

## Chapter 7

### An Examination of Blavatsky's Major Literary Works

#### 7.1 The Importance of Accessible Literary Representations of the Theosophical Worldview

The theosophical worldview was expounded most authoritatively and explicitly in Madame Blavatsky's writings. Her personal correspondences amplified particular issues for selected individuals. Her stream of articles presented to the public general and specific new or reactive assessments, evaluations, interpretations, theories, lines of speculative interest at particular points in time. However, it was in her major books that she left a lasting legacy, systematically articulating and defining what could be considered as the authoritative ideational structure of the theosophical worldview. In her articles, attention could be given to the particular issues and concerns of the moment. As the theoretical, practical, and social ramifications of the worldview permeated into a wider public milieu, current controversies, disputes, and topical themes were attended to through the publication of articles addressing such specific points. However, in her three most significant works,<sup>1</sup> the substantive content and ideal objectives of this worldview were presented in more structured and logically organized form. There were specific ostensible intentions underlying the production of each of these works. *Isis Unveiled* was intended as refutation of contemporary entrenched Western religious and scientific worldviews, and the introduction of a re-synthesized occult option. *The Secret Doctrine* was intended as a systematic exposition of that worldview, a synthesis of knowledge outlining the processes of cosmological and anthropological evolution, considered from an occult perspective. *The Voice of the Silence* was meant as an inspirational and instructive stimulus to personal spiritual development. Collectively, these three books can be viewed as the most explicit and calculated attempts of representing the theosophical worldview to the public as a consistent, encompassing and internally coherent body of knowledge. The maintenance of Madame Blavatsky's status as the pre-eminent theosophical spokesperson in part rested with the belief that she was the legitimate

---

<sup>1</sup> Another book, *The Key to Theosophy* is also considered a major work. However, it was intended as a more of an introductory book, simplifying and restating ideas found to be obtuse to the public, and thus not as iconoclastic or provocative.

messenger of a supernaturally sanctioned message, and that she possessed the requisite supersensory abilities and esoteric knowledge to confirm that assumption. However, her major writings were intended to attract interest and ideally, win over converts from those who found the worldview credible and appealing on its own merits. Thus, constructing a logically coherent, intellectually defensible, and emotionally alluring ideational edifice was essential if the theosophical alternative was to be considered a trustworthy option. As we have noted throughout, in attempting to legitimate the alternative theosophical worldview, Blavatsky drew from a nexus of experiential influences while attempting to use rational and intellectual arguments, materials, and procedures to enhance the presentation of her envisioned worldview for public consideration. Her works thus were mixtures of facts, conjecture, opinion, and expression of personal feelings and insights, with allusions to secretive sources of knowledge and other arcane forms of information. The framework of a mythologized narrative followed by extensive analytical commentary and explication was the written procedure mostly followed. For the most part, the credibility of her major literary works rest on the quasi-private “master-key” of symbolic interpretation that is claimed to reveal a coherent and consistent esoteric truth encoded in purposely enigmatic exoteric forms. The synthesis she sought to reveal derived from her application of this interpretative master key to the disparate esoteric sources at her disposal. The literary representation of this ideational system was a work (extending through her major books) of the imagination and the intellect, drawing upon all resources of the creative psyche (conscious and unconscious). The success of her method was dependent upon the capacity to argumentatively and rationally articulate a logical and coherent schema to defend her vision from critical perusal. Inspired by her motivational objectives and self-assured in her personal beliefs, the process of translating the vision of her worldview into an intended authoritative opus involved careful and methodical intellectual crafting and organisational effort. Ironically, for someone attempting to present a highly personalised and idiosyncratic worldview, Blavatsky was indebted to others for the final schematic forms of her two largest books, *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine*. Many other people were directly involved in the various production stages of the books, from supplying details about content to the collation and editing processes. As well, others were more indirectly involved in attending to logistical and

household affairs, allowing Blavatsky the comfort, time, opportunity and resources to embark upon her intensive literary pursuits. So though her major works were the manifestation of her own insights and vision, they emerged from a real-world support-system made up of those who were mostly fervent supporters, attracted or captivated by her personal charisma and the message she was delivering.

## **7.2 Blavatsky's Books – The Embedding of Charisma and the Evocation of Emotion**

Before dealing with the specifics of these books, another issue must be addressed. As is the case with the messages espoused by many charismatic and inspirational leaders, the constellation in writing of their worldviews often provokes intense emotional reaction. Their words are perceived to be extensions of themselves, and retain a degree of the power of persuasiveness and assurance attributed to the person. A revealing instance of this phenomenon is how the process of discovering, reading, and reacting to the written word of Madame Blavatsky has at times stimulated such a response. Even decades after her death, and by those who may have had minimal acquaintance with theosophical history. In the case of Madame Blavatsky's systematic writings, it was not unusual to find that they have had a singularly powerful effect, akin perhaps in some sense to the triggering of a conversion or initiatory experience. Let us look at a few typical expressions of this attitude. First, by Boris de Zirkoff in the preface to the first volume of her collected writings.

We commend her writings to the weary pilgrim, and to the seeker of enduring spiritual realities. They contain the answer to many a perplexing problem. They open wide portals undreamt of before, revealing vistas of cosmic splendors and lasting inspiration. They bring new hope and courage to the fainthearted but sincere student. They are a comfort and a staff, as well as a Guide and Teacher, to those who are already travelling along the age old Path. As for those who are in the vanguard of mankind, valiantly scaling the solitary passes leading to the Gates of Gold, these writings give the clue to the secret knowledge enabling one to lift the heavy bar that must be raised before the Gates admit the Pilgrim into the land of Eternal Dawn.<sup>2</sup>

H. P. Blavatsky was the bearer of mighty ideas, and with a mighty pen she bequeathed to this and the coming centuries a vision, a purpose and, greater than

---

<sup>2</sup> H.P. Blavatsky, *Collected Writings*, op. cit.

all these, an example of courage and steadfast trust in the law and in the wisdom of her teachers.<sup>3</sup>

We need to have our own inner dialogue with the text if it is to come alive in us. If we do, we become aware that we indeed participate in a universal process. The essence of the SD, together with that of her classic *The Voice of the Silence*, must be experienced rather than read.<sup>4</sup>

When the student has awakened to the significance of nature, of himself, and of the Wisdom-Religion, he is, one could say, at the turning of the evolution of the individual soul. It is for him that *The Secret Doctrine* was written. He finds himself swimming in a shoreless ocean of light and life and law... Isis may be thought of, therefore, as a personal book; *The Secret Doctrine* as the book of life eternal. Now he will read *The Secret Doctrine* as it was written to be read: The record of his own path and purpose, through all times and circumstances, and as he studies the external record, the inner memory will waken in him—and he will know.<sup>5</sup>

What we discern in these statements is that the writings of Madame Blavatsky are considered to be embedded with meaning and value beyond those attainable through any mere superficial or prosaic reading. Apparently, the sway of her charismatic presence was at least somewhat encapsulated in her idiomatic writing style and in the originality of expression and speculative meandering. Her major literary efforts are successfully expressions of her personality in that the reader often feels a rapport or awareness of Blavatsky the person as well as intuiting the contents of her message. The books themselves are felt by such so attuned to be illuminating and revelatory, instructive and consoling. They “contain the answer to many a perplexing problem,” bring, “new hope,” “courage,” “comfort,” serve as a “staff,” a “Guide” and a “Teacher,” and for the most empathetic and intuitive, supply “the clue to the secret knowledge” leading to spiritual realisation. The potential convert or supporter is pictured as one already seeking alternative and more emotionally satisfying worldview options. This aspirant is a “weary traveller,” a “seeker of enduring spiritual realities,” a “fainthearted but sincere student.” Even those more veteran and experienced seekers who may be “in the vanguard of

---

<sup>3</sup> Grace F. Knoche, *Prologue to HPB Special Issue (1997)*, retrieved from The Theosophical University Press Online, 1993, <<http://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/sunrise/46-96-7/hpb-gfke.htm>>. (Accessed July 8, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> I. M. Oderberg, *The Dawn of a New Age*, retrieved from The Theosophical University Press Online, 1991, <<http://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/sunrise/40-90-1/sc-imo6.htm>>. (Accessed July 8, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Anonymous, *Isis and the S.D.*, in *THEOSOPHY*, Vol. 74, No. 7, May, 1986, retrieved from Wisdom

mankind” are in need of guidance and teachings. The cognition of the secret knowledge hinted at in those writings will effect a radical transformation on the perceptions of the newly initiated. Those newly discovered “wide portals” reveal “vistas of cosmic splendour,” that will provide “lasting inspiration.”

And in her inspired writings, Blavatsky wields a “mighty pen” which reveals “mighty ideas,” which will serve as a lasting legacy for “this and coming centuries.” The “vision and purpose” she bequeaths will endure for generations, changing the fundamental orientation to the world for many. The new worldview will be based upon the “law and the wisdom of her teachers,” essentially, an embodiment of the theosophical vision. Her “courage and steadfast trust” in that spiritual worldview will reap justified rewards when future generations validate her mission. Thanks to her mighty pen, those foundational insights were made accessible and transmissible, thus giving her writings special legitimacy.

However, deciphering and properly digesting the theosophical message is not necessarily a straightforward process. It requires personal involvement, commitment to reaching fullest understanding, and an “inner dialogue with the text.” An existentially objective and open approach is required to make the meaning of the text “come alive in us.” If that process unfolds satisfactorily, a new state of awareness will prevail. “We become aware” where we previously were dormant or circumscribed by previous conditioning. Conviction “that we indeed participate in a universal process” leads to recognition that there are spiritual energies active throughout all phases of existence. The essence of Blavatsky’s systematic and inspirational books is meaningful on a non-verbal level. The habitual method of reading only supplies a partial, conceptual understanding of the spiritually dynamic processes pertaining to macrocosmic and microcosmic activities. Experience provides a personal means of validation for the type of worldview Blavatsky tried to present as a more authentic option.

To truly appreciate the meaning of Blavatsky’s works, it is first necessary to be properly attuned and receptive. When “the student has awakened” and recognized that inner and outer sides of reality are spiritually grounded, he is at a transitional threshold, “at the turning of the evolution of the individual soul.” And when he attains that

---

World, <<http://www.wisdomworld.org/setting/isis.html>>. (Accessed July 8, 2002).

consciousness of purpose and direction, he becomes aware that “it is for him that The Secret Doctrine was written.” This profound gestalt moment brings with it recognition that a different perceptual configuration of reality must be enabled because older entrenched perspectives seem less stable and assuring. Overwhelmed by the new vision, a period of consolidation and adjustment is necessary. “He finds himself swimming in a shoreless ocean of light and life and law ...” *Isis Unveiled* is directed to the elements of this alternative worldview from the point of view of the individual newly cognisant of this option. *The Secret Doctrine* is a revelation of the spiritual reality as such, “the book of life eternal.” Once properly sensitised and attuned to this level of cognition or consciousness, it is much more than a verbal or discursive document. It is a repository of spiritual content, properly meaningful only by reading “*The Secret Doctrine* as it was written to be read.” When approached from this direction, it is seen as embodying transcendental truths, “through all times and circumstances.” For the elite student, it is “the record of his own path and purpose,” a stimulant to awaken deeper levels of the enduring entity.” As he studies the external record, “the inner memory will waken in him—and he will know.” Thus, as a seemingly innocuous book, *The Secret Doctrine* does not reveal its fullest meanings. But through proper approach it will waken deeper levels of the psyche and “inner memory” will be revived or brought to consciousness. There will be no doubt about the credibility of this awakening on the part of the subject, “he will know” with the certainty of personal conviction.

These examples show how Madame Blavatsky’s major writings could be perceived to be more than ordinary books. This kind of awe, veneration, and emotional commitment of course was not unanimous, even amongst supporters. However, for those who endorsed the theosophical position or found her books appealing, respect and admiration were often abundant. Besides such reactions to the contents of those books, much of the mystique and glamour associated with them come from the circumstances under which they were produced. Questions about the methods of authorship, the sources of information, and style of composition were raised repeatedly. Particularly for *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine*, each of which were mammoth tomes intended to dramatically impact upon the currents of popular thought. In fact, disputes about the credibility of their composition and production were often inseparable from assessments

of their contents. The subsequent notoriety, while entrenching the disreputability of Madame Blavatsky amongst many (especially those whose enmity she provoked), also helped add to a mystique that was based on claims or presumptions of supernatural activity or intervention.

### **7.3.1 *Isis Unveiled* – Controversies and Circumstances Surrounding Its Composition**

Let us first look at *Isis Unveiled*. Published in 1877 after two years of often-controversial production, it set the tone for the movement and became the first authoritative embodiment of the theosophical worldview. The ambivalent circumstances of its construction have since become entrenched as part of the lore surrounding Blavatsky, used to demonstrate supernatural intervention by admirers, or suspicious manipulations by critics. The first thing noted in traditional theosophical accounts of the genesis of this work was that it was written on instruction from, or inspiration by, the Masters. It was intended to serve as a critique of traditional religious and scientific worldviews, with support offered to legitimise an occult perspective. All efforts to physically produce and organise the book were motivated by desire to fulfil this intention, hence apparently unorthodox methods of research, scholarship and literary production were used when needed.

HPB mentions that when she was called upon by her teachers to write so extensively, she was at a loss, for although she spoke several languages fluently, she did not feel at home in English. Judging from the over 30 articles previously published in various newspapers and periodicals, however, her English was more than adequate and she wrote with gusto. That same style appears in *Isis Unveiled*, where she was never hesitant in coming forward when she felt a principle was being compromised. Having only a small library, HPB was aided by her teachers in finding material. Several other people also helped her, notably Colonel Henry S. Olcott—principal co-founder of the Society—who assisted her for months in organizing and editing the manuscript, and Dr. Alexander Wilder, scholar and Platonist, who helped to write the introduction, corrected foreign terms, added valuable material here and there in both volumes, and cut out much extraneous matter. Even so, its two volumes comprise some 1,300 pages.<sup>6</sup>

This “calling” was believed to have been a stimulus from her Masters. To her, an

---

<sup>6</sup> John P. Van Mater, *Unveiling Isis: HPB's First Book*, retrieved from The Theosophical University Press Online, 1997, <<http://www.theosophy-nw.org/theosnw/theos/th-isisj.htm>>. (Accessed July 10, 2002).

extraordinarily justifiable rationale for embarking upon a task recognised as controversial and confrontational at the outset. If she had initial reservations and felt doubtful about adequately completing the intended objective, that hesitancy quickly dissipated as the work progressed. The means by which she was helped by her teachers, and by Olcott, Wilder, and others have been disputed, provoking controversy since work first began on her books. The complaints have centred on the one hand, on the alleged supernatural aid and/or inspiration, and on the other, about her apparently naïve approach to scholarship. Eyewitnesses to her working procedures had their own recollections and interpretations. Especially, Colonel Olcott.

