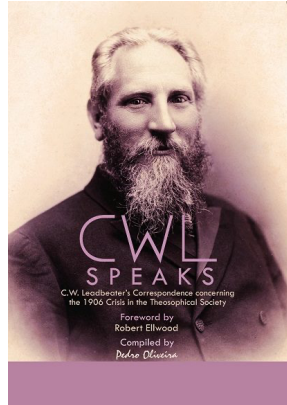


CWL Speaks: a few praises and criticisms



Pedro Oliveira

In a statement about the Leadbeater case and the Advisory Board meeting in London [May, 1906], A.P. Warrington, a leading member in the United States and also a lawyer, said: ‘It has been said that Mr. Leadbeater was tried; that moral wrongs were proved, and after confessing them he was condemned and forced to resign from the T.S. This is all utterly false! There could be no trial save in a court of justice, upon a definite indictment, with counsel representing both sides, where witnesses could be compelled to attend and be examined, and where the accused could be confronted by his accusers and subject them to cross-examination.’

CWL Speaks

Below is the review of *CWL Speaks – C. W. Leadbeater's Correspondence concerning the 1906 Crisis in the Theosophical Society* (Olive Tree Publishing, Australia, 2018) by Garry Trompf, Emeritus Professor in the History of Ideas, University of Sydney, 2007- (Professor, 1995-2006); Adjunct Professor in Peace and Conflict Studies, University of Sydney, 2016; Professor of History and Head of Department, University of Papua New Guinea, 1983-85; Senior Lecturer and then Associate Professor (and inter alia Head of Department), Religious Studies, University of Sydney (1978-1994). Visiting Professor to the Universities of California, Santa Cruz (three times); Utrecht, Edinburgh, Warsaw and the Jung Institute, Zurich. His review was published online on 30 June 2021 in *Aries*, ‘the first professional academic journal specifically devoted to a long-neglected but now rapidly developing domain of research in the humanities, usually referred to as “Western Esotericism”’.

‘The great value of Oliveira’s effort is that he has made as exhaustive a collection of letters about the 1906–1908 Leadbeater scandal as he could, and these letters not only let the renowned defendant in the case be heard, but other voices as well, including relevant boys’ parents, concerned female Theosophists, but above all influential members of the Society in a tangle of in-house politics. Colonel Olcott, co-founder of the TS with Madame Helena Blavatsky, is shown writing an open epistle to the “dear

Brethren” that the Mahatmas “M.” and “K.H.” (Morya and Koot Hoomi) instructed him to make Annie Besant his successor (161). His appeal is to two ethereal Masters crucial in authorizing Blavatsky’s esoteric teachings, and also for their cosmic disclosures in the 1880s Mahatma Letters reported especially by British Theosophist Alfred Sinnett and eventually published in 1923. Early in the twentieth-century, putatively verifiable access to such Masters came to be increasingly used as a means to bolster TS leadership. Leadbeater was a veritable adept at claiming clairvoyant contact with invisible helpers, and returned Besant’s favour of reinstatement by occult instructions that consolidated her position. Oliveira’s collection documents the waning power of would-be competitors: opponents to Besant’s heirship lose out. From the letters concentrating on 1906–1908 we hear little of the 1891 American split under William Quan Judge, who argued Besant was deviating from the Mahatmas’ original messages. But in Oliveiras’ specifically dated documentations, both Sinnett, who had already presented a challenge to Blavatsky (see my review of the 1889 *Secret Doctrine Commentaries* in *Aries* 11, 2 [2011]), and George R.S. Meade, who had been Blavatsky’s late-coming Secretary, were constantly at work undermining Besant’s claims to succession, always implying Leadbeater’s moral weaknesses and criticizing her support of him.

If Oliveira’s main purpose is to show that the evidence alleviates Leadbeater from opprobrium, and that his advice about masturbation was not unenlightened for his time (considering even Freud’s reactionary strictures against it), he has done signal service for scholarship by providing epistolary snapshots of in-house TS perspectives and power-play at the turn into the twentieth century, at the same time showing how the TS went about solving its schismatic problems and leadership contests.’

