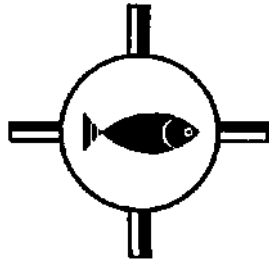


LIBERAL CATHOLIC INSTITUTE OF STUDIES



Unit 14

THEOSOPHY - MODERN

SOURCE MATERIAL

II

EXTRACTS FROM MODERN THEOSOPHY

by

The Rev. Hugh Shearman Ph.D.



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UNIT 14
Extracts from
MODERN THEOSOPHY
by
Hugh Shearman

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CHAPTER I: THE MEANING OF THEOSOPHY

The word Theosophy comes from the Greek words *theos*, meaning god, and *sophia*, meaning wisdom; and it means divine wisdom, God-wisdom, wisdom concerning God, or the wisdom of the gods.

The first general use of the term seems to have been among Neo-Platonists in the third century A.D., particularly Ammonius Saccas and his followers. The term is used by Iamblichus. Down the centuries the word theosophy has been applied to various forms of mystical speculation and to various mystery cults. On the whole, those who have been described at various past times as theosophists have been gnostics rather than mystics. They have been individuals who claimed to have knowledge of inner things rather than devotional piety alone.

Thus the term theosophy had a recognised meaning and currency long before it was adopted by the sixteen people who met together in 1875 and formed themselves into the Theosophical Society. But inevitably the word has become conditioned by its association with this active modern movement.

In practice, theosophy, or god-wisdom, has come to have two principal meanings. First, there is its primary meaning, signifying the ultimate wisdom, the ultimate truth which life holds; and then there is a secondary meaning, signifying the body of teachings about man and the universe which have been given forth, in particular, by members of the Theosophical Society, something which is knowledge rather than wisdom.

Wisdom cannot be conveyed to another person in so many words. Anybody who makes the attempt, by speech however eloquent, to render another person wise will almost certainly have to admit in due course that this is so. Knowledge is rather different. To some extent it can be conveyed to another person by books and lectures and spoken words. But even knowledge has to be conveyed mainly in terms of things that the other person already knows by his own direct experience. Sometimes experience can evoke wisdom; sometimes knowledge can evoke wisdom. But wisdom remains very hard to define.

The possession of wisdom involves the power to achieve appropriate action and right relationship largely without argument or conscious preliminary analysis and demonstration, the power to do and say the right thing and to act in harmony with circumstances more or less spontaneously.

Wisdom is revealed rather than built up. The powers of adult intelligence, of which we find ourselves in possession as we grow from childhood to maturity, are not built up out of the things that we are taught at school; they come into being in the process of our growth and we find them there and use them. They are not communicated to us by another person, though another person may sometimes present us with facts or situations which will enable us to discover that we have those powers. The capacity that we call wisdom is similarly incommunicable. Knowledge and the action of others may call it forth, but it is not given to us from outside.

Some have declared that there is in wisdom an element of love, that the power of understanding which is displayed by those whom we call wise involves a certain sympathetic self-identification with others, though not any passionate attachment. It has been said that wisdom is a love that knows and a knowledge that loves.

However it may be defined, the capacity which we call wisdom is not something that can be learned by rote. It may be evocable, but it is incommunicable. And this must be all the more so if the

wisdom is in any sense divine, whether by this We mean that it is wisdom concerning God or the wisdom of gods or godlike people.

The archaic Sanskrit motto of the Theosophical Society, as it is usually rendered into English, declares that "There is no religion higher than Truth." The truth than which no religion is higher is not the factual truth that may be found in a railway timetable or a work of reference. It is rather an ultimate reality, that ultimate Reality which is asserted in some form by the world's religions and by mystics and metaphysicians, No religion is higher than that Reality, because it is the underlying truth to which all religions refer.