One day in the summer of 1875, HPB showed me some sheets of manuscript which she had written, and said: "I wrote this last night 'by order,' but what the deuce it is to be I don't know. Perhaps it is for a newspaper article, perhaps for a book, perhaps for nothing: anyhow, I did as I was ordered." And she put it away in a drawer, and nothing more was said about it for some time. But in the month of September she went on a visit to her new friends, Professor and Mrs. Corson, of Cornell University, and the work went on. She wrote me that it was to be a book on the history and philosophy of the Eastern Schools and their relations with those of our times. She said she was writing about things she had never studied and making quotations from books she had never read in all her life: that, to test her accuracy, Prof. Corson had compared her quotations with classical works in the University Library, and had found her to be right.<sup>7</sup>

Here we see that Blavatsky claims to have essentially been a passive instrument, writing "by order," not admitting conscious volition, claiming she doesn't know the intended objective of the project. She claims that she complied unquestioningly with the orders. Either fully convinced of being the vehicle for the cause of the Masters or else possibly consciously or subconsciously inflating the sense of embarking on a privileged endeavour for Olcott's benefit. She recognized that the writing she had produced would be meant for use at some future time, and resumed the project within a few months in a different location. By this time, more clarity as to its purpose was being revealed. The subject matter was "the history and philosophy of the Eastern schools," which likely encompassed different past esoteric and occult traditions and thinkers. But by adding "and their relations with those of our times," it seemingly suggesting comparison and evaluation of more contemporary proponents of similar beliefs. By claiming that "she

---

<sup>7</sup> Cited in Daniel Caldwell, *The Esoteric World of Madame Blavatsky*, op. cit.



was writing about things she had never studied,” and quoting from “books she had never read in all her life,” she was either describing an extraordinary supersensory cognitive phenomenon or perhaps was exaggerating and posturing with a calculated air of naivety.

Much of her life had in fact been devoted to studying, reading, seeking out experience and advice in the field of esoterica. Either way, the impression given is that she was involved in a process quite different than normally assumed in the endeavours of authorship, playing a role in a process initiated outside her own personality and ego. The anecdotal observations about her working habits suggest that when fully engaged in the creative process she may have been subject to episodes of trance or other forms of abnormal or extraordinary experience. Possibly, she may have consciously or unconsciously dramatized the ongoing process of literary production to instil a sense of its critical importance. By implying that the Masters were feeding her privileged information and allowing her supersensory access to otherwise unavailable information, Blavatsky sets the stage for a book with special sanctification and profound revelations.

The acceleration of the literary work increased and became more methodical once new living quarters were acquired and a routine of labour became possible. Although already experienced as a writer, she had never undertaken such a massive literary undertaking, and thus had to adapt to a more demanding and disciplined schedule. However, Olcott does admit that during the daytime he was absent, and thus is not in position to comment on whatever activities Blavatsky may have been engaged in, or whether she may have been in contact with others. He assumes, based on her statements, that she was by herself, working one-pointedly around the clock on that project. But he himself was not in position to confirm or deny whether that indeed was accurate. Olcott though was impressed as he observed her in the process of composition, engaged in the creative flow of ideas and the time-consuming effort of reworking and fine-tuning her work. Olcott sees Blavatsky intensely engaged in the creative process, drawing upon her subjective imaginative and intellectual resources, putting her thoughts, intuitions, observations into coherent articulate form.<sup>8</sup> The laborious and detailed crafting of words to express as best as possible exactly what was desired appears to contrast with the initial

---

<<http://www.theosophical.org/theosophy/books/esotericworld/chapter06/index.html>>.

<sup>8</sup> See Gomes, *op. cit.*, pp. 123 – 125 for Olcott’s observations of Blavatsky’s writing routine.

spontaneous flow of imaginative and intuitive materials. However, even the self-corrections and revisions often were not felt to be satisfactory in expressing the desired thoughts. Blavatsky turned the production of the book into somewhat of a collaborative affair, serving as creative source and supplying the content and initial organisational shape. Olcott also played an editorial role, correcting her manuscript, proofreading, searching for quotations and supplementary materials, and trying to help embody ideas in the appropriate English terms. These duties were modestly noted to be of secondary importance. Corrective and auxiliary work rather than creative. Blavatsky was the ultimate arbiter however. She already knew what she was looking for in terms of supportive or illuminating ideas, but Olcott helped provide shape and linguistic coherence when she asked him to in his assisting role.

Despite his input and efforts, Olcott felt that he did not contribute creatively to the final outcome. Blavatsky in his opinion was operating on conceptual and cognitive levels far more elevated than he and other less attuned individuals were capable of reaching. He considered Blavatsky especially gifted and skilled in occult matters and thus a trustworthy source of privileged knowledge. Whether obtained directly via her own supersensory activities or by virtue of the help of her Masters.

... the book is hers alone, so far as personalities on this plane of manifestation are concerned, and she must take all the praise and the blame that it deserves. Then, whence did HPB draw the materials which compose Isis, and which cannot be traced to accessible literary sources of quotation? From the Astral Light, and by her soul-senses, from her Teachers—the "Brothers," "Adepts," "Sages," "Masters," as they have been variously called. How do I know it? By working two years with her on Isis and many more years on other literary work.<sup>9</sup>

On one hand, based on the normal criteria of authorship, the work is credited entirely to Blavatsky. However, because the information contained was said to have been revealed, or inspired by her Masters, then she in some ways is able to step back and claim only to be the messenger. So all conventional methods of scholarship and research become debatable variables. If Madame Blavatsky claims the Astral Light, her soul-senses, and the Masters as the three primary sources of knowledge, then she is apparently accessing information in a more unmediated, direct, and vivid manner than normally possible. Whether from within her own psyche and unconsciously objectified, or via external

influences. However, responsibility and accountability for the written content falls to the person engaged in its real-world production. So Madame Blavatsky was in fact the creative source, and responsible for the content though dependent on others for editing and organising.

Olcott recounts his experiences and gives his impressions of the way this process appeared to him.

To watch her at work was a rare and never-to-be-forgotten experience. We sat at opposite sides of one big table usually, and I could see her every movement. Her pen would be flying over the page, when she would suddenly stop, look out into space with the vacant eye of the clairvoyant seer, shorten her vision as though to look at something held invisible in the air before her, and begin copying on her paper what she saw. The quotation finished, her eyes would resume their natural expression, and she would go on writing until again stopped by a similar interruption.<sup>10</sup>

Olcott's observations seem to indicate that Blavatsky indeed entered a state of intense absorption, fixated or entranced as she focussed on her task. His interpretation though is conditioned according to the frame of reference supplied by Blavatsky. As well, he gives examples of what he felt was proof of supernatural intervention. This took place when she directed him to look for books that he did not remember seeing before and then discovering them in unexpected places. The possibility of other than occult causes is rejected because those seemed the more believable according to his line of reasoning.<sup>11</sup>

He then gives additional examples indicative of the dissociated or rapt state of consciousness that seemed to envelope Blavatsky as she wrote, including distinctive stylistic changes in her handwriting as she continued to produce written copy. Supporters have often interpreted these variations and transitions as proof of supernatural intervention, the sign of Mahatma influence or control. It would seem that if authentic, these distinct variations indicate that under certain circumstances Blavatsky entered some form of altered or abnormal state conducive to such phenomena. If this kind of handwriting transition were intentionally practiced, then it would show a high level of manipulative skill. Madame Blavatsky's capacity to change scripts extended even beyond her waking consciousness. At times Olcott would leave Blavatsky apparently asleep at

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> See Meade, *op. cit.*, p. 172 for discussion of possible theories for Olcott's corroborative stance.

her writing desk, only to find the next morning dozens of pages of polished manuscript, without need of revision. She told Olcott that they had been written by a Master using her body. Olcott, who believed that the manuscripts were written for her, not by her, takes the assumption of an intervening possessive supersensory presence as the most likely explanation.<sup>12</sup> It was assumed that while in sleep the astral body or abiding intelligence of a Master or a chela would “take over” and use her as a vehicle to produce the manuscript.

Whether she may have created and written them herself under a normal or abnormal state of consciousness is not considered in light of the appeal of the Master option. However, Olcott does contemplate the possibility that Blavatsky was subject to alterations of personality and behaviour, indicating to him transformations in state of consciousness.

Now it was a curious fact that each change in the HPB manuscript would be preceded, either by her leaving the room for a moment or two, or by her going off into the trance or abstracted state, when her lifeless eyes would be looking beyond me into space, as it were, and returning to the normal state almost immediately. And there would also be a distinct change of personality, or rather personal peculiarities, in gait, vocal expression, vivacity of manner, and, above all, in temper. HPB would leave the room one person and return to it another. Not another as to visible change of physical body, but another as to tricks of motion, speech, and manners; with different mental brightness, different views of things, different command of English orthography, idiom, and grammar, and different—very, very different command over her temper, which, at its sunniest, was almost angelic, at its worst, the opposite.<sup>13</sup>

Olcott sees a causal connection between the changes in manuscript and her “going off into the trance or abstracted state.” This description, if accurate, reveals that Blavatsky was apparently subject to phenomena associated with multiple personality and entranced states of consciousness. If, as seems to be the case in such descriptions, the ego were absent during the duration of the experience, then perhaps Gowan’s characterisation of parataxic phenomena would apply here. Clearly, while intensely committed to legitimating her cause and her calling, the psychological pressures must have been profound. Whatever the causes, it seems undeniable that under those sustained conditions that the likelihood of abnormal or extraordinary manifestations would be more probable.

---

<sup>12</sup> See Caldwell, *op. cit.*, chapter 6.

Conforming to the triggering conditions enunciated by Evans regarding the proclivity for visionary manifestations.

Olcott pondered the possibilities, noting that Blavatsky's condition was unlike that of mediums in that she exercised more volitional control than normally found in the production of similar phenomena. That she was able to replicate mediumistic phenomena consciously through her own willpower was a judgment that Olcott made based on his assessment of what he saw and how he interpreted it. He asks whether Blavatsky wrote *Isis Unveiled* as an ordinary spiritual medium. He uses the criterion of conscious and controlled will to differentiate between Blavatsky and more common mediums. However, he also had noted that much of her literary production came under less than conscious wilful control. Manuscripts apparently were produced in her sleep. Her body was allegedly used as a vehicle by other more advanced spiritual entities according to her explanations. She herself, when writing, seemed to display symptoms of multiple personality, trancelike states, extraordinary modes of cognition. So under what capacity she wrote was a matter of conjecture and judgement for Olcott. However, his faith in the authenticity and powers of the Masters led him to conclude that even when entranced or in multiple personality state, Blavatsky in fact was demonstrating Masterly behaviours and attitudes, hence not "really" pathological, but merely acquiescing voluntarily to the will of her teachers.

Olcott's personal assumptions were strongly coloured by his desire to believe in Blavatsky's special status, and his faith in her honesty.<sup>14</sup> What is important to note though is how matter-of-factly he simply presumes that each personality shift indicates a self-subsistent independent possessing presence, imprinting personality traits as alter egos of hers. As he watched her personality apparently fade away, he simply believed that each of these identifiable alter egos was the inhabiting intelligence of the moment, distinct from her own psyche. Any possibility of deception by Blavatsky or hypothesis of purely pathological processes at work was dismissed. His own frame of reference conditioned the expectations, and provided a readily available theory of explanation that reinforced the beliefs that he and Blavatsky were guiding their lives by. Whether Olcott's

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> See Washington, op. cit., pp. 43–44 for the theory of "mutual need" as a basis for Olcott's trust.

view is a perfectly conceivable and factually accurate explanation is not the main point. What is important to note is that within a self-contained alternative ideational climate, radically unconventional minority frames of reference may prevail as the most credible and self-evident approach to problem solving and provision of meaning.

Olcott hypothesises about Blavatsky's apparent susceptibility to possession, interpreting what would appear as the manifestation of multiple personalities as an elaborate mechanism implemented by the Masters to use her body "as one might a typewriter."<sup>15</sup> With this theory, Olcott surmises that Blavatsky's consciousness/ego/inner self vacates her body via the astral form to attend to other pressing cosmic business. While thus "unoccupied," various Masters and chelas took turns producing the text of *Isis Unveiled*. Olcott felt that he could detect specific personalities corresponding to the resident occupier of the moment, even designating them by names. These apparent self-sufficient entities were so identified, and treated as objective beings by himself and Blavatsky, who confirmed that hypothesis for him.

With this presumption of supernatural intervention, we see how Olcott was able to feel validated in his faith about the special nature of the theosophical enterprise. In his interpretation, Blavatsky had demonstrated her importance as the messenger of the Masters. He presumes that she initially volunteered for the task and allowed her personal self to vacate possession of her body as other higher-ranking entities took turns using it as their instrument. During those times that Olcott believed such transference was in operation, an explanation was needed to account for the diminution of Blavatsky's normally dominant personality. The reassurance that she "had gone off on other occult business that she could transact in her astral body"<sup>16</sup> was accepted at face value, reaffirming belief that Blavatsky herself was yet an important hierarchal operative, even when relinquishing her body to others. The assumption though seems to contradict his statement that she was in wilful control of the phenomena occurring during the production of *Isis Unveiled*. Even when Olcott became attuned to the nuances of the different personality types that appeared to possess her body, he still assumed he was conversing with independent highly evolved separate intelligences. The manner of his

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

conversational encounters with each of the alter egos is treated very casually and mundanely, without the slightest doubt that he might not be talking to the distinctive beings he was conditioned to expect. It simply never crossed his mind that the framework of interpretation enunciated by Blavatsky could be questioned. Hence, even in speaking to the alter egos about the “absent HPB,” he assumes an ulterior purpose to the bodily occupation. To the observer not sharing the same frame of interpretative reference, it would seem difficult to explain Olcott’s casual and unquestioning acceptance of, at the least, either the spontaneous manifestations of multiple personalities, or the sudden passivity of Blavatsky’s normally intense will and ego.

Blavatsky herself, in a letter to her sister, notes the phenomenon of split personality, dissociation, and possession.

