

Placing Western Esotericism on the Map:

Exploring the Geographic Distribution of a Modern Occult Organization¹

By John L. Crow

Florida State University

[Slide 1] Since the emergence of the academic study of Western Esotericism, there has been a persistent debate as to where the line between east and west should be drawn. The root question is what, in particular, makes so-called Western Esotericism “western”? Much of this debate is based on tracing the historical continuities of esoteric ideas and practices, polemical conflicts, or academic discourses. Yet few, if any, of these attempts have tried to draw Western Esotericism cartographically. This may be due to many difficulties and limitations associated with Western Esotericism itself. First, by its nature, Western Esotericism seems to manifest in individuals or small groups in a variety of places. This pattern seems to resist the process of mapping esoteric currents, polemics, and discourses. However, with the rise of globalization, mass communication, and the normalization of many western esoteric ideas and practices, opportunities to map the geographical distribution of esoteric phenomenon emerge.

[Slide 2] In the early twentieth century, poet, mountain climber and occultist, Aleister Crowley, assumed control of the organization, Ordo Templi Orientis (O.T.O.). Until his death in 1947, Crowley reorganized the group and integrated Thelema, the religio-philosophy he founded in 1904, as central to the organization’s message. After his death there was, at times, confusion and breaks in the organization’s leadership. However, in 1985 new management assumed control of the organization and since then the Ordo Templi Orientis has slowly expanded across the world spreading the message Thelema. From 1989 through 2003, the organization released annual demographic information, noting the membership numbers and

¹ I would like to thank Clive Harper and Ordo Templi Orientis for their assistance in this research.

countries of presence. Also beginning in the latter part of the twentieth century, there has been concerted efforts by Thelemites, both Ordo Templi Orientis members and non-members, to translate and publish the sacred texts of Thelema. Both of these data sets allow the geographic mapping of presence and interest in the organization and texts of Crowley's religio-philosophy. With these maps a general picture emerges of just how "western" this form of Western Esotericism really is in practice and how wide spread Thelema, at least in the form of the Ordo Templi Orientis, and its ideas has penetrated different parts of the world. This method of mapping organizations and text translation/distribution also opens up opportunities to explore other sites where the geographic boundaries of Western Esotericism arise.

All Must Be Done Well and With Business Way:

the Worldwide Spread of Ordo Templi Orientis, Inc. from 1989 to 2003

[Slide 3] Beginning in 1987, the international treasurer of the Ordo Templi Orientis began releasing demographic information about the size and location of the organization's membership. However, for the first two years the data was haphazard and incomplete. In 1989, a format emerged that was generally used until 2003, when the international membership data ceased being released. This does not mean the data was standardized though. Each year there were notes about changes and errors. Also the internal means of how membership was calculated varied. Despite these limitations, the data is still useful to get an overall sense of the O.T.O.'s distribution. Moreover, these organization's difficulties demonstrate just some of the problems esoteric organizations face when attempting to expand and take advantage of globalization, mass communications and the normalization of esoteric ideas worldwide. While all organizations struggle with expansion, especially international growth, esoteric organizations have the added challenges of generally low participation,

organizational secrecy, and marginalization and stigmatizing of membership by larger society.

During Aleister Crowley's lifetime, the membership of the O.T.O. was disparate and varied. There was an attempt at centralization of authority and oversight, but it was far from what are seen as corporate standards today. In contrast to Crowley's loose-knit organizational structure, the modern O.T.O. has implemented a worldwide corporate organization having membership in dozens of countries, a tight-knit, multi-level administrative structure, legal and organization headquarters in three nations, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, and it routinely enters into contracts, and defends itself legally in various disputes including copyright infringement, contract negotiation and religious vilification. There can be no doubt that the modern O.T.O. has attempted to merge modern globalization business practices with the dissemination of its esoteric religio-philosophical ideas. While these are not exclusive to the O.T.O., these modern manifestations of Western Esoteric groups offers a way to inject quantifiable data into a debate that has often lacked this kind of analysis.

Listen to the Numbers & the Words:

Mapping the Membership of Ordo Templi Orientis, Inc. from 1989 to 2003

[Slide 4] Having given a brief introduction as to what is different about modern, multi-national esoteric organizations, the following are some examples of what mapping can illustrate. The following slide shows the nations with resident members of Ordo Templi Orientis as of the year 1989 according to the data supplied by the O.T.O. Note that these numbers designate both initiates and associate members or what one might call a correspondence member. As can be seen, I have divided the membership numbers into four divisions with blue indicating fewer than twenty-five members in the nation, green indicating twenty-five to ninety-nine members, orange indicating one hundred to four hundred ninety-

nine, and red as five hundred and greater. Thus blue countries indicate regions where the O.T.O. is still in its nascence; green indicates an emerging level of establishment; orange indicates a fully established and stable presence, and red a completely sustained and long established presence. Over the fifteen years covered, only the United States is colored red.

