

## God: A Theosophical View

Pedro Oliveira

(Originally published in *Theosophy in Australia*, March 2004.)

If the Mahatmas, Madame Blavatsky's Teachers, are regarded as spiritual authorities within the Theosophical Society, then their view on God, as expressed in *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett*, becomes the definitive theosophical view on the subject, and it has, for a number of students of Theosophy. Here are some of the passages that have been quoted, again and again, and which are accepted by some as the final words on the subject:

Our doctrine knows no compromises. It either affirms or denies, for it never teaches but that which it knows to be the truth. Therefore, we deny God both as philosophers and as Buddhists. We know there are planetary and other spiritual lives, and we know there is in our system no such thing as God, either personal or impersonal. Parabrahm is not a God, but absolute immutable law, and Iswar is the effect of Avidya and Maya, ignorance based on the great delusion.[1]

... The God of the Theologians is simply an imaginary power, *un loup garou* as d'Holbach expressed it—a power which has never manifested itself. Our chief aim is to deliver humanity of this nightmare, to teach man virtue for its own sake, and to walk in life relying on himself instead of leaning on a theological crutch, that for countless ages was the direct cause of nearly all human misery.[2]

### The Mahatmas' View: Is it Definitive?

Their view is clearly uncompromising, vigorous and radical. It rejects the notion of God completely and absolutely. They also identify themselves with the Buddhist tradition. But the question presents itself: did the Mahatmas expect their view to be *the* view of the members of the Theosophical Society? Also, did they consider themselves as spiritual authorities in the TS? These questions may be relevant precisely because a number of students hold the view of the primacy of the Mahatmas' teachings—and HPB's teachings—over all other theosophical literature. One finds, though, in their letters statements that contradict such expectation:

If you would go on with your occult studies and literary work—then learn to be loyal to the Idea, rather than to my poor self.[3]

The cant about "Masters" must be silently but firmly put down. Let the devotion and service be to that Supreme Spirit alone of which each one is a part.[4]

Both quotations above indicate that the Adepts did not expect, nor encourage, members of the Society to look up to them as authorities. And the reason for this may be that in the field of Esoteric Philosophy one has to learn to open up one's higher faculties through study, right living and meditative awareness, before one can truly see. As the Mahatmas declared, 'the illumination *must come from within*', from the depths of one's own consciousness. In view of

this, making anyone, even a Mahatma, a spiritual authority is counterproductive and certainly generates a sense of abject dependence which works against one's own spiritual unfoldment.

Virginia Hanson, a life-long student of *The Mahatma Letters*, who penetrated very deeply into their spirit and teaching, pointed out that 'one cannot help noticing as one studies the letters, that the Mahatma never denies the reality of spirit—only of spirit as a separate and distinct principle apart from matter'.<sup>[5]</sup> She also mentioned that 'referring in another letter to the conclusion by an English member that the Mahatmas "have no God" the Mahatma K.H. says: "He is right — since he applies the name to an extracosmic anomaly, and that we, knowing nothing of the latter, find each man his God—within himself in his own personal, and at the same time *impersonal* Avalokiteswara" '(ML 113, chronological, p. 390).<sup>[6]</sup>

The last quotation is important because its substance reappears again and again in the theosophical literature, affirming that the real God is our seventh principle, Atma, the One Self, that which truly 'saves' us from countless existences lived under the grip of ignorance, and which is one with the Absolute, ultimate Reality. Consider the following passages from the famous communication from the Maha-Chohan, the Mahatmas' Master:

For as everyone knows, total emancipation from authority of the one all-pervading power or law called God by the priests—Buddha, Divine Wisdom and enlightenment or Theosophy, by the philosophers of all ages—means also the emancipation from that of human law. Once unfettered and delivered from their dead weight of dogmatic interpretations, personal names, anthropomorphic conceptions and salaried priests, the fundamental doctrines of all religions will be proved identical in their esoteric meaning. Osiris, Krishna, Buddha, Christ, will be shown as different names for one and the same royal highway to final bliss, Nirvana.<sup>[7]</sup>

Mystical Christianity, that is to say that Christianity which teaches self-redemption through our own seventh principle—this liberated Para-Atma (Augoeides) called by some Christ, by others Buddha, and equivalent to regeneration or rebirth in spirit—will be found just the same truth as the Nirvana of Buddhism. All of us have to get rid of our own Ego, the illusory apparent *self*, to recognize our true self in a transcendental divine life. But if we would not be selfish, we must strive to make other people see that truth, to recognize the reality of that transcendental self, the Buddha, the Christ or God of every preacher. This is why even exoteric Buddhism is the surest path to lead men towards the one esoteric truth.<sup>[8]</sup>

