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Charles Johnston's presentation has historical value as he was present in London at the June 24, 1885 meeting when Richard Hodgson read part of his report before the Society for Psychical Research. Johnston's experiences and firsthand observations about other early developments in the Theosophical Movement provide valuable insight.

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## The Theosophical Movement.

By Charles Johnston

It will be best to treat my theme historically; and I may be pardoned, perhaps, if I speak of my own observation of the Theosophical Movement, as it has been the most important thing in my life for the last two and twenty years.

When I first came to know of the movement, much had already been accomplished since the foundation of the Theosophical Society at New York in 1875. While Mme. Blavatsky was still in America, her first great work, *Isis Unveiled*, appeared, and even as early as 1878, the Theosophical Society, of which she was the tireless Corresponding Secretary, had carried its organization and work to England, India, Australia and other lands. Colonel Olcott's lectures on *Theosophy, Religion and Occult Science* had also been published, with their very interesting views of psychic force, and the comparative study of religions. Certain other books had also been written, of which more in a moment.

For some little time before we came in touch with the Theosophical Movement, some of us had been unconsciously preparing the way for it by other studies. We had gone pretty deeply into astronomy, geology, physics and natural history, paying special heed to the doctrine of Darwin and the large laws of Evolution, which play so great a part in the life and growth of the world. We had also applied ourselves to the study of Christianity, trying to get a firm grasp of the teachings of Jesus, in theory and practice alike, and also gaining some knowledge of the modern criticism of religious documents. Our natural and spiritual studies were in complete harmony. In Henry Drummond's phrase, we were able to recognize "natural law in the spiritual world."

Thus prepared, we came across Mr. Sinnett's book, *The Occult World*. This was toward the close of 1884. For my own part, when I first read this admirable little book, the occult phenomena there described seemed to me wholly credible, and I found no difficulty at all in believing that powers commonly called miraculous should be possessed by men who had come to their full spiritual heritage. But far greater than the occult phenomena were the personalities that shone through the narrative: the clear outlines of those great men whom we call Masters, revealed in their letters and acts throughout the book. The full significance of the subject came home to me just before Easter, 1885, when I read Mr. Sinnett's *Esoteric Buddhism*. After that reading, Theosophy was no longer an open question. The entire reasonableness of the account there given of the life and growth of the soul, interwoven with the long history of the world, came home with convincing force, and has remained with me ever since.

Meanwhile clouds had been gathering. During 1884, the recently founded "Society for Psychical Research" had become deeply interested in the phenomena described in *The Occult World* and in Mme. Blavatsky's magazine, *The Theosophist*, and had appointed a Committee to investigate these phenomena. A very favorable preliminary report had been issued, which shows that the members of the Committee saturated themselves with the ideas of the Theosophical Movement. It was decided to supplement this

preliminary work by further investigation in India, and a young student of psychic phenomena, Mr. Richard Hodgson, was asked to go to India, to carry this out.

During this period, events had been happening at Adyar, near Madras, the headquarters of the Theosophical Society. While Mme. Blavatsky and Colonel Olcott were absent in Europe, two members of the Society, M. and Mme. Coulomb, who had for years been sheltered at the headquarters at Bombay and Madras, were asked to withdraw. There were charges of misappropriation of funds, evil speaking and trickery, which made it inexpedient for them to remain at the central office of the Society in a position of trust. These two persons presently retaliated by making an attack on Mme. Blavatsky, to which publicity was given by a Madras missionary organ, and in which it was asserted that the phenomena described in *The Occult World* and elsewhere were tricks, and that many of them had been produced by these two members, who now repented of their misdeeds. Letters were published by them, which they said had been written by Mme. Blavatsky, and which gave color to the charge of fraud; but the originals of these letters were never available for impartial examination, and the alleged copies were full of mistakes, vulgarity and puerility, and bore little resemblance to the genuine letters of the great Theosophical writer. Mr. Richard Hodgson arrived in India shortly after this attack was made. He found something congenial in the thought and methods of these two retired members who accused themselves of fraud, and he practically adopted their views and pretensions as to the whole of the phenomena he had been sent to investigate. He spent a short time in India, and returned to England early in 1885. Toward the end of June, 1885, he read a part of his Report on the phenomena before a meeting of the "Society for Psychical Research."

