

The Evidence of Things Not Seen

“Faith,” declared Paul in his epistle to the Hebrews, “is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” “Faith,” declares Alexander Cruden, at the head of a lengthy list of biblical citations under that heading in his concordance to the Old and New Testaments, “is a dependence on the veracity of another.” It could be that faith is simply an agreement to be deceived, a proposition that neither Paul’s definition, nor Cruden’s, necessarily contradicts.

Since one man’s faith may be another’s folly, it is generally considered impolite to question openly even the dottiest supernatural beliefs of one’s fellow citizens. Those who entertain peculiar or millennial beliefs can usually be counted on to assemble in some congenial fastness, where they will not be embarrassed by public scrutiny unless they misbehave, as in cases like Jim Jones’s cult in Guyana or the Aum Shinrikyo sect in Japan. For the most part, no one pays fringe faiths much attention, and so the generations of gurus, ascended masters, Mahdis, and other self-proclaimed Messiahs sail into the ether of religious history, shrinking to the size of footnotes and then vanishing from sight altogether.

Thanks, however, to the industry and intelligence of Peter Washington, the editor of *Everyman’s Library*, the snow jobs of yesteryear have been compacted into a single multi-biography, *Madame Blavatsky’s Baboon*, with an irreproachable scholarly apparatus (forty-seven pages of notes and bibliography) and, more importantly, with an irresistible narrative brio. Has anyone before Washington undertaken the Augean labor of writing a coherent history of the intellectual antecedents of the New Age? Professional doubters, such as those who write for the *Skeptical Inquirer*, have their hands full controverting the absurdities of the passing moment—UFO claimants, Satanic child abusers, and spoonbending psychics. And those who are busy tilling New Age fields will not wish to call attention to their shabby ancestors, who were, with few exceptions, a disreputable lot in the conduct of their lives, while their immense tomes, full of bygone flummeries, do not decant well.

Review of *Madame Blavatsky’s Baboon*, by Peter Washington.

That is what makes *Madame Blavatsky's Baboon* such a delight for readers who look to history for a higher form of gossip. The Merchant/Ivory film team could refine half a dozen good screenplays from the ore Washington provides—beginning with the raffish career of the title character, the author of *Isis Unveiled* (1875), co-founder of the Theosophical Society, and an archetypal con artist of the sort who can't resist glorying in her trickster capabilities.

Blavatsky regularly arranged for the Hidden Masters with whom she was in communication—Koot Hoomi, Serapis Bey, et al.—to “precipitate” sealed letters from the immaterial realm into the pockets of her acolytes. One such missive to a wavering recruit, Colonel Henry Olcott, instructed him that Blavatsky “had a special mission in the world, and must be cared for at all costs, even if caring for her meant sacrificing the colonel's other interests, such as his wife and children.” Olcott dumped his wife and sons and became Blavatsky's lifelong patsy and her shill. After many wanderings they pitched their tents at Adyar, in India, and established the Theosophical Society. Blavatsky thrived as a spiritualist in Anglo-Indian circles, performing conventional psychic tricks, “making a brooch appear in a flowerbed, finding a teacup and summoning music out of thin air.” Often detected in her impostures, Blavatsky loftily maintained that her seeming scamming was actually an integral part of the Hidden Masters' higher plan—which only she could apprehend. Even today she has her remnant of true believers: a review of Washington's book in the *New York Times Book Review* occasioned a reproachful letter from one such diehard. As Washington observes, “There are those who argue still that if Blavatsky is a figure of scandal, it is only because the slanders on her reputation are signs of grace: the stigmata that all great martyrs must bear.” There is even a kind of heroism in such loyalty, as who might say, “Well, yes, he was crucified, but I had dinner with him yesterday.”

