The other world

Spiritualism and psychical research in England, 1850–1914

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trance medium Mrs. Piper, the language that he used to convey his deep satisfaction with the universe echoed, not the scholarly scientist, but the intense Nonconformist he had once been before his crisis of faith in young adulthood. In a letter to an unnamed correspondent, written in 1901, one can hear him “giving his testimony at Methodist meetings” in earlier times. “Be of good courage whatever happens,” he wrote,

and pray continually, and let peace come into your soul . . . Everything, absolutely everything, — from a spot of ink to all the stars, — every faintest thought we think of to the contemplation of the highest intelligence in the cosmos, are all in and part of the infinite Goodness. Rest in that Divine Love. 161

Indeed, for all his excesses of enthusiasm and credulity, Myers was not far from speaking for most of his colleagues in the SPR when he addressed them as the Society’s president in 1900:

To prove the preamble of all religions; to be able to say to theologian or to philosopher: “Thus and thus we demonstrate that a spiritual world exists — a world of independent and abiding realities, not a mere ‘epiphenomenon’ or transitory effect of the material world . . . .” This would indeed, in my view, be the weightiest service which any research could render to the deep disquiet of our time. 162

It was not the voice of detached scientific inquiry that spoke through these men.

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Theosophy and the occult

THE LURE OF THE EAST

Spiritualism and psychical research not only served as substitute religions for refugees from Christianity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century; both also had to define their positions with respect to the range of occult and mystical sects that studded the spectrum of Victorian and Edwardian heterodoxy. The relationships, on all sides, were complex and shifting. In theory, spiritualists and psychical researchers alike rejected the secretive and ritualistic elements of the occult tradition, proclaiming instead their absolute devotion to the standards of open, rational, empirical inquiry set forth by modern science. “The Spiritualism which has soothed so many,” wrote the Glasgow spiritualist James Robertson, “does not run into the realm of the mystical. The rational Spiritualist looks with clear, open eyes at what is presented.” 171 E. R. Dodds articulated at least one psychical researcher’s objections to the occult, when he explained:

The occultist, as his name betokens, values the occult qua occult; that is for him its virtue, and the last thing he will thank you for is an explanation. He is an intellectual anarchist, a rebel against the concept of natural law, and his unconfessed aim is a destructive one: he would like, if he could, to undermine the whole arrogant structure of modern science and see it crash about our ears . . . The genuine psychical researcher may feel this fascination, as I have sometimes done, but he has disciplined himself to resist it . . . Far from wishing to pull down the lofty edifice of science, his highest ambition is to construct a modest annexe which will serve, at least provisionally, to house his new facts with the minimum of disturbance to the original plan of the building. 172

Both spiritualists and psychical researchers insisted that their inquiries were part of the mainstream of modern thought, not remnants of magical mumbo jumbo from bygone ages. 173

Such declarations were easy to make, but difficult to implement. At heart, although few spiritualists and psychical researchers would admit it, they were groping for a knowledge that was beyond the scope of
physical science either to confirm or to deny. The questions they raised, the very language they used, often had close affinities with the concerns and the vocabulary of occultists. If spiritualists and psychical researchers deplored the exclusivity inherent in occult sects, or grew impatient with the dogged study of venerable texts supposed to embody the key to all wisdom, there were nonetheless fundamental bonds linking them to the occult. Many spiritualists came to embrace an essentially occult view of the universe, an animistic vision of closely interconnected parts all bearing the mark of cosmic soul, or world force, or ultimate spirit. For the occultist, there is no sharp distinction between matter and spirit, tangible and intangible, and that frame of mind proved highly tempting, particularly to spiritualists with inclinations toward mysticism.

Indeed the occult enjoyed a striking popularity in the late Victorian and Edwardian decades, and by no means only for spiritualists and psychical researchers. Although there has never been a moment in human history when magic has not exerted its fascination, some periods are more noticeably marked than others as far as public interest in the occult is concerned. The late nineteenth and early twentieth century was such a time, as triumphant positivism sparked an international reaction against its restrictive world view. In England, it was the age of “Esoteric Buddhism,” of the Rosicrucian revival, of cabalists, Hermeticists, and reincarnationists. In the late 1880s, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn first saw the light of day in London, and during its stormy history, the Order lured into its arcane activities not only W. B. Yeats, but also the self-proclaimed magus Aleister Crowley. Its founders included the extraordinary Samuel Liddell (MacGregor) Mathers, who spent years of his life poring over manuscripts of sacred magic in Paris and London. Palmists and astrologers abounded, while books on magic and the occult sold briskly. Without doubt, much of the attraction of these and related subjects depended on the dominant role that science had assumed in modern culture, for Dodds was right when he identified the occultist’s destructive anger against “the whole arrogant structure of modern science.” It was an anger shared by many men and women who would not have dreamed of calling themselves occultists, and yet who resented the confidence and certainty with which science reduced nature’s majesty to measurable quantities.

Among those who did specifically ally themselves in this period with one or another occult sect, dissatisfaction with the value system imposed by western science was often a paramount motive. Hargrave Jennings, for one, began his reverent history of an old occult sect, the Rosicrucians, with an assault on the vanity, the “intolerant dogmatism,” of modern science. Alfred Percy Sinnett, for another, one of the most active and prolific members of a new occult organization in Britain, the Theosophical Society, characterized modern science by its fanatical thirst for measurement, and its neglect of all knowledge that was not quantifiable. “That which is commonly called science,” he observed, is exclusively “physical” science. It works with instruments made of metal, glass and so on, and has accomplished work that may be fairly termed sublime in its examination of what I will venture to call the outside of things, but it always stops short in groping after a comprehension of their innermost essence.

Its failures are most obvious when we deal with any of the mysteries of Nature that are associated with life.

Life, Sinnett believed, was not accessible to quantitative measurement, and its puzzles could not be probed by the methods of physical science. He deeply regretted that contemporary western scientists summarily dismissed older scientific traditions, such as astrology, for being incompatible with their own approach to the natural world. Thanks to their narrowness of vision, he argued, they were barring themselves from examining “a multitude of Nature’s most interesting mysteries.” “A problem must come within the range of laboratory experiment to be a problem for modern science,” he complained, and yet how many of life’s profoundest questions, he wondered, could be analyzed in the laboratory?

What Sinnett was fundamentally attacking, of course, was not just the measuring mentality, but the omnipresent threat of materialism. “Dense materialism” he called it, “which cannot conceive of consciousness as anything but a function of the flesh and blood.” His wife, a staunch partner in the study of Theosophical wisdom, set out to show that Theosophy could serve to counter the modern “intellectual bias in favour of Materialism,” and other Theosophists were similarly inspired to oppose “a brave front to Materialism.” The physician and Wagnerian William Ashton Ellis, who, having once attended a sick Madame Blavatsky, knew something about Theosophy, linked that movement to spiritualism and psychical research because all three shared the same goal: “to shake off this great pall of gross matter that shuts men off into separate prison cells of personal egotism.” Theosophists, needless to say, were not alone among occultists in seeking to liberate themselves from matter and materialism. The lure of the occult, from the 1870s to World War I, lay precisely in its antipathy to the strictly rational, empiricist outlook that was increasingly perceived as the hallmark of Victorian thought. Involvement in occult studies provided one means of challenging and of discarding a frame
of mind that seemed to glory only in the concrete, the factual, and the substantive.\textsuperscript{11} Because much of the discontent that underlay the resurgence of interest in the occult during the late Victorian and Edwardian years arose as a response to the hegemony of science in occidental culture, it comes as no surprise to see the East emerging, in the eyes of the disaffected, as the repository of true wisdom. If Christianity had been hopelessly compromised by its concessions to science, the Hindu and Buddhist faiths might still be studied for their ageless spiritual teachings. If Christian clergymen could no longer pretend to speak authoritatively for their times, there were wise men in the East whose learning applied to the human condition at all times. If the Bible had been criticized so minutely as to leave scant room for divine affluence, there was still inspiration aplenty to be found in the \textit{Bhagavad-Gita}. The East, ever exotic, mysterious, alien, was an escape from and an alternative to the shallow, externally-oriented culture of the West. Western scientists might examine the outsides of things, as Sinnett noted, but Eastern sages looked inward where, in the realm of essence, eternal truth resided. The members of Britain's "counterculture" in this period created the East, if not exactly in their own image, then as a reflection of their discontent with their own society.\textsuperscript{12} In most cases, however, unlike the counterculture of a century later, British representatives of the movement were not drop-outs from that society. The majority of them were utterly respectable, hard-working professionals. If they succumbed to what J. N. Maskelyne scornfully dubbed "the artificial glamour surrounding Indian mysticism,"\textsuperscript{13} it was not because they wished to undermine the socioeconomic bases of their culture, but because they found that their cultural milieu catered so inadequately to the needs of the spirit.

\section*{Affinities with Spiritualism}

No one did more to encourage an artificial glamor surrounding Eastern wisdom than Helena Petrovna Blavatsky; nor did any other occult group in this period receive more public attention and press commentary than the Theosophical Society over whose infant destinies she presided. Friedrich Max Müller, the German-born orientalist and professor of comparative philology at Oxford, considered the movement significant enough in 1893 to compose a twenty-page article debunking its claims to any genuine foundation in Eastern religions. The following year Gladstone felt called upon to denounce the attitude toward atonement held by Annie Besant, the woman who succeeded Madame Blavatsky as matriarch of Theosophy, after the latter's death in 1891.\textsuperscript{14} Clearly, Theosophy could not be ignored.

