

III

THE MEDLEY CALLED THEOSOPHY

THE word *Theosophy* is the English form of a late Greek word, 'Theosophia' (*theos*, god; *sophia*, wisdom). Originally and by derivation it meant only 'a knowledge of things divine' or 'wise in the things of God.' Later, however, it came to be applied especially to any system of religious teaching which claimed an *intimate*, *direct*, or *unusual* knowledge of God, i.e. in addition to, or even in place of, the ordinary experimental knowledge of daily life or the authorized teachings of revealed religion.

In this later meaning, the term generally implied a claim to a 'secret doctrine' and a system of 'esoteric rites' into which people—and usually only selected people—might be 'initiated.' For instance, many of the so-called 'Mystery Religions' of the Roman Empire had these secret doctrines and rites, derived, no doubt, from the ancient Eastern religions which the Greeks and Romans met in their conquests in Asia. These Eastern religions influenced even some forms of early Christianity—particularly the *Gnostics* who represented a kind of amalgam of Greek philosophy, Eastern theosophy, and Christian speculation. In the same way, many of the later Christian mystics were similarly influenced by the speculations and the secret doctrines of the East—so much so that a writer like Jacob Boehme (1575-1624) was popularly known as the 'Teutonic Theosoph,' because of his claims to special visions and revelations. Hence, in speaking of *modern* Theosophy,

Mrs. Annie Besant, our most noted English Theosophist, can claim quite rightly a very ancient lineage for her subject: 'In considering this body of truth we are not studying a system invented and published in modern days; we have to do with what has aptly been termed the Wisdom-Tradition, handed down in all civilized countries, ancient and modern, by a long succession of prophets, teachers, and writers.'

I

But Theosophy, as we know it to-day—as a religion, a science, and a philosophy—is of very recent origin. It dates from the year 1875 when the Theosophical Society was formed in New York by Madame Blavatsky. This woman, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, born in Russia in 1831, was a person of strange gifts, and had a very chequered history. From her early days she took a great, even an engrossing, interest in spiritualism, and frequently acted as a medium. Mrs. Besant described her as possessing 'extraordinary psychic endowments.'

She went to America in 1873, chiefly in the interests of spiritualism; and in 1875, along with a Colonel Henry Steele Olcott, she founded the Theosophical Society. In a letter to a friend in Russia, she gave it as the aim of this society 'to make an experimental comparison between spiritualism and the magic of the ancients by following literally the instructions of the old Cabbalas, both Jewish and Egyptian.'¹

She and Colonel Olcott, finding America rather

¹ Quoted in W. S. Urquhart's book, *Theosophy and Christian Thought*, p. 19, an excellent book which I commend

unsympathetic, went to India in 1878 ; and here she and her system blossomed out into a new life. On the one hand, she began to study the strange speculations of the varied Eastern religions, and incorporated many of their ancient beliefs into her own teaching, and on the other hand, she found a more sympathetic reception among the Indian people, to whom religious speculation seemed as natural as exact science does to us. She gathered a group of admirers and students around her, Indian and European, who believed her to possess remarkable occult gifts. She claimed to have contact with the Great White Brotherhood in Tibet, which she described as a 'Lodge of Masters or Adepts' who could give messages to specially fitted people. Her particular master among this Brotherhood was one whom she called *Koot Hoomi*, from whom she used to produce constant messages. The Society for Psychical Research became interested in these messages and conducted a fair investigation ; but they came to the conclusion that Madame Blavatsky's claim was an invention, and she herself a fraud. Dr. Urquhart writes,¹ 'It was found that the shrine (where the answers were supposed to be posted) had been made with sliding panels at the back, and there seems to be no doubt that the answers were introduced by means of a mechanical device of this kind.'

After this exposure she left Madras in 1885 where she had made her headquarters. She lived for six years afterwards. During this time she published her best known book *Secret Doctrine* in which she states the modern theosophical creed. Her work was later developed by a much more able and balanced writer, Mrs. Annie Besant (1847-1933) who by her amazing

¹ *Theosophy and Christian Thought*, p. 21

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industry and literary talent gave the Theosophical Society a new standing and reputation.

Before I deal with the teachings of modern Theosophy there are three things which ought to be considered :

(i) What grounds are there for believing that Madame Blavatsky had any sources of special knowledge? Theosophy founds itself on a secret system of truth, supposed to have been given to special people, particularly to Madame Blavatsky, by the Great White Brotherhood, a group of Masters or Adepts, presumed to be living in some unrevealed place in Tibet. Mrs. Besant writes :¹ ' She gave up social rank, wealth, and family to seek the Master in Tibet, and spent some years with him at Shigatze, after which, returning to the world, she gave the rest of her life to carrying out his directions.' There is no proof of this claim that she spent years in Tibet, especially before she founded the Society. Unfortunately her word has been so discredited that even Mrs. Besant had to apologise indirectly for her as ' that much-maligned woman.' Thus her claim of being a student under this ' College of Masters ' must be questioned.