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From John Sameluk, an American theosophist from New Orleans, originally published in *Theosophy Forward*, ‘an independent on-line magazine looking toward the development of the Theosophical Society and the presentation of Theosophy in the twenty-first century’, edited by Jan Kind. Here is the link to Mr Sameluk’s review:

<https://www.theosophyforward.com/mixed-bag/notable-books/2366-notable-books-36>

Here is what he wrote on the 26 June 2018 issue of the magazine:

Pedro Oliveira has proven himself to be a true theosophist. *CWL Speaks* is a valiant defense of one who was unjustly attacked.

Robert Ellwood’s excellent Foreword offers guidance to the reader relative to the historical, cultural and psychological framing of the correspondence contained in this compilation.

So why should any student of theosophy today read Mr. Oliveira’s book? Obviously to learn the truth.

The road to hell is paved with good intentions. It is a road well paved! Those who metaphorically burned C.W. Leadbeater at the stake did so with the very best intentions. Those who continue today to throw fuel upon the fire that keeps the dugpas warm at night do so with the very best intentions.

Mr. Oliveira's book is a labor of love. This book, which is a compilation of C.W. Leadbeater's correspondence concerning the 1906 crisis in the Theosophical Society, is available for purchase from Olive Tree Publications. The web address for those interested is: <http://www.cwlworld.info/>

In a letter to Fritz Kunz, which is included in the book on page 143, CWL writes: 'You know that I have at least never done anything of which my friends need be ashamed'.

My personal admiration for CWL's total commitment and dedication to theosophy stems from my great good fortune of having known Fritz and Dora Kunz. I was introduced to theosophy by Fritz at Camp Indralaya. I worked with Dora when she served as National President of the American Section. Probably no one in this world knew CWL better than they.

I think the value of this book is to call our attention, as theosophists, to the never ending struggle we face with the dragon of darkness that forever challenges us upon our journey toward the light.

A brief biography of Charles Webster Leadbeater (1854-1934) is included upon the back cover of the book.

I wish to extend my appreciation to Ralph Hannon for agreeing to include this review in Notable Books.

* * *

From a former Director of the Krishnamurti Foundation America:

I have just completed reading your new book on CWL. It is well researched and extremely well written. Editing such a collection of original documents is a mighty task and you have done a fine job, congratulations. The appendices are also very good. Again, congratulations because you have added fine literature to the disambiguation of the historical record.

* * *

By a former Director of the School of the Wisdom;

I received a copy of your book "CWL Speaks" yesterday and spent hours reading it. Wonderful work! Also necessary. I have always felt that CWL got maligned by

some purists in the TS in spite of his profound occult knowledge. Discovering K himself was an enormous contribution made by CWL.

Thank you for writing this book. I wish to echo your last sentence in the book, “I will carry on, CWL, until my time comes.”

* * *

By an Italian theosophist:

I wish to congratulate you for your excellent “CWL Speaks”. A very thorough job! All his relevant correspondence regarding the 1906 crisis makes things right and God knows how needed this book is. I am reading it with much pleasure and I do hope I can buy some more copies of the same in Adyar bookshop in December.

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One of the services that The Campbell Theosophical Research Library, located at the National Headquarters of the Theosophical Society in Australia, offers to students and researchers is *Links to Theosophical Texts Online*. Its URL is

<http://www.austheos.org.au/clibrary/bindex-0.html>

The total number of links, including to different versions of “texts”, and to other categories is 16,409. It contains many articles and online books by H. P. Blavatsky, H. S. Olcott, Annie Besant, William Q. Judge, G. de Purucker and many others.

Under Leadbeater it includes a number of his articles and books, including articles and texts critical of him:

<http://www.austheos.org.au/clibrary/bindex-leadbeater.html>

The Leadbeater web page also includes Dr Gregory Tillett’s Ph.D. thesis ‘Charles Webster Leadbeater 1854-1934’, (1169+ pages), University of Sydney, 1986, Sydney eScholarship Repository.