Primary theosophy, if such there be—this wisdom, this experiencing of ultimate Reality—must necessarily be incommunicable and cannot be expounded in books, nor can it be encompassed or propagated by any particular society or cult. The last word about it has been said by the Chinese sage when he wrote: "He who knows speaks not; he who speaks knows not."

Then there is a secondary theosophy, the theosophy of which it is possible to speak. Secondary theosophy is an exposition of the nature of man and the universe, seen as an expression, within the limits of time and space, of that ultimate Reality than which no religion is higher. Secondary theosophy is an exposition or interpretation of the truths of nature in terms suited to a particular age and civilisation; and it is this that we generally mean when we speak of theosophy.

But no secondary theosophy is complete in itself nor can it be understood without some recollection that it is intended only to lead on to the experiencing of a greater and incommunicable theosophy underlying it. Since secondary theosophy is concerned with the whole universe in all its aspects, it is not always easy to say of any teaching or interpretation of nature that it is or is not theosophy; but, to be truly theosophical, any particular exposition of truth must certainly have behind it the conscious intention of awakening individuals to a direct knowledge and experience of God. Mrs. Besant once said, "The Theosophical Society exists ... to spread the thought that the direct knowledge of God is obtainable by man." It is by the standard of this conscious and knowledgeably pursued intention alone that we can judge whether or not particular teachings and expositions of doctrine are to be regarded as truly theosophical.

That aim of helping to awaken the individual to an experience of true theosophy, true god-wisdom, and to a knowledge of the ultimate meaning of life is absent from a great part of the sensational literature of the so-called "occult" and from the many works, often unexceptionable in themselves, which are put out to express and sometimes to exalt the personalities of various mystagogues and leaders of schools and cults.

Theosophy is defined in an official statement of the governing body of the Theosophical Society as "the body of truths which forms the basis of all religions and which cannot be claimed as the exclusive possession of any." The statement adds, "Members of the Theosophical Society study these truths, and theosophists endeavour to live them." It is with this "body of truths" as expounded in modern times by members of the Theosophical Society that the present work is concerned.

CHAPTER V: MAN AND HIS UNIVERSE**THE UNIVERSAL AND PARTICULAR**

IN this chapter devoted to describing theosophical teachings, a short summary of the whole theosophical picture of life will be attempted; and in later chapters parts of the subject will be dealt with in greater detail and more fully explained. For some, a short summary of theosophical ideas may be too tight-packed and difficult at first, and in that case they may leave it unread until later; but a preliminary bird's eye view showing where the parts fit into the whole is too useful to others to be omitted at this stage.

Of some of the deeper matters, of the nature of ultimate Being, little more can usefully be said beyond what can be said briefly in this chapter.

Theosophy, as an attempt to set forth "the body of truths which forms the basis of all religions and which cannot be claimed as the exclusive possession of any," gives an account of the nature of the universe and of man's place within it. Hence theosophy offers a metaphysic, a cosmology and a psychology; and therefore, by natural sequence, theosophy offers an ethic.

All the world's great religions and mystical teachings tend to declare in some fashion that there is an ultimate unity and purpose in life. In other words, there is one Universal Self, in whom all particular selves are one and with whom every particular self may discover his identity. Man is the microcosm of the universe, or, as it is said in the Christian tradition, God made man in His own image; and every particle of matter is a register of all that is. Every reality is a symbol and expression of a more intense reality within and beyond it. And beyond and within everything is one Being absolute, devoid of attributes because every attribute imposes a limitation, having no relationship to anything, not even the relationship of causation. From our point of view, indeed, that ultimate Being can be conceived of only as Non-Being, since we know things only through their limitations, frontiers and conditions, and that Being has neither limitations, frontiers nor conditions.

For the purpose of the present study it is sufficient to refer to the theosophical explanation of life as manifesting within the limits of our solar universe. That universe is seen as the expression of a single Life, a single Universal Self, universal with reference to the solar universe though limited in relation to the cosmic universe. He is referred to in many theosophical works as the Solar Logos and is portrayed in the more exalted conceptions of God to be found in the world's religions.