(ii) What grounds, in history, reason, or experience, are there for believing in this Great White Brotherhood or College of Adepts which seems to be able to discover unprovable things and reveal them at will to particular people like Madame Blavatsky? No information is ever given by Theosophists about this mystic college of experts, so conveniently hidden in the unapproachable mountains of Tibet. Madame Blavatsky alleges that this Brotherhood of Adepts has existed from immemorial times and still exercises power

¹ *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics*

on the education and evolution of our race by revealing 'cosmic secrets' about the origin of the world and the future of human destiny. She claimed that her own special 'Master' revealed important answers to herself; but alas! her fraud in this particular has been rudely exposed by the investigations of the interested but impartial Society for Psychical Research. Is there any reason for believing therefore that such a College of Adepts ever did or could exist, beyond Madame Blavatsky's vague assertions? I am afraid that most wise people must regard this 'basal claim' of Theosophy as entirely mythical, until some grounds for belief are provided for us. If the basal claim on which the revelation depends is denied, what is left?

(iii) The revelations given through the Great White Brotherhood are asserted to have 'universal importance,' and to be based on 'universal thinking.' But what are the facts? (a) All its main doctrines are taken *only* from eastern mystical religions. (b) From the *Upanisads*, or Hindu philosophy, Theosophy takes the bleak doctrine of a 'fundamental unknowable' in lieu of the Christian message of a revealed God and Father. (c) It teaches the Buddhist idea that all true spiritual growth consists in a gradual 'detachment' from the things of interest and concern in this present life. (d) It also appropriates from Buddhism the cruel doctrine of *Karma* and continual *reincarnation*. (e) Its various occult methods for attaining 'liberation' and saintship are entirely eastern in origin. Thus it has no claim to be *universal* at all, but only locally and inherently *Eastern*.

All this apart, what are the claims of modern Theosophy.

To be 'theosophical' in a true sense, any knowledge of God, His world and His ways, must be of a special kind—direct, immediate, mystical, intuitional. There is really no room in this system for what we call 'revealed religion,' where all men receive alike a body of truth and a code of conduct committed to them as the mind and will of God, equally open to all and equally binding on all—the God and Father of mankind giving light and full guidance to all alike.

Straightaway then, Theosophy strikes right across the foundations of our Christian faith. It believes, being a kind of sublimated pantheism, that God can only be known in and through His various 'emanations' or manifestations; and further, that gifted and specially qualified souls, 'Masters'—and they alone—can discover, 'by their own unaided efforts,' all that is humanly possible for us to know about God. In Mrs. Besant's own words, 'No man is truly a Theosophist who has not direct knowledge of God; but he may win this through any religion or by his own unaided efforts.'¹

In view of certain large and apparently generous claims made by Theosophy, I think it is needful to see how really opposite Theosophy and Christianity are in their basal positions. Christianity believes that the revelation of God's mind and will has been fully given to the whole world, once for all, in Jesus Christ, and that it is equally open to all by faith and a receptive mind, whether they be learned or simple, rich or poor,

¹ Her own article in the *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics*

East or West. Theosophy, on the other hand, believes that the truth about God, the world, and human souls can only be attained by special select people, and that they can attain it 'by their own unaided efforts.' Essentially, therefore, Theosophy is what we call an 'esoteric' system—inner, secret, mysterious—only to be attained by a select few.

Now since one of the main claims of Theosophy is that it is a *perfect amalgam of all the best religions*—and of the best in all the best religions—I think we should consider at the outset whether such a claim is either possible or feasible. This claim seems at first glance to be fair, generous, and catholic. How ideal it would be to have an 'amalgam' of all the best in the best religions !

Let us examine the facts. Quite evidently, Theosophy is founded on the unprovable speculation of the East—especially of India—regarding the being of God, the formation of the world, and the origin of man. Into this background it professes to incorporate all the essential truths of Christianity. To the mixture it claims to add the best of modern science and philosophy. As we can see, therefore, on its own profession, it is a charming amalgam, accepting truth and rejecting error, the world's greatest religious eclecticism.

But the real point is twofold. (i) Is the claim true ? Quite definitely, in regard to modern science, it is not. The Eastern speculation of reincarnation—i.e. souls after death being reborn into another human life—is totally against the proved findings of the science of heredity, where offspring are known to inherit not only their physical life but also their powers and capabilities from their parents and ancestry. Thus Theosophy pays

no attention to the accredited results of the science of biology. As modern progress on all questions of breeding has depended so much upon our recognition and our use of the facts of heredity and biology, we may safely say that Theosophy, which is committed to the speculation of reincarnation, cannot possibly claim to have any relation to Modern Science.

In the attempt to align the fanciful speculations of reincarnation with the assured results of modern biology and heredity, the Theosophists resort to ever more and more unsupported assertions. The following is taken from the official article in *Chambers's Encyclopædia*: 'The innate character which the child brings into the world is this result of its own past, and is physically expressed in the brain and nervous organization. The reincarnating ego is drawn by affinity to the nation and family fitted to supply the most suitable physical material and psychical environment. The physical particles thence supplied are stamped with the racial and family characteristics, bodily and mental, but their arrangement is dominated by the thought-body resulting as above stated. Thus mental and moral capacities gained by struggle in one or many incarnations become innate qualities, exercised "naturally," without effort, in a later incarnation, and thus progress is secured.' For quite unfounded supposition this equals any fantastic dream. '*The reincarnating ego is drawn by affinity to the nation and family fitted to supply the most suitable physical material and psychical environment.*' What does this mean, beyond mere words? In what possible sense can such a notion claim to be scientific? It is merely an untenable supposition to support an even more untenable theory. In other words, it is an attempted explanation of a *pre-scientific Eastern specula-*

tion ; and in this it shows a total disregard of all the known laws of biology and heredity.

