

How We Are Influenced by Public Opinion

(From *The Hidden Side of Things*, chapter X, 1913)

Race Prejudice

When anything occurs to prevent us from doing or saying exactly what we should like to do, we are in the habit of congratulating ourselves that thought at least is free. But this is only another of the many popular delusions. For the average man thought is by no means free; on the contrary it is conditioned by a large number of powerful limitations. It is bound by the prejudices of the nation, the religion, the class to which he happens to belong, and it is only by a determined and long-continued effort that he can shake himself free from all these influences, and really think for himself.

These restrictions operate on him in two ways; they modify his opinion about facts and about actions. Taking the former first, he sees nothing as it really is, but only as his fellow-countrymen, his co-religionists, or the members of his caste think it to be. When we come to know more of other races we shake off our preconceptions concerning them. But we have only to look back a century to the time of Napoleon, and we shall at once perceive that no Englishman then could possibly have formed an impartial opinion as to the character of that remarkable man. Public opinion in England had erected him into a kind of bogey; nothing was too terrible or too wicked to be believed of him, and indeed it is doubtful whether the common people really considered him as a human being at all.

The prepossession against everything French was then so strong that to say that a man was a Frenchman was to believe him capable of any villainy; and one cannot but admit that those who had fresh in their minds the unspeakable crimes of the French Revolution had some justification for such an attitude. They were too near to the events to be able to see them in proportion; and because the offscourings of the streets of Paris had contrived to seize upon the government and to steep themselves in orgies of blood and crime, they thought that these represented the people of France. It is easy to see how far from the truth must have been the conception of the Frenchman in the mind of the average English peasant of that period.

Among our higher classes the century which has passed since then has produced an entire revolution of feeling, and now we cordially admire our neighbours across the Channel, because now we know so much more of them. Yet even now it is not impossible that there may be remote country places in which something of that old and strongly established prejudice still survives. For the leading countries of the world are in reality as yet only partially civilized, and while everywhere the more cultured classes are prepared to receive foreigners politely, the same can hardly be said of the mill-hands or the colliers. And there are still parts of Europe where the Jew is hardly regarded as a human being.

Popular Prejudice

It needs little argument to show that everywhere among the less cultured people prejudgments are still strong and utterly unreasonable; but we who think ourselves above them – even we need to be careful, lest unconsciously we allow them to influence us. To stand against a strong popular bias is no easy matter, and the student of occultism will at once see why this is so. The whole atmosphere is full of thought-forms and currents of thought, and these are ceaselessly acting and reacting upon every one of us. The tendency of any thought-form is to reproduce itself. It is charged with a certain rate of

vibration, and its nature is to influence every mental and astral body with which it comes into contact in the direction of the same vibration.

There are many matters about which opinion is reasonably equally divided, as (for example) the angle at which one should wear one's hat, or whether one should be a Liberal or a Conservative.

Consequently the general average of thought on these matters is no stronger in one direction than in another; and about them and other such matters it may be said that thought is comparatively free. But there are other subjects upon which there is an overwhelming consensus of public opinion in one direction, and that amounts to so strong a pressure of a certain set of undulations connected with that subject upon the mental body, that unless a man is unusually strong and determined he will be swept into the general current. Even if he is strong enough to resist it, and is upon his guard against it, the pressure is still there, and its action is still continued, and if at any time he relaxes his vigilance for a moment, he may find himself unconsciously warped by it.

I have explained in the second volume of *The Inner Life* that a man who allows himself to contract a prejudice of this kind on any subject causes a hardening of the matter of the mental body in the part of it through which the oscillations relating to that subject would naturally pass. This acts upon him in two ways; first, he is unable to see that subject as it really is, for the vibrations which would otherwise convey an impression of it come against this callosity of the mental body, and either they cannot penetrate it at all, or they are so distorted in their passage through it that they convey no real information. Secondly, the man cannot think truly with regard to that subject, because the very part of this mental body which he would use in such an effort is already so hardened as to be entirely inefficient, so that the only way to overcome the unfairness is to perform a surgical operation upon that wart in the mental body, and excise it altogether, and to keep for a long time a close watch upon it to see that it is not growing again. If that watch be not kept, the steady pressure of the thought-waves of thousands of other people will reproduce it, and it will be necessary to perform the operation all over again.

