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Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6p8071k4

Journal
Journal of the American Academy of Religion, 62

Author
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Publication Date
1994

Peer reviewed
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MADAME BLAVATSKY AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE OCCULT TRADITION

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ABSTRACT

Madame Blavatsky provided the inspiration behind the Theosophical Society, probably the leading occult society of the twentieth century and one of the first western religious groups to show an interest in eastern religions. This essay examines, first, the way in which Madame Blavatsky transformed the occult tradition in response to the Victorian crisis of faith, and, second, the interpenetration of her occultism with her particular interpretations of Buddhism and Hinduism. The resulting discussion helps to show how a particular view of India and Indian religions took hold in the west.
THE WEST TURNS EASTWARD:

MADAME BLAVATSKY AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE OCCULT TRADITION

Throughout the twentieth century increasing numbers of western men and women have turned to India for spiritual fulfilment. The image of meditation centres and Indian gurus thriving in California and elsewhere now has become an integral part of our understanding of western culture. The sources of this western interest in the mystical East stretch back at least as far as the romantics and liberal Christians of the early nineteenth century (Christy; Lavan). In this essay, I will concentrate on one neglected source of this popular orientalism, namely, occultism. More particularly, I will examine, first, the way in which Madame Blavatsky transformed the occult tradition in response to the Victorian crisis of faith, and second, how she thereby encouraged the West to turn to India for spiritual enlightenment.

The romantic tradition certainly played an important role in shaping a popular fascination with Indian religions. Beginning with Emerson, and moving on in America to Walt Whitman, and in Britain to Edward Carpenter and E.M. Forster, the romantics portrayed the Indians as a people who shunned the material luxuries produced by industrialisation for a simple life centred on self-realisation and religious understanding; a people concerned with the eternal soul, not the transitory pleasures of this world (Emerson, 1903-4b; Carpenter, 1892). Nonetheless, the romantics paid little attention to what we might call the dogmatics of eastern religions. They generally came from literary and religious backgrounds that eschewed scholastic debates about doctrine. For example, Emerson had been a Unitarian minister and Carpenter an Anglican priest of the Broad Church school, two of the most liberal varieties of nineteenth century Christianity.
The romantics argued that the religions of India contained profound insights that reinforced the philosophy they had derived from German idealism, but they generally identified these insights with a loose pantheism, not with specific doctrines such as reincarnation or the law of karma.

Madame Blavatsky, in contrast, had a background in the occult tradition which historically had linked religious doctrines to cosmological theories, and she therefore paid rather more attention to the dogmatics of eastern religions. In particular, she interpreted Indian religions so as to suggest that they contained answers to the dilemmas then confronting religious believers in the west. She argued, for example, that Indian religions incorporated both an evolutionary cosmology that met the challenge of Darwinism, and a law of karma that met the moral qualms many of her contemporaries felt about doctrines such as the vicarious atonement. As an occultist, Blavatsky also differed from the romantics in her profound interest in questions of magic. Here she argued that India had a practical, as well as a spiritual, knowledge that the West sorely needed.

Blavatsky, therefore, had a dual impact on western conceptions of Indian religions. First, she gave occultism an eastward orientation akin to that already found in some romantic writing. Second, she introduced new elements to this popular interest in Indian religions, notably, an interest in Buddhist and Hindu dogmatics, a concern with Indian cosmologies as anticipatory of modern science, and a belief in an eastern lore concerning the occult properties of substances.

I

The mysterious Madame Blavatsky (nee. Hahn) was born in 1831 to an aristocratic family from Ekaterinoslav in Southern Russia (Fuller; Williams). She married General Blavatsky at the
of seventeen, but three months later returned to her grandparents, and then ran away to Constantinople because she was afraid that her family would send her back to the General. Quite what she did for the next seventeen years remains far from clear: some people say that she visited spiritual Masters in Tibet, whilst others say that she had an illegitimate child, worked in a circus, and earned a living as a medium in Paris. Most accounts, however, agree that she went to Egypt where she met the coptic magician Paulos Metamon. It also seems clear that some of the first phenomena associated with Blavatsky were the raps that accompanied her around Russia when she returned there in 1859.

