

# THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY



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## **The History of a Spiritualist Movement**

**Jeffrey D. Lavoie**



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*The Theosophical Society: The History of a Spiritualist Movement*

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## Part I.

# BACKGROUND

### 1.1 Preface

My first encounter with the Theosophical Society occurred while researching the religious roots of the Nazi movement for a World War II undergraduate class. It was through this experience that I read about one of the Theosophical Society's infamous co-founders who went on to become involved in many noteworthy tasks such as advocating for women's rights, performing the first recorded cremation in the history of the United States, and even helping an exploited country obtain a healthy sense of national pride (India). What I found to be even more captivating was that all of this had occurred during the Victorian era (1837–1901) and by a Russian woman who had been estranged from her husband. This woman turned out to be a creative, theatrical, and often times irascible Spiritualist named Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891).

After my preliminary introduction to Blavatsky as an undergraduate student, I started acquainting myself with some of her major writings. The first book I examined was a curious publication titled *The Secret Doctrine* (1888) which I determined to be dense, circular, and non-sensical. Notwithstanding my initial reaction, I found this work to be full of strange ideas shrouded in the mystery of 'Eastern' terminology which made me all the more captivated by its admitted success and influence. After reading this perplexing work I resolved to learn everything that I could about the eccentric leader Madame Blavatsky and this mystical organization known as the Theosophical Society. Since then I have voraciously studied the history and philosophy of this movement. This led to graduate studies at Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, MA during which time I studied the roots of the modern feminist movement and examined historical methodologies while cross-registering in Eastern religion classes at Harvard Graduate School of Arts and Sciences. This was followed by doctoral studies in Western Esotericism at the University of Exeter under the supervision of both Professor Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke and Dr. Hereward Tilton. My doctoral thesis directly pertains to the topics of temporality (time), soteriology (salvation), and cosmology (origin) in the early Theosophical Society; however, through my ac-

ademic endeavors I came to the realization that the Spiritualist movement of the nineteenth century held many similar elements to Blavatsky's later ideals purported in Theosophy even after the alleged 'Oriental shift' in her teachings. Despite Blavatsky's claim to have reformed the Spiritualist movement, it seemed evident that Blavatsky had not moved all that far away from mainstream Spiritualism. This realization mixed with the fact that many of the crucial figures associated with both of these movements have been ignored by modern history has led to the publication of this work.

### **1.2 Why Study Madame Blavatsky or the Theosophical Society?**

Multiple studies and biographical accounts have been published on the life of Helena Blavatsky; all of these surveys have maintained differing perspectives on her contributions and accomplishments. Some accounts paint Blavatsky as a depraved opportunist preying on the ignorant and unfortunate; others still view Blavatsky as a highly evolved spiritual teacher, with a direct line to the world's hidden 'masters.' This particular work attempts a very different type of study. In a sense this work is not just about the life of Madame Blavatsky, Henry Olcott, or, even a general history of the Theosophical Society. Instead this study provides a comparative history of two 'distinct' nineteenth century religious movements and attempts to define the connection between them- the Theosophical Society and its intersection with the Spiritualist movement out of which it had emerged. Additionally, this study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of key individuals associated with this connection and a detailed analysis of Blavatsky's writings.

It is important to remember that the Theosophical Society was founded by a group of Spiritualists in the nineteenth century who were interested in the investigation of paranormal activity including spirit channeling, table levitation, and the appearance of spirits in human form (materializations).<sup>1</sup> There is a word (which will be employed throughout this study) that explains these various unexplainable psychic events mentioned above - 'phenomenon' (phenomena - plural). In this introductory statement it seems appropriate to define the word 'Spiritualism' and the beliefs associated with this term. Historically, there are all varying types of Spiritualist groups including Christian orthodox and progressive agnostic belief systems; however, all of these seem to agree on one overriding philosophical tenet- *that departed spirits of the recently deceased can communicate with the living through*

*human beings known as mediums*- this belief is the main principle that unites all Spiritualists.