As this map indicates, in 1989 the predominance of the OTO membership was in the United States, Canada, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. It was emerging in Africa, and South America, and completely absent from Asia with the exception of Japan. **[Slide 5]** This slide animates the emergence of the O.T.O. in other parts of the world. I will let it loop a few times. First, note how in North America, the membership in the United States grows substantially over the time period, but Canada's stays relatively the same. In Central and South America, the O.T.O. struggles to maintain a sustained presence with the exception of Brazil in which it becomes established and stabilized quickly. In Europe we see the sustained presences of nations such as the U.K., Italy, and the Scandinavian countries maturing and stabilizing. We also see the general emergence of the O.T.O. in Eastern European nations and also Russia. It is also important to note that right from the beginning of this data the former Yugoslavian countries had a very strong O.T.O. presence and despite national conflict, this presence persisted with the exception of Bosnia. Looking at Africa, we can see there is continual activity in Western Africa and South Africa, but it is only in South Africa that any kind of persistence is seen and even here the numbers are low. Looking at Asia, we see that a low presence is continually seen in Japan and members begin to emerge in other Asian nations such as Korea and the Philippines, but we must keep in mind these numbers are extremely low. With the exception of Taiwan, none of them get over two members. The same can be said of the Middle East with exception of Israel. In Australia and New Zealand, we see a slow progression of members with Australia close to stabilizing—a process it completed after 2003.

[Slide 6] Here is how the map looks in 2003. Over the fifteen years, the O.T.O. triples in size and has a broad interest in a large part of the world. [Slide 7] This map shows the combined countries where the O.T.O. had a member at least once during the fifteen year period. However, this map is misleading. From it one might think that the O.T.O.'s religio-philosophy has spread broadly and that a large number of people across the world are interested in it and joining. This just is not true. [Slide 8] This first map removes all nations that never achieved an annual membership of at least ten. As become apparent, most of what seemed to be O.T.O. expansion disappears. However, even this map presents a misleading case. [Slide 9] This map is a better indication of where the O.T.O. is really significant. It highlights the nations that had, over the fifteen years, at least once achieved twenty-five members annually. As we can see, despite various individuals scattered throughout the world indicating some interest in the O.T.O., the Ordo Templi Orientis's sustained membership can be found in nations that are generally considered Western and that with the exception of Japan, no nation generally considered Eastern indicate a sustained presence for the Ordo Templi Orientis.

[Slide 10] Another map showing the similar results indicates where the central religio-philosophical text of Thelema has been localized. Called *Liber AL* by Crowley, this short text of three chapters contains the basic premises of Thelema. As such, when a Thelemic presence becomes established, it is not surprising to see the local population adapt the text to its particular needs. In many cases this means translation, a time consuming task, or sometimes it means publishing a local version in the original English. In either situation, the publication of *Liber AL* in a particular nation seems to have some correlation with O.T.O. presences that have a long term history with a high number of members, although the strength of this correlation would need a more significant investigation. In some ways, though, this is common sense. Not all members can be expected to learn English to read the originals, nor

can a movement spread without having core documents localized. Still, these efforts require at least some level of sustained interest and effort to achieve local translation and production. This is only found in typically western nations. One last thing to note about this map is that it covers versions of *Liber AL* published up until the present. Thus the Russian, Polish, Finnish, and others, have been published since 2003.

More Questions than Answers?

[Slide 11] These maps do raise a number of questions. Since the original documents created by Crowley were in English, it is not surprising to see the Ordo Templi Orientis flourishing within many English speaking nations. Thus its having international corporate representation in the United States, United Kingdom and Australia is understandable. However, there are significant differences between the English speaking nations. Why, during a time period when membership was growing by the hundreds in the United States did Canada, which is two-thirds English speaking, stay approximately the same? Similarly, why in Crowley's native England do the numbers of members pale in comparison to the United States? Clearly there are other factors that need to be explored. Conversely, why is it that Japan is generally the only so-called eastern nation to show a sustained presence of the O.T.O.? Is it because of the strong presence of western ideas and/or military personnel? It is important to keep in mind that these numbers do not indicate nationality, only presences. If an American armed service member was stationed in Japan or an expatriate was located in Japan, their numbers would be included for the nation. An alternative explanation could be Japan's openness to new religious movements as has been noted by scores of scholars. We might also ask why is it that the Ordo Templi Orientis flourishes in Brazil but nowhere else in Central and South America. One guess might be the influence of a previous proponent of Thelema, Marcello Motta, who lived in Brazil and wrote about the movement and translated texts. His legacy may be an influence in the reemergence of the O.T.O. in Brazil. We have

seen recently the resurgence of Theosophy in Denmark spurred by one person's efforts, so it is not too difficult to believe. Another, less easy to answer question is why the strong and sustained presence in the former Yugoslavian nations. In all of these instances, displaying the data in the form of maps helps reveal particular and interesting trends that might not be as apparent when presented in textual or tabular format. This presentation has focused on the Ordo Templi Orientis, but the same methods could be used for other organizations. I will give one example, The Theosophical Society.

