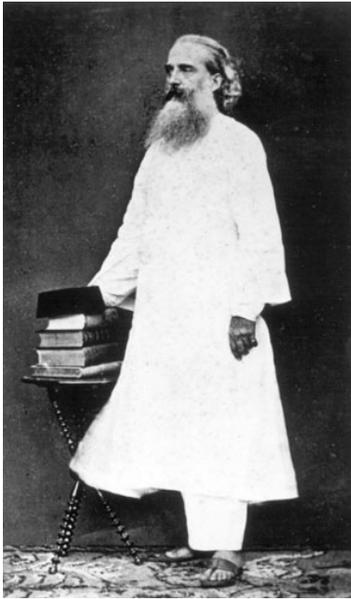


A TRIBUTE TO OLCOTT

By Dr. Daniel Ross Chandler



Henry S. Olcott

Henry Steel Olcott was a proverbial “outsider” who became a quintessential “insider.” The Founding President who established and developed the Theosophical Society became a nineteenth-century “world citizen” who professed an ancient wisdom and championed universal religion. The man who described himself in his *Old Diary Leaves* as exhibiting the temerity that characterizes a pioneer and the zeal of the optimist was convinced that karma evolves explorers, sowers, and reapers. Biographer Howard Murphet concluded that the Colonel was a “blown-in-the-glass pioneer, a scientist at heart, anxious to attack the enigma of life from fundamentals, deeply involved in the new thought, the new liberalizing influences of the day.”¹

This intellectually inquisitive, persistent seeker after truth was a devoted Yankee chela. He served as a bridge spanning western philosophy and eastern spirituality during an epoch-making time when the world was growing smaller and cultures were converging. The East and the West remained virtually estranged until the late eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century. However, in innumerable ways, the Silk Road was a restricted but formative context from which no religion emerged unchanged. Christianity was transformed by mingling with the mystical traditions that existed in Turkey, Persia, Central Asia and China.

In lectures given from 1936 to 1938, philosopher S. Radhakrishnan observed that a great infiltration was happening within the deepest fabrics that compose human thought. Olcott represented the epoch-making convergence among religions and cultures, standing betwixt and between these disparate universes. He embodied the American Protestant ethos while finding himself outside the ecclesiastical establishment and studying spiritualism, Buddhism, and Theosophy. Steeped in a Puritan heritage which he never completely abandoned, he drew from these sources the courage with which he surmounted adversity and the tenacity with which he refused to compromise his convictions.

¹ Murphet, Howard. *Hammer on the Mountain*. Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1972.



Statue of Henry S. Olcott in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

Olcott's ritual passage to South Asia replicated significantly his pioneering ancestor's "errand into the wilderness" and strangely the "errand to the world" conducted by America's nineteenth-century Protestant missionaries. However, being an outsider was an asset in some cases. For instance, when Olcott initially visited Japan, he was informed that only an outsider, a foreigner who seriously and faithfully practiced the Buddhist

religion, could unify the competing contingents within Japanese Buddhism.

The Founding President's rhetorical discourse contained anti-Christian and anti-Western criticism, although the speaker appropriated abundantly liberal Protestantism, metropolitan gentility, and academic comparative religion. Like the well-intentioned but misinformed missionaries whom the Colonel correctly chastised, he preferred a religious persuasion that was activist, optimistic, didactic, adaptationist, and progressive. When the Colonel recited in Pali his Buddhist vows in Jodo Shinshu Temple in Kyoto, Japan, he mused that had he been born in Boston or Hartford among his seventeenth-century Protestant ancestors, he would have been hanged for heresy!

From New England's environs Olcott secured edification. Initially he emerged as an exemplary Emersonian "universal reformer" who appeared during the nineteenth-century and scrutinized the existing social institution and professed persuasion with a penetrating analysis. He initiated reform efforts that were individualistic and anti-institutional. Religiously informed and inspired, he believed in human rights and social progress with an enthusiasm that fostered voluntarism and millennialism. As an Eastern gentleman who endorsed public religion rather than religious conversion, the Colonel preferred the schoolhouse and the home, neither the church nor the camp meeting, as centers for cultivating personal development and social transformation. In a nineteenth-century United States where immigration, industrialization, and urbanization wrought sweeping changes, he concurred with the other "universal reformers" when he concluded with Emerson that not being a reformer is not to live.

Olcott professed and popularized a world-view giving meaning and purpose to human existence. He cultivated an ancient wisdom or spirituality which he described as pre-existing since time immemorial. From a practical perspective, this guides an

aspirant towards inner peace and self-understanding through unselfish service. Emphasizing the unification and interconnection that suffuses life, he taught an essential oneness among all persons and species.

Although not presented as an alternative to religion or a religious alternative, countless concepts contained in the ancient wisdom have parallels in ancient and modern religion. The Colonel described his persuasion as an ancient wisdom that undergirds all religion. Since prehistoric times, he explained, sages and seers have expressed the primary principles that comprise this ancient wisdom, this perennial philosophy, this primordial tradition. Requiring acceptance of neither doctrines nor dogmas but insisting upon individual intellectual freedom, he presented this persuasion as a growing understanding rather than blindly-accepted affirmations. Humanity and the universe were considered as progressively unfolding latent power inherent in spirit and consciousness; a practice that satisfies man's spiritual aspirations by emphasizing a divine spark apprehended within humans; an experiential relationship among the sparks that remains inseparable from the Divine Spark from which the fragment comes; and an understanding that explains life's apparent inequities and injustice as culminating from a principle that guarantees that humans invariably receive the consequences emanating from their behavior.

By accepting and articulating belief in reincarnation, the President-Founder assisted individuals to appreciate a continuum along which humans evolve towards spiritual perfection. As a way of living, his philosophy admonished aspiring adherents to respond to events and situations with an awareness apprehending oneness among all sentient creatures and living beings; humans are encouraged to awaken their inner potential through intuition and insight. With this philosophy, people are admonished to develop their character and overcome the impediments and obstacles that impede their unity with the Divine Life. Through self-examination and self-awareness, humans learn contemplation, stilling the mind and emotions while sensing expanding consciousness. From this practical perspective, his philosophy was tested through a person's everyday experience, asserted an ultimate human responsibility and accountability, and provided an experiential foundation sustaining ethics and morality. From an expanded historical perspective, Olcott's life helps in comprehending and appreciating the extraordinary changes that have transformed humanity's thinking. Truth resembles a lingering flame igniting additional fire and spreading small sparks that can unleash roaring conflagrations.

When a solitary individual or struggling minority confront prejudice and superstition, some steadfast dissidents champion intellectual freedom and spiritual religion with a defiance that make them heralds predicting a dawning dispensation. Though they stand alone, beyond the respected and established standards, these

inquirers remain strong; like the American Colonel and his Russian noblewoman colleague, they are characterized by their particular purpose.

Colonel H. S. Olcott and Madame Blavatsky, steeped in the Hindu and Buddhist religions, exemplify that when in human history ground-breaking pioneers stepped across the barriers and boundaries imposed by restrictive traditions and confined understanding, these heroes and heroines of the human spirit have glimpsed new insights, felt fresh inspiration and gained a growing knowledge that enlivens a thriving spirituality. They become prototypes representing humanity's highest ideals.