Founded in New York in 1875 by Blavatsky and her American partner, Colonel Henry Steel Olcott, the Theosophical Society was at once a product of the late nineteenth century and the beneficiary of centuries of occult thought. Blavatsky herself stressed the roots of her teaching in the venerable texts of the Far East, but the very term "theosophy" conjured up a rich variety of associations with the cabalist, neo-Platonic, and Hermetic strands of western philosophic and religious thought. Meaning "divine wisdom," or "wisdom of the gods," theosophy was a familiar term in the vocabulary of the occult long before Madame Blavatsky stamped it with the mark of her own impressive personality. Belief in the existence of specially initiated adepts, or of secret documents that held, in coded signs and symbols, the key to understanding natures deepest enigmas, had haunted the fringes of European thought for centuries, tantalizing susceptible minds with the possibility of attaining truly godlike power over the natural world. C. C. Massey dubbed the Jewish cabala "a system of theosophy," while Hargrove Jennings used the label "theosophists" to describe the Paracelsists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The links between the new, Blavatsky brand of Theosophy and the older tradition related to Hermetic teaching were nicely encapsulated in Annie Besant's claim to have been none other than Giordano Bruno himself in a previous incarnation.\textsuperscript{15}

When Madame Blavatsky produced her own corpus of wisdom, beginning with \textit{Isis Unveiled} in 1877, she was by no means averse to drawing on time-honored occult beliefs. In fact, one of her critics, the author of \textit{Isis Very Much Unveiled}, concluded that her philosophical erudition consisted of nothing more than a "rehash of Neo-Platonist and Kabbalistic mysticism with Buddhist terminology."\textsuperscript{16} It was the Buddhist terminology that particularly appealed to Blavatsky. Her religious or metaphysical preferences lay in the Orient, especially in remote Tibet, where she claimed to have received instruction in ancient learning from the Mahatmas, or Masters, who, she insisted, guided her along the bizarre path of her life. Max Müller acknowledged the Eastern provenance of Blavatsky's doctrines, but was utterly scornful of her scholarship. In the so-called "primeval wisdom" of Theosophy, he could find nothing that cannot be traced back to generally accessible Brahmanic or Buddhist sources, only everything is muddled or misunderstood. If I were asked what Madame Blavatsky's Esoteric Buddhism really is, I should say it was Buddhism misunderstood, distorted, caricatured. There is nothing in it beyond what was known already, chiefly from
books that are now antiquated. The most ordinary terms are misspelt and misinterpreted.17

Fortunately there is no need to attempt an analysis of Blavatsky’s personality here, to probe her motives, to measure the extent to which she revitalized Western occultism with her contributions from the East, or to evaluate the degree of fraud that props up the foundations of modern Theosophy. Whether she was the “greatest impostor in history,” “a fibbing, cheating, variety performer,” or “the most successful creed-maker of the last three hundred years,”18 is not the issue at hand. Possibly Max Müller’s generous estimation of her character was apt; perhaps she was, initially, “dazzled by a glimmering of truth in various religions of the world” and did crave “a spiritual union with the Divine,” only to end by deceiving herself and her disciples alike.19 That she resorted to trickery much of the time, in order to produce assorted “miracles,” that she fabricated tall tales about herself in order to heighten the mystery and glamor of her past, is beyond doubt. Equally certain, however, is her striking success in capitalizing upon, and further promoting, contemporary fascination with oriental systems of religious and philosophical thought. The teachings of her supposed Masters may be only a rehash, mishmash, or muddle of many texts, both sacred and occult, but her mixture has proved to exercise an enduring appeal.

In launching Theosophy in the 1870s, Blavatsky also effectively capitalized upon modern spiritualism. In no way was Theosophy more a child of the late nineteenth century than in its affiliations with the spiritualist movement whose origins antedated Blavatsky’s Society by some twenty-five years. Indeed, it is difficult to conceive of the Theosophical Society meeting with much success at all had it not followed some of the trails already blazed by the spiritualists.20 Not only did Olcott and Blavatsky themselves first become acquainted through their mutual spiritualist interests, but “during the first year of its existence, the English Theosophical Society continued to be recruited almost entirely, if not solely, from the Spiritualist ranks.”21 Yet, after 1875, Madame repeatedly expressed her hostility toward spiritualism and announced, in no uncertain terms, that she rejected the “crude theories” of modern spiritualists.22 Uncharitable critics might well assume that, having failed to establish herself in the first rank of mediums, she decided to adopt even bolder means to achieve world fame. More sympathetic students of her life and work accept the theory that, from the first, her goal was to convert the materialists to the reality of spirit phenomena and that she embraced spiritualism until her Masters taught her to see how far removed from profound occult wisdom the silly séance phenomena actually were.23 In any case, the relationship between Theosophy and spiritualism provoked considerable debate in the last decades of the nineteenth century, as spiritualists and Theosophists scrutinized their respective tenets to determine how they merged or clashed with those of the other camp.24

The greatest clash arose over that most fundamental of spiritualist beliefs—the reality of communication with identifiable spirits of deceased people. Spiritualism was, of course, predicated on the proposition that, after death, a person’s spirit could remain in close touch with the living and could relay messages to them with the help of a medium. Theosophical denial of this principle, and denunciation of séance practices, seemed to many an angered spiritualist an attempt to cut the very heart out of their faith. But Theosophists had learned from Madame Blavatsky the dangers that followed all attempts to commune with spirits around the séance table. Not only did such efforts try to force the “ego of the departed... back into earthly conditions” when it should be allowed to progress to higher planes of spirit existence, but the lesser forms of spirit life that could be summoned to séances might be of a decidedly unsavory nature, prolonged contact with which regularly ruined the health and sanity of mediums.25 The astral plane, which Theosophy taught was intertwined with the plane of daily life, was far from a realm of pure spirit, as spiritualists might assume. On the contrary, Theosophists warned, the astral plane was inhabited by nonhuman “spooks, elementaries and elementals,” as well as “cas-tiff lower principles of former men and women, helped by certain elementals to utilize the vital forces of the medium, masquerading as the personalities of such departed friends as the persons assisting at the séances desired to invoke.”26 Suspicious of the comforting assurances so important to spiritualists, Theosophists closed the door on dear friends and beloved relatives, except in the rarest of cases, because the souls of decent people, they believed, characteristically departed for more refined realms of existence. In doing so, these souls abandoned the astral plane to a variety of nonhuman spirits, or, much worse, to the spirits of the most loathsome and reprobate human beings which, remaining earthbound, positively delighted in the chance to deceive credulous séance sitters.27 In short, Theosophists expected no good to come from séances, and much evil. They boasted that the spiritualism that they endorsed was something far grander than slate writing, table tilting, or rappings on furniture. Its purpose was not contact with the dead, but “the cultivation of the inner life and the systematic sacrifice of the lower instincts of our nature to the higher law.”28

If spiritualists and Theosophists had only had the veracity of spirit messages to discuss, the chances for cooperation between the two
groups would have been slight. On a wide range of other issues, however, Theosophical convictions were scarcely distinguishable from spiritualist arguments. At base, the two groups were partners in the struggle to convince contemporaries that spirit existed independently of matter. If Blavatsky was tactless enough to distinguish the true spiritualism of her Theosophy from the false spiritualism of the spiritualists, at least she made common cause with them in the formidable task of combating materialism.26 Furthermore, their position on religion in general, and Christianity in particular, made Theosophical teachings congenial to that large body of British spiritualists who had abandoned the Christian faith. In principle, the founders of Theosophy did not intend to launch a new religion; “There is no religion higher than truth” was their motto. From the first, Theosophists directed their gaze, according to Blavatsky’s instructions, on the ancient “WISDOM-RELIGION” from whose trunk sprang all the religions of the world; like so many “shoots and branches.”29 Just as the spiritualists felt confident that their beliefs could furnish the lowest common denominator to reduce all theological differences, so Theosophists emphasized the universality of their own precepts and the unlimited nature of their tolerance. Mrs. Sinnett summarized the position of the Theosophical Society when she wrote in 1885:

As Theosophy is not in itself a religion in the common acceptation of the word, hardly even a philosophy, it may and does include among its followers representatives of almost every form of religious belief in the world, as well as many who have no belief at all. It teaches people to search for the fundamental truth that is the basis equally of every creed, philosophy, and science, and thus to lay bare the fact that one truth supports every religion, no matter how divergent they may now appear; that truth being the Divine wisdom of the ancients, discoverable alike in the symbolic writings of the Kabballah, the Book of Hermes, the Vedas, and other sacred books of the East, in the Talmud, the Koran, our own Bible, as well as in the teachings of Pythagoras, Socrates, and many of the more recent philosophers.30

Even though the Theosophists looked much more directly to the East for their inspiration than did the spiritualists, both movements professed a similar longing to reveal timeless religious truth. The Theosophical emphasis on universal brotherhood, through shared religious and philosophical beliefs, was likewise guaranteed to win friends among the spiritualists.31

Since the Theosophists, in company with progressive spiritualists, refused to elevate Christianity to special prominence among the world religions, they bestowed upon the historical figure of Jesus no special eminence among world religious leaders. As the journalist who inter-viewed Madame Blavatsky for the Pall Mall Gazette, in April 1884, reported, the founder of Theosophy admired Christ who “was, like Buddha and Zarathustra, a great Mahatma, versed in the occult science of which she at present is the chief authorized exponent.” She believed, nonetheless, that greatest reverence was due “Gautama Buddha beyond all other Mahatmas, because he alone of all religious teachers has ordered his disciples to disbelieve even his own words if they conflicted with true reason.” Blavatsky may have spoken respectfully about Christ, but she only had scorn for the hypocrisy of those who called themselves Christians, and, as her remarks about Buddha suggest, she detested all systems of clerical authority. “For clergymen as a body she felt hatred,” Olcott recollected, “because, being themselves absolutely ignorant of the truths of the spirit, they assumed the right to lead the spiritually blind, and to damn the heretic, who was often the sage, the illuminatus, the adept.”32 It is true that she came to impose a fairly rigid hierarchical structure on the Theosophical Society, as a means of leading its members through the necessary stages of initiation into the esoteric knowledge that she claimed to possess, and some spiritualists accordingly accused her of instituting a new sort of priesthood. Yet Blavatsky eschewed the ceremonial trappings of priesthood, and while she remained in control of the Theosophical Society, ritual played a minimal role at its meetings. Indeed, the reading of minutes and the pursuit of business according to Robert’s Rules of Order might prove the highlight of a Theosophical gathering.33 Such austerity, however, was no more permanently satisfying to Theosophists in search of religious enlightenment than it was to non-Christian spiritualists. Both groups experienced that “‘afterglow’ of church-worship [that] ran through all the heretical societies in varying degrees,” and the Theosophical Society, after Blavatsky’s death, gradually took on a theological coloring that would have made the founder explode in one of her awesome temper tantrums.34

As expounded by Madame Blavatsky, therefore, Theosophy espoused a set of teachings fully as anthropocentric as were those of progressive spiritualism; it was the development of the human faculties to their profoundest capacities that Theosophists strove to achieve. In fact, despite the hierarchical organization of their society, Theosophists went even further than non-Christian spiritualists in their zeal to eliminate all vestiges of priesthood, all notions that only certain people, specially endowed or prepared, could mediate between humanity and the eternal spirit. Spiritualists, after all, needed mediums to communicate with the spirit world; each Theosophist, by contrast, was imbued with the conviction that his own Higher Self was the divine spirit, or God within him, in the Theosophical sense of the Deity as “the mys-
terious power of evolution and involution, the omnipresent, omnipotent, and even omniscient creative potentiality.” Every Theosophist was entirely and solely responsible for the nurture of that Higher Self. No prayer or ritual observance could absolve him from the consequences of his own actions.35 There was thus held out to the Theosophist the promise of unlimited evolution to a state of absolute spiritual perfection, but, at the same time, the warning that no divine mercy could wipe clean the record of his past sins. Charles Webster Leadbeater, a prominent Theosophical lecturer, former Anglican clergyman, and close friend of Annie Besant, underscored both aspects of Theosophical thought when he lectured in Buffalo, New York, at the turn of the century. Outlining the fundamental truths that Theosophists embraced, he explained, on the one hand, that “Man is immortal; that he is a creature who is ever evolving, and whose power and glory will in the future have no limit.” On the other hand, however, Leadbeater advised that “as we sow, so shall we reap; that as we are reaping now, so we have sown in the past; that there is an eternal law of justice and of equilibrium which operates in just the same way on the higher and spiritual planes as it does down here on the physical plane.”36 How close these views were to the beliefs of the non-Christian spiritualists scarcely needs to be stressed. Certain teachings — the absence of a personal deity, the denigration of priestlyhood, the conviction that each person creates his own future destiny, for example — were virtually interchangeable among Theosophists and progressive spiritualists. Except for the reference to “returning spirits,” the outspoken Scots spiritualist James Robertson could have been writing as a good Theosophist when he observed: “That our earth deeds affect our future life is what all returning spirits keep telling us. Creeds do not count in the eternal court; it is not what we believe, or profess, but what we are: nothing avails there but the life lived.”37

