THEOSOPHY AS A PROBLEM FOR PSYCHICAL RESEARCH

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On the fringe of psychical research there are numerous psychic, religious and occult groups, often led by strange personalities, whose paranormal claims are enthusiastically accepted by their followers. If parapsychologists attempt to critically assess the paranormal content, major methodological difficulties may follow—and mutual suspicion and confusion. Historically, the movement with which the early researchers were most engaged was modern Spiritualism (Moore, 1977; Oppenheim, 1985). But this is the centenary year of the most famous investigation ever carried out by the SPR. The "Report on Phenomena Connected with Theosophy" appeared in its *Proceedings* for December, 1885.

Modern Theosophy begins officially with the foundation of the Theosophical Society in New York in 1875. Ellwood (1979) has argued that this was an important early stage in the penetration of American society by oriental spirituality. Part of its appeal lay in the claims that it had access to knowledge of occult and spiritual secrets not granted to the world at large and that its leading figure, Madame H. P. Blavatsky, had occult powers. The objects of the Society were revised over the years and laid claim to most if not all areas of human knowledge, including the religious. The "Preamble and By-laws" of October 30, 1875, began "The title of the Theosophical Society explains the objects and desires of its founders: they seek to obtain knowledge of the nature and attributes of the Supreme Power and of the higher spirits, by the aid of physical processes" (as quoted in *Light*, November 30, 1895, p. 577).

This may not be pure religion as defined by some scholars, but it is at least a modern degeneration of it. Moreover, critics had no doubt at the time that they were dealing with a religious manifestation. Solovyoff (1895), a Russian friend of Blavatsky who turned against her, wrote: "What sort of woman was she, this foundress of a religion which, if not new, was at any rate renovated, and was propagated by her phenomena?" (p. 62). By 1893, two years after Blavatsky's death, he

noted: ". . . we see an entire religious movement, we see a prosperous and growing plantation of Buddhism in Western Europe" (p. 282). Maskelyne (1913) subtitled his exposure of Theosophy "A Brief History of the Greatest Imposture ever Perpetrated under the Cloak of Religion." The Committee of the SPR which investigated Theosophy commented in their private First Report (1884): "We must remember that in psychical research we must be on guard against men's highest instincts quite as much as their lowest. The history of religions would have been written in vain if we still fancied that a Judas or a Joe Smith was the only kind of apostle who needed watching. 'Fingunt simul creduntque.' 'The end justifies the means'—these two sayings are the key to a good deal of ecclesiastical history" (p. 7).

That Theosophical history can be understood as ecclesiastical history could indeed be argued, as the sequence of Theosophical "popes," rival "seers," holy books, heretics and attempts at "reformation" over the past century indicate (for a general history, see Campbell, 1980). The relevance of some other papers in this conference to the problem of Theosophy is also clear. Canon Rossner's primordial tradition, his attempt to link science and religion cannot but recall Blavatsky's 1877 attempt *Isis Unveiled: A Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology,* and its sequel *The Secret Doctrine* (1888) which claimed to be "The Synthesis of Science, Religion and Philosophy." Sergio Bernardi's exploration of shamanism poses the question—was Blavatsky a shaman, and did she undergo a crisis similar to that of a shaman before starting the Theosophical Society? Data about such a crisis is presented below. I need not labor the significance of Jung's archetypes for a possible understanding of the Masters or Mahatmas with whom Blavatsky claimed contact.

But why should Theosophy be a problem for psychical research a century after a famous report took it to pieces? You will recall the verdict of the SPR Committee in 1885: "For our own part, we regard her neither as the mouthpiece of hidden seers, nor as a mere vulgar adventuress; we think that she has achieved a title to permanent remembrance as one of the most accomplished, ingenious, and interesting impostors in history" (p. 207). It may be a surprise that the Theosophical movement has continued to this day and indeed enjoyed several eras of expansion—though Richard Hodgson, the SPR's investigator in India, where the Society had moved its headquarters in 1879, did note ". . . she may yet do much in the future for the benefit of human credulity" (p. 317). He spoke of Blavatsky, though in fact her Masters are "known" and venerated, sometimes in altered form, by esoteric groups that scarcely acknowledge the woman who originally wrote of them. But after all, religious history is full of beliefs that have survived

long after their logical base had gone, if they ever had one. What is that to psychical research?