**Differences and Similarities between Worldwide Distribution of Members
between the Ordo Templi Orientis and the Theosophical Society**

[Slide 12] The basic history of the Theosophical Society is probably known to most, if not all present, so I will not spend time reviewing it. To demonstrate a similar map for the Theosophical Society, I chose the year 1939. We can see the distribution in membership is similar to the O.T.O. However, there are some significant differences. First, the color scheme is generally orange and red. This is because the Theosophical Society had more members spread broadly. Secondly, we can see a large, established membership in South and Southeast Asia, and also Central and South America. These are areas the Ordo Templi Orientis has not become established in. Another problem with the map is that it does not have enough different gradients of membership to convey the differences. A nation with 500 members is the same as one with 4000 members. If one were focusing on the Theosophical Society, an appropriate scale would have to be determined to better represent the data. Here I used the former scale so a direct comparison could be made.

Despite all these differences, we do see a couple similarities to the O.T.O. If we removed India, Burma, Sri Lanka, and the nascent Egypt, we see the same swath from Africa to China uncolored. Also, we should note that the so-called "eastern" nations in which Theosophy was present were also ones where European colonialism was established. This

does beg the question of how “eastern” they are or what is the relationship with western colonialism and the presence of western esoteric groups in Eastern countries. Nevertheless, there are significant differences between the organizations and the data only allows a minimal number of similarities to be noted.

Conclusion: Maps a Useful Way to View Western Esotericism

[Slide 13] The academic field of Western Esotericism is still wrestling with the category of “western” and all its connected ideological, colonial, and discursive issues. Nevertheless, there are real people and groups associated with this phenomenon and maps can be a useful tool to visualize this data. The previous examples demonstrate, at least for the groups discussed, a general correlation for Western Esotericism to manifest in nations categorized as “western” or ones with a “western” colonial past. This seems to give some credence to there being a “western” aspect to the phenomenon contained under the domain of “Western Esotericism.” However, these conclusions can go only so far. The two groups briefly mentioned hardly represent the whole of Western Esotericism and are more properly categorized under the sub-group of occult organizations. These kinds of macro view maps can only indicate trends, they prove little.

That said, they still open up opportunities to view the data in new and interesting ways. Also, these maps only touch on what can be displayed and understood with maps. Maps can display a variety of data including localized areas, the distribution of members of an organization, the places in a country where events or group meetings took place. One could track the residences of an individual, or the sphere of influence any one person or group. But this only notes people and organizations. One could also use data regarding goods sold. Where do particular publishing companies get distributed, where do certain texts emerge, what are the routes of travel for goods and services? These are all aspects of Western

Esotericism that have a quantitative status and that means it can be mapped and those maps could reveal new and exciting things.

As Western Esotericism continues to develop and expand, it must adopt tools and methods that can add to its ability to create knowledge. Cartography is one of those underutilized tools that can and should be used more often. While the old adage is true, the map is not the territory; the map can certainly tell us many things about the territory previously unknown. Thank you.

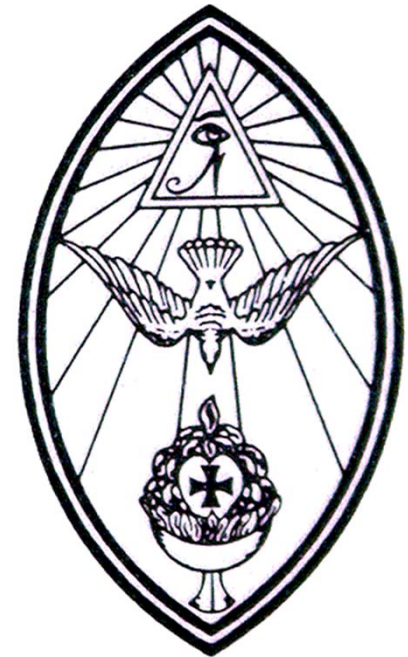
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Ordo Templi Orientis

- Aleister Crowley assumes control
- Leads organization until death in 1947
- Leadership continuity problems
- 1985 new management
- Organization begins to grow across world
- O.T.O. and non members publish *Liber AL* across the world

