

The Future of The Theosophical Society

By Dr. Annie Besant and others



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The following is a condensed report of lectures on “The Future of the Theosophical Society” delivered at the Tenth Congress of the Theosophical Society in Europe, held at Geneva from June 26 to July 1[1930]. Sunday, Monday and Tuesday mornings were given up to lectures by Dr. Besant, Dr. van der Leeuw and Bishop Leadbeater and long discussions on the last two lectures.[Originally published in The Australian Theosophist, September, 1930.]

FIRST LECTURE — Dr. ANNIE BESANT

Because this subject is of special importance it has been adopted for a series of addresses by myself and other speakers. It is a good thing that people having different processes of thought should tell what they think on a common subject, as it leaves each speaker free to put forward his own side of the subject only. I am going to put to you very bluntly what I personally consider to be a great menace to the future of the Society. There are really two things. The first is the general human habit of liking to be in a crowd, of liking to have around, one a number of people who agree with one, who do not think for themselves but take their thoughts ready-made. Such people are in a very unfortunate position in the Theosophical Society.

The knowledge of the Great White Lodge came to us in the last quarter of last century, through the form of that wonderful person, H. P. Blavatsky. She fought against the great enemy of religion, materialism. She succeeded to a great extent. We do well to remember, when this tendency, to go with the majority shows itself, that H.P.B. laid tremendous stress on freedom of thought inside the Society and outside it, realizing the great danger lying in the future.

The great danger to the Society is the process of crystallization. You know how, in chemical solutions, this takes place when a liquid becomes saturated; it changes with great suddenness into a solid body. To me the greatest menace is Theosophical orthodoxy, the danger, that we become crystallized in certain particular doctrines, and so become one among many sects of thought in the world.

I am not intending to attack any form of thought, but I want you to realize the danger. The principle of Theosophy is beautifully expressed in the text that Divine Wisdom—and

that *is* Theosophy—mightily and sweetly ordered all things. In the world there is plenty of strong thought which is not sweet in its expression. The Theosophist has to strive for complete freedom of thought, but also to give the same freedom as a right to everyone who desires it, to be careful not to be aggressive to others, but to give freedom for self-expression, the same freedom that he himself wants, to every individual of those who surround him, never trying to impose his own opinion.

Your wisdom will lie in trying to form your own opinion after considering many opinions in the world, and exercising your own judgment, while not finding fault with those who disagree. You may remember one phrase of Krishnaji's, that perfection lies in the poise between reason and love. He names two great qualities there, which are more evolved in human beings than in animals. He gives full weight both to the reasoning faculty and to love, and if you can succeed in striking a perfect balance between those two qualities, if you think your own best and have no desire to impose it upon another person, then you will soon reach perfection.

In the Theosophical Society we ought to attain that, because we proclaim Universal Brotherhood and our object is to form a nucleus of that Brotherhood. A nucleus sends out forces which are formative forces, giving the shape that is to be moulded through them. Remember the command of the Christ: "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father in Heaven is perfect." That is impossible for us under present conditions and at our stage of evolution, but it is to be attained; it must be reached and it shall be reached. Therefore, regarding the future of the Theosophical Society, if it is to carry out its work and to become in far-off days perfect, then we ought in the present day of universal imperfection to give the fullest freedom of expression to every thought around us.

We know that our ideals are higher than our practice, because the ideal is like the sun that draws up the life in the plant and brings it to perfect flower. So in the Society we shall keep the ideal of complete freedom of expression. We shall temper it by love and we shall form it by thought, so that these two may bring us poise. On either side many virtues are built, but we all tend to exaggeration along our own lines. That has to be deliberately corrected by us, realizing that, with the tendency to run to extremes in our own line, the more we feel repulsion, the more we have that quality of exaggeration in ourselves.

You know how Krishnaji speaks against fears of all kinds. Therefore we must aim at the higher indifference, not the indifference of slavishness, the following of the lower self, but that which realizes that the world is built in a love and wisdom greater than our own, which can so make use of evil that we can understand the phrase: "If I go up to heaven Thou art there; if I go down to hell, behold, Thou art there also." The statement, then, holds up an ideal unattainable for the moment, but we have a long time before us in which to attain.

You have also to realize that what is good for you at one stage becomes evil at another stage. You are a growing creature. The immortal spirit is your real self, but that real self comes into the world as a fragment of the Divine Life, and there it has to face all kinds of difficulties, though there are encouragements also. What is in line with its own thought it finds good; what is against it, it finds evil.

