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The Spiritualism of Madame Blavatsky:

An Introduction to Western Esotericism and the Life and Writings of a Victorian Occultist.

Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831 – 1891) was an early proponent of the popular and diverse Victorian religious movement known as modern Spiritualism. In 1875, she went on to co-found the Theosophical Society, an organization that was concerned with ascertaining the hidden (occult) mysteries of the world. In 1878 she relocated this fledgling society to India which resulted in her assimilation of Eastern terminology and teachings as she was one of the first individuals to seriously contemplate the Eastern religious traditions. It is typical of Theosophists to claim that the Theosophical Society always remained distinct from Spiritualism, maintaining that Blavatsky merely used the Spiritualist movement as a springboard to establish her Theosophical Society; however, the truth is not so dichotomous. Rather, it appears that Theosophy remained closely connected with the Spiritualist movement throughout the nineteenth century and merely presented a more philosophically advanced form of Spiritualism mixed with elements of Western Esotericism that incorporated Eastern terminology and ideology. The overall purpose of this article is to acquaint the reader with an understanding of Western Esotericism through an examination of the life of Madame Blavatsky and her

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Theosophical Society, and to provide evidence that the Theosophical Society remained firmly rooted in Victorian Spiritualism.

Defining Western Esotericism

Blavatsky's Theosophical Society has been categorised as a Western Esoteric movement. The term Western Esotericism may be unfamiliar to some readers, but it is synonymous with another word which has an ominous connotation across the diverse circles of the Western world- the occult. The term 'occult' is typically associated with a wide range of different topics such as near death experiences, Wicca, Spiritualism, crystal gazing, tarot cards, yoga, kabbalah, hermeticism (a belief in the teachings of Hermes Trismegistus), Freemasonry, and astrology to name only a few, but what does the word 'occult' actually mean? The word occult is derived from the Latin term *occultus* which signifies something that is hidden; now out of the list of subjects associated with occultism listed above it should be noted that none of them would be considered hidden. In fact, throughout the last several hundred years numerous books have been published expounding upon all of these occult subjects; thus, the original definition of this term has been culturally changed to define something else. As 'occult' no longer denotes a hidden philosophy, a new word has been employed which describes the intellectual history of these 'occult' subjects and their involvement within the academic discipline of history now referred to as Western Esotericism.

The first word in this term, 'Western' signifies something that is relevant in the Western world. This region could be geographically defined as Europe and North America. The second word 'esotericism' is a vague term that comes from two Latin words- *eso* (inside) and *ter* (opposition). Thus, a literal definition of Western Esotericism means 'something that is opposed to Western (mainstream) teaching.' It seems indisputable that the

dominant religious tradition in the Western world during the Victorian era was Christianity. Consequently, the original definition of Western Esotericism meant ‘something that was not Western (i.e. Christian);’ however, even this definition is incorrect as many esoteric groups have emerged out of Christian circles, while other groups were meant to effectively function within Christianity.² Antoine Faivre the renowned pioneer of Western Esoteric scholarship suggested that ‘esoteric currents could not, except by intellectual dishonesty, be defined as by nature marginal to the churches.’³ Given the ambiguity of this term, Faivre established four main criteria to determine whether a religious belief could be classified as ‘Western Esoteric.’ Though these classifications are open to debate in the emerging academic field of Western Esotericism, these guidelines are generally accepted as typical classifications for Western Esoteric beliefs. These include:

1) *Correspondences* – This refers that all of nature in all of its multiple parts (i.e. stars, planets, humans, animals, plants, minerals, states of mind, health, and disease) are linked through a series of correspondences or analogies.⁴ This is where the saying which is commonly employed in occult circles ‘as above, so below’ originated from.

2) *Living nature* – This characteristic is directly related to the concept of correspondences defined above. This phrase expresses the idea that nature ‘must be read like a book.’⁵ In other words the earth (‘mother nature’) also corresponds with the human condition.

² There is a group referred to as Christian ‘theosophists’ (the lower case ‘t’ differentiates this earlier philosophy from Blavatsky’s nineteenth century ‘Theosophy’ - these two distinct movements should not be confused) which include Jacob Boehme (1575 – 1624), Robert Fludd (1574 – 1637), and Jan Baptist van Helmont (1579 – 1644).

³ Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany: State University of New York, 1994), p. 6.

⁴ Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 8.

⁵ Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, p. 11.

Thus, the use of particular herbs, stones, and other natural elements are employed to treat particular ailments. This idea also includes the use of talismans and birthstones. Hanegraaff noted that this belief ‘furnishes the theoretical foundations for concrete implementation: various kinds of magical practice, “occult medicine”, theosophical soteriologies based on the frame work of alchemy, and so on are based on it.’⁶

3) *Imagination and mediations* – This term implies an imagination that reveals mediations of all kinds such as rituals, symbolic images...intermediary spirits.⁷ A mediation could be an angel, chohan, demon, or any other supernatural or highly evolved being. This characteristic distinguishes occultism from mysticism, as a mystic seeks a direct union with God without any intermediaries; whereas, occultists focus their attention on communicating with the intermediaries.⁸

4) *Transmutation* – This concept mandates that the practitioner will experience an inner transformation. This transmutation (or transformation) comes after a realization of something profound or deeply spiritual.

Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke noted that ‘Blavatsky’s cosmology presents the prime characteristics of Western Esotericism as defined by Antoine Faivre ... These characteristics comprise (a) correspondences between all parts of the universe, the macrosm and microsm; (b) living nature as a complex, plural, hierarchical and animate whole; (c) imagination and mediations in the form of intermediary spirits, symbols, and mandalas; and (d) the experience of transmutation of the soul through purification and

⁶ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), p. 398.

⁷ Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, p. 12.

⁸ Ibid.

ascent.⁹ Thus, the characterization of Blavatsky's Theosophical Society as a Western Esoteric movement seems justifiable. Now that a basic understanding of 'Western Esotericism' has been defined, the events surrounding Helena Blavatsky's early life will now be explored for their connection to Spiritualism.

Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831- 1891)

Blavatsky came from a long line of feminist thinkers. Her maternal grandmother, Helena Pavlovna Dolgorukov (1789-1860), was an early example of an independent woman who was both intellectual and scholarly during a time that the academy was dominated by men. Dolgorukov came from one of the 'most distinguished and aristocratic families in Russia' and was widely read in history, numismatics, archaeology, and natural science having published many works on botany.¹⁰ Princess Helena Dolgorukov, who married Andrey Mihailovich de Fadayevev (1789-1867), was a key influence on the young Helena Blavatsky during her formative years as she brought her up after the death of Blavatsky's own mother, Helena Hahn. Indeed, Helena's mother, Helena Andreyevna von Hahn née de Fadayevev (1814-1842), was also a feminist in her own right, establishing herself as a successful novelist at a young age; her first work was published at the age of 23 in 1837, her three most famous works being *Utballa*, *The World's Judgment*, and *Theophania*.¹¹ There are passages throughout Helena Hahn's writings that illustrate a feminist point of view. Specifically, Hahn tends to focus on the 'need for emotional emancipation of women.'¹² For example, *The World's Judgment* is written from a semi-autobiographical point of view. It contains the story of a woman who is a fiction writer and is unhappily married to a

⁹ Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *Helena Blavatsky* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2004), p. 141.

¹⁰ Catriona Kelly (ed.), *A History of Russian Women's Writings 1820-1992* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 110.

¹¹ This is according to a list published in 1906 that was edited by Dudley Warner, *Library of the World's Best Literature, Ancient and Modern*, 45 vols (New York: J. A. Hill & Company, 1906), XXIX, p. 243.

¹² Robin Bisha, Jehanne M. Gheith, Christine Holden, and William G. Wagner (eds), *Russian Women, 1698-1917: An Anthology of Sources* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002), p. 210.

soldier. This story depicts the subservient life of a woman in nineteenth-century Russia whose dismal existence revolves around the whims of her husband's military career. Hahn's descriptive story-telling most probably influenced the young Helena Blavatsky who would, by contrast, refuse to submit to the lifestyle of the protagonists in her mother's stories. Instead, she married at a young age and quickly left her husband in search of adventure. Although Helena Blavatsky lost her mother when she was still young (aged 11), the influence of her mother's feminist writings and convictions cannot be over emphasised.

Blavatsky's later attraction to Spiritualism as a religious movement illustrates her interest in feminist ideology and the continuation of her own maternal influences and the promotion of women's suffrage. Alex Owen in her study of Spiritualism in the nineteenth century notes the high proportion of women involved in the movement, concluding that there was a strong link between spiritualism and feminism in late Victorian England:

Many women became involved in spiritualism via their participation in women's rights agitation and the anti-slavery crusades, and there was a strong feminist presence among American mediums and believers. Leading feminists also often became interested in spiritualism at some point during their careers, attracted by other-worldly promises of a new age which would see the development of women's potential.¹³

¹³ Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), p. 31. For more information on Blavatsky's connection with feminism see Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2001).

Thus, Spiritualism acted as one of the primary catalysts open to women for social reform in the nineteenth century. As it developed in the 1850s onwards, Spiritualism would be the natural place for Blavatsky who was largely influenced by the ideals of her mother and grandmother. These ideals included a desire to promote women's rights and to illustrate to society the oppression towards women that was prevalent during the nineteenth century. Aside from these feminist influences deriving from Blavatsky's maternal relatives, other aspects of her childhood should be considered here.

Blavatsky's Early Life

At an early age Blavatsky possessed the ability to go into waking dreams or trances as explained by her sister Vera Jelihowsky.¹⁴ This is the method Madame Blavatsky used to write her later magnum opus *The Secret Doctrine*. A similar method was used by the protagonist in Blavatsky's fictional story 'A Bewitched Life':

As I continued gazing ... The space occupied by the empty rooms had changed into the interior of another smaller room ... whose old, dark walls were covered from floor to ceiling with book shelves on which were many antiquated folios, as well as works of a more recent date. In the centre stood a large old-fashioned table, littered over with manuscripts and writing materials. Before it, quill-pen in hand, sat an old man; a grim-looking, skeleton-like personage, with a face so thin, so pale, yellow and emaciated, that the light of the solitary little student's lamp was reflected in two shining spots on his high cheekbones, as though they were carved out of ivory ... However it may be, the words uttered by the quill remained in my memory for days after. Nor had I any great difficulty in retaining

¹⁴ Sinnett, *Incidents*, pp. 72-73.

them, for when I sat down to record the story, I found it, as usual, indelibly impressed on the astral tablets before my inner eye.¹⁵

Blavatsky's ability to weave believable fictional tales was already existent even in childhood (a trait which would be utilized in her later dealings with Spiritualism). Additionally, as a child Blavatsky developed an interest in Western esoteric literature through her multiple visits to her great-grandfather, Prince Pavel Dolgorukov's library. Dolgorukov was a noted Rosicrucian and Freemason who possessed an extensive collection of Western Esoteric titles.¹⁶ Thus, potentially, Blavatsky's familiarity with occult groups and ideas could have begun at an early age through her access to this library.

At age seventeen, Helena married Nicholas Blavatsky on 7 July 1849. Nicholas was around forty years old at the time, though later in life Blavatsky claimed that he was in his seventies.¹⁷ Blavatsky was known to exaggerate the truth and even fabricate stories if she thought it would be more entertaining to the listener. This is seen both in her fictional writings and more clearly by the well-documented account written by a follower turned critic, Vsevolod Solovyoff.¹⁸ In fact, her ability to tell stories that captivated the

¹⁵ H. P. Blavatsky, 'A Bewitched Life' in *Nightmare Tales* (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1892), pp. 10-11.

¹⁶ Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions*, p. 216. For a list of Renaissance authors HPB later recalled see 'HPB to Prince A. M. Dondoukoff-Korsakoff,' letter dated 1 March 1882, in C. Jinarajadasa (ed.), *H. P. B. Speaks*, 2 vols (Adyar: Theosophical Publishing House, 1950-51), II, pp. 62-63.

¹⁷ Iverson L. Harris, 'Incidents in the Life-History of Helen Petrovna Blavatsky', in Katherine Tingley (ed.), *The Theosophical Path*, 20: 1 (January, 1921), p. 13. There is some significance to the ages seventeen and seventy. In Helena Hahn's story entitled *Society's Judgment*, there is a male character who appears to be seventy (though the reader is told that he is really just under forty years of age) and he is cared for by his seventeen year old niece. It is fascinating that Blavatsky uses this same age exaggeration when discussing her own husband Nicholas. Helena Gan, 'Society's Judgment' in *Russian Women's Shorter Fiction: An Anthology 1835-1860*, trans. Joseph Andrews (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 57.

