



THE THEOSOPHIST

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Editor: *Mr Tim Boyd*

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Theosophy Undefined

RAFAEL MARQUES DE ALBUQUERQUE

THERE are plenty of beautiful and inspiring descriptions of what the word ‘Theosophy’ means. For a change, this article addresses an issue associated with the way we use the word. This is described as the ambiguous meaning of the word, which on the one hand refers to an individual state or quality, and on the other, to a particular doctrine described by modern theosophists. After clarifying these two meanings associated with Theo-sophy, the article describes three potential dangers stemming from the ambiguity, and finally outlines tentative solutions.

Certainly a historical exploration of the term Theosophy would reveal it has multiple meanings associated with it. In this article I will briefly describe and give examples of two of them, which seem enough to illustrate the point.

The first meaning of Theosophy can be described as a superior *state* of being, which includes comprehension of divine truths. H. P. Blavatsky (HPB) wrote in her article ‘What is Theosophy?’¹ in the first issue of *The Theosophist* (Oct. 1879):

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.

In *The Key to Theosophy*,² she explains:

this secret wisdom (Theosophy) cannot be attained by study alone, because it is a superhuman knowledge, infinite in nature, which can be communicated to the higher Spiritual Self in a state of ecstasy.

Later she also uses the term ‘samādhi’ to explain how Theosophy, or divine wisdom, can be attained. Therefore, Theosophy can mean a divine wisdom acquired by altered states, not something to be learnt in books. Rather than a body of knowledge, it is a *quality* or *state* achieved by individuals. In the terminology employed in *The Voice of the Silence*,³ Theosophy can be considered Soul-Wisdom, associated to the Heart Doctrine.

The second meaning of Theosophy

Mr Rafael Marques de Albuquerque, formerly a member of the Brazilian Section of the Theosophical Society, is a member of the Nottingham Lodge, in the English Section of the TS.

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represents a particular set of beliefs or doctrine. HPB uses the term in this way in *The Key to Theosophy*,⁴ when she asserts that the inner body of the Theosophical Society has a religious system of its own, which

was outlined a few years ago in *The Theosophist* and *Esoteric Buddhism*, and may be found still more elaborated in *The Secret Doctrine*. It is based on the oldest philosophy of the world, called the Wisdom-Religion [note: another term to refer to Theosophy] or the Archaic Doctrine.

Therefore, Theosophy can be used to mean the body of knowledge many of us are very familiar with, involving root races, the septenary nature of man, and so forth. Another example of this meaning is illustrated by the way in which HPB uses the word Theosophy as a definite body of knowledge. For instance in her article ‘What is Theosophy?’⁵ she mentions that ‘Theosophy believes also in the *anastasis* or continued existence, and in transmigration (evolution) or a series of changes in the soul.’ In these examples, Theosophy seems to be referred to as Head-Learning, or the Eye Doctrine, to use again the terms from *The Voice of the Silence*.

The two meanings described above are so widely used that they are analogous to the ones described in some dictionaries. For example, Dictionary.com⁶ defines theosophy as either ‘any of various forms of philosophical or religious thought based on a mystical insight into

the divine nature’, or, when in capital, ‘the system of belief and practice of the Theosophical Society’, which illustrate essentially the same difference of meanings.

If we just consider for a moment these two meanings of Theosophy it will be clear why this ambiguity may create problems. When we use the same word to refer to two different meanings, the two meanings can begin to be understood as one idea rather than two. The problem begins because the rhetoric and status that applies to the first meaning of Theosophy does not apply to the second meaning, although sometimes it is described as such — possibly because of the ambiguous use, and nature of the term.

To further explain this confusion, let me describe the status given to Theosophy, in the meaning of a state of superior wisdom, in which the Divine Essence is communicated, the Truth unveiled, and so forth. This Theosophy is described by HPB as fairly universal, as recurrent in humanity, as something experienced by the great sages and founders of religions, and taught to initiates of every country. Supposedly sages, shamans, *yogin*-s, rishis, saints and others experienced this Theosophy alike, even though they expressed it differently due to their diverse background and incapacity of the finite mind to fully understand the infinite Divine Essence. When the characteristics described above are applied to the particular set of beliefs described by HPB, Alfred Snett and others, the problem begins. The particular

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set of beliefs described by HPB and others are historically situated, hence have particular characteristics that are unique and not shared by other sages throughout history.

