H. P. Blavatsky's Theosophy in Context:

The Construction of Meaning in Modern Western Esotericism

Submitted by Tim Rudbøg to the University of Exeter
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Abstract of PhD Thesis by Tim Rudbøg, 15 December 2012

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H. P. Blavatsky's (1831-1891) Theosophy has been defined as central to the history of modern Western spirituality and esotericism, yet to this date no major study has mapped and analysed the major themes of Blavatsky's writings, how Blavatsky used the concept 'Theosophy' or to what extent she was engaged with the intellectual contexts of her time. Thus the purpose of this thesis is to fill this gap.

The proposed theoretical framework is based on the centrality of language in the production of intellectual products, such as texts—but contrary to the dominant focus on strategies, rhetoric and power this thesis will focus on the construction of meaning coupled with a set of methodological tools based on contextual analysis, intellectual history and intertextuality.

In addition to an overview of Blavatsky research this thesis will map and analyse Blavatsky's use of the concept 'Theosophy' as well as Blavatsky's primary discourses, identified as: (1) discourse for ancient knowledge, (2) discourse against Christian dogmatism, (3) discourse against the modern natural sciences and materialism, (4) discourse against modern spiritualism, (5) discourse for system and (7) discourse for universal brotherhood. In mapping and analysing Blavatsky's discourses, it was found that her construction of meaning was significantly interconnected with broader intellectual contexts, such as 'modern historical consciousness', 'critical enlightenment ideas', studies in religion, studies in mythology, the modern sciences, spiritualism, systemic philosophy, reform movements and practical ethics. It, for example, becomes clear that Blavatsky's search for an ancient 'Wisdom Religion' was actually a part of a common intellectual occupation during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and that her critique of the Christian dogmas was equally a common intellectual trend. To read Blavatsky's discourses as the idiosyncratic strategies of an esotericist, isolated from their larger contexts or only engaged with them in order to legitimise minority views would therefore largely fail to account for the result of this thesis: that in historical actuality, they were a part of the larger cultural web of meaning.

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