

## Authority in Theosophy?

The Founders of the Theosophical Society established, from its very beginnings in 1875, that the Society did not have an official creed or ideology. They did emphasize the search for Truth and the innate principle of Universal Brotherhood/Sisterhood.

In the Preamble to the TS By-Laws (1875) we read:

Whatever may be the private opinions of its members, the Society has *no dogmas to enforce, no creed to disseminate*. It is formed neither as a Spiritualistic schism, nor to serve as the foe or friend of any sectarian or philosophic body. Its only axiom is the omnipotence of truth, its only creed a profession of unqualified devotion to its discovery and propagation. In considering the qualifications of applicants for membership, it knows neither race, sex, color, country nor creed.

However, despite the many warnings given by Madame Blavatsky, the Mahatmas, Annie Besant and several others, a quasi-sectarian approach to Theosophy took place after the death of the Founders. It has influenced some students of Theosophy in different parts of the world. There are those who cling to the writings of HPB as the only genuine Theosophy and look with disdain at other authors. Other students focus their priority on the books by CWL and Annie Besant, while for other groups the writings of Geoffrey Hodson and Dr I. K. Taimni are seen as paramount.

The Society does not interfere with the private approach and preferences of its members, but its policy of Freedom of Thought is very clear:

No teacher, or writer, from H.P. Blavatsky onwards, has any authority to impose his or her teachings or opinions on members. Every member has an equal right to follow any school of thought, but has no right to force the choice on any other. Neither a candidate for any office nor any voter can be rendered ineligible to stand or to vote, because of any opinion held, or because of membership in any school of thought. Opinions or beliefs neither bestow privileges nor inflict penalties.

We include below several relevant statements by leading Theosophists which suggest that in Theosophy no authority is placed on any particular author, the Founders included, but that its teachings invite exploration, enquiry and assimilation.

This policy is much older than the Theosophical Society. It is present in the teachings of all great spiritual Teachers, and is remarkably encapsulated in the final teaching of the Buddha to his disciples:

“Be ye lamps unto yourselves. Be ye a refuge to yourselves. Betake yourselves to no external refuge. Hold fast to the truth as a lamp. Hold fast to as a refuge to the truth. Look not for refuge to anyone besides yourselves.

“And whosoever ... shall be a lamp unto themselves, and a refuge unto themselves shall betake themselves to no external refuge, but holding fast to the truth as their lamp, and holding fast as their refuge to the truth, shall look not for refuge to anyone besides themselves – it is they, among my bhikkus, who shall reach the very topmost height! – but they must be anxious to learn.”

*(Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion as Illustrated by Some Points in the History of Indian Buddhism by T. W. Rhys Davids, William and Norgate, London, 1881, pp. 182-183.)*

## **Madame Blavatsky on authority in Theosophy**

Occult truth cannot be absorbed by a mind that is filled with preconception, prejudice, or suspicion. It is something to be perceived by the intuition rather than by the reason; being by nature spiritual, not material. Some are so constituted as to be incapable of acquiring knowledge by the exercise of the spiritual faculty; e.g., the great majority of physicists. Such are slow, if not wholly incapable of grasping the ultimate truths behind the phenomena of existence. There are many such in the Society; and the body of the discontented are recruited from their ranks. Such persons readily persuade themselves that later teachings, received from exactly the same source as earlier ones, are either false or have been tampered with by chelas, or even third parties. Suspicion and inharmony are the natural result, the psychic atmosphere, so to say, is thrown into confusion, and the reaction, even upon the stauncher students, is very harmful. Sometimes vanity blinds what was at first strong intuition, the mind is effectually closed against the admission of new truth, and the aspiring student is thrown back to the point where he began. Having jumped at some particular conclusion of his own without full study of the subject, and before the teaching had been fully expounded, his tendency, when proved wrong, is to listen only to the voice of his self-adulation, and cling to his views, whether right or wrong. The Lord Buddha particularly warned his hearers against forming beliefs upon tradition or authority, and before having thoroughly inquired into the subject.

H. P. Blavatsky, ‘Lodges of Magic’, *H. P. Blavatsky Collected Writings*, vol. X, pp. 128-129

## **HPB’s Warning to the Theosophical Society**

Every such attempt as the Theosophical Society has hitherto ended in failure, because, sooner or later, it has degenerated into a sect, set up hard-and-fast dogmas of its own, and so lost by imperceptible degrees that vitality which living truth alone can impart. You must remember that all our members have been bred and born in some creed or religion, that all are more or less of their generation both physically and mentally, and consequently that their judgment is but too likely to be warped and unconsciously biased by some or all of these influences. If, then, they cannot be freed from such inherent bias, or at least taught to recognise it instantly and so avoid being led away by it, the result can only be that the Society will drift off on to some sandbank of thought or another, and there remain a stranded carcass to moulder and die.

