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Guide to the Helen I. Dennis Collection on the Theosophical Society 1897-1943



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Descriptive Summary

Identifier	ICU.SPCL.THEOSOPHY
Title	Dennis, Helen I. Collection on Theosophical Society
Date	1897-1943(inclusive)
Size	1.5 linear feet (3 boxes)
Repository	1100 East 57th Street Chicago, Illinois 60637

Abstract The Dennis, Helen I. Collection on Theosophical Society comprises 1.5 linear feet of material, principally correspondence but also including material printed by the Theosophical Society about its teachings, and Mrs. Dennis' notes on Theosophy. Mrs. Dennis donated this material to the University of Chicago Library (as well as duplicates of some material to the Columbia University Library) in 1943, so that ". . .the facts be given to neutral truth-seekers, for safe-keeping."

Information on Use

Access

No restrictions.

Citation

When quoting material from this collection the preferred citation is:

Dennis, Helen I. Collection on Theosophical Society, [Box #, Folder #], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library

Historical Note

Theosophy is not a religion, but an ancillary system to religion. The Theosophical Society has three objectives: (1) to form a nucleus of the universal brotherhood of humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste, or color; (2) to encourage the study of comparative religion, philosophy, and science; and (3) to investigate unexplained laws of nature and the powers latent in man, known as "occultism". While Theosophy is not a religion, it is closely allied with Hindu and Buddhist philosophies and beliefs. In fact, many scholars credit Theosophy with being the single greatest source of Western acquaintance with Eastern thought.

The Theosophical Society was founded in New York in 1875 by Russian émigré Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (later simply known by her initials, H.P.B.) and Colonel Henry Steele Olcott. The early history of the Theosophical Society in the United States is one of schism and controversy. Late in 1878, Madame Blavatsky and Col. Olcott left the United States,

eventually settling in Adyar, India in 1882, which today still serves as world headquarters of the Theosophical Society. This left leadership of the American group to William Quan Judge, a founding member of the Society. After some initial difficulty, Judge was able to build up the American group to the point of making it the largest part of the Society. The death of Blavatsky in 1891 signaled the beginning of a power struggle between Judge and Olcott, ending when Judge led his supporters out and formed the Theosophical Society of America in 1895.

The remaining part of the Theosophical Society was led by Olcott, who took care of administrative details, and by Annie Besant, who took over the role previously filled by Madame Blavatsky, that of spiritual leader for the Society. Mrs. Besant led a full and varied life. Married to an Anglican clergyman she left him for a series of mentors on theism, skepticism, and rationalism; with political radical Charles Bradlaugh, she was arrested for advocating and disseminating information on contraception in 1877; she was exposed to Fabian Socialism through George Bernard Shaw; and her humanitarian concern led to work as a social and educational reformer, strike leader, and union organizer. Besant, at the height of her career as a social reformer, was converted to Theosophy by Madame Blavatsky. She moved to India, and assumed Blavatsky's duties upon H.P.B.'s death, and also became a leading advocate for India Home Rule. Mrs. Besant was most interested in "occult" mysteries, and was soon joined in her quests by a former Anglican cleric, Charles W. Leadbeater. Besant and Leadbeater worked together intimately, and soon became the two leading lights in the Theosophical Society.

Leadbeater had joined the Theosophical Society in 1883, and had worked his way up to a position of some standing. This standing was improved by two speaking tours Leadbeater made in the United States, one of four months in 1900, and a two-year engagement begun in early 1903. During the second tour, Leadbeater spent his time in Chicago at the Dennis' home in Hyde Park. Leadbeater was accompanied on this tour by several young proteges, including at one point the son of Mrs. Dennis. Although he was a confirmed bachelor, Leadbeater was looked upon as something of an expert on child development in Theosophical circles.

That expertise was called into question in 1906, when Leadbeater was accused--and admitted--of teaching masturbation to his young charges. Because of the perceived seriousness of these charges, and the zeal that some members of the Society pursued the charges, Leadbeater was forced to resign from the Society in May of that year.