The term Logos is the Greek word for speech and is an attempt to express a mystery through a metaphor. Just as the word spirit or breath is used to indicate by simile a very refined and difficult conception of disembodied force, so this term Logos, or Word, is used in several religious traditions, including the Christian, to indicate the creative relationship of the Deity to His universe. It includes such ideas as striking a note or emitting a vibration, actions which are well known to produce remarkable creative or destructive results under certain conditions without the appearance of any direct mechanical agency.

This Solar Deity is said to express Himself as a Trinity. Through His three Aspects, He simultaneously creates, sustains and destroys or completes His universe. Through His third Aspect, He organises matter and creates the form side of His universe; through His second Aspect, He endows the forms with His life; through His first Aspect, He awakens the divinity in man which ultimately completes and

transcends the relationship between life and form through the discovery that self and not-self are one, thus leading to the ending of the necessity for manifestation and to the merging of immanence in transcendence. These three Persons or Aspects are expressed in many different symbols in the world's various religious systems, as the Christian Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Ghost, the various Trinities of Father, Son and Mother in other religions, or the Trinity of Destroyer, Preserver and Creator—to place these in the order which indicates their correspondences. For the purpose of describing the action of the Solar Deity as taking place in time, we think of the third Aspect as coming first into activity, then the second and then the first ; but this ancient analysis of supreme Reality into three Aspects or Persons in no wise negates the complete unity of life. All three Aspects are simultaneously present and active everywhere.

This Universal Self, this Being who expresses Himself in the solar universe, projects into the universe innumerable epitomes of His own Nature, sparks of His own Fire, individual lives, particular selves. In theosophical literature these are often called Monads, another Greek term meaning an ultimate unit of consciousness. So far as this universe is concerned, a Monad represents the first step out of the universal into the particular, the first step out of homogeneous universality into a state of separation and differentiation. These units are at first unconscious as such, and they learn to know themselves as separate units by experiencing external impacts through being identified with material forms.

Thus theosophists see the universe as existing, as it were, between the two poles of unity and diversity, of the universal and the particular. And, between the extreme diversity and separation of this physical world that we know and the ultimate integrating unity of the Universal Self, there are many intermediate states, called planes. These planes are states of consciousness, but they are also states of matter, though matter of a kind impalpable and imperceptible to our ordinary physical senses and as yet only glimpsed by a few mystics, visionaries and clairvoyants and very partially and inaccurately glimpsed at that. The conquest of these higher planes, finer than the physical, is part of man's future task and offers him possibilities of expanding freedom and progressive liberation from restrictions of time, space, dimension, separation and relationship, the absence of which restrictions we cannot even imagine in our physical condition. The planes constitute a great scale of approach or regression between the Universal Self and every particular self. The lower and more dense of these states of consciousness, immediately beyond and within the physical, have been the subject of investigation by students of psychic research and psychology.

The individual lives who inhabit this universe gradually achieve consciousness and then self-consciousness at every level and state of being within the universe. They are all destined to master the complete scale of existence which lies between the particular and the universal and to discover their complete identity with the Universal Self who is the ultimate Self of every one of us.

This process of expanding consciousness and self-awareness takes place through the units of consciousness being identified with successive material forms. As the powers of response of the individual lives increase, they are capable of expressing themselves through more and more highly organized material forms, mineral forms, vegetable forms, animal forms, human forms. The forms are out-lived and die as they serve their purpose, but the life continues; and through the outer pattern of evolving forms there is a continuous expansion of the indwelling life. On the form side there may be discontinuities, mutations, missing links, extinctions of species, annihilations of continents or worlds; but nothing is lost in the economy of the unfolding life which uses the forms and which retains every capacity and power of response which it has won while inhabiting those forms; and all that we see of friction, of advances and recessions, of successes and failures, is purposeful and of value.

