

**MADAME BLAVATSKY
AND HER "THEOSOPHY": A
STUDY. [LONDON-1895]**

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Madame Blavatsky and Her "Theosophy": A Study. [London-1895] by Arthur Lillie

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ARTHUR LILLIE

**MADAME BLAVATSKY
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AND

HER "THEOSOPHY"

A STUDY

BY

ARTHUR LILLIE

Author of "Modern Mystics and Modern Magic," "The Influence of Buddhism on Primitive Christianity," etc.

"If there are no Mahatmas, the Theosophical Society is an absurdity."—MRS.
BESANT (*Lucifer*, December 15th, 1890)

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PREFACE

IN the *Revue des Deux Mondes* for July, 1888, Mr. Émile Burnouf, the eminent Sanskrit scholar, has an article entitled *Le Bouddhisme en Occident*, which deals in flattering terms with Madame Blavatsky's "theosophy."

"This creed," he says, "has grown with astounding rapidity. In 1876, the Theosophical Society had but one branch. It had 104 in 1884, 121 in 1885, 134 in 1886, to-day it has 158. The branch in Paris dates from last year. Of the 134 centres, 96 are in India. The others are spread over the globe, in Ceylon, in Burmah, Australia, Africa, in the United States, in England, Scotland, Ireland, in Greece, in Germany, in France. The French 'Society of Isis,' though recent, possesses many distinguished names (p. 368)."

But since this article appeared in the leading review of Europe the progress of the society has been still more remarkable if we may trust the list of "charters" published in the *Theosophist* for December, 1891. In 1888 the society had 179 centres. In 1890 it had 241 centres. In 1891 it had 279 branch societies.

This is a great success; and it is to be confessed that in other countries besides France "distinguished names" are quoted in connection with the society. Messrs. Crookes, Myers, and Gurney took an interest in it. Mr. Edward Maitland, a man of genius, the author of the "Pilgrim and the Shrine," joined it, together with Mr. Sinnett and Dr. Hartmann, able writers. Professor Max Müller has given advice to Colonel Olcott on the subject of Oriental translations, and borne testimony to the good work that in that direction "theosophy" has accomplished. And Mr. Gladstone has done this "substitute for a religion" the signal honour of giving it and Mrs. Besant, its chief, a long theological article in the *Nineteenth Century*, that waxwork gallery of the notabilities of the hour.

But a more important conquest was made. Mrs. Besant is a woman of singular integrity and ability. She has brought to the rescue of the society her unrivalled platform eloquence. To show how important theosophy is growing, I think I cannot do better than quote from the *Daily Chronicle* of April 7th, 1894, an account of an interview with this lady on her return from India.

“Late on Thursday evening Mrs. Besant reached her home at Avenue Road, Regent’s Park, after nearly five months’ lecturing tour in India and Ceylon, where she has been expounding to the Buddhists their own faith. The gift of lucid speech, which has placed Mrs. Besant in the front rank of women orators, has made her reception amongst all classes of people in India one of enthusiastic appreciation. Triumphal arches, unceasing garlanding, and incessant rose-sprinkling have attended her journeyings about. The people have heard her gladly, and priests and philosophers have literally sat at her feet. At Adyar, for many days in succession, she sat in the hall receiving and answering questions. She has aroused the leaders of Indian society to an interest in their ancient institutions and religion never before manifested.

“Shortly after her arrival yesterday morning she was kind enough,” says a *Chronicle* interviewer, “to give me an audience. I found her seated in her study, looking very picturesque in a simple Tussock dress, with an Indian shawl arranged gracefully over one shoulder and around her waist. An Indian servant, in native head-dress, was in attendance. Mrs. Besant’s hair is now silvery white, and her face has a fuller contour than of yore, and a deeper and more introspective expression.

“Would you explain the object of your Indian tour, Mrs. Besant?”

“I have travelled on behalf of the Theosophical Society, and in company with its president, Colonel Olcott. All the arrangements were made by the Indian section of the society. My object has been to show to the Hindus that theosophy is identical with the teachings of their own scriptures, and that Madame Blavatsky had the special mission of bringing back to India the knowledge which it had itself lost, and then of spreading that knowledge through the world. Her claim, which I have supported, was that theosophy was the underlying

truth of every religion, and that the ancient Hindu scriptures contained the fullest presentment ever made public. I have endeavoured to justify that position in India by proving every point of theosophical teaching by quotations from the Hindu scriptures.

“In towns where the population was mixed in faith, I used the scriptures of the Parsees, Christians, and Mohammedans, and in Ceylon, where the population was Buddhist, I used the Buddhist scriptures. The enormous majority of my lectures were delivered to almost entirely Hindu audiences. I confined myself to the Hindu scriptures, and in all cases I stated that I regarded those scriptures and the Hindu religion as the origin of all other scriptures and all other religions. This was the position learned from Madame Blavatsky, and which I have held since I joined the Theosophical Society.’