What many people do not realize is the enormous influence that Spiritualism exerted on Victorian culture. Numerous famous individuals were influenced by this movement including Arthur Conan Doyle, Mary Todd Lincoln, and Victor Hugo to name just a few. Though it is difficult to obtain accurate figures as to the number of Spiritualist practitioners in the nineteenth century, Michael Gomes the Theosophical Historian noted the following numbers:

...in the United States between 9,000,000 and 10,000,000 Spiritualists in a population of some 44,000,000. The nine million figure was also reported by the Spiritualist authority, writer Andrew Jackson Davis. He arrived at his deduction not only by access to a 'superior condition' but from the fact that he ran his own bookstore and printing house on East Fourth Street in New York City. The Spiritualist weekly the Boston *Banner of Light*, challenged this figure in the March 7 issue, claiming that 'there are at least from ELEVEN TO THIRTEEN MILLIONS of Spiritualists in the United States.'<sup>2</sup>

The late Janet Oppenheim in her monumental work *The Other World* suggested that the number of Spiritualists in Britain during the nineteenth century was difficult to calculate due to the elusiveness and the ever-shifting population of the time period. She conservatively estimated that there were somewhere between 'ten thousand and one hundred thousand spiritualists in the nineteenth century.'<sup>3</sup> Though the above figures are subject to debate, they seem to imply that one out of four people during this time period were somehow associated with the Spiritualist movement. Thus, the importance of this movement on Victorian history and modern religious movements cannot be denied.

It is further unfortunate that at this stage in modern history, the average person has probably never heard of the Theosophical Society which has gone on to shape 20<sup>th</sup> century culture through the influence of such pivotal figures as Mahatma Gandhi, L. Frank Baum (author of *The Wizard of Oz*), William Butler Yeats, and even the king of pop- Elvis Presley.<sup>4</sup> It has even been rumored that Albert Einstein consulted Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine* from time to time having a copy which he kept on his desk.<sup>5</sup> Even though this movement has dwindled in membership in recent years, it played an important role in the history and formation of the twentieth and twenty-first centu-

ries. The conclusion seems evident- an understanding of these two past movements and their leaders remains critical towards ascertaining the religious and social climate of the present.

### **1.3 Spiritualism: A Nineteenth Century Religious Movement**

Modern Spiritualism began in 1848 at the Fox household out in the city of Hydesville, NY. Strange and eerie noises ricocheted throughout the house on 31 March awaking the Fox family. Katy one of the Fox daughters then attempted to communicate with this apparition allegedly addressing the ghost ‘Mr. Split-foot, do as I do.’<sup>6</sup> This was followed by a series of knocks which were believed to have been a communication from a spirit that was employing a type of Morse code to answer the questions it had been asked. Though other events prefigured this movement, this initial communication with the Fox sisters birthed a new religious belief system which was subsequently labeled Modern Spiritualism. Thus, at its very origination Spiritualism was directly connected to these psychological disturbances known as phenomena. This belief in the survival of the soul after death was eventually merged with Swedenborgian principles and provided the philosophy and the religious framework out of which the Theosophical Society would emerge. Some other different strains of philosophy that prefigured the Modern Spiritualist movement include Mesmerism and related ‘sciences’, mythography, the historical critique of Christianity, and the works of Andrew Jackson Davis. These belief structures provided the philosophical foundation on which Modern Spiritualism and eventually Theosophy would be built.

Most scholars recognize that when researching the Victorian cult known as the Theosophical Society that it should be divided into two chronological stages: the early Society which emerged out of Spiritualism from 1875-1878 and the later Theosophical Society which made an ‘Oriental shift’ having been relocated to India in 1879. Some researchers have labeled these two stages ‘first’ and ‘second’ claiming that these two periods remain philosophically distinct from one another; however, employing these categorizations implies that the ‘second’ Society was completely divergent from the views of the ‘first’ Society which does not seem to be supported by the evidence.