(ii) Is such a *religious* amalgam possible? On the face of it, it sounds very reasonable to say, ' I shall take this and that Christian ethical truth, and I shall incorporate them into this and that Buddhistic setting.' This is apparently quite broad and catholic. But we must not miss the greatest point of all, viz. that the Christian ethic depends for its validity on our acceptance of the Christian position ! The same is true of any system of truth—Buddhistic, Mohammedan, scientific or philosophical. Their conclusions naturally depend on their premisses. The roof stands on the foundations and the walls, and if we take away the foundations we cannot hope to preserve the house. For instance, the Christian call for some final sacrifice, such as Christ's, depends entirely on Christ's doctrine of God's Fatherhood and man's eternal worth. If we reject the doctrine, there is no ground for demanding the sacrifice. The point is obvious surely—we cannot ' select ' the Christian ethic apart from the creed which alone gives that ethic its appeal and validity.

This suggested amalgam can be seen for what it is worth if we take one further testing example. Theosophy says, ' Let us *combine* the teaching of Christianity and Buddhism.' Is this possible? The answer is that these two religions do not think about anything—God, or man, or sin, or human destiny—in any similar or allied way. For instance, the Christian ideal of our future life is the promised survival of a real and definite personality or individuality, which, through all possible changes, remains the same self-conscious entity. Thus our future blessedness, in the Christian view, is the *perfected self*. But the Buddhistic view of a soul's destiny

is that, at the last, it should be finally submerged, comprehended and lost in the Great Infinite ; for Nirvana, the last Blessed Estate, means essentially *deliverance from the problems of the personal soul*—absorption into the Divine, total annihilation of our personal being.

Of course the steps towards this perfect blessedness of extinction may be slow and gradual. The individual loses one feeling or desire or longing after another, step by step, incarnation after incarnation, until complete apathy is gained, and he reaches a state ' where there are neither ideas, nor the idea of the absence of ideas.' This is the blessedness of Buddhism—*complete deliverance from the tragedy of being a self.*

How can we possibly take the *best* out of these two views, and *dovetail* them together? Quite evidently they are complete contraries ; the one kills the other. If we accept the one, we must reject the other. This is exactly what Theosophy does. It takes the Eastern view in its entirety, and rejects the Christian in its entirety. Truly an unusual method of amalgamation !

Further, let us test this suggested amalgamation on another foundational point—the Buddhist and the Christian view of the *being of God*. We know the Christian view—God the Creator, the Father, the Lover and the Saviour of mankind, who seeks the redeemed fellowship and communion of all souls. We live in God's world, and we are made by Him in His own image, and for fellowship with Him at the last. God is in His world and maintains His world ; but He is above and greater than His own world. Now let us place beside this the Buddhist idea of God. I quote from the excellent article on ' Buddhism ' in *Chambers's Encyclopædia*, ' The idea of a God, as creating or in

any way ruling the world, is utterly absent in the Buddhist system. God is not so much as denied ; he is simply not known. Contrary to the opinion once confidently and generally held, that a nation of atheists never existed, the Buddhistic peoples are essentially atheist ; for they know no beings with greater supernatural power than any man is supposed capable of attaining to by virtue, austerity, and science.' How, I ask, can anyone possibly *dovetail* these two conceptions together, and make a charming amalgam ? They are poles apart. If we accept one, we necessarily reject the other. In spite of its eclectic claim, this is precisely what Theosophy does ! It clings as usual to the doctrine of the East—speaking of God always as ' It ' and not ' He '—and rejects Christianity. Again an ideal amalgamation !

3

Since I have mentioned some of Theosophy's remarkable claims of catholicity, let me discuss one or two more in the by-going.

(i) Mrs. Besant says that while being a Theosophist, you may, and indeed should, remain true to your own religion. At first sight this seems exceedingly broad-minded and generous. But how this is at all possible, after what I have said, I fail to see, even with the best will. Mrs. Besant justifies her statement by asserting that people should not be ' biased ' about their own faith—or be too convinced—or be too dogmatic—or even be too enthusiastic. In our vulgar phrase, does not this let the cat out of the bag ? I can see how a man may join the mystic circle of the Theosophists, if he is *not* a convinced Christian, or a convinced Mohammedan, or a convinced Buddhist, or a convinced

anything. But surely the whole point of being a Christian or a Mohammedan at all is that a man should be convinced. Anything else is worthless and futile. The reputed 'catholicity' of Theosophy, of which we hear so much, is only possible under conditions which make any religion a *nominal thing*, with no binding allegiance and no saving passion. Its appeal is due to that very specious liberality of mind which seems to imagine that one religion is as good as another ! We might as well say that one form of thinking or one form of morals is as good as another. I admit that slack people, who sit lightly to their own faith, can always unite. But as Christians, the more we believe in Jesus Christ and give Him the direction of our lives, the less can we 'combine' with any other system which contradicts His teaching or dilutes His message. Incidentally, the same is true of every good Mohammedan and every good Buddhist—and even every good Theosophist !

(ii) Mrs. Besant actually claims that by being a Theosophist we thereby become even better Christians. This depends entirely on what we mean by 'better.' If by better we mean slacker and less convinced, I shall agree. But what gain is there in a breadth which only means a sacrifice of depth and reality ?