For Blavatsky the highest wisdom, as set forth in her books, transcended both Christianity and its then blackest *bête noire*, Darwinism. (The baboon of the title was a cherished bibelot, a stuffed “bespectacled baboon, standing upright, dressed in wing-collar, morning-coat and tie, and carrying under its arm the manuscript of a lecture on *The Origin of Species*.”) “It was necessary,” Washington argues, “for someone to show the way forward by denouncing both the Darwinians, who stood for false ideals of progress, and the Christians, who believe in false myths of salvation. Blavatsky's supporters argue that attacking both parties with their huge vested interests was bound to provoke a bitter response: hence the personal attacks on their idol.”

Washington spends more of his time on the page recounting scandals than interpreting them, but in that passage he begins to suggest not only Blavatsky's appeal but that of the whole New Age mindset. New Agers want the best of both worlds, Here and Hereafter. They want a pleasant afterlife, which requires some recourse to the miraculous, but they don't want it to be conditional upon their own good behavior. They applaud the libertinism of the Enlightenment but deplore its irreligion. The scandal of God, as Madame Blavatsky sensed (along with her countryman Dostoevsky), is that he can be capricious, dispensing grace to reprobates and withholding it from the righteous.

This was, then as now, a gender-specific issue. Blavatsky, simply by asserting herself as a prophet and high priestess of a new religion, was making a feminist statement, one with which those who followed in her footsteps concurred: Annie Besant, initially an early advocate of contraception; Katherine Tingley, an American actress in the mold of Shirley MacLaine, who formed her own apostate, California branch of Theosophy; and innumerable others, down to the legions of lady psychics, seers, tarot readers, and astrologers in our own time. Women, as any woman knows, have as good a claim on Godhead and/or priesthood as men, and if this age won't acknowledge the justice of their claim, then let's have another. Believe in the Goddess and viva Blavatsky!

But the women have not been entirely alone in their mystic fane. There was, in those days (the *fin de siècle*), a love that dared not speak its name, but was, even so, hot to trot. Enter the pedophile and psychopathic liar Charles Webster Leadbeater, whose biopic might more suitably be filmed by Ken Russell. Leadbeater's account of his own early life is, like Blavatsky's and Gurdjieff's official CVs, a parcel of succulent lies, but the life the lies were designed to camouflage was just as juicy. Pedophilia was to be, more than once, the spur to travel, both before and after Leadbeater's ascension to the rank of bishop in the Liberal Catholic Church, an apostate institution in which bishoprics were to be had for the asking. Liberal Catholics chiefly believed in candles, incense, and glitzy vestments, along with Atlantis, Mu, and all that is divinely decadent. It was an enduring tradition. In the early sixties I came upon a remnant of the creed, one Bishop Itkin, who was often noted, in the newspapers of the day, for his prominent episcopal presence at rallies of the peace movement. Like Leadbeater, Itkin found that if you called yourself a bishop and wore a pectoral cross you would be treated with the same deference as the genuine article, both by the media and by altar boys.

Leadbeater is the Mr. Micawber of Madame Blavatsky's Baboon, a deliciously predictable reprobate and opportunist. In the course of his career

he scored at least as well as Father Bruce Ritter in our own era. He was disgraced repeatedly, but he would just expatriate himself and keep on scoring. Theosophy, by shrugging off a moral code, possessed a special attraction for homosexuals who wanted to love both God and man. Now that the more liberal Protestant churches have welcomed homosexuals into the ranks of the clergy, gays of a religious bent need not venture as far afield as Theosophy to enjoy the rites and consolations of the Christian faith. Only time will tell if Theosophy is strong enough to survive that loss.

Leadbeater's penchant for ephebes leads to the next, and most amazing biopic opportunity of this history—Krishnamurti. "One evening in the spring of 1909," Washington recounts, "Leadbeater noticed an extraordinary aura surrounding one of the Indian boys paddling in the shallows. The boy was dirty and unkempt . . . The boy took his fancy, and within days Leadbeater had told his followers that this child was destined to be a great teacher. . . ."