So I would put before you my belief that in the full unfettered exercise of individual thought lies the safety of the Society, that we ought to encourage differences of opinion in our Lodges, and that we must not cold-shoulder a person who holds a different opinion. The future of the Theosophical Society depends upon its becoming a freethought society. We claim to be a nucleus of Universal Brotherhood, and if you take the true meaning of the

word, it is the point from which all the forces come that go to build up the body. You must try to find the good way, your own way, of training yourself. My own way would probably not be palatable to anyone else, but when I feel irritation when an opponent is trying to convert me, I know that I have not reached that perfect poise in which perfection lies. A delicate balance quivers a little before it comes to a steady position. So we have to strive for perfection, knowing that love is the root of all virtues.

The future of the Society depends on the nearness with which we approach to that perfect poise between reason and love. Do not believe a thing because someone else believes it. Do not use the expression: "So-and-So says such-and-such a thing." Give full force to all arguments, and afterwards set yourself to work to examine what attracted or repelled you; see if it is an exaggeration of your own opinion or of your particular dislikes. Take care that you do not criticize until you have appreciated the good qualities, whether in a person or in a subject. In that way you are struggling towards perfection, realizing that each time you check your own exaggeration you are taking a step forward. Set to work! The road to perfection is slow, but the Christ would not have given the command if it were not possible of fulfilment.

SECOND LECTURE — Dr. J. J. VAN DER LEEUW

There was a time when no doubt seemed possible about the future of the Theosophical Society. Of late, however, very serious doubt has arisen in the minds of many. The world at large is no longer interested, and considers the movement as belonging to the past rather than to the future. More serious even is the conflict within the movement between two widely different conceptions, that of realization and that of revelation. This conflict has become acute since 1925, when Krishnaji in his teachings rejected those very things which had previously been revealed as coming from the World-Teacher. The faith of many has been shaken and a process of disintegration is taking place.

In trying to find the causes of this disintegration I shall criticize very frankly. Criticism has not been popular in the Society. It was generally characterized as unbrotherly, as attacks, or even as a manifestation of dark powers. I speak for love of Theosophy, not to attack it. I feel like a doctor at the bedside of a patient, who is studying the diseased organs, not the healthy ones.

In criticizing Theosophy we must first ask which Theosophy. Historically the word means the existence of the Divine, of Life. In an early theosophical pamphlet it is described as the archaic system of esoteric wisdom in the keeping of a brotherhood of Adepts. The meaning in which I use the word Theosophy in my following remarks is that of the teaching placed before the public in our literature and lectures, and also as the work considered as important and valuable in important centres of theosophical work.

This Theosophy was born in the Victorian era, towards the end of the nineteenth century. It was a period divorced from life, in which man had lost the vital relation of his world-image to the world of reality. What we call the world around us is our interpretation of eternal reality. Man however forgets that the world which he sees around him is only his interpretation of reality, part and parcel of his consciousness. He makes it into an objective reality, detached from his consciousness, absolute instead of relative. Thus he feels himself as the separate consciousness confronted on the one hand by an objective material world, on the other hand by a spiritual reality. He has to choose between these two—between materialism and idealism. Theosophy took the part of idealism against materialism, and thereby made its

philosophy a philosophy of the beyond. It looks upon reality as residing in a higher spiritual world, from which man descends in order to gain experience in these worlds. The purpose of life lies in a future perfection.

The world-thought has changed radically in recent years. It has reestablished the fundamental unity of life, in which duality is conquered. Spirit and matter are seen not as realities, but as terms denoting the relations of things to our consciousness. They are relative and interchangeable. The new attitude to life is neither idealism nor materialism. We may call it a new realism, in which reality is found in the here and the now. The actual experience of the moment is the open door to reality in this as in any other world. It is not a mystic state nor a merging into the absolute, if such a thing were possible. It is the realisation of the true meaning of the actual moment. The modern world is no longer interested in a philosophy of the beyond, and as long as Theosophy is that it will have no appeal for the new age.

Another characteristic of the Victorian era was the desire for a final certainty concerning the problems of life. Theosophy as a system claiming to solve these problems naturally found a response. It is the endeavour of many Theosophists to explain all things and to rationalize all that happens. It must always have a reason why, and be good for something.

The spirit of the new age is one which recognizes that life is not a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be experienced. It recognizes that life cannot be contained in any system, and it is neither rational nor logical. These are attributes of a conscious intelligence, whereas life is not such. Our age recognizes the influence of the unconscious, the irrational, in our human

Modern man does not seek the shelter of a system that rationalizes all. Rather than live in such a false security, he will brave the shocks of life in his own strength. For him the claim of Theosophy that it explains life and solves its problems is no longer a recommendation.

