

‘There is No Religion Higher than Truth’ Views on E. L. Gardner’s criticism of C. W. Leadbeater

Compiled by Pedro Oliveira



N. Sri Ram and E. L. Gardner in Camberley, UK, early 1960s

In November 1963 E. L. Gardner (1869-1969), a former General Secretary of the English Section of the Theosophical Society and respected student of Madame Blavatsky’s writings, published a booklet entitled *There is No Religion Higher than Truth: Developments in the Theosophical Society*. In it Gardner presents a strong criticism of C. W. Leadbeater’s perception of the Masters which is encapsulated in the following statement:

With the advantage of forty years perspective, plus the letters to Annie Besant and the events of 1920-30, it is now clear (as some have long known or suspected) that the Lord Maitreya and the Masters with whom Leadbeater was on such familiar terms were his own thought-creations.

Yet Gardner, unlike most of CWL’s critics, did not doubt his sincerity and honesty. He wrote:

Yet I feel certain that there was no intention to deceive. Bishop Leadbeater’s honesty and sincerity were undoubted. His clairvoyance was unquestioned. It was by that faculty that he discovered the boy Krishnamurti, who has at any rate turned out to be a great leader of thought, widely acknowledged all over the world. This discovery in itself was no small feat, and it was not an isolated case. And Leadbeater’s frequent references to the Masters were, from his own point of view, utterly sincere and true. Nor was it a case of a split mind. The projection was a vivid example of the phenomenon of ‘unconscious *kriyāśakti*’.

Gardner refers the readers to his own article on this phenomenon, ‘Kriyāśakti, Conscious and Unconscious’, published in *The Theosophist* (July, 1963). He adds:

The Sanskrit word Kriyāśakti is defined as the Power of Creative Thought. It is a well-known term in Occultism, and its meaning has been abundantly demonstrated during the past few

decades in research work on the mysteries of the human mind. The description of the mind by Patañjali, given long ago, is still much to the point:

The mind may be compared to a lens in the form of a sphere, so constructed as to be capable of giving a three-dimensional image inside itself of every external object. (Book 1, 41 – Stephen’s translation)

After briefly examining the phenomena associated with mental automatism and visualization, he refers to the complexities to be found in the relationship between a Master and a chela (disciple). He says:

The automatism of the elemental essence of thought-forms is used, it is said, in the occult relationship of Master and chela. A mental image of the chela is made by the Master, with a ‘radio’ link between image and chela. This image is isolated in the Master’s ‘cave’ and records the chela’s progress. The reverse process, though less efficient, is also possible. By intense contemplation a devotee can imprint the picture of a Master in his mental aura. Any link that a Master might make with the Chela’s pictured thought-form depends, however, on the clarity and purity of the created form. Conscious Kriyāśakti builds the form, but unconscious Kriyāśakti may endow it with the emotional vibrations of the chela. Therein lies the extreme hazard of the venture.

Later on, Gardner defines what he meant by hazard:

A clear and finely built thought-form of a Master may, occasionally, be the skilled product of conscious Kriyāśakti by a devotee. If its rock crystal purity be undisturbed, the form may presumably provide a medium for communication. But if its elemental life is affected by the skandhá of its creator — though quite unconsciously conveyed — then absorption and enhancement by the elemental will merely mean the birth of an attractive royal edition by its creator. Thus one’s own thought-creation of a Master may provoke the dangerous illusion of being the Master himself. And mental clairvoyance assists its realistic objectivity. The results of such a mistaken identity could well be disastrous.

Based on his theory, Gardner comes to several conclusions: the ‘Coming’ of the World Teacher through Krishnamurti did not happen; the ceremonies of the Liberal Catholic Church were not approved by the Masters, and the Theosophical Society lived twenty-one fateful years between 1909, the year of the discovery of Krishnamurti by CWL, and 1930, when, according to Gardner, Annie Besant woke up to the ‘truth’ regarding the happenings during that period, termed by him ‘the disastrous error’.