THE PLACE AND NATURE OF MAN

The individual lives or Monads pass successively through superphysical forms and through mineral, vegetable and animal forms. After the animal phase of experience comes the human. It is by entering the human stage of evolution that the individual lives discover their first faint capacity for expressing their innate divinity and for knowing and displaying the fact that they are “gods in the becoming”.

Man is individualised; he is not merely conscious but self-conscious. He has within him, even at the very primitive stage, the capacities of memory and comparison, analysis and synthesis, which provide the basis of the power of conceptual thought. He becomes capable of choice, of exercising free will, of acting as opposed to reacting. He becomes capable of making mistakes of a kind and to a degree unknown in the automatic, predictable and, within certain limits, perfect operations of wild nature. He can experiment, test by trial and error, and choose.

The process of the self-expression of the Universal Self through His universe in individual lives runs in a great arc, a path first of unconscious out-going, leading to conscious life, from which in turn develops a self-conscious return to the Source. It has been described as a process from unconscious perfection, through conscious imperfection, to conscious perfection.

First comes the phase of unconscious and automatic perfection in forms of organised matter in wild nature, the unconscious perfection of clouds and frost crystals and trees and wild creatures, which is rehearsed also in the childhood phase of the individual human life. Then comes the human phase of conscious imperfection, of freedom to learn through choice and through trial and error, the phase represented by adolescence in the life cycle of the individual. Then finally there comes the phase of conscious perfection, when all the capacities of primitive nature which the individual has passed through on the downward portion of the arc are consciously mastered, a phase which ought to be represented in the life of the individual by complete adulthood, a condition which, however, few of our race actually achieve at their present stage of social and psychological evolution.

Man in the theosophical view is a vastly more complex being than the physical organism which we normally see. He is conscious or potentially conscious on many of those simultaneously present levels or states which are called planes. In his ultimate nature each man is the Monad, the spark of the divine Fire, the condition of consciousness at which the individual particular self-experiences perfect identity with the Universal Self within this system of worlds. In the Monad fate and free will are one; for all the laws and accidents of the universe, which we may think of as the choice of God, the choice of the Universal Self, are also our own choice through our ultimate identity with that Universal Self. In the Monad, the God within and the God without are realised as one, and thus even the events and circumstances which seem to come to us from outside are the deliberate choice of our own ultimate and most intimate selves. Subjective and objective, self and not-self, and all other pairs of opposites, achieve in the Monad their solution and integration so far as humanity in this system is concerned.

We might think of the Monad as standing on the threshold of the Universal and gazing out into the world of the particular, dwelling in a world of unity but turning his attention into a world of diversity. The Monad then projects into the world of the particular an expression of himself, which distinctly belongs to the world of diversity, an individuality. This individuality is the soul, often called the Ego or I, because it belongs to a level of consciousness where separation and division and individuality, though refined, are real.

The Ego is thought of as having three aspects for which the terms will, wisdom and activity have been suggested. The will aspect is the individual's remembrance of the Monad, who is his true self, his "father in heaven. This spiritual will is indeed a remembrance of the future, a power to implant the end in the means, to go forward with a sure knowledge of ultimate destiny; for everything that befalls is, it will be recollected, the choice of the Monad through his identity with the Universal Self.

The wisdom aspect of the individuality has been referred to as the Christ in man, the universal principle of love which must be virgin-born in every human being and must be "the way, the truth and the life" for him in his task of reconciling the particular with the Universal.

Through its activity aspect, the individuality achieves a recurrent partial expression of itself in the personality, also a trinity, consisting of intellect, emotion and physique. Again and again the immortal individuality puts forth a personality into the world we know, gradually learning to know life and the laws of life (which are the laws of his own innermost nature, the choice of the Monad) through successive physical incarnations. From each incarnation he successively withdraws, gradually dissolving the personality as he assimilates its experiences and transmutes them into concepts and capacities. Then after a pause in the inward bliss of a temporary and relative completeness, he turns outwards again to express himself through another personality, under a great universal law of cycles, of out-breathing and inbreathing, systole and diastole.