¹⁸ 'Helen Blavatsky was a cheerful witty companion, with an inexhaustible store of rough but real humour, of narratives, interesting, though alas! By no means always founded on strict truth, and of anecdotes...' See

imagination are found throughout her childhood and continued into her adult fictional tales such as those collected in the volumes *From the Caves and Jungles of Hindustan* (1892) and *Nightmare Tales* (1892). Enacting the feminist examples of her mother and grandmother in her youth, Blavatsky deserted her husband in October 1849 and began a life full of world travel and adventures. Concerning the events after her marriage, Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke has suggested the most likely summary of Blavatsky's travels:

The initial focus of her travels and quest lay in the Middle East. Initially she travelled to Turkey, Greece, and Egypt. At times she travelled with Albert Rawson, a young American explorer, author, and artist. In 1850, they studied with Paolos Metamon, a Copt magician in Cairo. In early 1851 ... Blavatsky went to London via France ... her subsequent peregrinations through the United States (allegedly again with Rawson) and Latin America led her to India in 1852, but she failed to enter Tibet on this occasion. In 1854, she was again in the United States, and she travelled throughout India, Kashmir, Burma and parts of Tibet in 1856-1857. At Christmas in 1858 she returned to her family in Russia...¹⁹

Blavatsky and Colonel Henry Olcott

It was following these adventures in 1858 that Blavatsky converted to Spiritualism through the influence of Daniel Dunglas Home (1833 – 1886) despite her later insistence

Vsevolod Solovyoff, *A Modern Priestess of Isis*, trans. Walter Leaf (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1895), p. 5.

¹⁹ Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions*, p. 213. Also, see Patrick John Deveney, 'The Travels of H. P. Blavatsky and the Chronology of Albert Leigh Rawson: An Unsatisfying Investigation into H.P.B.'s Whereabouts in the Early 1850s', *Theosophical History* 10: 4 (October 2004), 8-31.

that she was never connected with this movement.²⁰ Modern Spiritualism originated in 1848 in Hydesville, New York with an event that some have labelled the ‘Rochester rappings’ which occurred at the Fox household on 31st March. It is curious to note that at its very inception Spiritualism was directly connected to psychical disturbances which were called ‘phenomena’. The word ‘phenomena’ (sing. phenomenon) was employed to describe the supernatural occurrences which became associated with séances and included spirit channelling, mysterious rappings, table levitation, and the appearance of spirits in human form (materializations). Spiritualism quickly became an extraordinarily popular belief system in the Victorian Era ranging from nine to ten million members (out of a population of forty-four million) in the United States and consisted in the belief of one basic tenet- *that departed spirits of the recently deceased could communicate with the living through human beings known as mediums.*²¹ Despite the diversity that existed within this movement, this rudimentary belief was considered the one unifying principle that united all Spiritualists.

Blavatsky’s involvement with the Spiritualist moment eventually led her to the Eddy farm in Chittenden, Vermont on 14 October 1874. William and Horatio Eddy lived in a small farmhouse along with their sister, Mary. These illiterate brothers claimed that full body materializations were occurring at their farmhouse nightly; a claim which prompted the publishing of an article in the Spiritualist periodical *Banner of Light* grabbing the attention of the curious Colonel Henry Olcott (1832-1907). Olcott obtained a commission from the *Daily Graphic* to write an article on the strange phenomena and headed out to the

²⁰ Henry Steel Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves: The True Story of the Theosophical Society*, 6 vols (New York: GP Putnam’s Sons, 1895), I, p. 70.

²¹ Michael Gomes, *Dawning of the Theosophical Movement* (Wheaton, IL: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1987), pp. 19-20. For statistics on English Spiritualism during this time period reference Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England 1850-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 49-50.

Eddy farm to begin personally investigating these bizarre occurrences. It was here at the Eddy brothers' farmhouse that the 'Theosophical twins' were first acquainted and Blavatsky first came into contact with one of the founding members of the Theosophical Society, Henry Olcott.²² Blavatsky had left her home at 124 East Sixteenth Street in New York City and travelled to William and Horatio Eddy's farm at Chittenden, Vermont with the express purpose of meeting Colonel Henry Steel Olcott. Olcott was the ideal spokesman for Blavatsky's future adventures in Spiritualism. Even Olcott in his later recollections printed in his *Old Diary Leaves*, noted the fact that Blavatsky had not been well known before he had teamed up with her at the Eddy's farm in 1875.²³

Blavatsky seemingly viewed the colonel as a means to entering the world stage. Here she had found an educated man (he was an attorney) who was trustworthy (he was a colonel in the army), and at the same time not overtly suspicious. Blavatsky possessed a capricious and irascible temperament which she often times unleashed on her unsuspecting followers, though especially on the credulous Olcott; however, at this initial meeting Olcott remained oblivious to this aspect of Blavatsky's personality. The nature of their relationship seemed to have remained strictly professional, as Olcott was a married man and Blavatsky had previously married an Armenian, Russian subject named Michael Bettanelly in Philadelphia in 1875. This relationship with Bettanelly was tumultuous and appeared to last only a few months though the divorce was not official until 25 May 1878.²⁴

²² Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves*, I, p. 4.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

²⁴ Helmuth von Glasenapp, *Image of India* (New Delhi: Indian Council for Cultural Relations, 1973), p. 173.

Before Blavatsky arrived at the Eddy's farm in 1874 the 'spiritual manifestations' were simply the mundane European and American relatives of those attending the séance. After the arrival of Blavatsky at the Eddy farm the spirits appearing were transformed into exotic figures either closely related to Blavatsky's earlier life or from distant lands. There was the Georgian Michalko Guegidze, the late servant of Madame Witte, a close relative of Blavatsky; Abraham Alsbach who communicated with Blavatsky in German; Hassah Agha a Muslim from Tiflis known only to Blavatsky, a Kurd Warrior, a peasant girl, an African, and a turbaned Hindu appeared. The appearance of these new 'spirits' was directly due to Blavatsky's presence at these sittings which appeared conducive to bringing in a foreign type of spirits and also evidenced her experience in contemporary Spiritualism (or Spiritism the French version of Spiritualism that included a philosophy of reincarnation). It is important to observe that Blavatsky's earlier journeys provided her with an opportunity to obtain many of the exotic costumes in which these spirits were dressed.