Finally, the end of the nineteenth century was a period in which men sought to be united in a brotherhood with all who thought alike. The danger of a nucleus of brotherhood is always that it is apt to become a secluded group, a brotherhood with the exclusion of less desirable brothers. The fact that we speak of an "outside world" shows that we consider ourselves to be inside something. This something is a wall which we have built around us, and which prevents the influx of fresh air. Thus the atmosphere of many Lodges is one of a snug and stuffy intimacy which becomes a breeding place of orthodoxy. Those who disagree suffer a silent excommunication.

The new age will have no barriers between man and man; and as long as membership of the Society means joining a sectarian group, with a set of beliefs, modern man will not be attracted by it. If the Society is to survive, its organization will have to be very much looser than at present. The traditional Lodge, with its traditional meetings, should be abolished, and members in a town should only be called together when there is something worthwhile to offer them.

These, then, are the reasons why the world at large is no longer interested in the Theosophical movement. More serious, however, are the causes of disintegration within. I spoke of the conflict between realization and revelation. In its historical meaning, Theosophy is the realization of the Divine in man, as opposed to Theology, which is discussion about the Divine. Though Theosophy was presented in this way from the beginning, it was also described as an archaic system of esoteric wisdom in the keeping of a brotherhood of Adepts. According to that conception, it is necessary to become a pupil of one of these Adepts in

order to gain the Divine Wisdom, and finally to gain initiation into the Brotherhood itself. The wisdom thus gained is then transmitted to others, and a hierarchical system of revelation arises. It is directly opposed to the idea of Theosophy as the realization of the Divine within the individual.

From the beginning the element of revelation has been present in the Society. The Mahatma letters, with the messages and orders they contained, were such revelations. Later on, messages coming through individuals took their place. Revelation is a communication from an unseen authority, which is inaccessible to others in practice. Therefore its contents can only be accepted or rejected, but can never be discussed, being outside the realm of reason. I am speaking of definite messages from unseen authorities, not about the bulk of our theosophical literature, which I do not consider as revelation since it does not speak in the name of a hidden authority.

The results of revelation are always fatal. Theoretically members are free to accept or not, but if they reject the message they are looked upon as having failed, and are cold-shouldered. I am not denying the existence of the Masters, or the possibility of communication. All I say is that a person who thinks rightly or wrongly that he has had a message from a Master should consider whether he agrees with it. If so he should speak in the strength of his own conviction and not in the name of the Master; if he does not agree he should say nothing. But never should he transmit it as a message from above. The results of revelation are even worse when they touch the individual life directly, when man seeks guidance of his own life through revelation, or seeks to know through others where he stands in his evolution, and what he should do. Again, I do not deny the existence of the occult path or the steps on it. But I consider it a fatal error to look upon two or three people as capable of telling others the steps they have taken on the path. No one can tell you where you stand in life, except the voice of life that is within you. The way life speaks in you it speaks in no one else, and no one can tell you what that voice says. There is no back door into the sanctuary of your own soul. There is only one entrance, which is that of your own experience. Consult with others as much as you like, but decide for yourself, and act in your own name. To shift responsibility on others is weakness, and shows fear to guide one's own life.

I see no future for the Theosophical Society unless it shakes off the element of revelation, never to come back. The evolution of occultism depends on its being pursued in a strictly scientific spirit, devoid of all religious or spiritual mystery.

The future of the Theosophical Society depends, therefore, first of all on Theosophy being in accordance with the spirit of the new age, instead of breathing the spirit of last century. It must conquer duality and cease to be a philosophy of the beyond. The entrance to reality, or life, lies in the here and the now, not in a mystical experience but the actual experience of everyday life. It must no longer claim to be a system explaining life and solving its problems, but try to lead men to an even deeper realization of life itself. Its brotherhood must no longer be one of a group of the elect, but one that knows no barriers.

But above all, members should recognize the conflict between the Theosophy of realization and that of revelation, which will ever remain incompatible. Let us no longer seek the shelter of systems for the security and consolation they can give, but rather go out alone into the storm of life. In that way alone shall we become strong, and what else is the purpose of Theosophy, but to lead man to greater strength?

THIRD LECTURE – BISHOP LEADBEATER

I am supposed to be speaking to you on a subject occupying the minds of many—the future of the Theosophical Society. The first question is, are we considering a distant or a near future? I have *no* doubt about the distant future of the Society. It will increase in numbers, usefulness and influence. But when speaking of the *near* future I must say that it depends on ourselves, the members of the Society. We may carry out the ideals of the Society, or, if less wise, spend our time in arguing the matter.

