

## Theosophy and Theosophical Christianity

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My first duty is to explain the vague and I fear somewhat misleading title of my paper, for I do not propose to define or discuss Theosophical Christianity, but rather to bring before the minds of my readers a problem that has interested me from the beginning of my enquiry into Theosophy.

The problem is this: — In the first place, why does Theosophy excite so much opposition among Christians who have shaken off many of the trammels of dogma, and from whom, therefore, Theosophy might expect a sympathetic tolerance? And secondly, why, even if this opposition be overcome, Theosophy remains, and must remain, distinct from Christianity.

Turning then to the first question, we can best enquire into the cause of opposition to Theosophy by considering a few of the objections put to us by Christians.

Primarily, *its authority* is a great stumbling-block alike to Christian and Agnostic.

To the Christian there is something especially shocking in accepting any authority antecedent to that of Christ, and when we make the further claim that the authority to which we give allegiance is higher than that of Christ, the torch of indignation is fairly lighted. Belief in living men whose holiness equals the holiness of Jesus, is felt to be blasphemy pure and simple. The dread too, of anything Oriental in character, the conviction so openly expressed that it is all very well for Hindus, but that it is impossible for "our own beloved countrymen" to touch Eastern philosophy without becoming lax in honesty and morals, is astonishingly prevalent even among well-meaning, kindly people. "Our beloved countrymen" would do well if their standard of life were as pure as that in countries where Eastern philosophy has held and still holds sway. These people forget that the birth-place of Christianity was in the East.

Great misunderstanding exists, moreover, as to the nature of this authority. It is said that a Theosophist is not expected or even allowed to think for himself. Now this statement is so absurdly untrue that, were it not so often made, it could hardly be believed a possible one. It is certainly made in ignorance. [Page 4]

Theosophists hold that there are men who possess an amount of knowledge concerning the nature of the Universe and of man, which, compared with that of the average human being, appears almost divine. Therefore are they authorities. But those who possess this knowledge, have won it for themselves after ages of toil for humanity, and after "trials passing speech". So too must the aspirant to knowledge win it for himself if he would tread in their footsteps. He must *learn*: he must not expect to be *taught*". and this

rule is inflexible, as all students well know. "The teacher can but point the way,..... the Pilgrim has to travel on alone", and again, "the Path is one for all, the means to reach the goal must vary with the Pilgrims".

Only by this means is self-knowledge to be obtained. Only by such methods is the value of the authority to be gauged.

When the learner's faith is changed into sight there can no longer be doubt for him; but even then he could not impart this confidence to another. For what, after all, do we understand by authority ? and what is Christian authority ?

Is it not a question of internal evidence ? We read the New Testament and find there something that we know to be *truth*: the testimony of men of all sorts and conditions has been given for eighteen centuries to the lofty Spirit that breathes through the Gospels. And why ? Because deep down in the heart of every man, "at the very base of his nature, he finds faith, and hope, and love"; and by this light of his soul — by the Spirit of truth which is in him — he recognizes in the Gospels the essence of the same Spirit. If this is so with regard to the truths Christianity expresses (and what Christian would deny it ?) why discredit the belief of Theosophists in other authority which appeals to the same internal evidence?

Another objection often raised is that no two Theosophists give the same definition of terms, or hold the same opinions as to their tenets; that their talk is a wild high-flown jargon; that no one can see what they "are at ", and that they do not know themselves.

This attack is much less easily disposed of, indeed there is some amount of justice in it. It is quite true that there are many and varied opinions amongst Theosophists; this is inevitable, since each has to think out the problems for himself. Each one naturally brings the results of his former religious experience to be ground in the mill of Theosophy. But our differences are not in essentials. The fact that we differ on some points does not alter the fact that all Theosophists agree upon three (at least) which is more than Christians can say.

It is true that our definition of terms often appears vague. This is due partly to the fact that the English language is badly equipped for translating the terms, and partly because most English minds are [Page 5] untrained in such lines of thought. .There have been many difficulties to contend with; but even here we are improving.

In one sense also it is true that we do not know what we are talking about. We *are* stumbling beginners in this boundless region of thought. But Theosophists can generally understand one another, and there is just the suspicion that the person who accuses us of unintelligible talk may not be taking much trouble to discover if there is any method in our madness.