First, there is some doubt that Blavatsky was rightly convicted, that she did fake all her phenomena, that her Mahatmas were a conscious invention (Price, 1984). Certainly most readers of the story, as summarized in numerous accounts, of how the intrepid investigators of the SPR unmasked the scheming Russian lady, are quite convinced, and for good measure the SPR sponsored a translation of Solovyoff (1895) in which the Mahatmas are shown in Blavatsky's letters apparently evolving, expediency dictated, from a Spiritualist framework. If today there are very few psychical researchers with any detailed knowledge of the case (so that, for example, finding a referee for a paper on the subject is difficult), there is no doubt that researchers at the time accepted it, even those like Myers who had been Fellows of the Theosophical Society.

The most recent critic of the 1885 Report, whose findings are being prepared for publication, is Dr. Vernon Harrison, formerly chief scientist of De La Rue, a past president of the Royal Photographic Society and a professional examiner of disputed documents. It will be remembered that two employees who had been dismissed by the Theosophical Society in India, accused Blavatsky of faking phenomena and they produced letters supposedly written by Blavatsky arranging the fraud. Blavatsky, of course, said that the employees, Emma and Alexis Coulomb, had forged her handwriting. She wrote to her official biographer, A. P. Sinnett, for example "Alexis Coulomb's handwriting is naturally like mine. We know all how Damodar was once deceived by an order written *in my handwriting* to go upstairs and seek for me in my bedroom in Bombay when I was at Allahabad. It was a trick of M. Coulomb, who thought it good fun to deceive him . . ." (Barker, p. 115).

Among the deficiencies of the handwriting section of the 1885 Report, Dr. Harrison notes that no examination was ever made of M. Coulomb's handwriting. He has, however, obtained a sample of M. Coulomb's handwriting and found that it does have many characteristics of Blavatsky's. For this and other reasons he thinks it possible that the Coulomb letters were forged by the couple in cooperation. Dr. Harrison has also examined the Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett, now in the British Library, which on the hypothesis of the 1885 Report, were written by Blavatsky with the occasional help of confederates. Here he finds that none of the scripts he has examined suggests that Blavatsky was the writer. There is also some uncertainty how the writing got on, or rather in, the paper in some instances. It could be what the Victorians called "psychography"—paranormal precipitation of writing.

I have here commented briefly on material kindly made available

to me by Dr. Harrison and, in a way that does not do justice to the cumulative case he builds up, of what was at best a shambles and at worst a deliberate attempt to deceive readers of the 1885 Report about the true nature of the handwriting evidence. At times Harrison is following in the footsteps of other critics, chiefly on the Theosophical side, who for that very reason have been disregarded by psychical researchers, their books not reviewed nor even at times admitted to libraries. His analysis cannot be so easily ignored.

The role of Hodgson, the chief SPR investigator, was central to the 1885 Report, and doubts have also emerged in recent years about the probity of his conduct in the study of another physical medium, Eusapia Palladino (Cassirer, 1983).

New evidence has also been published lately supporting Blavatsky's claim to have been given her basic instructions not by the Czarists as a Russian agent (as Hodgson thought), but by a group of esoterists linked with the Panchen Lama at Shigatse, Tibet. Blavatsky had quoted from the Books of Kiu-te in *The Secret Doctrine* and elsewhere, which were supposed to be found in Tibetan monasteries. Unfortunately, as Reigle (1983) notes, "Neither learned Tibetans nor Western scholars knew of any books by that name. They were therefore labeled as figments of H. P. Blavatsky's imagination, along with everything else in *The Secret Doctrine* (p. 1). Reigle has, however, followed up her references and has now identified the books in question as Buddhist Tantra. Indeed, he has found a reference to the Books of Kiu-te in a book published in London in 1876 and cited by Blavatsky. Alas, this introduces a dilemma well known in psychical research—the verification of the truth of the statement has involved finding a source which may be the source for what the subject says about the matter. There is no doubt that at times Blavatsky *could* follow books she was quoting quite closely without the reader realizing her dependence.