On 13 November 1874 Blavatsky published a critical article of spiritual investigator (and physician and nervous specialist) Dr. George M. Beard's investigation of the Eddy's brother manifestation in the *Daily Graphic* and affirmed Olcott's earlier theories regarding the credibility of the phenomena. This article was read by Eldridge Gerry Brown the editor of the *Spiritual Scientist* and he sent a copy of his magazine and a letter thanking her for her defence of these mediums.²⁵ This correspondence started a cordial relationship that provided Blavatsky with her first public platform in the United States in order to spread her thoughts on Spiritualism.

²⁵ Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *Helena Blavatsky* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2004), p. 29. This letter is reprinted in 'Elbridge Gerry Brown', in Boris De Zirkoff (ed.), *H. P. Blavatsky: Collected Writings: 1874-1878*, 15 vols (Pasadena: CA: Theosophical Publishing House, 1966), I, pp. 45-46.

Blavatsky and the *Spiritual Scientist*

Notwithstanding this earlier correspondence, it was not until 29 April 1875 that Brown allowed his periodical to be used as the unofficial vehicle for Blavatsky by officially printing an article from a mysterious group of (supposedly) highly evolved individuals called ‘the Brotherhood of Luxor.’ Brown went on to publish many of Blavatsky’s materials beginning with an introductory article on 3 December 1874; in return for his service Brown received 1,000 dollars of support from the future co-founders of Theosophy. This arrangement would not last long and soon came to an unfortunate ending including a falling out of sorts between Blavatsky and Brown towards the end of 1876. This confrontation was evidenced in another letter written by Blavatsky:

Several hundred dollars out of our pockets were spent on behalf of the Editor, and he was made to pass through a minor ‘diksha’ [initiation]. This proving of no avail-the Theosophical Society was established ... the man might have become POWER, he preferred to remain an ASS. De gustibus non disputandum est ...²⁶

At the beginning of her writing career, Blavatsky flavoured her view of Spiritualism (in the *Scientist*) with Western Esotericism, printing translations of Eliphas Lévi (1910 – 1875, the distinguished French Kabbalist and magician) and her infamous ‘reply to a Few Question to HIRAF’ in which she clearly associated her movement with Rosicrucianism, Paracelsus, alchemy, the Zohar, and the ‘oriental cabala.’²⁷ This Western Esoteric shift (so apparent in these articles) would become assimilated into Blavatsky’s Spiritualist

²⁶ Mary Neff, *Personal Memoirs of H.P. Blavatsky* (London: Rider, 1937), p. 227.

²⁷ Michael Gomes, ‘Studies in Early American Theosophical History: Elbridge Gerry Brown and the Boston “Spiritual Scientist”’, *The Canadian Theosophist*, 69: 6 (Jan. - Feb. 1989), 122-130 (pp. 129-130).

ideology which eventually became known as Theosophy. Blavatsky believed that the ‘oriental cabala’ was the source for all truth which undergirded every major world religion. This true religion had remained concealed for centuries and the responsibility fell on Blavatsky to later unveil it in *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and to describe it in *The Secret Doctrine* (1888). Blavatsky explained the origins of this ‘cabbalistic’ tradition:

The first Cabala in which a mortal man ever dared to explain the greatest mysteries of the universe ... [was] scrupulously and jealously guarded by the Wise Men of Chaldaea, India, Persia and Egypt, and passed from one initiate to another, in the same purity of form as when handed down to the first man by the angels, students of God’s great Theosophic Seminary. For the first time since the world’s creation, the secret doctrines, passing through Moses who was initiated in Egypt, underwent some slight alterations.²⁸

Blavatsky connected her conceptualization of the ‘oriental cabala’ to Spiritualism:

As the prophet Mahomet, when he perceived that the mountain would not come to him, went himself towards the mountain so Modern Spiritualism made its unexpected appearance from the East, before a skeptical world, to terminate in a very near future the oblivion into which the ancient secret wisdom has fallen ... Spiritualism is but a baby now, an unwelcome stranger, whom public opinion, like an unnatural foster-mother, tries to crush out of existence. But it is growing, and this same East may one day send some experienced, clever nurses to take care of it. The Rochester knockings, tiny as they were, awoke some vigilant

²⁸ H. P. Blavatsky, ‘A Few Questions to “HIRAF”’, *Spiritual Scientist*, 2: 19 (15 July 1875), 217-218, 224 (p. 224).

friends, who, in their turn, aroused thousands and millions of jealous defenders for the true Cause. The most difficult part is done: the door stands ajar; it remains for such minds as Hiraf invites to help earnest truth-seekers to the key which will open the gates, and aid them to pass the threshold dividing this world from the next ... It belongs to the exact knowledge of the Occultist to explain and alter much of what seems 'repulsive' in Spiritualism, to some of the too delicate Orthodox souls ...²⁹

Thus, Blavatsky attempted to connect Spiritualism to this ancient wisdom tradition by noting that Spiritualism was paving the way for this new 'Hermetic occultism' whose doctrines could be found in the 'oriental cabala' also known as the *prisca theologia* (or the hidden wisdom tradition referred to by Blavatsky as the 'secret doctrine') which had remained hidden in the East and which philosophy Blavatsky would attempt to disseminate through her major writings. Despite Blavatsky's theatrically brilliant marketing strategy this 'hermetic occultism' would remain relatively aligned with the basic tenets of Spiritualism though in a repackaged form.

Antoine Faivre noted the relationship between Spiritualism and Western Esotericism observing that Spiritualism 'does not belong to the history of esotericism properly speaking, but would be closely associated with it because of its wide influence and because of the problems it raised.'³⁰ In other words, Spiritualism though exerting influence upon various Western esoteric groups could not in itself be classified as a form of Western Esotericism because of its ambiguous definition. Because Spiritualism only required one common belief (that deceased spirits could communicate with the living), it

²⁹ H. P. Blavatsky, 'A Few Questions to "HIRAF"', *Spiritual Scientist*, 2: 20 (22 July 1875), 236-237 (p. 237).