Someone comes and envelops me as a misty cloud and all at once pushes me out of myself, and then I am not ‘I’ any more—Helena Petrovna Blavatsky—but someone else. Someone strong and powerful, born in a totally different region of the world: and as to myself it is almost as if I were asleep or lying by, not quite conscious, not in my own body but close by, held only by a thread which ties me to it. However, at times I see and hear everything quite clearly: I am perfectly conscious of what my body is saying and doing—or at least its new possessor. I even understand and remember it all so well that afterwards I can repeat it and even write down his words. At such a time I see awe and fear on the faces of Olcott and others and follow with interest the way in which he half-pityingly regards them out of my own eyes and teaches them with my physical tongue. Yet not with my mind but his own, which enwraps my brain like a cloud<sup>17</sup>

What is significant is that Blavatsky describes sensations of both cognisance and passivity. She feels that she is not really in wilful control of her bodily activities but it is the new occupant who initiates activity. However, although she feels a sense of detachment and remoteness, she still has full cognisance, lucidity, and is able to maintain memory. But she is completely passive, not able to assert her ego when traits of the ulterior personalities appear. The new dominating presence appears construed from elements drawn from memory, from imagination, from the depths of the psyche. The possessor is perceived as a strong and assertive male, with an exotic and mysterious background who appears accustomed to a leadership role. And while appearing to others as somewhat intimidating, he is a superior intellect who feels remote from lesser-

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

developed individuals. It is this other nexus of personality traits that is accredited with initiating actions and having access to privileged knowledge. Her own ego remains totally static and incapable of exerting will, helplessly passive as a spectator within her own body as the experience endures. Simply by her description, it would appear to an outside observer that a certain degree of subjective projection has contributed to the image of the possessing intelligence because it embodies similar traits attributed to the figure of her guardian Master, envisioned constantly since childhood. Her own interpretation, and that accepted by Olcott and other uncritical theosophists, was more straightforward and unequivocal. She was, through occult means, temporarily possessed by the controlling intelligence of a more elevated being, recognised as a member of the Brotherhood of Adepts.

Questions about Blavatsky's sources and technique of literary construction have polarised critics and supporters over the years. While she claimed to visualise passages in books by occult means, she also felt the need to legitimate her claims and theories by reference to a wide spectrum of authoritative sources. On the one hand, for supporters and sympathisers, the confirmation of the role of the Masters as active contributors via occult techniques provided the substantive material a unique quotient of supernatural credibility. Yet, to gain widespread public acquiescence, a sound argument had to be presented which supported theosophical principles while reasonably showing the weaknesses of established mainstream traditions. Thus, emulating accepted and respected scholarly methods by using supporting documentation and verifiable citations of recognised authorities, was a logical procedural strategy.

Blavatsky inadvertently sent a mixed message however. Knowledge was allegedly acquired via occult means, but this information could not be presented solely on that authority and yet publicly be considered reputable. So it was necessary to find supportive sources and show the connection between what could be discerned by occult methods, and what had already been revealed and documented by others throughout history. So the presentation of what was already presumed to be verifiable through supersensory investigation had to be filtered through the lens of multiple often oblique and obscure texts.

And by undertaking the work (or appearing to do so) of massive and thorough



scholarly erudition, the hope was that that serious attention would be paid to the new ideational system. So input purportedly derived from supersensory cognition, dissociated states, automatic entranced writings, the impressions provided through the occult auspices of the Masters, the unique esoteric decoding of symbolism etc., required the admixture of supportive materials considered reputable in mainstream traditional schools of thought. To gain the appearance of a legitimately reasonable option for the public at large, selective scientific, scholarly, philosophical, theological quotes, citations, references, allusions were necessary. And to further try and impress the sceptic or cynic, *Isis Unveiled* was presented with the hope that massiveness and eclecticism would be equated with soundness of argument and proof of truth.

In 1891 an article written by William Emmette Coleman called *Unveiling of Isis Unveiled* was published in a small spiritualist magazine, *The Golden Way*. Coleman, a critic of theosophy and Blavatsky, claimed that she conducted acts of plagiarism on a large scale. Blavatsky answered in her last article, *My Books*, written eleven days before she died. She responded by claiming that her command of English was inferior when the book was written; that she was unschooled and unaware of proper scholarship methods; that she was inexperienced in writing English; that her knowledge of literary rules was minimal; and that she started the project without a clear idea of what it would become. She claimed that there were communicative and technical problems between her, Olcott, and editor Professor Wilder as the book took its final form. Coleman though issued a more succinct critique in 1895 entitled *The Sources of Madame Blavatsky's Writings*, first appearing as an appendix to *A Modern Priestess of Isis* by Vsevolod Sergyeevich Solovyoff, a former friend of Blavatsky turned critic.

The theme of Coleman's critique was that Madame Blavatsky tried to allude to a greater scholarly erudition than she possessed by referring to authors and materials that she did not in fact directly have access to. He claims that she copied two thousand passages from other books without giving credit, and that a nucleus of about a hundred books that were in her possession were used to imply familiarity with thirteen hundred more, and used as sources for many unaccredited quotes and citations. He also claims that this was the procedure used for all her books, with the intent being to suggest greater scholarship than she actually possessed.

By this means many readers of *Isis*, and subsequently those of her *Secret Doctrine* and *Theosophical Glossary*, have been misled into thinking Madame Blavatsky an enormous reader, possessed of vast erudition; while the fact is her reading was very limited, and her ignorance was profound in all branches of knowledge.<sup>18</sup>

Coleman lists the sources he feels Blavatsky was most indebted to and the number of times she drew from them. The most came from the works of Dunlap, Ennemoser, Salverte, Des Mousseaux, Jacolliot, Mackenzie, Hone, Cory, and Howitt. Coleman however was a spiritualist, and an avowed hater of Blavatsky for her critique of spiritualism. He saw theosophy as an erroneous distortion, and sought to discredit the movement and Blavatsky's credibility by demeaning her techniques of assimilation and composition. However, debate about what Coleman's charges in fact means has persisted.

What was important for him was that H.P.B. be discredited, and his charge of plagiarism was but the latest in a string of weapons that had been so far ineffective. Ironically, all his charge amounts to is that she read at least a hundred scholarly works, massive tomes rivalling her first book in size and content, most now hard to obtain, some still untranslated into English. She then supposedly assembled over 2,000 quotations (crediting their original sources) from these books, which were, as Coleman describes them, "quotations from and summaries of the writings of other authors." She did this in such a way that not even he could assail her arguments but merely protested against her means of presentation.<sup>19</sup>

It appears that Blavatsky, may have embarked upon the creative literary process while enduring any number of induced or involuntary shifts in states of consciousness. But cognisant of the persuasive value of a reputable presentation, proceeded (with the help of others) by assembling a corpus of supporting materials to bolster the prestige of the book. How much of her idiosyncratic method was intended to suggest a greater degree of scholarship cannot be ascertained. And it appears that on particular points other collaborators brought up the need for further amplification or detail, though she took responsibility for incorporating data and determining the lines of argumentation.

It seems a common sense assumption that she would have wanted to associate her product with the most respected authorities in the effort to make the theosophical option appear attractive and substantial. The meticulous crafting of its shape, the constant

---

<sup>18</sup> William Emmette Coleman, *The Source of Madame Blavatsky's Writings*, retrieved from Blavatsky Archives, 2001, <<http://www.blavatskyarchives.com/colemansources1895.htm>>. (Accessed July 14, 2002).

<sup>19</sup> Gomes, op. cit., pp. 154-155.

revisions, physical cutting and pasting of sentences, reorganization of topics and so on contrast with Blavatsky's claims of a seamless supernaturally guided dictation process. It would seem that the primary intention was to produce an intellectually impressive and appealing book, with the end results justifying the means of production. However, it also seems likely that Blavatsky simply was following a method of citation and reference that appeared to be a useful and legitimate way of conveying a positive impression for ideas and beliefs she felt demanded full public consideration.

One of the motives of the undertaking was to draw attention to neglected, obscure, exotic schools of esoteric thought, so concealment of sources would seem to be a counterproductive approach. What Coleman's dissection does do is reveal that Blavatsky operated with a limited number of resources and materials that were used to suggest even greater erudition. It would seem that to Blavatsky, this was not a major point, because she felt that she had experiential confirmation of her major claims and that her training and apprenticeship in esoteric circles provided supporting validation. Appearances of scholarly erudition were meant for public consumption, as well as for legitimately provoking renewed interest in obscure and discredited forms of speculation. And yet, by boasting to her acquaintances of effortless access to the psychic version of those books, she still tried to glamorise and romanticise the creative process. It seems more plausible to assume that those core hundred books provided most of the secondary references, which were integrated into her exposition and used to support her own thematic claims and arguments, already ruminated upon and believed authenticated by experience prior to this literary enterprise.

### **7.3.2 *Isis Unveiled* -Deconstructive and Reconstructive Objectives - Challenges to Religion and Science and the Legitimation of the Esoteric Perspective**

The dominant theme running through *Isis Unveiled* was that the ideational status quo found in mainstream Western culture was unsatisfactory. That it presented a misleading and inauthentic vision of reality while intentionally in some cases, and inadvertently in others, denying or distorting the more legitimate and revolutionary truths of the esoteric orientation. Blavatsky singles out two dominant authoritative institutions, the Christian Church (particularly, Catholicism) and science (specifically, the supporters

of materialism) of being guilty of perpetuating inaccurate and demeaning worldviews. And in contrast, she tries to rehabilitate a worldview based on neglected or misrepresented occult and mystic traditions, as well as a more properly defined acknowledgment of spiritualist phenomena. The confident willingness to challenge conventional assumptions is sounded in a tone of argumentative self-righteousness in the preface to volume one, where an uncompromising commitment to rehabilitate the intrinsic truth of ancient esoteric sources is posited against entrenched popular prejudice, scientific misconception, and religious hypocrisy.

Blavatsky immediately indicates a personal experiential base of authority for her discourse, through her “intimate acquaintance with Eastern adepts and study of their science.”<sup>20</sup> Establishing this credential at the outset will indicate throughout the work that her expertise and authority extend beyond what may appear in written form. In fact, throughout the book, she makes reference to being allowed to only reveal selected and limited portions of the occult compendium of knowledge, even that purposely kept enigmatic and symbolic. Hence, even what may appear confusing and unconvincing is embedded with hints of a greater meaning, which Blavatsky has indicated she possesses. The reader, from the very first line of the preface, is therefore made aware that the author claims a unique and privileged status, and that her book cannot be judged by familiar criteria alone. Allowance must be made for the possibility that the science of the “Eastern adepts” is a source of superior authoritative knowledge.

As well, the justification of a self-righteous critique of established institutions is confirmed by belief that this alternative ideational option is “right” while the others are essentially “wrong.” Blavatsky confidently and earnestly feels that she is presenting and defending “the Truth.” Even if it may not be easily accessible and must be sought “wherever it may be found,” those convinced of its legitimacy must be brave and determined, and willing to work to change popular opinion. The willingness to confront the majority position is supported by assurance that the perennial wisdom of the esoteric tradition is indeed more accurate and superior than represented by unenlightened contemporary authorities.

---

<sup>20</sup> H.P. Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled*, retrieved from Theosophical University Press Online, 1877, <<http://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/isis/iu1-00in.htm#preface>>. (Accessed July 11, 2002).

Blavatsky tries to give assurance that she undertook the project objectively and impartially, without prejudice. At the same time, she is adamant and determined to aggressively challenge where she feels justified, showing no patience for established mainstream positions. Those would respectively encompass scientific and religious orthodoxies felt to be antithetical to the objective of discerning pure truth. Her critique thus is motivated by desire for objectivity. As well, she demands retroactive validation, and credit for the truth ignored by majority worldviews, with proper acknowledgment of previously derided or dismissed minority cognitive traditions. With these objectives then, she feels that her deconstruction is warranted, but that it is selective and specific, and ultimately intended to rehabilitate a neglected source of spiritual wisdom.

### **7.3.3 *Isis Unveiled* – An Overview of Thematic Contents and Points of Emphasis**

An outline of the contents of the book gives an indication of the way entrenched worldviews were critiqued as well as the fundamentals of an alternative spiritually grounded occult reconstruction. The subtitle is instructive, “A MASTER-KEY TO THE MYSTERIES OF ANCIENT AND MODERN SCIENCE AND THEOLOGY.”<sup>21</sup> Reference to this “master-key” is threaded throughout her writings and is a crucial pillar of her systematic exposition. This useful tool provided the justification for how she interpreted all pertinent material, and the basis for associating diverse items within what she feels is a consistent and unified syncretism. In fact, when looked at in application, the master key is essentially Blavatsky’s particular way decoding symbols and of presenting and interpreting data. It is based upon her understanding of occult, religious, philosophical, scientific sources. And though claiming to justifiably be a nineteenth century update of the esoteric wisdom tradition that has spanned ages and civilisations, it is eccentric and inconsistent. Blavatsky presumes that she is able to explicate the “real truth” of occult and mystical signification symbolically hidden in the output of such diverse schools as ancient Egyptian mythology, Neoplatonic philosophy, Hermetic texts, Vedanta philosophy, and many other allegedly esoteric sources. For her purposes, disparities and inconsistencies, and the influences of unique historical and cultural contexts were considered unessential and exoteric factors, distracting from the deeper

esoteric meanings that were always felt to be fully harmonious and congruent. She also reiterated that what may appear to be nonsensical or erroneous in esoteric materials may have been intentionally crafted that way to insure secrecy and confuse the profane from meddling in sacred matters. Madame Blavatsky called such procedures “blinds,” and admits to using this approach herself at times to safeguard private information. For those, like her, initiated into the elite minority of properly qualified symbolic decoders, access to the master key allowed the most innocuous of statements or events to be classified as esoterically relevant. But those who do not have the proper frame of interpretative reference are considered potentially dangerous because they spread false information and continually degrade what, properly understood, is vital spiritual knowledge. In *Isis Unveiled*, the tone is aggressively confrontational when challenging those felt to be most responsible for the misconstruing of esoteric knowledge. Her major targets of criticism are continually singled out and held accountable for supporting the exoteric worldviews felt to be the unsatisfactory repercussions of this misplaced orientation. Christianity and science are charged with much of this blame, particularly, Catholicism and materialism.

Dissatisfaction with the options offered by the dominant worldviews initiated a search for a more feasible alternative. She admits that her own personal objective was a personal religious quest, which extended beyond the boundaries of contemporary Western authoritative tradition. Intent on grappling with questions about the nature of God, the human spirit, and immortality, and rejecting traditional Western options, she sought practical as well as theoretical solutions, seeking an experiential foundation that would provide personal conviction and assurance.

It was while most anxious to solve these perplexing problems that we came into contact with certain men, endowed with such mysterious powers and such profound knowledge that we may truly designate them as the sages of the Orient. To their instructions we lent a ready ear. They showed us that by combining science with religion, the existence of God and immortality of man's spirit may be demonstrated like a problem of Euclid. For the first time we received the assurance that the Oriental philosophy has room for no other faith than an absolute and immovable faith in the omnipotence of man's own immortal self. We were taught that this omnipotence comes from the kinship of man's spirit with the Universal Soul—God!<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., <<http://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/isis/iu1-00in.htm#contents>>.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

The praise of such extraordinarily qualified and competent “sages of the Orient” suggests that they hold authoritative status. Their instruction is presented as a fusion of science and religion, by which the deepest and most baffling questions of mankind are affirmatively answered and decisively demonstrated. “The Existence of God and immortality of man’s spirit” are no longer enigmas, obscured through misrepresentation or misunderstanding, but objectively demonstrable like a mathematical formula. And so, a unique opportunity to promote a verifiable mystical equation is presented in the “Oriental philosophy.” With a confident sense of assured belief, and implicit trust in the superior knowledge of her mentors the Oriental sages, Blavatsky felt competent in undertaking a comparison of contemporary positions with that of the occult/Oriental tradition.

