

The Western Esoteric Traditions

A Historical Introduction

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Helena Blavatsky and the Theosophical Society

The Theosophical Society, founded at New York in 1875 by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott, has played a vital role in propagating esotericism in the modern era. Its appearance, in common with Spiritualism and other new religious sects, reflected a widening gulf between orthodox religious belief and science in the West. The progress of science and technology was challenging traditional Christian belief in the omnipotence of God, the need for grace, and the life hereafter. This dissolution of man's place within a divine order was crystallized by the publication of *The Origin of Species* (1859) by Charles Darwin. His theory of biological evolution, based on natural selection in consequence of the struggle for material existence, violated the idea of human spiritual identity and purpose. Modern science focused on concrete, material facts, and its explanations of the physical world only deepened a lack of confidence in biblical authority. Many spiritually inclined individuals were distressed by science but could no longer find comfort in orthodox religion.

Modern Theosophy, distinct from Boehme's Christian theosophy and its heirs, addressed these concerns in a progressive way. Adapting contemporary scientific ideas to posit the idea of spiritual evolution through countless worlds and eras, Theosophy restored dignity and purpose to humankind's earthly life within a cosmic context. Whereas Spiritualism simply posited survival after death, Theosophy located human destiny in an emanationist cosmology and anthropology derived from Neoplatonism and oriental religions; it repeated the

Hellenistic embrace of exotic Eastern ideas, but now these were represented by Buddhism and Hinduism. By popularizing ideas of reincarnation and karma, secret Masters, and Tibet as the land of ageless wisdom, Blavatsky attracted many spiritual seekers in Europe, North America, and India to her new religious movement.

[Theosophy was a major factor in the revival of the indigenous Western esoteric tradition. Blavatsky's writings garnered the materials of Neoplatonism, Renaissance magic, Kabbalah, and Freemasonry, together with ancient Egyptian and Greco-Roman mythology and religion, joined by Eastern doctrines taken from Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta to present the idea of an ancient wisdom handed down from prehistoric times.] The notion of advanced adepts in the Himalayas, the heirs of a tradition going back to Atlantis and earlier pristine civilizations, represented the Renaissance idea of *prisca theologia* passed on by a chain of initiates combined with the Romantic fascination with the Orient. This globalization of esotericism, inspired by and preserving Western esotericism, would promote its dialogue with exotic traditions and foster its international growth in the twentieth century. [Moreover, the Theosophical Society, with its emphasis on organization, publications, and instruction, became the model for many other Rosicrucian, Masonic, and occult societies committed to the spread of esoteric ideas.]

Blavatsky's Early Travels and the "Masters"

Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891) was born at Ekaterinoslav (now Dnepropetrovsk) in the Ukraine. Her parents were Colonel Peter von Hahn and Helena Andreyevna, née de Fadayev, a renowned novelist who died young. Her heritage combined Russian, French Huguenot, and German stock, and her maternal grandmother, Princess Helena Pavlovna Dolgorukov, was descended from one of Russia's oldest families. Helena's childhood was marked by numerous psychic phenomena, and she developed an early interest in esotericism, immersing herself in the large occult library of Prince Pavel Dolgorukov (d. 1838), her grandmother's father, who had been initiated into Rosicrucian Freemasonry at the end of the 1770s. An old family friend, Prince Alexander Golitsyn, a Freemason and mystic, encouraged her to travel abroad in search of ancient wisdom.¹

She was married in 1849, at the age of seventeen, to Nikifor Blavatsky (b. 1809), vice governor of Erivan province in Armenia, but deserted her husband on their honeymoon.² She then began a series of extensive travels throughout the world. Described in her own accounts, which were largely uncorroborated

and often conflicting in their chronology, these travels would take her around Europe, the Middle East, and North America, and possibly to India and Tibet over the next twenty-five years. These extensive journeys, extraordinary for a single woman at this time, record her tireless quest for contact with sages and occult teachers in exotic cultures.³