So we find that the denial of God by the Adepts seems to apply more to the theological conception of the Divine, which is fragmented, dualistic and contradictory, articulated as it was by the Aristotelian logic, in which there is a fundamental primacy of *logos*, word, concept, reason, over *nous*, spiritual perception, mystical insight. The Maha-Chohan clearly makes mystical Christianity, for example, one of the exceptions to this. The Mahatmas certainly condemn the God of the theologians, not necessarily of the mystics for while the former would write volumes upon volumes trying to define and explain their 'God', the mystics knew in the depths of their hearts the Ground of Being, the uncreated Divinity. The same is true of the real mystics, seers and yogis in every tradition.

## Scriptural and Theosophical References to God

Let us consider some references to God in some of the scriptures of the world and in theosophical literature.

In the gospel according to John (4:24), in his dialogue with a woman of Samaria, Jesus says: ‘God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth’. These are not the words of a theologian; they are a teaching from someone who knew. God is our deepest Self and true worship or communion takes place at those depths where we are one with the Divine Ground.

St. Paul, to whom HPB refers as an initiate again and again in her writings, communicates his vision of the Deity in his famous discourse in Athens (Acts of the Apostles): ‘God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands’(18:24). ‘That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from everyone of us: For in him we live, and move, and have our being.’ (18:27, 28). For the early Christians, God was not an ‘extracosmic anomaly’ but the indwelling Spirit abiding in the depths of the human heart as well as the transcendental Reality pervading everything, both being one.

The early Church Fathers, some of whom Madame Blavatsky said were initiate-members of the ancient Mystery Schools, held a view of the Godhead which was a combination of Platonic and Eastern sources. Annie Besant sums up the philosophical foundations on which the Mysteries were based:

The theory on which these Mysteries were based may be very briefly thus stated: there is ONE, prior to all beings, immovable, abiding in the solitude of His own unity. From THAT arises the Supreme God, the Self-begotten, the Good, the Source of all things, the Root, the God of Gods, the First Cause, unfolding Himself into Light. From Him springs the Intelligible World, or ideal universe, the Universal Mind, the *Nous*, and the incorporeal or intelligible Gods belong to this. From this the World-Soul, to which belong the “divine intellectual forms which are present with the visible bodies of the Gods”. Then come various hierarchies of superhuman beings, Archangels, Archons (Rulers) or Cosmocratores, Angels, Daimons, etc. Man is a being of a lower order, allied to these in his nature, and is capable of knowing them; this knowledge was achieved in the Mysteries, and it led to union with God.[9]

The little book *Practical Occultism*, in the chapter entitled ‘Some Practical Suggestions for Daily Life’, has this to say:

The “God” in us—that is to say, the Spirit of Love and Truth, Justice and Wisdom, Goodness and Power—should be our only true and permanent *Love*, our only reliance in everything, our only *Faith*, which, standing firm as a rock, can for ever be trusted; our only *Hope*, which will never fail us if all other things perish; and the only object which we must seek to obtain, by our *Patience*, waiting contentedly until our evil Karma has been exhausted and the divine Redeemer will reveal to us his presence within our soul. The door through which he enters is called *Contentment*; for he who is discontented with himself is discontented with the law that

made him such as he is; as God is *Himself* the Law, God will not come to those that are discontented with Him.[10]

In *The Key to Theosophy*, when discussing prayer, HPB presents her view of God:

ENQ. To whom, then, do you *pray* when you do so?

THEO. To “our Father in heaven” — in its esoteric meaning.

ENQ. Is that different from the one given to it in theology?

THEO. Entirely so. An Occultist or a Theosophist addresses his prayer to *his Father which is in secret* (read, and try to understand, *Matthew* vi, 6), not an extra-cosmic and therefore finite God; and that “Father” is in man himself.

ENQ. Then you make of man a God?