Such raps became increasingly common in the middle of the nineteenth century as the spiritualist movement spread across the western world. Spiritualism itself, however, was but the most prominent and most recent expression of an occult tradition dating back to the hermetic philosophy of the Renaissance (Yates; Podmore). Several Renaissance thinkers, notably Giordano Bruno, believed in an ancient wisdom tradition deriving from the Egyptians. These occultists thought that the Egyptians had possessed esoteric knowledge that had enabled them both to perform magic and to apprehend the divine. Occult cosmologies typically divided the universe into various planes such as the material plane of bodies, the divine plane of souls, and the spiritual plane which linked these two other planes together. The universe, therefore, was a single, divine whole governed by the motions of the planets which effected events on earth by acting upon the spiritual plane. Occult magic rested on the possibility of individuals influencing the actions of the planets: magicians knew the links by which the motions of the planets determined events on earth, and so they could use suitable substances, images, names, and numbers to manipulate these links and thereby modify events. Similarly, occult mysticism rested
on the possibility of individuals recognising themselves to be part of a single, divine whole: mystics practised an inner contemplation that led them to recognise their essential unity with the whole and so ascend through the stars directly to apprehend the divine in all things.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, an American called Andrew Davis went into a series of trances during which he gave numerous lectures which his friends duly noted down. His doctrines belong within the occult tradition, being indebted directly to the work of both Franz Mesmer and Emmanuel Swedenborg. Davis taught that the universe formed a single spiritual whole that had begun as a limitless liquid fire before dividing into different systems of stars containing both divine spirit and coarse matter. After this division, each star progressed from a largely material state to a purely spiritual state. As an illustration of such progress, Davis said that Mars had reached a more spiritual state than earth, so that the people on Mars now could communicate with spirits. Finally, Davis predicted that people here on earth soon would reach the point where they too could receive messages from spirits.

Sure enough, the spiritualist movement took off soon after Davis' prediction. In 1848, visitors to the Fox family in Arcadia, Wayne County heard a series of raps, and these raps then followed the Fox family on their visits to Rochester and Auburn. The raps seemed to come from an intelligent being since they could count out the number of children in the different families of the local community. People on earth seemed to be communicating with spirits. Before long, an epidemic of raps broke out all down the Eastern Seaboard and then throughout America. In 1874, Henry Olcott read of spirits that purportedly had materialised in a farmstead in Chittendon, Vermont. He went to investigate these spirits, writing reports on what he found for The Sunday Chronicle. When Madame Blavatsky read Olcott's reports, she too set off for Chittendon. On
her arrival, the spirits became more spectacular than ever before. Olcott was impressed. He began to write about her, and she therefore became a prominent figure in the spiritualist movement, soon afterwards defending first the authenticity of the Chittendon phenomena against a sceptical Dr. Beard and then the authenticity of the similar manifestations of John and Katie King in Philadelphia (Blavatsky, 1977:1,30-4 & 56-72).4

Blavatsky's biographers disagree as to whether or not she actually accepted the teachings of the spiritualists. Her followers say that she did not, citing as evidence a note in her scrapbook saying, "H. S. Olcott is a - Rabid Spiritualist, and H. P. Blavatsky is an occultist - one who laughs at the supposed agency of Spirits (but all the same pretends to be one herself)" (Blavatsky, 1977:1,93). Her detractors point to evidence that suggests that the scrapbook jottings are post-hoc rationalisations and to her public identification of herself as a spiritualist. Crucially, however, whether Blavatsky was or was not a spiritualist, she did not so much repudiate spiritualism as reinterpret spiritualism as a subordinate element within a larger occult worldview.

Blavatsky first expressed her own brand of occultism in an article of 1875 written in response to a piece on Rosicrucianism. Here she explained that "Occultism or magic . . . stands in relation to Spiritualism as the infinite to the finite, as the cause to the effect, or as the unity to multifariousness" (1977:1,101-2). Her occultism rested on cosmological doctrines which explained spiritualist phenomena as part of an ordered world in which natural magic was possible. Soon afterwards, Blavatsky wrote an article defending her understanding of such magic. Magic, she explained, did not contradict the laws of nature, but rather used natural powers that scientists did not yet acknowledge: thus, "magic is but a science, a profound knowledge of the Occult forces in Nature, and of the laws governing the visible or invisible
world" (1977:1,137). Clearly Blavatsky espoused the traditional occult belief in an ancient
wisdom incorporating both a mystical religion and natural magic.

On 7 September 1875, George Felt gave a talk on "The Lost Canon of Proportion of the
Egyptians" to a discussion group built around Blavatsky. During the discussion, Olcott wrote a
note asking "would it not be a good idea to form a Society for this kind of study?" The note was
passed to Blavatsky who nodded in agreement. Olcott was elected President at the following
meeting and at the next meeting, on 13 September, the group decided upon the title of The
Theosophical Society (Campbell; Ellwood). Blavatsky now had an organisation through which
to propagate her particular brand of occultism.

II

In order to appreciate the importance of Blavatsky's contribution to occultism, we must
locate her work within the spiritual upheaval of the late nineteenth century. The whole of the
occult revival of the second half of the nineteenth century owed much to the crisis then afflicting
Christianity. The leaders of the spiritualist movement, for instance, typically came from liberal
Christian traditions such as Unitarianism or Universalism, traditions that were trying to loosen
Christian dogma so as to bring Christianity into line with modern secular knowledge. Likewise,
the members of the spiritualist movement were typically people who had recently lost their
Christian faith (Podmore:217).