Reigle (1984) has followed up his research by suggesting that the "Book of Dyzan," a seminal poem at the beginning of *The Secret Doctrine* is a translation from a certain lost Tantra which was particularly associated with Shigatse. I have not yet seen any review of Reigle's claims by another Tibetan scholar, but he certainly appears to write with a considerable knowledge of Tibetan literature. We should not forget, though, the claim by Scholem (1941) that the "Book of Dyzan" is Kabbalistic in origin.

If psychical researchers were led, for example by Dr. Harrison's researches, to abandon the "impostor" theory of Blavatsky, into what context should they place her? The weightiest contribution from the Theosophical side, which to the best of my knowledge has been totally

ignored by researchers, is Barborka (1966), who, incidentally, had designed the first keyboard in the States for composition of Sanskrit in Devanagari script. He considered Blavatsky as an expression of Tibetan Tulku, a term difficult of definition in English, but approximating to the spiritual expression, projection or incarnation in a person (such as Blavatsky or the Dalai Lama) of a higher spiritual force or principle. The relationship may involve possession (as in more conventional mediumship to some extent) and out-of-body experiences for both the possessor and the possessed. All this emphasis on a Tibetan context for Blavatsky is irritating for those who believe that she never went there, but got her information from books. They will be even more displeased by what will probably be the next biography of her—from Fuller (in press) which again settles firmly for a Tibetan understanding of Blavatsky, even though it is apparently the first biography to use the SPR archives. (The contents of the SPR archive on Blavatsky are being printed in the quarterly journal *Theosophical History* from its first issue in January, 1985.)

I should like to call attention to a source which offers an alternative explanation to the belief that Blavatsky was actually in Tibet. Her colleague, the president of the Theosophical Society, Colonel Olcott wrote that "a certain wonderful psychophysiological change happened to H.P.B., that I am not at liberty to speak about, and that nobody has up to the present suspected . . ." (Olcott, 1941). Olcott is generally reckoned a credulous observer, even by other Theosophists, but his memoirs *Old Diary Leaves* especially the first volume, are remarkable testimonies to the complexity of Blavatsky. He, for example, was onto the possible interpretation of her as Tulku, though he used the Sanskrit term "Avesa" for the phenomenon. Now, Neff (1937), who was a leading Theosophical archivist, believed that the change of which Olcott wrote, was in Philadelphia in May–June 1875, when Blavatsky was ill; indeed this is one of several occasions when she might have died, but recovered. Letters written at the time in Russian were published in English translation in the New York theosophical journal *The Path* (1894–5). Naturally, the source has to be used with care, because the originals do not survive. The recipient was Blavatsky's niece.

In some of these letters, Blavatsky speaks of an intelligence enveloping her body and using her brain. "I have become a sort of storehouse of somebody else's knowledge . . . Someone comes and envelops me as a misty cloud and all at once pushes me out of myself, and then I am not 'I' anymore—Helena Petrovna Blavatsky—but someone else. Someone strong and powerful, born in a totally different region of the world; and as to myself it is almost as if I were asleep, or lying but not

quite conscious—not in my own body but close by, held only by a thread which ties me to it. However, at times I see and hear everything quite clearly: I am perfectly conscious of what my body is saying and doing—or at least its new possessor. I even understand and remember it all so well that afterwards I can repeat it and even write down *his* words . . ." (*Path*, 266).

In early letters Blavatsky called this intelligence "the Voice" or "Sahib." Later she began to call this Voice (or another) "Master." Just after her illness she wrote: "I have begun to feel a very strange duality. Several times a day I feel that besides me there is someone else, quite separable from me, present in my body. I never lose the consciousness of my own personality; what I feel is as if I were keeping silent and the other one—the lodger who is in me—were speaking with my tongue. For instance I know that I have never been in the places which are described by my 'other me' but this other one—the second me—does not lie when he tells about places and things unknown to me, because he has actually seen them and knows them well" (*Path*, 269–70).

She adds "In the night, when I am alone in my bed, the whole life of my No. 2 passes before my eyes, and I do not see myself at all, but quite a different person—different in race and different in feelings." She denies this is mediumship and claims to be able to stop any phenomena in a seance merely by entering the room.

