

What Is Theosophy?

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(Condensed from *The Theosophist* (1:1), October 1879, reprinted in H. P. Blavatsky: *Collected Writings*, 2:87-97)



According to lexicographers, the term theosophia is composed of two Greek words -- theos, »god,« and sophos, »wise.« So far, correct. But the explanations that follow are far from giving a clear idea of Theosophy. Webster defines it most originally as »a supposed intercourse with God and superior spirits, and consequent attainment of superhuman knowledge, by physical processes, as by the theurgic operations of some ancient Platonists, or by the chemical processes of the German fire-philosophers.«

Vaughan offers a far better, more philosophical 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.« In this view every great thinker and philosopher, especially every founder of 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.

There were Theosophists before the Christian era, notwithstanding that the Christian writers ascribe the development of the Eclectic theosophical system to the early part of the third century of their Era. Diogenes Laertius traces Theosophy to an epoch antedating the dynasty of the Ptolemies; and names as its founder an Egyptian Hierophant called Pot-Amun, the name being Coptic and signifying a priest consecrated to Amun, the god of Wisdom. But history shows it revived by Ammonius Saccas, the founder of the Neo-Platonic School. It was the aim and purpose of Ammonius to reconcile all sects, peoples and nations under one common faith -- a belief in one Supreme Eternal, Unknown, and Unnamed Power, governing the Universe by immutable and eternal laws. His object was to prove a primitive system of Theosophy, which at the beginning was essentially alike in all countries; to induce all men to lay aside their strifes and quarrels, and unite in purpose and thought as the children of one common mother; to purify the ancient religions, by degrees corrupted and obscured, from all dross of human element, by uniting and expounding them upon pure philosophical principles. Hence, the Buddhistic, Vedantic and Magian, or Zoroastrian, systems were taught in the Eclectic Theosophical School along with all the philosophies of Greece. Hence also, that preemi-

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nently Buddhistic and Indian feature among the ancient Theosophists of Alexandria, of due reverence for parents and aged persons; a fraternal affection for the whole human race; and a compassionate feeling for even the dumb animals. While seeking to establish a system of moral discipline which enforced upon people the duty to live according to the laws of their respective countries; to exalt their minds by the research and contemplation of the one Absolute Truth; his chief object in order, as he believed, to achieve all others, was to extract from the various religious teachings, as from a many-chorded instrument, one full and harmonious melody, which would find response in every truth-loving heart.

Theosophy is, then, the archaic Wisdom-Religion, the esoteric doctrine once known in every ancient country having claims to civilization. This »Wisdom« all the old writings show us as an emanation of the divine Principle; and the clear comprehension of it is typified in such names as the Indian Buddh, the Babylonian Nebo, the Thoth of Memphis, the Hermes of Greece, in the appellations, also, of some goddesses -- Metis, Neitha, Athena, the Gnostic Sophia, and finally --the Vedas, from the word »to know.« Under this designation, all the ancient philosophers of the East and West, the Hierophants of old Egypt, the Rishis of Aryavart, the Theodidaktoi of Greece, included all knowledge of things occult and essentially divine.

The central idea of the Eclectic Theosophy was that of a single Supreme Essence, Unknown and Unknowable -- for -- »How could one know the knower?« as enquires Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. Their system was characterized by three distinct features: the theory of the above-named Essence; the doctrine of the human soul -- an emanation from the latter, hence of the same nature; and its theurgy. It is this last science which has led the Neo-Platonists to be so misrepresented in our era of materialistic science. Theurgy being essentially the art of applying the divine powers of man to the subordination of the blind forces of nature, its votaries were first termed magicians -- a corruption of the word »Magh,« signifying a wise, or learned man, and -- derided.