THEO. Please say “God” and not a God. In our sense, the inner man is the only God we can have cognizance of. And how can this be otherwise? Grant us our postulate that God is a universally diffused, infinite principle, and how can man alone escape from being soaked through *by*, and *in*, the Deity? We call our “Father in heaven” that deific essence of which we are cognizant within us, in our heart and spiritual consciousness, and which has nothing to do with the anthropomorphic conception we may form of it in our physical brain or its fancy: “Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the spirit of [the absolute] God dwelleth in you?” Yet, let no man anthropomorphize that essence in us. Let no Theosophist, if he would hold to divine, not human truth, say that this “God in secret” listens to, or is distinct from, either finite man or the infinite essence—for all are one.[11]

C. W. Leadbeater, Annie Besant’s colleague and co-worker in the popularisation of Theosophy in the early twentieth century, also contributed his view to our understanding of the all-embracing Deity:

When we lay down the existence of God as the first and greatest of our principles, it becomes necessary for us to define the sense in which we employ that much-abused, yet mighty word. We try to redeem it from the narrow limits imposed on it by the ignorance of undeveloped men, and to restore to it the splendid conception—splendid, though infinitely below the reality—given to it by the founders of religions. And we distinguish between God as the Infinite Existence, and the manifestation of this Supreme Existence as a revealed God, evolving and guiding a universe. Only to this limited manifestation should the term “a personal God” be applied. God in Himself is beyond the bounds of personality, is “in all and through all”; and indeed *is* all; and of the Infinite, the Absolute, the All, we can only say “He is”.

For all practical purposes we need not go further than that marvellous and glorious manifestation of Him (a little less entirely beyond our comprehension) the great Guiding Force or Deity of our own solar system, whom philosophers have called the Logos. Of him is true all that we have ever heard predicated of God—all that is good, that is—not the blasphemous conceptions sometimes put forward, ascribing to Him human vices. But all that has ever been said of the love, the wisdom, the power, the patience and compassion, the omniscience, the omnipresence, the omnipotence—all of this, and much more, is true of the Logos of our system. Verily “in Him we live and move and have our being”, not as a poetical

expression, but (strange as it may seem) as a definite scientific fact; and so when we speak of the Deity our first thought is naturally of the Logos.[12]

The *Bhagavad Gita*, although originating in the Indian tradition, has now been embraced by many people in the world as a source of inspiration and spiritual guidance. It also contains valuable teachings regarding the nature of the Divine Ground and its oneness with the human being's inmost Self:

Many births have been left behind by Me and by thee, O Arjuna. I know them all, but thou knowest not thine, O Parantapa. Though unborn, the imperishable SELF, and also the Lord of all beings brooding over nature, which is Mine own, yet I am born through Mine own Power. Whenever there is decay of righteousness, O Bharata, and there is exaltation of unrighteousness, then I Myself come forth; for the protection of the good, for the destruction of evil-doers, for the sake of firmly establishing righteousness, I am born from age to age. He who thus knoweth My divine birth and action, in its essence, having abandoned the body, cometh not to birth again, but cometh unto Me, O Arjuna. Freed from passion, fear, and anger, filled with Me, taking refuge in Me, purified in the fire of wisdom, many have entered into My Being. However men approach Me, even so do I welcome them, for the path men take from every side is Mine, O Partha.[13]

The words of Sri Krishna show that there are many paths to the Divine, for there are different temperaments and approaches in the age-old quest for Truth. And on this quest one learns, progressively, to heed the call of the immortal Spirit within, the hidden God whose essential nature is truth, unconditioned consciousness and supreme happiness and joy—*sat, chit, ananda* in the Vedanta tradition.

Swami T. Subba Row was a very eminent member of the Theosophical Society in India in its early years. He was thoroughly versed in the philosophy of Vedanta, of which he was also a practitioner. HPB had a great respect for him and even requested him to help her with *The Secret Doctrine*, 'and writing most of the commentaries and explanations'[14], which he eventually declined. The Mahatmas referred to him as an 'initiated Brahmin', one with a direct knowledge of the spiritual realities. He has an enlightening commentary on the nature of Krishna in the *Gita*:

Some have taken Krishna's exhortation to Arjuna to worship him alone as supporting the doctrine of a personal god. But this is an erroneous conclusion. For, though speaking of himself as Parabrahm, Krishna is still the Logos. He describes himself as Atma, but no doubt is one with Parabrahm, as there is no essential difference between Atma and Parabrahm. So all sons of God, including Christ, have spoken of themselves as one with the Father. His saying, that he exists in almost every entity in the Cosmos, expresses strictly an attribute of Parabrahm. But a Logos, being a manifestation of Parabrahm, can use these words and assume these attributes. Thus Krishna only calls upon Arjuna to worship his own highest spirit, through which alone he can hope to attain salvation. Krishna is teaching Arjuna what the Logos in the course of initiation will teach the human Monad, pointing out that through himself alone is salvation to be obtained. This implies no idea of a personal god.[15]

