THEOSOPHY, GENDER, AND THE “NEW WOMAN”

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Women leaders are rare in the history of religions. Religions have idealized women as mothers, wives, and Madonnas, but rarely as founders, leaders or theologians. The Theosophical Society (TS) departs from this pattern. Born amidst “the cult of domesticity” and “the angel in the house,” Theosophy downplayed the importance of marriage, insisted upon the spiritual independence of women, included women on all levels of the organization, and – last but not least – upheld the theological authority of a woman. Theosophy offered the historically rare case of a male founder being overshadowed by his female counterpart, and the equally rare case of women having formal religious authority. Henry Steel Olcott was the first president of the TS, but there would have been no Theosophy without the fertile mind of his co-founder Helena Petrovna Blavatsky. Annie Besant succeeded Olcott as president in 1907. An important contributor to the feminist image and appeal of Theosophy, Besant had already achieved fame as an atheist, free thinker, socialist, and, according to popular opinion, the best female orator of the era. In the words of historian Kumari Jayawardena, Blavatsky and Besant were “among the two most outstanding women rebels of their period”:

Abandoning family life for the free life of the independent woman, rejecting personal domination by men and becoming forceful leaders themselves, they deliberately flouted bourgeois morality, discarding all prevalent creeds, beliefs, social conventions and political orthodoxies for the ideal of political, social and spiritual freedom. It is not an exaggeration to say that the “scandals” they caused reverberated around the world to the disgust of the Victorian establishment and the delight of dissenters in the West and the East. (Jayawardena 1995: 114)

An attempt to make religio-historical sense of Theosophy’s “New Woman,” this chapter provides an overview of the issues that concerned her, the life-styles she favored, and the agendas she engaged in. I begin with the broader social context to which she belonged – the “heterodox fringes” of the late Victorian era – here delimited to England and the United States. Second, I describe Theosophy’s New Woman with particular attention to what members referred to as “the sex problem,” including marriage,
reproduction and human evolution. And third, I discuss androgyny and androgynization, both of which were central to Theosophical concepts of identity and salvation, and both of which also contributed to the feminist appeal of Theosophy.

No longer the leading light of alternative religiosity, Theosophy has nevertheless retained its position as the mother of New Age and the backbone of late modern occultism. However, its gender discourse appears to have basically disappeared. The last section of this chapter addresses this lack of continuity, and briefly compares the gender discourse of early Theosophy with that of contemporary New Agers.

*Early Theosophy and the Progressive Underground*

Named after the ruling monarch in Britain, “Victorianism” refers to the period between 1837 and 1901 in English speaking parts of the Western world (Walker Howe 1975: 508). The Victorian gender ideology saw society structured upon complementarity between male and female, between public life and domestic privacy. Man’s “natural” destiny as breadwinner, political agent, and scientific explorer was attributed to his superior rationality, while woman’s nurturing capacities made her the “natural” custodian of household privacy. This was clearly a positive revision of pre-nineteenth century notions of gender. Woman was celebrated as the angel in the house and the light-bringer of domesticity; her sacrificial capacities were considered superior, and her potential for suffering and martyrdom unique (Bauer & Rilt 1979: xv; Vicinus 1972). However, such revisions still left little scope for personal autonomy. Placed on a pedestal of spiritual virtues, woman was still constituted as passive, receptive, and intellectually inferior.

Running parallel to discourses on domestic angels and public men, the late nineteenth century also saw novel concepts and radical experiments. Opposition was expressed through the development of political organs, including suffragette movements and organizations for social and judicial reforms. And it was expressed through the New Women (and men) who defied conventions, moved in avant-garde political and cultural circles, and flirted with bohemian lifestyles (Jayawardena 1995: 9). The typical

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1 The New Woman was established as a concept by the 1870s and has since been used by scholars to describe a new version of womanhood which emerged between 1870 and 1940 (Helleslund & Okkenhaug 2003: 2; see also Ledger 1997 and Patterson 2008).