In the first volume, science was the target. The volume was sarcastically entitled “*THE ‘INFALLIBILITY’ OF MODERN SCIENCE.*” Themes included her interpretation of the history of scientific inquiry and its magical basis; the understanding of natural forces and energies in light of their psychic foundations; explanations of phenomena associated with spiritualism and occultism; discussion of subtler classes of beings associated with phenomena and processes of nature; the inner constitution of man; the mechanics of marvellous occurrences; the differing approaches of modern Western science from that of ancient non-Western cultures; the superiority of ancient Egyptian and Indian approaches; and similar topics.

The thrust of this volume is that much of what has been considered superstition or been dismissed as unscientific or unworthy of attention in fact does deserve reconsideration from a more enlightened perspective. And when considered from the broader occult orientation, a much more profound understanding of the operations of the universe and of the potential of human experience will be effected. Blavatsky tries to rehabilitate the worthiness and relevance of magic, old mythologies, the Kabala, the Vedas, the thoughts of Egyptian Hierophants, Buddhist thinkers, ancient philosophers, alchemists, astrologers, mystics, and other discredited or misconstrued traditions and individuals. The distinction between esoteric and exoteric perspectives was also a major point that she was intent on establishing. The exoteric mode served conventional social purposes and conformed to the general worldview of the culture. The esoteric or “arcane”

perspective was a more limited, secretive, and non-conformist way of interpreting reality, primarily supporting mystical beliefs and insights. Blavatsky's interpretation of history is basically guided by this approach, allowing her to use or infer esoteric meanings where she feels that they are required. For instance, she claims that many ancient philosophers, particularly Pythagoras, Plato, and his later followers were also initiates in the mystery schools and cognisant of esoteric content and techniques.

The speculations of these philosophers upon matter were open to public criticism: but their teachings in regard to spiritual things were profoundly esoteric. Being thus sworn to secrecy and religious silence upon abstruse subjects involving the relations of spirit and matter, they rivalled each other in their ingenious methods for concealing their real opinions.<sup>23</sup>

This belief that "ingenious methods for concealing their real opinions" was a common practice amongst those she feels represented this tradition marks much of her thought. She sees a secret, carefully concealed minority tradition that maintains continuity throughout the ages, and a less informed, less spiritually sensitised majority who can't arrive at the fullest understanding. And, according to her speculation, the procedure of concealment was approached as a competition or personal challenge, as each esoteric expert apparently spent significant time and effort thinking of "ingenious methods for concealing their real opinions." Blavatsky also surmises that much subsequent scientific confusion comes from not recognising the esoteric option and stubbornly dismissing its possibilities.

One of the principles she tries to support is that magic is a legitimate and natural operative force in the universe. Much of what science is trying to understand would be more effectively accomplished if allowing for even the hypothetical plausibility of such a premise. The concept of a gradationally extensive multidimensional universe with a wider spectrum of powers and phenomena than conventionally understood was a major point of emphasis. And the nature of man likewise was believed to include principles and functions belonging to more subtle levels of existence but dramatically debilitated because of the restrictive influences of the physical body and the earthly plane of existence. Blavatsky ranges far and wide providing examples that she feels support her contentions. She explores such conventionally marginal subjects as the oddities of nature,

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., <<http://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/isis/iu1-01.htm>>.



enigmas of myths, the secrets of snake charming, rites of ancient mysteries, witchcraft trials, vampirism, psycho-somatic examples, spiritualist phenomena, and so on.

Ultimately, Blavatsky admits that her objective of rehabilitating the materials supporting this alternative esoteric tradition was to stimulate new interest in the subject matter of esotericism, and to gain a more respectful appreciation of the wisdom embedded in ancient and obscure texts and schools.

The whole of the present work is a protest against such a loose way of judging the ancients. To be thoroughly competent to criticise their ideas, and assure one's self whether their ideas were distinct and "appropriate to the facts," one must have sifted these ideas to the very bottom. It is idle to repeat that which we have frequently said, and that which every scholar ought to know; namely, that the quintessence of their knowledge was in the hands of the priests, who never wrote them, and in those of the "initiates" who, like Plato, *did not dare* write them.<sup>24</sup>

This protest against conventional ways of treating "the ancients" ultimately faces a dilemma. If "thoroughly competent" criticism can only be tolerated after their ideas were "sifted to the very bottom," then it assumes that full and comprehensive access to those ideas is possible. However, this seems to be an intrinsic impossibility "which every scholar ought to know." Quite simply, access is virtually impossible through conventional means. If the quintessence of their knowledge was in the hands of the priests, who never wrote them, and in those of the "initiates who, like Plato, *did not dare* write them," then how can judicious evaluation occur? If the esoteric meanings are unwritten, hidden, inaccessible, or incomprehensible without the proper master key, then it becomes a matter of faith accepting what that master key may reveal.

Even where common themes and patterns found in different cultural sources may be identified in broad outline, often the specific details and nuances of meaning are less than perfectly equable. The very real differences and subtleties pertaining to local context and environment are usually treated as superficial, classified as "exoteric," and therefore of minimal concern. Blavatsky is unconcerned with the historical and social details or their determining influences and ramifications. She is fixated on metaphysical concerns. And yet her version of esoteric interpretation is presented as merely a very limited revelation, with more profound mysteries still being guarded by the Brotherhood of Adepts for the protection of unqualified and unreceptive humankind. What knowledge

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., <<http://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/isis/iu1-13.htm>>.

that was revealed was always qualified as but a “partial glimpse” beneath the veil of Isis. The hint of veil after veil or ever deepening mystery was often used in Blavatsky’s rhetoric.

But even the incomplete sketch in *Isis Unveiled* was alluded to as less than straightforward. Blavatsky notes that initiates who encode the messages have the choice of several optional symbolic keys by which to operate, and are constantly vigilant about maintaining the tradition of secrecy. She stresses that historically only a very small minority of dedicated and experienced sages have been privy to the deeper meanings and solemn truths. So accepting her logic, it would follow that she thought herself a qualified expounder of privileged wisdom, and thus legitimately entitled to use whatever form of concealment to insure only the desired quotient of wisdom be accessible to the properly receptive reader. So some readers may discern more subtle layers of meaning than others, although even the surface reading will still be elucidative on the major points.

The second volume is also scathingly subtitled “*THE ‘INFALLIBILITY’ OF MODERN RELIGION.*” The Christian Church is targeted as an institution that has consistently and methodically repressed and punished alternative forms of spiritual seeking and expression. And, in the process, has seriously misrepresented and demeaned the content of other alternative traditions and the esoteric strains found embedded within its own history.

An analysis of religious beliefs in general, this volume is in particular directed against theological Christianity, the chief opponent of free thought. It contains not one word against the pure teachings of Jesus, but unsparingly denounces their debasement into pernicious ecclesiastical systems that are ruinous to man’s faith in his immortality and his God, and subversive of all moral restraint.

We cast our gauntlet at the dogmatic theologians who would enslave both history and science; and especially at the Vatican, whose despotic pretensions have become hateful to the greater portion of enlightened Christendom. The clergy apart, none but the logician, the investigator, the dauntless explorer should meddle with books like this. Such delvers after truth have the courage of their opinions.<sup>25</sup>

The teachings of Jesus, considered to be the moral foundation of Christianity, are spared from her wrath, but not the dogmatic doctrinal structure institutionally sanctified and propagated by the Church. One of her criticisms is that “debasement into pernicious

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., <<http://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/isis/iu2-00-c.htm>>.

ecclesiastical systems” is detrimental to authentic religious sentiment. Not only is it antithetical of free and open thought, but also it is considered subversive and discouraging, leading to abandonment of moral restraint as well loss of faith in belief in God and immortality. In her interpretation of history, the Vatican especially is seen as a negative, anti-progressive force, animated by “despotic pretensions.” And, spoken with irony, those who lack independence of thought are advised to refrain from reading books like hers that undoubtedly will raise questions about their own fundamental assumptions..

The themes in the second volume include a challenge to ecclesiastical authority; accusations of crimes and oppression committed by the Church; the comparative superiority of “heathen” positions; the divisiveness and non-uniformity of early Christianity; the comparisons between Oriental and Biblical cosmogonies; an interpretation of the Kabala; Christian distortions of Buddhist esoteric beliefs; evidence of esoteric tendencies in early Christianity; the connection between Masonry and the Jesuits; comparisons of the Vedas and the Bible; the origins of the myth of the devil; and an evaluation of Christianity in light of Buddhism.

Blavatsky feels that both the Catholic and Protestant Churches, for their own reasons, are opposed to admitting that there is legitimacy in phenomena traditionally classified as miraculous and that have been appearing in contemporary times within the spiritualist environment. The Catholic Church denies the credibility of principles that it has historically repressed, distorted or condemned. The Protestant Church is vociferously critical of the claims of spiritualism, because admittance of the miraculous in any unsanctioned form would compromise its integrity. Blavatsky makes it a major objective to show that much of what is shunned, derided, denied in Christian orthodox mainstream traditions did in fact have historical roots or associations within that ideational stream, and that those Christian manifestations, references, symbols, doctrines, are equivalent to what is found in pagan, ancient and Eastern thought. Only through a massive, concerted, and comprehensive effort on the part of the Church have those roots and associations been excised or transformed, forcibly dissociated from their authentic meanings and origins. Her accusations of intentional fraud, persecution, conspiracy, wilful and intense hatred and fear are made manifest on almost every page. And she proposes an alternative approach that will rehabilitate what has been deligitimised.

... every Christian dogma has its origin in a heathen rite, ... Besides, we propose to examine these facts from a different and perhaps rather novel point of view: that of the old philosophies as esoterically understood. These we have barely glanced at in our first volume. We will use them as the standard by which to compare Christian dogmas and miracles with the doctrines and phenomena of ancient magic, and the modern "New Dispensation," as Spiritualism is called by its votaries.<sup>26</sup>

Again, Madame Blavatsky trusts that her "novel point of view" is fully justifiable, and an accurate way of presenting objective truth. The "old philosophies as esoterically understood" once more require trust and faith in the trustworthiness of her interpretative method. Esoteric understanding was in fact her particular method of deconstructing symbolic data, which was presumably endorsed by the Masters and taught to their students. The intended undertaking of comparing Christian "dogmas and miracles" with magical and spiritualist doctrines and phenomena requires conviction that her frame of reference (that taught by Oriental sages and discerned in discredited and obscure sources), provides a more conceivable and enlightening set of explanations.

Blavatsky sums up the theoretical implications of *Isis Unveiled* by listing ten major points emphasised in the work. Firstly, that there is no such thing as a miracle, since all that occurs does so as a result of natural law. Next, she states that nature is divided into three components. A visible objective side, a more subtle confluence of energies and forces, and an abiding spiritual dimension. The third point is that man too has a threefold nature. The physical body, the astral body or soul, and an enduring transcendent spirit. Then she claims that magic, when studied as a science, is the true way of understanding the forces of nature. And that learning to control those powers by the individual is an art, requiring proper training and discipline. Next, that esoteric or arcane knowledge may be used beneficially and called magic, but if used selfishly is sorcery. The sixth point is the difference between mediumship, which is passive, and adeptship, which exhibits complete wilful control and mastery of supersensory powers. Next is her claim that the astral light records all temporal events, past, present and future, and that the skilled adept may be able to read that record. Following comes the claim that each of the separate human races has different propensities towards development of psychic skills. Her ninth point is that one of the conscious magical skills of the adept is intentional

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., <<http://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/isis/iu2-01.htm>>.

withdrawal of consciousness to the astral body. The final major point is that a thorough practical knowledge of magnetism and electricity is needed to fully understand and properly apply magical skills.

*Isis Unveiled* was an unexpected success, quickly selling out its first edition of a thousand copies, and eliciting both favourable and critical reaction. It became the first major authoritative theosophical compendium, explicitly proposing an alternative esoteric reading of history and the symbolic interpretation of much cultural data. This esoteric approach attempted to establish that a common origin of primeval transcendent wisdom was instituted by superior spiritual beings at the dawn of human incarnation during this global cycle. And that this sacred knowledge was transmitted and embedded within ancient religious traditions and other cultural forms, but only cognisable in its truest sense by morally qualified elite specialists fluent with the occult and mystical subject matter that was believed to be symbolically encoded. It may perhaps be fair to say that the impression that *Isis Unveiled* suggested to the reader was that whatever hinted at a greater, more mysterious, and spiritually satisfying reality than represented in conventional worldviews was eagerly (and perhaps indiscriminately) incorporated into the framework of the emerging alternative orientation. Thus, in the effort to show the limitations of the dogmatic, rationalist, and materialist perspectives, any piece of information apparently substantiating the credibility of abnormal, unusual, inexplicable experiences or occurrences was incorporated into the theosophical challenge. Everything that seemed to justify the premises of an esoteric perspective in any way possible was blended into the argumentative mix, bolstering a bold and aggressive challenge to orthodoxies in Western religious and scientific traditions. But since many of the points of contention were ultimately irresolvable, being matters of opinion and interpretation, the impact of the book was to stimulate debate and reconsideration of ideas commonly considered unworthy of serious attention. *Isis Unveiled* served to bring many disputable and disreputable issues and practices to the forefront, and treat them with dignity and respect. For theosophical purposes, it provided Blavatsky with a platform from which her vision was communicable in a more comprehensive manner than before. By presenting the rudiments of a coherent worldview, she hoped to make a convincing argument for adopting that option rather than remaining comfortably within the traditions she was

verbally combating. However, although a major objective was the attacking of Christian and scientific premises, the presentation of the main principles and doctrines of the theosophical worldview was not yet fully fleshed out in an integrated, comprehensive, or systematically enunciated coherent whole.

#### **7.4.1 *The Secret Doctrine* – Its Esteemed Status as Blavatsky’s Magnum Opus**

It took eleven more years and the publication of *The Secret Doctrine* in 1888 before the theosophical worldview was presented to the public in the form of a self-contained and systematic exposition. From the orthodox theosophical position, the embarkation on a fuller and more explicitly defined worldview exposition was seen as a strategic step, needed to insure consolidation of support from those who were sympathetic to the vision presented in *Isis Unveiled*, but wanted a more thorough and detailed articulation of the ideational system.<sup>27</sup>

When *The Secret Doctrine* is mentioned virtually anywhere theosophical sympathies lie, it is invariably praised as a significant monument in the history of human thought, a dramatic and revolutionary framework for interpreting the nature of reality. And Madame Blavatsky is most often accorded utmost praise, respect, esteem, admiration for being able to access and assemble the knowledge, and present it in an engaging and captivating literary style. There is no doubt that *The Secret Doctrine* has usually been accorded the privileged status of being considered the most definitive, authoritative, and important expression of the theosophical vision. The book often is so closely associated with Blavatsky the person that its perusal has often evoked a sense of her mystique and commitment. And the inspirational and invigorating effect of this literary production for those finding the option most satisfying, plausible, and convincing is apparent in many of the statements made about *The Secret Doctrine*. Let us look at a few examples.

