

## Freedom of Thought

Hugh Shearman

*Part of an unpublished manuscript. Dr Shearman was an eminent member of the Theosophical Society in Northern Ireland, and also a member of the Society's General Council. His books include Modern Theosophy, A Passionate Necessity, Desire and Fulfilment, To Form a Nucleus and A Guide to Work in the Theosophical Society. He also contributed many articles to The Theosophist and other Theosophical journals. He was awarded, in 1995, by the General Council of the TS, the prestigious Subba Row Medal for his contribution to Theosophical literature.*

Among the touring speakers who presented various aspects of Theosophy to the world, C. W. Leadbeater was one of the most popular. A very clear and lucid speaker, easy to understand, he was very much sought after in America. Ever since his days as a curate in the Church of England he had been active in creating and working in activities and movements for young people, which in those days necessarily implied activities that were almost entirely for boys.

In 1901 he was given a charter to establish a Lotus Lodge of the Theosophical Society for young people, to follow on from a Lotus Circle which had been formed in London for children with theosophical family backgrounds and connections. A number of the Society placed their children in his educational care, and when he was on tour he regularly in touch with one or two boys with him as an educational and social experience for them.

Boys achieve their fullest sexual potency quite early, and one of the problems of boys growing up is therefore what to do with the strong sexual drive that enters their lives. Leadbeater had apparently been a member of a group in the Anglican Church which discussed these problems and advanced specific practical views about them. His view came to be that what young people do with their own bodies is their own affair and usually harmless; but what they do with other people's bodies can involve serious responsibilities and can do considerable harm. He also looked on a strained and unhappy repression as liable to be very harmful. He therefore regarded masturbation, the self-induced stimulation of an ejaculation, as a proper solution for the sexual problems of adolescent boys.

At that time, however, any such practice was regarded by many people with horror, and many superstitions were held with regard to it. Thus boys were told that it could lead to blindness or insanity, and other quite mendacious claims were made for the purpose of scaring boys away from it.

When, psychically or otherwise, Leadbeater he became aware of rising sexual tension in a boy, he candidly told him what he could do to relieve it. But, in view of the prevailing climate of opinion, he also told any boy to whom he had communicated such advice to treat it as strictly confidential.

In the circumstances this was to invite trouble, and in the course of time it came, when two boys were discovered by their elders to have been made unhappy by

Leadbeater's teaching on this subject. One can only surmise why a difficulty arose with respect to these two boys when other boys placed under his care made no complaint and grew up ready to give their testimony as adults to Leadbeater's honourable and clean-minded teaching and behaviour. Parental pressure had probably something to do with it. Where Leadbeater most seriously misjudged the situation was that, in his zeal to apply his solution to the problems of growing boys, he offered it to prepubescent boys who felt that their lives were being invaded in a way that was bewildering and offensive.

Although very publicly associated with the Society as one of its most active lecturers and proponents, Leadbeater seems to have been quite inadequately aware of the likelihood of anything he said or did being identified with the Society, particularly when the Society had enemies. It was later suggested that Leadbeater might have entertained the idea that a sexual orgasm need not be wasted and could be used to carry an individual to some higher realm of consciousness. His biographer, Gregory Tillett, thought it relevant to quote a number of cases of persons who at that period had held ideas and advocated practices of that kind; but Tillett had conceded that precisely how, *or indeed if*, Leadbeater's teachings related to or (were) derived from any of these traditions is unknown. There seems to be no evidence that Leadbeater ever mixed sex and mysticism in that questionable way, and to have done so would have been quite incompatible with the tone and clear intention of all that he wrote.

Colonel Olcott had been visiting Ceylon, where he had had some problems to face. One was the demand of High Priest Sumangala Thero for omissions to be made from the Colonel's *Buddhist Catechism* which Sumangala had himself earlier approved. Another was the hostile rhetoric of Dharmapala. From the public in Ceylon the Colonel received immense displays of affection and support. From there he went to England, being met on arrival by Mrs Marie Russak, an American member who was to have a place in the Society's history.

Arrival in England in the spring of 1906 brought the President into the complexities of the Leadbeater case, in which Leadbeater was attacked by the American General Secretary and executive and by the woman responsible for the Esoteric School in America. A special representative, a Mr R. A. Burnett, came from Chicago to London to convey the American attitude. If Leadbeater consented to resign from all connection with the Theosophical Society and its work, he would not be prosecuted before his lodge. Otherwise his expulsion from the Society was demanded.

As the reaction of members of the Society pledged to respect freedom of thought for all its members, this approach was hardly constitutional. Colonel Olcott, however, in May 1906, took the chair at a private meeting of the executive of the Theosophical Society in England, with the American representative present and also a representative from France. On condition that the proceeding were strictly private and confidential, C. W. Leadbeater himself agreed to attend this meeting. Before leaving India he had been questioned about his views by Mrs Besant

The London meeting proceeded as if it were a court of law, with Leadbeater as the defendant, but there was no law in the Society which he could have been held to have broken. In a number of respects the affair had some resemblance to the Judge affair of some years previously, but Leadbeater answered all questions with great candour. Already American undertakings of privacy and confidentiality, given with respect to the matters now under review at the meeting, had been dishonoured. The proceedings at the meeting were subject to a similar undertaking, and this also was dishonoured.

Leadbeater declared that he was satisfied that the advice he gave to boys was right but, since there was such strong feeling about it, he was prepared to refrain from giving it in the future. He placed his resignation in Colonel Olcott's hands, to use if the Colonel thought proper. After Leadbeater left the meeting, the American representative urged that he should be expelled from the Society, but the Colonel decided against expulsion and went only so far as to accept the resignation.