(iii) There is another claim of Theosophy which holds a subtle attraction for certain types of people. 'No man,' says Mrs. Besant, 'is truly a Theosophist who has not direct knowledge of God.' This emphasis on 'direct knowledge' hints that Theosophy must always remain the creed of the 'favoured few' ; indeed it openly claims that its full acceptance can only lie with the favoured few. It can never be in any true sense an evangelism or a propaganda, for to offer its high doctrines to the common people would be like

casting pearls before swine. Its 'secret doctrine'—which, as I have already said, was the title of Madame Blavatsky's best known book—is only open to the initiated, i.e. to those who are mentally and spiritually fitted to receive and understand it. This is obviously a cast-back to the old discredited 'Mystery Religions' of the Roman Empire which, with their secret rites and often their vices, were cleared out of Europe and Asia by the full and open ethical message of the Christian gospel.

I admit that there are people of a genuine mystical turn of mind to whom Theosophy may seem to offer a direct speculative approach to God. But there are also many others who, to use the American phrase, are 'tickled to death' just to imagine that they possess a source of magical knowledge not open to others, and who love to think that they belong to a society that thinks itself intellectually exclusive.

4

The subjects with which Theosophy concerns itself are so large, and its language is so vague, so speculative and so occult, that at best I can give only a brief summary of its main teaching on certain crucial points, on which it must be judged.

(i) Let us consider its view of God.

Theosophy believes strictly in the *Unity* of God. But this is a unity that afterwards distributes itself in countless 'emanations' or manifestations of itself. Behind all things originally is this 'impersonal' God, described merely as *The One Existence, the Super Life, The Great Only, the Super-Consciousness*—high-sounding words, but to most people who value ideas, mainly

words. God is in and through everything ; and everything is an ' emanated part ' of Him. He is ' everything that is ' ; and of course, ' everything that is ' is a part of Him. This is a modern form of discredited pantheism.

Madame Blavatsky speaks of God as follows : ' We reject the notion of a personal, or an extra-cosmic and anthropomorphic God. The God of theology is a mass of contradictions. We will have nothing to do with him.' Again she adds, ' It does not think, nor does it exist, as it is *Be-ness*, not a *Being*.'¹ If the God of theology is a mass of contradictions, this is much worse ; for it is a mass of intellectual absurdities. If God does not *think* and does not *exist*, how can there be any *mind* or *existence* in any of His ' emanations,' most of all in us and in Madame Blavatsky ? The only possible source of ' mind ' in us or in the world is ' mind ' in our creator.

After the same vague and inconsequent fashion, Mrs. Besant writes : ' He is vaster than Space, and in Him move the uncounted myriads of stars, each one the centre of a system. He is minuter than an atom, for He is within every atom as its indwelling life.'² We admit that this expresses one side of a great truth—that God is in His own world, and not austere aloof from it, and that we, and indeed everything, live and move and have our being in Him. But it is one thing to believe this, and another to identify God merely with the things that exist, or to say that He is *Be-ness* and not a *Being*. It may be difficult for us to think of a personal God as ' infinite,' but it simply defeats our reason to indentify Him with the sum of the things that are finite.

¹ *Key to Theosophy*, p. 66

² *The Universal Text-book of Religion and Morals*, Part I, p. 10

This is plain pantheism, at its best and its worst—at its best, because it seeks to find a unity in the world : at its worst, because it is content with a false unity. In Theosophy there is no personal God, as we Christians speak of Him. He is in His world, and cannot be separated from it, and cannot be known apart from it. He cannot be said to ‘exist’ at all, apart from His universe, which is itself only an ‘emanated part’ of Him. It is difficult to grasp whether a Theosophist thinks of God as ‘He’ or ‘It.’ Madame Blavatsky says that God is not so much a *Being* as *Be-ness*—whatever conceivable idea can be attributed to a *Be-ness* that is not a *Being* ! God is just the One Great Existence, the Everything that is. This type of ‘unity’ is simply meaningless to our minds.

As I have been forced to point out elsewhere in this book, it seems queer to me that while denying that God is in any sense a Personal Spirit, greater than His own created world, who lives in and yet transcends His own world, the Theosophists should none the less so constantly attribute to Him such qualities as love, justice, and truth which, so far as we are concerned, can only be known to us as ‘personal’ qualities, i.e. the relations which only thinking beings can have to each other. If *Be-ness* is not a *Being*, we cannot by any possible logic give to it any of the qualities which belong solely to a personal *Being*.

(ii) According to Theosophy, Jesus Christ is in no sense a special and perfect revelation of God’s mind and will to all mankind. At the best He is a *Great Master*, equal no doubt to Buddha, Brahma, Confucius, or the mysterious Masters and Adepts of the Great White Brotherhood, who live somewhere deep in Tibet. He is only one of God’s many ‘Masters.’

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The Theosophist account of the 'history' of Jesus is quite remarkable. According to Mrs. Besant, He was born in Palestine in the year 105 B.C.¹ He was educated and trained among a community of the Essenes in the deserts, and entered some kind of monastery where he met 'learned visitors' from India and Egypt with whom He discussed all sorts of secret doctrines. He Himself was initiated into the mysteries of Egypt and the East, and was thus prepared to become a 'fitting earthly vessel' for one of the Great Sons of God. He only received the 'Christ-part' of His nature at his Baptism; and after the Crucifixion, the Christ-part left the body of Jesus. But He returned in a 'subtle spiritual body'; and for fifty years He remained among His disciples, 'teaching the mysteries.' I only narrate this fantasy to show how the Theosophists can treat history, and what reliance can be placed upon their reputed 'direct knowledge.' If this was a 'revelation' from the Great White Brotherhood through Mrs. Besant, it will help us to evaluate their other revelations at their true worth.