As regards the Divine essence and the nature of the soul and spirit, modern Theosophy believes now as ancient Theosophy did. The popular Diu of the Aryan nations [from arya (Sanskrit), meaning »noble, valid, trustworthy,« referring originally to the ancient peoples of Central Asia who emigrated into India, Iran, and Europe. -- Ed.] was identical with the Iao of the Chaldeans, and even with the Jupiter of the less learned and philosophical among the Romans; and it was just as identical with the Jahve of the Samaritans, the Tiv or »Tiusco« of the Northmen, the Duw of the Britons, and the Zeus of the Thracians. As to the Absolute Essence, the One and all -- whether we accept the Greek Pythagorean, the Chaldean Kabalistic, or the Aryan philosophy in regard to it -- any one of the above conceptions can lead but to pure and absolute Theosophy. Every Theosophist, then, holding to a theory of the Deity »which has not revelation, but an inspiration of his own for its basis,« may accept any of the above definitions or belong to any of these religions, and yet remain strictly within the boundaries of Theosophy. For the latter is belief in the Deity as the ALL, the source of all existence, the infinite that cannot be either comprehended or known, the universe alone revealing It, or, as some prefer it, Him, thus giving a sex to that, to anthropomorphize which is blasphemy. True, Theosophy shrinks from brutal materialization; it prefers believing that, from eternity retired within itself, the Spirit of the Deity neither wills nor creates; but that, from the infinite effulgency everywhere going forth from the Great Centre, that which produces all visible and invisible things is but a Ray containing in itself the generative and conceptive power, which, in its turn, produces that

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which the Greeks called Macrocosm, the Kabalists Tikkun or Adam Kadmon -- the archetypal man, and the Aryans Purusha, the manifested Brahm, or the Divine Male. Theosophy believes also in the Anastasis or continued existence, and in transmigration (evolution) or a series of changes in the soul which can be defended and explained on strict philosophical principles; and only by making a distinction between Paramatma (transcendental, supreme soul) and Jivatma (animal, or conscious soul) of the Vedantins.

To fully define Theosophy, we must consider it under all its aspects. The interior world has not been hidden from all by impenetrable darkness. By that higher intuition acquired by Theosophia -- or God-knowledge, which carried the mind from the world of form into that of formless spirit, man has been sometimes enabled in every age and every country to perceive things in the interior or invisible world. Hence, the »Samadhi,« or Dhyan Yog Samadhi, of the Hindu ascetics; the »Daimonion-photi,« or spiritual illumination of the Neo-Platonists; the »Sidereal confabulation of soul« of the Rosicrucians or Fire-philosophers; and, even the ecstatic trance of mystics and of the modern mesmerists and spiritualists, are identical in nature, though various as to manifestation. The search after man's diviner »self,« so often and so erroneously interpreted as individual communion with a personal God, was the object of every mystic, and belief in its possibility seems to have been coeval with the genesis of humanity, each people giving it another name. »By reflection, self-knowledge and intellectual discipline, the soul can be raised to the vision of eternal truth, goodness, and beauty that is, to the Vision of God -- this is the epopteia,« said the Greeks. »To unite one's soul to the Universal Soul,« says Porphyry, »requires but a perfectly pure mind.

Through self-contemplation, perfect chastity, and purity of body, we may approach nearer to It, and receive, in that state, true knowledge and wonderful insight.« Thus, while the Aryan mystic claimed for himself the power of solving all the problems of life and death, when he had once obtained the power of acting independently of his body, through the Atman -- »self,« or »soul«; and the old Greeks went in search of Atmu -- the Hidden one, or the God-Soul of man, with the symbolical mirror of the Thesmophorian mysteries; -- so the spiritualists of today believe in the faculty of the spirits, or the souls of the disembodied persons, to communicate visibly and tangibly with those they loved on earth. And all these, Aryan Yogins, Greek philosophers, and modern spiritualists, affirm that possibility on the ground that the embodied soul and its never embodied spirit -- the real self -- are not separated from either the Universal Soul or other spirits by space, but merely by the differentiation of their qualities; as in the boundless expanse of the universe there can be no limitation. Thus was it that Patanjali's Yogis and, following in their steps, Plotinus, Porphyry and other Neo-Platonists, maintained that in their hours of ecstasy they had been united to, or rather become as one with, God, several times during the course of their lives. This idea, erroneous as it may seem in its application to the Universal Spirit, was, and is, claimed by too many great philosophers to be put aside as entirely chimerical. In the case of the Theodidaktoi, the only controvertible point, the dark spot on this philosophy of extreme mysticism, was its claim to include that which is simply ecstatic illumination, under the head of sensuous perception. In the case of the Yogins, who maintained their ability to see Isvara »face to face,« this claim was successfully overthrown by the stern logic of Kapila.

