

## Is Theosophy an Ideology?

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The *Encyclopedia Britannica* defines ideology as ‘a form of social or political philosophy in which practical elements are as prominent as theoretical ones. It is a system of ideas that aspires both to explain the world and to change it’. The purpose of this article is to investigate if Theosophy, for a number of its students, and over a long period of time, has become an ideology.

Ideological nuances invade every form of human activity. The whole field of advertisement, for example, is based on the ideological principle of persuasion by repetition in different settings (television, magazines, websites, Facebook, etc.). An American economist once said that when the need for a new product did not exist it could be invented!

Ideological currents also pervade the world of religions, where in many cases adherents are cajoled into staying in the fold in order to protect themselves from an ‘evil’ world. Very often religious ideology attempts to sell a sense of belief-based security as well as a protecting community.

In modern philosophical circles ideology makes itself present in overemphasizing discourse while interpreting reality. A sophisticated linguistic apparatus is sometimes used to explain the world of everyday life while remaining disconnected from the real world of all too human experiences.

Even before Madame Blavatsky died, in May 1891, Col. Olcott was concerned with what he called the possibility of a ‘HPB sect’ within the Theosophical Society. But it was in 1892 that his concern took a concrete form:

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 H. P. B. 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 H. P. B. 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.<sup>i</sup>

However, Col. Olcott also saw another danger:

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 fellow-men, and from the first moment until now she has begged her hearers to regard the thought, and not the speaker.<sup>ii</sup>

As we shall see, it was the attributed authority, centred round the teachings of HPB, that may have led several generations of students to build the notion of Theosophy as a Blavatskyan-centred ideology that does not admit questioning and that regards the teachings from several other writers as less authoritative, if not positively wrong. A central element in this ideology seems to be related to the fact that HPB was a direct agent of the Masters. Curiously, whenever she addressed the members of the TS it was not the authority of her Teachers which she emphasized, not even her own authority, as we shall see, but the vital truths inherent in Theosophy as a living Wisdom.

Madame Blavatsky wrote in 1889:

In its capacity of an abstract body, the Society does not believe in anything, does not accept anything, and does not teach anything. The Society *per se* cannot and should not have any one religion. Cults, after all, are merely vehicles, more or less material forms, containing a lesser or greater degree of the essence of Truth, which is One and universal.<sup>iii</sup>

Her statement is entirely consistent with what was written in the Preamble to the Bylaws of the TS when it was formed in 1875: 'Whatever may be the private opinions of its members, the Society has *no dogmas to enforce, no creed to disseminate.*' This clearly means that the TS does not have an official, enforceable teaching although it encourages a search for Truth and Wisdom among its members. In her above-mentioned statement HPB implies that the position of an *official* Theosophical teacher was declared vacant from the early beginnings of the TS!

The Mahatma Letters also present a similar testimony of non-dogmatism and non-sectarianism in TS work:

We wish the London Society should preserve its harmony in division like the Indian Branches, where the representatives of all the different schools of Hinduism seek to study Esoteric Sciences and the Wisdom of old, without necessarily giving up for it their respective beliefs. Each Branch, often members of the same Branch — Christian converts included in some cases — study esoteric philosophy each in his own way, yet always knitting together brotherly hands for the furtherance of the common objects of the Society.<sup>iv</sup>

They also reaffirmed, in strong words, the complete and irreversible inexistence, within the Theosophical Society, of any ideological authority:

It is a universally admitted fact that the marvellous success of the Theosophical Society in India is due entirely to its principle of wise and respectful toleration of each other's opinions

and beliefs. Not even the President-Founder has the right directly or indirectly to interfere with the freedom of thought of the humblest member, least of all to seek to influence his personal opinion. It is only in the absence of this generous consideration, that even the faintest shadow of difference arms seekers after the same truth, otherwise earnest and sincere, with the scorpion-whip of hatred against their brothers, equally sincere and earnest. Deluded victims of distorted truth, they forget, or never knew, that discord is the harmony of the Universe.<sup>v</sup>

The first significant split within the Theosophical Society came about in 1895 when William Quan Judge, a close co-worker with HPB and one of the original founders of the TS, decided to leave the TS and form The Theosophical Society in America. From that time onwards a school of thought was created which maintained – and still maintains – that real Theosophy can only be found in the writings of H. P. Blavatsky, W. Q. Judge and in the Mahatma Letters. Such school of thought rejected the writings of Annie Besant, C. W. Leadbeater and others in the TS (Adyar) as ‘Neo-Theosophy’ for not conforming to the so-called original teachings of Theosophy. In some of the writings of representatives of such a school of thought, the view of Theosophy as an ideology, authority-based, becomes self-evident.