Despite the fact that the Theosophical Society underwent an obvious Oriental shift in 1879, from its inception the Society remained complicit to the basic belief of Spiritualism which held the possibility that the deceased spirit could somehow communicate with the living; this ideal was a central theme of the early Society and was maintained

even in its post-Oriental years. Now an argument could be made for an epistemological shift in the Society from an existential and experiential leadership in its earlier years and its eventual adoption of a dictatorial style led by Blavatsky's 'mahatmas' in its post-Oriental stage; however, even this categorization appears much too cut and dry than the facts will permit. Given this consistent philosophical belief in the basic premise of Spiritualism, the designation 'first' and 'second' seems an inaccurate description as the Society maintained some similar doctrines including a Western Esoteric emphasis and its accessibility by Spiritualists throughout the years of 1876-1891. This belief will be defended throughout this work.

The main thesis of this book is two-fold: the first goal appears self-evident in the title *The Theosophical Society: The History of a Spiritualist Movement*. It is the belief of the author that despite all of the shifting claims made by Blavatsky and Olcott implying that the Theosophical Society was a separate organization distinct from Spiritualism that, in fact, its philosophies and belief systems remained compatible with Spiritualism up until the death of one of its most popular co-founders Helena Blavatsky in 1891 (though shifting slightly in the year 1888 the Society remained open and embracing to Spiritualists). The second purpose of this work is to provide updated biographical information for the important figures related to these two movements who have largely been ignored by modern scholarship. Whether the author is successful at presenting these biographies by connecting them to the thesis that the Theosophical Society was a reformed branch of Spiritualism can only be determined by each individual reader; however, at a minimum these pages contain a detailed history of two enchanting movements that went on to define the Victorian Era and mold modernity.

#### **1.4 Theosophy: A Western Esoteric Spiritualist Movement**

Despite its heavy interaction with Spiritualism, Theosophy has been categorized as a Western Esoteric movement. The term 'Western Esotericism' may be unfamiliar to some readers, but it is synonymous with another word which has an ominous connotation across the diverse circles of the Western world- the occult. The term 'occult' is typically associated with a wide range of different topics such as near death experiences, Wicca, Spiritualism, crystal gazing, tarot cards, yoga, kabbalah, hermeticism (a belief in the teachings of the *Hermeticum*), Freemasonry, and astrology to name only a few, but what does the word 'occult' actually mean? The word occult is de-

rived from the Latin term *occultus* which signifies something that is hidden. Now, out of the list of subjects associated with occultism listed above, it should be noted that none of them would be considered hidden. In fact, throughout the last several hundred years numerous books have been published expounding upon all of these occult subjects; thus, the original definition of this term has been culturally changed to define something else. As 'occult' no longer denotes a hidden philosophy, a new word has been invented which describes the intellectual history of these 'occult' subjects and their involvement within the academic discipline of history now referred to as Western Esotericism.

The first word in this term, 'Western' signifies something that is relevant in the Western world. This region could be geographically defined as Europe and North America. The second word 'esotericism' is a vague term that comes from two Latin words- *eso* (inside) and *ter* (opposition). Thus, a literal definition of Western Esotericism means 'something that is opposed to Western (mainstream) teaching.' It seems indisputable that the dominant religious tradition in the Western world during the Victorian era was Christianity. Consequently, the original definition of Western Esotericism meant 'something that was not Western (i. e. Christian);' however, even this definition is incorrect as many esoteric groups have emerged out of Christian circles while other groups were meant to effectively function within Christianity.<sup>7</sup> Antoine Faivre the renowned pioneer of Western Esoteric scholarship suggested that 'esoteric currents could not, except by intellectual dishonesty, be defined as by nature marginal to the churches.'<sup>8</sup> Given the ambiguity of this term, Faivre established four main criteria to determine as to whether a religious belief could be classified as 'Western Esoteric.' Though these classifications are open to debate in the modern academic field of Western Esotericism, these guidelines are generally accepted as typical classifications for Western Esoteric beliefs. These include:

1) *Correspondences*- This implies that all of nature in all of its multiple parts (i.e. stars, planets, humans, animals, plants, minerals, states of mind, health, and disease) are linked through a series of correspondences or analogies.<sup>9</sup> This is where the saying which is commonly employed in occult circles 'as above, so below' originated from.