The Christian message of Jesus as the Redeemer and Saviour of sinful mankind has no meaning whatever for Theosophy. To begin with, by their 'law of Karma'—which we shall discuss later—Theosophists believe that there is no place for *repentance* in our human lives, and no possibility of *forgiveness* or *remission of sins*. As a man lives, so must he receive exact penalty; and this penalty is worked out, not only in this life but also in the trailing penalty he drags with him into some other of his many reincarnations. In this sense, Theosophy is a kind of final despair. There is no hope of forgiveness or of a new redeemed life here for any

¹ W. S. Urquhart, *Theosophy and Christian Thought*, p. 195

sinful man. He must 'dree his own weird' for his evil and his sin throughout hopeless centuries of re-incarnation, until—millions of years hence—he may at last be set free from the burden of self-living. That very picture of the 'burden of selfhood' is a kind of final pessimism.

How hopeless human life is without any uplifting doctrine of the love and redeeming Grace of God, with His healing and pardon, is emphasized in this quotation: 'The Theosophists themselves tell us that the progress of the soul in this endless chain is almost inappreciable through many lives: they teach us that only those capable of going through special initiations and a training in self-conquest of the severest character can make any decided progress. The whole conception of it leaves us weary and hopeless in the extreme.'¹

Moreover, in spite of Christ's full teaching to the simplest of people—for example, His revelation to the ignorant woman at the Well of Sychar—Theosophists, in order to justify their own pretensions, claim that He too had a 'secret doctrine,' only revealed to special adepts. It is true, no doubt, that deeper and richer Christian knowledge will always be given to those who tune themselves fully into Christ's spirit. But we do deny—the New Testament being our witness—that Jesus did not fully give His perfect revelation of God's Kingdom to *any and every accepting soul*. In other words, the Jesus to whom Theosophists refer is not the Jesus of the historical New Testament. He had indeed an 'inner circle' of disciples or students, but only in order that these learners should be fitted and qualified to go out to declare the *whole counsel of God* to all men, equally, everywhere.

¹ M. Carta Sturge, *Theosophy and Christianity*, p. 84

I need not speak much about the Theosophical idea of the evolving universe, because it is mainly here that their speculation runs riot and disports itself in the outdated pre-scientific notions of planes, circles, stages, and steps, about which there can be no possible confirmation one way or another. The universe of created things—though to the Theosophist there is, strictly speaking, no ‘creation’ as such—came into being by ‘emanations’ of this Great Be-ness or One Existence. How this Be-ness *willed* to do this, when it had no Will, is not explained. When we consider Theosophy’s account of how this world came into existence, we enter upon a series of amazing speculations, an elaborate series of descents or planes, in which ‘the coarsest of the spirit-matter in the upper plane becomes the finest in the plane beneath.’ And so on and on—and down and down—through successive planes and manifestations until at last we reach this world and the life we now know on earth. How all these successive planes and circles of creation were first made known to the Great White Brotherhood, who are only ‘creatures’ like ourselves, we are not told.

So far as I can grasp the vague terms—pseudo-scientific and pseudo-philosophical—in which Theosophists speak of the evolution of the world, it seems to be something like this. There comes or emanates from the Great One Existence something called a Logos. This Logos—‘by imposing on Himself a limit,’ according to Mrs. Besant—becomes the Manifested God. Then comes the self-unfolding of this Logos into a three-fold form : (i) The Root of All Being, The Will ; (ii) The Father-Mother of all the Worlds, Wisdom ;

(iii) The Universal Active or Creative Mind, the Fount of fashioning energies. And so on and on, plane after plane of manifestation, until we reach the world and the life now familiar to us.

To our minds, any theory of creation must always be a problem ; but this Theosophic account is simply crowded with problems. (i) It is at best a string of conjectures—unsupported and even needless conjectures—quite alien from any of our scientific knowledge of the processes of evolution from the simple to the complex, or the gaseous to the solid. (ii) To one who asks for any definiteness of thinking, it seems mainly a reel of high-sounding meaningless words, a barrage of language. (iii) This theory of evolving planes of descent cannot possibly explain anything apart from *the will and power of a creating spirit*. (iv) How can this elaborate hypothesis of steps and stairs be verifiable to anybody's mind, apart from the airy supposition that it was revealed to Madame Blavatsky by a College of Adepts hidden deep in Tibet. These people, if they existed, being men like ourselves, could not possibly know anything more than we now do 'by their own unaided efforts.' (v) Most of all, this account throws overboard all the established findings of science. Theosophy claims to be scientific. If so, then its scientific tests and facts have no conceivable relation to anything that we know about exact science ! Is it not better—far better—in a great faith to admit our ignorance of God's resources and powers and rely upon His creative Will and designing Love, than to attempt to delude ourselves behind what is only a smoke-screen of wild conjectures and whirling words ? Emanations can explain nothing without the character and purpose of a designing God.