In his Wordpress blog C W LEADBEATER 1854-1934, the late Dr Tillett published thirteen critical reviews of *CWL Speaks*. His conclusion was that the book was not a scholarly one, that it failed to declare its sources, that the material presented were probably from secondary sources and that it was a ‘hagiography’, and not a biographical study.

The website www.cwlworld.info published both the Foreword to the book by Dr Robert Ellwood plus the Introduction which states from which archives the CWL letters came from. Besides that it also published an extensive article on the historical background to the famous ‘Cipher letter’ – one of the central accusatory pieces which

was used against CWL – and facsimile images of the original letters by CWL prior to 1906, in order to show that the book did not rely on secondary sources.

In his post for April 2018, Dr Tillett stated the following in connection to what is stated in the book's Introduction – that there was a charge of sodomy against CWL in relation to the boy J. Krishnamurti:

Mr Oliveira mentions in passing the Krishnamurti guardianship case in the Madras Courts in 1912-1913, and asserts that “the central accusatory piece was the charge of sodomy against CWL” which charge was “dismissed in the course of the proceedings”. [CWL *Speaks* p. 278] That assertion is nonsense. The Krishnamurti guardianship case was a civil matter, not a criminal trial. Leadbeater was not before the court charged with any crime, let alone sodomy.

No allegation of sodomy was made in the course of the case. Krishnamurti's father, Narayaniah, alleged in his written statement that “a personal attendant”, Luxman, “had seen C.W. Leadbeater and J. Krishnamurti in the defendant's [i.e. Mrs Besant's] room engaged in committing an unnatural act”. The “unnatural act” was not further defined and certainly some people concluded that it referred to Sodomy. See “In the Court of the District Judge of Chingleput. O.S. No 47 of 1912. J. Narayaniah – Plaintiff versus Mrs Annie Besant – Defendant”.

For details of the case and the subsequent appeals, see:

<https://cwleadbeater.wordpress.com/2016/11/05/the-krishnamurti-custody-case-1912-1914/> “Veritas” *Mrs Besant and the Alcyone Case* Goodwin & Co, Mylapore, 1913 provides a very detailed report of the court proceedings in India, and reproduces almost all the documentary evidence presented by the Plaintiff, including that relating to the 1906 scandal, with copies of correspondence between Leadbeater and Besant. That work is available in digital form on-line at:
<https://archive.org/details/mrsbesantalcyone00veririch>

Narayaniah's allegation was not accepted by the Judge, which is a very different matter to having a charge (which did not exist) dismissed. However, in the course of his judgement, the Judge found Leadbeater to be “a person holding immoral ideas”. A good, and mercifully succinct, account of that case can be found in Arthur Nethercot *The Last Four Lives of Annie Besant* Rupert Hart-Davis, London, 1963:184-201.

Reviewing the statements made at that time, both in the course of the trial, as well in the press in Madras, India, what was stated in the Introduction to *CWL Speaks* does not seem to be unjustified:

“Perhaps Mr. Leadbeter [sic] may have the same supposed occult explanation for these actions towards my sons as he put forward in connection with the charges brought by the parents against him on the previous well-known occasion. You are aware that eventually the explanation was not accepted,

even by Theosophists as justifying his action, and that he solemnly promised on that occasion [London, 1906] never to repeat the practice again. What came to my knowledge, as already stated above, is a plain breach of his promise, as you know, his action is not merely morally reprehensible, but is a heinous offense, punishable by Criminal Law.”

(Alcyone – statement by G. Naraniah, Krishnamurti’s father, *Mrs. Besant and the Alcyone Case*, by Veritas, Goodwin & Co., Mylapore, 1913, p. 46.)

The records of the proceedings state that Mr Naraniah described the offence he saw CWL commit on his son by writing on a piece of paper. It was not mentioned openly in court.

The following is what appear in a Madras newspaper:

‘To make a charge against his son of an offence punishable with 13 years transportation, and to be declared a perjurer for making it, does not render the plaintiff unfit to have the custody of the injured boy!’