More information about the "Sahib" appears in a later letter: "I see this Hindu every day, just as I might see any other living person, with the only difference that he looks to me more ethereal and more transparent. Formerly I kept silent about these appearances thinking they were hallucinations. But now they have become visible to other people as well. He (the Hindu) appears and advises us as to our conduct and our writing. He evidently knows *everything* that is going on, even to the thoughts of other people, and makes me express his knowledge. Sometimes it seems to be that he overshadows the whole of me, simply entering me like a kind of volatile essence penetrating my pores and dissolving in me. Then we two are able to speak to other people, and then I begin to understand and remember sciences and languages—everything he instructs me in, even when he is not with me any more" (*Path*, 297).

In 1877 she makes this claim: "As to Sahib, I have known him for a long time. Twenty-five years ago he came to London with the Prince of Nepaul; three years ago he sent me a letter by an Indian who came here to lecture about Buddhism . . . I always recognize and know the Master, and often talk to him without seeing him. How is it that he hears me from everywhere, and that I also hear his voice across seas and oceans twenty times a day? I do not know, but it is so. Whether it

is he personally that enters me I really cannot say with confidence: if it is not he, it is his power, his influence. Through him alone I am strong: without him I am a mere nothing" (*Path,* 299).

What are we to make of this material? There is exaggeration in these letters, but perhaps we would agree that Blavatsky had been having some inner experiences. They resemble to some extent the descriptions by mediums of their trances and clairvoyance—that is, hysterial phenomena. But there may be a more fundamental dislocation of the psyche, such as we associate with schizophrenia. Blavatsky, who had been ill, felt that there was someone else inside her, that she had been called to a special role. As this condition developed, so did the Theosophical teaching, with much input also from books and people encountered. On the other hand, this may be (as Barborka suggests) what it feels like if the Tulku experience comes to you—quite different from ordinary life, but still explicable in the Tibetan tradition. It also has parallels perhaps from the shamanism of Siberia, an area near which Blavatsky lived for a time.

To the psychical researcher, especially one who accepts the 1885 report, it is important that the Tibetan connections of Blavatsky prove to be spurious. It may be allowable that the Hindu above (later identified, I think, with one of the Indians affiliated with the mainly Tibetan "brother") is a hallucination, or even a spirit guide, but not that he was a real person "astrally" projecting. The attempt to clarify the matter goes on, and although the number of researchers engaged in it appears to be growing, they are few in comparison with the size of the problem. Blavatsky records are scattered in a dozen or more theosophical archives—the movement split after her death many times. The Russian revolution destroyed much and the Asian climate has taken its toll on letters and papers also. It is a multi-disciplinary enterprise, for one would need some knowledge of Hinduism or Buddhism to show that Theosophy was only derivative, and of Spiritualist history and psychical research to understand Blavatsky's time there. Later Theosophical history also presents problems. Psychic or occult powers were claimed by the leaders who followed after Blavatsky—such as Besant, Leadbeater and Steiner—even Krishnamurti. In varying degrees they (the leaders) were associated with related psi-based religious movements and the psychical researcher has an interest in the experiences that trigger off the groups. There is, sometimes, no clear dividing line between an occult group and a religious movement—Theosophy has often been both. As Ellwood (1983) notes: "The juxtaposition of deep-diving philosophy, comparative religion, and rather spectacular talk about adepts is highly characteristic of Theosophy" (p. 119).

To conclude, we encounter in Theosophy a problem that confronts

us elsewhere in the parapsychology of religion and of occult movements—the separation of veridical material from a mass of piety, exaggeration and, at times, fraud. A century ago, in August, 1885, when Blavatsky arrived in Rome in retreat from India, it looked clear to most researchers, for Hodgson had read his paper, reporting his conclusions, to the SPR public meeting in London on May 29 and June 24, that it was all fraudulent. Mahatmic letters continued to be precipitated on occasion—one turned up on a letter from an Indian to Colonel Olcott in June, 1886, when both Blavatsky and the Coulombs had long gone—but apart from a few Theosophists, no one supposed there was a problem here. Today it is different. We must face the possibility that a religious messenger came from the East in the shape of Blavatsky and received a rejection, after initial success, in which psychical research did not play an honest role. At the very least, until the debate about the Harrison findings and the Tibetan connection has clarified, we should suspend judgment.

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