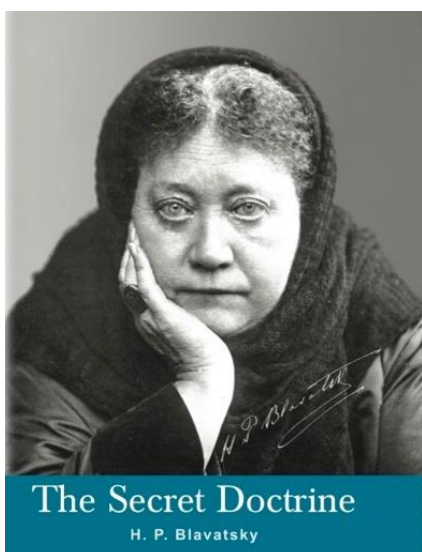


## Annie Besant and *The Secret Doctrine*

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It was her review of *The Secret Doctrine*, published in *The Pall Mall Gazette*, London, on 25 April 1889 that led Annie Besant to contact Madame Blavatsky and eventually dedicate her life to the work of the Theosophical Society. Written by someone not fully familiarized with the tenets, the scope and the metaphysics of the Esoteric Philosophy, her review stands even today as one the best ever written about HPB's magnum opus.



Cover of the SD edition by The Theosophical Publishing House, Adyar, Chennai, India. Cover design by Neeta Agrawal.

The review was entitled ‘Among the Adepts – Madame Blavatsky on *The Secret Doctrine*’ and it was reprinted in *The Theosophist*, August 1889. Below are some excerpts of Annie Besant's historical review:

The first volume of the “Secret Doctrine” is divided into three parts – an exposition of Cosmic Evolution, of the Evolution of Symbolism, and of the contrast between Science and the Secret Doctrine. Of these the first will most repel and the third will most attract. For the first is a metaphysical treatise wherein the Hindu brain, subtlest and most mystic of all mental organisms, expounds Being and the beginning of beings in a fashion that no Western intellect can rival. The causeless Cause, the rootless Root, whence spirit and matter alike differentiate, is the One Existence – hidden, absolute, eternal indistinguishable by us from non-existence in that it has no form that can enable us to cognise it. From this all that exists proceeds; in itself Be-ness – why not Existence? – then Becoming, and the Becoming alone can be intelligible to us. ...

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Very briefly and roughly put, the idea is that Be-ness evolves spirit and matter, spirit descending further and further into matter in search of experience not otherwise attainable, evolving all forms; it reaches the lowest point, commences its re-ascent, evolves through mineral, vegetable, animal, until it attains self-consciousness in man: then in man, with his sevenfold nature, it climbs upward, spiritualizing him as he evolves, until the grosser body and the animal passions are purged away, and his higher principles united to Atma, the spark of the divine spirit within him, reach their goal, the absolute existence whence they originally came, carrying with them all the gains of their long pilgrimage. This process implies, of course, manifold reincarnations for each human spirit as it climbs the many steps at whose summit alone is Rest. ...

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The second volume of Mdme. Blavatsky's work deals with man, the first part being occupied with his genesis, the second with the symbolism of his religions, the third with the contrast between the Occult and the scientific views of his evolution. Of these the first will be met with the most furious and contemptuous resistance, for briefly this is the theory; Man as he is now, with his sevenfold nature – physical body, vital principle, “astral body”, animal soul, human or rational soul, human spirit, divine spirit – was not created offhand complete.

\* \* \*

The book deserves to be read; it deserves to be thought over; and none who believes in the progress of humanity has the right to turn away over-hastily from any contribution to knowledge, however new in its form, from any theory, however strange in its aspect. The wild dreams of one generation become the common places of a later one, and all who keep an open door to Truth will give scrutiny to any visitant, be the garb of Asia or of Europe, be the tongue of Paris or of Ind. If this counsel be of folly or of falsehood, it shall come to naught, but if of Truth ye cannot overthrow it. Passing strange is it. Of the truth in it our superficial examination is insufficient to decide.

The February, 1939 issue of *The Theosophist* carried a reprint of the second book review by Annie Besant of *The Secret Doctrine*, originally published in *The National Reformer* on 23 June 1889. An editorial note in the same issue of *The Theosophist* says that both reviews ‘reveal the magnificent mind which Annie Besant brought to her first encounter with Theosophy’. Below are selected passages from her second review of HPB’s classic:

But skimming is more likely to repel than to attract: the unfamiliar archaism and yet more unfamiliar mysticism of the *Book of Dzyan*, which is claimed as one of the oldest MSS. in the world; the subtle metaphysics, which become wholly unintelligible and even contradictory unless the delicate gradations of phrase be noted and understood; the Oriental atmosphere in which the mental images live and move; the antagonism of the whole intellectual trend to the thought of our Western civilization; all this is but too likely to make the 19th century Englishman raise his eyebrows, shrug his shoulders, and throw the book down. For the Orient begins to study the universe just where the Occident ceases to study. With telescope and with microscope, with scalpel and with battery, Western Science interrogates Nature, adding fact to fact, storing experience after experience, but coming ever to gulfs unfathomable by its plummets, to heights unscalable by its ladders. Wide and masterful in its answers to the “How?”, the “Why?” ever eludes it, and causes remain enwrapped in gloom.