That meeting made an epoch in the attitude of public opinion toward the Theosophical Movement. Never sympathetic, public opinion thereafter became frankly hostile and incredulous. Mme. Blavatsky was treated as an imposter, and her friends as fools. The public accepted Mr. Hodgson's view without question or examination. And public opinion has never gone behind that verdict, but has rested on it for more than twenty years.

With others, I was present at that fateful meeting. After Mr. Hodgson had read his Report, members of the Committee went among the audience to discuss it. Mr. F. W. H. Myers was one of these. When he asked what impression the meeting had made on me, I remember replying that the whole thing was so scandalously unfair that, had I not been a member of the Theosophical Society, I should have joined it forthwith, on the strength of Mr. Hodgson's performance.

My reason for this extreme expression was that, while it was popularly supposed that the "Society for Psychical Research" had investigated the phenomena in question, that Society had never, in fact, investigated the phenomena. It delegated its work to a Committee of five. But the Committee never investigated the phenomena. The Committee in turn entrusted its task to Mr. Richard Hodgson. But Mr. Hodgson never investigated the phenomena. And for an excellent reason. Mr. Hodgson came to India at the close of 1884 and left it early in 1885. But the phenomena had, for the most part, taken place years earlier, the most important of them at Simla, in 1880. So what Mr. Hodgson really did, was to make a pretence of investigating phenomena which had taken place four or five years before, while he was thousands of miles away. He was somewhat in the position of a small boy poking about a laboratory, after some lecture on spectrum analysis, and coming sagely to the conclusion that the experiments had been carried out with the aid of a tallow candle and a piece of painted ribbon.

Certain things may be cited, to illustrate the candor and judgment of Mr. Hodgson. He submitted to an expert in handwriting parts of letters attributed to a Master, and some writing said to be by Mme. Blavatsky. The expert, in a somewhat detailed reply, after commenting on the documents, gave it as his positive conclusion that Mme. Blavatsky was not the writer of the letters attributed to the Master. It will

hardly be believed that Mr. Hodgson deliberately cut out this part of the expert's letter. It is only from a stray sentence a hundred pages away that we get the purport of the missing passage.

Again, consider Mr. Hodgson's credulity. For example, there is the question of a meeting not far from Darjiling, between a disciple, Ramaswamier by name, and a Master, said by those who have met him to be a Rajput by race, certainly not less than six feet four, and of majestic bearing. But Mr. Hodgson seems able to believe that this great Rajput was "personated" by a little Madrasi, not much over four feet six. And he believes that an intelligent man, such as Ramaswamier was, could talk to the little Madrasi for a considerable period, in broad daylight, in the open air, and believe him to be the majestic Rajput with whose portrait he was familiar. And this is the more singular, as Mr. Hodgson elsewhere dilates at length on the peculiar type and voice of this very Madrasi, as evidence that he would be recognized even if carefully disguised.

Or take Mr. Hodgson's treatment of handwriting. We have already seen how he disposes of adverse expert opinion. He prefers to be his own expert. And he makes a great show of counting g's and d's and e's. He finds that in some pieces of writing there are two forms of the letters e and d; what might be called a German d and a Greek e, alternating with the ordinary copybook forms. On this discovery he builds great conclusions. When he comes to count up hundreds of these letters, one is insensibly persuaded that something is being proved. I was somewhat impressed, until it occurred to me that my own writing shows exactly the same variations of the same letters, and in about the same proportions. So the evidence pointed strongly to me, as the real delinquent. Emerson's handwriting also has the same peculiarity. One sees how flimsy is Mr. Hodgson's reasoning. In exactly the same way it can be proved that the English, or the Red Indians, are the lost tribes of Israel, or that Shakespeare wrote Bacon's Essays.