The initial focus of her travels and quest lay in the Middle East. Initially, she traveled to Turkey, Greece, and Egypt. At times she traveled with Albert Rawson (1828–1902), a young American explorer, author, and artist. In 1850, they studied with Paolos Metamon, a Copt magician, in Cairo.⁴ In early 1851, the year of the Great Exhibition, Blavatsky went to London via France, and in August she first met with her “Master.” He allegedly informed her that she should prepare for an important task that would require three years’ preparation in Tibet.⁵ 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 traveled throughout India, Kashmir, Burma, and parts of Tibet in 1856–1857. At Christmas 1858, she returned to her family in Russia, where she frequently displayed her involuntary ability to cause psychic phenomena (rappings, bell sounds, moving furniture, telepathy). In early 1868 at Florence, she received word from her Master that she should join him at Constantinople, and from there they traveled overland to Tibet.

Her Master, known as Morya, was said to live near the grand monastery of Tashi Lhunpo at Shigatse, the seat of the Panchen Lama. Here Morya and another Master, Koot Hoomi, Kashmiris of Punjabi extraction, ran a school for adepts adjacent to the monastery. The Masters were understood to be advanced adepts with superhuman powers who were subject neither to the monastery nor its rules but who had complete access to its library and resources. Blavatsky was taken on as a disciple (*chela*) and given the teaching for which she had always longed. She was introduced to Tibetan Buddhist sacred literature, shown the treasures of the monastery, and otherwise prepared to be the Masters’ missionary to the West. She allegedly remained in this Himalayan fastness, preparing for her work, from late 1868 until the end of 1870. Blavatsky would always claim that this initiation was the cornerstone of her vocation to bring spiritual enlightenment to the West. After her return to the West, she established a short-lived society for the study of Spiritualism at Cairo in late 1871. After further travels in Europe, she briefly resided in Paris, where in 1873 she allegedly received orders from Morya to travel to the United States.⁶

It should be emphasized that Blavatsky’s references to her Masters during these veiled years of travel and initiation are almost all retrospective from the later, Indian phase of her life. The very concept of the Masters can be seen to derive via high-grade Freemasonry from the Rosicrucian idea of invisible and

secret adepts, working for the advancement of humanity. In this respect the idea of Masters is intrinsic to modern Western esotericism: the idea of the "Great White Brotherhood" steering mankind to higher stages of development has continued to influence twentieth-century esotericism (e.g., Annie Besant, Alice Bailey, H. Spencer Lewis, Elizabeth Clare Prophet, G. I. Gurdjieff) and also recurs in much New Age spirituality.

From Spiritualism to Ancient Wisdom

Blavatsky's public (and more documented) life began with her arrival in the United States in 1873. Blavatsky began her esoteric career in the Spiritualist movement, which then was extremely widespread in the country. In the autumn of 1874, she met her future cofounder of the Theosophical Society, Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907), a prominent attorney with an interest in Spiritualism, at the Eddy farmhouse in Chittenden, Vermont, where he was reporting for the New York newspapers on séances producing materialized spirit forms. Blavatsky published articles on Spiritualism and became actively involved in the Spiritualist movement, conferring with a spirit called "John King" and publicly defending discredited Spiritualist mediums.⁷

Blavatsky thought American Spiritualism, however useful as an initial foil to materialism, was devoid of real occult knowledge. By February 1875, she was already describing her interest in the Western esoteric tradition, referring to Renaissance magi, the terminology of Kabbalah, and making her first use of the term "theosophy."⁸ Soon she turned away from Spiritualism. In March 1875, John King was superseded as her contact by the Masters Serapis Bey and Tuitit Bey, members of a mysterious community called the Brotherhood of Luxor, which Blavatsky identified as the Egyptian group of the Universal Mystic Brotherhood. At the supposed suggestion of the Masters, Olcott and Blavatsky in May 1879 formed a society called the Miracle Club to inform the public about paranormal phenomena and their mediums.⁹ In July 1875, she began writing articles for the short-lived Boston magazine *Spiritual Scientist*, referring to Gnostics, Paracelsians, alchemists, and Rosicrucians. Her sources were Eliphas Lévi, Hargrave Jennings, and other contemporary occultists. This was also her first public disclosure of the existence of occult brotherhoods of adepts.¹⁰

