

the recognition of the Hermetic philosophy, the anciently universal Wisdom-Religion, as the only possible key to the Absolute in science and theology." The two-volume work accomplished a major statement of modern occultism's defiance of materialist science. The first volume, *Science*, opens with an attack on Darwin's *Origin of Species* and Thomas Huxley's *Physical Basis of Matter*, materialism being her chief target. Subsequent chapters on Spiritualism, psychic phenomena, Mesmerism, the Kabbalah, and the advanced knowledge and achievements of ancient peoples seek to expose and undermine the complacency of modern science. The second volume, *Theology*, contains polemics against Christianity, presents esoteric forms of Christianity including Gnosticism, a further discussion of Kabbalah, ancient and modern secret societies including the Jesuits and Freemasons, and a comparison of Christianity, to its general detriment, with Hinduism and Buddhism.

The underlying theme among these diverse topics is the existence of an ancient wisdom religion. The many faiths of man are said to derive from a universal religion known to both Plato and the ancient Hindu sages. The wisdom religion is also identified with Hermetic philosophy "as the only possible key to the Absolute in science and theology" (I, vii). Every religion is based on the same truth or "secret doctrine," which contains "the alpha and omega of universal science" (I, 511). This ancient wisdom religion is the religion of the future (I, 613). In a few centuries, the world religions of Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam will recede before the "facts" and "knowledge" of the ancient and universal doctrine. This ancient wisdom religion is a Hermetic philosophy based on an emanationist cosmology (I, 154, 285, 295f). Contrary to modern evolutionary theory, this doctrine posits the involution of man from "higher and more spiritual natures." A "divine spark" has descended into matter, and once it has reached its densest material level, it begins its ascent back to its source. Blavatsky thus assimilates modern evolutionism into her scheme, but only as the return cycle, and moreover, she rephrases its biological imperative in spiritual terms: ["The human race must be finally *physically* spiritualized" (I, 296).]

The terms "theosophy" and "Theosophist" also appear in the text of *Isis Unveiled*. Interestingly, Blavatsky makes only brief references to Jacob Boehme but identifies the Paracelsians or "fire-philosophers" of the sixteenth century as Theosophists (I, xxxvii, xli). Overall, the *theosophia* of the ancient Alexandrian world is her model, for example in her remark that the Neoplatonic school united the mystic theosophy of old Egypt with the refined philosophy of the Greeks (II, 41). She also frequently quoted her collaborator and editor, Professor Alexander Wilder (1823–1908), author of *New Platonism and Alchemy* (1869), who coined the term "eclectic theosophical system" to describe the thought of the Neoplatonists. Wilder is usually credited with writing the introduction to *Isis Unveiled*, titled "Before the

Veil." Blavatsky dwelled at length on the ideas of Plato, Plotinus, Porphyry, and Iamblichus in *Isis Unveiled*, and she framed their thought in terms of Wilder's eclectic theosophy. In turn, she envisaged modern Theosophy as the heir of Alexandrian Neoplatonism, effectively ignoring the Christian varieties of theosophy.

The Foundation of the Theosophical Society

Blavatsky and Olcott had considered ways and means of fostering philosophical and experimental study of spiritualist phenomena from the beginning of 1875. The Masters were again allegedly involved. Alluding to Morya, Blavatsky had (early in 1875?) written in her memorandum "Important Note" about her intervention in Philadelphia to advance occult sciences, "M.: brings orders to form a Society—a secret Society like the Rosicrucian Lodge."¹² Blavatsky's residence at 46 Irving Place, New York, became a regular meeting place for people with occult leanings. On 7 September, a group gathered to hear George Henry Felt (1831–1906) deliver a lecture titled "The Lost Canon of Proportion of the Egyptians" or "The Cabala" (depending on the source summarizing the lecture). Others present reflected related occult interests. Dr. Seth Pancoast (1823–1889), a professor of anatomy, owned the largest library on Kabbalah in the United States and wrote books on the topic in 1877 and 1883. Emma Hardinge Britten (1823–1899) was a renowned English trance medium and occult author residing in New York. Charles Sotheran (1847–1902) was a prominent Freemason, representative of the high-grade Swedenborgian rite in the United States, and author of a book on Cagliostro. Henry J. Newton (1823–1895) was interested in spirit photography, and he was the president of the First Society of Spiritualists in New York. Charles Carleton Massey (1838–1905) was a visiting London lawyer who would later organize the British Theosophical Society (1878), help found the Society for Psychological Research (1882), and translate several German works in this field by Friedrich Zöllner, Eduard von Hartmann, and Carl du Prel.

