

Can a Theosophist Be a Christian?

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Having travelled through different countries in which the Theosophical Society is established and visited many of its lodges and branches, one cannot help noticing a certain pattern that seems to emerge. In almost thirty-five years of association with the TS I have seen, in the premises of many of its lodges and branches, religious symbols associated with Hinduism and Buddhism, including many statues and pictures of the Buddha, the Sanskrit word Om in Devanagari script, pictures of Krishna and Shiva, paintings of the lotus flower, pictures of the Founders of the TS and of its several Presidents, paintings and pictures of the Society's emblem, but very rarely a cross.

Judging by the decoration in our lodges and branches it is not difficult for a newcomer to associate the TS with either the Buddhist or the Hindu tradition, or even with both. This is a definite pattern which has probably existed for most of the existence of the Society as a public institution. How did such a pattern emerge? What are the historical reasons for it? Is there a subliminal anti-Christian streak in the TS? These questions have prompted the writing of this article.

Even before the Coulomb-Christian Missionaries conspiracy against Madame Blavatsky in Madras, in 1884, Christianity already had received a bad press within the Society. Commenting on and endorsing the views of the anonymous author of *Ancient and Pagan Christian Symbolism in Isis Unveiled* (1877) HPB writes:

If by Christianity is meant the external religious forms of worship, then he certainly seeks to destroy it, for in his eyes, as well as in those of every truly religious man, who has studied ancient exoteric faiths, and their symbology, Christianity is pure heathenism, and Catholicism, with its fetish-worshipping, is far worse and more pernicious than Hinduism in its most idolatrous aspect. But while denouncing the exoteric forms and unmasking the symbols, it is not the religion of Christ that the author attacks, but the artificial system of theology. (1)

In another passage in the same book, she writes:

The Christian virtues inculcated by Jesus in the sermon on the mount are nowhere exemplified in the Christian world. The Buddhist ascetics and Indian fakirs seem almost the only ones that inculcate and practice them. Meanwhile the vices which coarse-mouthed slanderers have attributed to Paganism, are current everywhere among Christian Fathers and Christian Churches. (2)

By any standard of interpretation, some of her sweeping statements mentioned above are quite extraordinary. She describes Christianity as ‘pure heathenism’ and Catholicism as ‘fetish-worshipping’. As Nagarjuna taught, in the eight century CE, absolute views cannot liberate us from the torments of *samsāra* or conditioned existence. He also taught that *nirvāna* is the end of all absolute views. Madame Blavatsky seems to ignore the fact that, despite its many problems, the Christian tradition did contribute a great deal to the academic and social progress of the western world, as the University of Oxford and the thousands of charities which are inspired by Christian values testify, but also through the living testimony of countless Christians throughout the world who have been inspired to lead nobler, better and more useful lives because of the Christian teachings.

It is also quite difficult to see men like Cardinal Newman and C.S. Lewis, for example, both deeply Catholic in their outlook and understanding, as ‘fetish-worshippers’. However, perhaps the most remarkable of her statements is the claim that ‘the virtues inculcated by Jesus in the sermon on the mount are nowhere exemplified in the Christian world’. For that would mean that in the entire Christian world there is not even one single person who is inspired and who seeks to live his or her life according to the sublime ethics contained in that teaching. Either Madame Blavatsky’s clairvoyance was so far reaching and precise, as to scan the minds and hearts of billions of people worldwide, or her statement betrays a deep-seated reaction to the tradition originated in Christ. Clothed with her intrinsic authority and known forcefulness it is not really difficult to see how such views became almost the accepted currency in the Theosophical Society.

In *The Key to Theosophy*, Madame Blavatsky expounds her views on prayer. As can be seen from the quotation below, she does admit the possibility of a deeper level of prayer in another religious tradition but not in Christianity.

ENQUIRER. But how do you explain the universal fact that all nations and peoples have prayed to, and worshipped a God or Gods? ...

THEOSOPHIST. It is explained by that other fact that prayer has several other meanings besides that given it by the Christians. It means not only a pleading or *petition*, but meant, in days of old, far more an invocation and incantation. The *mantra*, or the rhythmically chanted prayer of the Hindus, has precisely such a meaning, as the Brahmins hold themselves higher than the common *devas* or 'Gods.' A prayer may be an appeal or an incantation for malediction, and a curse (as in the case of two armies praying simultaneously for mutual destruction) as much as for blessing. And as the great majority of people are intensely selfish, and pray only for themselves, asking to be *given* their 'daily bread' instead of working for it, and begging God not to lead them 'into temptation' but to deliver them (the memorialists only) from evil, the result is, that prayer, as now understood, is doubly pernicious: (a) It kills in man self-reliance; (b) It develops in him a still more ferocious selfishness and egotism than he is already endowed with by nature. (3)

The writings of St Augustine, Meister Eckhart, St John of the Cross, Julian of Norwich, Thomas à Kempis, to mention but a few, make it very clear that although there is a tendency towards petitionary prayer in devotees of *many* traditions, including Christianity, there is also a much deeper and perhaps mystical dimension in what is called prayer. 'When I pray for aught, my prayer goes for naught; when I pray for naught, I pray as I ought', wrote Eckhart. In his work *Ascent of Mt Carmel*, St John of the Cross wrote:

When he is brought to nothing, the highest degree of humility, the spiritual union between his soul and God will be effected. The journey does not consist of recreations, experiences and spiritual feelings, but in the living, sensory and spiritual, exterior and interior death of the cross.

True prayer can thus be a spiritually transformative experience, cleansing one's nature from every vestige of self-centredness and illusion.

