

# What is Theosophy?

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THIS is one of the most frequently asked questions in the theosophical milieu and, since the word ‘theosophy’ remains without an official definition, it will always be a matter to ponder over. We will examine the subject quoting H. P. Blavatsky’s words, because the theosophical movement as a whole accepts her as a common source of inspiration. Nevertheless, the same concepts may be found in many other theosophical writers.

The term *theosophia* apparently was first recorded during the 3rd century of our era by Porphyry, a well-known Alexandrian philosopher who belonged to the Neo-Platonic school. It is composed of two Greek words: *theos*, meaning ‘god’ or ‘divine’; and *sophia*, or ‘wisdom’, which may also be translated as the ‘wisdom of the gods’, ‘wisdom in things divine’, or ‘divine wisdom’. The term flourished among Neo-Platonists down to the 6th c. and was also used by certain Christians. In the course of time, several people and movements spiritually inclined also adopted the denomination of ‘theosophers’ or ‘theosophists’ for themselves. That was the case of Meister

Eckhart in the 14th c., a group of Renaissance philosophers such as Paracelsus in the 16th c., Robert Fludd, Thomas Vaughan, and Jacob Boehme in the 17th; and Emanuel Swedenborg and Karl von Eckartshausen in the 18th c., among others. Finally, the theosophical movement reappeared in the 19th c. with the founding of the Theosophical Society in 1875 by H. P. Blavatsky, H. S. Olcott, and others. Through it, certain eternal truths were presented again in a suitable fashion to modern times and a rich literature has been produced by Theosophical Society members in its more than 130 years of activity.

But then the question arises: Is theosophy what the founders of the TS taught? Is it what every leader of the TS wrote? What is the relationship between the teachings given through the TS and those older ones also known as theosophy? Since people with different religious and philosophical backgrounds used the same word ‘theosophist’ to call themselves, the term ‘theosophy’ must represent something that unites them beyond concepts and beliefs.

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### **Theosophia as a state of consciousness**

In her article ‘What is Theosophy?’ HPB attempts an explanation of the term ‘theosophy’, describing who a theosophist is. To that end, she quotes Vaughan’s definition:

A Theosophist — he says — is one who gives you a theory of God or the works of God, which has not revelation, but an inspiration of his own for its basis.<sup>1</sup>

A theosophist’s knowledge about the Divine does not come from any external source. He does not gather information from books, teachers, etc., but from his own inmost nature. In fact, an essential common feature of every theosophist is his teaching about the possibility for a human being to reach the Divine at the moment of *real ecstasy*, or what is known as *samādhi* in Eastern philosophy. In her article ‘The Beacon of the Unknown’, HPB speaks about this as being a ‘transcendental Theosophy’, which, according to her, ‘is true Theosophy, inner Theosophy, that of the soul’:

The INFINITE cannot be known to our reason, which can only distinguish and define; but we can always conceive the abstract idea thereof, thanks to that faculty higher than our reason — *intuition*, or the spiritual instinct of which I have spoken. The great initiates, who have the rare power of throwing themselves into the state of *samādhi* — which can be but imperfectly translated by the word *ecstasy*, a state in which one ceases to be the conditioned and personal ‘I’, and becomes one with the ALL — are the only ones who can boast

of having been in contact with the *infinite*; but no more than other mortals can they describe that state in words . . . .

These few characteristics of *true* Theosophy and its practice have been sketched for the small number of our readers who are gifted with the desired intuition.<sup>2</sup>

And HPB herself had access to this kind of Divine Wisdom. Let us see what she wrote about her own source of knowledge:

Knowledge comes in visions, first in dreams and then in pictures presented to the inner eye during meditation. Thus have I been taught the whole system. . . . Not a word was spoken to me of all this in the ordinary way . . . nothing taught me in writing. And knowledge so obtained is so clear . . . that all other sources of information, all other methods of teaching with which we are familiar dwindle into insignificance in comparison with this.<sup>3</sup>

