spiritual life; and they wished to elucidate, if possible, that Christianity was the culmination of all the various religious systems which had preceded it.

(emphasis added)²⁰

And in the same address:

The revelation that he gave them was called by these twelve the true Christianity, the Synthesis of all Religions.²¹

Felkin's understanding of Christianity was that it was an all-embracing system that could synthesize all other religions: this idea was fairly widespread in occult circles and the distinction between an occult order and a religion allowed such ideas room to flourish. In the early years of the 20th century it was problematic to declare oneself anything but an Anglican, but the existence of auxiliary religious and spiritual organizations, orders and lodges allowed spiritual experimentation without forfeiting the almost tribal loyalty to the Church of England felt by most English people. The decline of the Church of England as a social force and the rise in the working with non-Christian deities by occultists has been almost concurrent (although probably unrelated): this has resulted in many occultists preferring to be labelled as 'Pagan' if they choose a religious label at all.²²

So Felkin was both an Anglican Christian and an occultist, but was he a Baha'i? His understanding of all religions being one would have made acceptance of the Baha'i teachings as they were understood in the West at the time a simple step. But did he accept 'Abdu'l-Baha as one of the Secret Chiefs he had been searching for? Unless further evidence emerges that will never be known for sure; however, his affiliation as a Baha'i is confirmed by the highest authority:

We have been asked, however, to state that inasmuch as Mr Maurice Chambers, who is known to be one of New Zealand's earliest Baha'is, himself testifies that Dr Felkin was a Baha'i and, in fact, that it was Dr Felkin who taught Mr Chambers the Faith, there seems to be no reason to doubt that Dr Felkin was a believer.²³

Interestingly there is no mention of Felkin on the website of the NSA of the Baha'is of New Zealand.

What did he hope to achieve by setting up esoteric orders in New Zealand and what was the attraction of these remote islands? Admittedly New Zealand had a pleasant climate and the demographic to allow Felkin to set up a medical practice, but so did plenty of other places. His introduction to the Society of the Southern Cross by Father Fitzgerald was, of course, significant but perhaps there was a deeper reason going back to the Sphere Group and the concept of a world-enveloping spiritual network. Just as Wellesley Tudor Pole was working to reawaken the heart centres of the British Isles, Felkin may have been thinking globally, wanting to physically create a global spiritual network. Another Theosophist who was known to Felkin was the explorer Percy Fawcett (1867–c.1925) who along with his eldest son, disappeared under unknown circumstances in 1925 during an expedition it was claimed intended to find 'Z' – his name for what he believed to be an ancient lost city in the uncharted jungles of Brazil. Correspondence has recently come to light that indicated that rather than looking for a lost city, Fawcett was intending to set up a theosophically-based community in the heart of the Brazilian jungle. As yet it is pure conjecture but this would seem to be a similar concept to that of Havelock North in the southern hemisphere, it may be that they intended these communities to be the nuclei of a worldwide spiritual network.

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Endnotes

1. Francis King, *Modern Ritual Magic: The Rise of Western Occultism*. Avery Publishing Group, 1989, 28.
2. Robert William Felkin, MD, FRSEd, Late Lecturer on Tropical Diseases and Climatology, Edinburgh (Obituary) *The British Medical Journal*, 1(3449), 12 February 1927, 309.
3. Peter Dunn, 'Perinatal lessons from the past: Robert Felkin MD (1853–1926) and Caesarean delivery in Central Africa (1879) *Arch Dis Child Fetal Neonatal Ed.* May 1999, 80(3): F250–F251 doi:10.1136/fn.80.3.F250.
4. Robert S. Ellwood, *Islands of the Dawn: The Story of Alternative Spirituality in New Zealand*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993, 162.
5. A symbol of importance in the Golden Dawn system, in particular relating to the Practicus 3=8 grade, in which members were advised to meditate on this symbol, which is similar to the Ace of Cups, cups being the Tarot equivalent of hearts. The cup is a symbol of spiritual receptiveness and the aim of the meditation is to become like the cup, open to being filled.
6. Farr's letter quoted Robert Gilbert, *The Golden Dawn Scrapbook: The Rise and Fall of a Magical Order*, York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, 1997, 144.
7. Alan Richardson and Geoff Hughes, *Ancient Magicks for a New Age: Rituals from the Merlin Temple. The Magick of the Dragon Kings*, St Paul, MN: Llewellyn, 1989, 15.

8. King, *Ritual Magic* 99.
9. Patrick Benham, *The Avalonians*, Glastonbury: Gothic Image, 1993, 102.
10. <http://www.forest-of-dean.net/fodmembers/index.php?mode=thread&id=19883>.
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12. Arthur Waite, 'The Testimonies of Frater Finem Respice, Imperator or the Templum Stellae Matutinae, On Matters connected With the alleged Third Order, the German Rosy Cross and the Business of his Temple', manuscript, Hermetics.Org, The Hermetic Resource Site, Accessed 2013, http://www.hermetics.org/pdf/waite/A.E._Waite_-_Ordo_RR_et_AC.pdf.
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15. Wellesley Tudor Pole, 'A Wonderful movement in the East, A visit to Abdul-Baha at Alexandria', *Star of the West*, 1911, 1(18), 1–4, reprinted from the 29 December 1910 issue of *The Christian Commonwealth* (London).
16. This is indicated in an unpublished tablet of 'Abdu'l-Baha to Maurice S. Chambers dated 30 March 1919 translated by Shoghi Effendi in an unpublished letter to Ahmad Sohrab dated 30 March 1919 cited in a Universal House of Justice Research Department Memorandum 'Existence of Correspondence between 'Abdu'l-Bahá and New Zealand Believers during Spring 1919', dated 21 July 2005.
17. Benham, *Avalonians*, 101–4.
18. University of St Andrews, Papers of Sir David Russell, Major Wellesley Tudor Pole Papers, Papers of the Order of the Table Round, 1918–1922, Call Number ms38515/6/37/2 <https://pacific.st-andrews.ac.uk/Dserve/dserve.exe?dsqIni=Dserve.ini&dsqApp=Archive&dsqCmd=Show.tcl&dsqDb=Catalog&dsqPos=o&dsqSearch=%28%28text%29%3D%27Felkin%27%29>.
19. Patrick J. Zalewski (edited by Joseph Lisiewski), *Secret Inner Order Rituals of the Golden Dawn with the Approval of Israel Regardie*, Phoenix, AZ: Falcon Press, 1988, 8. <http://www.scribd.com/doc/13030052/Zalewski-Secret-Inner-Order-Rituals-of-the-Golden-Dawn->.
20. Robert Felkin, Lecture of the Study Group of the Societas Rosicruciana, Monday, 14 February, 6.30 pm. [Christian Rosenkreutz], mss, n.d. [1921?] <http://magicoftheordinary.wordpress.com/2008/07/09/the-history-of-the-rr-et-ac-by-robert-w-felkin/>.
21. Ibid.
22. At a public meeting of the OTO attended by the writer, it was stressed that the OTO was not a religion and that consequently membership was not incompatible with Paganism.
23. From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of New Zealand, 29 June 1976 in Collis Featherstone, 'Introduction', *Arohanui: Letters from Shoghi Effendi to New Zealand*, Suva: Bahá'í Publishing Trust Fiji, 1982.