In other words, it is an eclectic belief system developed in the 19th Century according to its zeitgeist, or spirit of the time. Moreover, those beliefs were communicated to us through the limitation of written text. Although this can be considered a brilliant mystically-inspired work of comparative religion, it cannot hold the status of Truth and universality we confer to the other meaning of Theosophy. If we do so, we embrace an understanding of Theosophy that is potentially problematic. In the next paragraphs I will describe what I believe to be three potential problems, leaving it to the reader to judge whether these problems actually exist amongst theosophists, or they are hypothetical possibilities.

The first potential problem is the development of an arrogant approach to spirituality. This danger arises from the belief that the doctrinal knowledge elaborated in the theosophical literature expresses the universal absolute knowledge behind all forms of religion. Logically, this leads to the conclusion that any doctrinal detail from a specific religion which agrees with 'Theosophy' is correct; whilst divergences are attributed to superstition, cultural bias, or a supposed failure of believers in comprehending their own religion. It can sound comforting to us to mingle the two interpretations of Theosophy, the

eternal Soul-Wisdom and the Head-Learning doctrine, because it suggests a superiority of our doctrine when compared to others. But, warns *The Voice of the Silence*:⁷

Self-gratulation, O Disciple, is like unto a lofty tower, up which a haughty fool has climbed. Thereon he sits in prideful solitude and unperceived by any but himself.

The above quote leads to the second potential problem: that theosophists become increasingly insular. Despite the historical involvement of theosophists in interfaith activities, which surely is not completely absent today, it becomes difficult to establish healthy and honest dialogues if we believe that our books express the true doctrine (that is, the true interpretation of deeper realities) and all the others are but distortions of it. If we consider Theosophy as the only true doctrine we hinder our potential to learn and grow from the wisdom of others, and assume the posture of teachers and 'light bringers' in relation to other religions, instead of humble and open-minded seekers of wisdom. In other words, to understand Theosophy as a doctrine spoils our interest in learning about other approaches and dissuades others' interest in communicating with us. The danger of becoming insular is not only related to religion. It might jeopardize the possibilities of approximation even to groups which have roots in the Theosophical Society, such as the Anthroposophical Society.

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The third potential problem of understanding Theosophy as doctrine is to become dogmatic, even though HPB warned against it. ‘Theosophists repudiate all claim to infallibility’, she wrote in *Society Without a Dogma*,⁸ and yet some theosophists struggle to question her words or the Mahatmas, or to admit that despite all their wisdom they were still placed within cultural and historical boundaries, and were influenced (and sometimes misled) by them. Such a dogmatic approach to Theosophy is a natural consequence of using the word Theosophy to refer simultaneously to the universal Truth behind all religions and to the doctrine or belief system elaborated by Blavatsky and others.

This problem of the ambiguity of the term Theosophy is not new. For instance Sri Ram, in the ‘Watch-Tower’ article⁹ of December 1955, argued against the use of Theosophy as ‘a set of ideas or beliefs’, defending the subjectivity and multiplicity of Theosophy. Years later, in July 1963, he wrote:

Theosophy has never, at any time in the course of the history of the Society, been officially defined or crystallized. On the contrary, the General Council of the Society adopted in December 1950, at the time of the Society’s double diamond Jubilee, a resolution explicitly calling it a ‘Wisdom undefined and unlimited’, and affirmed the freedom of each and every member to come to his own understanding of it. In stressing this freedom, it coupled Universal Brotherhood and this

undefined Wisdom in such a way as to suggest that it is these aims and methods which give the Society its unique character. The Wisdom has to remain undefined, partly because it is unlimited, and partly for the reason that it contains aspects and elements which are beyond the scope of words and our limited thinking.