³⁰ Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, p. 87.

remained open to numerous interpretations and denominations. Case in point, the Theosophical Society would become founded as a Spiritualist movement that maintained a philosophy that seemed to continually align with Spiritualism; nonetheless, it evolved and adopted many characteristics and philosophies that would become typical of Western Esotericism. Thus, the Theosophical Society was both a Western Esoteric and a Spiritualist movement. As Faivre noted there was some ambiguity in his definition and he also explained that the problems of Spiritualism led to the development of Western esotericism; this was certainly true of the Theosophical Society.

The Founding of a ‘Western Esoteric’ Spiritualist Movement

On 7 September 1875, Blavatsky and Olcott, along with about a dozen other colleagues were sitting listening to a lecture by George Felt on ‘The Lost Canon of Proportion of the Egyptians.’ While listening to this lecture Olcott was inspired to form a society that would further the study of occultism. On 13 September, in a private meeting it was decided that this society was to be called the Theosophical Society. The word ‘Theosophy’ combines two Greek terms ‘theos’ (God) and ‘sophia’ (wisdom). Other names for the society were considered with the aid of a dictionary, among them ‘Egyptological,’ ‘Hermetic,’ and ‘Rosicrucian.’ The consideration of these terms evidences the strong affinities between the early Theosophical Society and Western Esotericism.³¹

It is imperative to observe that the very foundations of the Theosophical Society (though rooted in Western Esotericism) were defined for their relationship to Spiritualism. In the original Preamble issued with the legal by-laws in the November 1875 meeting it was stated that:

³¹ The word ‘Hermetic’ is derived from the name ‘Hermes’ and implied an acceptance and a belief in the teachings of Hermes Trismegistus.

It [The Theosophical Society] is formed neither as a Spiritualistic schism, nor to serve as the foe or friend of any sectarian or philosophic body ... The Spiritualists, who profess to be in constant relations with the departed, are unable to agree upon a system of philosophy. Thus the longing of the race for a practical demonstration of its future existence goes unsatisfied; the laws of intercommunication between the visible and the invisible worlds are not accurately defined; and the problem of the two eternities which bound this life remains unsolved, despite a multitude of churches and academies ...³²

Thus, one of the primary goals of the Theosophical Society was to establish a clear philosophy for the Spiritualist movement while avoiding being labelled as a Spiritualist schism.

That same year in 1875, Blavatsky began work on her first book *Isis Unveiled*, published in 1877 as a 1,300 page, double volume set that served as a manual for all things occult and contextualized the Spiritualist phenomena. This work included terms and concepts related to Buddhism and Hinduism during a time when Eastern religions were just starting to receive more public and scholarly attention in the Western world.³³

It should be noted here that Blavatsky's writings were extremely circular with no central thesis. It has been claimed by one of Blavatsky's Spiritualist critics, William Emmette

³² Preamble of the Theosophical Society dated 30 October 1875 and reprinted in *The Theosophical Forum*, (September 1947), pp. 515-18.

³³ On Orientalism and its influence on Theosophy, see Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, 'The Theosophical Society, Orientalism, and the "Mystic East": Western Esotericism and Eastern Religion in Theosophy', *Theosophical History* 13: 3 (July 2007), 3-28 (pp. 11-14).

Coleman, that *Isis Unveiled* was largely plagiarized from about one hundred different sources even though in the footnotes Blavatsky cited close to one thousand sources which gave her the false appearance of erudition. Even in *Isis Unveiled* the beginning of Blavatsky's syncretism becomes apparent and her work towards comparative religions is admirable.

During the time that *Isis Unveiled* was published in 1877, numerous Spiritualist mediums were being exposed as frauds across the Western world. Blavatsky's defence of this issue came in the form of a philosophical belief that claimed that many of the communicating spirits which were being channelled at séances across the Western world were not actually the spirits of the recently deceased; rather, these 'spirits' were deceiving elementals which were the shells of former human beings who had passed beyond the ability to communicate. In other words, these exposures were not due to the fraudulency of mediums, but to the fraudulency of the spirits that they were channelling. This rationalization was one of Blavatsky's more obvious attempts at reconceptualizing Spiritualism in order to make it a more philosophically advanced belief system (though the idea of deceiving spirits was found in the concept of the *diakkas* promulgated by the Spiritualist Andrew Jackson Davis [1826 – 1910]).

As prophesied in her 'Reply to HIRAF article' (1875), 'it belongs to the exact knowledge of the Occultist to explain and alter much of what seems "repulsive" in Spiritualism, to some of the too delicate Orthodox souls,' Blavatsky made it her mission to reform Spiritualism and her 'theory of elementals' attempted to explain the prevalence of deceitful mediums who conned people out of their hard earned money.³⁴ In a letter dated

³⁴ Blavatsky 'A Few Questions to "HIRAF"', 2: 20 (22 July 1875), 237.

10 September 1875 the public response to Blavatsky's reformation was evidenced: 'The spiritualists are furious because we do not share many of their opinions and do not regard all their mediums' lies as Gospel truth.'³⁵ By advocating publically for the reform of Spiritualism which would require a philosophical change in approach from its accepted practices, Blavatsky made herself a target to many contemporaneous Spiritualists. This reformation resulted in multiple repercussions especially from the corresponding Spiritualist William Emmette Coleman who would be one of the most influential sceptics to charge Blavatsky with plagiarism. Coleman suggested that the Theosophical Society at its inception was 'an offshoot from Spiritualism; finding 'some 267 points were copied from those of spiritualism.'³⁶

Though a separation between Spiritualism and the Theosophical Society seemed obvious, a line demarcating these two movements was never clearly drawn. The hesitancy to break away from Spiritualism is evidenced in the following letter written to John Bund the editor of the *Religio-Philosophical Journal* on 26 January 1878 (several months following the publication of *Isis Unveiled*):

I am a true, firm, if anything, too exalted spiritualist. Desiring as I do, to leave no stone unturned to force spiritualism and nobler truths upon the world of scientists in general and skeptics especially, I try to show the readers that I am neither credulous nor blind to the imperfections and short-comings of Spiritualism as it is now. I work in my own way and try to do my best. Why believe me a deceiver and a schemer? I feel pained to see that I have no greater

³⁵ Solovyoff, *A Modern Priestess*, p. 254.