2) *Living Nature*- This characteristic is directly related to the concept of correspondences defined above. This phrase expresses the idea



that nature ‘must be read like a book.’<sup>210</sup> In other words the earth (‘mother nature’) also corresponds with the human condition. Thus, the use of particular herbs, stones, and other natural elements are employed to treat particular ailments. This idea also includes the use of talismans and birthstones. Hanegraaff notes that this belief ‘furnishes the theoretical foundations for concrete implementation: various kinds of magical practice, “occult medicine”, theosophical soteriologies based on the frame work of alchemy, and so on are based on it.’<sup>211</sup>

3) *Imagination and mediations*- This term implies an imagination that reveals mediations of all kinds such as rituals, symbolic images...intermediary spirits.<sup>212</sup> A mediation could be an angel, chohan, demon, or any other supernatural or highly evolved being. This characteristic distinguishes occultism from mysticism as a mystic seeks a direct union with God without any intermediaries; whereas, the occultist focuses his attention on the intermediaries.<sup>13</sup>

4) *Transmutation*- mandates that the practitioner will experience an inner transformation. This transmutation (or transformation) comes after a realization of something profound or deeply spiritual.

Professor Goodrick-Clarke noted that ‘Blavatsky’s cosmology presents the prime characteristics of Western Esotericism as defined by Antoine Faivre’s pioneering studies...These characteristics comprise (a) correspondences between all parts of the universe, the macrocosm and microcosm; (b) living nature as a complex, plural, hierarchical and animate whole; (c) imagination and mediations in the form of intermediary spirits, symbols, and mandalas; and (d) the experience of transmutation of the soul through purification and ascent.’<sup>214</sup> Thus, the characterization of the Theosophical Society as a Western Esoteric movement seems justifiable; however, this raises a tension that must be discussed upfront.

Antoine Faivre further explained that Spiritualism ‘does not belong to the history of esotericism properly speaking, but would be closely associated with it because of its wide influence and because of the problems it raised.’<sup>215</sup> In other words, Spiritualism though exerting influence upon various Western Esoteric groups could not in itself be classified as a form of Western Esotericism because of its ambiguous definition. Because Spiritualism only required one common belief, it remained open to numerous interpretations and denomina-

tions. Case in point, the Theosophical Society originated as a Spiritualist movement and maintained a philosophy that seemed to continually align with Spiritualism; nonetheless, it evolved and adopted many characteristics and philosophies that would become typical of Western Esotericism- Theosophy was both a Western Esoteric and a Spiritualist movement. As Faivre noted there was some ambiguity in his definition and he also explained that the problems of Spiritualism led to the development of Western esotericism- this was certainly true of the Theosophical Society.

Looking back on history is a privilege of the present, yet the question remains, 'how would a contemporary of Helena Blavatsky have classified the relationship between the Theosophical Society and Spiritualism?' Though there is much disagreement on this issue, one Victorian newspaper reporter for the *Standard* claimed that Blavatsky was 'the principal exponent of a superior and more philosophical sort of Spiritualism; sometimes called Theosophy, and sometime Esoteric Buddhism.'<sup>16</sup> The belief that Theosophy was a philosophically advanced form of Spiritualism seems fitting. Also, after 1879 the Theosophical Society relocated to India and through this new environment was heavily influenced by Eastern texts and mythology. Henry Olcott the co-founder of the Society in his *Diary Leaves* referred to Blavatsky as a practitioner of 'Eastern Spiritualism' which also provided for the Eastern influence on the Western teachings of the Society especially apparent in such writings as *The Secret Doctrine* and *The Voice of Silence* while admitting the influence of Western Spiritualism.<sup>17</sup> The Theosophical Society's relocation to India in 1879 and the assimilation of the Society into Indian culture will be referred to throughout this writing as the 'Oriental shift.'