It is reported on his own website that when His Holiness the Dalai Lama is at home in Dharamsala, he wakes up at 3.30 am. After his morning shower, he begins the day with prayers, meditations and prostrations until 5.00 am. After breakfast, from 6 am to 8.30 am, His Holiness continues his morning meditation and prayers. After returning from his office, he then has time for his evening prayers and meditation from 6.30 p.m. until 8.30 p.m. Prayer is therefore central to his daily life. And one of the prayers he repeats, every day, is from Shantideva's book *A Guide to the Way of Life of the Bodhisattva*:

For as long as space remains,
For as long as sentient beings remain,
Until then may I too remain
To dispel the miseries of the world.

The following passages from *H.P. Blavatsky Collected Writings* and *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett* explicitly deny the historical existence of Jesus, who is the source of the Christian teachings:

As a matter of fact, in spite of all the desperate research made during long centuries, if we set aside the testimony of the 'Evangelists,' i.e., unknown men whose identity has never been established, and that of the *Fathers* of the Church, interested fanatics, neither history, nor profane tradition, neither official documents, nor the contemporaries of the *soi-disant* drama, are able to provide one single serious proof of the historical and real existence, not only of the Man-God but even of him called Jesus of Nazareth, from the year 1 to the year 33. All is darkness and silence. (4)

W. Stainton Moses, an English medium who was in correspondence with A. P. Sinnett, declared in a letter that the spirit called 'Imperator' was 'clearly visible and audible' to him, to which one of the Mahatmas commented:

So was Madme. Lebendorff to the Russian child medium ... So is Jesus and John the Baptist to Edward Maitland; as *true* and as *honest* and *sincere* as S.M.; though neither knew the other John the Baptist having never heard of Jesus who is a spiritual abstraction and no living man of that epoch. (5)

Modern scholarship, however, has established through works such as *The Nag Hammadi Library*, edited by James M. Robinson, and *Christian Beginnings* by Geza Vermes, that the existence of Jesus is an undeniable fact. Some of the Gnostic manuscripts, which were discovered in Upper Egypt in 1945, and dated from the fourth century CE, actually mention his name and corroborate the view that he was a genuine spiritual teacher in his time. The scholars who edited such texts for publication were not mere believers, ‘interested fanatics’ nor zealots. They were trained men and women exercising the rigour of their academic knowledge and experience on the documents before them, and after years of work they declared the texts to be historically genuine.

The word ‘tradition’ admits two meanings in its original Latin expression, *traditio*: one is ‘to transmit’, to pass forward; the other is ‘to betray’. Perhaps every religious tradition, without exception, bears testimony to this dual meaning in its own history and development. The Crusades, the Holy Inquisition and more recently the sexual abuse of children within the Church are real blemishes within the Christian tradition. The fanatical Hindus, who chanting verses of the *Bhagavad Gitā* destroyed the Babri Masjid, an ancient mosque in Ayodhya, in 1992, and threw India on the very edge of a social, political and religious abyss, are a blemish on the Hindu tradition, as is the caste-based discrimination which although illegal still thrives in that country. Buddhist countries like Thailand, Burma and Sri Lanka are not free from widespread corruption, exploitation and discrimination, in spite of the lofty teachings of Buddhism. The position of women in Islamic countries is well documented and shows that countless numbers of them are deprived of their legitimate rights as females and subjected, sometimes ‘legally’, to a male authority.

In spite of the misrepresentations of the Christian tradition in theosophical literature – and criticism of any tradition should always be welcomed, provided it is based on facts – there is much in that tradition that would attract the unbiased student. Some of its central teachings do not appeal to metaphysical realities, to mere belief nor to an attitude of aloofness towards the world. They actually address the primacy of mutual love and understanding and are therefore profoundly relevant today.

In his letter to the Galatians (3:28), St Paul makes a statement that reaffirms the reality of universal brotherhood without distinction: 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.' His is a voice of sanity that our deeply divided world could well listen to. The apostle of Christ who never met him in the flesh but entered into spiritual communion with him, declares, at the very beginning of the Christian tradition, that our appearance, religion, ethnicity, culture do not matter. What truly matters is this life-altering perception that we are one humanity, one life, one destiny.

In the gospel according to St John (17:22-26), before he was arrested Jesus prayed to the Father for his disciples, those chosen by him to carry his message into the world. It is perhaps one of the most moving prayers in the Christian tradition:

And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one: I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me. Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am; that they may behold my glory, which thou hast given me: for thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world. ... And I have declared unto them thy name, and will declare it: that the love wherewith thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them.

The essence of religion is not a creed, a doctrine, ritual, belief, custom, regulations, ceremonies. It is indeed a perfect, profound, irreversible and transforming realisation of the unity with our fellow human beings and with all life. Such realisation is also love in its deepest sense, the Ground of Being. The birth of the Christian tradition lies in the relationship between Jesus and his disciples. And his last gift to them, before his arrest, was a heartfelt prayer to God the Father that the love that was his very life would also inundate, bless and inspire his disciples in their work in the world.

Can a theosophist be a Christian? It is difficult to say. Perhaps this is a matter for individual consideration. But there is no doubt that Christians like St Paul and Jesus were indeed theosophists for they both taught altruism which, according to HPB, is the essence of Theosophy.

Endnotes

1. Blavatsky, H. P., *Isis Unveiled*, J. W. Bouton, New York, 1877, Vol 2, p. 80.
2. *ibid.*, p. 526.
3. Blavatsky, H.P., *The Key to Theosophy*, Theosophical Publishing House, London, no year given, pp. 69-70.
4. *H. P. Blavatsky Collected Writings*, The Theosophical Publishing House, Madras, 1962, Vol 9, p. 226.
5. *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett*, Theosophical Publishing House, Manila, 1993, Letter 38.