³⁶ Coleman, 'The Sources of Madame Blavatsky's Writings', in Vsevolod Solovyoff, *A Modern Priestess of Isis*, trans. Walter Leaf (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1895), p. 365.

enemies in the world than spiritualists themselves, whose faith or rather philosophy I would see spread throughout the world and become the only and universal belief on earth. Please pitch into myself, cigarettes, entourage, fatness, Calmuck nose, etc., etc., as much as you like, and I will be the first to laugh but don't represent me as an enemy of true Spiritualism. Olcott is as sincere as myself in that. If he has several times protested against being called a spiritualist, I have as many times pitched into him for that. He may be a flapdoodle in his loose expressions, but he has always been a true spiritualist.³⁷

It seemed apparent that as late as 26 January 1878 Blavatsky was still identifying herself as a Spiritualist. Thus, Blavatsky never clearly defined her connection and relationship to Spiritualism. What is important for this discussion was that this connection with Spiritualism still existed in 1878.

It is crucial before continuing the chronology of Blavatsky's life to understand her creative imagination. Returning from her foreign travels to stay with her relatives in Russia between Christmas 1858 and 1860, Blavatsky encountered several invisible spirits/friends including a German artist, a nice, kind fat old lady, and a tall, very funny old man at Rougodevo, the country house belonging to her sister Jelihowsky.³⁸ Later at New York, Blavatsky created another 'invisible' friend whose identity she had borrowed from mainstream Spiritualism: a spirit named John King. John King was a well known spirit guide channelled in séances across the Spiritualist circles of the Western world.

³⁷ The extract given here, from a letter to him dated 26 January, 1878, runs counter to what H.P.B. has already written on the subject, but I include it for the sake of completeness. It was quoted by William Emmette Coleman in a series on the early history of the T.S., 'Spiritualism and the Wisdom Religion' (*The Carrier Dove*, San Francisco, Nov. 1891, p. 298), Michael Gomes, 'Studies in Early American Theosophical History: H.P.B.'s American Correspondence', *The Canadian Theosophist*, 71: 5 (Nov. – Dec. 1990), 102- 107 (pp. 103, 107).

³⁸ Sinnett, *Incidents*, p. 92, 93, 94 and 99.

However, Blavatsky claimed that she was the first person to communicate with John King, who appeared more of a nuisance to her than anything. This 'John King' would cause all types of problems for Blavatsky which included continuously demanding and stealing money, forging people's handwritings, and playing cruel practical jokes. He was also known to write postscripts on letters sent out by Blavatsky. These notes were made in red and blue pencil a device that would later be used by the 'hidden Tibetan masters' as they communicated with outsiders.³⁹ In 1875, John King had left and was replaced by a new, albeit still invisible, occult Master Serapis and Tuitit Bey, members of the Brotherhood of Luxor.⁴⁰ Thus, the Spirit guide 'John King' had morphed into Blavatsky's 'masters' evidencing her reliance on Spiritualist philosophy.

As time progressed, Blavatsky continued her belief in invisible companions. She would later fabricate an idea of 'hidden masters' or adepts that possessed secret understanding of hidden knowledge. There is some controversy over whether these masters were entirely fictitious, based upon historical individuals, or if they were Tibetan masters that Blavatsky had met in her travels.⁴¹ The idea that these were based on actual historical figures in the life of Blavatsky has recently been explored by Paul Johnson in his work *The Masters Revealed* (1994), but, despite finding similar philosophies in historical figures, any attempt to pinpoint exact historical personages must remain speculative.

³⁹ Gertrude Marvin Williams, *Madame Blavatsky Priestess of the Occult* (New York: Lancer Books, Inc., 1946), pp. 181-184.

⁴⁰ Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *Helena Blavatsky* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2004), p. 7. Michael Gomes observes that one of the primary members of this brotherhood was Serapis Bey who hailed from Elora, India. Michael Gomes, *Dawning of the Theosophical Movement* (Wheaton: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1987), pp. 71-72.

⁴¹ For an intriguing study of this historical approach see K. Paul Johnson, *The Masters Revealed: Madame Blavatsky and the Myth of the Great White Lodge* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

From 1876-1878, Blavatsky moved in to an apartment on Eighth Avenue and Forty-Seventh Street in New York, affectionately known within her circle as the Lamasery. While residing at this location Blavatsky networked with an eclectic group of people ranging from eccentric Spiritualists to Jewish rabbis.⁴² Blavatsky's residence in the United States would, however, be curtailed. In May 1878 she received orders from the masters that she needed to go to India and start a Theosophical Society out there. This did not stop Blavatsky from becoming a citizen of the United States which she completed in July of 1878. Blavatsky and Olcott made preparations to leave for India in December 1879. This would be the last time Blavatsky would visit America.

Blavatsky and the Oriental Shift

In February 1879, the founders of the Theosophical Society set foot on Indian soil.⁴³ Before their arrival into Bombay they had connected with the Vedic group known as Arya Samaj. The Arya Samaj was an offshoot of Raja Rammohun Roy's (1774 – 1833) philosophies that replaced Roy's Christian tendency with a fundamentalist Vedic philosophy.⁴⁴ Roy was a noted Indian philosopher who acted as both a religious and social reformer. He advocated for gender equality while attempting to legitimize the religious practices of Hindu traditions to a Western audience. The Arya Samaj believed in God as the One unformed and unknowable deity, condemned any forms of idolatry, and maintained the infallibility and unity of the Hindu scriptures known as the Vedas.

⁴² Sylvia Cranston, *HPB: The Extraordinary Life and Influence of Helena Blavatsky, Founder of the Modern Theosophical Movement* (Santa Barbara, CA: Path Publishing House, 1993), p. 169.

⁴³ For Blavatsky's assimilation into Indian culture see Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity and Belief* (Princeton UP, 1998) and Mandakini Dubey's *Esotericism and Orientalism: Nineteenth-Century Narrative Initiations* (Duke UP, 2003).

⁴⁴ For Roy's writing on gender equality see *Abstract of the Arguments Regarding the Burning of Widows Considered as a Religious Rite* (1830).

The Theosophical Society gravitated to this group of religious reformers who viewed the Vedas as superior to any other Scripture. When Blavatsky and Olcott first arrived in India they were greeted by a group of about 300 natives welcoming them to their native land. They met in a wonderfully decorated hall and in honour of their arrival the Hindu drama *Sitaram* was acted out.⁴⁵ At the end of these festivities Hurrichund Chitamon, the president of the Bombay chapter of the Arya Samaj presented Blavatsky with a bill for all of the services rendered.⁴⁶ This was the beginning of the end of this relationship between these two groups. Also at odds with this was the exclusivist attitude of the Arya Samaj in comparison to the eclectic theological position of the Theosophical Society. Finally, in 1879, Blavatsky and Olcott converted to Buddhism effectively ending the affiliation with Arya Samaj.