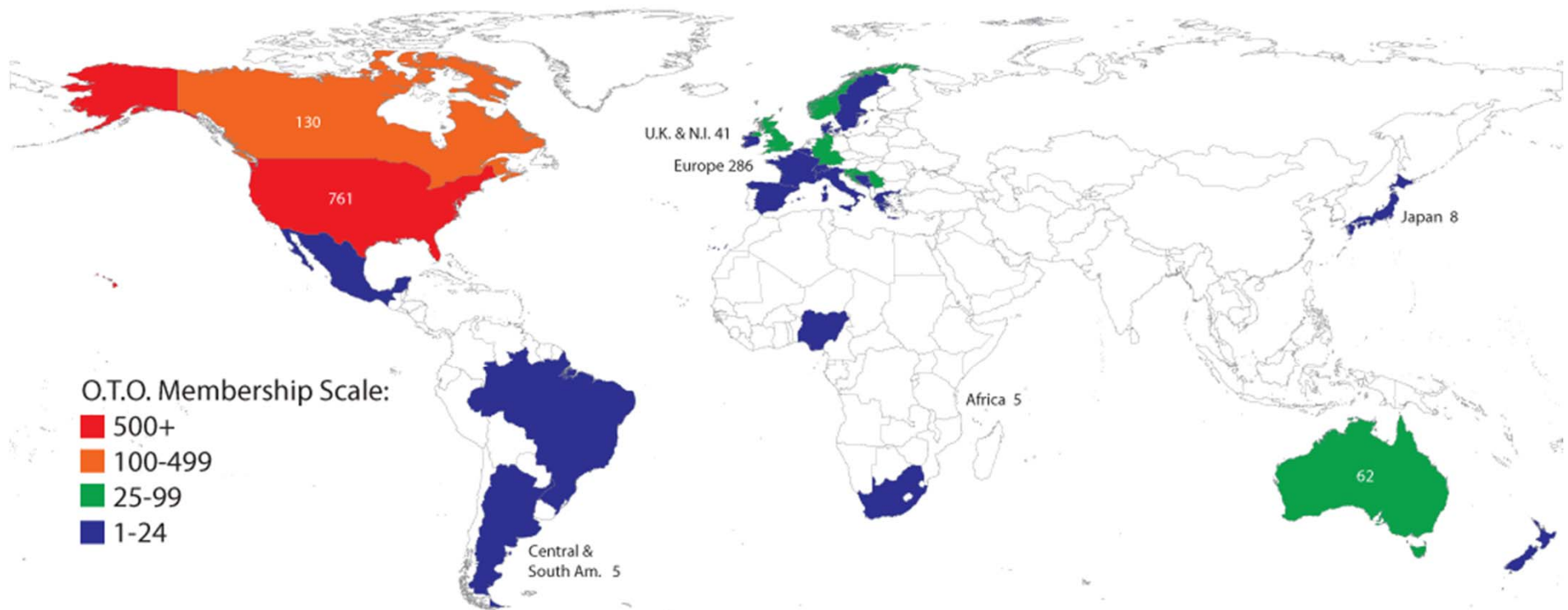


Ordo Templi Orientis

- Demographic data begins 1987
- General format emerges in 1989
- Data contains inconsistencies
- Issues with how membership was determined
- Illustrate difficulties with expansion
- Expansion requires a tight structure and control