Political Prejudice

In many parts of the country there is a vast amount of bitter political bias. The majority of the people in a district hold one view or the other (it matters little which), and they find it difficult to imagine that the members of the opposite party are ordinary human beings at all. They are so sure of their own point of view that they appear to think that everyone else must really hold it also, and that it is only out of malice prepense that their opponents are pretending to hold an entirely different view. Yet their own ideas are usually not arrived at by any process of thought or of weighing two lines of policy, but are hereditary, precisely as are most men's religious opinions. There is so much excitement and unpleasant feeling connected with politics in almost every country that the wisest course for the student of occultism is to have as little as possible to do with the whole matter. Not that, if he happens to reside in a country where he has a vote, he should refuse to use it, as many good people have done, because of the mass of corruption which sometimes surrounds political activity of the lower kind. If there is much that is evil in connection with such affairs that is all the more reason why every good citizen should use the power that the system has vested in him (however foolish in itself that system may be) in favour of what seems to him the right and noble course.

Government

The occult theory of government, of the politics of the State, is pre-eminently the common-sense view. The management of a country is as much a matter of business as the management of a factory or

a school. The country has many points of similarity to a great public school. It exists primarily for the benefit of its people, and the people are put there in order to learn. The head of the country makes whatever regulations he considers necessary to secure its efficiency, and there must be discipline and order and prompt obedience to those regulations, or there can be no progress. The king is the headmaster. His work is to exercise sleepless vigilance over the welfare of the school, to employ all methods in his power to make it the best of schools. Our business is not to criticize him, but to obey him, and loyally to give our heartiest co-operation in carrying out whatever he thinks best for the good of the country as a whole. The business of a government is to govern; the business of its people is to be good, loyal, law-abiding citizens so as to make that task of government easy.

A king who thinks of or works for fancied private interests of his own, instead of acting only for his country, is obviously failing to do his work; but remember that any subject who in politics thinks of or works for supposed private interests of his own, and not for the good of the country as a whole, is also equally failing to do his duty as a good citizen. As to the outer form of a government, almost any form can be made to work satisfactorily if the people co-operate loyally and unselfishly, forgetting themselves as units and regarding the country as their unit; but no form of government, however excellent, can be successful and satisfactory if its people are selfish and refractory.

Religious Prejudice

All that I have said of race prejudice is also true of religious prejudice, which is indeed in many ways even worse than the other. Few men choose their religion; most people are born into a religion, exactly as they are born into a race, and they have no valid reason for preferring it to any other form of faith; but because it happens to be theirs, they arrogantly assume that it must be better than any other, and despise other people whose karma has led them into a slightly different environment. Precisely because this partiality is thus in the air, and because the ordinary man cannot see the pressure of public opinion, the unfairness steals in upon him unobserved and seems to him quite natural, and indistinguishable from an opinion which he has formed for himself on some reasonable grounds.

It is necessary that we should constantly pull ourselves up, and examine our reasons for the opinions we hold. It is so fatally easy to go with the current and to accept other men's ready-made thoughts, instead of thinking for ourselves. "Almost everyone does this, so why should not I?" That is the feeling of the average man, and yet if we would be just to all, as a student of occultism must be – if we seek to know the truth on all subjects, as a student of occultism should know it – then we must at all costs root out these prejudices, and keep a lynx-like watch against their return. We shall find ourselves in many ways differing from the majority, because the opinions of the majority are often unjust, ill-conceived, unreliable; but that after all we must expect, for we are setting before us a high ideal, which as yet does not appeal to that majority. If we think on all points as it thinks, and act in all ways as it acts, in what way have we raised ourselves above it, and how can we be drawing nearer to our goal?