Robert Crosbie, a staunch student of Mr Judge’s writings as well as of HPB’s, and the originator of the United Lodge of Theosophists in 1919, stated:

Theosophy does not emanate from any society nor from any living persons. So far as the world and all Theosophists are concerned, Theosophy comes from H. P. B. and W. Q. J., or rather, through them. So, to avoid misconceptions, we get back of living persons to the Message and the Messengers.<sup>vi</sup>

The unassailable basis for union among Theosophists, wherever and however situated, is SIMILARITY OF AIM, PURPOSE, AND TEACHING. The acceptance of this principle by all Theosophists would at once remove all barriers. A beginning must be made by those *whose minds have become plastic by the buffetings of experience*. An agreement between such is necessary; an assembling together in this spirit.<sup>vii</sup>

However, such view was not – and is not – limited to those belonging to other organizations dedicated to the study of Theosophy. It also found representatives in well-known members of the TS (Adyar), like the late Geoffrey Farthing, a former General Secretary of the Theosophical Society in England and noted theosophical author. Commenting on the well-known passage of *The Key to Theosophy*, that says the TS ‘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’, Mr Farthing says: ‘This established Theosophy as something specific and the paragraph constitutes virtually a fourth object for the Society. Could there be a worthier one?’

When considered carefully, the words used by HPB in the passage just mentioned – ‘assist’ and ‘help them’ – suggest that theosophical students could become facilitators in the

presentation of theosophical teachings, rather than self-styled teachers that speak from a position of authority and transmit a teaching which is set in concrete.

Although Mr Farthing had submitted his views to the General Council of the TS at Adyar in 1996, as part of his manifesto, the Council did not adopt them. Included in his manifesto was the following statement:

All beliefs concerning Theosophy and the Theosophical Society ought seriously to be questioned against what can easily be discovered of the original teachings and intentions for the Society. ... The Society has its own special message to promulgate. This message only exists in the writings of H.P.B. and in the Mahatma Letters. This message in its completeness (as far as it was given out) is unique.<sup>viii</sup>

The following was the General Council's reply to Mr Farthing's manifesto:

The consensus was that freedom of thought necessarily implies a wide horizon of thought and perception. Belief that the writings of H.P.B. and the Mahatma Letters constitute the only source of the message the T.S. should promulgate cannot be imposed on members, as such limitation goes against the grain of that freedom of thought. Each one must have the freedom to decide what best helps understanding of oneself and provides inspiration to work for the ideal of human progression and perfection.<sup>ix</sup>

When a young theosophist in Brazil, I had the opportunity to ask our then International President, John Coats, about why there are such clashes within the TS, including ideological ones. His reply was illuminating: 'Because the Society is composed of individuals who think for themselves. We are not a bunch of sheep.'

The freedom the TS extend to its members includes the freedom to hold on to views, even when this occurs tenaciously and sometimes in detriment of mutual harmony and goodwill. However, in the Resolution on Freedom of Thought it is also stated that we should 'exercise the right of liberty of thought and of expression thereof, within the limits of courtesy and consideration for others.' This can hardly be achieved when we tell our fellow-members that the book or books they are studying are rubbish because we do not accept the ideas of the author or authors of those books.

However diverse may be the views about Theosophy, the different schools of thought apparently agree that it is essentially Wisdom, and not merely knowledge. And Wisdom concerns life and living, not just ideas and views. It is possible that there is a dimension of Theosophy which, when contacted, may illumine the purpose of life and existence in such a way which second hand knowledge cannot in itself provide. Hugh Shearman may have pointed at this in the following passage:

The future of the Theosophical Society must depend, not upon a body of literature, but upon Theosophists. And Theosophists are of value, not for their opinions or their ontological structures, but for the extent to which they can embody something that is beyond and greater

than all systems or descriptions. Indeed our various Theosophical ontologies are deeply united in one teaching. They all, in various fashions, declare that the principle or aspect of human nature which alone gives us value and significance is beyond that mind in us which creates systems, which depends upon other people's descriptions or is concerned with comparing one teaching disadvantageously with another. Though we are still only momentarily conscious of it here, that which unites humanity is one Life which lives through all things. Theosophy is discovered by letting that Life consciously and expressively take over our lives. ...<sup>x</sup>

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References:

<sup>i</sup> Olcott, H. S. *Old Diary Leaves*, Fourth Series, p. 425, The Theosophical Publishing Society, London, 1910.

<sup>ii</sup> Idem, p. 426.

<sup>iii</sup> Blavatsky, H. P. 'The New Cycle', *La Revue Theosophique*, Paris, Vol. I, No. 1, March 21, 1889, pp. 3-13.

Translated from the French original.

<sup>iv</sup> *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett* in chronological sequence, Arranged and Edited by Vicente Hao Chin Jr, Theosophical Publishing House, Metro Manila, Philippines, 1993, pp. 412-413 .

<sup>v</sup> Idem, p. 412.

<sup>vi</sup> Crosbie, Robert, *The Friendly Philosopher*, The Theosophy Company, Los Angeles, 1945, p. 369.

<sup>vii</sup> Idem, p. 410.

<sup>viii</sup> Farthing, Geoffrey, *The Theosophical Society and its Future Manifesto 1996*. Privately printed by the author.

<sup>ix</sup> Annual Report of the Theosophical Society, 1996.

<sup>x</sup> Shearman, Hugh, 'Theosophical Ontologies', *The Theosophist*, October 1971.