Again, one notices that, where the conditions under which certain phenomena took place were vague, Mr. Hodgson is fertile in conjecture. But where everything is clear-cut and convincing, the Report airily declares that it "does not profess to give completely satisfactory explanations." Soon after he reached India, Mr. Hodgson fell under the spell of the Coulombs, became the victim of their suggestions, and saw exactly what they wished him to see. Othello-like, he found confirmations strong as holy writ in every suspicion that they suggested to him; and this, although he knew that the Coulombs were hundreds of miles away when the more important phenomena occurred; that they had a personal spite to wreak, and, perhaps, a personal profit to secure. The really grave charge against the "Report of the Society for Psychical Research" is, that not one of all those who are reporting was actually a witness of the phenomena as they occurred. The whole thing is hearsay and conjecture; very credulous hearsay, and not very intelligent conjecture.

Procedure of this kind, in any established field of research, would have imperilled the reputation of the Committee and its members. But they were perfectly safe in this instance, because they had behind them an immense force of hostile public opinion, suspicious of all suggestion of Occult force, suspicious of Mme. Blavatsky because she proclaimed the reality of Occult force. Not one in ten thousand of those who to this day believe that the Society for Psychical Research "exposed" Mme. Blavatsky, ever read the Report. As the verdict fell in with their prejudices, they accepted the view of the Society, which accepted the view of its committee, who accepted the view of its agent, who never saw the phenomena he professed to investigate.

The wiser course is, to set aside this hearsay and conjecture, and with clear and candid mind to consider the testimony of those who were actually present when the phenomena occurred. This is the easier, at the present day, as the general understanding of these things has made great strides forward in the last twenty years. The phenomena produced by Mme. Blavatsky and the Masters who worked with her, were not

mere exhibitions of magic. They were experiments intended to show that certain kinds of force existed, that definite powers could be applied to produce results of a definite kind, in the physical and psychical worlds. Now it is the fact that almost every type of force illustrated by the phenomena of Mme. Blavatsky and her friends has since been very generally recognized, even by popular opinion. For instance, there were the appearances of "astral bodies." But under the name of "phantasms of the living," astral bodies have passed into the realm of accepted fact. Again, certain phenomena implied "action at a distance," Occult force operating through void space. But we have now, on the one hand, the "telekinesis" of the psychical researchers, and, on the other, wireless telegraphy, the wireless direction of torpedoes, and so on. So that both the mental generation of force, and the movement of matter at a distance are fully admitted. Other phenomena which took place in Mme. Blavatsky's presence were attacked because they seemed to involve the disintegration of matter. But nowadays all matter has disintegrated. The very atoms have gone to pieces. Once again, Mme. Blavatsky made the very fertile suggestion that certain phenomena might be understood, by taking the fourth dimension of space into account. But to-day the fourth dimension is becoming familiar. On the one hand, physicists invoke it to express the action of radiant matter, while chemists use it to explain the vagaries of some of the coal-tar compounds; and, on the other, we find an advanced theologian putting forward the view that the appearances of Jesus after the resurrection were made possible by his mastery of space of four dimensions.

The principles which underlay the phenomena of Mme. Blavatsky and the Masters who worked with her, are becoming widely recognized. The time is coming when it will be possible for people in general to understand that these phenomena were simply experiments, produced to illustrate still unfamiliar natural forces, and entirely within the realm of law. This simple truth, though repeatedly stated by Mme. Blavatsky and her friends, was obscured and distorted by Mr. Hodgson's make-believe investigation, and by the verdict of the Society for Psychical Research. That verdict was accepted by a prejudiced public, hostile to Mme. Blavatsky, and inflamed against her because thirty years ago she expressed concerning the established churches and sciences views which one may now hear any day, from the pulpits of the New Theology.

Not so many years earlier, Charles Darwin was the target of a not less hostile fire. He was branded as a fraud and a blasphemer by good people who thought they were doing God service. Darwin has had his revenge. His thought has transformed the very theologians who denounced his doctrine of transformation. I believe the day is rapidly approaching when we shall see a like reversal of the verdict against Mme. Blavatsky; when it will be recognized that she was a pioneer not less valiant than Darwin. While Darwin taught the evolution of the body, Mme. Blavatsky taught the evolution of the soul.