Class Prejudice

More insidious still perhaps is the class or caste bias. It is so comforting to feel that we are somehow inherently and generically superior to everybody else – that no good feeling or good action can be expected from the other man, because he is a bloated aristocrat or a member of the proletariat, as the case may be. Here again, as with all the other misconceptions, the study of the hidden side of the matter shows us that what is needed is more knowledge and more charity. The occultist sees a

prejudice to be a congestion of thought; what is necessary therefore is to stir up the thought, to get to know the people and try to comprehend them, and we shall soon find that fundamentally there is little difference between us and them.

That there are classes of egos, that some are older and some are younger, and that some are consequently more ignorant than others, it is impossible to deny, for that is a fact in nature, as has been shown by our study of the order in which different divisions of mankind arrived from the moon-chain upon the earth-chain. But there is a common humanity which underlies all the classes, and to this we may always appeal with the certainty of obtaining some response.

Those who feel sure that they belong to the higher class of egos must prove their nobility by great tolerance and charity towards the less fortunate younger members of the human race; *noblesse oblige*, and if they are the nobility they must act accordingly. A prejudice is usually so transparently foolish that when a man has freed himself from it he cannot believe that he ever really felt it, cannot understand how any of his fellow-creatures who have any pretence to reasoning powers can be subject to it. So there is a certain danger that he himself may become intolerant in turn – intolerant of intolerance. The occultist, however, who sees the mighty combined thought-form and understands the almost irresistible power, and yet the curious insidiousness of its action, understands very well the difficulty of resisting it – the difficulty even of escaping sufficiently from its thralldom to realize that there is anything to resist.

Public Standards

Fortunately this almost irresistible pressure of public opinion is not always wrong. In certain directions it is founded not upon the cumulative ignorance of the race but on its cumulative knowledge – on the experience of generations that have gone before us. Public opinion is undoubtedly in the right when it condemns murder or robbery; and countries in which public opinion has not yet advanced so far as to express itself clearly on these points are universally admitted to be in the rearguard of civilization. There are still in the world communities in which law and order are only beginning to exist, and violence is still the deciding factor in all disputes; but those countries are universally recognized as undesirable places of habitation and as lagging behind the progress of the world.

There are other crimes besides robbery and murder which are universally condemned in all civilized countries, and in all these directions the pressure exerted by public opinion is a pressure in the right direction, tending to restrain those erratic spirits who might otherwise think only of their own desires and not at all of the welfare of the community.

The occultist, seeing so much more of what is really happening, establishes for himself a far more exacting code of morals than does the ordinary man. Many things which the ordinary man would do, and constantly does do, without thinking twice about them, the occultist would not permit himself to do under any consideration, because he sees their effects in other worlds, which are hidden from the less developed man. This is a general rule, though here and there we meet with exceptions in which the occultist, who understands the case, will take steps which the ordinary man would fear to take. This is because his action is based upon knowledge, because he sees what he is doing, while the other man is acting only according to custom.

The great laws of morality are universal, but temporary and local customs are often only ridiculous. There are still many people to whom it is a heinous crime to go for a walk on a Sunday or to play a game of cards. At such restrictions the occultist smiles, though he is careful not to hurt the feelings of

those to whom such quaint and unnatural regulations seem matters of primary importance. In many cases, too, the superior knowledge gained by occult study enables him to see the real meaning of regulations which are misunderstood by others.

Caste Prejudice

A good example of this is to be seen in regard to the caste regulations of India. These were established some ten thousand years ago by the Manu in charge of the fifth root-race, when He had moved down the main stock of that race from Central Asia to the plains of India. This was after the sub-races had been sent out to do their colonizing work, and the remnant of the main stock of His race was but small as compared to the teeming millions of Hindustan. Wave after wave of immigration had swept into the country, and mingled freely with the ruling race among its previous inhabitants, and He saw that, unless some definite command was given, the Aryan type, which had been established with so much trouble, would run great risk of being entirely lost. He therefore issued instructions that a certain division of His people should be made, and that the members of the three great types which He thus set apart should remain as they were, that they should not intermarry with one another or with the subject races.