The leadership capabilities of Annie Besant were called into question by some members over her handling of this situation, particularly after Col. Olcott announced that the Masters had told him Besant should succeed as President of the Society, and then quickly passed away. The personal magnetism of Mrs. Besant, and her popularity with a majority of the members of the Society, staved off this challenge. Besant's continuing relationship with Leadbeater, and the growing perception by members of the Society that the Leadbeater affair had been mishandled, led to his reinstatement in 1908.

Mrs. Dennis was corresponding secretary of the American Section of the Esoteric School of the Theosophical Society in 1905 and 1906, and was Leadbeater's principal accuser. Her interest in the case stemmed not only from her personal abhorrence of the practice of masturbation,

but also that Leadbeater had taught it to her son, Robin. This may help explain her vehement feelings toward Leadbeater, and toward the woman she saw as his protector, Mrs. Annie Besant.

Scope Note

The Helen I. Dennis Collection has been divided into two series: I. General material about the Theosophical Society, and II. Correspondence. The general material about the Theosophical Society includes material published by the Society as well as Mrs. Dennis' notes on the teachings. Of special note is the Blavatsky manuscript, apparently written by Madame Blavatsky in her own hand. In the last folder are photographs of Madame Blavatsky, Col. Olcott, and Mrs. Besant, as well as a group photo taken around the turn of the century.

The rest of the material is correspondence, copies of correspondence, and other material related to the Leadbeater affair, most of which was produced in the years 1906 and 1907. The correspondence dates from 1897, when Mrs. Dennis first corresponded with Mrs. Besant, to 1943, when she deposited the Collection with the University of Chicago Library. Mrs. Dennis, from her official position, was privy to a great amount of information, corresponded with many of the leaders of the Society (including Alexander Fullerton, and G.R.S. and Laura Mead). Because of her personal interest in the affair she copied a great deal of material including letters she received, copies of letters she received, copies of letters others received and showed to her, copies of letters she sent, and copies of letters others sent and showed to her.

This collection is a good source for information on Theosophy, particularly of the so-called "middle period," after the deaths of Madame Blavatsky and Col. Olcott. It is also a good source on the life of Mrs. Annie Besant during the years 1906-1907, when she was ascending to leadership in the Theosophical Society.

Subject Headings

- Dennis, Helen I.
- Besant, Annie Wood
- Leadbeater, Charles W.
- Theosophy

INVENTORY

Box 1

Folder 1

Margaret Thomas, compiler, "Theosophy or Neo-Theosophy"

Box 1

Folder 2

Theosophical catechism

Box 1

Folder 3

"The Coiled Serpent; A Compilation"

Box 1

Folder 4

Miss Hulpert's diagrams illustrating some aspects of evolution

Box 1

Folder 5

"In Memorium H.P.B."

Box 1

Folder 6

Madame Blavatsky manuscripts

Box 1

Folder 7

"Initiation"

Box 1

Folder 8

Quotation from Plutarch

Box 1

Folder 9

Notes on Theosophical philosophy and doctrines

Box 1

Folder 10

Notes on Theosophical teachings

Box 1

Folder 11

Dennis notes on Theosophy

Box 1

Folder 12

Account by Mrs. Dennis of a superphysical experience, submitted to and published by Quest magazine

Box 1

Folder 13

List of members Eastern (Esoteric) School of Theosophy

Box 1

Folder 14

Esoteric School of Theosophy, American Division officers

Box 1

Folder 15

Photographs of Theosophical Society members

Box 2

Folder 1

Correspondence from Annie Besant to Helen Dennis, July 1897 to January 1906

Box 2

Folder 2

Correspondence between Dennis and Theosophical Society (TS) member, 1905

Box 2

Folder 3

Theosophical Society, correspondence, January 1906

Box 2

Folder 4

Correspondence from Mrs. Dennis to her husband about the Leadbeater affair, January 1906