H.P.B.’s *magnum opus* is intended to present a wholly coherent outline of an ageless doctrine, a system of thought based upon occult facts and universal truths inherent in nature and which are as specific and definite as any mathematical proposition. The teachings of that system as a whole cannot be deduced from, or

---

<sup>27</sup>See for example, Kirby Van Mater, *The Writing of the Secret Doctrine*, retrieved from The Theosophical University Press Online, 1998, <<http://www.theosophy-nw.org/theosnw/theos/th-kvms.htm>>. (Accessed July 11, 2002).

found in, any of the known exoteric religious or philosophical schools of ancient or more recent times, although separate ideas and single tenets can be occasionally found, or at least hinted at, in the works of ancient writers, suggesting the existence of a parent doctrine carefully hidden from view.<sup>28</sup>

Here we see that *The Secret Doctrine* is recognised as more comprehensive, systematic, and expansive than *Isis Unveiled*, and an estimable and authoritative “*magnum opus*” of the theosophical worldview. The knowledge it conveys is felt to be an authentic derivation or extension of “an ageless doctrine,” with the content of that knowledge consisting of universal occult truths, and thus fully trustworthy and reliable. And yet, the historically familiar exoteric sources of knowledge do not provide the same depth of meaning, though sporadic references may sometimes be discerned. To the interested reader, this stupendous revelation is presented for consideration and evaluation.

Blavatsky’s book is thought to be unique, an organic synthesis of supersensory visionary experience and revelations of privileged knowledge. It is considered to be stimulating, challenging and provocative. In fact, the contents are felt to be so revolutionary and profound that it is assumed that they must have a special authoritative legitimacy.

Blavatsky’s explanation about being the specially qualified and selected messenger for the particular historical cycle would carry the imprint of truth because it satisfactorily provides the kind of emotionally reassuring conviction such knowledge would seem to demand. And therefore, any other possible hypothesis must be rejected as incomplete.

The *Secret Doctrine* sets forth what purports to be the root knowledge out of which all religion, philosophy, and science have grown. The sub-title—“The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy” reveals the daring aim and scope of the undertaking. It is an effort to present and align certain fundamental principles in such a way as to render possible a synthesis of all knowledge.<sup>29</sup>

In this observation, the same basic feelings are shared. It is believed that the knowledge expounded is a special expression of undisputable truth. Religion, philosophy, and science are recognised as distinct forms of knowledge, capable of being harmonized and blended into a more comprehensive total worldview. This potential goal of a

---

<sup>28</sup> Boris De Zirkoff, *The Sources of The Secret Doctrine*, in *H.P. Blavatsky and The Secret Doctrine*, op. cit., p. 8.

<sup>29</sup> Alvin Boyd Kuhn, *Theosophy: A Modern Revival of Ancient Wisdom*, op. cit., <<http://www.blavatskyarchives.com/kuhnthesecretdoctrine.htm>>.

“synthesis of all knowledge” is the bold aim of the undertaking, covering a broad scope of topics and concerns. Blavatsky’s intentions in pursuing the goal of a synthesis was to both confront existing dominant worldviews in the three critical categories of knowledge, deconstructing what she felt was misappropriate, as well as setting out the foundations for a reconstructed spiritually oriented alternative. This view of the book emerging as a special response to the urgent circumstances of a perceived spiritual crisis is noted here.

The *Secret Doctrine* was written for the Western world to stem the tide of abject materialism. No messenger made his appearance in glowing aura to impress the multitude and, if he had, he would probably have been completely ignored. Instead, we have a book designed to gain acceptance in the minds of thinking men for many long years to come. The form and content of the S.D. is such that the student is constantly referred to the thoughts and ideas of hundreds of authors, all of whom are generally tending in the same direction.<sup>30</sup>

From here we see that the book format was felt to be the most efficacious way of gaining attention. *The Secret Doctrine* was seen as a necessary tool intended to combat materialism. Using the literary form to present a comprehensive and logically consistent exposition of this alternative ideational orientation would have seemed the optimum way of facing the challenge. The emphasis is on a gradual, incremental conversion via reasoned comparison and reflection upon the principles so expounded. The synthetic and eclectic form of the book is valuable because it hints at and suggests parallels and similarities found in a multitude of sources. They may not display absolutely identical thoughts, but they are “generally tending in the same direction.”

#### **7.4.2 *The Secret Doctrine* – Compositional Mystique and *The Stanzas of Dzyan***

The methodology of Blavatsky’s authorship of *The Secret Doctrine* again takes on semi-mythical quality. This book was stated to not just be a straightforward treatise, compilation, or speculative product of the physical authoress. Major parts of its substance too were said to have been transmitted through supersensory and occult means from the Masters to Blavatsky<sup>31</sup>

Considerable portions thereof were dictated to her by one another Adept, not as an employer would dictate to his secretary, but by direct transference of ideas from

---

<sup>30</sup> Richard I. Robb, *Access to Great Ideas*, retrieved from *Theosophy Northwest*, 1975, <<http://www.theosophy-nw.org/theosnw/theos/th-sdref.htm>>. (Accessed July 14, 2002).

<sup>31</sup> See Charles J. Ryan, *H.P. Blavatsky and the Theosophical Movement*, op. cit., chapter 16.



one mind to another in the condition of *tulku*. Other portions are descriptions by H.P.B. of what her trained spiritual consciousness actually saw in the akashic records marshalled before it. These incredible records were either evoked by her own powerful will or unfolded under the superior will of the Adepts, in those cases where she was unable to do it herself. Still other portions of the manuscript were precipitated by one or another of the Initiates she was working under, and worked over by her, edited, rearranged and incorporated into her work.<sup>32</sup>

So, as with *Isis Unveiled*, theosophical loyalists believed that the core of the newly construed magnum opus was supernaturally legitimated and sanctioned.

During the period when the *Secret Doctrine* was being written, Madame Blavatsky's chronic health problems worsened. At one stage during a medical crisis, her very survival was in doubt. Her subsequent dramatic recovery was quickly turned into another element of the personal myth that perpetuated her legendary status. She explained her quick return to better health as the work of the Masters, who gave her the option of relinquishing her physical existence and gaining spiritual respite, or else continuing to live so that *The Secret Doctrine* might be completed and her obligations of service fulfilled. The narration of her story by others added to the mystique and supernatural legitimation of the book as an especially necessary and intended theosophical statement. The following words reflect this outlook.

... ill health could not break her spirit, and she fought on to complete her work—no matter how severe were her pains, so long as it was possible. However, it seemed as if even her indomitable will would have to yield at last, for her complication of diseases finally reached another dangerous crisis. In the spring of 1887, while at Ostend, the doctors gave her up, and she sank into unconsciousness. But her work was not completed, and again the Master intervened and she was enabled to use that worn-out body for another four years. Awakening out of what seemed her last sleep, she said: “Countess, come here. . . . Master has been here; He gave me my choice, that I might die and be free if I would, or I might live and finish *The Secret Doctrine*. He told me how great would be my sufferings and what a terrible time I would have before me in England (for I am to go there); but when I thought of those students to whom I shall be permitted to teach a few things and of the Theosophical Society in general, to which I have already given my heart's blood, I accepted the sacrifice, and now to make it complete, fetch me some coffee and something to eat, and give me my tobacco box.” ... When viewed in retrospect, it is hardly too much to say that the situation at the time H.P.B. decided to make the sacrifice of going on to complete her work was a critical turning point for the welfare of humanity. The Adepts had chosen the one available messenger whose special endowments, such

---

<sup>32</sup> de Zirkoff, op. cit., p. 3.

as her sympathetic and penetrating knowledge of her fellowmen, her indomitable determination and her occult training, enabled them to write a saving clause of brotherhood in world affairs.<sup>33</sup>

This quasi-martyr complex was expressed often by Madame Blavatsky, who interpreted the disreputability accorded her and the complications of personal karma as necessary stages to be endured, fought through by willpower, and decisively conquered. In her personal role, Blavatsky was perceived to be “making the sacrifice,” as well acting for “the welfare of humanity.” And being allowed to “live and finish *The Secret Doctrine*” obviously heightened anticipation and the expected worth of the book, while reinforcing Blavatsky’s supernaturally sanctioned authoritarian role as messenger of the Masters.

The logistical difficulties of editing, collating, revising, organising the variety of written materials that she produced eventuated in having others help collaborate to prepare the final product. During this time, a select number of friends and associates contributed to the overall physical arrangement of *The Secret Doctrine*. The two most active participants were Bertram Keightly and his nephew Dr. Archibald Keightly, theosophists who financially supported Blavatsky on her relocation to London. They, along with Edward Douglass Fawcett provided much day-to-day editorial assistance.<sup>34</sup> As well, Blavatsky asked for consultation on various topics from others with specialised knowledge. The Keightly’s for instance were instrumental in proposing the topical structure by which the book was organised, with separate volumes suggested for cosmological, anthropological, historical, and practical themes.<sup>35</sup> Clearly then, the actual physical labour of literary organisation, editing, arrangement was not a solo effort, but a matter of Blavatsky supplying the content and depending on advice and creative input from others to properly shape and organise it.

The important new component in her presentation was the claim that she now would be commenting on a mysterious, ancient, and obscure sacred text called the *Stanzas of Dzyan*. Originally, this material was either considered, as Blavatsky proposed, a revelation of privileged and supernaturally sanctioned esoteric knowledge. Or else, as

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>34</sup> See Bertram Keightly, *Mr. Bertram Keightly’s Account of the Writing of the Secret Doctrine*, retrieved from The Blavatsky Archives Online, 2001, <<http://www.blavatskyarchives.com/keightleyb1893.htm>>. (Accessed July 13, 2002).

critics charged, a conglomeration of fraudulent plagiarised or invented material.<sup>36</sup> The explanation given by Blavatsky of a transmission from the spiritual hierarchy to an esoteric school in Tibet, or the assumption by critics of a purely fictional or plagiarised origin, have predominated for decades as the most viable explanations for the source of the *Stanzas of Dzyan*.

However, in 1975 H.J. Spierenburg ... identified the Books of Kiu-te as the Tibetan Buddhist Tantras—the correct transliteration of the Tibetan title is Gyud-sde, but 'Kiu-te' is a good approximation of the pronunciation. In 1981, another theosophical scholar, David Reigle, independently came to the same conclusion regarding the identity of the Books of Kiu-te.<sup>37</sup>

By tentatively locating the *Stanzas of Dzyan* within the Tibetan *Kanjur*, questions arise regarding the correlation between Blavatsky's exposition and commentaries and the purported source material. Though showing similarities in themes and subject matter, there apparently was not an exact duplication of known text material.

The Kâlachakra Tantra is the only Buddhist Tantra whose subject matter resembles the cosmogenesis and anthropogenesis of The Secret Doctrine. According to Reigle, 'Dzyan' is a Tibetan phonetic rendering of the Sanskrit jñâna (wisdom), the result of dhyâna (meditation), and 'Jñâna' is the title of the fifth and last section of the Kâlachakra Tantra. However, none of the stanzas that Blavatsky quotes from the Book of Dzyan has so far been located in the abridged Kâlachakra Tantra or in verses from the root Kâlachakra Tantra quoted in other Buddhist writings.<sup>38</sup>

Questions about how or when Madame Blavatsky may have come in contact with authentic esoteric Tibetan materials have not been definitively answered. To orthodox theosophists, her inflated biography suggests that she had both physical and occult access to Tibet, and had visited privileged and secret seats of learning by travel and in her astral body. Sceptics question whether she ever actually entered Tibet, or had opportunity to obtain the kinds of knowledge she claimed. Johnson suggests two possible means of acquisition of the knowledge that may have formed the basis of the *Stanzas of Dzyan*. He theorises that Das and Gyatso, whom he named as possible sources of her Mahatmas, may have been permitted to reveal some of the scriptures they took from Tibet to India.

---

<sup>35</sup> See Caldwell, op. cit., chapter 18

<sup>36</sup> See Meade, op. cit., p. 379.

<sup>37</sup> David Pratt, *The Book of Dzyan*, retrieved from Exploring Theosophy, 1998, <<http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/dp5/dzyan.htm>>. (Accessed July 15 2002).

Alternatively, he feels that another possible Master personage, Ranbir Singh, who had arranged for the translation of the *Books of Kiu-te* into Sanskrit, may therefore have provided the source by which Blavatsky familiarised herself with the information.<sup>39</sup>

Madame Blavatsky provided her own phraseology, sequencing, and interpretative commentary, using the *Stanzas of Dzyan* as a framework for discussion of her eclectic cosmological and anthropological theories. By crediting the source of the stanzas to the original transmission to humankind by the spiritual hierarchy, her presentation acquires more mythical persuasive allure and legitimating authority. Not only is she the chosen vehicle for communication and transmission of the message of the Masters, but also, her new primary written source is said to be imbued with sacred esoteric significance. Even if a legitimate derivation from a traditional Tibetan Buddhist school can be traced, the focus is not on the Buddhist religion per se. She draws from every possible source that she feels is pertinent, with the Tibetan Buddhist accreditation used as a legitimating factor, a starting position within which to conduct the systematic delineation of cosmological and anthropological theosophical principles.

### **7.4.3 *The Secret Doctrine* – An Overview of Thematic Contents and Points of Emphasis**

In the exposition of the work, Madame Blavatsky begins by noting the ground she wants to cover. In the preface she immediately states her intention

The aim of this work may be thus stated: to show that Nature is not "a fortuitous concurrence of atoms," and to assign to man his rightful place in the scheme of the Universe; to rescue from degradation the archaic truths which are the basis of all religions; and to uncover, to some extent, the fundamental unity from which they all spring; finally, to show that the occult side of Nature has never been approached by the Science of modern civilization.<sup>40</sup>

Her intention then is to rehabilitate the disputed and disreputable "occult side of Nature" and reveal that there is an underlying spiritual stratum that is primary and common to all religions. This can only be done by challenging the ensconced Western traditions that deny the primacy of esoteric spirituality. Her work however is not unique in its themes

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Johnson, op. cit., pp. 202-203.