Many Victorians believed that Christianity and science directly opposed one another.
Early in the nineteenth century, geologists showed that the earth was considerably older than
Biblical estimates suggested: Archbishop Ussher had scribbled in the margins of the King James
version of the Bible that God had made the world in 4004 B.C., now the geologists talked of millions' of years. In the middle of the nineteenth century, Darwin dropped his bombshell: his theory of organic evolution through natural selection was incompatible with a literal reading of the doctrine of special creations as found in Genesis, and further the theory of evolution implied that humanity was on a level with other species, not God's supreme design. More generally, science as a whole tended to suggest that nature was too uniform for the supernatural miracles described in the Bible.

Science, however, was not the only dilemma that confronted Christians in the second half of the nineteenth century. Many moralists disliked the Christian doctrines of vicarious atonement and eternal damnation. They wondered about the morality of sacrificing an innocent Christ for the sins of others, even if the sacrifice was voluntary. And they wondered how a loving God could damn people for eternity, let alone condone the vengeful tortures of hell-fire.

The dilemmas that beset Christians represented both an opportunity and a danger to occultists. On the one hand, occultists could point out that occultism avoided those Christian dogmas that their contemporaries found it so hard to accept. Thus, they could display their familiarity with, and acceptance of, new scientific discoveries, as, for instance, Davis did when he incorporated geological discoveries into his writings. On the other hand, however, occultists had to be careful not to overdo things since they too had beliefs that could seem implausible in the harsh light of contemporary science. If science questioned the existence of a Christian God, then did it not also question the existence of any deity? And if science taught that nature was too uniform for miracles, then did it not also teach that nature was too uniform for magic?
Blavatsky was well aware of the context in which she wrote. She described "Science and Theology" as "two conflicting Titans" between which "a bewildered public" was "fast losing all belief in man's personal immortality" and "in a deity of any kind" (1972:1,X).\textsuperscript{5} She thought that her contemporaries needed a religion that could meet the challenge of modern science, and she thought that occultism provided just such a religion. Consequently, she described her own work as "a plea for the recognition of the hermetic philosophy, the ancienly universal Wisdom-Religion, as the only possible key to the Absolute in science and theology" (1972:1,VII).

Geology and evolution had disproved the dogmas of the Christian Church, but they were an established part of the ancient wisdom tradition. In the case of geology, scholarship "has found unanswerable proofs that human existence antedates the last glaciation of Europe" - "a hard nut, this, for Patristic Theology to crack; but an accepted fact with the ancient philosophers" (1972:1,3). In the case of evolution, "modern science insists upon the doctrine of evolution; so do human reason and the 'secret doctrine,' and the idea is corroborated by the ancient legends and myths" (1972:1,152).

Blavatsky, therefore, outlined an occult cosmology which embraced both a geological time scale and an evolutionary view of development.\textsuperscript{6} The universe began with a single all-embracing deity who was mind and who infused each particle of matter with a spark of the divine. From then on, the universe evolved through a cycle of emanations. Lower orders emanated from higher orders, and then the lower orders became increasingly dense and gross until they reached a turning point after which they became increasingly spiritual until eventually they were reabsorbed into the infinite and eternal deity. This cosmology fitted nicely with both geological knowledge and the theory of evolution since it replaced the Christian idea of a
transcendent God who created the world in seven days with an immanent God who created the world slowly through natural processes.

Although Blavatsky accepted Darwin's theory that all life evolved, she rejected T.H. Huxley's argument that all life had originated in matter. Darwin, she pointed out, made no claims about how life had begun, but merely talked of how he thought life had developed. The theory of evolution did not give us any reason to suppose that life had begun with protoplasm as opposed to the divine spirit. Evolution, then, need not imply materialism. On the contrary, Blavatsky argued that all religions rightly taught that nature consisted of three substances corresponding to the matter, spirit, and soul of the occult tradition. She said: "there is a visible, objective nature; an invisible, indwelling nature, the exact model of the other, and its vital principle; and, above these two, spirit, source of all forces, alone and indestructible" (1972:II,588).

According to Blavatsky, then, a third plane linked the gross material plane to the unchanging divine. It was this plane that underlay the truth of the "Hermetic axiom" that "as in heaven, so on earth" (1972:I,294). Thus it was this plane that underlay the possibility of occult science and natural magic. Magicians understood how this plane united the whole universe, so they could use one thing to influence another thing. Here Blavatsky argued that "one common vital principle pervades all things, and this is controllable by the perfected human will" (1972:II,590). Thus, those magis who knew the "astral" properties of natural things could use this knowledge to accomplish their will. The practice of occult healing, for example, rested on the manipulation of those "imponderable fluids" that linked everything in a single sympathetic relationship. Occult healers, such as the disciples of Mesmer, altered the physical state of their patients by influencing these fluids through suitable actions.
Blavatsky believed only in natural magic. In accord with the assumptions of her own age, she wanted to defend magic on natural and scientific grounds, not on supernatural or dogmatic grounds such as that of the Bible as divine revelation. Thus, she denied that occult science transgressed the laws of nature. As she explained: "Nothing can be more easily accounted for than the highest possibilities of magic. By the radiant light of the universal magnetic ocean, whose electric waves bind the cosmos together, and in their ceaseless motion penetrate every atom and molecule of the boundless creation, the disciples of mesmerism - howbeit insufficient their various experiments - intuitionally perceive the alpha and omega of the great mystery. Alone, the study of this agent, which is the divine breath, can unlock the secrets of psychology and physiology, of cosmical and spiritual phenomena" (1972:I, 282). Her point was that contemporary scientists did not know all of the laws of nature. She even suggested that the theory of evolution pointed towards the probability that occultists indeed would develop natural powers as yet unknown to scientists: given that a soul had evolved at some point along the line from vegetable to human, there seemed every possibility that humans would develop new powers some time in the future.