It is *not* true, I hope, that we talk vain-gloriously. If we do, and if we pretend to knowledge that we have not, we deserve any blame that may fall upon us, and Theosophists are no more free from this

temptation than other folks.

Again, it is said that Theosophy is too complicated, wants too much intellectual study ever to reach "the masses". The masses will answer for themselves very soon, if they have not begun to do so already. Reincarnation and Karma are essentially doctrines for the poor man: he will grasp these theories, and they will be his salvation, mental, moral and physical. Spiritual perception, not intellectual attainment, is the one thing needful in Theosophy, and the poor are in this particular not less endowed than the rich. Nor need we fear a lack of clear-headedness among those of them who have leisure for studying the philosophy. Theosophy can take its boldest stand upon this ground: and the manner in which it is received by the poor will be one of the greatest tests as to its practical applicability to daily life.

Next stands *Occultism*. This is, I believe, the most deeply-rooted of all objections, and the one that it is hardest to combat. Many will listen up to this point with interest, or with tolerance, but here the real battle begins. It is natural that it should be so, and if we look at the history of many a revival of Occultism in Europe we shall see that to Protestants, at least, the mention of any investigation into the hidden forces of nature, must inevitably arouse a feeling of profound distrust!

For the Church of Rome has been rightly credited with having had a hand in these revivals; the Church of Rome has learnt something of magic and believes in it, and this belief, spread by its agents among the people, has resulted in not a little fraud and superstition. Then there are the very real dangers attending the study of Occultism; dangers which none know so well as Occultists themselves, dangers which none can escape, none can overcome, save those who intend to use any power they may have for good, not evil. People are beginning to realise the dangers surrounding hypnotism and the spiritualistic séance room, the phenomena being little more than the result of ignorant use, if not actual misuse, of the forces in nature which Occultism reveals.

How is this distrust to be removed from those who do not believe in [Page 6] the authority we own — who have no faith in the purpose which alone can make the study of Occultism justifiable?

It cannot be done, and we can only offer a reply to some of the specific charges brought to bear against this study: as for instance, that people are asked to believe in an Occultism of which they can know nothing, because those who do know are pledged to secrecy. That it is idle to talk of Theosophy being for all, when it is only the favoured few who become "initiated" or "illumined". That only those are attracted to this study who have a love of the mysterious, and who desire to pose as the priests of a new religion, who having no capacity for real science, hope by this means for a smattering of back-door revelation which shall pander to their self-importance. Now, with regard to the pledge of secrecy, there is *no* getting over the dislike to it. We can only say that many honest people have taken it and have found nothing in its nature or result that could offend the most delicate sense of honour. We can further point out that the pledge of Freemasonry is equally binding, and is not, so far as I know, considered either dangerous or wicked.

We are *not* asked to believe in Occultism or in anything else that we do not choose to believe in. Belief in Occultism, and the knowledge of certain facts concerning it, are open to all the world, and all have ordinary means at hand on which to found such a belief. The question is, what makes the belief of those

who are able and willing to pass on, sufficiently strong to induce them to take a pledge?

If they are driven forward by a force there is no resisting, namely, by the conviction that by so doing they are helping on the best interests of humanity, who shall say that they are wrong to go ? Neither is it fair to say that the pledged few are "favoured" or "illuminated", which means, in plain language, that they have an unfair advantage over the rest of the Society!

The number of the pledged is comparatively few, but there is no favour shown to them. We wish to strive after what we call good; to lead a pure life is certainly a *sine qua non* of acceptance. Every true Theosophist would warn any person against pledging himself until he had proved to himself the reality of his intention to study seriously, and until he had pondered well his motive for studying Occultism.

Only in this sense could "the few" be accused of spiritual aristocracy, or of exclusiveness.

With regard to our reckless handling of science, enough has been written and said to show the stand that Theosophy takes: and those in the ranks of Theosophists who follow scientific research find, I believe, many a gap in their philosophies which can only be filled by occult science.

Mention must also be made of *Nirvana*. [Page 7]

People have the wildest notions about Nirvana — and if Occultism excites their horror, the idea of Nirvana is that most often singled out for ridicule and scorn. (We have only to note the flippant references to it in the daily papers to be aware of this fact.) To their minds Nirvana, means annihilation, and they maintain that Theosophy represents it as such, because Theosophy admits the loss of consciousness.