Spiritualists did not, for the most part, employ the term “Karma” to describe the force at work molding the individual’s existence beyond the grave, although such a concept was implicit in much non-Christian spiritualist literature on the afterlife. It was, of course, explicit in Theosophical writings, in which the workings of Karma play the central role in the unfolding drama of every human life. An article in Theosophical Siftings, demonstrating alleged similarities between Theosophy and Buddhism, pointed out in 1889 that the Theosophist believes in the three essentials: — ‘Maya,’ or illusion; ‘Karma,’ or fate; and ‘Nirvana,’ the condition of rest, which is neither sleep nor death, but is the longed-for conclusion to all the chances and changes of Life. Coincident with this belief is that of ‘Reincarnation,’ by which each new life is but the entrance upon existence of a spiritual entity which has passed through many other lives, and whose conduct in each of these — and in all of them — is, in fact, its ‘Karma’ self-created, the doom which it inaugurates and works out for itself — according as it is or is not in harmony with the Divine Will and the law of its own structure.38

The Theosophist’s Karma, as the article made clear, was no arbitrary power imposed upon an unsuspecting and defenseless victim. Each person, Theosophists averred, constructed his own Karma out of the totality of actions, words, and thoughts that compose a lifetime. From reincarnation to reincarnation, the individual molded his fate, profiting or suffering in the next life from the good or evil performed in the preceding one, and aiming to progress along the spiritual evolutionary scale until his lower and higher selves finally merged. The soul, attaining at length its eternal rest, then finally liberated itself from Karma and from the necessity for rebirth in the flesh. In their condemnation of the Christian doctrine of eternal reward or punishment, and in their insistence on the superior virtue and justice of their own Karmic law, Theosophists forged yet another bond between themselves and the non-Christian spiritualists.39

For the Theosophist, the concept of Karma was as inextricably intertwined with the belief in successive reincarnations as the twin menaces of atheism and materialism were inseparable for the spiritualist. The length of a single life was simply not deemed enough time for the soul to work out its fate according to principles of absolute justice; it needed opportunities spanning hundreds, even thousands, of years, for too many forces beyond an individual’s control might intervene, too many coincidences might occur in the course of one life, or even a few lives, to hinder its free and equitable growth.40 Sinnett explained that Karma was particularly linked with “the teaching concerning Reincarnation,” because Karma shows us that the bodily form to which the soul is drawn back is not selected at random . . . Governed by the all-sufficient discernment of Nature, the soul ripe for Re-incarnation finds its expression in a body which affords it the exact conditions of life which Karma — in this sense its desert — requires.41

Reincarnation was a doctrine perfectly suited to the diversified origins of Blavatsky’s Theosophy, whether these were ancient occult traditions leading back to Pythagoras, the philosophic and religious teachings of the great Eastern faiths that she plundered freely, or the impact of evolution on contemporary thought. Whereas Darwinian theory subsumed the individual in the evolution of the species, however, the Theosophical belief in reincarnation focused sharply on the indi-
vidual. It is not necessary to investigate here the elaborate theories that emerged in Theosophical thought to explain what happens to the individual soul between incarnations (it rests and renews itself on the heavenly plane known as Devachan) or the complicated Theosophical vision of the human being as composed of numerous bodies (physical, ethereal, astral, mental) that peel off gradually after death. What is fundamental to the Theosophical doctrine of reincarnation is the absolute refusal to accept a meaningless universe. All the complicated teachings of Blavatsky and her successors served one basic purpose: to preach the message that human life does have meaning, that the evolutionary process is not a random one, that there is a goal toward which the individual progresses, and that moral justice guides every step of the way. The Theosophists were very much products of their era when they recoiled in dismay from the possibility of a chaotic cosmos without underlying moral values.

The great majority of British spiritualists in this period did not embrace a belief in reincarnation. They held instead to a vision of eternal progress in the spirit world, without interruption by repeated return to assorted earthbound, physical frames. Their assumption that the individual retains his personal identity throughout spirit existence seemed incompatible with the multiple identities implicit in the doctrine of reincarnation. Yet the differences between spiritualists and Theosophists in this respect were more apparent than real, for they shared an immensely optimistic view of gradual human progress to spiritual perfection. Hence it is not surprising that the idea of reincarnation proved attractive to some British spiritualists who tried to incorporate it into their faith, with or without formal membership in the Theosophical Society. The “spiritists,” for example, distinguished themselves from other spiritualists by their adherence to the teachings of Hippolyte Léon Denizard Rivail, a Frenchman whose theories about the spirit world featured the doctrine of spiritual progress through reincarnation. Known to the public as Allan Kardec, founder and editor of the Revue spirite in Paris, he wrote numerous volumes of devotional and instructional literature concerning spirit communication. They circulated widely on the European continent, and even in parts of Latin America, but were little known or admired in Britain.

Yet his work suggested that aspects of Theosophical, spiritualist, and Christian beliefs could form a viable, though bizarre, ménage à trois. If Christians were repelled from the idea of reincarnation by Blavatsky’s hostile tone, they could find in Kardec far more sympathy for their own faith. A striking example of such a tripartite synthesis occurred in the life and writings of Marie, Countess of Caithness and Duchesse de Pomar, Kardec’s warm admirer, and a Christian spiritu-
definition. It was a cast of mind that made her highly susceptible to the doctrines of Theosophy, and she soon became a prominent Theosophist on both sides of the Channel. When Madame Blavatsky descended on Paris in the spring of 1884, the Duchesse de Pomar undertook to act as official hostess and opened her home to everyone of suitable social or intellectual pedigree who wished to meet the high priestess. On the occasion of that visit, Blavatsky gave her stamp of approval to the first Theosophical society in France, a "Société théosophique d'Orient et d'Occident," which the Duchess had already founded. When Blavatsky died in 1891, the Duchess fancied herself a possible contender for the leadership of the international Theosophical movement, but events proved otherwise. In the end, she turned to the SPR for help in setting up an Anglo-French Société de Psychologie in 1894, with Professor Richet as its first president and Myers its initial vice-president. When she died the following year, the infant society came into a substantial inheritance.

For Lady Caithness, the ultimate purpose of psychical research and spiritualist inquiry was "moral and religious elevation." For her, it was a "holy cause," which, she believed, she had "received the mission to promulgate." Certainly the religious significance of the subject attracted her far more than its potential scientific contribution, although she frequently paid lip service to that aspect as well. It would be difficult, however, to pin a theological label on her. "Eclectic" would be accurate, but not particularly helpful. Unorthodox she assuredly was, but Christian she nonetheless considered herself. She was a Theosophist, but having graduated to Theosophy from spiritualism, her fundamentally favorable attitude toward Christianity seems to have successfully withstood the anti-Christian outbursts of the Theosophical Masters.

Membership in Theosophical associations in Britain from the late 1870s suggests that Theosophy remained doctrinally flexible, or vague, enough to draw spiritualists from both the Christian and progressive camps. Whether they were attracted by the Eastern allure of Theosophy, by its emphasis on each person's sole responsibility for his own fate, by the echoes of old occult lore, or by the hope of experiencing reincarnation, numerous British spiritualists moved into Theosophical circles during the 1880s. They did not, in all cases, stay there for very long, but they were at least tempted to familiarize themselves with Theosophy. Not only were its central doctrines frequently to their liking, but ancillary elements might also lure spiritualists and put them at ease in a Theosophical lodge.

The early miracles associated with Madame Blavatsky could not fail to rivet spiritualist attention upon her, for she seemed to be in touch with the spirit world in a remarkably direct and palpable way. Having in the past tried her hand at mediumship, she could obtain standard spiritualist rappings when the occasion required, and she could produce missing objects as well. More impressive, however, were the times when she caused mail to be delivered in an extraordinary fashion; it was nothing for a folded note to come floating down from the ceiling in her presence—a note which, when opened, proved to bear some message or instruction from her Mahatmas. In 1883, Madame contrived to have a special cabinet, or "shrine," created at the Theosophical Society's Indian headquarters in Madras, into which such letters tumbled abnormally. Nor was it beyond the powers of the Mahatmas to mend broken objects, such as the china vase which crashed off a shelf in the shrine in August 1883. It was restored to perfect wholeness after the broken pieces were returned to the shrine for a mere five minutes, and not so much as "a trace of the breakage [could be] found on it!" After her supposed miracles had been exposed, largely thanks to the SPR, Blavatsky spoke contemptuously of them, pretending that they had never played an important part in the unfolding of Theosophical truth. But she was equivocating; the physical phenomena of Theosophy were as critically important to that movement in its early days as were the physical manifestations of spiritualism. The Russian author and occultist V. S. Solovyoff, who became well acquainted with Blavatsky after 1884, rightly commented, with regard to these phenomena:

It was with their help that H. P. Blavatsky founded her Theosophical Society, they were her panoply when she appeared in Europe to disseminate her doctrine, by them she advertised herself and gathered about her those who for one purpose or another wished to see them. It was these phenomena only which interested and brought into her circle of acquaintance such men as Crookes, ... and the English savants who had established the London Society for Psychical Research.

These phenomena, no doubt, first caused British spiritualists to take note of Theosophy.