The principles that governed human life were the same as those which governed the rest of the universe. Humans too had a threefold nature; they consisted of a divine spark, an astral or inner fluidic body, and a physical body. Humans too emerged from more spiritual natures and then trod the evolutionary path from spirituality down to a gross materiality and finally back towards the divine. Here Blavatsky introduced the mysticism that lay at the centre of the occult tradition. Like many before her, she maintained both that humans contained a divine spark within them, and that their telos was to unite themselves with the divine infinite. She called on
people to search within themselves for an unmediated experience of the divine during which they would appreciate the oneness of all things. Individuals should turn inwards to discover God: "there being but ONE Truth, man requires but one church, the Temple of God within us; walled in by matter, but penetrable by any who can find the way; the pure in heart see God" (1972:II,635).

Blavatsky also responded to the moral concerns of her contemporaries. She echoed the qualms of contemporary Christians when she asked "whether Christendom would not be the better for adopting Christism in place of Christianity with its Bible, its vicarious atonement and its devil?" (1972:II,472). She accepted that evil existed, but then went on to criticise the concept of the devil as a mistaken attempt to present evil as a consequence of a historical figure who consciously choose to do evil. Likewise, she argued that the doctrine of the atonement derived from an ancient Mystery of Initiation during which the hierophant chose to sacrifice his life to the gods "whom he hoped to rejoin" (1972:II,42). Christians, however, had turned this Mystery into a dogma according to which one sinless man had died to atone for the fall of the rest of humanity.

We have seen that many contemporary Christians were worried about the morality of these teachings. However, such Christians, and many who had lost their faith, were equally worried about what would provide the basis for moral action in a post-Christian world. Blavatsky tried to ease their anxiety by claiming that the ancient wisdom taught that unity with the divine required moral behaviour. "A man," she added, who believes that "he has no scapegoat to carry the burden of his iniquities for him" is more likely to behave morally than one who believes "that murder, theft and profligacy can be washed as white as snow" if only he believes in the atoning Christ (1972:II,288).
As well as responding to the problems facing contemporary Christians, Blavatsky modified the occult tradition in one other crucial respect. She made India the source of the ancient wisdom. She acknowledged that occultists traditionally identified Egypt as the fountainehead of the ancient wisdom, but, she added, recently "it has been discovered that the very same ideas expressed in almost identical language, may be read in Buddhistic and Brahmanical literature" (1972:I,626). Some contemporary orientalists claimed that Hinduism pre-dated Christianity and most contemporary orientalists claimed that Christian and Hindu teachings had much in common. Thus, when Blavatsky read Jacolliot or Jones she naturally thought that here, in Indian religions, lay the proof of the ancient wisdom that occultists long had spoken of as the source of all religions. The evidence fitted her existing beliefs so nicely. Well might she claim, almost exultantly, that "a conclusive opinion is furnished by too many scholars to doubt the fact that India was the alma mater, not only of the civilization, arts and sciences, but also of all the great religions of antiquity" (1972:II,30). Now scholars would have to acknowledge the existence of an ancient wisdom tradition. Now the occultists would be vindicated.

Blavatsky referred to scholars who had shown that many Biblical legends also appeared in Sanskrit works that pre-dated the Bible. She also noted that "when we find some of the oldest Ceylonic traditions in the Chaldean Kabala and the Jewish Bible, we must think that either Chaldeans or Babylonians had been in Ceylon or India" (1972:I,578). Similarly, she pointed out that scholars had shown that Buddhist missionaries had translated Sanskrit works into every asian language. Consequently, she concluded, we now knew for a fact that the religion of the ancient
inhabitants of India has spread throughout the world providing the groundwork of each and every
religion. Here Blavatsky offered her own account of how an oriental wisdom had spread
westwards. Six thousand years ago, India had contained a brilliant civilization that was over-
flowing with people; later a matured section of these people had emigrated to Eastern Ethiopia
where they had become known as the mighty builders, and from where they had colonized Egypt;
and, finally, western culture owed much to a Judaic law that had come from these Egyptians.
There was, therefore, an ancient wisdom underlay all religions, and this ancient wisdom had
definite Indian roots. As Blavatsky explained, "there is not one of all these sects - Kabalism,
Judaism, and our present Christianity included - but sprang from the two main branches of that
mother-trunk, the once universal religion, which antedated the Vedic ages - we speak of that
prehistoric Buddhism which merged later into Brahmanism" (1972:II,123).