The question is — *what* consciousness is lost ? True, the loss of personality is loss of *personal* consciousness. But personal consciousness is not spiritual consciousness, and only by the loss of the one can the other be gained.

In our present condition we can only be dimly and fitfully conscious of the consciousness that enters *Devachan*, the state of rest between two periods of earth life (in reality the Heaven of the Christians): but Nirvana, which comes at the close of the cycle of births, is a state of spiritual consciousness compared with which that of Devachan is gross. No wonder then, that we have no conception, not the remotest conception, of the consciousness of Nirvana, and no discussion as to its nature can be profitable. Further, it may be pointed out that to enter Nirvana is not the highest aim of the Theosophist — but to renounce it. He who enters is lost to humanity. He who says "For others' sake this great reward I yield" returns as a "Saviour of mankind". Few outsiders understand that this is the supreme choice — this the "Great Renunciation", and yet it should never be lost sight of: stupendous though the ideal be, it has been fulfilled and may be again.

How is it then possible to compare the Heaven of Christianity with Nirvana ?

The best of Christians has only the hope of doing good to his generation. To the best of Christians the thought of the rest of Heaven is legitimate, is sweet. However cheerfully the burden of life is borne, however lovingly he has toiled for his race, however sorely his heart has ached for the suffering he has done his best to relieve, he will leave it all behind, and enter the haven where he would be. *But*, with his work for humanity ended, so far as further effort is concerned, "the little done, the undone vast" is his last sad cry. The Christian ideal is beautifully expressed by Spenser:

" Is not short pain well borne, that brings long ease  
And lays the soul to sleep in quiet grave ?  
Sleep after toil, port after stormy seas,  
Ease after war, death after life, does greatly please."

but this ideal is pitiful compared to that set forth in the "*Voice of the Silence*" with which many readers must be familiar. I do not mean to imply that no Christian would renounce Heaven if he should conceive that [Page 8] it was required of him to do so, but I contend that the hope of Heaven as unending reward for short pain undergone on earth is a subtle one, and must have its effect upon a man's character.

There are further objections of course — notably the rejection of a personal God, and consequent lack of humility, and absence of prayer.

To most Christians the rejection of a God is a terrible thought. To them the Fatherhood of God, the love of and for God, the sense of his presence, of sin forgiven, all go to make the sum of emotion which feeds their spiritual life, the loss of which would mean the loss of all that they understand by religion. It is easy therefore to see what their attitude is towards those who claim to have something better than their religion, whose "pride of intellect" leads them to believe that man has within him a ray of that which is of the same essence as divinity itself, and with which he may identify himself through individual effort. They cannot imagine the existence of humility without a person to humble oneself before. But surely to be humble is to have a capacity for reverence — and reverence is a quality of mind not the mark of the fervent believer.

The question of prayer is a very difficult one. Theosophists do not pray to the Christian God, but they do appeal to that God who is part of themselves, but who is as yet outside of them. But the appeal is a registration of *will* — a command, and not a supplication. It is "the profound obeisance of the soul to the dim star that burns within". And herein lies the difference.

We will now consider the second question, as to why Theosophy must remain distinct from Christianity, even supposing opposition be overcome.

There are many good people who will tolerate in others a freedom of thought and speculation from which they themselves abstain, and who, having the spirit of good-will towards men, will accept the co-operation of any who show a like spirit. The denial of a personal God is to them not so terrible a thought, or at least they are content to leave the discussion in the belief that the difficulty arises more in the expression than in the conception. Indeed, it is astonishing what latitude some Christians allow on this point; the veil of separation is so thin, that it seems as if it might be rent at any moment. But the veil is a

reality — however thin — and is the division between Theism and Pantheism. These people can least understand why Theosophy shows so uncompromising a front. It is they who charge us with intolerance and with rushing to found a new sect (as if these ideas were new !). "What is good in Theosophy" they say, "is to be found in Christianity: the rest may or may not be true, but at any rate there is nothing contrary to the Spirit of Christ in your speculations. Why cannot you quietly accept the good in the Christian Church and leave the [Page 9] rest, without making such a fuss. We are quite willing to have you in our midst. We sympathise with your aspirations, we see that you are in earnest. We yield to none in our ideal of brotherly love, and by separating yourself and refusing to join our worship you fail in brotherly love, and are misunderstood where it is all important that you should be understood".