Other Theosophical practices also underscored its affinities with spiritualism. Automatic writing, for example, was elevated to near sacred status in Theosophy, since Blavatsky claimed that the great founding text, *Isis Unveiled*, was dictated to her by the Mahatmas. A decade later, when she was struggling to produce another magnum opus, *The Secret Doctrine*, the Mahatmas aided her again, this time with "precipitated messages," not unlike the written exhortations and encouragements mysteriously received by spiritualists from loved ones beyond the veil. Often Blavatsky would find, on returning to her writing...
table in the morning, “a piece of paper with unfamiliar characters traced on it in red ink,” and she would have her marching orders for the day. The Masters not only told her how to proceed with her literary task, but they also informed her when a previous day’s effort deserved to be “consigned to the flames.”37 Furthermore, certain assumptions about the possibility of spirit photography were common to Theosophists and spiritualists, and likewise facilitated the cross-fertilization that occurred between the two groups toward the close of the nineteenth century.38 Even as late as 1910, the London Spiritualist Alliance hailed as a “welcome sign of the times” the “growing friendliness between Theosophists and Spiritualists.”39

H. P. BLAVATSKY AND THE SPR

Nor were spiritualists alone in greeting Theosophy with interest when it migrated to England, first in the late 1870s, but more successfully in the early 1880s. As Solovyoff noted, the SPR was by no means indifferent to Blavatsky’s miracles. Before her first extended visit to London in the spring of 1884, the British branch of the Theosophical Society had already established “cordial relations” with the SPR. C. C. Massey was a member of both groups, as were Myers, Sinnett, and a few others, including Dr. George Wyld, president of the British Theosophical Society and active in the BNAS. When Barrett was planning the inaugural conference of the SPR late in 1881, he had invited Wyld to attend, and Wyld had replied with enthusiasm.60 Even Blavatsky’s explosive presence in 1884 did not immediately threaten the good feelings between Theosophists and psychical researchers. Believing that Madame and her claims were well worth investigating, the SPR established a committee to interview the Theosophical delegation to London that year, and in August Blavatsky and her entourage were invited to Cambridge. Sidgwick’s reaction to Blavatsky’s visit indicates the fundamentally friendly attitude that the SPR initially held toward Theosophy’s founder. “On the whole,” he wrote in his journal for 9 August 1884,

I was favourably impressed with Mme. B. No doubt the stuff of her answers [to questions posed by Sidgwick and Myers] resembled Isis Unveiled in some of its worst characteristics; but her manner was certainly frank and straightforward – it was hard to imagine her the elaborate impostor that she must be if the whole thing is a trick.61

The SPR was inclined to give Theosophy the benefit of the doubt because psychical research, too, shared with it certain assumptions and attitudes. The hidden powers of the human race, its unexplored capacities for growth and development, were a fundamental concern of the Theosophists. Their Society’s formal statement of purpose in-

cluded the goal: “To investigate the unexplained laws of nature and the psychical powers latent in man.”62 Few members of the SPR would have taken issue with that aim. Nor would they have protested against the social biases of British Theosophy, at least as articulated by Mr. and Mrs. Sinnett, in whose home London Theosophists gathered in the mid-1880s. “We were at home, always, on Tuesday afternoons,” recalled Sinnett.

and my wife’s Diary is filled every week with long lists of our Tuesday visitors. The movement in this way spread at first in what may in a broad sense be called the upper levels of society, and it appeared to me desirable that it should take root that way to begin with, its influence being left to filter downwards with social authority behind it, instead of beginning on lower levels and trusted to filter upwards if it could.

Although some psychical researchers may have been amused by Sinnett’s social pretensions, the SPR in general would have applauded his desire to place “social authority” squarely behind Theosophy; the SPR was doing no less for psychical research.63

The community of interests, and even of personnel, which maintained amicable ties between the SPR and Blavatsky for a couple of years, was shattered in 1885, when the former issued a devastating report about her movement. The report, described as “easily the most dramatic and entertaining bit of work that the Society has ever published,” resulted from Hodgson’s detective research. When the SPR committee that interviewed Blavatsky, Olcott, and other Theosophists in the spring and summer of 1884 decided that further, more extensive, and on-the-spot inquiry was needed, Sidgwick paid for Hodgson to undertake an Indian adventure.64 Having completed his Cambridge education in 1881, with an honours degree in moral sciences, Hodgson had obtained an academic position as University Extension Lecturer, but he abandoned his teaching post in 1884 to track down Theosophical mysteries in Madras. After a brief subsequent stint as extramural lecturer in philosophy at Cambridge, he became secretary of the American Society for Psychical Research in 1887 and thereafter remained a full-time psychical researcher for the rest of his life.

Despite the harshness of its final report, the SPR inquiry into Theosophy began with no preconceived critical opinions. As Podmore, who was a member of the investigative committee, later explained:

When . . . we found ourselves confronted with evidence for occurrences in India, analogous in some respects to those which had already formed the subject of our inquiries in England, and when we found that some of these occurrences were vouched for by witnesses of good
repute and good intelligence in other matters, we held that we should not be justified in summarily dismissing their evidence.

If anything, the SPR was startled by the vehemence with which Hodgson accused Blavatsky of wholesale fraud. As late as March 1885, when Hodgson had been in India for three months and was sending to the SPR investigative committee weekly letters in which he conveyed his increasingly dim views of Theosophy, Sidgwick could nonetheless write in his journal that there were "still some things difficult to explain on the theory of fraud." Even those few things, however, vanished when Hodgson returned to England in April with the full array of damning evidence. His findings, preceded by a short supporting endorsement from the committee, were published in the third volume of SPR Proceedings.

Hodgson's debunking task had been facilitated by the publication, in September and October 1884, of letters allegedly sent from Blavatsky to M. and Mme. Coulomb, former two of her chief assistants at the Theosophical Society headquarters in Madras. These letters revealed, in ample detail, how Blavatsky arranged for various miracles to occur, even in her absence; how the holy shrine was manipulated by the Coulombs on Blavatsky's instructions, with a dummy head and shoulders atop a disguised confederate to provide the faithful with glimpses of a Mahatma's "astral" projection; how telegrams from the Mahatmas were carefully arranged in advance to be dispatched by the Coulombs at specific times in order to create a maximum effect on the lucky recipient. The tale of the broken and instantly mended chin mask lost its miraculous aura when it emerged that the shrine had a sliding back panel that leaned against the wall of what was called the Occult Room. At that very place in the wall, a window had formerly existed. Although almost entirely covered with bricks and plaster, it still allowed narrow access to the shrine from the room (Blavatsky's bedroom) on the other side of the wall. The mystery of the shrine was not specifically revealed in the Blavatsky-Coulomb correspondence; that Hodgson had to piece together for himself when he arrived in Madras in December 1884, for the shrine had already been destroyed, following the publication of the Coulomb letters. Because those letters were published in the Madras Christian College Magazine, Theosophists tried to dismiss them as forgeries, produced by Blavatsky's Christian enemies who hated her for rivaling their own missionary efforts among the Indians. One of Hodgson's principal responsibilities, accordingly, was to determine the authenticity of the documents, and he sent a selection of them to two handwriting experts in England, one of whom was employed by the British Museum. Comparing the Coulomb letters with documents known to have been written by Blavatsky, each expert, independently of the other, pronounced them to be the handiwork of one and the same author.

Hodgson's investigative zeal, together with the explanations willingly provided by the treacherous Coulombs, also uncovered the means by which Theosophical letters might suddenly flutter down from ordinary looking ceilings. Thanks to a construction method that filled spaces between ceiling beams with blocks of wood and mortar, it was possible to scrape away some of the mortar, leaving space for a letter to rest on top of one of the beams. If a fine thread, the color of the ceiling, were loosely twined around the letter, and held by a confederate standing just outside the room, it could be pulled at a designated moment; the letter would make its startling impression as it floated downward, while the confederate, having drawn back all the thread, strolled away.

The letters, like those precipitated into the shrine or sent to particularly favored followers, were signed by one of two Mahatmas who took a special interest in the Theosophical Society: Koot Hoomi and Morya. Hodgson painstakingly ascertained, with the help of the same handwriting experts, that here, too, Blavatsky's pen had been busy. He announced, without hesitation, that these treasured Theosophical documents emanated from no loftier source than Madam herself, or from one trusted Indian disciple who learned to imitate the Koot Hoomi handwriting which Blavatsky had created. This was, of course, an even graver charge than plagiarism, for which the Mahatmas themselves had been blamed ever since they, supposedly, had first used Blavatsky as their amanuensis. It was certainly insulting to accuse the Masters of lifting their profound wisdom from the pages of numerous, readily accessible sources, such as Ennemoser's History of Magic, or to point out glaring errors in their scholarship, but their very existence was not necessarily thrown into doubt as a result. Such, however, was the conclusion to which Hodgson's report inexorably led. Not only was the written proof of their involvement with Theosophy denied any but the most humdrum human status, but the leading witnesses to their special guardianship of the Theosophical Society all turned out to be more than a little suspect—either because of deliberate falsehood on their part or because, being so patently gullible, they were clearly putty in Blavatsky's hands.

If the Mahatmas were fictitious, as the SPR report unequivocally stated, the whole structure of Theosophy was assuredly perched on very "sandy foundations." All that was central to Theosophical belief, its claim to authority as a universal philosophy of life and death, rested on the contention that its teachings derived from superhuman
sources transcending time and space. Reveal the falsity of that contention, and Theosophy collapsed into just another cult revolving around its crank founder. The SPR investigative committee might conclude its brief summary of Hodgson’s findings with the somewhat condescending observation that Blavatsky had “achieved a title to permanent remembrance as one of the most accomplished, ingenious, and interesting impostors in history,” but that was a devastating come-down from the rank of inspired prophetess to which she had pretensions. It goes without saying that her staunchest disciples refused to concede that the report damaged Blavatsky’s reputation. They accused Hodgson of undertaking his Indian inquiries, not in a mood of impartial research, but as prosecutor, judge, and jury all at once. The integrity of the Coulombs was, with justice, assailed, and Blavatsky complained that she had never even been shown the incriminating letters which, she insisted, were largely fabrication. Simnett accused the SPR of pandering to public opinion in its denigration of Theosophy and triumphantly concluded that Hodgson’s logic served no purpose, because Blavatsky’s complex character was not explicable “by any commonplace process of reasoning.”

It would take more than Hodgson’s detective work to drive true believing Theosophists from their convictions, just as repeated exposures of materialization mediums did nothing to shatter the confidence of true believing spiritualists. Hodgson was quite right when he told Sidgwick that “Theosophy will go on,” for an organization like the SPR had no power to halt a movement like Theosophy. The best Hodgson and Sidgwick could hope for was to assist in preventing “people of education from being further duped.”

PROMINENT BRITISH THEOSOPHISTS

People of education were, in some cases, willing to have their eyes opened, and departures from Blavatsky’s circle occurred, both before and after 1885, whenever common sense prevailed over occult impulses. Even W. S. Moses, who apparently for some years enjoyed a mutual admiration with Blavatsky, grew disgusted by the lack of originality manifested in her Mahatmas’ writings. C. M. Davies confessed to having “sat at the feet of Madame Blavatsky,” but found that Theosophy offered him little besides her “Turkey cigarettes.” In the case of C. C. Massey, however, the break with Blavatsky came after he had been closely affiliated with, and deeply committed to, the Theosophical movement in Britain.