O.T.O. Member Distribution, 1989

Ordo Templi Orientis Worldwide Membership Distribution
for the year 1989

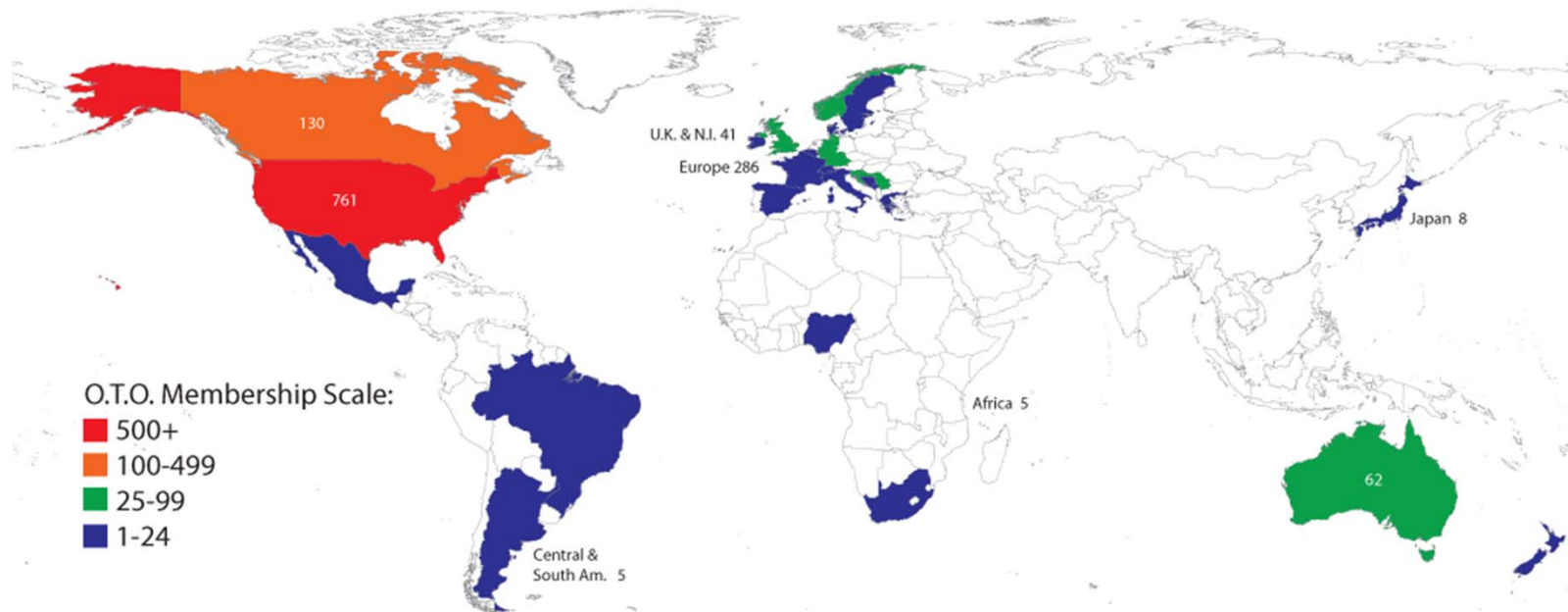


O.T.O. Membership 1989-2003

Because this is a PDF, the animation on this page does not function.
Please see the following URL to see the animated map of OTO expansion:

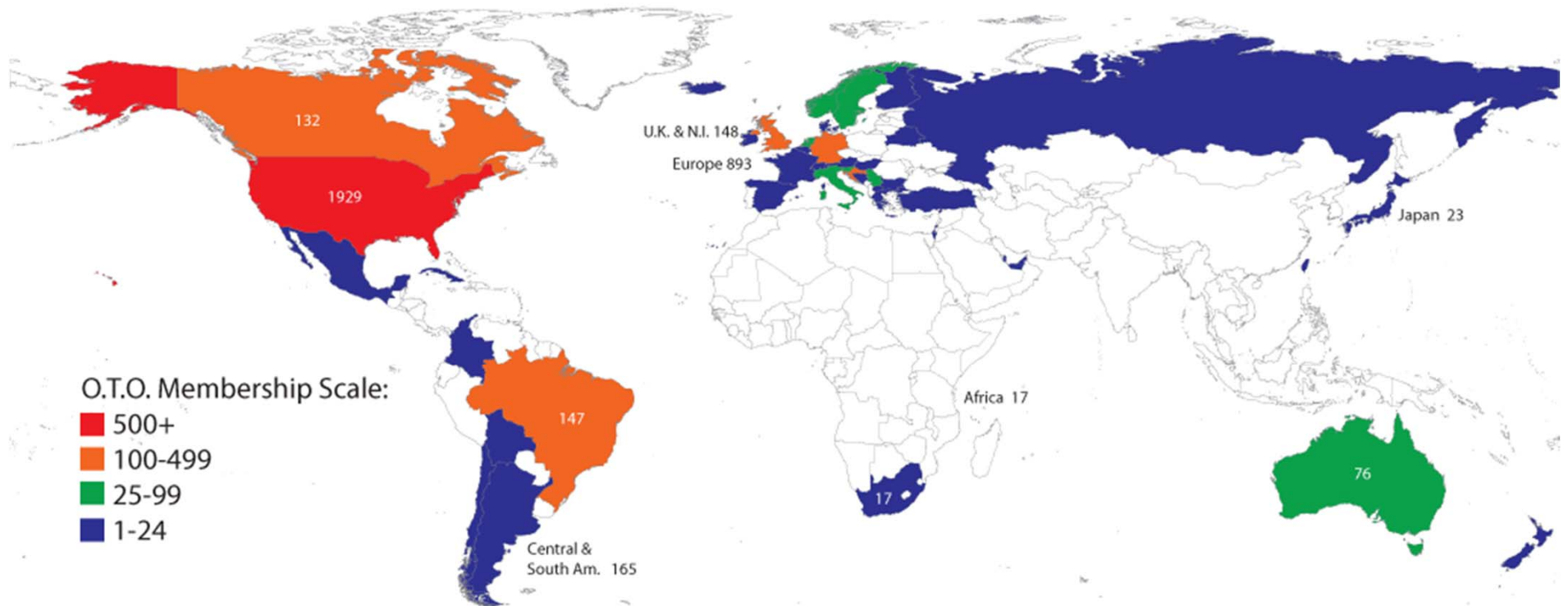
http://www.thelema.com/images/OTO_expansion_1989-2003.gif