This kind of knowledge is much deeper than that acquired through books and lectures, because one deals with reality in a more direct way than through ideas — this perception is supra-conceptual. From this point of view, theosophy, essentially, is not a limited body of concepts, but transcends any verbal formulation. It is a *state* of Divine Wisdom, which is potentially in every human being. A theosophist, in his turn, is one who realizes that state of inner enlightenment, irrespective of his culture, time, or language:

In this view every great thinker and philosopher, especially every founder of

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a new religion, school of philosophy, or sect, is necessarily a Theosophist. Hence, Theosophy and Theosophists have existed ever since the first glimmering of nascent thought made man seek instinctively for the means of expressing his own independent opinions.<sup>4</sup>

### **Theosophia and theosophical teachings**

But the word theosophy is also applied to the *theosophical teachings*; that is, the body of concepts taught by a theosophist as a result of his insight and wisdom. There is an important difference between *theosophy* as the state of *Divine Wisdom* and *theosophy* as the *teachings* that come through someone who has attained (whether temporarily or permanently) that enlightened state. The *Divine Wisdom* is the perception of Truth, but the teachings are a necessarily partial and conditioned expression of the real *theosophia*. They are, therefore, not the Truth, but a description of it. One may be in touch with the theosophical teachings and know them very well, but it is not the same as to realize the theosophical state of consciousness, because we cannot reach Wisdom through the accumulation of knowledge. When taken as an end in themselves, the theosophical teachings are of little value; but if the aspirant is earnest, their application will help him to live the right life, to develop self-knowledge, and ultimately to awaken the *Divine Wisdom* that is in his inmost being.

Now, the very nature of the theo-

sophical teachings accounts for their diversity. A theosophist will speak according to his own inspiration 'expressing his own independent opinions'. They are not brain-born ideas, but arise from a deep state of consciousness, where the individual is facing Truth in some of its many aspects. And in that state he does not learn through easily repeated concepts, but through 'images'. He has therefore the difficult task of putting into words his holistic comprehension of something which is beyond our known reality. We can imagine how faint must be the expression of a truth in our languages, and why many mystics refused to put into words that which is Sacred. Quoting again HPB's words:

One of the reasons why I hesitate to answer offhand some questions put to me is the difficulty of expressing in sufficiently accurate language things given to me in pictures, and comprehended by me by the pure Reason, as Kant would call it.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, they have to communicate it as skilfully as they can if they want to point out the way to others. Thus, the expression of the theosophical teachings must necessarily be different from theosophist to theosophist according to his own temperament, intellectual background, and so on, giving to the theosophical exposition an extraordinarily dynamic nature that prevents it from becoming a creed. Therefore, although one person may feel more attracted by the theosophical teachings as expressed by a particular theosophist, if he has a right

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understanding, he will know that no verbal exposition is able to express the Truth (not even at an intellectual level) and that *theosophia* will not be attained by believing in any body of concepts. This is why, since its inception, the Theosophical Society has encouraged no dogmatism or belief.

### **Ancient Wisdom, a universal theosophy**

There were theosophists and Theosophical Schools for the last 2,000 years, from Plato down to the medieval Alchemists, who knew the value of the term, it may be supposed.<sup>6</sup>

Theosophy transcends the Theosophical Society and was with humanity since its inception, not only in Western countries, but also in the whole world. Since 'every great thinker and philosopher is a Theosophist', Buddha, Zoroaster, Lao Tzu, Jesus Christ, Patañjali, Śankarāchārya, Nāgārjuna, and Rumi, among others, gave theosophical teachings, no matter how they labelled their teachings.

According to the theosophical view, every world religion is based on, and comes from, one and the same ancient truth known in the past as the 'Wisdom-Religion'. This *universal theosophy* we are talking about 'is the body of truths which forms the basis of all religions, and which cannot be claimed as the exclusive possession of any'.