If we are amazed at these conjectures regarding God and the World, when we come to consider the nature of man, we are dazzled. God emanates to us in a series of *descents*, but man evolves upwards in an equally mysterious number of *ascents*. It appears that we have seven kinds of body. (Seven, by the way, is a magic number with Theosophy; everything seems to evolve in sevens—which in itself seems childish or artificial.)¹ Our salvation consists in working up through these seven bodies to the highest. But even then, after death, we are returned, by a series of infinite reincarnation, to begin the weary process again.

Human nature, we know, is complex. I wonder, however, if it can be just as complex as the following: First, we have a *Physical Body* which, of course, we all admit. Of this there is a mysterious *Etheric Double*, which is said to be 'the seat of the life-force' and the source of 'vitality.' These points should be noticed here: (a) In Theosophy these various 'bodies' which we are alleged to possess are all given fanciful *Indian* names, such as *Jiva*, *Manas*, *Atma*, and what not; but as such, they are mere words to those who are not Indian, and sound a little like mumbo-jumbo; and in effect they show that Theosophy is entirely Eastern in origin. (b) What does an *Etheric Double* mean? It is evidently taken from the theory that there is such a thing as 'ether' filling all space—an assumption that has been discarded by science. (c) What is this

¹ As instances of the 'magic seven,' Theosophy says that there are seven planetary chains, each with seven globes. There are 'seven kingdoms of Nature, and in our own globe there are seven interpenetrating worlds. On each planet there are seven Root Races, and each has seven sub-races. All this must be either magic or nonsense.

'vitality-body' which can possibly be spoken of *separate* from the physical body? It is quite accurate to speak of the 'vital force' in us, or in any living thing, which alone gives the physical body its living unity: but the one cannot exist without the other. But to call our 'principle of life' an *Etheric Double* is just so much nonsense.

Then we have an *Astral Body*. Here the Theosophists really let themselves go. They can tell us its shape—it is oval, egg-shaped, and protrudes about a foot beyond our physical body! They can even tell us its *colour*. Its colour changes with our feelings. Love makes it rose-coloured, religion blue, intellect yellow, spiritual aspiration violet. Commenting on this, someone has remarked that if a man in the course of the day were to change his feelings often, he might well become the nearest approach to a chameleon that we can imagine!

Beyond this, there is a *Mental Body*, which is the seat of thought. Then there are bodies which belong to our timeless existence—a *Causal Body*, a *Super-Spiritual Body*, and so on. But why go on? This is only playing fancifully with modern psychology, and giving useless and materializing names to what are only subtle parts of our undivided personality. Psychology may pursue many interesting experiments in the obscure quarters of our queer personality; but its greatest gain so far has been to show us that in spite of everything we are more than ever a *unity*, not a collection of different 'bodies' but a self-acting unity. Here, once more, Theosophy is convicted of gratuitous speculation—some of it absurd, and all of it Eastern. Certainly its talk of science can be set aside. Or at least, it is a different kind of science from anything we know! The best we can say of the claims of Theosophy is that so few of its

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statements can be either *proved* or *disproved*, because they are merely speculative guesses beyond the reach of all testing or examination.

Paul Oltramare sums up this specious psychology of the human soul thus : ‘ In short, with an almost total disregard of the law of parsimony and of the rule against the multiplication of entities, we may explain many of the mysteries of our present life, and many of the hitherto unexplained problems of Nature by simply transferring the difficulty to a higher plane, and ‘ discovering ’ beings personally responsible for what previously appeared to be a mysterious occurrence.’ ¹

7

Finally, this short account would be incomplete without some reference to Theosophy’s wholesale adoption of the Eastern background of *reincarnation*, a theory to which Theosophists are definitely committed, as they claim that it alone throws any light upon the shadowed side of the ‘ tragedy ’ we call life.

Theosophy asserts that after the soul in death has worked its way up through its numerous planes and circles, it is sent back—we do not know how or by whom or why—to begin the weary round again. Its new state in every fresh reincarnation is strictly dependent on its previous life. Its ills and sorrows, its disease or happiness, its powers and capacities, its shame or its glory are the inescapable outcome of that previous existence, the natural penalty of the past by the austere laws of Karma which act inevitably.

For unsubstantiated speculation this doctrine of reincarnation tops everything—not only unsub-

¹ *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics*

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stantiated, but actually contradicted by the proved results of the sciences of biology and heredity. In a specious way, the incarnation theory seems to give certain types of mind a satisfactory explanation of some dark facts in our difficult life. To say that a man's position or power, talent or quality, character or gifts, disease or good fortune are only the natural and inevitable outcome of his personal behaviour in some previous form of existence, seems unassailably satisfactory and comforting. If a man believes this, he can have no grievance against God and no kick against life. There is no apparent 'inequality' in Providence to explain away; our condition of good or evil is only and entirely due to our own past merit or demerit—and there's an end of it.

The belief in reincarnation goes back to the most archaic elements of human speculation. It is a relic of the child-age of man's thinking. To begin with, it is closely linked with the earliest forms of animistic religions where men believed that everything—rivers, trees, hills, animals, and men—had each a separate spirit which could leave its own body and visit other people, either to comfort, tease, or plague them. As a result of this, most early peoples believed in some form of 'transmigration' of one spirit into the preserves of another; and the naïve folk-lore of the world is full of amusing or tragic stories of how a soul could migrate and inhabit another life. Men could be changed into swine, and the spirit of a wolf or a cat could possess a human life. Devil-possession and such kindred ideas are only forms of this universal child-thinking of the past.