H. P. Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy* (1889)

## **‘what lies behind the fence of words is even more important than what you read’: *The Mahatma Letters***

You share with all beginners the tendency to draw too absolutely strong inferences from partly caught hints, and to dogmatize thereupon as though the last word had been spoken. You will correct this in due time. You may misunderstand us, are more than likely to do so, for our language must always be more or less that of parable and suggestion, when treading upon forbidden ground; we have our own peculiar modes of expression and what lies behind the fence of words is even more important than what you read. But still — TRY.

*The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett* in chronological sequence (1993), Letter 111.

## **Madame Blavatsky: ‘Theosophy is not a Religion’**

‘Theosophy is not a Religion ... “Theosophy is Religion” itself. A Religion in the true and only correct sense, is a bond uniting men together – not a particular set of dogmas and beliefs. ... Now Religion, per se, in its widest meaning is that which binds not only all MEN, but also all BEINGS and all things in the entire Universe into one grand whole. This is our theosophical definition of religion; ... and must be called in its integrity and universality by the distinctive name of WISDOM-RELIGION.’

H. P. Blavatsky, *H. P. Blavatsky Collected Writings*, vol. X, p. 161.

## **HPB on Self-Knowledge: ‘we are ceaselessly self-deceived’**

Self-Knowledge

[‘Lucifer’, Vol. I, No. 2, October, 1887, p. 89; *H. P. Blavatsky Collected Writings*, Volume 8, p. 108.]]

The first necessity for obtaining self-knowledge is to become profoundly conscious of ignorance; to feel with every fibre of the heart that one is ceaselessly self-deceived.

The second requisite is the still deeper conviction that such knowledge—such intuitive and certain knowledge—can be obtained by effort.

The third and most important is an indomitable determination to obtain and face that knowledge.

Self-knowledge of this kind is unattainable by what men usually call “self-analysis.” It is not reached by reasoning or any brain process; for it is the awakening to consciousness of the Divine nature of man.

To obtain this knowledge is a greater achievement than to command the elements or to know the future.

## **Annie Besant: Opinion and Belief in the Theosophical Society**

Before dealing with investigations, let me make clear my own position with regard to all questions of opinion and belief within the Theosophical Society itself. Some of our members echo the statements of one seer or another, and seem to consider that such a statement

ought to preclude further discussion. But no one in the T.S. has any authority to lay down what people shall think, or not think, on any subject. We are not in the position of an orthodox Church, which has certain definite articles of faith, which imposes certain definite creeds in which all faithful members are bound to believe. The only point which we must accept is Universal Brotherhood, and even as to that we may differ in our definition of it. Outside that, we are at perfect liberty to form our own opinions on every subject; and the reason of that policy is clear and an exceedingly good one. No intellectual opinion is worth the holding unless it is obtained by the individual effort of the person who holds that opinion. It is far healthier to exercise our intelligence, even if we come to a wrong conclusion and form an inaccurate opinion, than simply, like parrots, to echo what other people say, and so put out of all possibility intellectual development.

In fact, differences of opinion among the members ought to be regarded as safeguards to the Society rather than as menaces, for our one great danger, as H. P. B. recognized, is the danger of getting into a groove, and so becoming fossilized in the forms of belief that many of us hold today; this will make it difficult for people in the future to shake off these forms, and thus will involve posterity in the same troubles which so many of us have experienced with regard to the teachings among which we were born. The Society is intended, always has been intended, to be a living body and not a fossil, and a living body grows and develops, adapting itself to new conditions; and if it be a body which is spiritually alive, it should be gaining continually a deeper and fuller view of truth. It is absurd for us to pretend, at our present stage of evolution, that we have arrived at the limit of the knowledge which it is possible for men to obtain. It is absurd for us to say that the particular form into which we throw our beliefs at this moment is the form which is to continue for ever after us, and to be accepted by those who follow us in time. All of us who study deeply must be fully aware that our conceptions of truth are continually deepening and widening, that, as we might reasonably expect, we find new avenues opening up before us; and nothing could be more fatal to a Society like ours than to hallmark as true special forms of belief, and then look askance at any one challenging them, trying to impose these upon those who will come after us. If the Society is to live far into the future, as I believe it will, then we must be prepared to recognize now, quite frankly and freely, that our knowledge is fragmentary, that it is partial, that it is liable to very great modifications as we learn more and understand better; and especially is this true of everything which goes under the name of investigation.