More than twenty letters from Serapis Bey were received by Olcott in the summer of 1875, many exhorting him and Blavatsky to further efforts and spiritual attainment, and even offering tactical advice. The word "Try" is continually emphasized, which implied the goals of occultism: to cultivate one's will, increase one's knowledge, master higher powers, and develop latent faculties.

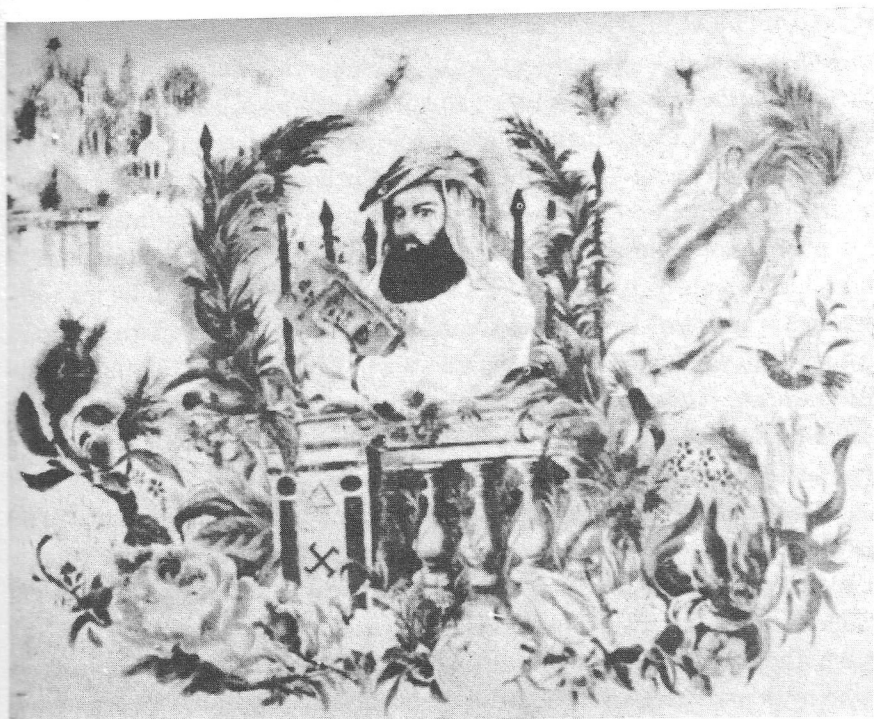


FIGURE 11.1. John King painted on silk by himself, flower decorations by H. P. Blavatsky, reproduced in *H.P.B. Speaks, Volume I*, edited by C. Jinarajadasa (Adyar, Theosophical Publishing House, 1950). Original at headquarters of Theosophical Society, Adyar.

The motto “TRY” was also used by the American Rosicrucian Paschal Beverly Randolph (1825–1875). Joscelyn Godwin has commented on the wider movement in the 1870s to promote occultism as opposed to Spiritualism. While Spiritualists concentrated on séance revelations, occultists favored psychical research combined with the study of old books on magic, Hermeticism, and Kabbalah. Blavatsky’s new ideas reflect this current as well as the Egyptian atmosphere of Hermeticism.¹¹

Isis Unveiled and Western Esotericism

Already in September 1875, Blavatsky began writing her first book, to be published in 1877. Titled *Isis Unveiled: A Master Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology*, this work represented an encyclopedic review of her readings in ancient religion, philosophy, mythology, and science. The Western esoteric theme is evident in its preface: “Our work, then, is a plea for