When Blavatsky rewrote the occult tradition in the light of modern science, she rejected
the concept of a personal God and expounded a philosophy that overlapped somewhat with the
teachings of Buddhism. She also noted that the arguments of some orientalists suggested that
certain sanskrit works might be the basis of many of the worlds' religions, a suggestion that
would justify the occult belief in an ancient wisdom. At first sight, however, these two
arguments might seem somewhat incompatible since the sanskrit works in question were the
sacred works of Hinduism, not Buddhism. Blavatsky closed this gap by arguing that the
doctrines that people now called Buddhism were actually the true teachings of the Vedic works,
that this true Brahmanism later had been corrupted by accretions introduced for reasons of self-
interest by the Brahmins, and that the Buddha merely had taught the need to return to the true
religion of the Vedas. Thus, the true Brahmanismm of the Vedas incorporated those doctrines
which the Buddha later had picked up: "Gautama Buddha's philosophy was that taught from the beginning of time in the impenetrable secrecy of the inner sanctuaries of the pagodas" (1972:II,169). Blavatsky, therefore, distinguished modern Hinduism from a true Brahmanism which was essentially the same as Buddhism.

Indian religions no doubt really did embrace a number of doctrines that closely resembled those that Blavatsky arrived at whilst reworking the occult tradition to meet the Victorian crisis of faith. Nonetheless, certain aspects of Victorian orientalism did not fit at all nicely with the idea that India was the progenitor of an ancient wisdom tradition. What, for instance, of the belief that Hindus were idolaters, or the belief that Hinduism sanctioned barbaric practices such as suti [self-immolation of widows]? Clearly, any use of Victorian orientalism to support the occult tradition had to be a selective use in which some arguments were marshalled and others countered.

Blavatsky justified her selective use of contemporary occultism by using two interconnected distinctions. If anyone claimed that Indian religions were not as she said, she simply replied that this person had focused on either modern Hinduism or the exoteric meaning of the Vedic works, not on the true esoteric meaning of ancient Brahmanism. She argued that scholars often fell into the trap of taking modern Hinduism or the Vedas at face value when the true religion of India remained hidden in the esoteric, Brahmanical teachings of the Vedas. Indeed, whilst orientalists rightly had dated the Vedas as pre-Christian, we should not trust their interpretations of Vedic works since they could not perceive the inner meaning of these works: "our scientists do not - nay, cannot - understand correctly the old Hindu literature" (1972:1,581).
We are now in a position to see how exactly Blavatsky approached the task of interpreting Indian religious beliefs. Her view of Brahmanism and her reworking of the occult tradition fed off one another: on the one hand, some Buddhist and Hindu doctrines suggested various ways in which she might respond to dilemmas facing contemporary religious belief in the west; and on the other hand, her proposed solutions to these dilemmas influenced her interpretation of Buddhist and Hindu doctrines. On those occasions when her proposed solutions to contemporary dilemmas contradicted the view of Indian religions taken by contemporary orientalists, she typically overcame the apparent impasse by appealing to the traditional occult belief in esoteric knowledge. The orientalists had failed to go beyond the exoteric doctrines of Buddhism and Hinduism to discover the esoteric doctrines of the ancient Brahmanism. This appeal to esoteric knowledge legitimised a rather subjective and idiosyncratic approach to her material. She used contemporary scholarship selectively to support her own views, reinterpreting or ignoring aspects of science, orientalism, and the religious traditions of India which otherwise might have proved troublesome.

IV

Blavatsky identified Brahmanism with her own monotheistic, immanentist, and mystical cosmology. Contrary to the view of several prominent orientalists, she argued that Indian religions taught that there was one divine principle. Whilst exoteric Buddhism and Hinduism undeniably presented the faithful with a number of different images of the divine thereby allowing them to approach the divine through the image that most suited their nature, esoteric Brahmanism taught that these different images all depicted aspects of the one supreme principle.
Thus, "despite their apparent Polytheism, the ancients - those of the educated class at all events - were entirely monotheistical" (1972:I,23).

The supreme deity of Brahmanism was not a personal God who interfered miraculously in the universe, but rather an impersonal, eternal principle which worked through the natural process of evolutionary development. Orientalists were wrong, therefore, to represent Brahma as the supreme God of the Hindus. Brahma was just a "secondary deity" who, like Jehovah, created the world (1972:I,91). Beyond Brahma, there lay the immanent, impersonal root of all things, and this immanent principle was the true supreme God of the Vedas. Likewise, Buddhism did not teach "atheism," the annihilation of the soul upon reaching nirvana, but rather the immortality of individual souls within a larger divine soul (1972:II,533).

