POINT LOMA, THEOSOPHY, AND KATHERINE TINGLEY

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If the Key to understanding the Theosophical Society may be found in the life of Blavatsky, then the key to understanding Point Loma, in many ways, may be found in the life of Katherine Tingley... (Ashcraft 2002: 33)

Introduction

In the late nineteenth century, only twenty years after its inauguration in 1875, the Theosophical Society experienced its first major split when the American section separated from the Theosophical Society (Adyar). Only one year after the death of the American leader William Q. Judge (1851–1896), the highly charismatic leader Katherine Tingley (1847–1929) seized power over the American society. Soon thereafter she moved headquarters from New York to Point Loma, California, in order to unfold her grand utopian vision of what came to be the most comprehensive partly self-supported communal experiment Theosophy has ever developed. The Point Loma community came to consist of a school for children, a Greek theater, a temple, fruit gardens, and a Theosophical university with a publishing arm among many other significant achievements. In 1942, however, the Point Loma project came to an end, and the more humble remains of the society are now located in Pasadena.

Katherine Tingley and Her Background

Testimonies portray Katherine Tingley as a highly charismatic woman possessing outstanding qualities (Ashcraft 2002: 33–35). She was beyond doubt the primary leader behind the development of the innovative Point Loma Theosophical experiment. As such, Max Weber’s conception of charismatic authority, as distinct from traditional authority and legal authority, in many ways characterizes Katherine Tingley’s leadership. Whereas a traditional leader acquires leadership through socially accepted lineages, and legal or bureaucratic leader(s) are elected through established procedures, the charismatic leader acquires and maintains leadership through revolution, and by means of what followers perceive to be
extraordinary qualities and abilities, so that such followers naturally come to function as their leader’s disciples (Weber 1970a: 77–80).

Thus, for a more thorough comprehension of the dynamics of the Point Loma community, insight into Katherine Tingley’s life would be beneficial. However, in dealing with her early life the historian is faced with distinct difficulties, since very little is known, and the few extant sources were primarily written retrospectively by Tingley herself. She was born on July 6, 1847 at Newburyport, Massachusetts prior to the Civil War, and was given the name Katharine Augusta Westcott. Evidence indicates that she was educated in the Newburyport schools and by private tutors. She also studied the piano, singing, and the harp at an early age, not unusual at the time for young women of an upper middle class background. She profoundly enjoyed the company of her maternal grandfather, especially what she felt to be their shared sense of “the silence without words” and his Masonic knowledge. She never really showed much fondness for her parents’ Puritan heritage (Tingley 1926: 35–37). According to her own narrative, young Katherine was rebellious and felt misunderstood. She therefore spent much time alone wandering off into the woods (Tingley 1996, ch. 1). Tingley equally mentions that it was during this time that she first envisioned building a magnificent “White City” in the West (Tingley 1928: 41, 172).

By the late 1880s, having been married twice and with no children of her own, Katherine had experienced the disappointments of family life. A new purposeful endeavor was required to give meaning and substance to her life. Living in an increasingly industrialized New York City characterized by the suffering of the underprivileged and the poor conditions of the Manhattan East Side, Katherine decided to take action. In 1887 she formed the Society of Mercy in order to provide visits and help to the unfortunate people in prisons and hospitals.

Many people like Katherine from the growing middle class felt the need to improve the poor conditions in society, and so they utilized their right to organize or join social and political reform movements (Greenwalt 1978: 14). Katherine, as a modern woman in search for existential meaning, set up one secular form of philanthropic endeavor after another.

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