“How was your teaching received by the people of India?’

“Everywhere I met with enthusiastic receptions. The Pundits, or spiritual teachers, gave me the warmest welcome, and continually expressed their extreme pleasure at this justification of Hinduism before the world, as the source of all great religions and philosophies.’

“Did they not seek to test your knowledge, Mrs. Besant?’

“Yes; the learned Brahmins would come to me with obscure passages and allegories from the sacred writings, asking for interpretation. My answers were based upon the teachings which I have myself received from my Master, one of the great Eastern teachers, to whom I was led by Madame Blavatsky. It is this teaching which enabled me to deal with the learned and spiritual questioners who came to me with their problems. I was able to show them that there really was attainable a secret knowledge which threw light upon the obscurities of their own scriptures. I found no one who was inclined to deny the existence of such knowledge, but I found many who feared that it was entirely lost, and who rejoiced at this definite proof that it was still within reach.’

“But Anglo-Indian society had diverted itself with many funny stories about Mrs. Besant. One was that on board the steamer coming home she had dined apart for fear of losing caste.

“What truth is there, Mrs. Besant, in the statement that you have embraced Hinduism?’

“There is no truth in the statement as made, but it is true, as I

have already explained, that I regard Hinduism as the most ancient of all religions, and as containing more fully than any other the spiritual truths named theosophy, in modern times. Theosophy is the ancient Brahma Vidyâ of India. Of this, Hinduism is the earliest and best exoteric presentment. Exoterically, therefore, I am a Hindu in my religion and in my philosophy, but this was as true when I went to India as it is true now. There is absolutely no change in my position. It was just because I was Hindu in religion and philosophy that I was given the mission of recalling to the modern Hindus the real grandeur and sublimity of their religion. This could not have been done as effectively by any one who was not at one with them in the broad outlines of religious faith. To the occultist the ceremonials of the Hindu religion are full of significance, for they are all based on the experimental knowledge of the existence and of the powers of spiritual intelligences. As a philosophy intellectually accepted, theosophy may remain apart from all religious faiths, but regarded from the spiritual side—if devotion is to form any part of the life—the theosophist will use the religion most adapted to his own nature. In my own case that religion is Hinduism in its ancient and pure form.”

I will make one other quotation, for some of the music by and by may be in a different key. The following eloquent tribute is from *Borderland* (October 15th).

“ If everything be true that Dr. Hodgson and the Psychical Research Society say about her, it only heightens the mystery, and adds to the marvel of the influence which Madame Blavatsky undoubtedly has exercised, and is exercising, at the present moment. For the most irate of the sceptics cannot deny, and will not dispute, the fact that the Theosophical Society exists, that it is far and away the most influential of all the associations which have endeavoured to popularise occultism, and that its influence is, at the present time, felt far and wide in many lands, and in many churches. The number of pledged theosophists may be few, although it is probably greater than most people imagine. But the theosophical ideas are subtly penetrating the minds of multitudes who know nothing about theosophy, and are

profoundly ignorant of all the controversies which have raged round Madame Blavatsky.

"This is eminently the case with the doctrine of reincarnation, and with the altered estimate which the average man is beginning to form of the mystic teachers and seers of India. Reincarnation may or may not be true. Whether true or false, it has, until the last decade, been almost unthinkable by the average Western. This is no longer the case. Multitudes who still reject it as unproved have learned to recognise its value as a hypothesis explaining many of the mysteries of human life. A few admit that there is nothing in reincarnation antagonistic to the doctrine of Christ, and that it is quite possible to hold firmly all the great verities of the Christian revelation, without rejecting the belief that the life of the individual, upon which judgment will be passed at the Great Assize, is not necessarily confined to the acts done between the cradle and the grave, but may be an existence of which such a period is but one chapter in the book of life. Altogether apart from the question of the actual truth of the doctrine, it is indisputable that the sympathetic recognition of the possibility of reincarnation has widened the range of popular thought, and infused into religious speculation some much-needed charity. And this, which is unquestionably a great achievement, will ever be associated with the name of Madame Blavatsky.

"Still more remarkable has been the success with which this remarkable woman has succeeded in driving into the somewhat wooden head of the Anglo-Saxon the conviction—long ago arrived at by a select circle of students and Orientalists, of whom Professor Max Müller may be said to be the most distinguished living representative—that the East is, in matters of religious and metaphysical speculation, at least entitled to claim as much respect as the West. That indeed is stating it very mildly. 'The snub-nosed Saxons,' as Disraeli used to love to describe the race which made him Prime Minister, are learning somewhat of humility and self-abasement before the races whom, by use of material force, they have reduced to vassalage.

"Down to quite recent times the average idea of the average Englishman—notwithstanding all the books of all our pundits—has been that the Hindoos were benighted and ignorant pagans, whom it was charity to subdue, and a Christian duty to attempt to convert. To-day, even