Indian religions taught that everything contained a spark of the divine. Brahmanism was a mystical religion according to which individuals discovered the supreme power by looking inwards and contemplating the divine within themselves. Properly understood, Hinduism concentrated on mystical experience, not on external images or ceremonies. Scholars were wrong, therefore, to suggest that the Indians were idolaters or fetishists. Once again, Blavatsky distinguished the exoteric practices of modern Hinduism from the esoteric practices of Brahmanism. She explained, for example, that "the esoteric significance of the lingham was too truly sacred and metaphysical to be revealed to the profane and the vulgar," and that "the Aryan Hierophant and Brahmin, in their proud exclusiveness and the satisfaction of their knowledge, [would not] go to the trouble of concealing its primeval nakedness under cunningly devised fables" (1888:II,471). To the untutored eye modern Hinduism might seem fetishistic, but that was only because the untutored eye did not perceive the esoteric meaning of the fetish.
Blavatsky even argued that Brahmanism incorporated truths only recently discovered by modern science. In particular, the legends of the Rig-Veda proved that the ancient Aryans had accepted both a geological timescale and the dual evolution of spirit and matter. In the Chaturlioti Mantra, for example, the earth goddess asks the Lord of the airy regions to teach her the Mantra that will give her hair. Blavatsky takes up the story: "He complied, and then as soon as the Mantra was pronounced by her 'in the proper metre' she found herself covered with hair (vegetation). She was now hard to the touch, for the Lord of the air had breathed upon her (the globe had cooled). She had become of a variegated or motley appearance, and suddenly acquired the power to produce out of herself every animate and inanimate form, and to change one form to another" (1977:I,226). Blavatsky maintained that this allegory clearly reveals that the ancient Hindus had understood the doctrine of evolution. In fact, of course, the idea of changing "one form to another" can not straightforwardly be identified with the theory of evolution; to say, for instance, that I understand why water changes into ice is not to say that I understand the theory of evolution. Blavatsky also understood the Asvattha, or sacred tree, to signify the emanation of the world from the deity, that is, the process by which the divine spark takes on a visible form. The branches of the Asvattha extended downwards and the roots extended upwards in a way that symbolised the fact that everything (the roots) had evolved from the deity or "the invisible world of spirit" (the sky) and thence proceeded downwards to the material earth (1972:I,153).

Just as the cosmology of the Vedas resolved the scientific dilemmas facing religious belief in the west, so the ethics of the Vedas resolved the moral difficulties of such belief. Blavatsky argued that Indian religions avoided the difficult moral questions then troubling Christians because the law of karma showed how the moral quality of our actions necessarily
produced commensurate effects on us either in our current lives or in our future incarnations.\textsuperscript{11} Crucially, each got what they deserved. She explicitly contrasted the concept of justice implicit within Indian religions with that implied by vicarious atonement and hell-fire. Brahmanism rejected "salvation by proxy" in favour of a system of "strict and impartial justice" based on a "Supreme Power which cannot fail, and therefore, can have neither wrath nor mercy, but leaves every cause, great or small, to work out its inevitable effects" (1972:I,541).

Blavatsky even argued that Indian religions provided a secure basis for moral action vastly superior to anything to be had from Christianity. Brahmanism had no concept akin to the devil, but rather saw necessary evil as a consequence of past actions within an evolutionary process. Certainly, the absence of the concept of the devil meant that Brahmanism did not try to coerce people into moral behaviour by means of threats of eternal damnation. But, nonetheless, belief in the law of karma provided a reason for moral behaviour since each knew they would reap exactly as they sowed. Here Blavatsky contrasted the way in which Brahmanism gave an impetus to morality with the way in which the Christian belief in divine forgiveness placed moral behaviour at a discount. Thus, for instance, she told her aunt: "A Buddhist, Brahmanist, Lamaist, and Mahomedan does not take alcohol, does not steal, does not lie while he holds fast to the principles of his own heathen religion. But as soon as the Christian missionaries appear, as soon as they enlighten the heathen with Christ's faith, he becomes a drunkard, a thief, a liar, a hypocrite. While they are heathen, every one of them knows that each sin of his will return to him according to the law of justice and readjustment. A Christian ceases to rely on himself, he loses self-respect. 'I shall meet a priest, he will forgive me,' as answered a newly 'initiated' to Father Kiriak" (1950).\textsuperscript{12} Moreover, because Indian religions saw evil as necessary, not the work
of a rebel will, they "taught to return good for evil," not, like the Jews and Christians, to return "an eye for an eye" (1972:II,165).

Blavatsky related certain characteristics which she found in Indian society to her view of Indian religion. In particular, she argued that because Brahmanism was the ancient wisdom tradition of the occultists, those who truly espoused Brahmanism must be both magicians and mystics.