This was the only restriction that was laid upon them. Yet this very simple and harmless regulation has been expanded into a system of iron rigidity which at the present time interferes at every step and in every direction with the progress of India as a nation. The command not to intermarry has been distorted into an order to hold no fellowship with the members of another caste, not to eat with them, not to accept food from them. Not only that, but the great race divisions made by the Manu have been again divided and subdivided until we are now in the presence of not three castes but a great multitude of sub-castes, all looking down upon one another, all foreign to one another, all restricted from intermarrying or from eating together. And all this in spite of the fact, well-known to all, that within the written laws of Manu (though they contain much which the Manu himself certainly did not say) it is stated quite definitely that the man of higher caste may eat with one of the lowest caste whom he knows to be living in a rational and cleanly manner, and that in the Mahabharata caste is declared to depend not upon birth but upon character. For example,

One's own ploughman, an old friend of the family, one's own cowherd, one's own servant, one's own barber, and whosoever else may come for refuge and offer service – from the hands of all such shudras may food be taken.

(*Manusmriti*, iv, 253)

After doubt and debate, the Gods decided that the food-gift of the money-lending *shudra* who was generous of heart was equal in quality to the food-gift of the *Shrotriya brahmana* who knew all the Vedas, but was small of heart. But the Lord of all creatures came to them and said: Make ye not that equal which is unequal. The food-gift of that *shudra* is purified by the generous heart, while that of the *Shrotriya brahmana* is befouled wholly by the lack of goodwill.

(*Manusmriti*, iv, 224, 225)

Not birth, nor sacraments, nor study, nor ancestry, can decide whether a person is twice-born (and to which of the three types of the twice-born he belongs). Character and conduct only can decide.

(*Mahabharata, Vanaparvan*, cccxiii, 108)

Yet obvious as all this is, and well known as are the texts to which I have referred, there are yet thousands of otherwise intelligent people to whom the regulations made (not by religion but by custom only) are rules as strict as that of any savage with his taboo. All readily agree as to the absurdity of the taboo imposed in a savage tribe, whose members believe that to touch a certain body or to mention a certain name will bring down upon them the wrath of their deity. Yet all do not realize that the extraordinary taboo which many otherwise sensible Christians erect round one of the days of the week is in every respect as utterly irrational. Nor do our Indian friends realize that they have erected a taboo, exactly similar and quite as unreasonable, about a whole race of their fellow men, whom they actually label as untouchable, and treat as though they were scarcely human beings at all. Each race or religion is ready enough to ridicule the superstitions of others, and yet fails to comprehend the fact that it has equally foolish superstitions itself.

These very superstitions have done irreparable harm to the cause of religion, for naturally enough those who oppose the religious idea fasten upon these weak points and emphasize and exaggerate them out of all proportion, averring that religion is synonymous with superstition; whereas the truth is that there is a great body of truth which is common to all the religions, which is entirely unmarred by superstition, and of the greatest value to the world, as is clearly proved by Mrs. Besant's Universal Text Book of Religion and Morals. This body of teaching is the important part of every religion, and if the professors of all these faiths could be induced to recognize that and,-- we will not say to abandon their private superstitions, but at least to recognize them as not binding upon any but themselves, there would be no difficulty whatever in arriving at a perfect agreement. Each person has an inalienable right to believe what he chooses, however foolish it may appear to others; but he can under no circumstances have any possible right to endeavour to force his particular delusion upon those others, or to persecute them in any way for declining to accept it.