Mme. Blavatsky did a great deal more than illustrate, by her experiments, unfamiliar phases of force. She brought forward, with great force, certain spiritual and moral principles. First among these was the principle of universal brotherhood, without distinction of race, creed, caste, color or sex. This, for immediate application in life. Then there were more abstract doctrines, such as that of the One Spirit manifested in the universe, and of which all lives, including our own, are the expression. Then there was the teaching of the larger self, of which the personality of each one of us is but a part; the deeper self which, touching our daily life on one side, on the other dwells with the infinities. Again, she taught the periodical manifestation of life, including the life expressed in our personalities. And she pointed to the elder religions of the East, as fertile sources of spiritual suggestion.

But these very ideas are finding universal acceptance to-day. We are familiar with the Peace Conferences, which rest their work boldly on the brotherhood of man. And all science, even the most materialistic, now sees in the universe the manifestation of a single ever-mysterious Power. The doctrine of the larger self, the deeper self, the "subliminal" self, is abroad everywhere, notably in the newest

books. And as for the old wisdom of the East, we find the author of the New Theology avowedly drawing thence his theory of manifested life, and Sir Oliver Lodge taking from the same source his very suggestive teaching of Life and its periodic expression. It is true that these two writers, speaking, the one, of “the higher self,” and the other of “the larger self,” believe they are indebted for their thought to Mr. F. W. H. Myers. But it is more than likely that Mr. Myers got this thought from the Theosophical writings which he studied so attentively during 1884, and in which it fills so large a place.

We find, therefore, that the experiments made by Mme. Blavatsky, and those who worked with her thirty years ago, illustrate forces and powers now beginning to be generally recognized. Can we be expected to believe that, by a happy inspiration, she “invented” just the right phenomena to illustrate subsequent discoveries? And can we be expected to believe that is likely to have been done by one who anticipated by thirty years the last conclusions of the “new science” and the “new theology”?

At the time, we saw how futile was Mr. Hodgson’s supposed investigation, and we were, therefore, confirmed in our belief in the good faith of Mme. Blavatsky, our belief that the phenomena described in *The Occult World* were entirely genuine, and had taken place as described, and our belief in the Masters who had given an account of spiritual and bodily life as satisfactory to the reason as it was inspiring to the soul. So we set ourselves to search the Scriptures of many lands, to study the teachings of the Sages of all times, to try to realize, in study and life, the spiritual principles which, in their large simplicity, underlie the teachings of Scriptures and Sages alike. The Report of Mr. Hodgson in no way disturbed the even tenor of our work, which was positive and constructive, along spiritual and moral lines.

A good many members of the Theosophical Society were shaken or driven away by the storm of adverse public feeling aroused by the Report. But many remained and continued to work, and the Society steadily grew in numbers. It must be confessed that it did not grow equally in real unity and brotherly love. This was presently to be shown by events.

In 1891 Mme. Blavatsky died. The bitter attack on her, which we have discussed, so far from checking her energies, in reality ushered in her greatest and most creative period. To it belong *The Secret Doctrine*, such books as *The Voice of the Silence*, *The Key to Theosophy*, and her new magazine, *Lucifer*, besides other work of enduring power. In all ways, her achievement vindicated her, and she stands as one of the most courageous and self-sacrificing workers for humanity, one of the great names of all time.

After the departure of Mr. Hodgson, the atmosphere of suspicion lingered at Adyar. Colonel Olcott remained there, while Mme. Blavatsky passed the closing years of her life in Europe. It is unhappily true that from that time onward Adyar became a storm-center in the Theosophical Movement. Whoever went there found an atmosphere filled with suspicion, and many came away strongly tinged with that atmosphere and spreading suspicion through the Theosophical Society. It would be pleasanter to pass over these things in silence; but justice demands that stress be laid on certain facts.

Among those who made the pilgrimage to Adyar, and came within its atmosphere of suspicion and accusation, was Mrs. Besant. The final result of the suggestions among which she found herself was, that she formulated charges against Mr. Judge, Vice-President of the Society, and General Secretary of the American Section, which he had built up by untiring and devoted effort during the years following the attack on Mme. Blavatsky. Mrs. Besant declared that Mr. Judge had been guilty of dishonesty, in giving out, as from Masters, letters and messages which, she said, were not from Masters; and she demanded a Committee of Inquiry. Colonel Olcott, whose hostility to Mr. Judge colors all his later writings, was entirely willing to appoint the Committee. It was appointed, and met, with Colonel Olcott as Chairman, in London, in the summer of 1894.