Now can we hold our own here ? I think so. I think we can prove that the desire to adopt us is one of expediency and policy, and that the reasons for holding aloof are those of principle. In the first place, as Theosophy holds that Christianity is only one expression, and a blurred one, of that truth which lies at the back of all religions (to which Theosophy points the way), it is quite impossible to identify Christianity with it. Christianity is but a fraction of the whole, and holds much the same place in religion as Europe does in the map of the world.

In the second place, the time is ripe for separating genuine believers from halting adherents. If some people are so broad in their views that they can tolerate Theosophy in their Church, the sooner the Church is made aware of the fact the better. These people believe that the Church is changing rapidly and will soon sink its dogmas. I do not believe it, I believe that the Church and its dogmas will stand, though the number of its supporters will decrease. It is the old question of reform within the Church. Had Sir Thomas More's ideal of uniformity been realised, the Church of Rome might have been very different: as it is she is the same now that she was in More's day. The reason that we are free today to follow the bent of our consciences in religious matters is because Reformers and our Nonconformist forefathers broke away from the Church for what may appear to us very small matters of conscience. Toleration is a shifting expression. In More's time it resulted usually in one having one's head cut off. In this nineteenth century it brings mental ease and comfort.

Let those who desire a church and dogma declare for it boldly, and let those who do not, enquire if there is nothing else that will satisfy their spiritual wants. It is the lack of anything else that keeps three-fourths of thoughtful people in the Church. They are quite right not to pull down until they can build up again — not to leave the company of those with whom they have so much sympathy of heart, if not of head, until they find communion of heart and head elsewhere.

Since writing this I came across an article of Prof. Momerie's in the April (1891) *Contemporary Review*, in which he very emphatically expresses the opinion that the Church is doomed. He is a good example of the type of Churchman I was thinking of, and I quote his words: "The Church of England is within a measurable distance of dissolution. In fifty or a hundred years' time, unless it undergoes a radical change, it will have practically [Page 10] ceased to exist. There may still be an institution of bishops, priests and deacons, but it will appeal exclusively to the intellectual dregs of the community, and could only therefore in bitterest irony be called a 'National Church'".

I do not know, and I should like to know, what ideal of a National Church Prof. Momerie and similar thinkers hold. Have they a desire for unity, or do they show a disposition to combine among themselves

for that purpose ? They are pulling down; what will they build up? A universal philosophy or a patched church, with the old orthodox Church of England as its bitterest enemy ? Anything that rouses people to think must be good. But the leaders of these free-thinking Churchmen are able men, and must have gone much farther in thought than they dare admit, and it is difficult to see why they go no further. Reform within the Church cannot be final, another generation, "fifty or a hundred years hence", will be questioning quite as anxiously as today the honesty of its position with regard to the Church of the period. People will not speak the whole truth and leave it to take care of itself. Even these reformers take a very paternal attitude towards truth; they want to wrap it up in cotton-wool, to keep it from the air. It is fair to say that I am now thinking especially of *English* Christians. Most other religious thought, German for instance, has long been on far more philosophical lines, has indeed been largely influenced by the thought of its avowedly non Christian philosophers. Take Schliermacher, whose writings would be tabooed by most English Christians and all Churchmen; he was looked upon as a little free in his views, but when he died Court and Church alike mourned his loss as a thinker and divine. Jean Paul's books are read in every family circle, and the nation holds him in loving veneration, and with justice.

*Levana.*

"He who seeks something higher in its own nature, not merely in degree, than what life can give or take away, that man has religion, though he believe in infinity, not in the infinite, only in Eternity without an Eternal. For he who regards all life as holy and wonderful, whether it dwells in animals, or, still lower, in plants: he who, like Spinoza, by means of his noble soul floats and rests less upon steps and heights than upon wings, whence the surrounding universe — the stationary and that moving by law — changes into one immense Light, Life and Being surround him, so that he feels absorbed in the great light and wishes to be nothing but a ray in the immeasurable splendour. Such a man has, and consequently imparts, religion.....At least two miracles or revelations remain for you uncontested in this age which deadens sound with un-reverberating materials: they resemble an Old and New Testament, and are these: the birth of finite being, and the birth of life within the hard world of 'matter'". [Page 11]

In the third place: while certain units among Churchmen declare their eagerness to keep Theosophists in their ranks, it is none the less true that they are but units who have the courage of their toleration, and their willingness would not receive support from Churchmen as a body, and they must know this. How would most clergy (to say nothing of their congregations) receive a proposal to lecture in their parish room on Reincarnation or Karma ? Would they welcome a definition of the place Theosophy assigns to Christ ?