The personality does not remember previous incarnations except through the immortal individuality, and, since most personalities about us are very far from being full expressions of the individuality or higher self, such memories are rare and spasmodic.

To fulfil the needs of man in this huge, age-long experiment in the use of free will to master the universe—his own universe, the choice of the Monad—there have been vast cyclic patterns of changing races, religions, civilisations, cultures and environments upon this planet and upon others.

EVOLUTION IN TIME

By exercise of free will, man learns to know himself; for, if he is true to his own nature, his environment enriches him and aids him to grow, but, if he is untrue to his own nature, then environment frustrates him. Self and environment are one, two aspects of a single nature. By being his own self, man masters environment, man discovers himself. Since man is the microcosm of the universe, every outward object and relationship is an expression of his innermost nature; and, in the world about him, in its beauty or hideousness, peace or turmoil, he is seeing an intimate portrait of himself, which exists to instruct him.

This process of inter-relationship arising from the underlying unity of self and not-self, of the individual and his environment, is known as the law of Karma, the Sanskrit word for action. It is the law of freedom of choice by which man asserts his divine independence and discovers his ability not merely to react but also to act. It is also the law by which, from our personal and external point of view, it may be said that perfect justice rules the world in all things, that ultimately no good is unrewarded, no evil unpunished, no advantage unmerited, no suffering undeserved, and both hope and fear are alike unnecessary.

These processes go on in an orderly cyclic sequence through the whole duration of a universe. Fresh outpourings of life, or rather of lives, are successively sent forth on the downward arc of immer-

sion in matter through identification with material structures and organisms. Successively the lives swing on to individualisation and self-consciousness, through the conscious imperfection of human nature. Then they pass on towards the conscious perfection and integrated simplicity of super-humanity.

It thus follows that we have simultaneously in our universe beings at every stage in this age-long process of experiencing. We have innumerable lives in the universe which are behind us in evolution and are obviously less developed than we are in complexity and heterogeneity of organisation and in freedom of choice and power of response. Similarly, we have in the universe others vastly superior to ourselves, older souls, who have completed the relationships and experiences of our human stage of evolution and have ascended to stages which lie beyond us but to which we too shall in time ascend.

Super-humans are not often to be met with among earth's humanity, since They would not find there an environment suited to Their needs; but a group of Super-humans is said to constitute an Inner Government of this planet. Regarding our earth's humanity as a single great entity, these exalted Personages form the Higher Self of our humanity. Operating mainly on the higher planes of consciousness and rarely on the physical, They form the immortal Individuality of the human race on this planet, whose will, wisdom and activity incarnate in the successive races, faiths, cultures and other broad movements of humanity, and who also guide humanity in the mass through the experiences which will lead to liberation from the human phase of existence.

There are also other streams of lives which are occupying this universe with us but which are not taking quite the same evolutionary pathway as humans do and so do not express themselves physically, or in other cases they do not pass at the physical level through the stages corresponding to those at which humans stand. Instead they finish the physical part of their existence as plant or bird or fish or in some similarly lower form to pursue the later stages in superphysical forms. To some of these other streams of lives are given such names as fairies, angels, shining ones, *devas* ; and all play a part in the activity, balance and economy of the great whole of life.

It may well be that, from the point of view of the great Artist behind it all, there is no progression as we know it in this huge evolutionary scheme and that it all has its being in the perfection of an Eternal Now. It may be that evolution in time is, from one point of view, an illusion. Theosophists do not quarrel with the relative truth of various doctrines of illusion; but they hold that, if there is an illusion, we are living within its laws and must recognise for practical purposes the succession of past and future and the existence of lives at more advanced and less advanced stages.