THE HON’BLE MR. JUSTICE BAKEWELL’S JUDGMENT IN G.
NARANIAH, *versus* MRS. BESANT

(Reprint from the *Madras Standard*.)

After Annie Besant lost her case for guardianship of Krisnamurti and his brother Nytiananda, in the Judgement by Justice Bakewell of the Madras High Court, she appealed of the decision. Below is the judgement regarding her appeal, particularly in relation to the charges of immorality against CWL:

“I now pass to the specific charges of immorality brought by the plaintiff against Mr. Leadbeater. They are referred to in paragraph 5 of the plaint and are described in the particulars delivered in pursuance of the order of the learned Judge. As regards the second charge I doubt whether the Statements of witnesses who speak to what Lakshman told them are evidence. It seems to me that this charge really depends upon the evidence of Lakshman who was called as a Court witness. His evidence is to be found at page 278 of the printed papers, (a previous statement in writing as to what he said he saw is to be found in Ex. VII) and it is quite clear that his evidence is insufficient to support a charge of an unnatural offence or any act of gross indecency on the part of Mr. Leadbeater. With regard to the first charge the plaintiff’s evidence, if true, would establish that Mr. Leadbeater had been guilty of grossly indecent conduct in connection with the elder boy.”

“Although Mr. Leadbeater was not, and could not well be represented before us, the defendant has taken upon her shoulders the burden of his defence with regard to these charges. She discharged the task of defending him with extreme zeal and with great ability. She sought to show that, in view of the changes in the alleged dates and of the variation in the character of the alleged offence, no Court of Law would hold Mr. Leadbeater guilty either of

an unnatural offence or of grossly indecent conduct in connection with the elder boy.”

Madras High Court

Mrs. Annie Besant vs G. Narayaniah on 29 October, 1913

Equivalent citations: (1913) 25 MLJ 661

Author: A White

JUDGMENT Arnold White, C.J.

(<https://indiankanoon.org/docfragment/1214788/?formInput=unnatural%20offence>)

Therefore, in the understanding of the presiding Justice, above stated, there was indeed a ‘charge of an unnatural offence or any act of gross indecency on the part of Mr. Leadbeater’, brought by Mr Naraniah, which was dismissed by Justice Bakewell in the first court case.

This is what the Indian Penal Code (1860) has to say about unnatural offences:

Section 377 in The Indian Penal Code (1860)

377. Unnatural offences.—Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal, shall be punished with [imprisonment for life], or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine.

Explanation.—Penetration is sufficient to constitute the carnal intercourse necessary to the offence described in this section.

* * *

Although the courts exonerated CWL from the charge of unnatural offence against the boy Krishnamurti the press in Madras continued its campaign against him and Mrs Besant. However, a very telling episode of the whole process occurred when Mrs Besant handed over a copy of the ‘Cypher letter’ to Mr Naraniah’s lawyers. For reasons best known to themselves they opted for not producing it in court. They were very expert and respected lawyers and yet they did not make any use of the document, one which CWL denied having written in the form that it was presented.

The Elder Brother, Dr Tillett’s biography of C. W. Leadbeater, published originally in 1982 and recently reprinted by Routledge & Kegan Paul, became very influential in the field of theosophical history. It was avidly recommended by those sections of the Theosophical Movement which were – and still are – hostile to both Besant and Leadbeater. It is housed in more than 200 libraries around the world. It also became the leading book of the ‘received tradition’ about Leadbeater, a tradition which begun in 1905 with Helen Dennis and her associates in Chicago.

CWL Speaks is a much less ambitious book. It simply aimed at presenting the serious crisis of 1906-1908 through the eyes of a man whose reputation was damaged

world wide, partly by his advice to teenage boys, but much more widely by those who saw him as a criminal and a monster. The book had modest sales and attracted equally modest interest. However, it stands as an alternative view of the Leadbeater story, fully based on documents. For many there cannot be an alternative view and what the 'received tradition' showed cannot be changed. But hopefully there will be those who would like to know what the reviled man has to say. *CWL Speaks* was written for them.

The book is available at www.cwlworld.info.