The charm of Krishnamurti's story is much like that of the movie *Forrest Gump*, a fairy tale in which a simpleton, after only a little adversity, is blessed with all possible blessings because his heart is pure. Leadbeater intuited that young Krishna, known in the spirit realm as Alcyone, had lived thirty lives already, ranging in time from 22662 B.C. to A.D. 624, which Leadbeater began to chronicle in the pages of *The Theosophist*: "It turned out that in each of these thirty lives everyone else known to Leadbeater also figured, but with different identities and sometimes different sexes. Some had been famous historical characters. Others had lived on the moon and Venus." Alcyone's long saga became the means by which Leadbeater revenged himself on old enemies and theosophical rivals. Thus, in an earlier life, Mrs. Besant (in this life, too, a serial monogamist) "acquired twelve husbands for whom she roasted rats." Another Leadbeater scoop: Julius Caesar's marriage to Jesus Christ. The bishop could out-tabloid even the *Weekly World News*, and in this he prefigured the can-you-top-this spirituality of our own era, in which sheer imagination is confused with causality. Such fads as creative visualization, UFO abductions, and incest survivalism all conflate dreams and matters-of-fact, and they are licensed to do so by the intellectual deference long accorded to crackpot religions.

Leadbeater's tales of his divine Alcyone soon put the teenage Krishnamurti on the theosophical map. Mrs. Besant adopted "Krishna" and his sibling, Nitya, transported them to London, and put them on a new dietary regimen of porridge, eggs, and milk. Leadbeater, a fanatic about good hygiene, personally attended their daily ablutions. The boys' father

sued for repossession of his offspring, charging Leadbeater with “deification and sodomy.” That is only the beginning of Krishnamurti’s golden legend. By the sound of it, he was a rather nice fellow, his God-head notwithstanding—a bit like Bertie Wooster in his happy blindness to his own astonishing privilege.

Three further gurus round out Washington’s dramatis personae: George Ivanovich Gurdjieff (1873?–1949), Peter Ouspensky (1878–1947), and Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925). Gurdjieff was the most audacious of the lot, the self-appointed Svengali to several generations of mystical Trilbys. He bootstrapped himself from an impoverished childhood in Armenia to become, by 1912, the spiritual drillmaster of his own small sect in Moscow. He kept his followers busy with a regimen of chanting and breathing exercises, modern dance, and character-building drudgery, a program of summer-camp monasticism much emulated by later gurus: submission = inner peace.

At the height of his notoriety, in 1922, Gurdjieff had established his own school-cum-commune at the Chateau du Prieuré, forty miles outside Paris. Many noted intellectuals of the era made pilgrimages to the Prieuré—A. R. Orage, a prominent magazine editor who was chiefly responsible for Gurdjieff’s celebrity; D. H. Lawrence, who wasn’t about to be someone else’s Trilby and didn’t stay long; and most famously, Katherine Mansfield, who died there after a brief sojourn, her faith in Gurdjieff not being sufficient to cure her tuberculosis. Because of its unities of time, space, and action, Mansfield’s few weeks of discipleship would be the best bet for a *Masterpiece Theatre* offering. Mansfield’s *Liebestod* would supply the plot, and here is the *mise en scène*:

Society ladies who had never done a day’s work would be set to peel[ing] potatoes or weed[ing] a flower border with teaspoons while learning a few Tibetan words or memorizing Morse code. Others were given complicated exercises in mental arithmetic while performing certain movements. A Harley Street doctor was deputed to light the boiler, writers cooked and chopped, and eminent psychiatrists shoveled manure or scrubbed the kitchen floor. The place had the atmosphere of a savage boarding school run by a demented if genial headmaster and most of the pupils loved it—for a while.

Peter Ouspensky was as drab a personage as Gurdjieff was colorful. Ouspensky’s lifelong search for the miraculous began in the mists of pseudoscience, where he inferred from the mathematical postulate of time as “the fourth dimension” (the title of his first publication) the

necessity of a Nietzschean eternal recurrence. This brainstorm shaded by degrees into an acceptance of reincarnation, occultism, and all the rest of the theosophical agenda. A visit to the Theosophical Society's headquarters at Adyar only left him longing for a social environment large enough to swallow him whole. His wish—perhaps the essential impulse of a religious vocation—echoes Donne: “. . . bend / Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new. . . . Take me to You, imprison me, for I / Except you enthrall me, never shall be free / Nor ever chaste, except You ravish me.”