The term 'Oriental' is typically used to refer to countries in Asia; however, the term 'Orientalist' contains a slightly negative connotation though it more accurately describes the attitude of Blavatsky and Olcott upon entering India. Edward Said noted that 'in a quite constant way, Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible *positional* superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand;' this definition of 'Orientalism' is directly related to colonial imperialism and the belief of Western superiority in Eastern culture which remains an impending issue.

Regardless of this shift, the mere fact that Blavatsky was attempting to purify Spiritualism by providing an intellectually viable philosophy against materialism made her adopt many of the characteristics

of Western Esotericism including a neo-Platonic world view which is at the core of Faivre's four characteristics of Western Esotericism. It should be clarified at the onset of this work that the purpose of this book is to examine and analyze the relationship between Spiritualism and the Theosophical Society, *not* to dispute over theoretical classifications.

### **1.5 Theosophy and Spiritualism: A Reformation**

To Madame Blavatsky, Theosophy was a reformation of the Spiritualist movement. Throughout the course of this research, it has been determined that this reformation was more apparent than actual. Regardless of Blavatsky's claims that she had for the first time unveiled (or more accurately revealed) the 'ancient wisdom tradition' which was the foundational truth of all religions, her Theosophy actually affirmed many Spiritualist doctrines and continued to embrace these ideals long after the Society's relocation to India. Blavatsky continuously shifts back and forth between reconciling Theosophy with Spiritualism by listing their affinities while at other times attempting to clearly demarcate her organization from Spiritualism focusing upon their distinctions. Notwithstanding this wavering, one thing cannot be denied- that these two religious groups were intimately connected with one another both in history and philosophy. This book attempts to understand this connection and serves as the first step towards defining this ambiguous relationship. It is only fair to warn the reader upfront that there is no 'smoking gun' at the conclusion of this study that will put this work in perspective and clearly define this relationship; rather, it is only by chronologically examining the writings of key figures associated with both of these movements that the relationship between these two movements begins to be understood. Now many of these writings change and evolve over time and no one testimony (or quote) will prove or disprove this connection. Rather, it is only by comparing these writings to each other that the complexity of this relationship will begin to emerge. This relationship will provide the point of connection (or common ground) between the biographies of the various figures explored throughout this work.

It should further be noted that while many of Blavatsky's interactions and references to Spiritualism are mentioned throughout the pages of this book, nonetheless, some information had to be left out due to space constraints. Still, the author believes that the examples presented in this work provide a fair and balanced sampling of her views throughout the years. In order to arrive at a balanced conclu-

sion, this study will examine the writings from some of the influential leaders of both of these unorthodox movements comparing and analyzing them for their relationship to each other. Examining each author's writings chronologically and noting the evolution of their thoughts through their works will assist the reader in ascertaining the kinetic social climate within these two Victorian religious movements. Again, whether the author succeeds at this task will be left up to the decision of the reader, but the author requests that readers embark upon this journey through Victorian history with an open mind towards truly understanding the richness and diversity of the events and personalities during the years 1875-1891 that contributed to the origination and promulgation of the Spiritualist movement known as the early Theosophical Society.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This goal seemed apparent in the original Preamble of the 1875 Theosophical Society which asserted that the Founders hoped 'that by going deeper than modern science has hitherto done, into the esoteric philosophies of ancient times, they may be enabled to obtain, for themselves and other investigators, proof of the existence of an 'Unseen Universe,' the nature of its inhabitants, if such there be, and the laws which govern them and their relations with mankind.'

<sup>2</sup> Michael Gomes, *Dawning of the Theosophical Movement* (Wheaton, IL: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1987), pp. 19-20.