The Duty of Freedom

It therefore becomes the duty of every student of occultism to examine carefully the religious belief of his country and his period, in order that he may decide for himself what of it is based upon reason and what is merely a superstitious accretion. Most men never make any such effort at discrimination, for they cannot shake themselves free from the influence of the great crowd of thought-forms which constitute public opinion; and because of those they never really see the truth at all, nor even know of its existence, being satisfied to accept instead of it this gigantic thought-form. For the occultist the first necessity is to attain a clear and unprejudiced view of everything – to see it as it is, and not as a number of other people suppose it to be.

In order to secure this clearness of vision, unceasing vigilance is necessary. For the pressure of the great hovering thought-cloud upon us is by no means relaxed because we have once detected and defied its influence. Its pressure is ever present, and quite unconsciously we shall find ourselves yielding to it in all sorts of minor matters, even though we keep ourselves clear from it with regard to the greater points. We were born under its pressure, just as we were born under the pressure of the atmosphere, and we are just as unconscious of one as of the other. As we have never seen anything except through its distorted medium, we find a great difficulty in learning to see clearly, and even in recognizing the truth when we finally come face to face with it; but at least it will gradually help us in our search for truth to know of this hidden side of public opinion, so that we may be on our guard against its constant and insidious pressure.

Business Methods

For example, this public opinion is at a very low level with regard to what are called business methods.

In these days of keen competition, things are done and methods are adopted in business that would have astonished our forefathers. Many of these actions and methods are perfectly legitimate, and mean nothing more than the application of shrewder thought and greater cleverness to the work which has to be done; but unquestionably the boundary of what is legitimate and honourable is not infrequently overstepped, and means are employed to which the honest merchant of an earlier age would never have descended.

Indeed, there has come to be a sort of tacit understanding that business has a morality of its own, and that ordinary standards of integrity are not to be applied to it. A man at the head of a large mercantile house once said to me: 'If I tried to do business according to the Golden Rule – "Do unto others as ye would that they should do unto you" – I should simply starve; I should be bankrupt in a month. The form in which it runs in business matters is much nearer to that immortalized by David Harum: "Do unto the other man as he would like to do unto you, and do it first." ' And many others to whom this remark was quoted frankly agreed with him. Men who in all other respects are good and honest and honourable feel themselves bound in such matters to do as others do. "Business is business," they say, "and the moralist who objects does not know its conditions," and under this excuse they treat one another in business as they would never dream of treating a friend in private life, and make statements which they know to be false, even though outside of their trade they may be truthful men.

All our virtues need widening out so that they will cover a greater area. At first man is frankly selfish, and takes care only of himself. Then he widens his circle of affection, and loves his family in addition to himself. Later on he extends a modified form of affection to his neighbours and his tribe, so that he will no longer rob them, though he is quite willing to join with them in robbing some other tribe or nation. Even thousands of years ago, if a dispute arose within a family the head of the family would act as arbitrator and settle it. We have now extended this as far as our neighbours or our fellow-citizens in the same State. If we have a dispute with any of them, a magistrate acts as an arbitrator, in the name of the law of the land. But we have not yet reached a sufficient state of civilization to apply the same idea to national quarrels, though we are just beginning to talk about doing so, and one or two of the most advanced nations have already settled some difficulties in this way.

In the same way the brothers of a family stand together; in dealing with one another they will not take advantage, or state what is untrue; but we have not yet reached the level on which they will be equally honest and open with those outside of the family, in what they call business. Perhaps if a man meets another in private life or at a friend's house, and enters into conversation with him, he would scorn to tell him a falsehood; yet let the same man enter his shop or place of business, and his ideas of what is honourable or lawful for him at once undergo a sad deterioration.

Undoubtedly, people who manage their affairs along the lines of sharp practice sometimes acquire large fortunes thereby; and those who regard life superficially, envy them for what they consider their success. But those who have accustomed themselves to look a little deeper into the underlying realities recognize that it is not success at all – that in truth there has been no profit in such a transaction, but a very serious loss.