No doubt, this naïve belief helped to explain to our forefathers some of the apparent abnormalities of

human life. When a man behaved like a pig, it seemed such a satisfactory explanation to say that the spirit of a pig had migrated into his life ! All this represented man trying to think and reason ; and if to-day we smile at the naïve explanation he gave, we honour the groping mind that felt it *had* to find some working theory.

This belief in ' transmigration of souls ' lingered on even when men grew secretly ashamed of the belief. It lingered in literature especially, where the poet or the dramatist used it with artistic power. But most of all, it lingered in the folk-lore of the people and in the magic tales so often told to children, who have always had that divine gift of making the incredible seem so natural. What stories were told of ogres, giants, magicians, and witches who (if you were not good) could switch your spirit in exchange for Mr. Bruin's or Mr. Reynard's !

Especially in the locked-up East, where not even the backwash of passing science had lapped the shores, this belief in transmigration and reincarnation remained unshaken, as it still does in their popular religions. Here the theory, at least in modern days, is confined to the *souls of men* ; and there is no belief that the spirits of animals and men are interchangeable. But undoubtedly this belief in the reincarnation of spirits still holds strongly in Eastern religions like Buddhism : and it is from these Eastern pre-scientific sources that modern Theosophy has appropriated its doctrines—a remnant, I maintain, of the most archaic and naïve elements of pre-scientific speculation ! ' We cannot say why one belief rather than another has been adopted in any specific instance ; but it is clear that the resemblance of children to parents or other relatives has played some part. The complex of beliefs is therefore

to some extent a semi-scientific creed, taking the place of a biological account of heredity and based on reasoning that we can follow.'¹

Theosophists are now committed to this ancient and outdated belief. They assert that the human spirit, after death, is sent back to live again on earth in a new life—in any land, any nation, any age, or any clime. They believe that this alone explains the apparently chance allotment of illness, sorrow or weakness which afflicts so many lives. For by the Law of Karma our new life is only the accumulated outcome of our personal conduct in some former life—the fruit of our own past goodness or evil. *We are only receiving our natural deserts: and so there is no possible ground for complaint or repining against the inequalities of Providence.*

Apart from the sheer speculation of the theory, and the plain contradiction of the findings of genetic science, is the theory as *just* and *satisfactory* as it seems? We admit that many of the intolerable limitations with which some people are born into this world, may seem inequitable, cruel, and unjust on any theory. But the point is—*are they less unjust or less cruel or less inequitable on the theory of reincarnation?* If reincarnation is true, does it seem less unjust for me to suffer for sins and faults committed in a past life of *which I have not the slightest memory, and with which I have no intelligent connection?* How is it just for me to be punished now for sins which I don't *know* I ever committed? Reincarnation may seem to lay a few difficulties, but it actually raises a hundred more.

Further, there is a subtle point which this theory always dodges! It says that our present inequalities in this life are only the natural outcome of former

¹ N. W. Thomas, *Transmigration*

inequalities in some past incarnation. But only go far enough back and ask *why* there should have been these inequalities in the past, and what caused them or justified them then? The truth is that here as elsewhere, Theosophy doesn't face up to any of the ugly facts, but only pushes them into the dim past. If I suffer to-day because I was a slave ten million years ago, the one question that Theosophy doesn't face—and the one question that must concern me—is *why was I a slave ten million years ago?* It is just as unfair and inequitable that I was once a slave as that I should now suffer for it helplessly and unavailingly to-day. You don't abolish a rock just by throwing a few inches of soil over it, or by shoving it into a dark cellar.

In any case, every theory, if it remains a mere theory, must be judged by its total effect on the things of final value in human thought and endeavour. On the one hand, there can be little doubt that the ideas of reincarnation lessen a man's notion of his own personal responsibility for what he makes of his life, his opportunities, and his character. If he is just what some dim unknown past has made him, both in his circumstances and his qualities, he tends to deny his own responsibility, and lays the blame anywhere else than on his own endeavours. And on the other hand, as has been proved in most Eastern nations, this theory has been the brooding mother of all kinds of ignoble fatalism and effortless resignation, which have robbed men and women of any saving dream or a passionate desire for material and spiritual betterment.

Further, I very seriously question the ethical quality and worth of the motive, so highly extolled by the Theosophists, with which a doctrine of reincarnation seems to provide me for living a good and unselfish life.

I am asked to live nobly and serve others unselfishly— (and I should like here to do honour to the fine programme of social service which Theosophy advocates) —but from what motive and inspiration am I asked to do this? Simply and solely that by my present good living and good works I may make it easier for myself in a subsequent existence, and may thereby work myself out eventually from the wheel of future reincarnations in this weary world, and may lose my personal soul in the Divine, and be thus freed from the burden of my own selfhood. I cannot help agreeing with one acute critic who labels this ‘camouflaged selfishness.’ In the Christian ethic, the motive for the good and generous life is strangely different from this—because good is good, and is worthy in itself apart from any reward—because loving and serving God, no matter how life treats us, is its own satisfaction—not because by doing good and being kind we shall eventually free ourselves from the painful round of endless incarnations.