It is clear that for such investigations some further mental equipment is necessary than that normally afforded by the human body. And here comes the “parting of the ways” between East and West. For the study of the material universe, our five senses, aided by the instruments invented by science, may suffice. For all that we can hear and see, taste and handle, these accustomed servitors, though often blundering, are the best available guides to knowledge. But it lies in the nature of the case that they are useless when the investigation is to be into modes of existence which cannot impress themselves on our nerve-ends.

\* \* \*

The powers we possess are not supernatural; they are latent in every human being, and will be evolved as the race progresses. All that we have done is to evolve them more rapidly than our neighbours, by a procedure as open to you as it was to us. Matter is everywhere, but it exists in seven modifications of which you know only four, and until lately knew only three; in those higher forms reside the causes of which you see the effects in the lower, and to know these causes you must develop the capacity to take cognisance of the higher planes.

\* \* \*

At the commencement of a cycle awakens the Unmanifested Logos - abstract and potential ideation, the root of the later Mahat, the universal, intelligent soul - and thence the second Logos with its double aspect, Purusha and Prakriti – Spirit-Matter, “Father-Mother” – and Mahat the Son. From this Triangle of Being, Purusha, Prakriti, and Mahat go forth all life and form, in numerous hierarchies, on the seven planes of existence. Spirit crystallizes, as it were, into matter through the first three, becoming more and more consolidated and gross, reaching its turning point in the fourth, becoming intellectually self-conscious as it thus grows denser; from the fourth it climbs upward again, shaking off the grossness of its material envelope but retaining the experience it could not otherwise have won, until, wise with all it has gathered during its struggles and its wanderings, it returns whence it came forth and rests. Such a cycle forms a Manvantara, and this is followed by “the sleep of Brahma”; when he awakes, another cycle commences, but on a higher plane.

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As Science has shown living forms everywhere on the material plane, races in each drop of water, life throbbing in every leaf and blade, so the *Secret Doctrine* points to living forms on higher planes of existence, each suited to its environment, till all space thrills with life and nowhere is there death, but only change. Amid these myriads are some evolving towards humanity, some evolving away from humanity as we know it, divesting themselves of its grosser parts. For man is regarded as a sevenfold being, four of these parts belonging to the animal body and perishing at, or soon after death; while three form his higher self, his true individuality, and these persist and are immortal. These form the Ego, and it is this which passes through many incarnations, learning life's lessons as it goes, working out its own redemption within the limits of an inexorable law, sowing seeds, of which it ever reaps the harvest, building its own fate with tireless fingers, and finding nowhere, in the measureless time and space around it, any that can lift for it one weight it created, bear for it one burden it has gathered, unravel for it one tangle it has twisted, close for it one gulf that it has dug.

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Very attractive, and showing wide acquaintance with the latest discoveries of science, is the third section of Volume I, “Science and the Secret Doctrine contrasted”. It is of curious interest to note how some of the latest theories seem to catch glimpses of the occult doctrines, as though Science were standing on the very threshold of knowledge which shall make all her past seem small. Already her hand is trembling towards the grasp of forces beside which all those now at her command are insignificant. How soon will her grip fasten

on them? Let us hope not until the social order has been transformed, lest they should only give more to those who have, and leave the wretched still more wretched by force of contrast. Knowledge used by selfishness widens the gulf that divides man from man and race from race, and we may well shrink from the idea of new powers in Nature being yoked to the car of Greed. Hence the wisdom of those “Masters”, in whose name Mme. Blavatsky speaks, has ever denied the knowledge which is power until Love’s lesson has been learned, and has given only into the hands of the selfless the control of those natural forces which, misused, would wreck society.

In the October 1893 issue of *The Path*, a magazine edited by William Q. Judge, we find the following note regarding *The Secret Doctrine*:

#### A WORD ON THE “SECRET DOCTRINE”

#### AN OLD LETTER REPUBLISHED

There is so much discussion going on just now in the Theosophical movement as to the value of *The Secret Doctrine*, as to the amount of aid given to H. P. Blavatsky in the compilation of it, and as to her position as a Teacher in Occult matters, that it appears to us that the republication of an old letter – published in 1888 – which bears on these questions, is peculiarly timely, and may be of service to many who did not have the opportunity of reading it on its first issue. The letter is, of course, of no authority for those members of the T.S. who do not share our sentiments of reverence for the Masters, but for those who do, the interest of it will be great. It was received in mid-ocean by Col. Olcott, P.T.S., and was originally published with his consent in a small pamphlet entitled “An Explanation important to all Theosophists”.