If man is a soul in process of evolution towards perfection, temporarily stationed here on earth in order to learn certain lessons and to achieve a certain stage of his progress, it is obvious that the only thing that matters is to learn those lessons and to make that progress. If man be in truth, as many of us

know he is, a soul that lives for ever, the true interest of the man is the interest of that soul, not of the body, which is nothing but its temporary vesture; and anything that hinders the progress of that soul is emphatically a bad thing for the man, no matter how advantageous it may appear for his body.

The soul is acting through and advancing by means of his vehicles, and the physical body is only one of these, and that the lowest. Manifestly, therefore, before we are able to pronounce whether any course of action is really good or bad for us, we must know how it affects all of these vehicles, and not only one of them.

Suppose that one man overreaches another in some transaction, and boasts blatantly of his success and the profit which it has brought him. The student of the inner side of nature will tell him that there has been in reality no gain, but a heavy loss instead. The trickster chinks his money in his hand and in his shortsightedness triumphantly cries: "See, here is the best of proof; here are the golden sovereigns that I have won; how can you say that I have not gained?"

The occultist will reply that the gold may do him a little good or a little harm, according to the way in which he uses it; but that a consideration of far greater importance is the effect of the transaction upon higher levels. Let us put aside altogether, for the moment, the injury done to the victim of the fraud – though, since humanity is truly a vast brotherhood, that is a factor by no means to be ignored; but let us restrict ourselves now exclusively to the selfish aspect of the action, and see what harm the dishonest merchant has done to himself.

The Results of Deceit

Two facts stand out prominently to clairvoyant sight. First, the deceiver has had to think out his scheme of imposture; he has made a mental effort, and the result of that effort is a thought-form. Because the thought which gave it birth was guileful and ill-intentioned, that thought-form is one which cramps and sears the mental body, hindering its growth and intensifying its lower vibrations – a disaster in itself far more than counter-balancing anything whatever that could possibly happen in the physical world. But that is not all.

Secondly, this duplicity has set up a habit in the mental body. It is represented therein by a certain type of vibration, and since this vibration has been set strongly in motion it has created a tendency towards its own repetition. Next time the man's thoughts turn towards any commercial transaction, it will be a little easier than before for him to adopt some knavish plan, a little more difficult than before for him to be manly, open and honest. So that this one act of double-dealing may have produced results in the mental body which it will take years of patient striving to eliminate.

Clearly, therefore, even from the most selfish point of view, the speculation has been a bad one; the loss enormously outweighs the gain. This is a certainty – a matter not of sentiment or imagination, but of fact; and it is only because so many are still blind to the wider life, that all men do not at once see this. But even those of us whose sight is not yet open to higher worlds, should be capable of bringing logic and common sense to bear upon what our seers tell us – sufficiently at least to comprehend that these things must be so, and to take timely warning, to realize that a transaction may appear to be profitable in one direction and yet be a ruinous loss in another, and that all the factors must be taken into account before the question of profit or loss is decided.

It is clear that a student of the occult who has to engage in business must needs watch closely what are called business methods, lest the pressure of public opinion on this matter should lead him to perform or to condone actions not perfectly straightforward or consistent with true brotherhood.

Prejudice Against Persons

This applies also in the case of public opinion about a particular person. There is an old proverb which says: "Give a dog a bad name and you may as well hang him at once." The truth which it expresses in so homely a manner is a real one, for if the community has a bad opinion of any given person, however utterly unfounded that opinion may be, the thought-form of it exists in the atmosphere of the place, and any stranger who comes will be likely to be influenced by it. The newcomer, knowing nothing of the victim of evil report, is unlikely to begin his acquaintance with him by charging him with specific crimes; but he may find himself predisposed to think ill of him, without being able to account for it, and may have a tendency to place a sinister interpretation upon the simplest of his actions. If we are trying to follow the truth we must be on our guard against these influences also; we must learn to judge for ourselves in such cases and not to accept a ready-made public judgment, which is just as truly a superstition as though it were connected with religious subjects.