<sup>40</sup> H.P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, retrieved from Theosophical University Press Online, 1888, <<http://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/sd/sd1-0-co.htm#preface>>. (Accessed July 15 2002).

and sentiment. It is a revised and reworked presentation of ideas and beliefs that have been expressed in many places over the history of the human race. Blavatsky claims that she is presenting an integrated and coherent synthesis of knowledge that has only been cognised as such by the very privileged and spiritually qualified few throughout history. What had been inaccessible to the public was now being somewhat revealed through her writings.<sup>41</sup>

Blavatsky anticipates a cynical and sceptical reception for her new primary source, the *Stanzas of Dzyan*, recognising that others will feel it is a purely fanciful fiction. However, she still is adamant in claiming its authoritative status, and in the integrity of the worldview symbolically embedded. In the Proem that follows the introduction, Blavatsky imaginatively sets forth the premise of the true cyclical evolutionary schemata by which universes and all varieties of life proceed. She uses a poetical narrative style to establish a mythical tone in the initial phase of her presentation, alluding to symbolically encoded deeper meanings capable of extrapolation by the properly attuned and trained esoteric specialist.

Setting forth the evolutionary theory of periodic cyclical manifestations in symbolic and metaphorical form, *The Secret Doctrine* methodically proceeds with discussion of the various cosmic elements, processes, and interrelationships in their manifold aspects. *The Stanzas of Dzyan* are next enunciated one by one, again in poetical, allusive, suggestive mythical form. And from there, Blavatsky engages in her commentaries and observations as they relate to the Stanzas.

The first volume, *Cosmogogenesis*,<sup>42</sup> is devoted to discussion of the processes and phenomena of the cosmos perceived as a multidimensional whole, in which the familiar natural universe is contained as a lower emanation generated by the power of the Absolute. The volume is divided into three main sections, each of which includes several chapters. In the first section, the topics of cosmic evolution; the differentiation of the One into the many; the unfolding of cyclical necessity; the orderly procession of the distinctive globes, rounds, and races; the nature of the presiding hierarchies; the composition of man's inner being; and so forth are discussed. Part II of the first volume

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> For the Cosmogogenesis portion, see H.P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, Theosophical University Press Online, 1888, <<http://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/sd/sd-hp.htm#pt1>>. (Accessed July 15, 2002).

concentrates on various facets of symbolism, including the various keys of interpretation needed to discern the meanings encoded in pictographic, linguistic, mythic, and other forms of representation. Part III of the first volume is devoted to showing the contrast between the scientific and the esoteric approach. Modern scientific procedure is critiqued and shown to be incapable of adequately accounting for all the mysterious phenomena and enigmas found in nature. Occult-grounded hypotheses are posited as being more accurate and revealing, but often incompletely understood and inaccurately represented by modern science.

In restating the major points of the first volume, Blavatsky concentrates on the themes she was most interested in pursuing. The first was the confirmation that the knowledge dealt with in *The Secret Doctrine* was only attainable and decipherable by those who were especially trained and spiritually qualified to unveil the deepest level of meaning embedded within the symbols and outer form.

The Secret Doctrine is the accumulated Wisdom of the Ages, and its cosmogony alone is the most stupendous and elaborate system: *e.g.*, even in the exotericism of the Puranas. But such is the mysterious power of Occult symbolism, that the facts which have actually occupied countless generations of initiated seers and prophets to marshal, to set down and explain, in the bewildering series of evolutionary progress, are all recorded on a few pages of geometrical signs and glyphs. The flashing gaze of those seers has penetrated into the very kernel of matter, and recorded the soul of things there, where an ordinary profane, however learned, would have perceived but the external work of form. But modern science believes not in the "soul of things," and hence will reject the whole system of ancient cosmogony. It is useless to say that the system in question is no fancy of one or several isolated individuals. That it is the uninterrupted record covering thousands of generations of Seers whose respective experiences were made to test and to verify the traditions passed orally by one early race to another, of the teachings of higher and exalted beings, who watched over the childhood of Humanity.<sup>43</sup>

The firm conviction that there is an unbridgeable gulf between that group of "exalted Seers," with their infallible insights and the "ordinary profane" who perceive "but the work of external form" is reiterated. However, these Seers are portrayed as energetic and eager technicians of the sacred, not content to merely transmit ideas of the past, but ever vigilant in continued research and refinement of ideas. And diligently active in providing independent evidence confirming the basics of the ancient wisdom. Blavatsky thus is trying to show that this "uninterrupted record covering thousands of generations"

deserves to be evaluated as a depository of objective knowledge, tested experientially in a way that would be condoned by scientific authority. If only it would accept the premise that nature was intrinsically spiritual as a working hypothesis.

The second point emphasised by Blavatsky was that there was but a single encompassing spiritual source from which all else emanates. The conception of an impersonal but subsuming and inclusive “homogeneous divine Substance-Principle”<sup>44</sup> from which manifest existence emerges and which is beyond categorisation itself, was a common mystical/Idealist philosophical theme. It has been non-the-less conceptualised and expressed in different ways through ideational systems such as the Upanishads, Vedanta, and esoteric Buddhist schools, and found in Western sources such as Neoplatonism, Gnosticism, Hermetic teachings, and various Idealist philosophical offshoots as well. It justifies the belief that the notion of substance is essentially an illusion that applies only in manifest existence, but reverts to status of a principle of latency when considered in abstraction apart from manifestation.

The third major point was to emphasise the invariability and inevitability of cyclical law and the spiritual basis of the universe. Again the difficulty of struggling with conceptual phrasing for mystical and abstract theories makes expression a bit laboured. Human intellect can only recognise the manifest phase of cosmic process, conceiving the universe once removed from its unconditioned and absolute mode. As the “veil” rather than the essence, as it were, which cannot be conceptually represented. One thing that is taken as a given though is the belief that the periodic cycles of involution and evolution, stasis and activity, are essential facets of the total cosmic whole.

The fourth point was that the phenomenal world of appearances was illusory. The dualistic theme continues, as the “temporary,” “ephemeral,” “evanescent ever-changing forms” of the conceivable universe is characterised as illusion, or “Maya.” In contrast, the changelessness and eternal immutability of the One remains perpetually constant and beyond verbal comprehension. Yet, on the plane of normal existence, the Universe seems to appear real enough, when perceived through the consciousness of its beings. However, ultimately all is Maya, and individuals “are as unreal as it is itself.”<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., <<http://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/sd/sd1-1-13.htm>>.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

Fifth, she stated that all entities maintain their own form of consciousness. Here, Blavatsky takes a radical pantheistic approach, attributing all “kingdoms” in the universe with delimited forms of consciousness proper to their own plane of perception. In searching for “noumenal essence” rather than surface appearances, she argues that universals are more substantive and enduring on an Ideal plane than “the particulars which existed only in name and human fancy.”<sup>46</sup> So here we have a slight foray into Platonic-Absolute Idealist thinking. What appears phenomenally is classified as mere “appearance” and is considered less substantive than what is determined through reason and logic.

The sixth point was that the universe operates via internal law rather than external causes, and is directed and guided by spiritual intelligences. With this line of reasoning, feeling, thought, and will are stated to be the primary causal agencies on the human microcosmic scale. And on the macrocosmic stage, the operative laws of the cosmos were initiated at more spiritualised stages of emanation, necessitating an “almost endless series of Hierarchies of sentient Beings.”<sup>47</sup> These other sentient orders are constantly active in enabling and implementing the “Karmic and Cosmic Laws” that provide structure and coherence on all the discrete planes of being.

The second volume of *The Secret Doctrine* is titled “Anthropogenesis,” and roughly takes the same form as the first volume, being divided into three sections with a number of separate chapters within each part.<sup>48</sup> The first section likewise describes and then comments on a number of specific stanzas. The focus now is more specifically on the subject of human evolution, treated from the occult perspective. The format of the second volume follows the plan of the first. It begins with some preliminary notes and then sets the outline for part one, also expressed in the idiom of symbolically encoded mythical stanzas. The discussion concentrates on an explication of the beginning of sentient life, with extensive and detailed speculation about the discrete phases of the evolutionary process. A major premise of Blavatsky’s evolutionary narrative was that ancient mythologies, religions, and folklore in fact refer to the existence of a

---

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> For the Anthropogenesis part, see H.P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, Theosophical University Press Online, 1888, <http://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/sd/sd-hp.htm#pt21>>. (Accessed July 15, 2002).



scientifically unconfirmed and contrary prehistory, extending through various phases of proto-human development, considered predecessors to the human race. Blavatsky describes the conditions in alleged former dominant “antediluvian” civilisations of Lemuria and Atlantis, as well as yet more distant precursor environments on the newly formed earth. Even pre-earthly cycles on the occult similitude of the moon are incorporated into her narrative. A plethora of purported explanations of the greatest enigmas of anthropology, archaeology and history are proffered as well. In most of these cases, Blavatsky proceeds by literally interpreting mythic and legendary materials as disguised historical fact, using her symbolic master key to support her speculation. Literary references and presumed geological clues to mythical beasts, giants, angels, fairies, lost civilisations, and the like are purported to be proof of an alternative esoteric historical record that confirms the outline of her narrative

The essentials of this line of thought are summed up in the three propositions she enunciated at the start of the second volume.

As regards the evolution of mankind, the Secret Doctrine postulates three new propositions, which stand in direct antagonism to modern science as well as to current religious dogmas: it teaches (*a*) the simultaneous evolution of seven human groups on seven different portions of our globe; (*b*) the birth of the *astral*, before the *physical* body: the former being a model for the latter; and (*c*) that man, in this Round, preceded every mammalian—the anthropoids included—in the animal kingdom...<sup>49</sup>

Blavatsky proposes a number of controversial theories pertaining to biological, social, historical and geographical development. The three propositions that are proffered are explicitly noted to “stand in direct antagonism” with both science and religion, and hence, represent a distinctive worldview. The contents of those propositions presuppose the validity of the type of evolutionary theory she was propounding, by which familiar, natural, and organic processes are subsumed within a vaster schema. The theory of seven simultaneous racially distinct evolutionary divisions is based on the belief that earthly evolution is but a stage in a much more extensive cosmic round, and that the entities incarnating in these distinctive races have common psychic, mental and bodily evolutionary characteristics and traits which distinguish each from the other. According to the sequence of emanations, the astral body is believed to have preceded and informed

the physical and to have been the main vehicle of consciousness prior to the earthly cycle. The evolutionary process works itself through more planes/dimensions than the merely physical through the duration of the macrocosmic cycle, with the successive ethereal levels and stages of this unfolding movement appearing progressively more spiritually infused. The notion that man preceded mammal likewise is based on belief that the evolutionary process is not just a matter of growth and development of bodily form, but that intelligence and spirit subsist prior to incarnation.

Besides enunciating her theories on purely conceptual terms, Blavatsky attacked the ideational status quo from a different platform. On the one hand, she availed herself of as much empirical data as she could reasonably manipulate for supportive purposes. But another key part of her methodology was a defence based on the trustworthiness of her symbolic interpretations of diverse streams of data. To support many of her theories, she stated that she was using the most authoritative and definitive method of symbolic interpretation, explicating the most accurate and succinct meanings of legends, stories, and myths from the accumulated resources found throughout the cultures of the world, past and present. Her supporting premise was that there were “seven keys” to the proper understanding of a primordial sacred symbolism, and that by applying those keys there would be no doubt that the most baffling enigmas and mysteries would be decisively deciphered. Blavatsky, although recognising that using this kind of unverifiable methodology would prove problematic, yet insisted upon its credibility and validity.<sup>50</sup>

The symmetry suggested by repeated usage of the number seven leads Blavatsky to believe that symbolic analysis takes place on seven possible levels, requiring the seven keys for appropriate interpretations. She also feels assured that with the mastery of the mystery language, science will follow the same interpretative path and confirm that the essentials of the primordial wisdom tradition are sound. Yet, applying this method as she felt justified, Blavatsky essentially interpreted a plethora of mythological and legendary materials in a strictly linear historical manner. Despite the insistence on the presence of multiple levels of symbolic meaning, *The Secret Doctrine* is often reductive, insisting that a common cosmological narrative underlies all traditional myths and folklore. This

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., <<http://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/sd/sd2-0-pn.htm>>.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., <<http://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/sd/sd1-2-02.htm>>.

attempt to find “the” meaning of such materials was not unique or original. Nor was the belief that a common universal impetus lay behind such cultural efforts. However, rather than discerning solar, phallic, animistic or other disguised primal root patterns, Blavatsky postulated a theory wherein myth was believed to be a method used by advanced spiritual beings of encoding the true story of the history and destiny of the human race. What was found veiled in ambiguity, or allusive and metaphorical in ancient traditions, was, with the help of Blavatsky’s interpretative keys, now given precise meaning. As well, the familiar interpretations found in religious institutions were dismissed as exoteric and intended to pacify the unenlightened. Only the few elite spiritual specialists of any time or place were felt qualified to transmit the esoteric perspective via symbolic representation.

Blavatsky’s approach to symbolic interpretation is crucial in understanding the way she justified her speculation. With the accumulation of massive amounts of diverse materials in support of her evolutionary theories, a common connecting link was needed to validate their inclusion. The way she justified using seemingly disparate and dubious materials was by claiming that there existed esoteric hidden meanings that weren’t discernible through exoteric readings. Only by application of the proper methodologies of interpretation would the “real” meaning be explicable. And when this approach was practiced, the underlying themes and details would provide another body of credible evidence in support of the evolutionary theories enunciated in *The Secret Doctrine*.

There is no purely *mythical* element in any of the ancient religious texts; but the mode of thought in which they were originally written has to be found out and closely adhered to during the process of interpretation. . . . How is it to be expected that the merely profane thinker, however great his erudition in *orthodox* symbolism, so to say—*i.e.*, in that symbolism which can never get out of the old grooves of Solar-myth and sexual-worship—shall penetrate into the arcana behind the veil. One who deals with the husk or shell of the dead letter, and devotes himself to the kaleidoscopic transformation of barren word-symbols, can never expect to get beyond the vagaries of modern mythologists.<sup>51</sup>

This view of symbolic interpretation reveals how Blavatsky felt justified in utilising seemingly discredited or irrelevant supportive data for her systematic exposition. She assumes initially that so-called exoteric readings of religious and cultural texts are

---

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., <<http://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/sd/sd2-1-19.htm>>.

fundamentally limited and incapable of revealing deeper hidden messages.<sup>52</sup> However, she feels that they in fact signify more than is apparent to the non-initiated. This would seem to indicate that she placed minimal importance on the possibility that they may possibly be primarily or entirely directed towards local, immediate, historically and socially determined priorities. In her view, there unequivocally always existed a secret hidden esoteric meaning which only the properly qualified and initiated elite could discern and deal with. And by extension, this would assume that in each culture and historical environment, representatives of this unbroken chain of the occult wisdom tradition were in deed represented, and capable of covertly wielding influence to assure that multiple levels of meaning were properly symbolised and encoded. The presumption that secret records were regularly attended to over the entire historic span, and could be deciphered by the properly trained initiate, also suggests that the same underlying message was constantly being perpetuated, and would be immediately cognisable despite cultural, historical, racial, or geographical variances.