ANNIE BESANT  
WILLIAM Q. JUDGE

The specific allusion to *The Secret Doctrine* in the letter in question, which is signed ‘K.H.’, is reproduced below:

I have also noted your thoughts about the *Secret Doctrine*. Be assured that what she has not annotated from scientific and other works we have given or suggested to her. Every mistake or erroneous notion corrected and explained by her from the works of other Theosophists *was corrected by me or under my instruction*. It is a more valuable work than its predecessor,—an epitome of occult truths that will make it a source of information and instruction for the earnest student for long years to come.

In *The Adyar Bulletin*, May 1913, Annie Besant wrote the following about *The Secret Doctrine*:

I had been studying Comparative Mythology very much for many years and it was all a tangle, when I first read *The Secret Doctrine*; in it a clue was given, and a system which made everything fall into its place as one great thing. All my past studies became intelligible, instead of remaining a chaos. Of course *The Secret Doctrine* is not a systematic book . . .

H. P.B. flies about from one point to another; there is no coherent outline. In that way it is a very confusing book, but still to me it is the book of books . . .

Do not read *The Secret Doctrine* for its quotations but for its original teachings. Then as to her method . . . In the astral body seen by the clairvoyant, you see all these different colors changing, while H. P. B.'s colors are fixed, representing a principle. Remember you will never get good out of H. P. B.'s writings if you look for details. She did not care for details, and unless you can adapt yourself to her large views you will not get much good out of her.

Instead of puzzling over it, you should remember that she sees some great fact and states it; she sees another fact at a different angle, and she plumps it down, not caring in the least that the corners of the two do not fit. But whenever you go deeply into a subject dealt with by her, you will always find that there is some great truth underneath, and the more I know, the more valuable do I find her.

The January 1939 issue of *The Theosophist* carries the following editorial comment regarding the 1938 Adyar Edition of *The Secret Doctrine*:

The Adyar Edition of *The Secret Doctrine* was officially published on the 17th November 1938 at the Founders' Day celebration in the Great Hall, Adyar. The President introduced the set of six volumes, saying : "I am very happy to make this act of reverence to H. P. Blavatsky, the great mother of our Movement, the one to whom we owe more than any other of our leaders. It is a very happy thing that we have this Adyar Edition, named as she would have wished it, and in reverence we dedicate it to her memory, in the present and in the future". The President announced that 800 copies had been ordered before publication.

It chimes in harmoniously with the launching of this Adyar edition to reproduce in this issue (see next page) the review of *The Secret Doctrine* which Dr. Besant wrote fifty years ago. Mme. Blavatsky published the first two volumes in October 1888. Early in 1889 W.T. Stead asked Annie Besant to review it, and her review appeared in *The Pall Mall Gazette*, of which he was Editor, on April 25. The incident is related by Dr. Besant in her *Autobiography* (pages 339-340), where she describes the intellectual conflict through which she was passing and her diligent search for answers to questions that were working in her mind:

Mr. Stead gave into my hands two large volumes. "Can you review these? My young men all fight shy of them, but you are quite mad enough on these subjects to make something of them." . . . Home I carried my burden, and sat me down to read. As I turned over page after page the interest became absorbing; but how familiar it seemed how my mind leapt forward to presage the conclusions, how natural it was, how coherent, how subtle, and yet how intelligible. I was dazzled, blinded by the light in which disjointed facts were seen as parts of a mighty whole, and all my puzzles, riddles, problems, seemed to disappear. The effect was partially illusory in one sense, in that they all had to be slowly unravelled later, the brain gradually assimilating that which the swift intuition had grasped as truth. But the light had been seen, and in that flash of illumination I knew that the weary search was over and the very Truth was found.

In the midst of writing this review Mrs. Besant wrote to Mr. Stead: "I am immersed in Mme. Blavatsky. If I perish in the attempt to review her, you must write on my tomb 'She has gone

to investigate the Secret Doctrine at first hand”.

Two months later (June 23) Mrs. Besant wrote another review for *The National Reformer*, Charles Bradlaugh’s paper. She mentions it in her *Autobiography*, quoting some passages as showing “how swiftly some of the main points of the teaching had been grasped.” ...

Finally, in *The Theosophist*, January 1939, we read about W. T. Stead and his connection with HPB, Annie Besant and *The Secret Doctrine*:

It was the writing of this review of *The Secret Doctrine* which convinced Annie Besant of the truth of Theosophy and brought her into the movement. She asked Mr. Stead for an introduction to the writer, and then sent a note asking to be allowed to call. In reply Mme. Blavatsky wrote, 15th March 1889: “I too have long been wishing to make your acquaintance as there is nothing in the world I admire more than pluck and the rare courage to come out and state one’s opinions boldly in the face of all the world, including Mrs. Grundy.”

W. T. Stead was an impartial critic but a steady friend of the Theosophical movement, and devoted many a column in his journal to Theosophy and its literature. He knew H. P. Blavatsky during the early years of The Society and she called him a “real Theosophist”. He was on the *Pall Mall Gazette* for nine years, and in the last year (1889) published Annie Besant’s review of *The Secret Doctrine*. In 1890 he founded the *Review of Reviews*, which carried his name as a champion of struggling causes and countries the world over, and which he edited until 15 April 1912, when he went down with the Titanic.