For Massey, Theosophy represented an important phase in the ongoing metaphysical and theological explorations that filled the better part of his adult life. Already a convert to spiritualism when he met Olcott and Blavatsky on a trip to the United States in 1875, Massey eagerly embraced the doctrine of reincarnation and placed it at the center of the Christian mysticism with which he became identified. With Massey, as with Lady Caithness, seemingly incompatible doctrines merged effortlessly under the magic wand of an entirely earnest, undogmatic, and eclectic seeker after truth. So impressed was he with the Theosophical Society, whose birth he had witnessed in New York in the autumn of 1875, that shortly after his return home he organized in London the first European branch of the Society. Significantly, early meetings of the British Theosophical Society, in 1878 and subsequently, were held at the Great Russell Street home of the BNAs; among the first members of the British Theosophical Society, in addition to Massey and Wyld, were other BNAs participants, such as Dr. C. Carter Blake of Westminster Hospital, and Emily Kislingbury, onetime secretary of the BNAs who was also chosen to be the first secretary of the British Theosophical Society.

Blavatsky appreciated Massey’s efforts on behalf of Theosophy, and in 1879 she saw fit to bestow on him a special mark of favor—a Mahatma letter addressed to him personally. It appeared mysteriously in the minute book of the British Theosophical Society and came in answer to Massey’s urgent request for empirical evidence that the Masters existed. For a while, Massey was satisfied with the authenticity of the document and believed it to have been genuinely precipitated into the minute book by occult agencies. A few years later, however, he was shown other letters that made him realize that the event had been staged by Blavatsky, then in India, with the help of a member of the London Society who was a medium. When he wrote to Blavatsky, asking for an explanation, she equivocated, admitting that she had forwarded the letter to the medium in question, but insisting that the communication from the Master was absolutely genuine. Massey, whose credulity had its limits, resigned from the British Theosophical Society in the summer of 1884.

The physician George Wyld left the ranks of British Theosophy even earlier than Massey. Although Wyld served briefly as the Society’s second president, between 1880 and 1882, he was apparently never as impressed by Blavatsky and her teachings as Massey once was. On first acquaintance, Wyld found Madame rather similar in appearance and manner to “a worn-out actress from some suburban theatre in Paris.” Being a convinced spiritualist, he could not help noticing “her undoubtedly mediumistic powers,” and he joined her Society out of a mixture of curiosity, interest, and “belief in her promises.” Yet he could never accept her “coarse and rude behavior in public,” and
ultimately it seemed to him “a marvellous thing how any refined and thoughtful man or woman could continue to believe in this queer woman who smoked so incessantly, as an inspired expounder of the highest spiritual secrets of the human race.”

It was not, however, Blavatsky’s abuse of tobacco (mixed, according to speculation, with hashish) that especially offended Wyld; it was her scornful treatment of sacred subjects. He winced when, on being asked her views of Christ’s nature, “she replied, ‘...I have not the honour of the gentleman’s acquaintance.’” He was outraged when he read her assertion, in the May 1882 issue of *The Theosophist*: “There is no God, personal or impersonal.” Indeed, that bold statement convinced Wyld to part company with her, for he reasoned that if there were no God, there could be no God-wisdom, or Theosophy. As it turned out, nevertheless, Wyld abandoned only Blavatsky, and not theosophy. Like Massey, he too took what appealed to him of Eastern occult wisdom, blended it with his “intense belief in the life, teachings, and works of Jesus Christ,” and produced his own hybrid faith which he appropriately dubbed Christo-Theosophy. 

A. P. Sinnett’s rupture with Blavatsky came more gradually than Wyld’s or Massey’s and was engendered largely by a clash of personalities. For years, Sinnett was able to accept the deceit and chicanery that evidently formed an integral part of Blavatsky’s character, and he could comment, without the slightest irony or sarcasm:

Madame Blavatsky’s shortcomings or defects of character did not alter the fact that through her intermediation the Veil had been lifted (more or less) from the Occult World previously so totally concealed from view – so far as the world at large was concerned. My wife and I had long been alive to her strangely diversified nature but had attained to a condition of mind and knowledge that enabled us to look behind her at those [the Mahatmas] who for want of a better agent had accepted her with all her disqualifications, as the intermediary who should make their existence known to us.

Sinnett first met Madame Blavatsky in India, late in 1879. He was an influential journalist at the time, editor of the Anglo-Indian daily, *The Pioneer*, and an important conquest for Blavatsky. Sinnett, too, came to Theosophy from spiritualism, and he did not prove a difficult convert. During long visits at his homes in Allahabad and Simla, Blavatsky dazzled the journalist with her “manifestations of occult power then freely given...” When Madame, beginning in 1880, delivered mail to him from Koot Hoomi and Morya, Sinnett was overwhelmed. These “Mahatma Letters” became the basis of Sinnett’s two books, *The Occult World* (1881) and *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883), which effectively, in clear, sensible language, advertised abroad Theosophy’s claims to ancient and secret wisdom. In fact, Sinnett identified himself so closely with the new movement, and campaigned so tirelessly as a propagandist for Theosophy, that the proprietors of the *Pioneer* decided to dispense with his editorial services. It seemed a good time for Sinnett and his wife to return to London, where they arrived in April 1883.

Sinnett quickly made himself, and his home, a center of Theosophical activity in London. The following year, he maneuvered out of office the president of the London Theosophical Society, Dr. Anna Kingsford, who had dared to criticize Sinnett’s *Esoteric Buddhism*, and helped to install a more tractable officer in her place. Even after the disastrous Hodgson Report began to take its toll on membership in what had become known as the London Lodge, the Sinnetts kept it alive, if not well. Their dominance of Theosophical circles in London came to an abrupt and inevitable end, however, when Madame Blavatsky settled permanently in that city in the spring of 1887. Sinnett had deplored the idea of such a move and had not hesitated to say so, certain as he was that Blavatsky’s presence could only have a deleterious effect on British Theosophy, not to mention his own control of the London Lodge. Blavatsky was not easily disconcerted by human opposition and, shortly after her arrival in England, formed a new group, the Blavatsky Lodge of the Theosophical Society, as the unabashed rival of the London Lodge. It was an uneven competition. Not only was the incomparable Blavatsky herself president of the new lodge, but she further stacked the deck by setting up within it the Esoteric Section, to tantalize prospective members with a “promise of some mysterious teaching not given to the rank and file of the Theosophical Society.” When she required applicants for membership in the Esoteric Section to take pledges of obedience to her, Sinnett announced that such a policy “sinned... against fundamental principles of Theosophy.” Blavatsky retaliated by condemning certain sections of *Esoteric Buddhism* in the pages of her *Secret Doctrine*, published in 1888. By this time, however, the Sinnetts claimed that they were receiving private messages directly from Koot Hoomi, without Blavatsky’s intermediary services. They felt that they had their own, unsullied corner on truth, which they continued to communicate to the few “faithful members of the old London Lodge” who still gathered for evening meetings at the Sinnetts’ home.

After Madame’s death in May 1891, the relations between the London and Blavatsky Lodges blew hot and cold, with Sinnett now leading his group into outright secession from the Theosophical Society, now working to bring the London Lodge back into the Theosophical fold. In Sinnett’s long and rocky relationship with Blavatsky and Theosophy
are evident the dangers latent in a movement where doctrine is articulated piecemeal, and where truth can always be reinterpreted by a leader who claims to be above criticism. Questions of dogma were manipulated to hide what amounted to little more than petty power struggles. Nevertheless, a substantial difference between Sinnett’s Theosophy and Blavatsky’s did in time emerge. Once Sinnett’s refusal to cooperate with Madame in launching the Esoteric Section had driven the two former comrades apart, Sinnett discovered that some severe doctrinal errors had crept into Theosophical teachings. When he realized that the initial Mahatma Letters, sent to him between 1880 and 1884, were not, as he first assumed, written by the Masters themselves, but dictated to Blavatsky, he could freely criticize them for the passages with which, he asserted, she had manifestly tampered. Nowhere, he argued, were Blavatsky’s distortions more blatant than in the sections “on after-death conditions” where her “bitter denutation of spiritualism” prompted her to produce messages that were actually “a travesty” of Koot Hoomi’s intended meaning. Sinnett, in short, came to challenge Blavatsky’s scorn for spirit communications, and after his wife’s death in 1908, he was deeply consoled by the opportunity to communicate with her. He was convinced of her spirit identity and had no fear that some elemental was playing pranks on him. Although he offered a Theosophical explanation for his wife’s ability to convey genuine messages – even Blavatsky did not altogether rule out the possibility of such communications when the spirit in question was of the purest and most elevated nature – it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Sinnett, toward the end of his life, found more comfort and encouragement in his early spiritualist beliefs than in his later Theosophical ones.

Other spiritualists who were temporarily Blavatskyites similarly found no permanent resting place at Madame’s feet. Their reasons for departure were varied. Emma Hardinge Britten, like Massey, participated in the earliest meetings of the Theosophical Society in New York, but left soon afterward when she found that the doctrine of reincarnation was incompatible with her spiritualist beliefs, and when she suspected that Blavatsky and Olcott were straying from “simple Spiritualism into the realms of dreamland.”

Mabel Collins, private trance medium and novelist, had a dramatic falling out with Blavatsky after the two women worked together as joint editors of Lucifer, the Theosophical periodical which Madame launched in London in 1887. W. B. Yeats gained entrance to the Esoteric Section of the Blavatsky Lodge, but ran afoul of Theosophical authority and was asked to resign in 1890. His thirst for experimental corroboration of certain occult claims struck some of his colleagues as inappropriate and disturbing.

Spiritualists and psychical researchers were certainly not the only ones to experience both Blavatsky’s charm and wrath. After its first few years, the Theosophical Society began to attract men and women who were not affiliated with spiritualism and who, in some cases, were even repelled by aspects of spiritualist teaching. Dr. Anna Kingsford, for example, a London physician, vegetarian, vehement antivivisectionist, and feminist, was president of the Theosophical Society’s London branch in 1883–4, despite her strong antipathy to spiritualism. An even more prominent convert to Theosophy was, of course, Annie Besant. Although, in her private withdrawal from secularism, Besant had been attending séances and investigating spiritualism, she was by no means ready to call herself a spiritualist. Her leap of faith from secularism to Theosophy in 1889 struck contemporaries as all the more inconceivable precisely because there were no visible intermediate jumps.

The young A. R. Orage, still an elementary schoolteacher in Leeds and not yet famous as editor of the New Age, pore over Blavatsky’s writings and organized a Theosophy Group in the 1890s. Without previous exposure to spiritualism, he was fascinated by the avenues to Eastern religious literature that Theosophy opened to his wide-ranging speculative curiosity. Furthermore, he found in Theosophy, as he likewise found in socialism, an alternative to the “doctrines and discipline” of organized religion that he vigorously repudiated. Primarily, however, Theosophy for Orage was one of the several systems of thought and modes of experience to which he turned throughout his life in the hopes of finding the hidden reality that could give meaning to a world without values. Plato, Blavatsky, the Bhagavad-Gita and Mahabharata, Nietzsche, diverse socialist prophets, and, most important of all, Gurdjieff – all provided milestones in the landscape of Orage’s intellectual and emotional pilgrimage.