Ordo Templi Orientis Worldwide Membership Distribution
for the year 1989



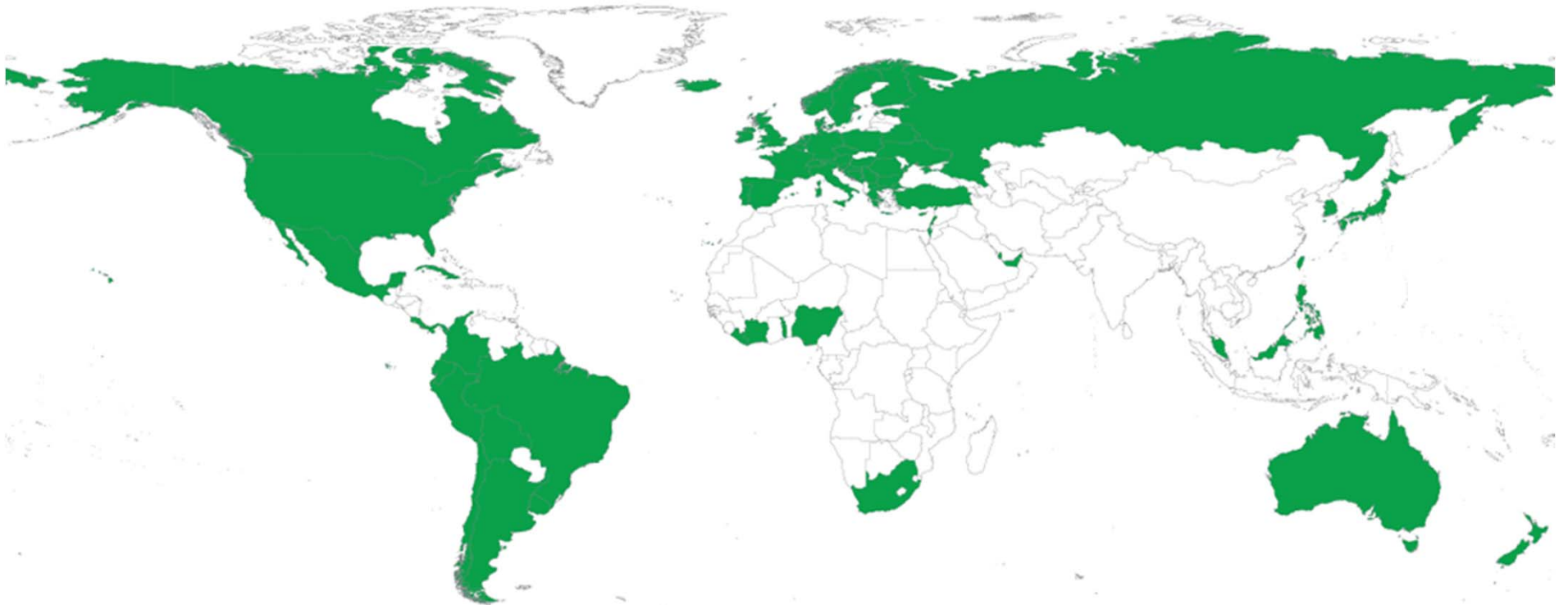
O.T.O. Member Distribution, 2003

Ordo Templi Orientis Worldwide Membership Distribution
for the year 2003



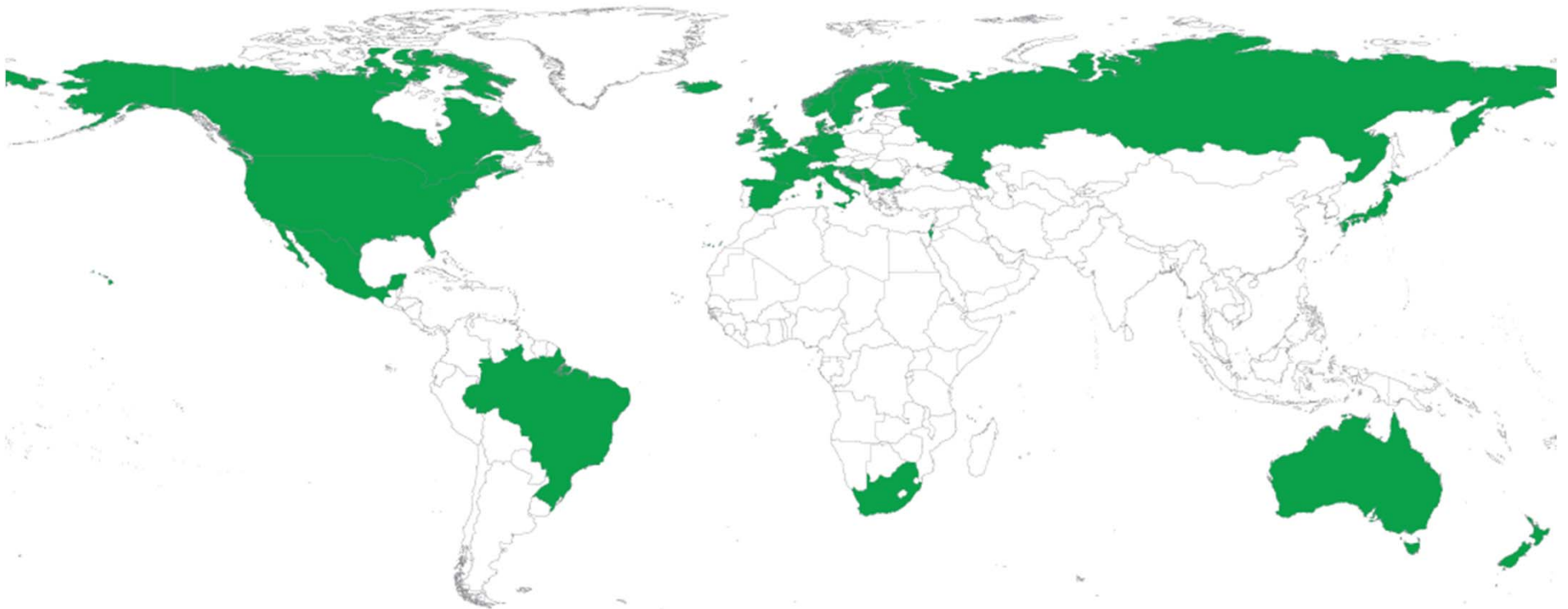
O.T.O. Presence over 15 Years

Ordo Templi Orientis Worldwide Membership Distribution
for the years 1989-2003



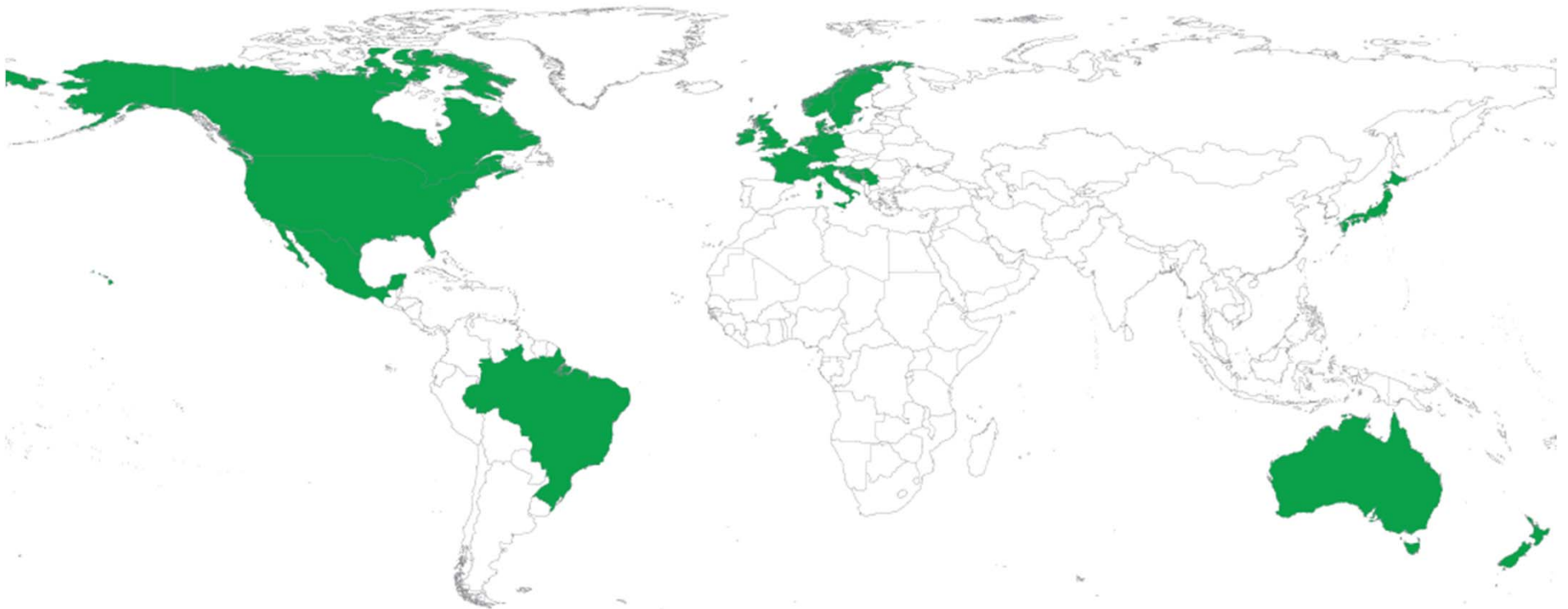
O.T.O. Presence 10 or More