Because the Indians possessed the ancient wisdom, they could perform magic. Thus Blavatsky claimed that "in India, magic has never died out" (1977:I,141-2). She pointed to the legends of the mysterious East and the renowned powers of Indian yogis as proof of the possibility of performing natural magic in accord with an occult science. Here Indian magic depended on the adept's knowledge of, and so influence upon, an astral sphere which consisted of those fluidic links which bound all things together. As she explained, "this secret of secrets, that soul is not knit to flesh, was practically demonstrated in the instance of the Yogis" who "emancipated their souls from the fetters of Prakti [matter]," and who "so developed their soul power and will force, as to have actually enabled themselves, while on earth, to communicate with the supernal worlds, and perform what is bunglingly termed 'miracles'" (1972:II,564).

Similarly, Indian adepts could practice a form of occult healing. Ayurvedic medicine depended on the doctor's knowledge of, and so influence upon, the astral plane. Ayurvedic doctors recognised the psychic origins of much disease; they accepted that "a curse, a blessing, a vow, a desire, an idle thought, can each assume a visible shape and so manifest itself objectively to the eyes of its author, or to him that it concerns" (1972:II,410). Indian magic and Indian medicine, therefore, were not supernatural or fraudulent, but rather the exercise of real powers of the mind.
as yet unacknowledged by Western science. The Yogis "depend entirely upon the will of the operator" (1977:II,68).

Because the Indians possessed the ancient wisdom, they were mystics concerned to lead pure lives built around inner contemplation of the divine. In particular, Blavatsky argued that the spirituality and asceticism of the Indians appeared in their commitment to a vegetarian diet. She did not praise vegetarianism because cows were holy, or because animals had souls, but solely because, as occultists had long believed, different foods had different effects on our psychic faculties: meat possessed a "magnetism" that was "deadening and obstructive to the 'psychic man'" (1977:IV,297). Like many Buddhists, Hindus and Jains, she believed that the state of our spiritual selves depended on our diet. Thus vegetarianism was both a source and a symbol of spirituality.

One might expect practices such as caste to have posed a problem for Blavatsky's view of India since she did not consider caste to be a spiritual, moral, or ascetic institution. Actually, however, Blavatsky again avoided such difficulties by distinguishing between an esoteric Brahmanism and an exoteric Hinduism. She dismissed those Indian social practices of which she disapproved as corruptions of an earlier ideal. Thus, for example, selfish Brahmins had "crammed the ancient manuscripts with interpolated slokas, intended to prove that the castes were predetermined by the Creator" (1972:I,588; 1972:II,169). Sometimes contemporary orientalists agreed with her analyses, but when they did not, she argued against them on almost a priori grounds: "I have not made a study of Hindu law, but I do know something of the principles of Hindu religions, or rather ethics, and of those of its glorious founders. I regard the former as the embodiment of justice, and the latter as ideals of spiritual perfectibility. When, then, anyone
points out to me in the existing canon any text, line or word that violates one's sense of perfect justice, I instinctively know it must be a later perversion of the original Smriti" (1977:IV,128). Here her subjectivist approach becomes so marked that she seems almost to declare that Indian religions and so Indian society must be as she wishes irrespective of any evidence to the contrary. Orientalists might or might not support her analysis: if they did, well and good; if they did not, they were wrong.

V

Blavatsky both adapted the occult tradition to meet the challenge of Victorian science and morality, and drew on Victorian orientalism to argue that the source of the ancient wisdom was India. The logic of these two arguments compelled her to bring Indian theologies into a close relationship to her occultism. Consequently, she both incorporated a number of the doctrines of eastern religions into her occultism, and interpreted eastern religions in the light of her occultism. The resulting view of India both reinforced and extended a conception of a mystical East which already had been popularised by some of the romantics.

Blavatsky reinforced the romantic view of the East in three main areas. First, she argued that Indian religions taught an immanentist cosmology that resembled the pantheism attributed to them by the romantics. She did so because she incorporated an evolutionary perspective which was rare amongst the romantics into her occultism, and then identified her occult cosmology with the teaching of the Vedas. Second, she portrayed Hinduism as a mystical religion that encouraged people to turn inwards and find the divine within themselves. Her mysticism was both a traditional part of occult teachings and a corollary of the immanentist or pantheistic
cosmology which she shared with the romantics. Finally, she described the Indian people as spiritual and ascetic. Whereas the romantics adopted Rousseau's idyllic view of the simplicity of primitive, or non-western, people, she argued, in accord with the occult tradition, that only pure people could possess the esoteric knowledge that she attributed to the Indians.

Blavatsky also added to the romantic view of the East in three main ways. First, she championed the theological dogmas of reincarnation and the law of karma on the grounds that they reconciled the idea of a moral universe with the idea of a universe governed by natural laws in a way that could provide a basis for acting morally in an age when the sanctions of Christianity had lost their force. Second, she put forward the idea that eastern religions possessed an esoteric meaning that only the spiritual adept could discover; she did so in accord with the occult tradition, thereby defending the more outlandish aspects of her interpretation of Buddhism and Hinduism, such as the belief that they incorporated the discoveries of modern science. Finally, she made India the centre for the natural magic which occultists traditionally associated with their cosmological schemes. Indian adepts understood the fundamental unity and spiritual nature of all that existed, and this understanding lent a special efficacy, that western science could not match, to practices such as Ayurvedic medicine.