In the ferment of ideas and movements that animated the closing decades of the nineteenth century and the opening years of the twentieth, it was possible to perceive Theosophy as part of a vast liberation movement designed to topple the materialistic, patriarchal, capitalistic, and utterly philistine culture of the Victorian Age. Edward Carpenter, iconoclast by excellence and a man who proclaimed Walt Whitman and the Bhagavad-Gita as the two major influences on his own work, found a central place for Theosophy in his characterization of the “years from 1881 onward.” “It was a fascinating and enthusiastic period,” he recalled:

The Socialist and Anarchist propaganda, the Feminist and Suffragist upheaval, the huge Trade-union growth, the Theosophic movement, the new currents in the Theatrical, Musical and Artistic world, the
torment even of change in the Religious world – all constituted so many streams and headwaters converging, as it were, to a great river.  

Therein surely lay much of the enduring attraction of Theosophy. For all the disillusioned who dropped out of Blavatsky’s orbit, there were others who stayed, undismayed by the SPR report, by Madame’s personal shortcomings, by the squabbles and bickering among her followers. The early history of Theosophy contains the names of numerous disciples whose devotion to Blavatsky was nothing short of saintly, given the abuse that she tended to heap upon her most loyal followers. There was Countess Wachtmeister, for example, the widow of a Swedish diplomat, who took care of Blavatsky in Würzburg and Ostend, from the autumn of 1885 until Madame’s move to London in 1887, and who continued her ministrations for a brief time in London as well. Dr. Archibald Keightley, a Cambridge-educated physician, together with his cousin Bertram, a Cambridge-educated lawyer, arranged to bring Blavatsky to England and actually had her living with them throughout the summer of 1887, “in a tiny cottage” in the London suburb of Norwood. Of all possible house guests, Madame must have been the least congenial for an extended visit in close quarters. Undaunted, the Keightleys established a Theosophical headquarters for her, largely at their own expense, at 17 Lansdowne Road, Holland Park.  

What kept these people, and many others, attached to Madame and Theosophy, despite all the evidence of deceit in high places?

Theosophy survived the many attacks aimed against it in its vulnerable infancy because it was exceedingly elastic; its teachings, as they evolved over the years, could address surprisingly diverse viewpoints and satisfy seemingly contradictory needs. For those who wanted to rebel dramatically against the constraints of the Victorian ethos – however they perceived that elusive entity – the flavor of heresy must have been particularly alluring when concocted by so unabashed an outsider as H. P. Blavatsky. Yet Theosophy could also comfort the anxious heretic, the frightened exile from Christianity, while it likewise attracted men and women who kept the Christian label, but adorned it with assorted unorthodoxies. It could even complement the Christian mystic’s urge to achieve the extinction of conscious personality, for the ultimate goal of Theosophy was the release of the higher self into the eternal world of universal spirit.

One of the most attractive aspects of Theosophy was that it offered much the same promise of special protection and care as has always figured among Christianity’s most appealing elements. In place of Christ’s guardianship and intercession (as well as those of the saints, in the case of Roman Catholicism), Theosophy offered the Mahatmas, the so-called “White Lodge” or “Great White Brotherhood,” who took particular interest in Theosophists and showed deep concern for their welfare. From the mountains of Tibet where they resided, the Brothers, Mahatmas, Masters, or Adepts, by all of which terms they were designated, watched closely the development of their followers. These occult Brothers, including Morya and Koot Hoomi, were not deities, but rather “men of great learning, . . . and still greater holiness of life.” They were men who, having passed through numerous reincarnations, had attained a state of being where the physical body ceased to restrict their movements. Their astral forms traveled freely around the world, appearing to startled disciples, conveying messages both written and oral, and surveying the international progress of Theosophy.  

What was particularly encouraging about the Theosophical Masters – far more so than anything that Christianity had to offer – was the suggestion that each diligent student of the Masters’ wisdom might, in lives to come, progress toward their lofty status.

The conviction that Theosophists are under the special, benevolent supervision of the Brothers is, however, only one reason why Theosophy has survived a century’s vicissitudes. The idea of secret knowledge has always been irresistible to human nature. It is highly flattering to believe oneself the possessor of esoteric wisdom, revealed only to a select group of cognoscenti. Even when the bonds with Christianity proved too firm to sever altogether, as in the case of Massey, Wyld, and Lady Caithness, Christian Theosophists were drawn to the allegedly arcane nature of Blavatsky’s revelation. The suggestion of magical powers played no small part in luring people to Theosophy. Wyld admitted as much when he observed that “all the theosophists that joined the society in his time, did so in the hope of mastering the secrets of magic. Each wished to be an Apollonius of Tyana.”  

Theosophy could give its devotees a sense of importance and potential power that Christianity, with its traditional emphasis on humility, passive acceptance of suffering, and impotence in the face of divine wrath, could rarely offer.

It is this sense of importance that suggests certain generalizations about the role of women in the Theosophical movement. Blavatsky is, naturally, the preeminent example, but Dr. Anna Kingsford and Annie Besant also come readily to mind. While Blavatsky’s life history is so obscured by fabrication that her motives for launching Theosophy are anybody’s guess, some striking similarities in the less mythicized lives of Kingsford and Besant tempt speculation. Both were high-spirited, intelligent women who found intolerable the limitations of married life in the third quarter of the nineteenth century and who, it appears, ultimately found satisfaction in the role of religious prophet. Although,
admittedly, conditions for women in Britain had changed since the seventeenth century, the same frustrating restrictions still largely prevailed during the lives of Kingsford and Besant as had prompted a few women in the earlier period to adopt the stance of inspired prophetess.\textsuperscript{89} University education, access to the pulpit, political power—all were denied women in the seventeenth century, so that, almost of necessity, those who struggled to comment on social and political conditions in the country were driven to play a part that guaranteed them at least a temporary audience. There is no strict parallel here with the experiences of Kingsford and Besant, despite the continued paucity of higher educational and career opportunities open to women in the 1870s, for both women sought religious fulfillment as sincerely as political or social influence. Yet it was precisely the religious mantle, assumed after gaining prominence in the world of men, which both Kingsford and Besant apparently believed gave them greater authority than any of the others that they had donned during full and varied lives.\textsuperscript{90}

When Anna Kingsford and Annie Besant rebelled against the limitations of married life in Victorian Britain, they were specifically rejecting the role of Anglican clergyman’s wife. Mrs. Besant separated completely from her husband. Frank Besant, vicar of Sibsey, in the autumn of 1873, and, as is well known, traveled from religious skepticism to a position of outspoken prominence in the National Secular Society. Kingsford’s religious scruples took her in a very different direction. While Annie Besant, in a reaction shared by many contemporaries, rejected the Christian doctrines of eternal punishment and vicarious atonement, and wondered how a loving God could have created a world full of misery and sin, Kingsford’s response to the religion of her parents and husband was more intensely personal. She grew to loathe the “hardness, coldness, and meagreness” of the Anglican church and felt “its utter unrelatedness to her own spiritual needs, intellectual and emotional.” She longed for a more satisfying church service and spiritual atmosphere and, not surprisingly, found them in Roman Catholicism, to which she had been beckoned by “an apparition purporting to be that of St. Mary Magdalen.” She was formally received into the Catholic Church in 1870, under the name Mary Magdalen, and was confirmed two years later by Archbishop Manning. Kingsford’s husband, Algernon Godfrey Kingsford, became vicar of Atcham, Shropshire, but, unlike Frank Besant, was willing to give his wife free rein. Throughout all the adventures and campaigns of her life, he remained very much a shadow figure in the background. The man who joined her in many of those campaigns and who accompanied her to Paris, where she studied medicine from 1874 to 1880, was not the Reverend Kingsford, but her loyal collaborator and biographer, Edward Maitland.\textsuperscript{91}

Defiance of convention became a way of life for Annie Besant and Anna Kingsford, but it was not empty defiance merely for its own sake. They were never rebels without a cause. Whether the struggle was for free thought, birth control, Fabian socialism, or Indian nationalism, Besant brought her intense zeal and energetic commitment to the effort and became a formidable public speaker in the process. Kingsford’s social causes included higher education and suffrage for women, dietary reform, and, above all, antivivisection.\textsuperscript{92} She told Maitland at their first meeting that she detested cruelty and injustice in all their forms, whether toward man, woman, or beast, and if her battle for social justice was somewhat impaired by her physical fragility, her devotion to the principles involved was always ardent.\textsuperscript{93} Nor was she solely an armchair sympathizer. Her long efforts to obtain a medical degree were not only inspired by the desire to do something meaningful with her life; the professional education was particularly intended to help her argue against the doctors’ claims that vivisection was necessary for the advancement of medical science. Finding that the doors to medical school in England were closed to her, she enrolled in the Paris Faculty of Medicine and received the M.D. degree in 1880.\textsuperscript{94} Thereafter she set up medical practice in London and soon attracted a substantial number of female patients. Unfortunately, she had only a few years to pursue her profession, for early in 1888 she died of consumption. Annie Besant, by contrast, one year younger than Dr. Kingsford, flourished until 1933.

Both women, despite all their other interests and concerns, gave their deepest commitment to crusades of the spirit. For Besant, the involvement with Theosophy that began in 1889 lasted for the rest of her long life, although under her leadership the Theosophical Society followed some trails that Blavatsky had never blazed. For Kingsford, the practice of medicine in London during the 1880s could never compete with the pleasure that she derived from her occult studies. The religious restlessness that led her to Roman Catholicism as a young woman never left her; the last years of her life saw her assume first the presidency of the London Theosophical Society in 1883 and, after her clash with Sinnett, the leadership of the Hermetic Society, which she and Maitland launched in 1884. It was the Hermetic Society that allowed Kingsford complete freedom to pursue her own brand of religious occultism. Scorning to be anyone’s disciple, during the 1880s she articulated an individual theology, drawn from Christianity, Renaissance magic, Eastern mysticism, and late Victorian feminism, that was resoundingly her own.\textsuperscript{95}
Indeed all the causes that she passionately espoused found their way into her intoxicating religious brew. The ferocity with which she opposed vivisection, for example, becomes fully explained only when one learns that she and Maitland embraced a highly specific theory of the soul’s upward movement through successive reincarnations, from plants through animals to man, with the elimination of the material body as the final goal of the journey. Her theology likewise bore the firm imprint of her fervent feminist sympathies; she announced that “the object of all sacred mysteries, whether of our Bible or other,” was “to enable man anew so to develop the Soul, or Essential Woman, within him, as to become, through Her, a perfect reflection of the universal Soul, and made, therefore, in what, mystically, is called the image of God.” She waxed lyrical about the feminine nature of the divine principle and warned men that they could never attain “to full intuition of God,” until they exalted “the Woman in themselves.” One scholar of the occult has even linked Kingsford’s thought to a contemporary French visionary extravagance, the doctrine of the Woman-Messiah. Furthermore, she venerated the Virgin, and one of the strongest attractions of the Catholic Church for her was “the worship of Our Blessed Lady.”