When Blavatsky and Olcott first arrived in Bombay they attracted the attention of a newspaper editor named A.P. Sinnett (1840- 1921). Sinnett was the editor of the influential Anglo-Indian newspaper *The Pioneer*, published at Allhalabad.⁴⁷ Sinnett first came into contact with Blavatsky through correspondences and remarks made through this periodical. Sinnett was fascinated with this eccentric woman and invited her to visit him and his wife at his summer home in Simla in 1880. Blavatsky and Olcott obliged and the result of this visit, including Blavatsky's psychical 'phenomena' and the apportment of objects and letters for Sinnett from the 'hidden masters' is captured in *The Occult World* (1881). On its publication in London, Sinnett's book brought Helena Blavatsky's phenomena to a wider audience in Victorian England.

⁴⁵ John Symonds, *The Lady with the Magic Eyes: Madame Blavatsky- Medium and Magician* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff Publisher, 1960), p. 113.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ For more information on Alfred Percy Sinnett see his *Autobiography of Alfred Percy Sinnett* (London: Theosophical History Centre, 1986).

Around the autumn of 1880, Sinnett began to receive correspondences with some hidden, Tibetan masters.⁴⁸ These correspondences were delivered to Sinnett over the course of six years between 1881 and 1887 and became known as the Mahatma Letters. Many were delivered to Sinnett by Blavatsky in person; however, some came through the mail, others randomly fell from the ceiling, and still others were sent in even more peculiar ways. These letters were written primarily in blue and red pencil, and contained the signatures of the Tibetan masters Morya and Koot Hoomi. Though these letters claimed to have been written by secretive, supernatural ‘masters’, a report published by Richard Hodgson in the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* (1884/5) suggested that these letters were clever forgeries produced by Blavatsky.⁴⁹ In 1883, Sinnett published his own compilation of these letters in the work entitled *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883) that attempted to summarize these mysterious doctrines. Despite the question of their authorship, the publication of the Mahatma Letters (through the book *Esoteric Buddhism*) was monumental in influencing the future publication of *The Secret Doctrine* and the Theosophical Society as a whole for they provided the philosophical framework that Blavatsky would build upon in her later works. Though some may view this ‘Oriental

⁴⁸ For the progression in the definition of the ‘Masters’ and their successive Hinduization, then Tibetanization, see Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, ‘The Coming of the Masters: The Evolutionary Reformulation of Spiritual Intermediaries in Modern Theosophy’, in Andreas B. Kilcher (ed.), *Constructing Tradition: Means and Myths of Transmission in Western Esotericism* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2010), pp. 113-160 (pp. 128-132).

⁴⁹ There is still a debate raging as to the identity of these ‘masters’. Kerri Barry suggests that these ‘Masters’ were simply different representations of Blavatsky’s psyche. See Kerri Barry, ‘Genius, Fraud, or Phenomenon? The Unsolved Case of H. P. Blavatsky’, *Theosophical History: A Quarterly Journal of Research*, 12: 2, (2006), 23-35 (p. 29). Her article was methodically critiqued by the noted Theosophical historian Michael Gomes in ‘Response to Kerri Barry’s Genius, Fraud, or Phenomenon?’, *Theosophical History: A Quarterly Journal of Research*, 13: 1 (2007), 3-9. For more information see Vernon Harrison, *H.P. Blavatsky and the SPR: an examination of the Hodgson Report of 1885* (Pasadena, CA: Theosophical University Press, 1997). To read the actual report see Richard Hodgson, ‘Account of Personal Investigations in India and Discussion of the Authorship of the “Koot Hoomi” Letters,’ *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, 3 (1885), pp. 209-317.

shift' as a clear demarcation between the Theosophical Society and Spiritualism, several critics who suggested otherwise will now be examined.

In 1884 one of Blavatsky's critics Arthur Lillie (1831- 1912?, a novelist and former British officer who served in India) published a booklet called *Koot Hoomi Unveiled* (1884) that questioned the existence of these 'mahatmas' along with any 'Eastern influence' exerted on the Theosophical Society.⁵⁰ Lillie suggested that the underlying philosophy of this work was remarkably similar to American Spiritualism guided by Blavatsky:

The Buddhist doctrine of karma is pretty well understood. It is held that the causation of good or evil deeds carries a man hereafter to the Domain of Joy or the hell Avitchi, and detains him there until the said Karma is exhausted ... But the Buddhism of Koot Hoomi knocks this central support of Buddhism away altogether ... Plainly the very illogical person has given up the main tenets of Buddhism to supply a want felt by the members of the Theosophical Society. By the ordinary rule of karma the mother that the daughter wants to clasp in Heaven might be her little niece, and the elderly departed husband that a fond wife is sighing for might be driving his go-cart in the next square. Buddhism has been transformed into American Spiritualism.⁵¹

Thus, the Mahatma Letters presented an 'Orientalist' version of Spiritualism. When Blavatsky had arrived in India in 1879 she was obviously influenced by Eastern philosophies and texts, thus reversing Lillie's observation made in 1884: 'Buddhism has

⁵⁰ For more information on the life of Arthur Lillie see Jeffrey Lavoie, *Theosophical Society: The History of a Spiritualist Movement* (Boca Raton, FL: Brown Walker Press, 2012).

⁵¹ Arthur Lillie, *Koot Hoomi Unveiled; or, Tibetan "Buddhists" versus the Buddhists of Tibet* (London: The Psychological Press Association, 1884), p. 5.

been transformed into American Spiritualism.’ Rather, American Spiritualism had been transformed into Buddhism.

The Eastern guru Swami Vivekananda noted a similar connection between the Spiritualist influence on Theosophy. Vivekananda, offended by Olcott’s lack of support for his branch of Hinduism, critiqued the Theosophical Society with a similar argument accusing the Society of assimilating Hinduism and Buddhism into one Spiritualist belief structure which had become an ‘Indian grafting of American Spiritualism- with only a few Sanskrit words taking the place of spiritualistic jargon- Mahatma missiles taking the places of ghostly raps and taps, and Mahatmic inspiration that of obsession by ghosts.’⁵² ‘Hindus,’ he added angrily, ‘do not stand in need of dead ghosts of Russians and Americans.’⁵³ They have ‘no need or desire to import religions from the West.’⁵⁴ Thus, it seemed that several of the Theosophical Society’s contemporaneous critics believed that the Theosophical Society maintained a deep connection with Spiritualism both practically and philosophically even in these later years following their relocation to India.

