

Has Theosophy Become a Creed?

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AT the end of her book *The Key to Theosophy*, published in 1889, Madame H. P. Blavatsky (HPB) issued a warning to the members of the Theosophical Society (TS):

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 sand-bank of thought or another, and there remain a stranded carcass to moulder and die.¹

Is it possible that for some students Theosophy has become a creed? It would be so easy, as part of the conditioning

be so easy, as part of the conditioning alluded to by HPB, to elect some author or authors as one's favourite ones. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines creed as "a system of religious belief; a faith; a set of beliefs or aims which guide someone's actions." How many make their choices of study in theosophical literature according to the self-professed occult status of their favourite author or authors? Such circumstances could, eventually, become influential factors in Lodge or Branch programmes, thus creating the perception that the TS may not be different from a sect: Theosophy as a set of ideas that require acceptance, not necessarily investigation.

In the well-known letter to Annie Besant in 1900, nine years after HPB had passed away, Mahatma KH stated:

The TS and its members are slowly manufacturing a creed. Says a Tibetan proverb: "Credulity breeds credulity and ends in hypocrisy." How few are they who can know anything about us.²

The "creed" mentioned by KH was a tendency to worship the Masters as deities, which they refused, and to put on a

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pedestal both HPB and her teachings, as well as Annie Besant.

In his book *Old Diary Leaves*, in an entry for the year 1892, Col. H. S. Olcott strongly warned against this tendency, eight years *before* Annie Besant had received that historical letter:

It will have been seen from what is written in previous chapters how much my mind was exercised about the evident probability of a new sect springing up around the memory of HPB and her literature. From week to week things seemed to be going from bad to worse: some of my most fanatical colleagues would go about with an air “of wisdom, gravity, profound conceit, as who should say, I am Sir Oracle, and, when I open my lips, let no dog bark!” One would have thought that HPB had laid upon their shoulders the burden of the whole Himalayan Mysteries; and when one ventured to challenge the reasonableness of something which they were quoting, they would answer with a sort of restraint of the breath — “But, you know, she said so” — as if that closed the debate. Of course they meant no harm, and, perhaps, to a certain extent, were really expressing their awe of the departed teacher; but all the same it was a most pernicious tendency, and, if unchecked, was calculated to drag us into a sectarian pitfall.³

He also wrote:

But let no one suppose that this vicious tendency towards hero-worship has been rooted out from our natures, for a new idol is being fashioned in the form of that dear,

unselfish, modest woman, Annie Besant. If the walls around our Society were less resistant, her blind admirers would be already digging out a niche in which to place the idol for worship. Needless to say, one has only to be familiar with Mrs Besant’s speeches and writings to have overwhelming proofs that such an attitude towards her is most distasteful. Many years ago she deliberately sacrificed the world to work for her fellowmen, and from the first moment until now she has begged her hearers to regard the thought, and not the speaker.⁴

Some years after that, Annie Besant, then President of the TS, issued a very clear statement about the question of opinion and belief within the TS:

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 TS 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

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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.⁵

Her colleague, C. W. Leadbeater, also presented his views on belief regarding to theosophical teachings:

Theosophy has a considerable literature, but it has no inspired Scriptures. . . . 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.⁶

Yet, in spite of these clear and unequivocal warnings one can see that for a number of students of Theosophy the approach to it is creed-like: an almost religious acceptance of the teachings as ideas that come from a divine source, not as principles to be investigated rationally in order to find the truth about them for oneself. This seems to have happened also to some students of Madame Blavatsky's writings. Her occult status as an initiated disciple of the Masters may have obfus-

cated for them one of her own most important advices:

On the other hand, the bigoted sectarian, fenced in as he is, with a creed upon every paling of which is written the warning "No Thoroughfare", can neither come out of his enclosure to join the Theosophical Society, nor, if he could, has it room for one whose very religion forbids examination. The very root idea of the Society is free and fearless investigation.⁷

When the nature of Theosophy is seen as being limited to what is contained in books the tendency to transform it into an ideology will always be there. Yet an ideology is a walled, closed mindset, which is infused with personal faith. It is not difficult to see how it can easily lead to division and isolation. In his book *Modern Theosophy*, Hugh Shearman makes the following statement:

In practice, theosophy, or god-wisdom, has come to have two principal meanings. First, there is its primary meaning, signifying the ultimate wisdom, the ultimate truth which life holds; and then there is a secondary meaning, signifying the body of teachings about man and the universe which has been given forth, in particular, by members of the Theosophical Society, something which is knowledge rather than wisdom.⁸

In referring to Theosophy's essential nature, Madame Blavatsky makes a similar but essential distinction:

If Eastern comparisons may be permitted, Theosophy is the shoreless ocean of uni-

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versal truth, love, and wisdom, reflecting its radiance on the Earth, while the Theosophical Society is only a visible bubble on that reflection. Theosophy is divine nature, visible and invisible, and its Society is human nature trying to ascend to its divine parent. Theosophy, finally, is the fixed eternal sun, and its Society the evanescent comet trying to settle in an orbit to become a planet, ever revolving within the attraction of the sun of truth. It was formed to assist in showing to men that such a thing as Theosophy exists, and to help them to ascend towards it by studying and assimilating its eternal verities.⁹