But above all, there is a deep fundamental gulf between Christianity beyond the power of either side to bridge over — the gulf of personality.

Whittle it away as you will, the Christian belief is in a personal God. However spiritual, he believes in a Being, not in *Being*, a Being who loves and wills: a Spirit, not *Spirit*: he worships an Eternal, not Eternity. The attempt to gloss over this difference for the sake of a show of unanimity could not be right. I can see no failure in brotherly love consequent necessarily upon a definition of the points at issue. It is the Spirit of Love we desire to cultivate, and that Spirit can manifest itself among those who differ in doctrine as clearly as among those who are agreed.

By all means let us sink our differences when it is a question of practical work for others; and let us show the same tolerance as we claim for ourselves. Most of us have not long set out upon the path of Theosophy ourselves; we should do ill indeed to attack those who decline to follow us.

There is another reason for taking a distinct position; it is this: Theosophy by no means desires to attract Christians only. If it joined hands with Christianity it would have no force of appeal to people outside the pale of any creed, in whose ranks some of the noblest natures are to be found.

What of those men and women who, having no hope of personal immortality, yet spend their lives in the service of humanity with purity of motive and unselfishness that might put many a Theosophist to shame?

What of those who, having stood aloof from any definite belief, have yet felt within them a yearning for a spiritual life, and a reverence for the deep mysteries which every day discloses: who see an ordering of the universe for which they have found no explanation?

Has Theosophy nothing to say to them? It offers at least a lofty ideal, worthy of their consideration, and I venture to say that the discovery of this grand scheme of redemption without a Redeemer, or rather with man as his own redeemer, will be the giving of sight to many that are blind, and of a new lease of endeavour after good.

I used the word "discovery", because we must remember that though all this has been familiar to scholars and thinkers of every age, yet scholars [Page 12] and thinkers are comparatively few, nor are they as a rule popularizers of knowledge or of thought. Most of us are very ignorant, many have never even heard of Reincarnation and Karma as points in Eastern philosophy.

Theosophy has therefore come as a timely reminder of these forgotten truths, and we cannot too zealously endeavour to give to others the opportunity we have seized so eagerly for ourselves.

We have then considered the reasons why Theosophy encounters opposition from Christians; how far that opposition may be disarmed; and why, after all, Theosophy stands in such apparent opposition to Christianity.

But the real question we have not attempted to touch — why it is that. Christians hold views that lead them to attack Theosophy?

In short, the question is, really, why do not all people think alike?

Why if truth is one and indivisible, should its reflections be cast so differently?



If the hypothesis of Reincarnation cannot answer this, what other can?

For instance, as Theosophists believe the bent of our minds in this life is determined by the impulses we have brought with us from a former existence, and of the bent of our minds in the next life we are the arbiters now. We cannot, at this stage of our journey, look back and know what we have been, but we can judge of the present, and by the light of the present we may predict something of what the future will be.

Shall not we who have been drawn towards Theosophy in this life, be yet more strongly attracted in the next to whatever expression of this philosophy may have been established by that time? Shall we not pick up the lost threads more easily ?

Will those who oppose Theosophy now not be less likely to look favourably upon its representative of the future ? If the theory be true it must be so.

The time has not yet come for all, and we believe that therefore it is that the voice of Theosophy meets with little response in so many hearts. But with the larger hope that Reincarnation offers, we believe that the time must come, sooner or later, to every earnest seeker after truth, when he will no longer be satisfied with the fragment he has hitherto possessed, and when the philosophy of the East, with its answer to the problems of life and of death, will appeal to him as Truth.

We too have caught but a faint glimmer of that truth which is our lost heritage if we will but reclaim it; but as we know that dawn is to be looked for in the East, so we turn our eyes eastward, knowing that in that direction the Sun of Truth will surely rise.