As previously mentioned, it is beyond the scope of this article to judge the extent to which we as theosophists have fallen in the three traps described here. It is arguable, however, that the problems here raised — and also perceived by Sri Ram and others many decades ago — are not solved. This article argues that, if we want to address these problems, a key step is to rethink the terminology we employ when talking and writing about Theosophy. It seems wise to point out to the reader, however, that my intent is *not* to suggest that we have talked about Theosophy for so many decades wrongly; but to point out that being mindful of this problem when using the word Theosophy has the potential to bring benefit to how we communicate — to both theosophists and non-theosophists — and perhaps even to how we think about Theosophy.

The tentative proposal here outlined is that we use the term Theosophy solely in the first of the two possible meanings of the terms described in this paper. It means to refer to Soul-Wisdom, or the Heart Doctrine, rather than the Head-Learning, or the Eye Doctrine. It is beyond the scope of this article to

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discuss in depth the nature of Theosophy — for instance creating analogies between Theosophy and the Buddhist *prajña* or the Christian gnosis. Instead, I propose employing the term Theosophy to designate a *state* or a *quality* of being without discussing — in this paper — details of the nature of this state or quality. I suggest that, as state or quality of being, Theosophy *cannot* be communicated with words, it is experiential. Thus, conceptual or factual knowledge is not Theosophy.

This article will now outline a few possible uses of the term ‘Theosophy’. Phrases such as ‘Theosophy tells us that . . .’ or ‘According to Theosophy . . .’ make little sense in this perspective. Theosophy is neither a body of knowledge nor someone. Instead, we could say ‘Blavatsky tells us that . . .’, ‘The theosophical literature tells us that . . .’, or even ‘Theosophists often say that . . .’, or to be more rigorous such as “‘The Yoga Sutras of Patañjali” tells us that . . .’ or ‘*The Key to Theosophy* tells us that . . .’ Furthermore, we cannot *teach*, *spread*, or *explain* Theosophy. We can teach, spread or explain ideas, concepts, doctrines, knowledge, but not Soul-Wisdom. The use of Theosophy would then be employed as a state or quality, as in ‘Shamans develop Theosophy with time’, ‘Some priests surely reached Theosophy’, or ‘A personal search for Theosophy’. It could be replaced by the word ‘wisdom’, when applied to divine matters, hence the widely used synonym ‘Divine Wisdom’.

Another natural implication of this

proposal refers to the body of knowledge we have available in the theosophical literature. In this perspective, the seven root races, the three fundamental propositions, the septenary nature of man, thought-forms, the seven rays, and all the communicable ideas expressed in our books *are not Theosophy*. This should not diminish the value of our literature; we have impressive treatises of comparative religion, powerful texts, transformative perspectives, and a multitude of reasonable ideas that may or may not be literally truth, in the sense of having correspondence to the objective reality. Ultimately, it does not matter so much whether the theosophical literature expresses precise objective realities, for instance, whether or not the Lemurians existed and were exactly as HPB described. The ideas that can be expressed with words are tools to develop wisdom, to *develop Theosophy*. In other words, they are tools to allow us to experience transcendental Truth, they are not Truth themselves. To use a metaphor commonly used in Buddhism, the teachings are like a raft, you build it and use it to cross the river. But once you have crossed the river, you abandon it. To take the metaphor further, the value of the raft comes from its capacity to take you to the other side. The other side of the river, arguably, is ultimate Theosophy. Our teachings are just a raft, but there are several ways to build rafts.

In this way, Theosophy can become something universal, as a foundation of religions, since it is arguable that the great

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teachers and sages developed deep wisdom towards the divine, and hence they accessed some degree of Theosophy. In a more humble example, suppose a follower of any religion or doctrine seeks to be wiser in a spiritual sense. Conceptually, this person would be seeking Theosophy. However, this Divine Wisdom would manifest in the individual level according to her or his particular doctrine and individual traits. Perhaps they would develop a Buddhist Theosophy, a Zoroastrian Theosophy, or even a Blavatskian Theosophy. In that sense, we could even talk about a Leadbeaterian Theosophy, or a Krishnamurtian one. In other words, while Theosophy might be considered universal, when manifested in one's experience this wisdom is coloured by whoever accessed it, and is even further limited when communicated in words.