Blavatsky has had a tremendous impact on the development of popular orientalism in the west. The Theosophical Society still flourishes as the grandparent of the New Age movement - in 1991 the Society opened a new centre for the study of theosophy and science (Theosophical Society). In addition, many later New Age figures and groups have been historical offshoots of the Society including both Rudolph Steiner with his Anthroposophical Society and Jiddu Krishnamurti with his stress on individuals finding their own paths. More importantly, many of
Blavatsky's views remain fashionable throughout the New Age movement. The general problem which she confronted continues to provide the rational for many New Age groups. They too try to reconcile religious life with a modern world dominated by a scientific spirit; thus they seek natural accounts of the workings of the divine and the possibility of magic, often appealing to idiosyncratic interpretations of things such as the new physics as evidence for their religious beliefs. Further, New Age groups continue to show a predilection for equating their beliefs with an ancient wisdom associated with the religious traditions of cultures other than their own. Finally, New Age groups often adopt Blavatsky's method for bridging any obvious gaps between the pseudo-scientific religious beliefs that they espouse and the alternative religious traditions that they champion. They appeal to some sort of esoteric understanding of these alternative religious traditions to justify their loose interpretations based on a selective use of contemporary scholarship. Indeed, they sometimes seem to define their understanding of alternative religious traditions and cultures in terms of their own preferences without bothering to study these traditions and cultures in anything other than the most superficial manner.
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1. This essay first appeared in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* LXII/3 (1994), 747-67. I thank the Leverhulme Trust for awarding me a Travel Abroad Studentship with which to pursue my research.

2. The different attitudes to religious dogma of the romantics with their liberal Christianity and the occultists with their interest in cosmological theories and magic is clear from the debate between Emerson and Professor Bush, a Swedenborgian (Emerson, 1903-4a). These different attitudes to dogma made for significantly different approaches to Indian religions. Thus, for example, Carpenter complained of one of Blavatsky's most prominent followers: "with all her enthusiasm for the subject, Mrs Besant does not appear to have the intuitive perception, the mystic quality of mind which should enable her to reach the very heart of the old Vedantic teaching"; her thinking is "clear and systematic," but she "has little of the poetic or inspirational" (1916:221).

3. It is notable that the leading exponents of what has been called neo-Hinduism, people such as Sri Aurobindo and Swami Vivekananda, later defended and reconstituted Hinduism on similar grounds.

4. Blavatsky changed her mind about the Philadelphia phenomena when they were discredited as clearly fraudulent (1977:I,75-83). Olcott gives another contemporary account of the phenomena.

5. Theosophists think her most important work is *The Secret Doctrine*. Nonetheless, I have concentrated on *Isis Unveiled* since it was here that she first met the challenge of modern thought in a manner that promoted the vision of the East that forms the main subject of this essay.

6. Like many occultists Blavatsky also believed that the secret
of the universe lay hidden in Pythagorean numerals and ancient symbols: "the fundamental geometrical figure of the Kabala," for instance, "contains in its grandiose, because simple combination, the key to the universal problem"; and likewise, "the sacred numbers of the universe in their esoteric combination solve the great problem" (1972:I,14 & 7).

7. The best expression of her mysticism is The Voice of the Silence.

8. She often cited Jacolliot, Jones, and others on topics such as the antiquity of Indian religions and the influence of oriental ideas on the Romans (1972:I,585-7).

9. Later, however, she succumbed to the pressure of scholars who insisted that her doctrines were not those of Buddhism. She said that there had been a semantic muddle since the theosophists had used the word Buddhism when they should have used "'Budhism' from Budha, Wisdom or Knowledge" (1888:I,11).

10. Her early identification of the religion of ancient Indian with Buddhism is symbolised vividly by her redrawing of the map of India to include the sacred Buddhist cities of central Asia: "When we say, indiscriminately, 'India,' we do not mean the India of our modern days, but that of the archaic period. In those ancient times countries which are now known to us by other names were called India. There was an Upper, a Lower, and a Western India, the latter of which is now Persia-Iran. The countries now named Thibet, Mongolia, and Great Tartary, were also considered by the ancient writers as India" (1972:I,589).

11. At first Blavatsky dismissed the idea of reincarnation (1972:I,289), but early in the 1880s she began to argue that humans did go through a cycle of rebirths, though she denied there was any discrepancy between the two views she expressed (1972:IV,182-6).
Her classification of the "Mahomedan" along with the rest might seem to be a mistake. In fact, however, she argued that Islam, properly understood, taught belief in karma. Once again, she legitimised this idiosyncratic interpretation by distinguishing the true esoteric Islam that interested her from the corrupted, modern and exoteric Islam that scholars had focused upon.