The Alexandrian Theosophists were divided into neophytes, initiates, and masters, or hierophants; and their rules were copied from the ancient Mysteries of Orpheus, who, according to Herodotus,

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brought them from India. Ammonius obligated his disciples by oath not to divulge his higher doctrines, except to those who were proved thoroughly worthy and initiated, and who had learned to regard the gods, the angels, and the demons of other peoples, according to the esoteric hyponoia, or under-meaning. »The gods exist, but they are not what the hoi polloi, the uneducated multitude, suppose them to be,« says Epicurus. »He is not an atheist who denies the existence of the gods whom the multitude worship, but he is such who fastens on these gods the opinions of the multitude.« In his turn, Aristotle declares that of the »Divine Essence pervading the whole world of nature, what are styled the gods are simply the first principles.«

Plotinus, the pupil of the »God-taught« Ammonius, tells us that the secret gnosis or the knowledge of Theosophy has three degrees -- opinion, science, and illumination. »The means or instrument of the first is sense, or perception; of the second, dialectics; of the third, intuition. To the last, reason is subordinate; it is absolute knowledge, founded on the identification of the mind with the object known.« Theosophy is the exact science of psychology, so to say; it stands in relation to natural, uncultivated mediumship, as the knowledge of a Tyndall stands to that of a school-boy in physics. It develops in man a direct beholding; that which Schelling denominates »a realization of the identity of subject and object in the individual«; so that under the influence and knowledge of hyponoia man thinks divine thoughts, views all things as they really are, and, finally, »becomes recipient of the Soul of the World,« to use one of the finest expressions of Emerson. »I, the imperfect, adore my own Perfect« -- he says in his superb Essay on the Over-Soul. Besides this psychological, or soul-state, Theosophy cultivated every branch of sciences and arts. When ignorant of the true meaning of the esoteric divine symbols of nature, man is apt to miscalculate the powers of his soul, and, instead of communing spiritually and mentally with the higher, celestial beings, the good spirits (the gods of the theurgists of the Platonic school), he will unconsciously call forth the evil, dark powers which lurk around humanity -- the undying, grim creations of human crimes and vices -- and thus fall from theurgia (white magic) into goetia (or black magic, sorcery). Yet, neither white, nor black magic are what popular superstition understands by the terms. The possibility of »raising spirits,« according to the key of Solomon, is the height of superstition and ignorance. Purity of deed and thoughts can alone raise us to an intercourse »with the gods« and attain for us the goal we desire.

It is a noticeable fact that neither Zoroaster, Buddha, Orpheus, Pythagoras, Confucius, Socrates, nor Ammonius Saccas, committed anything to writing. The reason for it is obvious. Theosophy is a double-edged weapon and unfit for the ignorant or the selfish. Like every ancient philosophy it has its votaries among the moderns; but, until late in our own days, its disciples were few in numbers, and of the most various sects and opinions. »Entirely speculative, and founding no school, they have still exercised a silent influence upon philosophy; and no doubt, when the time arrives, many ideas thus silently propounded may yet give new directions to human thought« -- remarks Mr. Kenneth R. H. Mackenzie IX° . . . himself a mystic and a Theosophist, in his large and valuable work, *The Royal Masonic Cyclopaedia* (articles Theosophical Society of New York and Theosophy, p. 731). Since the days of the fire-philosophers, they had never formed themselves into societies, for, tracked like wild beasts by the Christian clergy, to be known as a Theosophist often amounted, hardly a century ago, to a death warrant. The statistics show that, during a period of 150 years, no less than 90,000 men and women were burned in Europe for alleged witchcraft. It was but late in the present century -- in 1875 -- that some progressed mystics and spiritualists, unsatisfied with the theories and explanations of Spiritualism, started by its votaries, and finding that they were far from covering the

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whole ground of the wide range of phenomena, formed at New York, America, an association which is now widely known as the Theosophical Society. And now, having explained what is Theosophy, we will, in a separate article, explain what is the nature of our Society, which is also called the »Universal Brotherhood of Humanity.«