It sounds naive to imagine that Gautama Buddha, Patañjali, and Jesus Christ, if they had the chance to meet and have a cup of tea, would agree about the seven root races and the septenary nature of man, because those are supposedly the inner teachings from time immemorial. In fact, Subba Row, who is believed to be a highly regarded *chela*, rejected the idea of a sevenfold division of human beings, describing it as 'almost unintelligible to Hindu minds' in *The Philosophy of the Bhagavadgītā*.¹⁰ The point here is not that one of the two was wrong, but that either version is just a description of ultimately indescribable truths, given by two individuals who supposedly reached

a high level of wisdom, Theosophy. They are conceptual or factual knowledge, hence not Theosophy.

Another potentially problematic term associated to Theosophy is 'theosophical'. If Theosophy is defined as this Soul-Wisdom beyond our mundane capacity to know and communicate, then the definition of what would be a theosophical book, a theosophical concept, a theosophical method, or even a theosophical society becomes complicated. One solution to this would be the use of the term theosophical to refer to elements historically associated to the Theosophical Society, as the Theosophical Society has its name legitimated by use throughout time.

Therefore, the works of the members of the Theosophical Society constitute the theosophical literature, the ideas they created would be theosophical concepts, and the ways they employed, the theosophical methods. The danger this solution creates regarding the use of 'theosophical', is similar to the one described in the beginning of this article; it can lead to the mistaken interpretation that whatever is theosophical (that is, associated with the historical Theosophical Society) is universal and therefore absolutely superior to other doctrines and religions.

Despite the suggestions of how to use the words 'Theosophy' and 'theosophical' provided in this article, the solution to the use of both words is beyond a series of rules regarding 'right and wrong' ways to use the terms. My aim is that we

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as theosophists become aware of the potential problems of using both words and understand the differences between the two 'Theosophies'. Hopefully, as a

consequence we can become more mindful in our use of the word Theosophy and find our own solutions to achieve clearer communication and understanding. ✧

Endnotes

1. H. P. Blavatsky. 'What is Theosophy?' *The Theosophist*, October 1879.
2. ———. *The Key to Theosophy*. The Theosophical Publishing House (TPH), New York, 1888.
3. ———. *The Voice of the Silence*. TPH, Chennai, 31st reprint, 2013.
4. ———. *The Key to Theosophy*. Ibid.
5. ———. 'What is Theosophy?' *The Theosophist*, October 1879.
6. Dictionary.com. Available at dictionary.reference.com/browse/theosophy and accessed in December 2015.
7. H. P. Blavatsky. *The Voice of the Silence*. Ibid.
8. H. P. Blavatsky. 'Society Without a Dogma'. *The Spiritualist*, London, 8 February 1878.
9. Sri Ram. *On the Watch Tower: Selected Editorial Notes from The Theosophist 1953-1966*. TPH, Chennai, 1966.
10. T. Subba Row. *The Philosophy of the Bhagavad-gita: Four lectures delivered at the Eleventh Annual Convention of the Theosophical Society in 1886*. TPH, Chennai, 2007.

There are different possible approaches to what Theosophy is. The longer one studies the wholeness of it, the less easy it is to define it. How can we define a Wisdom which belongs to life, therefore lives and breathes, in which there are the depths which belong to what we call the Spirit, which is subtler than the subtlest mind can encompass, whose every aspect is meaningful with the meaning of that Spirit?

The Truth, or the Wisdom, cannot be known except by a mind which is completely open to it. It is only when the mind is clear of every idea, every colouring wish, every element of self, that it can discover the Truth. That truth is reflected in such a mind; there is no need to go after it. The truth then comes to the person. He discovers it in his heart. It is only in absolute freedom of mind and heart that truth in its absoluteness can shine and manifest itself. Therefore, in the Theosophical Society we try to maintain that freedom which is the open way or space. That is the reason why Theosophy is left undefined.

N. Sri Ram, 'Why Theosophy is Left Undefined'
The Theosophist, October 1964