In support of his view, Gardner quotes from the ‘On the Watch-Tower Notes’ by N. Sri Ram (1889-1973), President of the Theosophical Society, in *The Theosophist* (July, 1963), written before Gardner’s booklet was published, and with the comment on his article published in the same issue of that magazine. It is to be noted, however, that nowhere in his previously referred article Gardner mentions CWL. Sri Ram wrote that Gardner’s article:

... throws a clear light on a phenomenon which occurs among people of all religions, namely, that of an image formed subjectively, partly out of material from the creator’s thought-environment, and partly out of ideas generated by his own personal emotions and desires, assuming an objectivity, a full-scale reality, that is completely convincing to him. Many a

vision takes place in this manner and is afterwards proclaimed to others and becomes the basis of a legend. The image is really a projection from the person's own mental make-up, to use a modern psychological term, but it gains a strength and a vitality from his sub-conscious reactions, which give it the character of an independent entity. The process involved in this phenomenon is well illustrated by what is said about 'elementals' in early Theosophical literature, artificial entities which are either created for a specific purpose and maintained by deliberate design and volition, or, coming into existence more naturally through repetitive or collective thought, get strengthened through interchange with the psychic condition of their unconscious progenitors and thus prolong their life for as long a period as the impulse might last.

Mr Gardner points out that while an image of some loved and revered person, or Teacher, if it be of rock-crystal purity, as he calls it, can be a medium for communication with him, any unconscious desire vibrations — also any established tendencies of thought — will affect the image — and it may then become a 'talking image' reflecting the subconscious mind of its creator. H.P.B refers in her writings to the 'enormous mysteries' of the human mind and of the deceptive nature of the psychic realms to which it is related.

After the pamphlet was published, in November 1963, there were naturally many reactions, both in favour of it and criticizing it. In a letter to N. Sri Ram, dated 7 December 1963, Hugh Shearman (1915–99), a well-known author and a leading member of the TS in Northern Ireland, mentions that 'If he [Gardner] had a case, he has made it badly and has tried to support it with an inaccurate rendering of past T.S. history. He has not, I think, ever understood the Liberal Catholic Church. My own experience inside it has satisfied me that the directives which C.W.L. understood himself to have received with respect to it had a fundamental authenticity.' On the other hand, V. Wallace Slater (1900-1987), General Secretary of the English Section of the TS at that time, and one of the founders of the Theosophical Research Centre in London, wrote to Sri Ram saying that 'I have received very favourable comments from a number of leading members in this country, including Corona Trew, Sir Hugh Sykes, Clara Codd and others.'

In his reply to Shearman, dated 10 December 1963, Sri Ram expressed his views about Gardner's pamphlet: 'Doris Groves has since shown me your letters to her on the subject of Mr. Gardner's pamphlet. I do not go along with the statements in it or even accept its main thesis concerning the question of the Coming. But as the impression obtains that I do, and in any case, considering the nature of those statements, I feel impelled to express openly, that is, in *The Theosophist*, my own thoughts on the matters dealt with in the pamphlet. I am enclosing a proof-copy of what I am saying, which will appear in the January 1964 issue of *The Theosophist*. I hope it will help many members who read the pamphlet to see things in a better perspective, and not let themselves be thrown off their balance by questions that have been raised.' Sri Ram then adds: 'When I had my talk at Camberley with E.L.G., I could not (I am saying this confidentially to you) engage in a free conversation because I had to speak very loudly to make myself heard. As I have indicated in my article [published in February 1964 in *The Theosophist*], I read E.L.G.'s manuscript rather hurriedly, and though I had misgivings, I felt he had a right to express his views, and it would be for the members to form their own views on the subject.' In the same letter Sri Ram says he was sending a copy of

what he had written to Gardner himself, Leslie Leslie-Smith and V. Wallace Slater, the last two being those who helped Gardner to publish his booklet.

After receiving a copy of Sri Ram's views on the matter of the pamphlet, Slater and Gardner sent him the following cable: 'Suggest you postpone your comments on Gardner pamphlet until February.' Slater wrote to Sri Ram on 19 December 1963: 'If I may be perfectly frank, as I know you would wish me to be, I feel you have been rather rushed into withdrawing your approval of the pamphlet. It appeared from your letter to Mr. Gardner that Doris Groves (influenced by Rukmini) and Hugh Shearman, were the two leading members who persuaded you to change your mind. I can add that Helen Zahara has also expressed to me strong objections to the pamphlet.' He then added: 'I think that it is up to those of us who agreed that the pamphlet should be published to make clear what Mr. Gardner had in mind, even if in some places his wording may lead to misunderstanding.'