The Influence of Friends

An influence which often bears a very large part in a man's life is that of his friends. This is recognized in a popular proverb which says that a man may be known by his friends. I take that to mean that the man usually chooses his friends from men of a certain type or a certain class, and that that in turn means that he finds himself in sympathy with the ideas of that type or that class, and so is likely to reproduce them himself; but it also means much more than this. When a man is with a friend whom he loves, he is in the most receptive attitude. He throws himself open to the influence of his friend, and whatever characteristics are strongly developed in that friend will tend to produce themselves in him also.

Even in the physical world the belief of a friend commends itself to us merely because it is belief. It comes to us with a recommendation which assures for it our most favourable consideration. The hidden side of this is in truth merely an extension of the idea to a higher level. We open ourselves out towards our friends, and in doing so put ourselves in a condition of sympathetic vibration with them. We receive and enfold their thought-waves; whatever is definite in them cannot but impress itself upon our higher bodies, and these undulations come to us enwrapped in those of affection; an appeal is made to our feelings, and therefore to a certain extent our judgment is for the time less alert. On the one side, this may imply a certain danger that an influence may be accepted without sufficient consideration; on the other hand, it has its advantage in securing for that opinion a thoroughly sympathetic reception and examination. The path of wisdom will be to receive every new opinion as sympathetically as though it came from our best friend, and yet to scrutinize it as carefully as though it had reached us from a hostile source.

Popular Superstitions

It must be remembered that superstition is by no means confined to religious matters. Most travelled Englishmen are aware that in certain parts of the Continent there exists a very decided superstition against the admission of fresh air into a room or a railway carriage, even though science teaches us that fresh air is a necessity of life. We know without a shadow of doubt, from scientific teaching, that sunlight destroys many disease germs, and vitalizes the atmosphere; so it is impossible to question that it ought to be admitted to our houses as freely as possible, more especially in those unfortunate countries where we see so little of it. Yet instead of accepting this blessing and exulting in it, many a housewife makes determined efforts to shut it out when it appears, because of a superstition connected with the colours of curtains and carpets. It is not to be denied that sunlight causes certain colours to

fade, but the curious lack of proportion of the ignorant mind is shown in the fact that faded colours are regarded as of greater importance than the physical health and cleanliness which the admission of the sunlight brings. Civilization is gradually spreading, but there are still many towns and villages in which the superstitious following of the customs of our unscientific forefathers prevents the adoption of modern methods of sanitation.

Even among people who think themselves advanced, curious little fragments of primeval superstition still survive. There are still many among us who will not commence a new undertaking on a Friday, nor form one of a party of thirteen. There are many who regard certain days of the week or of the month as fortunate for them and others as unfortunate, and allow their lives to be governed accordingly. I am not prepared to deny that a larger number of instances than could reasonably be accounted for by coincidence can be adduced to show that certain numbers are always connected in some way with the destiny of certain persons or families. I do not yet fully understand all that is involved in this, but it would be silly to deny the fact because we have not immediately at hand an adequate explanation of it. Those who are interested in pursuing this question further will find some of the instances to which I am referring in the appendix to Baring Gould's *Curious Myths of the Middle Ages*.

I do not doubt the existence of what are commonly called planetary influences, for I have already explained the hidden side of them; but I say that, while these influences may make it easier or more difficult to do a certain thing on a certain day, there is nothing whatever in any of them, or all of them combined, that can prevent a man of determined will from ordering his life precisely as he thinks best. As has been said, the wise man rules his stars, the fool obeys them. To let oneself become a slave to such influences is to make a superstition of them.

The Fear of Gossip

Perhaps the greatest and most disastrous of all the taboos that we erect for ourselves is the fear of what our neighbours will say. There are many men and women who appear to live only in order that they may be talked about; at least that is what one must infer from the way in which they bring everything to this as to a touchstone. The one and only criterion which they apply with regard to any course of action is the impression which it will make upon their neighbours. They never ask themselves: "Is it right or wrong for me to do this?" but: "What will Mrs. Jones say if I do this?"