Olcott regarded Felt's speculations about intermediary beings as potential proof of the existence of elemental spirits, which he believed could appear in many guises at séances. Blavatsky agreed with Olcott that they should form a group to investigate such matters. The next day, 17 November, a society was formed "for the study and elucidation of Occultism, the Cabala, etc."¹³ At subsequent meetings, officers were elected, with Olcott becoming president, Dr. Pancoast and George Felt vice presidents, and Blavatsky corresponding secretary. The Western esoteric traditions, as evidenced in her articles and work on *Isis Unveiled*, but also involving occult science and experiment, thus provided the initial focus of the Theosophical Society in New York. Writing to the eminent

Russian psychical researcher Alexander Aksakov, Blavatsky referred to this early stage of the project:

Olcott is now organizing the Theosophical Society in New York. It will be composed of learned occultists and Kabbalists, of Hermetic philosophers of the 19th century, and of passionate antiquarians and Egyptologists in general. We want to do experiments comparing spiritualism and the magic of the ancients by following literally the instructions of old Kabbalists, both Jewish and Egyptian. For many years I have been studying the Hermetic philosophy in theory and practice . . . coming to the conclusion that spiritualism in its physical manifestations is nothing else but the python of the ancients or the astral or sidereal light of Paracelsus.¹⁴

Blavatsky expressed this purpose of the Theosophical Society in *Isis Unveiled*: "The object of its founders was to experiment practically in the occult powers of Nature." The preamble to the bylaws said that the group hoped to penetrate further than science into "the esoteric philosophies of ancient times" and "to collect and diffuse a knowledge of the laws which govern the universe." Belief in universal brotherhood and the emphasis on Asian religions were added later in 1878 after the Theosophical Society became involved with Indians.

The Theosophical Society in India

Up to 1878, the Theosophical Society's promotion of the spiritual over matter focused on the phenomena of practical occultism with experiments in astral projection. Meanwhile, the attraction of the Orient beckoned as the home of spiritual mystery. Blavatsky regularly alluded to her links with Eastern adepts of the mystic brotherhood; *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and her articles made frequent reference to Hinduism and Buddhism. This romantic image of the East was the product of colonial contact with India. Following eighteenth-century British oriental studies, German Romantic scholarship had led to high regard for India as a source of wisdom. Rammohun Roy (1772–1833), the famous Hindu reformer, evangelized his idea of an Indo-European golden age, arguing all religions had a common root and linking Unitarian Christianity with Vedanta. Sir Edward Arnold's *The Light of Asia* (1879) spread a popular knowledge of Buddhism in the West. Both men are mentioned in Blavatsky's writings. Blavatsky and Olcott established relations with sympathizers in India and Ceylon, who appreciated Blavatsky's championship of their traditional religion and culture against missionary influence. These Indian contacts led to a collaboration with

the Arya Samaj, a Hindu reform movement founded in 1875 in Bombay by Swami Dayanand Sarasvati, who wanted a return to the teaching of the Vedas.

In its circular of 1878, the Theosophical Society reformulated its objects to include a knowledge of natural law, especially its occult manifestations; the development of latent powers within the individual; an appreciation for oriental religious philosophies; and, chiefly, the formation of a brotherhood of humanity.¹⁵ These were gradually formalized into the three present objectives of the society:

1. To form the nucleus of a universal brotherhood of humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste, or color.
2. The study of ancient and modern religions, philosophies, and sciences.
3. The investigation of the unexplained laws of nature and the psychical powers latent in man.

This link with the Arya Samaj provided an excuse for transferring operations to India, and in December 1878 Blavatsky and Olcott sailed for India via London, arriving in Bombay in February 1879. Initially based in Bombay, Blavatsky and Olcott tirelessly promoted Theosophy through extensive travels and relations with leading intellectual and political figures in India. In October 1879, they began publishing a journal called *The Theosophist*. Educated Indians were especially impressed by the Theosophists' championship of Indian religion and philosophy in the context of the country's growing self-assertion against the values and beliefs of the European colonial powers. In May 1880, Blavatsky and Olcott formally converted to Buddhism on a visit to Ceylon, where they were feted by enormous crowds, and new branches of the Theosophical Society were founded.¹⁶

Through their travels, meetings, and contributors to the magazine, Blavatsky was swiftly exposed to Indian philosophy, in particular Samkara's Advaita Vedanta, the Upanishads, and the *Bhagavad Gita*, which feature extensively in her articles and later works. Her preference for Advaita Vedanta related to its exposition of the ultimate reality as a monist, nontheistic, impersonal absolute. This nondualist view of Parabrahm as the universal divine principle would become the first fundamental proposition of *The Secret Doctrine*, which she began writing in 1883. In the same period, Blavatsky assimilated Buddhist ideas into her eclectic Theosophy, ultimately equating Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta as the common source of her esoteric doctrine.¹⁷

The Mahatmas and Esoteric Buddhism

Alfred Percy Sinnett (1840–1921), the Anglo-Indian editor of an influential national newspaper, *The Pioneer*, was an important convert to Theosophy in India.