In the leaflet *Theosophy and Islam*, published by the Australian Section of the TS, the Islamic view of the Divine is presented:

One of the most important teachings in Islam is the doctrine of *Tawhid* or the blessed Oneness. Says the Quran: “*La Illaha Illallah!*” (Muhammad, Chapter 47, Verse 19). “There is no God but Allah”. It means there is nothing but the Divine in the whole universe. Everything that exists, whether animate or inanimate, is the Divine. In his article “The Philosophy of Islam” (*The Theosophist*, January 1929) Nadarbeg K. Mizra points out that “in Islam all the prayers and meditations have been so arranged as to direct the attention of the disciple to an abstract idea of God”. Says the Quran: “O Thou! whose abstract nature is free from illustrations and whose attributes are beyond examples”. (Al-Saffat, Chapter 37, Verse 80) Mirza explains that God’s “attributes are beyond description and cannot adequately be even conceived by a human mind”.

Frithjof Schuon, in his book *Understanding Islam*, translates the fundamental statement from the Quran, *La Illaha Illallah*, as ‘there is no divinity (or reality, or absolute) outside the only Divinity (or Reality, or Absolute)’. The Islamic precept of absence of images in religious worship clearly indicates the notion that God is beyond description and intellectual apprehension. But this does not mean that one cannot come to experience the Divine fullness. The great Sufi teachers are living examples of the discovery and realisation of the Oneness of God in the deep and untrodden recesses of the human soul and spirit.

### Theosophy as an Eclectic System

Theosophy, the Wisdom-Religion, has been, from time immemorial, an eclectic system. It is not identified with one particular system only but seeks to express the core teachings of the world’s religious and philosophical traditions. The word eclectic comes from the Greek verb *ekleg*, ‘pick out’. Theosophy, in its eclectic nature, ‘picks out’ the essence of every tradition and shows it to be identical, in its spirit, to that of every other tradition. The eclectic character of Theosophy was highlighted by Madame Blavatsky in *The Key to Theosophy*:

ENQUIRER. What is the origin of the name “Theosophy”?

THEOSOPHIST. It comes to us from the Alexandrian philosophers, called lovers of truth, Philaletheians, from *phil* “loving,” and *aletheia* “truth.” The name Theosophy dates from the third century of our era, and began with Ammonius Saccas and his disciples, who started the Eclectic Theosophical system.

ENQUIRER. What was the object of this system?

THEOSOPHIST. First of all to inculcate certain great moral truths upon its disciples, and all those who were “lovers of the truth.” Hence the motto adopted by the Theosophical Society: “There is no religion higher than truth.” The chief aim of the Founders of the Eclectic Theosophical School was one of the three objects of its modern successor, the Theosophical Society, namely, to reconcile all religions, sects and nations under a common system of ethics, based on eternal verities.[16]

The expression ‘all religions’ includes, obviously, the theistic religions of Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. By emphasising the importance of searching for Truth ‘freely and

fearlessly', Theosophy renders a valuable service to all genuine seekers: it points to the existence of a common ground among all the different traditions—a truly universal teaching, based on an uplifting ethic which has at its very heart the principle of Universal Brotherhood without any distinctions, a principle that emanates from the reality of the undivided unity of all existence; but it also helps the student to realise as a fact that the centuries-old religious structures have accumulated many accretions, like superstitions, dogmas, man-made hierarchies, ideological domination of its adherents and a sectarian mind-set that has fuelled many bitter divisions, atrocities and wars.

In her magnum opus, *The Secret Doctrine*, Madame Blavatsky elaborates on the unique but eclectic nature of Theosophy:

As a whole, neither the foregoing nor what follows can be found in full anywhere. It is not taught in any of the six Indian schools of philosophy, for it pertains to their synthesis—the seventh, which is the Occult doctrine. It is not traced on any crumbling papyrus of Egypt, nor is it any longer graven on Assyrian tile or granite wall. The Books of the *Vedanta* (the last word of human knowledge) give out but the metaphysical aspect of this world-Cosmogony; and their priceless thesaurus, the *Upanishads*—*Upa-ni-shad* being a compound word meaning “the conquest of ignorance by the revelation of *secret, spiritual* knowledge”—require now the additional possession of a Master-key to enable the student to get at their full meaning. The reason for this I venture to state here as I learned it from a Master.[17]