Box 2

Folder 5

Theosophical Society, correspondence, February 1906

Box 2

Folder 6

A. Besant, initial reply to Leadbeater charges, February 26, 1906

Box 2

Folder 7

Theosophical Society, correspondence, March 1906

Box 2

Folder 8

Copies of correspondence sent to Besant, April 1906

Box 2

Folder 9

Theosophical Society, correspondence, May 1906

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Folder 10

A. Besant correspondence, May 1906

Box 2

Folder 11

Copies of correspondence sent to Besant, May 1906

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Folder 12

Extracts from a letter from a foreign correspondent to Dr. Burnett (n.d.)

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Folder 13

Theosophical Society, correspondence, June 1906

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Folder 14

Besant correspondence, June 1906

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Folder 15

Copies of correspondence sent to Besant, June 1906

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Folder 16

Open letter to Theosophical Society members from Annie Besant about Leadbeater affair, June 9, 1906

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Folder 17

Letter from A. Besant to members, concerning Leadbeater affair

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Folder 18

Photographic re-production of Besant letter, June 9, 1906

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Folder 19

Copy of minutes of meeting of Philadelphia section of Theosophical Society

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Folder 20

Theosophical Society, correspondence, July 1906

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Folder 21

Besant correspondence, July 1906

Box 2

Folder 22

Copies of correspondence sent to Besant, July 1906

Box 2

Folder 23

Dennis' response (through Executive Committee) to Besant accusation of betrayal of trust

Box 2

Folder 24

Theosophical Society, correspondence, August 1906

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Folder 25

Besant correspondence, August 1906

Box 2

Folder 26

Copies of correspondence sent to Besant, August 1906

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Folder 27

Theosophical Society, correspondence, September 1906

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Folder 28

Besant correspondence, September 1906

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Folder 29

Theosophical Society, correspondence, October 1906

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Folder 30

Besant correspondence, October 1906

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Folder 31

Theosophical Society, correspondence, November, 1906

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Folder 32

Besant correspondence, November 1906

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Folder 33

Theosophical Society, correspondence, December 1906

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Folder 34

Besant correspondence, December 1906

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Folder 35

Copies of correspondence sent to Besant, September-December 1906

Box 2

Folder 36

Copies of Leadbeater-Alexander Fullerton correspondence, 1906-1907

Box 3

Folder 1

Theosophical Society, correspondence, January 1907

Box 3

Folder 2

Theosophical Society, correspondence, February 1907

Box 3

Folder 3

Theosophical Society, correspondence, March 1907

Box 3

Folder 4

Theosophical Society, correspondence, April 1907

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Folder 5

Besant correspondence, January-April, 1907

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Folder 6

Theosophical Society, correspondence, May-October, 1907

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Folder 7

Copies of correspondence sent to Besant, 1907

Box 3

Folder 8

Theosophical Society, correspondence, 1908-1909

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Folder 9

Statement to Theosophical Society by Frank F. Knothe after 1908 Convention (n.d.)

Box 3

Folder 10

Correspondence related to the Theosophical Society, 1922-1927

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Folder 11

Correspondence related to the Theosophical Society, 1939

Box 3

Folder 12

Correspondence related to the Theosophical Society, 1940-1943

Box 3

Folder 13

Helen I. Dennis' handwritten reminiscence of Leadbeater affair, ca. 1940

Box 3

Folder 14

Copies of stenographic reports on the Leadbeater affair, 1906

Box 3

Folder 15

Copies of official documents relating to the case of C.W. Leadbeater, 1906

Box 3

Folder 16

Correspondence with mother of fourth boy in Leadbeater case, 1905-1906 (with copy of "cipher" note)

Box 3

Folder 17

Stationary purportedly used by Leadbeater

Box 3

Folder 18

Printed material in Leadbeater affair, 1906-1909