Madame Blavatsky identifies seven layers of meaning that would be recoverable through the properly trained occult expert in esoteric symbolic decoding. However, only three levels of meaning are apparently available for possible access by current uninitiated humanity. The other planes transcend the average consciousness and cannot even be properly symbolised in linguistic terms. The three planes of thought that could be symbolically encrypted were the Realistic, Idealistic, and purely Divine or Spiritual. The procedure of actually encoding symbolic meanings in texts followed five possible methodologies. These apparently changed as preferences historically, and respectively were the “symbolical,” “emblematical,” “parabolic,” “hieroglyphical,” and “logogrammatical.” And, presumably, the adequately prepared symbolic decoder would be the only source of the most comprehensive interpretation, because only the initiated can presume to know the fullest truth. The “merely profane” erudite thinker or scholar is believed to be incapable of transcending the parameters of his own theoretical framework, unable to “penetrate into the arcane behind the veil.” Ultimately, the

---

<sup>52</sup> For a critique of the credibility of theosophical claims to represent an authentically esoteric perspective, see Rene Guenon, *East and West*, Ghent, New York: Perennial Wisdom Series, 1995, pp. 157 – 158. For explanation of Guenon’s rationale, see Mircea Eliade, *Occultism, Witchcraft and Cultural Fashions*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press Ltd., 1976, p.66.

definitive criterion is whether the interpreter of symbols is spiritually attuned, empathetic with the premises of occult philosophy, and properly trained in esoteric methodology. If he is qualified, then his interpretation will always be more authentic than those who only deal with “barren word-symbols” and the “husk or shell of the dead letter.” In other words, a personal spiritual commitment to the occult worldview always will be superior to academic, modern, or purely intellectual analysis, which is restrictive and limited to the “vagaries” of current theories and schools of thought.<sup>53</sup>

Throughout *The Secret Doctrine*, Blavatsky carefully collates an enormous quantity of what she feels are case examples confirming particular facets of her evolutionary schemata. As well as drawing from the available factual and hypothetical data base of ancient and modern philosophies and sciences, the majority of her supporting evidence comes in the form of religious, mythological, folkloric, fictional, speculative, imaginative, anecdotal materials. Interestingly, she states “there is no purely *mythical* element in any of the ancient religious texts.”<sup>54</sup> From her perspective, what passed as mythical in fact signified a more secretive, esoteric set of meanings. Thus every scrap of information deriving from past cultural sources was reinterpreted through the prism of her form of symbolic analysis and used to corroborate the premises of her system. Rather than “demythologise,” she in fact unintentionally “re-mythologised” much of her data to integrate it into her evolutionary narrative. By turning legendary and mythical materials into alleged occult “facts” and then reinstating them into her new synthesis via esoteric interpretation, they in a sense moved from one form of mythical status to another

Perhaps this can be characterised as a change from spontaneous naïve imaginative expression to a more sophisticated intellectual crafting of that very same data. *The Secret Doctrine*, then, essentially substitutes a new encompassing myth for the diverse elements found unconnected in extant mythical sources. Ironically, Blavatsky could not see that the integrated synthetic systematic worldview she presented as historical fact was essentially a restructured and expansive creation myth, a recitation of origins and a speculative overview of human purpose and destiny as understood within the parameters of that myth, expressed largely through the imaginative language of the *Stanzas of Dzyan* but

---

<sup>53</sup> For a critical view of the credibility of the symbolic method employed by Blavatsky in *The Secret Doctrine*, see Geoffrey Ashe, *The Ancient Wisdom*, London: McMillan Ltd. 1977, p. 27.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

then treated purely by intellectual exegesis. By maintaining that skeletal outline as the basis of her cosmological and anthropological narration, she in fact did utilise mythical form, but by extrapolating the kinds of intricate rational and empirical deductions felt justified via esoteric symbolic analysis, the vast majority of *The Secret Doctrine* is an exercise in clever arrangement of seemingly consonant thematic materials. In compiling supporting examples from a variety of different sources, Blavatsky mostly minimised or dismissed the actual historical and contextual associations pertaining to each datum as exoteric, and thus flawed or irrelevant. With charismatic authoritativeness, she was able to claim privileged insight or access to the definitive esoteric interpretations, so the views expounded in *The Secret Doctrine* were not assailable by those who could not claim that same qualifications and expertise.

All elements drawn from myth, legend, literature and other imaginative creations were accorded literal linear historical status somewhere within the broad schema. Even though the historical time frame of the worldview is enormous, encompassing astounding sets of complex interrelated cycles, globes, chains, planes of being, races, sub-races, kingdoms of nature, etc., the narrative still reads as a process of unfolding linear history. Planetary chains are occupied and abandoned, a variety of organic forms develop and evolve, races succeed each other, civilisations rise and fall, and so forth, in the staggering evolutionary pageant. The destiny of humanity was seen extending from the germinal state of the remotest past to the expectant fully evolved collective spiritual maturation of the distant future.

Working within this enormous cosmic scale, Blavatsky had to provide case examples to illustrate the credibility of her theories. Pure conjecture and hypotheses alone would not provide convincing assurance. So facts had to be arrayed to support the theories. And she thus had to draw her evidence wherever it could be found. Hindu and Buddhist cosmology, European fairy-tales, Hellenistic mystery-religions, alchemical treatises, fringe-scientific speculation and other materials were incorporated into the new mix. Using the justification of esoteric symbolic interpretation, much material categorised as imaginative in some form or other was reclaimed and relocated within the newly elaborated system. Though in fact she was consolidating the elements of a new myth, Blavatsky proceeded by using quasi-scientific references and attempts at logical

argumentation to support the speculation derived from the primary sources.

Once more we address only those who, doubting the general derivation of myths from "the contemplation of the visible workings of external nature" . . . think it, "less hard to believe that these wonderful stories of gods and demi-gods, of giants and dwarfs, of dragons and monsters of all descriptions, are transformations, than to believe them to be inventions." It is only such "transformations" in physical nature, as much as in the memory and conceptions of our present mankind, that the Secret Doctrine teaches. It confronts the purely speculative hypotheses of modern Science, based upon the experience and exact observations of barely a few centuries, with the unbroken tradition and records of its Sanctuaries; and brushing away that tissue of cobweb-like theories, spun in the darkness that covers a period of hardly a few millenniums back, and which Europeans call their "History," the Old Science says to us: Listen, now, to my version of the memoirs of Humanity. <sup>55</sup>

Motivated to convincingly present and defend a worldview that was thoroughly and absolutely grounded on mystical and occult spiritual principles, Madame Blavatsky carefully, methodically, and systematically crafted an intricate web of ideas, beliefs, claims, and assumptions, supported by her method of symbolic extrapolation applied to a wide range of materials. When she addresses "only those" who would rather believe that myths are inventions rather than "the contemplation of the visible workings of external nature," she reveals that she in fact does believe that there is an objective factual basis of myth. Her point of contention is that the conventional view of myth as "fictions" does not do justice to the subject matter. Rather, she feels that they refer to "transformations" which occurred in "physical nature." In some shape or other, whether distorted, rationalised, disguised, faintly recalled, myths are considered to be latent or vestigial elements of the collective unconscious, "as much as in the memory and conceptions of our present mankind." However, rather than deducing that psychological or cultural functions may be primary factors, Blavatsky instead concludes that they are more properly reflective of actual "transformations" witnessed in the physical world at some far distant past. This is the view of myth as understood esoterically and that "the Secret Doctrine teaches." Science, conversely, with "the experience and exact observations of barely a few centuries," is comparatively ill equipped to make authoritative claims. The dismissal of science as manifestly unfit to provide credible explanations is based on belief that its "purely speculative hypotheses" are not as trustworthy as a more

authoritative source of knowledge. The “Old Science” on the other hand, “with the unbroken tradition and records of its “Sanctuaries,” can confidently provide a more accurate and compelling narrative of the esoteric “version of the memoirs of Humanity.”

*The Secret Doctrine* then can be seen as an ambitious and bold attempt to rehabilitate ancient and obscure sources of information by reinterpreting their meanings in light of a more modern rendering of esoteric occult and spiritual ideas and theories. As well, the injection of selected elements of contemporary thought, such as evolution, progress, electro-magnetic discoveries, data from diverse fields of scholarship from archaeology to zoology and so on, were intended to give additional legitimacy to the main premises. The choice of separate cosmological and anthropological narrative structures, each first introduced by mythical phraseology from the *Stanzas of Dzyan* and later thoroughly commented upon through rational and empirical arguments, allowed the system to appeal to both imagination and intellect. Blavatsky begins the enterprise by establishing her source of authority, stating that the knowledge conveyed carries supernatural validation, since it derives from impeccable occult sources, both past and present.

As well, her own charismatic presence is established when she describes her own special role as a confidante, student, emissary, or acquaintance of these elite spiritual experts. She initially sets a tone of anticipation by simply translating her version of the *Stanzas of Dzyan*, allowing the reader to establish empathetic connection with those ambivalent and suggestive mythically phrased statements. Then, the transition from passive imaginative attentiveness to careful analytical scrutiny is effected when Blavatsky embarks on her extensive commentaries and analyses. The myth of creation now becomes subject to clever intellectual extrapolation, exegesis, amplification, supported by examples drawn from different sources. The justification for extracting such materials from their cultural contexts is that they do not actually mean what they seem to mean, or say what they seem to say. The vast majority of humanity only cognises exoteric meanings. However, an elite minority of esoteric experts have mastered the specialised skills of encoding and decoding multiple layers of symbolic meaning. Invariably, these esoteric analyses refer to the occult and mystical realities that dominate

---

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.,



the worldview being legitimised. So full justification is felt in linking seemingly discredited, disreputable, discarded and dismissed data and theory because, esoterically interpreted, they embody truths not discernible via exoteric evaluation. Thus, all varieties of imaginative and speculative materials may be sifted through to find enough commonality to create an eclectic synthesis.

And in both cosmological and anthropological narrations, a linear historical framework of progressive spiritual evolution is assumed. Even when broken into cyclical formats, each succeeding incarnation or manifestation shows continuity, resuming at a somewhat different stage than where the previous one ended. Whether it is the progression of matter through successive kingdoms; the spiritual progress of individuals locked in the causal loop of karma/reincarnation; the succession of different root races; the transitions between different rungs of the spiritual hierarchy from cosmic manifestation to cosmic manifestation; etc., the common theme is progressive continuity. The synthesis of all supporting data to legitimise this orientation eventuated in the establishment of a newly reconstructed myth. However, Blavatsky did not treat her system as primarily an imaginative vehicle, meant to evoke empathetic resonance only through intuitive and emotional reaction. Although those elements were intrinsic by virtue of the narrative structure, she firmly and unyieldingly insisted upon establishing legitimacy based upon the logical and intellectual credibility of her claims. The bulk of her exposition is devoted to explaining how and why the esoteric occult orientation is superior to the dogmatic, rational, and scientific worldviews.

Her arguments consistently take the form of comparisons, by which other approaches are deemed inferior. Thus, she is often fixated upon trying to use reason, logic, appeal to common sense, to suggest flaws in traditional orientations and more plausible solutions via the esoteric approach. And, in establishing and defending the theosophical worldview as a deserving alternative to current traditions, it was necessary to show that such a way of interpretation had sustentative factual validity as well as a firm logical basis. Thus, Blavatsky found it necessary to claim a historical basis for the system. Rather than present an ideational structure intended to gain support through faith and emotional connection, she always insisted that her system was true in a literal and factual way, and could be both intellectually as well as emotionally compelling. The

Masters were real historical entities intimately involved influencing world history on multiple levels. The esoteric tradition extended unbroken from the very first appearance of proto-humanity. The claims of occultists have always had an empirical factual basis of some sort, even when extended beyond the artificial boundaries of science. Myths and legends were reflections of actual occurrences in nature from somewhere in prehistory. Progressive spiritual evolution could be discerned as a constant objective by proper symbolic decoding of cultural materials by trained esoteric experts, regardless of environment.

For Madame Blavatsky, everything symbolic and imaginative always was filtered through the exact same wavelength within the exact same interpretive spectrum, and invariably reduced to supporting stature for her basic premises. The one-pointedness with which she defended the occult orientation was based on belief in the literal validity of its principles. In fact, it would not be too radical a speculative surmise to say that she believed in a form of occult fundamentalism.<sup>56</sup> Incorporating much of the stance of conventional Victorian era morality, history was conceived as an unfolding drama, with the occult forces of “good” locked in perpetual battle with the baneful influences of the “dark” on multiple spheres of being. The existence of hierarchies struggling to influence the fate of mankind was felt to be a given, with hidden conspiratorial potential a real likelihood. Believing in the critical significance of this struggle, there was urgency in convincingly and unequivocally establishing that the occult reality was in fact a literal fact, and that one’s choices and line of conduct did have real repercussions, both personally and in the occult travails of humanity.

### **7.5.1 *The Voice of the Silence* – Its Specialized Objective and Unique Format**

While *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine* are presented as explicit challenges to the defenders of the dominant worldviews, expressed both as critical and constructivist options, *The Voice of the Silence* falls into a different category. It was said to derive from the same original source as the *Stanzas of Dzyan*, from a Mahayana Buddhist instructional text called *The Book of the Golden Precepts*. While her two other major

---

<sup>56</sup> For discussion of Blavatsky’s penchant towards this kind of outlook, see Theodore Roszak, *Unfinished Animal*, New York/Hagerstown/San Francisco/London: Harper Colophon Books, 1977, pp. 122-123.

works were massive undertakings, directed towards the systematic repudiation of the criteria of the dominant worldviews, this book is a sparse epigrammatic portrayal of a path towards spiritual realisation. Blavatsky again claims to present a translation of portions of an authentic though rare religious text, which she claims to have memorised while a student in Tibet. Though Blavatsky's assertions about physically entering and dwelling in Tibet for extended amounts of time have been disputed, the contents of this book have been noted to reflect authentic Buddhist sentiment, even if not universally acknowledged as a pure Buddhist historical document.

### **7.5.2 *The Voice of the Silence* – Compositional Factors**

The composition of this book, as with her other major works, once again was considered to have occurred under somewhat intriguing and mystifying circumstances. Annie Besant was a visitor during the period in 1889 when it was written.

She wrote it in Fontainbleu, and the greater part was done when I was with her, and I sat in the room while she was writing it. I know that she did not write it referring to any books, but she wrote it down steadily, hour after hour, exactly as though she were writing either from memory or from reading it where no book was. She produced in the evening that manuscript that I saw her write as I sat with her, and asked me and others to correct it for English, for she said that she had written it so quickly that it was sure to be bad.<sup>57</sup>

In the preface, Blavatsky indeed claims that she had memorised selected portions of the ninety small treatises that made up *The Book of the Golden Precepts*. Whether her creative literary methods actually included exercise of supersensory skills or not, the impression was conveyed to theosophists that she was composing via extraordinary means. As per Blavatsky's other main books, this too helped consolidate her authoritative status and reaffirm her active relationship with the Masters and the hidden brotherhood.