A similar belief would be promulgated by some members of the Spiritualist press, though especially through one publication *Medium and Daybreak* edited by the Spiritualist and media mogul James Burns (1835 – 1894) who in 1889 viewed Blavatsky’s psychical abilities and phenomena as being consistent with those produced by other contemporaneous Spiritualists including Charles Williams, Henry Slade, D. D. Home,

⁵² Swami Vivekananda, ‘Stray Remarks on Theosophy’, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1955), IV, p. 318

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ See also Vivekananda, ‘My Plan of Campaign’, III, pp. 207-227 (pp. 208-209) and Olcott, VI, pp. 128-129, 136-137; ‘Death of Swami Vivekananda’, *Theosophist*, 23: 11 (August 1902), 696-697.

and Agnes Guppy.⁵⁵ Thus, it seems indisputable that even in their later years the Theosophical Society maintained a philosophy which remained heavily influenced by Spiritualism.

In 1888, Blavatsky published *The Secret Doctrine* which she claimed was the essence of Hindu, Zoroastrian, Chaldean, Egyptian, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism and Christianity.⁵⁶ Its purpose was to ‘reconcile all religions ... and to show the roots of each to be identical with that of every other great nature.’⁵⁷ Also, this book attempted to ‘prove the necessity of an absolute divine principle in nature.’⁵⁸ This work (while providing a syncretism of the world’s major religions noted above) relies heavily on Horace Hayman Wilson’s translation of the *Vishnu Purana* (1832) for its universal cosmology and attempts to engage the latest nineteenth-century ideas of evolution and anthropology. *The Secret Doctrine* takes Western esoteric concepts and mixes them with some Buddhist (and Hindu) philosophy expressed through Eastern terminology. The truly remarkable aspect of *The Secret Doctrine* is in its syncretism not its originality. *The Secret Doctrine* would supply the basic tenets for the Theosophical Society and its offspring groups, though it would discriminate against Spiritualists by advocating that communications with the spirit world were impossible except through the ‘masters’ or other adepts.

Before the publication of the *Secret Doctrine*, communication between spirits and mediums remained a possibility, though based upon some very specific circumstances (which varied in each of Blavatsky’s various publications). This new prohibition relating to a

⁵⁵ W. H. Harrison, ‘Theosophy and Mediumship: The Alleged Himalayan Brothers’, *The Medium and Daybreak*, 15: 733 (18 April 1884), 246-247, 249-250 (p. 247) and James Burns, ‘Madame Blavatsky as a Spiritualist’, *The Medium and Daybreak* (15 March 1889), p. 165.

⁵⁶ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine*, I, p. viii.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, I, p. xx.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

spirit's ability to communicate with the world of the living would potentially prohibit any practicing Spiritualist from joining membership with the Theosophical Society. Despite this obvious discrimination, Blavatsky's belief in spirit communications was continuously changing and that same year (1888) she arrived at a truce with the noted Spiritualist (and editor of *Light Magazine*) William Stainton Moses and agreed to become more inclusive of Spiritualist beliefs. The terms of this agreement were suggested in Olcott's diary, though this truce did not last very long.⁵⁹ Still, this proposal testifies that the relationship between Spiritualism and the Theosophical Society was never clearly defined even in later years.

In 1889, while engaged in writing a third volume to *The Secret Doctrine* and editing the French Theosophical periodical *La Revue Theosophique*, Blavatsky wrote a conversational, question-and-answer style, 310-page work called *The Key to Theosophy* that explained the basic tenets of the Theosophical Society and allowed for communications with spirits (i.e. Spiritualism) under rare circumstances.⁶⁰ Once again it appeared that Blavatsky had altered her opinion concerning the basic tenet of Spiritualism. At the start of writing *The Key to Theosophy*, Blavatsky's health had deteriorated rapidly and eventually on 8 May 1891 she died of influenza.

The life of Helena Blavatsky continues to fascinate readers even in this modern age. Her Theosophical Society went on to multiply under the leadership of Annie Besant and chapters currently exist all across the U.S.⁶¹ Blavatsky assimilated tenets of the popular

⁵⁹Olcott, IV, pp. 497-498. The sentences in brackets were taken from the earlier article that Olcott referred to in his *Old Diary Leaves* found in Henry Steel Olcott, 'William Stainton Moses', *The Theosophist*, 14: 2 (November 1892), 109-111 (p. 109).

⁶⁰H. P. Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy* (London: The Theosophical Company, 1891), p. 27-35.

⁶¹Membership in the States has dwindled significantly in the past few decades. 'From a high of 8520 members in 1927, and a post war high of 6119 in 1972, official American membership declined to 3546 in 2010.' Robert Ellwood, 'Theosophy After the Baby Boomers', in *Quest Magazine*, 99: 1 (Winter 2011), 30-31, 39 (p. 30).

Spiritualist movement with Western Esoteric ideas and even incorporated eastern terms and philosophies into one organized group called the Theosophical Society. Through Blavatsky's global endeavours the Theosophical Society became intimately attached to both South Asian and Western history providing a new outlet for Western Esotericism in the nineteenth century. As for her connection with Spiritualism, several ideas have been brought to light in this paper which evidenced a continual Spiritualist influence throughout her life. Perhaps most importantly, her more influential critics Arthur Lillie, Swami Vivekananda, and James Burns (both Western and Eastern) all suggested the ongoing influence of Spiritualism on Blavatsky and her philosophy (even after the relocation of the Theosophical Society to Madras, India). Thus, all of these points evidence that no clear line of demarcation between Spiritualism and the Theosophical Society was drawn and that the Spiritualist movement continued to exert influence both on Blavatsky and on the Theosophical Society throughout the nineteenth century. Regardless of what one may think about the life and character of Blavatsky there is no way to deny her contribution to the field of Western Esotericism and the influence that she has exerted both upon the history of Spiritualism, Victorian Studies, modern religious movements, and the world at large.

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