Sri Ram's reply to Slater's letter was written from Varanasi, India, on 3 January 1964:

I duly received your letter of December 19. I wrote to you immediately acknowledging the cable sent by you and E.L.G. and agreeing to postpone my comments till February.

Actually I was not "rushed into withdrawing your approval of the pamphlet" by Rukmini or Doris Groves, although they both discussed it with me, feeling quite upset. The discussions and some letters from abroad made me feel that I should express my own views. I am of the opinion – unlike some others – that E.L.G. had a right to express his views which he had obviously thought over carefully. But while I agreed with him on a number of points I also had the ideas which I have expressed in my comments but unfortunately not prominently in the foreground of my mind when I talked with E.L.G.

I believe in what I have stated in those comments as to viewing all such matters free from any authority. If you remove the basis of authority what E.L.G. says is an expression of ideas to be carefully considered, not the declaration of a position to be accepted by all in the place of a position previously held. The same would apply to whatever I say.

You will note that I say in my comments that I share E.L.G.'s scepticism as regards certain things. By following up that statement with a reference to the discrepancy on God, religion, etc, I have indicated that there is reason for scepticism. The feeling of scepticism, which is essentially negative, has to be separated from any positive explanation of how the statements in question came to be made (Kriyāśakti, A.B. put aside her clairvoyance, etc.). E.L.G. has given a positive explanation, and that is all right on his part; but my attitude as regards explanations is one of openness and essentially exploratory, combined with the feeling that it may not be necessary to settle these issues connected with the past, which most of us have put aside completely and about which we do not have certain knowledge.

In his letter to Sri Ram, dated 20 December 1963, Hugh Shearman expresses his views about "occult" experiences:

A point that I try to make in discussions in members' meetings in the T.S. is that all expressions of experience of "the occult" ought to have a certain discrepant character, since they represent different personal convergences upon something that is beyond the level of the argumentative mind. Temperamentally I find no difficulty in being at one and the same time a

Liberal Catholic priest and what one might call an extreme anti-clericalist. One does not have to live only on one side of a fence. I believe that to C.W.L., also, there was no conflict between his own kind of ecclesiasticism and the attitude conveyed in the K.H. letter which is so often quoted [letter 10 of *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett*, third edition; letter 88 in the chronological sequence edition].

Over a year ago I had a most interesting conversation on a long train journey with a clergyman whom I discovered to be the Dean of Christ Church, Dublin. I found among other things that he had sympathetically read C.W.L. But the most memorable point in our conversation was that we found that we were in perfect agreement as to the complete compatibility of the two apparent extremes of the religion of Inner Light which utterly rejects form and institution and the religion of Sacrament which is uncompromisingly ecclesiastical.

For me this kind of insight is a true key to “the occult”, and I have some sense of disappointment when people who can say quite wise things yet seem compulsively bound to one of a pair of opposites. The real “occult” seems to be a level of understanding in which these opposites do not even have to be resolved, and the measure of success of the T.S. seems to lie in the number of people it can lead towards this experience with respect to their own place and circumstances in life.

Shearman also wrote about the evidence of others regarding the high spiritual influences around the young Krishnamurti, wholly independent from CWL:

It is a rule of scientifically written history that all relevant evidence must be taken into account before a final conclusion is offered. On some of the matters to which Mr. Gardner referred it would be difficult to assess the value of the evidence that is available, since it consists of testimony relating to individual experiences of a highly subjective nature. But to ignore that testimony and write as if it did not exist amounts to a suppression of the truth. Thus Mr. Gardner wrote, “Obviously there has been no Coming.” That this was not obvious to many people who were close to Krishnamurti is evident from many personal testimonies. It will suffice to quote one of these as an example. Miss Clara Codd, writing on the nature of love, wrote: “I knew and remember something of what that Divine Love – agape – is, from that wonderful meeting in Benares, long years ago, when Krishnaji was overshadowed. I seemed to see then, momentarily, through the eyes of the Lord Christ, the Buddha Maitreya, the World Teacher, and I knew then that with Him was no shadow or sense of difference, no big or small, no important or unimportant. All were equally important, equally dear.”¹

Such a statement is not something that can be evidentially proved, but equally this type of testimony cannot wholly be left out of account, nor should it – in a Society devoted to brotherhood, truth and the communication of experience – be, as it were, shouted down or devalued and obscured by a mass of untrue statements.