Colonel Olcott should have seen that his procedure was entirely unconstitutional, and against the whole spirit of the Theosophical Movement. He should have seen that all views as to the existence of Masters, their power, and their part in any phenomena or messages, were, in fact, matters of religious belief, and as such, privileged under the Constitution of the Society, which secures to every member the right to believe or disbelieve any teaching whatever, and to assert his belief or disbelief, without in any way impairing his standing in the Society. Colonel Olcott should further have seen that he had no more right, morally and theosophically, to question Mr. Judge's good faith, than he had to question the good faith of some other member, who may have professed his belief in the miracles of the New Testament, the wonders of Buddha's paradise, or the views of Zollner concerning the fourth dimension of space. But Colonel Olcott saw none of these things. He carried the Committee of Inquiry forward, and Mr. Judge appeared before it. What happened may be recorded in Colonel Olcott's own words.

"Mr. Judge's defense is that he is not guilty of the acts charged; that Mahatmas exist, are related to our Society, and in personal connection with himself; and he avers his readiness to bring many witnesses and documentary proofs to support his statements. You will at once see whither this would lead us. The moment we entered into these questions we should violate the most vital spirit of our federal compact, its neutrality in matters of belief. . . For the above reason, then, I declare as my opinion, that this enquiry must go no further; we may not break our own laws for any consideration whatsoever."

Admirable words. One wonders, though, how Colonel Olcott failed to see, months before, that "the moment we entered into these questions we should violate the most vital spirit of our federal compact, its neutrality in matters of belief." Had he seen that, he would have seen that he was wrong in appointing the Committee; wrong in allowing the matter to be brought before him in his official capacity, and kept before him; wrong in not pointing out, at the outset, that the bringing of such charges was "a violation of the most vital spirit of the Theosophical Society, its neutrality in matters of belief."

The Committee of Inquiry was dissolved. But, unfortunately, neither the letter nor the spirit of Colonel Olcott's wise words was adhered to in the months that followed. Public and private attacks were directed against Mr. Judge, in the newspapers, in letters, and in other ways even more prejudicial. In spite of the warning of Colonel Olcott that such attack was a violation of the most vital spirit of the Theosophical Society, Mr. Judge was denounced, with growing bitterness, by those who should have been the first to uphold the Theosophical ideal of "neutrality in matters of belief," of tolerance, of charity. These attacks went so far that those who adhered to the ideals expressed, but not acted on, by Colonel Olcott, joined with Mr. Judge in 1895 in forming a separate society, the Theosophical Society in America, to carry on the work on these true and enduring lines. From this time forward, Colonel Olcott wholly forgot what he had so truly said of neutrality, and began a series of bitter attacks on Mr. Judge which he continued long after Mr. Judge's death, early in 1896. Nor was he alone in thus violating the most vital spirit of the Theosophical Society. Attacks multiplied, and grew in bitterness; and, as is almost invariably the case with the spirit of persecution, these attacks were nominally made in the interest of pure morals, and to defend the Theosophical cause. One fails to see how the Theosophical cause could be defended by violating its most vital spirit. Nor can one say much more for the claim that these attacks were in the interest of good morals, and to defend members of the Society from delusion and "psychic tyranny."

In a society of students, banded together in the search for truth, in the spirit of tolerance and good will, what place is there for this patronizing attitude on the part of a few, who undertake to guard the rest against delusions? Is not that attitude an entire mistake, perhaps a somewhat questionable assumption of superior virtue and wisdom? Or let us look at the matter in another way: Was the persecution of Mr. Judge justified by its results? Those who took part in public or private attacks on Mr. Judge have since been prominent in the Adyar Society. Will they venture to say that the persecution of Mr. Judge, the bitter attacks on him after Colonel Olcott's declaration of neutrality, did, in fact, secure their society

against delusion, against astral dangers, against “psychic despotism?” Once more, these attacks were made, we were told, to protect “the victims of Mr. Judge,” those who believed in Mr. Judge, his ideals, his good faith, his work. As one who thus believed and believes, I should like to ask whether those who hold the same view have showed any marked symptoms of moral or mental deliquescence? Are these painfully manifest in their works? Take a concrete case: THE THEOSOPHICAL QUARTERLY for April is in the hands of the public. It is, to a large degree, the work of those who believe in Mr. Judge. Does it show, in a marked degree, a weakness of morals and intellect, as compared, let us say, with the April numbers of the magazines which represent the party hostile to Mr. Judge, the party of inquisition and prosecution? These magazines are also in the hands of the public. I am perfectly content to leave the decision to those who read them.