There is always, too, the great problem of what the purpose of it all can be. The theosophical account of the universe throws this problem back at the individual ; for it tells him that the whole universe is ultimately his own choice, and that, if he wants to know why he chose thus, he must search into his own innermost nature and know himself and not hope for an answer in words from some external authority. In fact, the purpose of life, the motive which prompts the Creator to enjoy Himself in this great work of art which is His universe, can be known only through the mystical experience of participation in the work of art and not through intellectual explanations of a metaphysical character. It is discovered, in fact, through living and not through talking, reading or speculating about life.

CHAPTER VI: THE EVOLUTION OF MAN**THE CONTINUITY OF MAN**

IN an old-fashioned Christian tradition, man is thought of as “having a soul. If one could discover accurately what this has meant to some who have accepted such a statement, it is probable that they often thought of the soul as an invisible external object, rather like a captive balloon, which the individual trailed about with him and into which he would withdraw at death.

Theosophists, on the contrary, have asserted that man is a soul and has a body, a view with which any more deeply thinking Christian would agree. The soul or the immortal higher self of the individual human being is referred to in theosophical literature as the individuality or the Ego. Within and beyond the soul is the spirit or Monad, which may be described as the level of consciousness at which the particular self knows his identity with the Universal Self, the spark of divinity which is the very foundation of human nature. The Monad represents that mystical reality which is spoken of by Jesus when he quoted the 82nd Psalm which says, “Ye are gods and all of you are children of the Most High.”

The Ego or soul of man, however, is not merged in the Universal and is a distinct separate individuality. For the purpose of his growth through experience, the soul of man projects a personality, consisting of mind, emotional nature and physical body. When he has exhausted the possibilities of one personality, the soul withdraws from it by the process called death, and subsequently projects a new personality.

This is the process known as reincarnation. The doctrine of reincarnation forms an important part of many of the world’s religious systems, particularly among Hindus and Buddhists. In some communities where the doctrine prevails it is accepted simply as a part of nature which any individual can experience for himself and which has nothing very wonderful or strange about it. It is not unusual in such communities to come upon cases of people claiming to remember their lives in previous personalities; and such memories are accepted as interesting but ordinary. Literature, especially travel literature, is so full of cases of this type that it is not necessary to cite them. In many western countries, also, quite a number of individuals claim to remember past lives. Cases of this type are more numerous, far more numerous, than is generally realized; for relatively few of those who have or think they have such memories are ready to speak about them. Whatever their cause, such interior visions have an intimate psychological significance for those who experience them, and they are rarely exposed to the probing of the unsympathetically curious or to the ridicule of those who are eager to assert a superiority of adjustment.

Experiences of this kind have naturally met with various kinds of adverse criticism, and various attempts, some of them obviously valid in certain cases, have been made to explain them away. Telepathy has now reached the stage of laboratory demonstration and proof, and this phenomenon does seem to supply an explanation of some alleged memories of past lives. The writer has been struck, for example, by the number of people whom he has encountered who have claimed to remember a past life in which they were present at the events described in the Christian gospels, particularly the Crucifixion. They have not necessarily been people who would readily have imbibed this impression as part of their juvenile religious education; but almost certainly they cannot all have been present at the Crucifixion. That event has been the centre of thought and feeling from millions of people down the

years, and it may well be that the thought-form or psychic current thus established has impressed itself upon many sensitive people, so that they may easily feel that they were actually present at the event.

In other cases the memories of past lives may be fantasies built up to compensate for something lacking in a person's pattern of normal life. For example, a modern writer on the subject has referred to a Middle West town in America where there were four or five women who all claimed to be reincarnations of Cleopatra and who, incidentally, were not on speaking terms with one another. A cynic remarked to the writer, with regard to reincarnation, that all the front seats seemed to be taken. The whole subject necessarily provides a field for unlimited fantasy-building; and we must take this into account, giving it neither too much nor too little significance. Reincarnation has quite an impressive case literature, and good test conditions seem to have prevailed in the examination of many of these cases.