In another place Mr. Gardner stated that “the Lord Maitreya and the Masters with whom Leadbeater was on such familiar terms were his own thought-creations.” Again this is perhaps not a matter that it would be easy to prove evidentially one way or another; but one cannot ignore or with honesty suppress the fact that Bishop Leadbeater’s testimony on this subject

¹ Clara Codd, *The Way of the Disciple*, published by Theosophical Publishing House, Adyar, Madras.

was supported by that of many other people, including three successive Presidents of the Theosophical Society.²

E. L. Gardner wrote to Sri Ram on 6 January 1964:

My dear Sri Ram,

Many thanks indeed for your kind response to our suggestion and request to postpone your comments. My reason for the request is simply to avoid the opening up of all manner of questions if it be submitted that Krishnaji is the answer to Mrs Besant's proclamation of the Coming of the World Teacher.

I have set down as briefly as possible the objections to this view – quite apart from Krishna's own repudiations. They are ample in themselves. But I would also add that the first letter of C.W.L.'s to A.B. in 1916, introduces the 'Lord Maitreya' so abruptly and easily as to imply a long familiar topic between them. Looking back at all the happenings I feel certain that the source and only source of the COMING was C.W.L.'s 'Lord Maitreya'.

In the writing of the Pamphlet I was intent on keeping all within close limits. No one is blamed, due respect and credit is given for honesty of purpose of all concerned. A mistake is explained without any reflection on character.

In Nethercot's new book and in the many reviews – Bishop Leadbeater is described as 'deliberately deceiving Mrs Besant', as a 'fraudulent charlatan' and much else! Some of this is repeated last week in obituaries of Lady Emily Lutyens – who died a few days ago. What possible defence is there for C.W.L. other than the Pamphlet?

Of the large number of letters that have come in to Wallace [Slater] and myself, all – with three exceptions – are favourable. Most of them very warmly expressed.

Wallace found last week a Canadian Theosophist article by [Victor] Endersby (1960 I think) stating that Alice Bailey's 'Tibetan' and C.W.L.'s 'Master' were both creations of their own – Dugpas he called them. Without proof such statements carry little weight. It is the proof that I offer that is so conclusive. We seem to be just in time with this Pamphlet.

I shall hope that you will feel able without reserve to support it and I am sure the Society will benefit greatly by knowing the truth. The Lodges too will have a most interesting and enlightening subject for study related to the Third Object. Several have it already in their syllabuses.

It may prove interesting to compare Gardner's above statement that 'that the first letter of C.W.L.'s to A.B. in 1916, introduces the 'Lord Maitreya' so abruptly and easily as to imply a long familiar topic between them. Looking back at all the happenings I feel certain that the source and only source of the COMING was C.W.L.'s 'Lord Maitreya', with the following passage of Mary Lutyens' book *Krishnamurti: Years of Awakening* (1975). It contains an account by C.W.L. to Fabrizio Ruspoli, who was at Adyar, of an event that took place on 28

2 C. W. Leadbeater *a Great Occultist*, Compiled by Sandra Hodson and Mathias J. van Thiel, available online.

December 1911 in Benares, when Krishnaji, as the Head of the Order of the Star, was handing over certificates of membership to new members. Approximately 400 people were present, including Mrs Besant, C.W.L., Miss Francesca Arundale, J. Nityananda and a number of European members, besides many others:

All at once the hall was filled with a tremendous power, which was so evidently flowing through Krishna that the next member fell at his feet, overwhelmed by this mighty rush of force. I have never seen or felt anything in the like of it; it reminded one irresistibly of the rushing, mighty wind, and the outpouring of the Holy Ghost at Pentecost. The tension was enormous, and everyone in the room was most powerfully affected. It was the kind of thing that we read about in the old scriptures, and think exaggerated; but here it was before us in the twentieth century. ... At a meeting [of the Esoteric Section] the President said for the first time that, after what they had seen and felt, it was no longer possible to make even a pretence of concealing the fact that Krishna's body had been chosen by the Bodhisattva, and was even now being attuned by Him. (p. 55)

Finally, in the February 1964 issue of *The Theosophist*, in his column 'On the Watch-Tower', N. Sri Ram, as President of the TS, addressed the controversial matter of E. L. Gardner's booklet. Below are some extracts of what he wrote:

It is stated in the pamphlet, "Obviously there has been no Coming". I would add to this sentence the words: "as expected". Krishnaji is giving a teaching, message or whatever else we may call it, which is of unique value and importance. He is himself quite an extraordinary person, unlike anybody else in so many respects. May it not be that he is fulfilling the mission to which the prophecy really referred? Even after breaking from the Society and with the traditional lines of Theosophical thought, Krishnaji in 1928-1929 did claim to have reached complete identification with the Truth. He used the words, "One with the Beloved", and explained — this explanation is printed in Mr Gardner's pamphlet — "To me it is all, it is Sri Krishna, it is the Master K.H., it is the Lord Maitreya, it is the Buddha, and yet it is beyond all these forms. What does it matter what name you give?"

Dr. Besant started her political work in 1913, and it was then that she said she put aside the use of her clairvoyant faculties. The proclamation as to the Coming was made by her in a Convention lecture at Adyar, entitled "The Opening of the New Cycle" in December 1910, three years after she became President, and while she was still obviously in the plenitude of her powers. It is difficult to imagine that in a matter of such tremendous importance, she could have made the proclamation without any grounds of her own. She spoke with great assurance and as if she knew, and not as if she had been told by a colleague.

It is quite possible that both Dr Besant and Brother Leadbeater understood what was hoped for and expected according to their own ideas of the form it should take, but based the central idea on what they had learned through contact with the higher Sources.

There is the statement in Mr. Gardner's pamphlet that "The Lord Maitreya and the Masters with whom C.W.L. was on such familiar terms were his own thought-creations". This is a statement which the world at large would readily believe, but in the form in which it is made it may not coincide with the truth. Brother Leadbeater through the faculties he had probably got a great deal that is valuable and correct, yet there might be mixed with it certain of his personal ideas and the influence of his personal predilections.

I feel that no one — and not only Brother Leadbeater — should be considered infallible, and such a view is consistent with the highest respect to the person concerned, and with faith in his integrity. As H.P.B. says in *The Secret Doctrine*, there are “enormous mysteries connected with the mind”. Something might easily go wrong in the process of translation from a higher to a lower plane, in one’s recollections of what he had heard or knew inside himself. The only safe rule for all of us is to consider for oneself impersonally every statement, from whatever source it may come, and act according to one’s own understanding, not imagining that one’s understanding and judgment must be absolutely correct.

Today, fifty-nine years after the publication of E. L. Gardner’s pamphlet, different Lodges and different Sections of the TS may gravitate towards this or that author, or authors. Partially as a result of the contribution of E. L. Gardner, V. Wallace Slater, E. Lester-Smith, Leslie Leslie-Smith, Geoffrey Farthing and several others, interest in the writings of H. P. Blavatsky in the English Section remains a focal point. I. K. Taimni’s books became a success story in Latin-America and in the French-speaking world. Geoffrey Hodson’s books are much appreciated in New Zealand, Australia and in other places as well. And, not surprisingly, books by Annie Besant and C. W. Leadbeater continue to attract the interest of members and non-members in many places. Many of CWL’s books featured prominently in Amazon’s books web pages. The TS, to the disappointment of some, did not become a one-author Society but has continued to promote a diversity of views in Theosophical studies, thus honouring its motto: *satyan nasti paro dharmah*, ‘there is no religion higher than truth’. Mr Gardner certainly got that right.