Ouspensky's prayers were answered when, just before World War I, he was taken before Gurdjieff and their long game of Captain-may-I began. Imprisoned, enthralled, and ravished, Ouspensky became Gurdjieff's John the Baptist and general dogsbody. His daily witnessing of his master's scams and caprices only snugged the bonds of love tighter, as in *The Blue Angel*. Just as their platonically sadomasochistic romance reached a rolling boil, the Russian Revolution kicked in, and Gurdjieff's little band of disciples, along with a small tribe of gypsy relatives, became refugees, seeking escape into Turkey. They caromed about the steppes of central Asia between the contending Red and White armies, giving modern dance recitals, living on mushrooms and berries, and gathering about the campfire at night to drink in the master's wisdom. It would require the budget of another *Dr. Zhivago*, but the dance sequences on the battlefield could be stunning. *Le Sacre du printemps*? George C. Scott is Gurdjieff. Gene Hackman would pass muster as Ouspensky, though, really, it's a role anyone could handle. That was Ouspensky's problem.

Rudolf Steiner—a guru only insofar as that was one of the duties he imposed on himself as a universal genius and world redeemer—was the son of Austrian peasants and had a childhood that would have been the envy even of Wordsworth. Nature spoke to him incessantly. As he matured, Steiner tried to translate these intimations into a theory that would controvert positivistic science, and so, with some scraps of Goethe's errant optical and biological theories and with deep draughts of Kant, he began to construct his *Summa*. Then Madame Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine* blew his *Summa* out of the water. He converted to Theosophy in 1902 and became the Society's leader in German-speaking lands.

Of all Washington's leading actors, Steiner was the dullest, the most conventionally respectable, and the most successful. He lived to see two cathedralish Goetheanums built according to his own Art Nouveau-like specifications (the first one, of wood, burned down), and the system of Steiner schools is still around to offer progressive education with a theosophical flavor. Should the government ever establish a National Endow-

ment for Occult Science, it would have to find someone like Rudolf Steiner to be its chairman.

As the chronicle approaches our own time, the roster of theosophical dabblers and day-trippers multiplies. There are index entries for Aldous Huxley, Christopher Isherwood, Bob Dylan, and recent leaders of the Liberal Party in England. The last of Washington's gurus, Idries Shah, seems to have been sent down from on high specifically to prove the theory of eternal recurrence. Like Blavatsky, Shah was in touch with "an invisible hierarchy which had chosen him to transmit their wisdom to suitable individuals. He was now looking for European pupils and helpers, and for introductions to the rich and powerful whose help he needed to transform the world. To this end he had founded SUFI: the Society for Understanding Fundamental Ideas."

Shah managed to connect with one of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky's most devoted disciples, Captain J. G. Bennett. Now an old man and a spiritual orphan, Bennett was persuaded in the 1960s to turn over a valuable English estate at Coombe Springs, which had served for many years as a Gurdjieff-style Prieuré. When the other trustees of the estate balked, Shah was adamant: there must be an outright gift or nothing at all. Bennett tried to negotiate, but the more conciliatory his behavior, the more outrageous Shah's demands became. The new teacher wanted to know how Bennett could have the nerve to negotiate with the Absolute. Once the Absolute had got his way, "Shah's first act was to eject Bennett and the old pupils from their own house, banning them from the place except by his specific permission. His second act was to sell the property to developers for £100,000 in the following year, buying a manor house at Langton Green near Tunbridge Wells in Kent with the proceeds."

Why do they do it? Why do fools fall in love—and believers believe, even as they're being fleeced? I think it is Pascal's wager applied to the realm of personal finance. Just as gamblers gamble from a secret desire to know the thrill of utter ruin, so believers need to immolate themselves upon the altars of the Absolute in order to prove themselves worthy of the sacrificial fires. The experience may not last long, but the thrill must be exquisite. For those who prefer to experience that thrill vicariously, *Madame Blavatsky's Baboon* gets you close enough to smell the singed hair.