

Foreword

This fine account by Pedro Oliveira of the 1906 crisis in the Theosophical Society, in which the prominent Theosophist Charles Webster Leadbeater was accused of sexual teaching and perhaps practice deemed unacceptable by the Society's leadership, is important not only for its contribution to Theosophical history, but also because it represents one response to a time of rapid change in the life of the world, above all in social and psychological attitudes. Good historical writing is not just the narrative of a certain slice of time, often a narrow slice. It also offers a window into an era and its people, for no one lives entirely apart from his or her times, whether in sympathy with its trends or in reaction against them.

In most ways Theosophy in the first decade of the twentieth century was in sympathy with the trends. This was a period often called the Progressive era, when movements toward peace, feminism (including votes for women), the rights of workers, concern for animals (and vegetarianism), together with broad-mindedness toward the varied religions and cultures of the world (many of them then under imperial domination) were in the air. Many Theosophists were in the forefront of these causes, and the Society itself, with its leadership by women as well as men (rarely seen in the conventional religions of the day), and its regard for world religions as repositories of the ancient wisdom, embodied them. The writings of Theosophists, beginning with H. P. Blavatsky, were moreover among the first to incorporate versions of Darwinian evolution into a spiritual worldview.

However, in one area, sexuality, Theosophical thought remained firmly rooted in traditional values even in the era of bloomers and then flappers. Indeed, for some Theosophists, values went the other way: there were those, including married couples, who observed strict celibacy and considered sexual abstinence the royal road to the higher life. C.W. Leadbeater himself, in *The Masters and the Path*, quotes from H. P. Blavatsky (herself drawing here from Eastern sources) to the effect that among the first rules of a *chela* or disciple was "Absolute mental and physical purity." The Victorian meaning of such "purity" would have been well understood; it was spelled out in a later rule to mean avoidance even of touching another living being, human or animal. This mentality no doubt had some roots in the rigid morality of the Victorian middle class, out of which demographic Theosophy had strong representation, and in certain medical opinions of the times, but owed even more in the literature of Eastern asceticism which Theosophists received enthusiastically. To its credit Theosophy did much to introduce Eastern spirituality to the rest of the world, but such strictures were not always suitable in a society without the traditions and monastic establishments of their homelands.

One exception to Theosophical "purity": the same C.W. Leadbeater was accused in 1906 of teaching masturbation to boys and perhaps himself practicing homosexuality, or even as was later whispered the black arts of sex magic, like his notorious contemporary Aleister Crowley. In the present book Pedro Oliveira makes clear that, in respect to these charges, Leadbeater was often assumed guilty before he could be proven innocent, and that none of the charges were in fact proven then or later in a way that could have satisfied a court of law. And in fact, in this particularly respect, C.W.L. may have been more attuned to the trends than he have recognized.

In the same year, 1906, over in Vienna Sigmund Freud turned fifty, and was becoming more and more widely known for his much-debated psychoanalytic theories. In the previous year, 1905, Freud had first published *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, which work, expanded and reprinted over the years, presented

many of the basic concepts of Freudian psychology. The “Three Essays” – “Sexual Aberrations”, “Infantile Sexuality”, and “Transformations of Puberty” – explain that a basic energy, sometimes called “libido”, grounded in biology itself and becoming the sexual drive in its culminating adult form, seeks expression in all stages of life from infancy on up, though in different ways appropriate to different life-stages, like water shunted through various pipes and channels. This drive, because of the other requisites of life and culture, must often screen itself and indeed may be the potent but unconscious inner motivation for why we want what we want and do what we do.

In 1906 Freud received the full blast of criticism for this treatise, even as did Leadbeater at the same time for his alleged views. Fellow psychologists attacked the innovative doctor basically for obscenity as it was then understood, calling their colleague variously a “dirty-minded pansensualist”, a “Viennese libertine”, the perverted writer of “pornographic stories” masquerading as scientific papers, and the psychoanalytic method “mental masturbation”. But Freud did not stop in his analytic research and writing, or in slowly gathering disciples like, at the time, C.G. Jung, though the world was then mostly against him. In the same mode, Leadbeater continued his clairvoyance and writing despite temporary exile.

Freud was, of course, to prevail in a very important sense. While his research methods and specific ideas remain highly controversial, his impact on popular culture can hardly be gainsaid. Countless persons who have not read a word of the master’s actual writing talk confidently of the ego, projection, the Oedipus complex (or father and mother issues), unconscious desires, being in denial, and of course Freudian slips. What this street-level Freudianism really seems to be saying is that regardless of theory we now experientially recognize that on some plane other than the conscious reasoning mind, we have roads to travel, tasks to accomplish, and desires to deal with whether we can put them into words or not, and these excursions are really important, indeed have to do with who we are. All this is because, as Freud emphasized by talking about the mind as a medical man rather than a philosopher or even a theologian, our hidden but potent passions are definitely bodily at source as is also mind, and not contenders in a spirit or mind warring against the flesh dualism. Both mind and body are interacting and necessary components of one being. (In its way Theosophy says the same thing by affirming that, in the manifested universe, spirit and matter are always together, the proverbial two sides of the same coin.)

It remains to be said that, in a parallel way, Leadbeater also won. He was and remains controversial too. But he kept on doing what he believed he was called by the Masters to do, through his gift of clairvoyance, and after his re-acceptance into the Society became one of its most popular teachers. I find that for many Theosophists, including myself, a book of CWL’s (often *The Masters and the Path*) was the first substantial Theosophical work they read. Leadbeater had a remarkable gift for making the concepts of this old/new worldview plausible through his knack for language and easy-to-understand illustrations, while at the same time the author kept the wonder of the many-layered Theosophical universe, and its provocative difference from the secular outlook, attractively before the reader as well.

So far as sexuality and Theosophy are concerned, George Arundale, who became International President of the Society the year of Leadbeater’s death, 1934, was able to write in “The Glory of Sex”, a 1940 article: “The urge of sex, as we call it, though it has been so degraded everywhere, means in fact the Creative Spirit of God. . . There is no doubt that the sex urge is the nearest force we have to that Godliness which is essentially ours. . . To draw near to our essential Godliness or to create like a God, or to do both, that is the purpose, the objective of the sexual urge.”

To be sure, Theosophy has always emphasized, and still does, that sexuality is meant to be exercised only within a committed one-to-one relationship. Like every other aspect of life, our sexual lives call down discipline as well as glory. But the meaning of what there transpires is now expanded to include wonder as well as asceticism, the change perhaps influenced at least indirectly by the cultural Freudianism widespread by 1940. A slice of how we got from one perspective to another is the burden of *CWL Speaks*, and it is highly recommended, for it is also the story of its times.

Robert Ellwood

Dr Robert Ellwood is the author of over twenty-five books, ranging from textbooks in religious studies (including *Many Peoples, Many Faiths*, a popular world religion textbook) to books of religious history (*The Fifties Spiritual Marketplace*, *The Sixties Spiritual Awakening*, and *Islands of the Dawn*, among others) to inspirational books written from a theosophical perspective (*Finding the Quiet Mind*, *The Pilgrim Self*, *Theosophy: A Modern Expression of the Wisdom of the Ages*, *The Cross and the Grail*, *Finding Deep Joy*, *Frodo's Quest*). He was a professor of world religions at the University of Southern California for thirty years, from 1967 until his retirement in 1997.