H. P. Blavatsky’s Theosophy in Context:

The Construction of Meaning in Modern Western Esotericism

Submitted by Tim Rudbøg to the University of Exeter
as a thesis for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Western Esotericism
In December 2012

This thesis is available for Library use on the understanding that it is copyright material
and that no quotation from the thesis may be published without proper
acknowledgement.

I certify that all material in this thesis which is not my own work has been identified and
that no material has previously been submitted and approved for the award of a degree
by this or any other University.

1
H. P. Blavatsky's Theosophy in Context: The Construction of Meaning in Modern Western Esotericism

H. P. Blavatsky's (1831-1891) Theosophy has been defined as central to the history of modern Western spirituality and esotericism, yet to this date no major study has mapped and analysed the major themes of Blavatsky's writings, how Blavatsky used the concept 'Theosophy' or to what extent she was engaged with the intellectual contexts of her time. Thus the purpose of this thesis is to fill this gap.

The proposed theoretical framework is based on the centrality of language in the production of intellectual products, such as texts—but contrary to the dominant focus on strategies, rhetoric and power this thesis will focus on the construction of meaning coupled with a set of methodological tools based on contextual analysis, intellectual history and intertextuality.

In addition to an overview of Blavatsky research this thesis will map and analyse Blavatsky's use of the concept 'Theosophy' as well as Blavatsky's primary discourses, identified as: (1) discourse for ancient knowledge, (2) discourse against Christian dogmatism, (3) discourse against the modern natural sciences and materialism, (4) discourse against modern spiritualism, (5) discourse for system and (7) discourse for universal brotherhood. In mapping and analysing Blavatsky's discourses, it was found that her construction of meaning was significantly interconnected with broader intellectual contexts, such as 'modern historical consciousness', 'critical enlightenment ideas', studies in religion, studies in mythology, the modern sciences, spiritualism, systemic philosophy, reform movements and practical ethics. It, for example, becomes clear that Blavatsky's search for an ancient 'Wisdom Religion' was actually a part of a common intellectual occupation during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and that her critique of the Christian dogmas was equally a common intellectual trend. To read Blavatsky's discourses as the idiosyncratic strategies of an esotericist, isolated from their larger contexts or only engaged with them in order to legitimise minority views would therefore largely fail to account for the result of this thesis: that in historical actuality, they were a part of the larger cultural web of meaning.
Table of Contents

List of accompanying material ....................................................................................... 6
Abbreviations and punctuation ......................................................................................... 7
Introduction ....................................................................................................................... 8
The two major parts of this thesis ..................................................................................... 9
The Chapters of Part 1.................................................................................................... 10
The Chapters of Part 2..................................................................................................... 10
The two appendices ....................................................................................................... 11

PART I

THE ACADEMIC STUDY OF H. P. BLAVATSKY'S THEOSOPHY ......................... 13
1.1 Major Trends in Blavatsky Research – Literary Review ........................................ 14
   1.1.1 Early encounters ................................................................................................. 14
   1.1.1.1 Colonel Henry Steel Olcott (1832-1907) .................................................... 15
   1.1.1.2 Alfred Percy Sinnett (1840-1921) .............................................................. 17
   1.1.1.3 Countess Constance Georgina Louise Wachtmeister (1838-1910) ......... 20
   1.1.1.4 George Robert Stowe Mead (1863-1933) ................................................. 21
   1.1.1.5 Annie Besant (1847–1933) ........................................................................ 23
   1.1.2 Sceptics ............................................................................................................ 24
   1.1.2.1 The Society for Psychical Research ......................................................... 25
   1.1.2.1.1 The Society for Psychical Research and the 'Coulomb case' .................. 26
   1.1.2.1.2 The Society for Psychical Research and the 'Hodgson's report' .......... 26
   1.1.2.1.3 The Society for Psychical Research and A Modern Priestess of Isis .... 29
   1.1.2.2 Conclusion to the sceptics ........................................................................... 33
   1.1.3 Historical Studies ............................................................................................ 33
   1.1.3.1 The academic study of Blavatsky's Theosophy, 1930-1971 ...................... 33
   1.1.3.2 The academic study of Blavatsky's Theosophy in the 1980s .................... 36
   1.1.3.3 The academic study of Blavatsky's Theosophy in the 1990s .................... 37
   1.1.3.4 The academic study of Blavatsky's Theosophy from 2000 to now .......... 41
   1.1.4 The Academic study of Western esotericism .................................................. 44
1.2 Theory and Method ................................................................................................. 52

PART II

H. P. BLAVATSKY'S THEOSOPHY, SOURCES AND DISCOURSES .............. 73
2.1 The Nature of Theosophy according to Blavatsky ............................................... 74
   2.1.1 Origin and use of the word Theosophy through Western history ............... 74
   2.1.2 Blavatsky's first use of the term Theosophy .................................................. 90
   2.1.3 The formation of the 'Theosophical Society' ................................................... 95
   2.1.4 Blavatsky's conceptualization of Theosophy ................................................. 101
   2.1.4.1 Neo-Platonic roots and etymological definition of the term ..................... 102
   2.1.4.2 The Wisdom-Religion ............................................................................. 105
   2.1.4.2.1 The Abstract Theosophy, Wisdom-Religion or 'Divine Wisdom' ....... 108
   2.1.4.2.2 The Historical Wisdom-Religion ......................................................... 115
   2.1.4.3 Theosophy as Psychology and Divine inspiration ................................... 119
   2.1.4.4 Practical Theosophy, Divine Ethics and Universal Brotherhood ............ 122
   2.1.4.5 Theosophy and The Secrets of Nature ..................................................... 127
   2.1.5 Concluding summary ...................................................................................... 134
2.2 Blavatsky's Discourse for Ancient Knowledge ...................................................... 136
   2.2.1 Modern Historical Consciousness .................................................................. 141
   2.2.1.1 The modern discourse of progress ............................................................ 142
   2.2.1.1.1 Blavatsky's embrace of progress prior to Isis Unveiled 1875-1877 .... 153
   2.2.1.1.2 Blavatsky's embrace of progress in Isis Unveiled 1877 ....................... 155
   2.2.1.1.3 Blavatsky's embrace of progress between Isis Unveiled and The Secret  

3
2.3 Blavatsky’s Discourse against Christian dogmatism

2.4 Blavatsky’s Discourse against the Natural Sciences and Materialism

2.5 Blavatsky’s Discourse Against Modern Spiritualism

2.6 Blavatsky’s Discourse for System