Annie Besant, *Investigations into the Super-physical*  
Theosophical Publishing House, Adyar, Madras, India, December 1913

### **The Attitude of the Enquirer: C. W. Leadbeater**

Theosophy has a considerable literature, but it has no inspired Scriptures. We who write books on the various branches of the subject, put before our friends the results of our investigations, and we take every care that what we state shall be scrupulously accurate as far as our knowledge goes; but the model which we set before us when we write is not the sacred Scripture but the scientific manual. So far as the western world is concerned, the study of Theosophical subjects is comparatively a new one, although in the East many books have been written in which these matters are expounded; but these oriental books naturally do not approach them from the modern scientific point of view. Our plan in verifying

the information originally given to us has been just what was adopted in the beginning of the sciences of chemistry or astronomy—a careful observation of all the phenomena within reach, their tabulation, and the endeavour to deduce from them the general laws which govern them.

We are then in the position of the early students of a new science, and although, thanks to the information we have received from eastern Teachers, we have already grasped the main outline of our science, our own investigations are constantly adding to our knowledge of its detail, and this fact often makes it necessary for us to modify statements made in the earlier days of the movement, and to amend imperfect or premature generalisations. The details will increase in number and accuracy as the number of those who can make the investigations increases, but the broad outlines of principles which have been given to us will always remain the same.

Our attitude to Theosophy should, I think, be thus characterised:

1. We must not exchange the blind belief in the authority of the Church for an equally blind faith in personal Theosophical teachers.
2. We must preserve an open mind and an intelligently receptive attitude.
3. We should accept as working hypotheses the truths which are given to us, and should set to work to prove them for ourselves.
4. We should realise that this teaching sets before us the scheme of the Logos for His universe, and that the condition of making progress in that universe is to learn the rules of that scheme, and set ourselves to work with them and not against them.
5. We should seek development or progress not for the sake of ourselves, but in order that the knowledge we may acquire may be used for the benefit of humanity, and that we may fit ourselves to be the servants of that humanity.
6. We must change absolutely our point of view towards life. When regarding the sorrow and suffering of the world, we must put aside the despairing attitude of the theologian for one of hopefulness, because the teachings fills us with the calm certainty that everything will at last be well.

C. W. Leadbeater, 'The Attitude of the Enquirer'  
(The Adyar Bulletin, February 1911)

### **'Why Theosophy is Left Undefined': N. Sri Ram**

This wisdom is described as divine. What is divine? Let me attempt a definition. The divine is that which has a quality of nature to which the mind and heart can surrender itself without any reservation. There are people who say: "I surrender myself." They go to the temple, prostrate themselves on the ground. But this is not real surrender. There is much reservation behind such so-called surrender, many expectations and wants. Surrender is neither physical nor mental, it has to be surrender by the whole being. It is only when one surrenders or gives himself completely, without asking for anything, whether in love or devotion, that he can know or rather experience that which is Divine.

There are different possible approaches to what Theosophy is. The longer one studies the wholeness of it, the less easy it is to define it. How can we define a Wisdom which belongs to life, therefore lives and breathes, in which there are the depths which belong to what we call the Spirit, which is subtler than the subtlest mind can encompass, whose every aspect is meaningful with the meaning of that Spirit?

The Truth, or the Wisdom, cannot be known except by a mind which is completely open to it. It is only when the mind is clear of every idea, every colouring wish, every element of self, that it can discover the Truth. That truth is reflected in such a mind; there is no need to go after it. The truth then comes to the person. He discovers it in his heart. It is only in absolute freedom of mind and heart that truth in its absoluteness can shine and manifest itself. Therefore, in the Theosophical Society we try to maintain that freedom which is the open way or space. That is the reason why Theosophy is left undefined.

N. Sri Ram, 'Why Theosophy was Left Undefined', *The Theosophist*, October 1964

### **'emptiness is the relinquishing of all views': Nagarjuna**

In the *Mûlamadhyamaka-kârîka*, Nagarjuna, the great Buddhist philosopher, points to the ending of all views as Sunyata, emptiness, the ultimate reality:

The victorious ones have said  
That emptiness is the relinquishing  
  of all views.  
For whomever emptiness is a view,  
That one has accomplished nothing.

I prostrate to Gautama  
Who through compassion  
Taught the true doctrine,  
Which leads to the relinquishing  
  of all views.

From Jay Garfield, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way – Nagarjuna's Mûlamadhyamakakârîka*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1995, XIII: 8, p. 354.