Another was Allan Octavian Hume (1829–1912), the retired Secretary of the Government of India. Blavatsky was a regular visitor to the Sinnetts' summer home in Simla from September 1880 onward. During this first visit, she produced several striking paranormal phenomena. At this time, members of the secret brotherhood (soon identified as the Masters Koot Hoomi and Morya, supposedly resident in Tibet) began a voluminous correspondence chiefly with Sinnett and some initially with Hume. These so-called Mahatma ("great soul") letters to Sinnett, typically delivered by precipitation or apport, would between 1880 to 1885 number more than a hundred. Sinnett's access to the press coupled with his own books swiftly broadcast Theosophy to English-speaking readers in both India and England. His first book, *The Occult World* (1881), gave sensational publicity to Blavatsky's phenomena and the Mahatma letters, attracting the interest of the London Society for Psychical Research, and his *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883) disseminated the basic teachings of Theosophy in its new Asian cast on the basis of the philosophical and cosmological explanations contained in the Mahatma letters. In 1883, Sinnett returned to England, where he acted as vice president and secretary of the Theosophical Society's London lodge.¹⁸

From 1881 onward, Blavatsky and her alleged "guides" (brothers, Mahatmas) gradually disseminated an elaborate philosophical edifice involving a cosmogony, the macrocosm of the universe, spiritual hierarchies, and intermediary beings, the latter having correspondences with a hierarchical conception of the microcosm of man. A key aspect of Theosophy is the septenary (sevenfold) principle, governing both the macrocosm and the microcosm. The first formal statement of the sevenfold principle in humans was actually published in October 1881 by A. O. Hume, on the basis of teachings received from Koot Hoomi:¹⁹

Divisions of the Spiritualists

1. The Body

2. The Animal Soul, or *Perispit*

Subdivisions of the Occultists

1. The Physical body, composed wholly of matter in its grossest and most tangible form.
2. The Vital principle—(or *Jiv-atma*)—a form of force, indestructible and when disconnected with one set of atoms, becoming attracted immediately by others.
3. The Astral body (*Linga Sharira*) composed of highly etherialized matter; in its habitual passive state, the perfect but very shadowy duplicate of the body; its activity,

- consolidation and form depending entirely on the *kama rupa*.
4. The Astral shape (*kama rupa*) or body of desire, a principle defining the configuration of —
 5. The animal or physical intelligence or consciousness or Ego, analogous to, though proportionally higher in degree than, the reason, instinct, memory, imagination, &c., existing in the higher animals.
 3. The Spiritual Soul or Spirit
 6. The Higher or Spiritual intelligence or consciousness, or spiritual Ego, in which mainly resides the sense of consciousness in the *perfect* man, though the lower dimmer animal consciousness co-exists in No. 5.
 7. The Spirit—an emanation from the ABSOLUTE; uncreated; eternal; a state rather than a being.

Reincarnation, Karma, and Spiritual Evolution

In *Isis Unveiled*, Blavatsky had not only asserted the triune principles of man (body, soul, and spirit), common to both Plato and St. Paul, but she denied the possibility of reincarnation on this earth.²⁰ By late 1882, Blavatsky had revised her view in the context of the septenary constitution of humans, which functioned as an integral part of the process of reincarnation. The three lower principles—the body, the vital principle, and its astral counterpart—are abandoned at death, and the four higher principles proceed into the next order of spirituality, the astral plane (*kama loka*), which acts as a form of purgatory. The fifth principle, *Manas*, is itself separable into higher and lower elements, and in their ensuing struggle, the best, most elevated, and spiritual portions attach themselves to the sixth principle, *Buddhi*, whereas the lower remnant associates itself with the body of desire (*Kama-rupa*) and eventually dissolves. The higher, *Manas*, the Ego of the late earthly personality, then follows the sixth and seventh principles into the spiritual condition called *Devachan*.²¹ *Devachan* corresponds to the idea of heaven, a condition of subjective enjoyment, the