On the subject of reincarnation there is a question which many people naturally ask. They say, "If we reincarnate, why do I not remember my past lives?" This question involves a fallacy; and a clarification of it will help towards a better understanding of the theosophical view of the constitution of man.

The real reincarnationist answer to that question is, "You never had any past lives." The point is that that which asks the question is the personality and not the immortal higher self. A particular personality, consisting of intellect, emotional nature and physical body, is projected by the higher self and had no previous existence. It may be conditioned in various ways by the previous experiences of that higher self in connection with other previous personalities; but, as a personality, it has no capacity for remembering those other personalities. And this question, "Why do I not remember my past lives?" is always asked by the personality; for the immortal higher self does not need to ask it. He remembers all and understands the true significance of the experiences of his successive personalities.

One could illustrate the relationship by a simile. The higher self might be regarded as the actor, and the personality as the role. The actor who, tonight, is playing the role of Macbeth may, as an actor, remember that on the preceding night he played the part of Hamlet. But Macbeth, as Macbeth, can have no recollection of Hamlet.

It is in the higher self that all the memories are stored, and at the stage reached by our present humanity, those memories can only occasionally filter down into the personality and be recorded in the mind of the personality. This seems to happen mainly in four different types of circumstances. First, it may happen when the individual concerned is a very advanced specimen of the race and has therefore made his personality into a true expression of the higher self. This is rare, for most personalities in this world are not obedient instruments in the hands of the higher selves but generally pursue a course of their own, activated largely by a wonderfully elaborate system of automatic reactions. Secondly, memories of a past life may be experienced when some special event or circumstance in the present personality-existence sets up, as it were, a note or vibration or pattern that is peculiarly evocative in relation to some event of a past life and so puts the present personality in touch with the memories of the higher self. Thirdly, memories seem to occur occasionally among very primitive people who spend only a short time between incarnations. Fourthly, memories seem to occur sometimes in the case of people, not necessarily primitive, who have died young and have returned quickly to reincarnation. A good deal of our most interesting case literature bearing on reincarnation falls into the last two categories.

This conception of life in a long series of successive personalities is to be found in many religions and philosophies. It is repeatedly described in various Hindu scriptures, often very vividly. In the *Bhagavad Gita* we find such passages as the following:

“As a man, casting off worn-out garments, taketh new ones, so the Dweller in the body, casting off worn-out bodies, entereth into others that are new.”

“As the Dweller in the body experienceth in the body childhood, youth and old age, so passeth he on to another body. The steadfast one grieveth not thereat.”

PALINGENESIS IN CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM

It is interesting to notice that the idea of reincarnation prevailed in several religious traditions from which it has subsequently been excluded. Thus, if one is to accept the statements of the Christian gospels, Jesus accepted and taught reincarnation or palingenesis. In St. Matthew's Gospel, Jesus states on a couple of occasions that John the Baptist was a reincarnation of Elijah. The idea of reincarnation was also current at the time, and we read of speculation as to whether Jesus might not himself be Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the prophets. The doctrine of reincarnation seems also to have been current in the early church. It was strongly held among the Gnostics, and it is expressed clearly in the *Pistis Sophia*. In some cases the early fathers imply only pre-existence of the soul in other worlds; in other cases they imply successive lives in this. Origen asks in his controversial writings against Celsus: “Is it not more in conformity with reason that every soul for certain mysterious reasons—I speak now according to the opinion of Pythagoras and Plato and Empedocles, whom Celsus frequently names—is introduced into a body and introduced according to its deserts -and former actions?” Preexistence at least, and possibly reincarnation, is implied in the well-known query of Jesus concerning the blind man—whether this man sinned, or his parents, that he was born blind.