These considerations should make it clear to all that the attacks on Mr. Judge were exactly what Colonel Olcott called them, a violation of the most vital spirit of the Theosophical Society. They were so, in two ways. They were a violation of the spirit of charity, of tolerance, of brotherly love, of that kindly affection which seeks virtues and not deficiencies, which looks for faults at home, and not in others, which seeks not its own, and thinks no evil. They were also a violation of the vital spirit of the Theosophical Society, since that Society is a body of students, of seekers after truth, on perfectly equal terms; a body of students, each of whom has an entire right to hold any belief or unbelief that commends itself to him, and to express that belief or unbelief; as indeed must be the case in all free search after truth.

And this brings me to the closing portion of my subject: the Theosophical Society and its work in the world. For I have hitherto spoken of something larger and more inclusive: the Theosophical Movement. Mme. Blavatsky always spoke of the Theosophical Movement as being, as it were, a wave of force, set in motion by Masters, the Elder Brothers of humanity, and destined to bring spiritual life to the hearts of men. The Theosophical Movement has many expressions. Of these, the Theosophical Society is one. If I were asked what the Theosophical Society is, I should be inclined to say that, for me, it stands for a state of mind, or rather an attitude of the heart. That attitude is essentially this: To put my own interest as secondary and the interest of my friend as primary; to be more willing to hear than to speak; to endeavor always to see the truth in my neighbor’s heart, rather than to seek to impose my own view of truth. Instead of antagonism, the Theosophical Society should bring unity of heart. When in action we make the interests of others primary, and keep our own interests in the second place, we bring unity. We must by no means fall into the error of thinking that this will mean giving way to our neighbor, letting him get the better of us, yielding to him in a servile way. That could never be for his interest, and, in doing this we should by no means be putting his interest first. Cowardice is one thing. Devotion to the interests of another is a quite different thing, and one calling for high courage as well as self-sacrifice. Gently to hear, kindly to judge: this is the principle for which the Theosophical Society stands; genuine toleration, an entire willingness to hear the other side; a readiness to accept new truth. This attitude in action is well described in the primary object of the Theosophical Society:

“To form the nucleus of a Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, without distinction of race, creed, caste, color or sex.”

One may ask, is not this exactly what the Churches are doing? Happily, yes; and to an ever increasing degree. Among many branches of the more liberal Churches, the spirit of toleration and reconciliation has already gone far, and will, let us hope, go much farther. Yet there are still many directions in which mediation is needed. For example, do the older branches of the Church, the Eastern and Western, freely admit each other’s equality, each other’s possession of spiritual truth? Or do the Christian Churches, as a whole, approach the non-Christian religions in a brotherly and kindly spirit, not claiming any superiority, not demanding any paramount position, not insisting on deep differences, but seeking rather the truths

which are common to all? Again, we have much liberty and light, on the one hand, among the followers of science; and on the other, within the Churches. But do the Churches render full justice to the votaries of science? Do these see what are the ideals, the hopes, the aspirations of the Churches? Here is still great need for mediation, for reconciliation.

And whence can come mediation and reconciliation, but through mutual understanding? And how can mutual understanding come about, except through gentle listening, a willingness to hear the other side, a wish to learn and enter into the other's truth, rather than to impose our own. This, if I am right, is the Theosophical method, the method for which the Theosophical Society exists.

Tolerance, brotherly love, conciliation, spiritual unity: such are the ideals of the Theosophical Society. For those who hold these ideals, great horizons open, wide vistas of work and hope spread before them. These vistas, this work, this hope, are not the mere private concern of our members. They are common and universal. And in closing, I cannot do better than advise all whose concern these things are, to attend to them.

CHARLES JOHNSTON.