Although in a letter to her close friend Lady Caithness, Kingsford dismissed Blavatsky as “an occultist, not a mystic.” Kingsford was no mean occultist herself. She, too, was fascinated by the possibility of magical powers and was eagerly receptive in 1886 when “a proposal to study occultism was made to her by a notable expert, who, being well versed in Hermetic and Kabalistic science, had attained his proficiency in the best schools.” In the previous year, Kingsford and Maitland had published their version of The Hermetic Works, and she had a highly particular purpose in mind when she determined to undertake a regular course of occult studies: in learning to obtain power “over the elemental forces,” she intended to direct them “against some of the leading vivisectors, and especially M. Pasteur.” Suffering acutely from her physical ailments, this frail, neurotic, but determined woman grasped at magic in a final, desperate effort to exercise power, to exert some significant control over her environment, to achieve fame and greatness. She convinced herself that her magical exercises were potent and that, by the sheer concentration of her will, she could eliminate her opponents. When Professor Paul Bert, prominent in Third Republic politics and science, and “among the most notorious of the vivisecting fraternity of Paris,” died in November 1886, she gloated malevolently in her diary:

For months I have been working to compass the death of Paul Bert, and have but just succeeded. But I have succeeded; the demonstration

of the power is complete. The will can and does kill. . . . Paul Bert
has wasted to death. Now only one remains on hand—Pasteur, who
is certainly doomed, and must, I should think, succumb in a few
months at the utmost. Oh, how I have longed for those words—“Mort
de M. Paul Bert”! And now—there they actually are, gazing at me
as it were in the first column of the Figaro,—complimenting, con-
gratulating, felicitating me. I have killed Paul Bert, . . . as I will kill
Louis Pasteur, and after him the whole tribe of vivisectors, if I live
long enough. Courage: it is a magnificent power to have, and one that
transcends all vulgar methods of dealing out justice to tyrants. It
seems that Dr. Kingsford had neither sound mind nor sound body
by this point in her life.

Despite her certainty that she was infinitely superior to Theosophy’s
founding mother, Kingsford set forth a theology that was similar to
Blavatsky’s in many ways. The belief in reincarnation, astral bodies,
the concept of Karma, the certainty that “every man makes his own
fate,” the description of God as “the Substance of humanity” — all
help to explain why Kingsford initially found a ready welcome in Lon-
don’s Theosophical Society. In 1883, a year before their nasty row,
Simett warmly praised Kingsford’s book, The Perfect Way, and
pointed out that its “inner inspirations” appeared identical with Theos-
ophy’s. Yet, like Massey and Wyld, her sojourn in Theosophy was
troubled, not only by personality conflicts, but by an underlying dis-
agreement over the place of esoteric wisdom in Christian thought.
Blavatsky wanted no part of Christianity; Kingsford, by contrast, thought
of herself as a Christian reformer. Two days after the Hermetic Society
was founded in the spring of 1884, she wrote in her diary: “What we
really seek is to reform the Christian system and start a new Esoteric
Church.” Massey concurred warmly and was one of her staunchest
supporters in the new venture; he wrote to Maitland in July that the
Hermetic Society ought to become a sort of “Speculative Church Re-
form Society.”

From the publication of The Perfect Way in 1882 until Kingsford’s
death six years later, she reiterated the same reform message: Chris-
tianity, at its most fundamental core, incorporated the esoteric wisdom
of the pagan schools, particularly “the Hermetic mysteries of Egyp-
tian and Hellenic origin.” Christian revelation, she and Maitland
argued, was the “descendant and heir” of these schools, not the arch
competitor. The members of the Hermetic Society should therefore
strip away the false accretions and distortions imposed on Christianity
over the centuries, in order to elucidate its “original esoteric and real
doctrine.” Kingsford set the example by interpreting the Creed as a
Hermetic document, just as she and Maitland had already interpreted
the Bible, that supreme "depository replete with occult and mystic lore." Everywhere they looked, in fact – in neo-Platonism, Gnosticism, Sufism, in Pythagorean, Platonic, and Alexandrian texts, in the Eleusinian mysteries, the Cabala, and Hebrew legends – Kingsford and Maitland discovered every more overwhelming evidence to convince themselves that the Christian religion was not created during the lifetime of Christ. Rather they saw it as a faith whose deep roots traveled back to an ancient, hidden truth, an esoteric knowledge far more fundamental than the teachings of the New Testament. Their "Esoteric Christianity" may have borne as little resemblance to Christianity as Blavatsky's "Esoteric Buddhism" bore to Buddhism, but the distinction between their goals should, nonetheless, be clear. For Blavatsky, the revelation of occult knowledge, through her own agency, rendered Christianity irrelevant and exposed its absurdities. For Kingsford and Maitland, the revelation of esoteric wisdom underscored both the venerability and universality of Christianity and equipped it to participate fully in what they believed would be the future development of religious thought.

It is exceedingly difficult to know what, if any, were Blavatsky's spiritual longings, but with Kingsford, spiritual malaise seems to have been an inextricable part of a more general dissatisfaction with her life and an abiding sense of frustration. Her ceaseless groping for a set of beliefs to stimulate her emotionally, intellectually, and aesthetically led her to Roman Catholicism, Theosophy, and Hermeticism, not to mention the secular causes that she championed with fanatical fervor. She drank deeply from occult waters and embraced unorthodoxy in diverse guises. Yet she never quite managed to break the fine thread that bound her to the Christian faith.104

With Annie Besant, the thread appeared to be severed irrevocably as she made herself famous on secularist platforms around the country. Her rejection of Christianity seemed too resolute for backsliding. With the aid of Theosophy, however, she did slide back, at least to a position not unlike the Esoteric Christianity of Kingsford and Maitland. If it is true, as Besant's mother claimed, that her daughter "was always above all else pre-occupied with religion,"105 then Theosophy helped to turn her attention away from the social crusades in which, for years, she had sought alternative outlets for her religious zeal. Theosophy, in time, also gave her an international stature that neither the National Secular Society nor the Fabian Socialists could ever have offered her. As always with personal motivation, the historian who ventures to assign reasons does so at substantial risk. Whether it was the drive for world fame and unquestioned authority that impelled Besant first to join and then to dominate the Theosophical Society, or whether she was driven forward by the religious problems that had plagued her for years, is not a resolvable question. What is part of the historical record, however, is the trajectory of her spiritual migrations from the high church fervor of her adolescence through free thought to the occult messianism of her last, long Indian phase.106

Whatever it was that Besant sought all along the way was not likely to turn up in the National Secular Society. When she became a Theosophist, she admitted that "the Materialism from which I hoped all has failed me," and indeed it is hard to imagine her ardent, emotional personality flourishing in the ranks of Victorian freethinkers.107 Yet she had committed too much time and drained too much of her energy on behalf of materialism to dump it all in a single moment of Blavatskian bewitchery. In defending her move to Theosophy, she placed great emphasis on the Theosophical rejection of the supernatural. The first lesson taught to the Theosophical novice, she explained,

is that every idea of the existence of the supernatural must be surrendered. Whatever forces may be latent in the Universe at large or in man in particular, they are wholly natural. There is no such thing as miracle ... This repudiation of the supernatural lies at the very threshold of Theosophy: the supersensuous, the superhuman, Yes; the supernatural, No.

She denied that she had veered abruptly from materialism to a belief in the existence of pure spirit entities and complained that

"Spirit" is a misleading word, for, historically, it connotes immateriality and a supernatural kind of existence, and the Theosophist believes neither in the one nor the other. With him all living things act in and through a material basis, and "matter" and "spirit" are not found dissociated. But he alleges that matter exists in states other than those at present known to science.108

Theosophy perfectly served Besant's needs. Consciously or not, she used it to abandon an intellectual position that no longer satisfied her, if it ever really had. Through Theosophy, she could resume her earlier quest for life's hidden purpose without appearing to succumb entirely to blind religiosity. That she was, nevertheless, moving back toward a more overtly religious frame of mind is beyond doubt, and in her renewed receptivity to spiritual aspirations, she looked sympathetically at Christianity once again. The result, at the turn of the century, was Esoteric Christianity or The Lesser Mysteries, a volume in which Besant assumed yet another pose for her readers: the revealer of fundamental Christian truths whose exposure could strengthen the Christian faith in the modern world. She seems to have derived the book's argument from a union of Blavatsky and Kingsford. After explaining
A surrogate faith

that the religions of the past all claimed a hidden, esoteric element, Besant proceeded in great detail "to prove beyond the possibility of rational doubt" that Christianity, too, had an original Gnostic aspect. The atonement, resurrection and ascension, the Trinity and the sacraments, she insisted, could not be completely elucidated until they were seen as manifestations of the esoteric mysteries that formed the universal components of religious experience.

Until Christianity was thus fully illuminated, she warned, it would continue to suffer attrition and decline.

Christianity, having lost its mystic and esoteric teaching, is losing its hold on a large number of the more highly educated. . . . It is patent to every student of the closing years of the last century, that crowds of thoughtful and moral people have slipped away from the churches, because the teachings they received there outraged their intelligence and shocked their moral sense.

It was the fault of the Protestant Reformation, she implied, with its assertion that the gospel ought to be accessible to everyone, no matter how uneducated. The consequence was a crude simplification of Christian teaching that was abhorrent to tender consciences. Once admit, however, that events recorded in the Bible and "thought to be historical have the deeper significance of the mythical or mystical meaning," and Christianity would enjoy an immeasurable resurgence of strength. The student of the Christian religion would, she promised, find "with joy, that the pearl of great price shines with a purer, clearer lustre when the coating of ignorance is removed and its many colours are seen."

In her search for the roots of Christianity, Besant came, if not exactly full circle, closer to the initial point of departure on her spiritual wanderings than her freethinking colleagues of the 1870s and 1880s would have ever dreamed possible. Her theology was far from orthodox Christianity, but her quest for the hidden wisdom of the world became steeped in a Christian imagery that suggests the strength of her attachment to that faith, even while she remained a leader of the Theosophical Society. She closed her exposition of Esoteric Christianity, for example, with a paean to the "Virgin of Eternal Truth," and she expressed yearning to look upon "the splendour of the Face of the divine Mother, and in Her arms the Child who is the very Truth." In the final paragraph of Esoteric Christianity, the Christ imagery predominated, as she wrote exultantly:

Yet since in man abides His very Self, who shall forbid him to pass within the Veil, and to see with "open face the glory of the Lord"? From the Cave to highest Heaven; such was the pathway of the Word made Flesh, and known as the Way of the Cross. Those who share the manhood share also the Divinity, and may tread where He has trodden. "What Thou art, That am I."110

Theosophy and the occult

Christ, truth, esoteric knowledge, and divinity all appear as synonymous concepts for Annie Besant by the turn of the century. Accordingly, after she officially became president of the Theosophical Society in 1907, it seemed to her entirely appropriate to make the search for a new Christ the central feature of a movement devoted to the study of divine wisdom.111

THEOSOPHICAL SCIENCE

Theosophy had yet another trait that enfeated it to the late nineteenth century, a trait that illustrated its elasticity even more sharply than did its curious relation to Christianity: It claimed to be scientific. At first glimpse, the claim appears simply outlandish, coming from a movement many of whose members were specifically protesting against the entire occidental emphasis on scientific knowledge. Yet Mrs. Besant was not the only Theosophist who found Blavatsky's doctrines intellectually respectable because they seemed capable of scientific proof. One needs to ascertain, however, what she and her Theosophical colleagues meant by scientific proof.