In *The Secret Doctrine*, HPB hints at the fact that the source of Theosophy lies in a deep investigation into “the soul of things”, and that the truths arrived at by those ancient seers is not based on authority but on experience:

The flashing gaze of those seers has penetrated into the very kernel of matter, and recorded the soul of things there, where an ordinary profane, however learned, would have perceived but the external work of form. But modern science believes not in the “soul of things”, and hence will reject the whole system of ancient cosmogony. It is useless to say that the system in question is no fancy of one or several isolated individuals. That it is the uninterrupted record covering thousands of generations of Seers whose respective experiences were made to test and to verify the traditions passed orally by one early race to another, of the teachings of higher and exalted beings, who watched over the childhood of Humanity.¹⁰

In its teaching aspect Theosophy can be seen as a description of universal processes unfolding in the human being, in Nature and in the cosmos. Every description involves a point of view. It also involves a language in which such views can be communicated. This was emphasized by one of the Mahatmas when they were trying to convey occult teachings to A. P. Sinnett. In one of their letters they said: “Our terms are untranslatable.”¹¹ But they also had this to say to Mr Sinnett:

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.¹²

In the *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārika*, Nagarjuna points to the ending of all views as *śūnyata*, 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.¹³

I prostrate to Gautama
Who through compassion
Taught the true doctrine,
Which leads to the relinquishing of
all views.¹⁴

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In the so-called “Bowen Notes”, consisting of a record of studies with HPB in London before her passing in 1891, a similar idea was advanced:

Come to the SD[*The Secret Doctrine*] (she says) without any hope of getting the final Truth of existence from it, or with any idea other than seeing how far it may lead *towards* the Truth. See in study a means of exercising and developing the mind never touched by other studies.¹⁵

This mode of thinking (she says) is what the Indians call *Jnāna Yoga*. As one progresses in *Jnāna Yoga* one finds conceptions arising which, though one is conscious of them, one cannot express nor yet formulate into any sort of mental picture. As time goes on, these conceptions will form into mental pictures. This is a time to be on guard and refuse to be deluded with the idea that the new-found and wonderful picture must represent reality. It does not. As one works on, one finds the once admired picture growing dull and unsatisfying, and finally fading out or being thrown away. This is another danger point, because for the moment one is left in a void without any conception to support one, and one may be tempted to revive the cast-off picture for want of a better to cling to. The true student will, however, work on unconcerned, and presently further formless gleams come, which again in time give rise to a larger and more beautiful

picture than the last. But the learner will now know that no picture will ever represent the Truth. This last splendid picture will grow dull and fade like the others. And so the process goes on, until at last the mind and its pictures are transcended and the learner enters and dwells in the world of No-Form, but of which all forms are narrowed reflections.¹⁶

Divine Wisdom, Theosophy, in its own nature is beyond all views. When the study of Theosophy is successful it leads to an unveiled, wordless perception of the essential unity of all life. Such perception is never divisive, exclusivist, condemnatory of others, for it has become one with the Wisdom that is the life of all things:

For, she is the brightness of the everlasting light, the unspotted mirror of the power of God, and the image of his goodness. And being but one, she can do all things: and remaining in herself, she maketh all things new: and in all ages entering into holy souls, she maketh them friends of God, and prophets.¹⁷

“She maketh all things new.” Divine Wisdom, when found, is a complete renewal of consciousness, a newness of mind and heart, amounting to being born into a world of undivided unity, harmony and compassion. The TS was formed to help its members to ascend towards it and its future usefulness may depend on their ability to do so. ✧

Endnotes:

1. H. P. Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy*, Theosophy Company, Mumbai, 1997, “Conclusion”, pp. 302-3.

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2. C. Jinarājadāsa, *Letters from the Masters of the Wisdom*, First Series, Theosophical Publishing House (TPH), Adyar, Chennai, 1973, “Additional Letters”, Letter 46.
3. H. S. Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves*, Fourth Series, TPH, Adyar, 1975, p. 438.
4. Olcott, pp. 439-40
5. Annie Besant, “Investigations into the Super-physical”, *Adyar Pamphlet No. 36*, 1913.
6. C. W. Leadbeater, *The Adyar Bulletin*, February 1911.
7. Blavatsky, “What are the Theosophists?”, *The Theosophist*, vol. 1, October 1879.
8. Hugh Shearman, *Modern Theosophy*, TPH, Adyar, 1954, pp. 3-4.
9. Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy*, sec. 4, “The Abstract and the Concrete”, pp. 56-57.
10. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, TPH, Adyar, 1978, vol. 1, pp. 272-3.
11. *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett*, chron. seq., edited by Vicente Hao Chin, Jr., TPH, Manila, 1993, letter 46.
12. *The Mahatma Letters*, letter 111.
13. Jay Garfield, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way -- Nagarjuna's Mula-madhyamaka-kārika*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1995, XIII: 8, p. 354.
14. Garfield, XXVII: 30, p. 352.
15. Ianthe H. Hoskins, *Foundations of Esoteric Philosophy*, TPH, London, 1980, p. 64.
16. Hoskins, pp. 66-7.
17. “Wisdom of Solomon” (King James’ Bible), 7:26-27.