Now, methods must change with the times. The methods of fifty years ago are not ours today. Our discussions concern not the work to be done, but the way to do it. The Objects of the Society are good, but there are many opinions regarding the way to carry them out, and this variety of opinion is good, for it will prevent us from crystallizing. The fundamentals that we have to popularize do not change. We must spread the idea of Brotherhood. Brotherhood exists, but people do not realize it, and we must try to help them to this realization. That is the main aim of the Society.

The other two aims are good also. The comparative study of religion shows us that in fundamentals all religions agree; and that is perhaps the only thing about religion that matters. Get the people to realize this.

The third Object, the study of the powers latent in man, is to give us a sound basis for our knowledge. Occultism is merely the study of the inner side of man—but the inner side of things is generally more important than the outer.

All these studies help towards the great idea of Brotherhood.

We used to say that this great study of Theosophy has been “revealed” to us. The antithesis between revelation and realization seems to me to be elusive, for they are two stages of the same process. Every great idea is, when first given out, a revelation, and then we begin to understand it.

Madame Blavatsky, when teaching us, used to say: “These are the facts, but do not take them because I say so; examine and accept them only if you have for yourself found them to be the best explanation.” I have never been under the delusion, nor was she, that we know the whole truth. We in the Fifth Root Race are very proud of our intellect, and certainly what we have found—the facts formerly known only to the few—is marvellous. But because the discovery for us is so new, we are somewhat like a child, proud of its new toy.

But reason is not everything. You have no conception of the conditions under which Theosophy came to us in the early days. The orthodox form of Christianity had become impossible for many. We were as though living in a gloomy cage, filled with superstitions, and Theosophy helped us to step out into the sunlight. We had to put away many things that were unbelievable. This brought many people to Atheism. The first time I had the honour of hearing our great President—it was in London—she spoke against the orthodox Christianity of that day. I as a curate was staggered, but could not deny the truth of her points, which she pushed to an absolute conclusion. That was the first thing that showed me that facts were the only things worth finding. There seems to be no proof, short of Occultism, of anything taught in the orthodox Church—not even that Christ lived in Palestine.

Madame Blavatsky told us to accept nothing merely because she had expressed it: many, however, did. And when a Report of the Society for Psychological Research claimed that Madame Blavatsky was a charlatan, many people dropped the cause. Others, however, who

had reasoned it out, and had found it the only reasonable hypothesis of life to work upon, were not shaken.

The first time I heard of Theosophy my whole soul went out to it. It was an inner certainty for me, an intuition. So, you see, I had felt it, and I had reasoned it out. I have taken the trouble to convince myself of the reality—but of course everything may be an illusion, even my standing here and your seeing me! Every day we have to accept things without proof—the word of Science and the testimony of experts. In astronomy we must always be ready to revise our old conceptions when new discoveries are made. Facts are true as far as they go: they themselves are unalterable, but we may see them differently. Thus the broad outlines of Theosophy remain, though conditions may change. There will always be wider vistas before us. We mould our lives by the things we do. The immediate future of the Society is in our hands. If we can be liberal in our thought, we shall hold our rather heterogeneous crowd together.

Realize the central facts of Theosophy, and show no hostility towards others of our brethren who tread paths different from our own. Our Krishnaji says that the highest is pathless. Still we are not all so evolved as to work out the way for ourselves. It is our privilege to take advantage of the labour of those who have gone before. We do teach the child, acquaint him with the conditions around him, without leaving him to find everything for himself. Well, that is what we are trying to do in our Society, by advising people; but by no means may we force our opinion upon them.

Our Masters say that if only three people remain faithful to this inner teaching, They will be with them to help them. It will not come to that. Do not despair of the future. I cannot hold that there is only one way, for around us we see noble men struggling along many paths. A Great Teacher has said, “Upon whichever path a man approaches me upon that path do I meet him, for all paths are mine.” When we know the whole truth, we shall see all paths converging in one point. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind, and the best way to be persuaded is to go forth and work for the good of mankind. Here below we have but the broken arch; only in heaven shall we have the perfect round.

Let Brotherly Love prevail, then we shall be helping in the evolution which Krishnaji said in *At the Feet of the Master* is God’s plan for man. Let us stand together as brethren, and work together. The brotherhood of man is a great reality; the brotherhood of this Society ought to be a great reality to us. I have had forty-seven years of it and shall stay in it to the end of this incarnation, and I hope I shall know enough in the next incarnation to join again.