However, the pure and original teachings of religions became, in time, more or less corrupted by human ambition and selfishness, and obscured by supersti-

tion and ignorance. Thus, universal theosophy became entangled in a mass of confusion, and now a special effort is necessary to bring back its purity. One of the aims of the Theosophical Society is to encourage its members to investigate and discover the eternal truths enshrined in different religions, philosophies, and sciences, and to offer them to the public in a purified form.

### **Modern Theosophy and the TS**

When the Theosophical Society was founded it had no literature of its own, and the main activity of its members was in the field of that universal theosophy. But today, after more than 130 years, the literature produced through the TS covers a wide field of subject matter. It has a metaphysical dimension that teaches the functioning and constitution of the Cosmos, the aim of sentient existence in different forms of life, the universal laws that rule its development, and so on. Besides, modern theosophical literature speaks about right living and the application of theosophical principles in daily life and, finally, there are also a good number of books revealing universal theosophy as present in different myths, philosophies, religions, and sciences. All this literature is known as 'modern Theosophy' (now usually written with a capital 'T').

Modern Theosophy offers a certain shared cosmivision, but since it was produced by some theosophists' own inspiration, it is not a definite body of knowledge, but a dynamic exposition

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that differs in many details or ways of expression from one author to another. Modern Theosophy is not based on revelation or the teachings given by someone considered special and infallible, and it constantly receives new additions, presenting different aspects and new formulations of the theosophical principles. In fact, that is the way the Founders originally meant it, as revealed in many of their writings, and even in those of the Masters of the Wisdom. For example, in her first letter to the American Theosophists assembled in the 1888 Convention, HPB wrote:

According as people are prepared to receive it, so will new Theosophical teachings be given. But no more will be given than the world, on its present level of spirituality, can profit by. It depends on the spread of Theosophy — the assimilation of what has been already given — how much more will be revealed and how soon.<sup>7</sup>

If modern Theosophy would have been given to the world only during the first years of the TS, the remaining members working for more than 100 years on a repetition of what had already been given, it would mean the failure of the theosophical movement, as HPB warns in *The Key to Theosophy*.<sup>8</sup> But fortunately that was not the case. There were several theosophists in the Theosophical Society, and each one of them transmitted his insights and wisdom in a distinct and original way.

### The role of the Theosophical Society

Theosophy is an all-embracing Science; many are the ways leading to it, as numerous in fact as its definitions.<sup>9</sup>

Many are the ways leading to that state of Divine Wisdom, because many are the different personal dispositions, states of development, and karmic bonds of every aspirant. The emphasis in every genuine theosophical association is not gathered around a single way but around *a single aim*. Thus, for example, J. Boehme's Christian theosophy, Mme Blavatsky's occultist theosophy, and J. Krishnamurti's psychological theosophy (if we can give them those labels), though different in language and concepts, are nevertheless theosophical teachings, since they all tend to awaken the Divine Wisdom in the aspirant. And this feature of the TS, the policy of allowing freedom of thought and encouraging its members' incessant searching with an open mind, is essential not only for the realization of *theosophia* in oneself, but also for the vitality of the modern theosophical movement. In HPB's words:

Orthodoxy in Theosophy is a thing neither possible nor desirable. It is diversity of opinion, within certain limits, that keeps the Theosophical Society a living and healthy body, its many other ugly features notwithstanding. Were it not, also, for the existence of a large amount of uncertainty in the minds of students of Theosophy, such healthy divergencies would be impossible, and the Society would degenerate into a sect, in which a

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narrow and stereotyped creed would take the place of the living and breathing spirit of Truth and an ever growing Knowledge.<sup>10</sup>

Almost every sentence of this excerpt is worthy of deep thought, but we will leave that to the reader. We will only point out that to say *genuine* Theosophy is only HPB's and her Masters' teachings (for example) is not only based on a misunderstanding of what theosophy really is, but it also goes against the TS' own interests. One individual member may agree particularly with a certain exposition of theosophy, let us say, Mme Blavatsky's, and he has a right to do so. But he should neither try to force others to accept his view, nor claim that her particular expression of theosophy should be exclusively studied, at the risk of betraying the Founders' original aim. The Theosophical Society, aiming to become a nucleus of the *universal* brotherhood, must remain open to universal theosophy, to everything that may help to morally and spiritually elevate people who belong to different races, creeds, sex, castes, and colours. Otherwise, it will become a particular sect, promoting a 'stereotyped creed', suitable only to a portion of humanity sharing certain common characteristics. That would be the failure of the TS:

Every such attempt as the Theosophical Society has hitherto ended in failure, because, sooner or later, it has degenerated into a sect, set up hard-and-fast

dogmas of its own, and so lost by imperceptible degrees that vitality which living truth alone can impart.<sup>11</sup>

Of course, this does not imply that where Theosophical groups as such meet should be a place to spread other traditions (see John Algeo's 'On the Watch-Tower', April 2007) nor that everything promoted as being a 'spiritual teaching' is really theosophy. That is, not everything promoted as being spiritual, philosophical or religious helps to elevate the human condition. As we said, sometimes the originally spiritual teaching was corrupted out of ignorance, thirst for domination, and so on. In other cases the teaching is offered by a 'false prophet' — someone whose intention is not at all to give a spiritual teaching, but to obtain personal profit. There are also some schools that spread a kind of 'spiritual materialism' leading to the psychic, to fanaticism, or other forms of selfishness, as is happening today in the New Age movement to a large extent. Therefore, each member of the TS must develop a deep understanding and discrimination in order to discover, in an open and non-dogmatic way, where theosophy is truly expressed and where it is not.

### Summary

Thus it is clear that the term 'theosophy' is used in different contexts. To clarify this matter, we could apply the following classification to make a distinction among the different applications of this term:

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a) *theosophia*: the *transcendental theosophy*, that is, the state of consciousness of inner enlightenment.

b) *universal theosophy*: those theosophical teachings given by every great thinker, sage, and philosopher, modern or ancient. In this category we may add two subcategories:

b<sub>1</sub>) *ancient theosophy*, sometimes called the Ancient Wisdom, meaning that ancient truth known in the past as the 'Wisdom-Religion'.

b<sub>2</sub>) *modern Theosophy*, the Theo-

sophical teachings offered by members of the Theosophical Society.

Since the TS was not founded to promote any particular system, its members should not limit Theosophy to a definite set of concepts, if they do not want to create a new cult. It is our responsibility to preserve a space of freedom for every member to discover universal theosophy by himself so that, by living according to its teachings, he or she may realize the theosophical state of consciousness. ✧

## References

1. *Collected Writings*, vol. II, p. 88, 'What is Theosophy?'
2. *Ibid.*, XI, p. 258.
3. *Ibid.*, XIII, p. 285, 'Knowledge Comes in Visions'.
4. *Ibid.*, II, p. 88, 'What is Theosophy?'
5. *Ibid.*, XIII, p. 285, 'Knowledge Comes in Visions'.
6. *Ibid.*, VII, p. 169, 'The Original Programme Manuscript'.
7. *Ibid.*, IX, p. 244, 'Letter from H. P. Blavatsky to the Second American Convention'.
8. *The Key to Theosophy*, Conclusion, 'The Future of the Theosophical Society'.
9. *CW*, vol. VII, p. 169, 'The Original Programme Manuscript'.
10. *Ibid.*, IX, pp. 243-4, 'Letter from H. P. Blavatsky to the Second American Convention'.
11. *The Key to Theosophy*, Conclusion, 'The Future of the Theosophical Society'.

**You must remember that all our members have been bred and born in some creed or religion, that all are more or less of their generation, both physically and mentally, and consequently that their judgement is but too likely to be warped and unconsciously biased by some or all of these influences. If, then, they cannot be freed from such inherent bias, or at least taught to recognize it instantly and so avoid being led away by it, the result can only be that the Society will drift off on to some sandbank of thought or another, and there remain a stranded carcass to moulder and die.**

H. P. Blavatsky  
*The Key to Theosophy*