8

I am not blind to the appeal which Theosophy may make to certain kinds of people. (i) It offers a seeming spiritualized unity, however vague and visionary, to their idea of the universe. (ii) It emphasizes the evolutionary processes of the world and mankind, now openly acknowledged by all except obscurantists. (iii) It gives a certain kind of explanation to the mysteries of our human lot and hap, on the shadowed side of experience. (iv) It does offer a certain sort of future ‘liberation to the soul,’ though that liberation may be prolonged for untold millions of years. (v) It does attempt to answer a few of the questions which many

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of us are generally content to leave unsolved. (vi) It suggests one valuable thing—that there may be real and genuine ‘knowledge’ beyond mere reasoning and the measuring tape of the practical scientist, and that ‘experience of the Divine’ may be as real as experience of anything else. (vii) It stresses the constant desire for our own ‘perfecting’ by the good life we lead, and preaches unselfishness and good works as the highest doctrine. (viii) It professes to escape from all dogmatic narrowness, and the common bias of one faith against another, and it also professes to welcome the good points of any creed into its own widespread net. (ix) It is the frank enemy of all materialistic and mechanistic theories, tracing everything back to spirit, and trying to reconcile the apparent dualism of mind and matter. (x) By its emphasis on the value of ‘active thought,’ it tries to justify the place and function of all true prayer in the world: for by its belief in the hierarchy of spiritual powers, it believes that prayer is only a natural tapping of the resources of the universe. (xi) It makes all living deeply responsible, urging that even ‘the things we think’ have an eternal effect for good or ill, and may either help or hinder human development. (xii) It pictures definite progress here, and progress in the after life.

I give this short summary of my grounds of criticism.

(i) Theosophy offers us no God that can be thought of as in any sense personal, knowable, friendly, or worthy of worship. Its theory of ‘emanations’ is not only speculatively improbable, but also derogatory of God’s character, power, or purpose in His universe. There are fewer real difficulties in calling Him *Father* than in calling Him *Super-consciousness*. The one at least is an idea: the other is only a word.

(ii) Its view of the world and 'creation' is imagination run riot. One thing we may surely say—there certainly can be none of the boasted 'direct knowledge' behind these fanciful conjectures. Not even the mythical college of The Great White Brotherhood of Tibet could have come to know these things 'by direct knowledge' or by 'their own unaided efforts,' nor, if they knew them, would they have condescended to reveal them by the sleight-of-hand tricks of which Madame Blavatsky was convicted.

(iii) Its theory of our human nature is psychologically fanciful beyond words—and certainly beyond proof or even belief.

(iv) By its wedding with the ideas of reincarnation, Theosophy commits itself entirely to the fantastic, and parts company with any shadow of science. Worst of all, this theory, in spite of its easy claims, offers no explanation of the shadowed side of life that is in any way satisfactory, but only deepens the tragedy by pushing it into the mists. By taking refuge so plainly in the occult, Theosophy shows that it neither desires nor welcomes proof. It is thus a dangerous mixture of magic and superstition.

(v) It offers us—who above everything are self-conscious personalities—no reasonable destiny that can be compared for a moment with the Christian hope. In Christ we look for 'personal perfection' with God, with whom, though we shall be changed and progressively changing, we shall yet remain consciously 'ourselves.' In Theosophy, as in the Eastern religions of which it is a Westernized product, our bliss lies in liberation *from* ourselves, and in a self-destroying re-absorption into the 'One Existence.'

(vi) Theosophy talks much of its great doctrine of

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Universal Brotherhood. I confess I am annoyed at the proprietary fashion in which it sometimes speaks of this as if it were its native and peculiar discovery. Actually its doctrine of Brotherhood, with other fine ethical truths which it expounds, is an unacknowledged appropriation from Christianity. Here, as elsewhere, Christianity gives the finer dream and the purer motive. I can conceive of no brotherhood of man so universal, so pure, or so binding as the brotherhood which we have in Jesus, in whom we are all equally the children of God's love.

(vii) Its theory of select souls, secret doctrines, esoteric rites is offensive to all who honour their less gifted fellowmen. We believe that there are undoubtedly degrees of 'illumination' according to our special gifts and our honest application. By his rare and constant study, one man may certainly gain a distinctive insight not granted to the indifferent or the slothful. But it is another thing, and indeed a vicious thing, to say that *only the select few* can ever know the things of final value. We believe that for all good purposes these final things about life and worth have been made free in Christ's revelation for the whole world of mankind.

(viii) In conclusion, I should like to say that we find nothing worthy or inspiring in Theosophy which we do not find purer and fuller in Jesus, our Lord. In Him we have a truly reasonable view of the world and the mystery of our own souls. We have—what is most signally lacking in Theosophy—a true view of 'sin' and redemption from the power of evil. We have a gracious doctrine of repentance, forgiveness, and healing. We have, most perfectly of all, a great dream of 'being and becoming' for our own souls where

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the worst man may truly become a *New Man*. We have the hope of all good fulfilment now—in this life, not merely in the ageless future. We have worthy motives for right conduct, and true relations for the finest brotherhood and service. And finally, we have a God whom we can worship and know, whose mind for us and all sinful men is plainly revealed in what concerns the welfare of our souls. Meanwhile, if there is much that we do not know, we can rest in a hopeful and sustaining faith, believing, it may be, that there is much in this world that we do not need to know, and never can know, until we know as we are known.