Like so much in Theosophy, venerable traditions and modern developments merged to influence scientific pronouncements. Official statements on science, contained in Blavatsky's Isis Unveiled and The Secret Doctrine, obscure more than they unveil, but it is nonetheless evident that Blavatsky saw herself as the great synthesizer of science and metaphysics. The Secret Doctrine was, in fact, subtitled The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy, and it bears some comparison with other works of occult scientists, such as Paracelsus and Swedenborg.112 When Blavatsky spoke of nature's laws, with which Theosophists were supposed to become intimately familiar, she harked back to a neo-Platonic comprehension of scientific inquiry. For her, as for other occultists of the late nineteenth century, the scientist's role was still to explore connections, or correspondences, between the diverse parts of the universe, and the universe, in Blavatsky's gospel, was thoroughly permeated by spirit as a creative, causative agent.

Blavatsky first set forth her overarching philosophy of science in the preface to Isis Unveiled: A Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology, where she bemoaned the conflict of reason and religion and pointed the way to true knowledge of the natural world. Looking around at contemporary civilization, she saw

On the one hand an unspiritual, dogmatic, too often debauched clergy; a host of sects, and three warring great religions; . . . On the other
hand, scientific hypotheses built on sand; no accord upon a single question; rancorous quarrels and jealousy: a general drift into materialism. A death-grapple of Science with Theology for infallibility - "a conflict of ages."

In the midst of this death-grapple, Blavatsky lamented, contemporaries had lost sight of "genuine science and religion," the "twin truths - so strong in their unity, so weak when divided." Just as the spiritualists claimed to have revealed the sole possible meeting place of science and faith, so Blavatsky believed that it was her task to discover a "middle ground," from which the sincere seeker after truth could dispassionately study both fields of endeavor. She found it, not surprisingly, in Platonic philosophy, although Plato might have been astonished to learn that he, "the greatest philosopher of the pre-Christian era," "mirrored faithfully in his works the spiritualism of the Vedic philosophers who lived thousands of years before himself, ..." Blavatsky then pointed out, on the authority of "Porphyry, of the Neoplatonic School," that Plato's philosophy "was taught and illustrated in the MYSTERIES." Her lack of knowledge about the provenance of Gnostic, Alexandrian, and Hermetic writings was patent, but it was enough for her that she established ostensible links between Eastern religion, ancient philosophy, and occult practice, all of which were pressed into service as part of the great campaign to reconcile science and theology. With her authorities thus jumbled together, Blavatsky proceeded to expound her own hybrid philosophy of cosmic nous, or spirit, in which a broad range of additional experts, from Pythagoras to John Tyndall, of all people, were also summoned to support her world view.  

As Tyndall's name suggests, Blavatsky, despite her fondness for occult scientists of the past, also derived stimulation from the present, and her writings about science reflected current trends as well as the state of knowledge in bygone centuries. She had a clever eye and ear for what was in the scientific air and could weave seemingly prophetic announcements concerning the atom's divisibility, for example - into her occult tapestry. In The Secret Doctrine, she turned her attention to the evolution of the human race, disagreeing vehemently with the Darwinian account of that process, yet clearly aiming to capture her share of an audience that was avid to learn more about natural organic change. In her account of evolutionary growth, Blavatsky denied that mere physical alterations could have produced the human intellect and spirit, that man emerged from simian forebears, and, in fact, that man had ever existed in any form other than human. Her alternative explanation is of such dense complexity that the simplicity of Darwin's stands out all the more impressively. The central tenet in her version of human evolution concerns the five root races of mankind, whose cyclical and successive patterns of development unfolded independently of animal evolution. The agent of change, in Blavatsky's cosmic scenario, came from outside the physical organism, whether botanical, bestial, or human; it descended from above as a kind of spirit influx, the fuel on which the entire machinery operated.

What is noteworthy about Blavatsky's so-called scientific theories is not their characteristic eccentricity, but her reiterated emphasis on their empirical foundation. Theosophy, she told the Pall Mall Gazette in 1884, is "an exact science, based, like any other science, upon the recorded result of centuries of experience." What sort of experience she did not specify, but it could not have been experimentation in any systematic manner - even Yeats's simple experiments sufficed to get him expelled from the Esoteric Section. Given their antipathy to scientific materialism, Theosophists might well have been expected to eschew laboratory investigation; consequently, they might also have been expected to claim empirical corroboration with some restraint. On the contrary, however, Theosophical writers typically exuded complete confidence on that score. Wyld, for one, boasted that he "had obtained scientific demonstrations" that miracles frequently occurred, even in his own day. He, at least, was a medical doctor, but Sinnett, with far less justification, assumed scientific airs, scattering scientific terminology throughout his work, and posing as an informed source on new scientific theories. Annie Besant, in keeping with her careful disentanglement from secularism, asserted that "Theosophy accepts the method of Science - observation, experiment, arrangement of ascertained facts, induction, hypothesis, deduction, verification, assertion of the discovered truth." She was the proud author of a pamphlet on Occult Chemistry and wrote with equal authority about planetary chains and other celestial phenomena.

Besant's approach to research, however, reveals the limits of her commitment to the modern "method of Science" and, as with Blavatsky, places her in the tradition of the neo-Platonists, for whom "chemistry took on a quasi-religious aura." Tangible evidence, as such, interested her very little. She was only being candid when, on publishing an expanded edition of Occult Chemistry, she subtitled it A Series of Clairvoyant Observations on the Chemical Elements. The surprising insights that it contained were derived from exercises of will, not laboratory calculations. In the chapter on "Theosophy as Science," which begins Besant's little text on Theosophy, published in 1912, she wrote at length about will, vitality, intellect, and mind. She described the creative activity of the monad, or eternal man, and traced the links between the physical body and its astral counterpart. She
examined the mental sphere, including its "heaven-portion," the intuitional sphere, "in which the Christ-nature unfolds in the Man," and the spiritual sphere, and she concluded with a few brief comments about the significance of religious rites and ceremonies. Although she asserted that these subjects fell within the purview of Theosophical science, since Theosophy had undertaken vastly to increase the areas of knowledge open to scientific inquiry,\textsuperscript{120} it was clear that theology completely eclipsed science, as any twentieth-century reader would have understood that term, in Besant's volume.

If Theosophical scientists could boldly identify causative agencies where the physical science of the day could only raise questions, that was because Theosophists had a decidedly unfair advantage over professional scientists. The former could range freely over a spirit world of their own creation to designate instruments of change in the material world, and they could do so in the name of a "Higher Science." As the Theosophist William Kingsland, later a biographer of Blavatsky, wrote in 1888:

There exists... a Higher Science, which is also Religion in its purest sense, and which deals with the hidden forces in nature at which Physical Science stops short, but which are more than suspected by the majority of mankind, because every form of Religion whatsoever is an acknowledgment of a something, which underlies, and is superior to, the phenomena of Nature.

Massey, likewise, stressed the difference between merely superficial "information concerning things" and real knowledge of them which brought the inquirer face to face with the "Divine principle of Nature." Science, Massey argued, was grievously incomplete without religion.\textsuperscript{121}

The confusion of theological speculation and scientific concepts, of inner vision and outward inquiry, sprang from the Theosophical belief in the close intermingling of matter and spirit. In some cases, no doubt, both the vocabulary and authority of science were quite purposefully misapplied, to bolster metaphysical or theological conjectures that needed to be "packaged" for Western audiences. But what was significant about Theosophy was not, of course, its claim to contribute to biology, chemistry, or physics, but its role as a religious alternative. Like spiritualism, it arose at a time when Christianity's many weaknesses had been starkly exposed, but when people still felt the acute pain of trying to live without some sense of meaning, purpose, design, and beneficence in the universe. The certainty with which Theosophists maintained that there existed beings higher than the earthbound specimens of humanity had scarcely any specific connection with current theories of biological evolution, or even with current theories of material and technological progress. It was the reflection of a religious need—the need both to aspire to some future loftier condition of existence and to feel, in this life, the protection and care of something superhuman.

The manipulation and misuse of scientific language for spiritual purposes was hardly unique to Theosophy in this period. In addition to spiritualism itself in its several varieties, such manipulation characterized the Christian Science of Mary Baker Eddy and the Anthroposophy of Rudolf Steiner, which grew out of Steiner's affiliation with Theosophy in Germany. Swedenborgianism, too, combined pseudo-scientific terminology with its mysticism, but that faith had first blossomed in a far different intellectual climate and was even more immediately inspired by Renaissance science than were the occult movements that emerged in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Blavatsky was quick to point out Swedenborg's intellectual debt to "the Hermetic philosophers," Pythagoras, and the cabalists, and, in order further to minimize his scientific contributions, she dubbed him merely "a seer;... not an adept."\textsuperscript{122} Yet it was not Blavatsky's modern scientific acumen that drew men and women to Theosophy. Fundamentally, they were looking for antidotes to science, alternative ways of interpreting the universe and human destiny, even though they might be impressed by an apparent familiarity with scientific theories. Since Blavatsky could sprinkle the jargon of science throughout her writing, it meant to many a devotee that she had mastered the limited knowledge that modern science could provide and had gone beyond it to offer the far profounder knowledge that they sought.

C. C. Massey observed in the late 1880s that Christian teachings on immortality were meager indeed when compared to "some Eastern systems of religious philosophy."\textsuperscript{123} What science had not rendered incredible in Christian doctrine, biblical criticism had left suspect, or moral outrage had made unacceptable. Furthermore, the late nineteenth-century Christian churches were less concerned with enriching theology than with trying to secure for themselves a popular base through increased emphasis on the social role of institutionalized religion. As care and cure of souls came to play a less prominent part in their daily concerns, other sources of comfort developed to supplement, or completely replace, their services. What Christianity left imprecise about human survival became fully explicated, if along rather different lines, both in spiritualism and in Theosophy. Future joys, as well as trials, in the life after death were vividly depicted in spiritualist and Theosophical literature alike, with exhaustive details that rescued the fearful from the terrors of uncertainty.