### **7.5.3 *The Voice of the Silence* - An Overview of Thematic Contents and Points of Emphasis**

The form given to the book is roughly similar to that used in *The Secret Doctrine*, with enunciation of the fragmentary lines followed by more detailed commentary and

---

<sup>57</sup> Annie Besant and C.W. Leadbeater, *Talks on the Path of Occultism*, Volume Two, Adyar/Wheaton/London: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1926, pp. 14-15.

analysis. The major difference though is that here, the critical dynamic is mostly absent. Blavatsky is not concerned with comparing, defending, justifying the contents, or challenging the entrenched mainstream orientations. Now, the length of the book is less than one tenth the size of the other two main works, with commentary mostly in the form of definitions of terms and explications of verses. As well, the Buddhist terminology and frame of reference is exclusively maintained throughout, not used as an example of eclectic synthesis to be integrated with similar ideas from other cultures or disciplines. The verses themselves are somewhat cryptic and poetically allusive, while the commentary is sparse and direct. Her main objective is to elucidate for the individual spiritual aspirant a distinctly inspirational path leading towards mystical realisation. Focus is firmly on the details of the steps to be taken; the possible hindrances that may be encountered along the way; the subjective states of mind that will prevail during the process; and the considerations relating to achievement of the ultimate goal of liberation.

The *Voice of the Silence* is divided into three sections, each based on a separate fragment from the *Book of the Golden Precepts*. These are respectively entitled “The Voice of the Silence,” “The Two Paths,” and “The Seven Portals.” In the preface, Blavatsky states her belief that the original precepts had a legendary origin and were transmitted through various Eastern mystical schools. She said that the original precepts come from a primordial occult source, partially transmitted through an entirely symbolic language based on ideographs and taught in Tibet at the highest level of esoteric training. The knowledge discussed in the fragments is explicitly devoted to the attainment of mystical states of consciousness, but only a selected portion could be entrusted to the contemporary world because of its cynical stance regarding such matters.

Nor could they be all translated and given to a world too selfish and too much attached to objects of sense to be in any way prepared to receive such exalted ethics in the right spirit. For, unless a man perseveres seriously in the pursuit of self-knowledge, he will never lend a willing ear to advice of this nature.<sup>58</sup>

However, for those who are serious and willing to devote themselves to such objectives, the book is meant as a practical compendium of advice and insight.

---

<sup>58</sup> H.P. Blavatsky, *The Voice of the Silence*, retrieved from Theosophical University Press Online, 1889, <<http://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/voice/voice.htm>>. (Accessed July 17, 2002).

Therefore it has been thought better to make a judicious selection only from those treatises which will best suit the few real mystics in the Theosophical Society, and which are sure to answer their needs. It is only these who will appreciate these words of Krishna-Christos, the "Higher Self."<sup>59</sup>

Identification of "Krishna-Christos" as the "Higher Self" clearly signifies that the subject matter is mystical in content, and that though phrased in Buddhist terms, the substitution of equivalent terms and concepts is acceptable for those in the Theosophical Society who assume a syncretistic position.

The first fragment, "The Voice of the Silence," abounds with succinct advisory statements, preparing the student to break away from habitual patterns of thought and conduct and develop an intuitive understanding that appearances are illusory. Not by intellectual deliberation, but by listening to the "inner ear" and learning to discern what is real from alluring appearances.

Before the soul can comprehend and may remember, she must unto the Silent Speaker be united just as the form to which the clay is modelled, is first united with the potter's mind.

For then the soul will hear, and will remember.

And then to the inner ear will speak—

THE VOICE OF THE SILENCE<sup>60</sup>

The advice continues along similar lines, mostly warning about becoming entrapped by the senses and the intellect. The "Waters of Renunciation" must be entered and all desires, vices, sins left behind if real progress is to be made. Mention is made of the "five impediments," the "four modes of truth," and other references to various specific stages on the ascending path. And while many lines refer to psychological and existential dynamics in an oblique or metaphorical way, there are also numerous isolated stanzas that appear to be simple platitudes, non-specific and indirect at best in amplifying the main themes. For instance these lines seem to be thrown out to sustain mood rather than add to content, or else appear laboured and contrived metaphors (that often refer to phenomena of nature) when expressed in English.

---

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

The rose must re-become the bud born of its parent stem, before the parasite has eaten through its heart and drunk its life-sap.

The golden tree puts forth its jewel-buds before its trunk is withered by the storm.<sup>61</sup>

The uneven poetic rhythm fluctuates between passages that convey strong devotional tones, practical advice, and suggestive references to spiritual content and those that seem devoid of the same inspiration. And when turning to the type of commentary used by Blavatsky, we mostly find brief footnotes of amplification that are only referential to the specific point in question. A must sparser approach than in her earlier books. Here is an example.

The "four modes of truth" are, in Northern Buddhism, *Ku* "suffering or misery"; *Tu* the assembling of temptations; *Mu* "their destructions" and *Tau*, the "path." The "five impediments" are the knowledge of misery, truth about human frailty, oppressive restraints, and the absolute necessity of separation from all the ties of passion and even of desires. The "Path of Salvation"—is the last one."<sup>62</sup>

Looking at the second fragment, "The Two Paths," we find that the focus shifts to a different subject. The main issue at hand is deciding which is the proper direction to proceed once enlightenment has been obtained. There are two Paths, three great Perfections, and six Virtues that lead to mystical enlightenment. In choosing which direction to follow, there are two distinct options in terms of the type of knowledge that may be obtained. One revolves around the "Doctrine of the Eye," and consists of the contents of exoteric knowledge. That is the Buddhism presented for the masses. The other involves "the "Doctrine of the Heart," which consists of orally transmitted esoteric knowledge for the elite.

False learning is rejected by the Wise, and scattered to the Winds by the good Law. Its wheel revolves for all, the humble and the proud. The "Doctrine of the Eye"... is for the crowd, the "Doctrine of the Heart," for the elect. The first repeat in pride: "Behold, I know," the last, they who in humbleness have garnered, low confess, "thus have I heard" ...

"Great Sifter" is the name of the "Heart Doctrine," O disciple.<sup>63</sup>

---

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., <<http://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/voice/voice2.htm>>.

The distinction between pride for intellectually derived exoteric knowledge and humility for privately transmitted intuitive understanding reveals a scenario in which the latter is held in higher esteem and evaluated to be more spiritually authentic.

The Dharma of the "Eye" is the embodiment of the external, and the non-existing.

The Dharma of the "Heart" is the embodiment of Bodhi,\* the Permanent and Everlasting.

[\*True, divine Wisdom.]<sup>64</sup>

For those having decided to follow the “Dharma of the Heart,” and who proceed via the esoteric teachings, mystical realisation will occur in due course. Then, the newly enlightened aspirant must decide between two options in so far as his future course of action is concerned. He may take the “Open Way,” enter the state of Dharmakaya and withdraw into private Nirvanic peace, or else he may choose the “Secret Way,” deferring bliss until the end of the current cycle while continuing to incarnate out of a sense of compassion for those not yet awakened. The choice is up to the individual, though obviously the “Secret Way” is presented as the more noble and esteemed option. Renunciation based on compassion for others embodies the highest moral standard.

Sweet are the fruits of Rest and Liberation for the sake of *Self*; but sweeter still the fruits of long and bitter duty. Aye, Renunciation for the sake of others, of suffering fellow men.<sup>65</sup>

As well as the explicit exhortations and clear enunciations of guidance and knowledge, the second fragment also is infused with abundant examples of overly laboured metaphors.

The Lamp burns bright when wick and oil are clean. To make them clean a cleaner is required. The flame feels not the process of the cleaning.<sup>66</sup>

The main themes of the second fragment were the differentiation of the paths of study, and the enunciation of the two options available to the enlightened adherent. The third fragment, the “Seven Portals,” returns again to the obstacles to be confronted and methods of achieving Nirvanic enlightenment.

---

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

Those who choose the Eye Doctrine must take the path of “four-fold Dhyana.” Though difficult, it is not as demanding or intensive as the “six Paramitas,” or “gates of virtue,” leading to “Bodhi and Prajna,” the seventh “step of Wisdom.” This is the challenge for those opting for the Heart Doctrine. These portals are “Dana,” or charity; “Shila,” or harmony; “Kshanti,” or patience; “Virag,” or indifference based on the conquest of illusion; “Virya,” or the energy expended searching for truth; “Dhyana,” or the path of pure knowledge; “Prajna,” or wisdom sustained as an elevated state of consciousness. Mastery of these keys leads to successively higher stages of inner development. However, at each level there are specific impediments and “snares” to overcome. Only through self-mastery, the conquest of illusion, and the nullification of the passions will true realisation be attainable. Yet even at that advanced stage, a final obstacle must be overcome. That is the feeling of pride.

A sense of pride would mar the work. Aye, build it strong, lest the fierce rush of battling waves, that mount and beat its shore from out the great World Maya's Ocean, swallow up the pilgrim and the isle—yea, even when the victory's achieved.<sup>67</sup>

And even after surmounting all apparent obstacles and reaching the threshold of “victory,” there are still dangers to be wary of. The possibility of a relapse induced by infatuation with new modes of experience and exercise of supersensory powers is real.

Beware, lest in the care of Self thy Soul should lose her foothold on the soil of Deva-knowledge.

Beware, lest in forgetting SELF, thy Soul lose o'er its trembling mind control, and forfeit thus the due fruition of its conquests.

Beware of change! For change is thy great foe. This change will fight thee off, and throw thee back, out of the Path thou treadest, deep into viscous swamps of doubt.<sup>68</sup>

The collapse of discipline, loss of mind control, fascination with supersensory forms of knowledge, and the difficulties of coping with new changes will potentially lead to lack of assurance and doubt. Yet if persistence prevails and this crisis is surmounted, true enlightenment will be achieved. And when it is, there is no room for doubting its

---

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., <<http://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/voice/voice3.htm>>.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.



authenticity.

He standeth now like a white pillar to the west, upon whose face the rising Sun of thought eternal poureth forth its first most glorious waves. His mind, like a becalmed and boundless ocean, spreadeth out in shoreless space. He holdeth life and death in his strong hand.

Yea, He is mighty. The living power made free in him, that power which is HIMSELF, can raise the tabernacle of illusion high above the gods, above great Brahm and Indra. *Now* he shall surely reach his great reward!

Shall he not use the gifts which it confers for his own rest and bliss, his well-earn'd weal and glory—he, the subduer of the great Delusion?

*Nay*, O thou candidate for Nature's hidden lore! If one would follow in the steps of holy Tathagata, those gifts and powers are not for Self.<sup>69</sup>

Again, it is stressed that by achieving that state, the reward of personal rest and bliss is not considered the appropriate option. The moral commitment towards providing enlightened compassion for those still wrapped in ignorance is the highest good conceivable, in this hypothetical weighing of alternative idealised lines of action.

Now bend thy head and listen well, O Bodhisattva—Compassion speaks and saith: "Can there be bliss when all that lives must suffer? Shalt thou be saved and hear the whole world cry?"<sup>70</sup>

Providing personal leadership in educating the suffering masses about the true good of enlightenment is the moral obligation and duty of those who personally have earned that privileged status for themselves.

In this comparatively direct and minimalist book, Blavatsky conforms more rigorously to a traditional Buddhist approach, both in spirit and in form. Whether the precepts were authentic Buddhist teachings translated verbatim, or creatively embellished and expressed in her own metaphorical terms, they yet provided a literary vehicle legitimising a mystical orientation.

This book can be seen to be compatible with the principles of the entire theosophical worldview as expressed in her other writings, but it also stands more than the others as a direct expression of pure religious sentiments and beliefs. There is no argumentation or laborious effort to logically and empirically prove that the content

---

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

deserves outside acknowledgment. The preface begins by admitting that most of the world would not be receptive to the real message. This is grudgingly accepted without provoking the kinds of massive legitimising efforts intended to win converts that usually characterised her writings. Here, she knows who her intended audience is and addresses them directly without her usual rhetorical style. These are the minority within the minority, the theosophists who are serious about approaching a path of personal discipline leading to growth of consciousness and character. The cosmological and anthropological principles enunciated in great detail earlier are now implicit, and don't get in the way of the main theme of personal transformation. Despite possible questions about sources and authorship, the authenticity of the tone of the teachings and the expression of the sentiments have extended beyond the purely theosophical and occult milieu, garnering independent respect from such as William James, D. T. Suzuki and the Ninth Panchen Lama.<sup>71</sup>

#### **7.6 Blavatsky's Major Books – Their Qualified Influence on Posterity.**

Collectively, Madame Blavatsky's three major works provide the essential literary corpus of a comprehensive worldview. They confront the mainstream, authoritative traditions and attempt to deconstruct the foundations upon which they have established their dominance. They offer a detailed alternative option, constructed upon clearly enunciated principles and premises. And a path towards attainment of the most esteemed state of consciousness was described for all who were interested. Those who empathised with the orientation embraced the internal consistency of the theosophical worldview in those major works. Yet despite often laudatory reception and rapid sales of the books, they still did not create the dramatic impact on society-at-large that was desired. This partly was due to both external and internal issues. The disreputability of portions of Madame Blavatsky's private life, accusations of plagiarism in *Isis Unveiled*, and charges of fraudulent activities regarding psychic phenomena gave her a certain notoriety that mitigated against serious consideration by many. And internally, the premises about the personal involvement with the Masters, the unorthodox treatment of her materials, the

---

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> See Cranston, op. cit., pp. 83-86.

disputable evidence and logical inferences for some of her theories, as well as other factors perhaps made her works appear less self-evident than was hoped for at large. For every challenge to entrenched authority and tradition, enemies were confronted. And there were many who took great zeal in finding just or unjust ways of discrediting the theosophical option. Her major works thus can be seen as “successes” in so far as they embodied the ideational system intended. But as revolutionary statements of a universally appealing worldview, they did not convincingly supplant dominant religious, philosophical or scientific traditions. Their influence was pervasive on a less massive scale, permeating through different social and intellectual milieus, broadening the popularity of occult and mystical knowledge. And the main literary works have remained the primary legacy of Blavatsky for posterity. Something of her charismatic personality is reflected through the idiosyncrasies and the nuances of her style, the clever and creative eclectic linking of materials, the impassioned and emotionally committed tone of her rhetoric, and the spiritual vision that animated her writings. Yet, despite the mixed historical results of her writings, the importance of providing a bold confrontational challenge in *Isis Unveiled*, a major theosophical opus in *The Secret Doctrine*, and a succinct spiritual guidebook in *The Voice of the Silence*, cannot be overlooked. These books have continued to be definitive sources of inspiration and erudition for a minority who feel resonance with this form of esoteric representation. We shall now look in more detail at the historical and sociological factors specific to the theosophical leadership and its “clientele.”