But it is perhaps desirable to state unequivocally that the teachings, however fragmentary and incomplete, contained in these volumes, belong neither to the Hindu, the Zoroastrian, the Chaldean, nor the Egyptian religion, neither to Buddhism, Islam, Judaism and Christianity exclusively. The Secret Doctrine is the essence of all these. Sprung from it in their origins, the various religious schemes are now made to merge back into their original element, out of which every mystery and dogma has grown, developed, and become materialized.[18]

In one of his articles, ‘A Personal and Impersonal God’, T. Subba Row acknowledged the opposing views on the subject of God among TS members at that time (1883). He showed that living the spiritual life is more important than engaging in metaphysical arguments:

Let us then each take the solution that best suits our mental and spiritual constitution, and let us leave our neighbours an equal freedom of choice; let us never hesitate to state and defend our own views and oppose those other views that we think wrong, but let us do all this as we would defend our own and oppose our opponent’s game at chess, with no more feeling against our opponents than we have against an adversary at the noble game.

Above all let us remember that in this present life, the high theoretical questions of Personal, Impersonal, and No-God, are of less concern to us than our own everyday life about the right conduct of which no similar difficulties exist.[19]

What is the theosophical view on God? Is it the one declared by the Mahatmas, or by the Maha-Chohan, or by Madame Blavatsky? Is it the one present in the *Gita*, or in Annie Besant’s books, or in Subba Row’s articles? Do not all the above views enrich our

understanding of this profound subject? Are they not an example of the eclectic spirit of Theosophy? In the end, perhaps every student will have to answer these questions by himself or herself. But whatever the theosophical view on God may be, or for that matter, on any subject, it will be one that is not exclusive, parochial, intolerant, divisive, crystallised. If it is a theosophical view at all, it will help to enlighten the human mind, to open vast vistas of perception and experience, and to point the way to the entrance of that path that leads deep into the Mystery that makes us all one with every living creature, with every human heart and with the boundless universe.

#### References:

- [1] *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett in chronological sequence*, ed. Vicente Hao Chin, Jr., Theosophical Publishing House, Manila, 1993, p. 270. As the late Virginia Hanson, one of the deepest students of the Letters of all time, explained, Letter 10 (chronologically 88) 'is not a letter at all. It is headed, "Notes by K.H. on a 'Preliminary Chapter' headed 'God' by Hume [A. O. Hume, one of the recipients of the Letters], intended to preface an exposition of Occult Philosophy".' (In *An Introduction to the Mahatma Letters* by Virginia Hanson, Olcott Institute, Theosophical Society in America, 1996, p. 45).
- [2] *ibid*, p. 270.
- [3] *ibid*, p. 432.
- [4] *Letters from the Masters of the Wisdom — First Series*, ed. C. Jinarajadasa, The Theosophical Publishing House, Madras, 1948, p. 112.
- [5] *An Introduction to the Mahatma Letters*, p. 46.
- [6] *ibid*, p. 48.
- [7] C. Jinarajadasa, *op cit*, pp. 5-6.
- [8] *ibid*, p. 6.
- [9] Besant, Annie, *Esoteric Christianity*, The Theosophical Publishing House, Wheaton, 1987, p. 15.
- [10] Blavatsky, H.P., *Practical Occultism*, The Theosophical Publishing House, Madras, 1981, pp. 72-73.
- [11] Blavatsky, H. P., *The Key to Theosophy*, Theosophical Publishing House, London, year of publication not provided, pp 67-68.
- [12] Leadbeater, C. W., *An Outline of Theosophy*, The Theosophical Publishing House, Madras, 1963, pp. 22-23.
- [13] *The Bhagavad Gita*, transl. Annie Besant, The Theosophical Publishing House, Madras, IV:5-11.
- [14] *Letters of H. P. Blavatsky to A. P. Sinnett*, ed. Trevor Barker, T. Fisher Unwin Ltd, London. 1925.
- [15] Subba Row, T., *Notes on the Bhagavad Gita*, Theosophical University Press, Pasadena, 1978, p. 6.
- [16] Blavatsky, H.P., *The Key to Theosophy*, Theosophical Publishing House, London, no year of publication, pp.1-3.
- [17] Blavatsky, H. P., *The Secret Doctrine*, The Theosophical Publishing House, Madras, 1979, p. 269.
- [18] *ibid*, p. viii.
- [19] Subba Row, T., *Esoteric Writings*, Theosophical Publishing House, Madras, 1931, p.457.