This is perhaps the most terrible form of slavery under which a human being can suffer, and yet to obtain freedom from it, it is only necessary to assert it. What other people say can make to us only such difference as we ourselves choose to allow it to make. We have but to realize within ourselves that it does not in the least matter what anybody says, and at once we are perfectly free. This is a lesson which the occultist must learn at an early stage of his progress. He lives upon a higher level, and he can allow himself to be influenced only by higher considerations. He takes into account the hidden side of things of which most people know nothing; and, basing his judgment upon that, he decides for himself what is right and what is wrong, and (having decided) he troubles himself no more as to what other people say of him than we trouble ourselves as to the flies that circle round our heads. It never matters in the least to us what anyone else says, but it matters much to us what we ourselves say.

A Better Aspect

Happily this mighty power of thought can be used for good as well as for evil, and, in some ways, the pressure of public opinion is occasionally on the side of truth and righteousness. Public opinion, after

all, represents the opinion of the majority, and therefore the pressure which it exercises is all to the good when it is applied to those who are below the level of the majority. It is indeed only the existence of this mass of opinion which renders social and civilized life possible; otherwise we should be at the mercy of the strongest and the most unscrupulous among us. But the student of occultism is trying to raise himself to a level much above the majority, and for that purpose it is necessary that he should learn to think for himself, and not to accept ready-made opinions without examining them. This much at least may be said – that, if public opinion does not yet exact a very high level of conduct, at least the public ideal is a high one, and it never fails to respond to the noble and the heroic when that is put before it. Class feeling and esprit de corps do harm when they lead men to despise others; but they do good when they establish a standard below which the man feels that he cannot fall.

In England we have a way of attributing our morals to our religion, whereas the truth seems to be that there is little real connection between them. It must be admitted that large numbers of the cultured classes in almost any European country have no real effective belief in religion at all. Perhaps to a certain extent they take a few general dogmas for granted, because they have never really thought about them or weighed them in their minds, but it would be an error to suppose that religious considerations direct their actions or bear any large part in their life.

They are, however, greatly influenced, and influenced always for good, by another body of ideas which is equally intangible – the sense of honour. The gentleman in every race has a code of honour of his own; there are certain things which he must not do, which he cannot do because he is a gentleman. To do any of those things would lower him in his own estimation, would destroy his feeling of self-respect; but in fact he has never even the temptation to do them, because he regards them as impossible for him. To tell an untruth, to do a mean or dishonourable action, to be disrespectful to a lady; these and such as these, he will tell you, are things which are not done in his rank of life. The pressure of such class feeling as this is all to the good, and is by all means to be encouraged. The same thing is to be found in a minor degree in the tradition of our great schools or colleges, and many a boy who has been strongly tempted to escape from some difficulty by an act of dishonour has said to himself: “I cannot do that, for the sake of the old school; it shall never be said that one of its members descended to such an action.” So there is a good side as well as a bad one to this matter of public opinion, and our business is to use always the great virtue of discrimination, so that we may separate the desirable from the undesirable.

Another point worth remembering is that this great, clumsy, stupid force of public opinion can itself be slowly and gradually moulded and influenced. We ourselves are members of the public, and under the universal law our views must to some extent affect others. The wonderful change, which during the last thirty years has come over modern thought in connection with the subjects which we study, is largely due to the persistent work of our Society. Through all those years we have steadily continued to speak, to write, and above all to think sanely and rationally about these questions. In doing so we have been pouring out vibrations and their effect is plainly visible in a great modification of the thought of our day. Only those men who are fully ready can be brought as far as Theosophy, but thousands more may be brought half-way – into New Thought, into Spiritualism, into liberal Christianity. In this case, as in every other, to know the law is to be able to wield its forces.