Ordo Templi Orientis Worldwide Membership Distribution
for the years 1989-2003; 10 or More Members



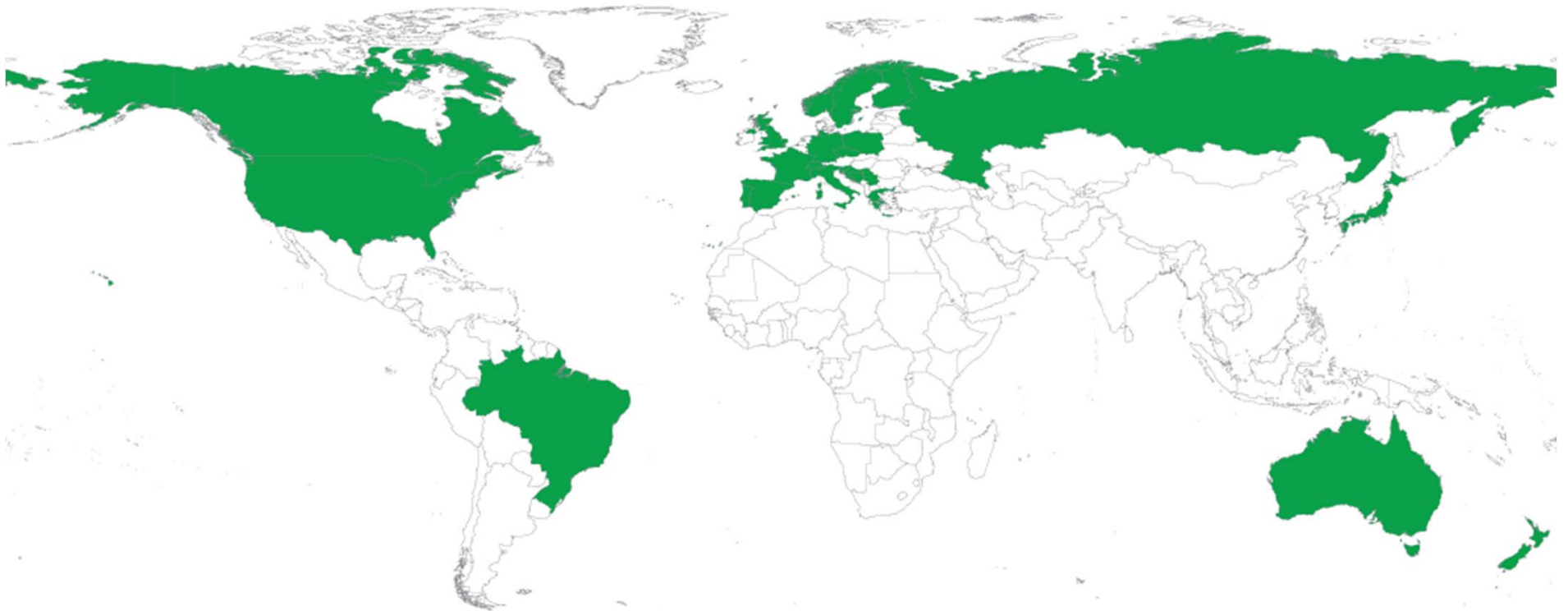
O.T.O. Presence 25 or More

Ordo Templi Orientis Worldwide Membership Distribution
for the years 1989-2003; 25 or More Members



Published Version of *Liber AL*

Countries Where *Liber AL* Has Been Translated & Published



Questions Based on Maps

- Why did the US grow so rapidly but not Canada?
- Why is growth the U.S.A. so much greater than in Crowley's native U.K.?
- Why is Japan the only Eastern nation with a sustained presence?
- Why Brazil in South America but not others?
- Why continually popular in former Yugoslavian nations?

Conclusion

- A tentative correlation between the category “western” and the place where “occult” groups spread
- Many opportunities for cartography to add to knowledge of individuals, groups and phenomenon
- Cartography a useful tool in quantifying aspects of Western Esotericism