Although promises had been given that the proceedings of this 'Kangaroo court' should be kept strictly private and not disclosed to other members or to the public, Herbert Burrows proceeded to publish the minutes of those proceedings. And accusations of child abuse and other crimes or improprieties began to circulate.

Much play was made with a short note, in a code which Leadbeater used to show to boys for their entertainment. In this there were a couple of expressions which could be read as implying that advice had been sentimentally extended to explicit acts. Leadbeater said that the wording of a note he had once written had been altered by somebody. He was not able to get seeing this note himself until two years later.

Jinarajadasa, lecturing in the United States that spring, had already heard about the charges made against Leadbeater and the way he had been treated. He was also aware of the extent to which promises of confidentiality had been dishonoured. He therefore wrote to Alexander Fullerton, the General Secretary of the Society in America, pointing out that he himself had lived for many years in the closest intimacy with Leadbeater and had never had the slightest reason to suspect him of the practices with which he had now been charged or which had been alleged in gossip about him. Fullerton, an emotionally unstable man who seemed at that time to be nearly out of his mind, responded in such terms that Jinarajadasa resigned his membership of the society. A lodge invited him to continue lecturing for it. The American executive of the Society then announced that it would withdraw the charter of any lodge inviting Jinarajadasa to speak.

Immediately after the Leadbeater session in London, Colonel Olcott had attended the Society's first international Congress in Paris. He had presided at the British Section's Convention. He had also visited Belgium and the Netherlands. Then he went on to America. He was not at all well. He had celebrated his seventy-fourth birthday before leaving Europe and had been feeling the burden of the years.

At the American convention Dr Weller van Hook was elected General Secretary in place of Alexander Fullerton, a stable man replacing a very emotional one. Fullerton's influence, however, seemed to linger with the Colonel, and from New

York Olcott issued an 'executive notice' canceling Jinarajadasa's membership diploma because of this defence of Leadbeater.

On the boat going back to Europe Colonel Olcott had a serious accident, falling down a steep stairway and suffering severe bruising and a knee injury. Very much shaken, he had to remain in hospital in Genoa for some time. He returned to Adyar by way of Ceylon. While in Colombo he was seriously ill with heart troubles. He reached Adyar at the beginning of September. There he had a visit from the Master M. who told him to remain President of the Society while he lived.

Mrs Besant had been working in India throughout 1906 and now had in view the establishment of a Hindu university. News of what had been happening to Leadbeater had, of course, reached her. She had had discussions with him in India before the London proceedings and had since been in correspondence with him and was deeply concerned about the whole affair. With her intense seriousness it was hard for her, without great heart-searching, to put into proportion anything that seemed to involve a moral issue, for a sense of humour is for most people an essential adjunct of a sense of proportion.

She could not bring herself to approve of the advice that Leadbeater had been giving to boys. Yet she had too clear and just a mind not to perceive that it was a matter quite personal to Leadbeater himself and was not the business of the Theosophical Society. He had not been propounding from its platform any of that advice to which exception had been taken. The Society's profession of freedom of thought and freedom of speech would become nonsense if a member who had served it well was to be persecuted and penalized for his private opinions as Leadbeater was.

She seemed to go through several phases of attitude, at one stage feeling sure that Leadbeater's resignation would have to stand. But she was quite satisfied that the proceedings against Leadbeater were based on 'one-sided statements by hysterical people' and thought that the Americans had 'behaved disgracefully'. She even thought of resigning from the Society herself. She took an adverse view of Mead and Keightley who were fussily severe on Leadbeater. However, she was also aware that Leadbeater's wide public connections as a writer and lecturer might cause any opinions or rumours connected with him to compromise the Society in the eyes of the public.

Annie Besant was also a woman approaching sixty years of age who had always been powerfully influenced by the moral and social standards of middle-class mid-Victorian England. She was very strongly opposed to the advice that Leadbeater had been giving. He himself, although agreeing not to express such views, so as not to disturb or compromise the Society, held firmly to the rightness of the views he had expressed and the advice he had given.

Mrs Besant clearly vacillated in her attitude, issuing a paper within the Esoteric School which certainly condemned the teaching Leadbeater had given yet approved no alternative apart from repression or perhaps a saintly detachment which very few

boys could realistically be expected to achieve. She knew, at the same time, that she represented the Theosophical Society which claimed to offer freedom of thought and freedom of expression.

The case of Jinarajadasa who had been expelled from membership merely because he held that Leadbeater, his old friend and teacher, had been unjustly treated, weighed heavily upon Mrs Besant, and she urged Olcott to reconsider his decision and reinstate Jinarajadasa. This the Colonel did after consulting the General Council and the General Secretaries; but his decision was now challenged from America on the grounds that the power of the President had been improperly invaded by the General Council. Agitation against Leadbeater continued.

In his biography of Annie Besant, Arthur H. Nethercot commented on this whole episode of Annie Besant's efforts to reach a right judgment about Leadbeater and the Society that 'it is fairly safe to say that if the situation had arisen three or four decades later than it did, after the liberation of conceptions of sexual practices and sexual morality had occurred, there would have been far fewer cries of shocked outrage and probably little more than a few raised eyebrows'.

There remains the unanswered question of what Mrs Besant would have felt was the right approach to people's sexual problems. Earlier in life, for example, she had come out publicly as an advocate of access to contraceptives and had then later withdrawn the book about it which she had put on sale. She had come to believe that contraception was not the final answer to certain adult problems. But what was the answer? Probably she would have held that only when the personal mind is stilled and the personal self-image is abandoned and an ultimate Reality enters our lives can we clearly see the real situation and know perfectly what to do. But the path to such a clarification may be long and the devices tried on the way may be many.