<sup>3</sup> Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England 1850-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 49-50.

<sup>4</sup> Sylvia Cranston, *HPB: The Extraordinary Life and Influence of Helena Blavatsky, Founder of the Modern Theosophical Movement* (Santa Barbara, CA: Path Publishing House, 1993), pp. 511-512.

<sup>5</sup> Cranston, *HPB*, p. xx.

<sup>6</sup> Nancy Rubin Stuart, *The Reluctant Spiritualist: The Life of Maggie Fox* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Books, 2005), pp. 5-6. Recently, some researches have suggested that this address to 'Mr. Splitfoot' was a later interpolation.

<sup>7</sup> There is a group referred to as Christian 'theosophists' (the lower case 't' differentiates this earlier philosophy from Blavatsky's nineteenth century 'Theosophy'-these two distinct movements should not be confused) which included Jacob Boehme (1575 - 1624), Robert Fludd (1574 - 1637), and Jan Baptist van Helmont (1579 - 1644); these figures could be considered 'esoteric' Christians.

<sup>8</sup> Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany: State University of New York, 1994), p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 8.

<sup>10</sup> Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press), p. 398.

<sup>12</sup> Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, p. 12.

<sup>13</sup> Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, p. 12.

<sup>14</sup> Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *Helena Blavatsky* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2004), p. 141.

<sup>15</sup> Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, p. 87.

<sup>16</sup> 'Supernatural Experiences of Madame Blavatsky,' *Standard* (19 November 1886), p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves*, I, p. 15. Also, the term 'the Society' will be used in this book to refer to the Theosophical Society in cases where it seems grammatically awkward to employ the full name.



## Part II.

# THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY

### 2.1 The Theosophical Society: An Historical Analysis

The Theosophical Society was founded in 1875 primarily (but not solely) by Colonel Olcott (1832-1907) and the capricious Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891).<sup>1</sup> An attempt was made by these two individuals earlier that same year to institute a small Spiritualist organization known as ‘The Miracle Club’ for the purpose of investigating and propagating inquiries into psychic phenomena and mediums. The establishment of this club was announced in the *New York Daily Graphic* on 4 May 1875 and in the *Spiritualist Scientist* on 20 May of that same year though this group never seemed to take off due to a severe lack of leadership and direction.<sup>2</sup> This failure paved the way for the emergence of a similar yet different organization that would forever change the face of Spiritualism. On 7 September 1875 Blavatsky, Olcott, and about a dozen other colleagues had gathered to hear a lecture presented by George Felt on ‘The Lost Canon of Proportion of the Egyptians.’ At this meeting, Olcott suggested forming a society that would further the study of occultism (Western Esotericism).

On 13 September, in a private meeting it was decided that this society was to be called the Theosophical Society. The word ‘Theosophy’ (written with a capital ‘T’ to distinguish it from the theosophy of Jacob Boehme and other earlier practitioners of an unconnected belief system) was a combination of two Greek word ‘theos’ (God) and ‘sophia’ (wisdom). Though other names for the society were considered with the aid of a dictionary, among them ‘Egyptological,’ ‘Hermetic,’ and ‘Rosicrucian’ ‘Theosophical’ was finally chosen, as it was felt to express the esoteric truth they sought. A current edition of Webster’s *American Dictionary* owned by Olcott gave a definition: Gk. ‘wise in things of God.’ Supposed intercourse with God and superior spirits, and consequent attainment of superhuman knowledge by physical processes, as by the theurgic operations of some ancient Platonists, or by the chemical processes of the German fire philosophers... a direct insight into the processes of the divine mind, and the interior relations of the divine nature.<sup>3</sup>

At the core the Theosophical Society was formed for the express purpose of studying and understanding the 'Unseen Universe' and ascertaining the ancient 'occult' philosophies. It is imperative to observe at the beginning of this study that the very foundations of the Theosophical Society though rooted in Western Esotericism were defined for their relationship to Spiritualism. In the original Preamble issued with the legal by-laws in the November meeting it was stated that:

It [The Theosophical Society] is formed neither as a Spiritualistic schism, nor to serve as the foe or friend of any sectarian or philosophic body... Its only axiom is the omnipotence of truth...The Spiritualists, who profess to be in constant relations with the departed, are unable to agree upon a system of philosophy. Thus the longing of the race for a practical demonstration of its future existence goes unsatisfied; the laws of intercommunication between the visible and the invisible worlds are not accurately defined; and the problem of the two eternities which bound this life remains unsolved, despite a multitude of churches and academies...

Thus, one of the early goals of the Theosophical Society was linked to establishing a clear philosophy for the Spiritualist movement. Based upon these original purposes set forth above, the Theosophical Society was viewed by many as another Spiritualist organization emerging out of this mainstream movement. Also of importance, most of the founders of this movement (including the two most well known- Helena Blavatsky and Colonel Henry Olcott) were both directly linked to the mainstream Spiritualist movement of the nineteenth century. This Society would go on to become one of the most popular occult movements of the twentieth century and even today continues to exert its influence on modern New Age and occult movements. Its initial popularity was largely due to its ability to attract the attention of multiple prestigious Spiritualists such as C. C. Massey, Emma Hardinge Britten, A. E. Newton and William Stainton Moses to name a few. Few would deny the direct connection between the Theosophical Society and Spiritualism at its inception. In order to ascertain the relationship between these two organizations an understanding of both individual belief structures must first be understood. At this point the Theosophical Society will be examined beginning with an evaluation of its two primary co-founders- Madame Blavatsky and Henry Olcott.



## 2.2 Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831- 1891):

### A Feminist Genealogy

The main reason for the recounting of these biographical details concerning the life of Madame Blavatsky is to provide the reader with a basic chronological structure concerning the events that will be mentioned throughout this work. Many of these incidents will be expounded upon in later sections; however, at this point only a basic overview is required.

Helena Petrovna Blavatsky came from a long line of feminist thinkers.<sup>4</sup> Helena's maternal grandmother, Helena Pavlovna Dolgorukov (1789-1860), was an early example of an independent woman who was both intellectual and scholarly during a time when the world was dominated by men. Dolgorukov came from one of the 'most distinguished and aristocratic families in Russia' and was widely read in history, numismatics, archaeology, and natural science having published many works on botany.<sup>5</sup> Princess Helena Dolgorukov, who married Andrey Mihailovich de Fadaye (1789-1867), was a key influence on the young Helena Blavatsky during her formative years as she brought her up after the death of Helena's own mother, Helena Hahn. Indeed, Helena's mother, Helena Andreyevna von Hahn nee de Fadaye (1814-1842), was also a feminist in her own right, establishing herself as a successful novelist at a young age; her first work was published at the age of 23 in 1837, her three most famous works being *Utballa*, *The World's Judgment*, and *Theophania*.<sup>6</sup>

There are passages throughout Helena Hahn's writings that illustrated a feminist point of view. Specifically, Hahn tended to focus on the 'need for emotional emancipation of women.'<sup>7</sup> For example, *The World's Judgment* was written from a semi-autobiographical point of view. It contained the story of a woman who was a fiction writer and was unhappily married to a Russian officer. This story depicted the subservient life of a woman in nineteenth-century Russia whose dismal existence revolved around the whims of her husband's military career. Hahn's descriptive story-telling most probably influenced the young Helena Blavatsky who would, by contrast, refuse to submit to the lifestyle of the protagonists in her mother's stories. Instead, she would marry at a young age and quickly leave her husband in search of adventure. Although young Helena Blavatsky lost her mother when she was still young (*aet.* 11), the influence of her mother's feminist writings and convictions cannot be over emphasized.

Blavatsky's later attraction to Spiritualism as a movement illustrated her interest in feminist ideology and the continuation of her own