It is also interesting to speculate as to why reincarnation should gradually have been abandoned by Christians. The idea of reincarnation was widely current among the upper classes in the Roman Empire and in various Mystery Schools; and it cannot have seemed at all necessary for Christians to propagate that doctrine when they had other doctrines which they felt to be uniquely their own and much more important. It was not the business of Christians to teach reincarnation. At the same time, a recollection that reincarnation may have been very much a feature of the thought-climate of the times can help us to some interesting reinterpretations of the Christian scriptures and can suggest a meaning wholly different from the customary Calvinistic one for such a passage as the opening chapter of the Epistle to the Ephesians.

Later, as the Mysteries declined and as Christianity became a religion of the humblest and least philosophical classes, reincarnation, a doctrine increasingly associated with paganism which was persecuting Christianity, was abandoned by Christians as belonging to the wrong side in the conflict. The Gnostic Christians, who were reincarnationists, became unable in the end to dissociate themselves from the declining paganism, and they were ultimately excluded from the Christian body.

Moreover, in an age of growing barbarism, Christianity became increasingly materialised and stressed more and more the bitterly selfish ideal of personal salvation, losing sight of the teaching of Jesus that he who would save his life must lose it. Such a materialistic view of the purpose of life gave rise to a strong desire to shut out any doctrine that required belief in the destruction of the personality or even of the physical body. So Christians abandoned the middle way of integration through sacrifice and divided man's future into the two irresolvable opposites of an everlasting and materialistic

heaven and an everlasting hell. This view was then read back into the sayings of Jesus, and where he had spoken of condemnation for an age he was credited with preaching a doctrine of “eternal damnation,” a doctrine which the Greek text of the New Testament almost certainly does not support and which was contrary to the evident spirit of the teachings of Jesus.

Nevertheless the Gnostic doctrines, including reincarnation, persisted even through the dismal depravity and ignorance of the Middle Ages; and the Christian church had to fight such a sect as the Albigensians with torture, fire and bloodshed. The inherent reasonableness of the doctrine of reincarnation of various kinds caused them to reappear from time to time among Christians; and one of their chief attractions was that they were compatible with a conception of divine justice, which was hardly true of some of the doctrines which had supplanted them. The anonymous author of *Lux Orientalis*, a little work on the subject published in London in 1662, summed up the matter as follows:

“ I say the Doctrine of Praeexistence thus stated, is in nothing that I know of, an enemy to *common Theology* ; all things hence proceeding as in our ordinary Systems; with this only difference, that this *Hypothesis* clears the *divine* Attributes from any shadow of harshness or inequality, since it supposeth us to have sinned and deserved all the misery we suffer in this condition before we came hither ; whereas the other which teacheth, that we became both guilty and miserable by the single and sole offence of *Adam*, when as we were not then in being; or as to our souls as much as *potentially* in our great Progenitor ; beares somewhat hardly upon the repute of the *Divine perfection*.

In much the same way, reincarnation can be found in the traditions of Islam, although it is not now generally preached as part of that religious system. There are texts in the *Quran* which seem clearly to refer to it. For example: “How is it that ye believe not in God? Since ye were dead and He gave you life, He will hereafter cause you to die and will again restore you to life; then shall ye return unto Him.” (ii, 28.) But, as in Christianity, so also in Islam it has been among the more refined schools of mysticism rather than among the masses that reincarnation was taught and understood. The thirteenth century Persian poet, Jalāl-uddīn Rūmī, wrote a striking summary of the reincarnation idea:

“I died from the mineral and became a plant.
I died from the plant and reappeared in an animal.
I died from the animal and became a man.
Wherefore, then, should I fear? When did I grow less by dying?
Next time I shall die from the man,
That I may grow the wings of the angel.
From the angel too must I seek advance.
All things perish save His Face.”

GROUP SOULS

This description from the Persian poet gives a good summary of the view of reincarnation which is current among those modern gnostics, the theosophists. Life is expressing itself even through forms which we classify as inorganic. When the experience of embodiment in inorganic substances has been completed, the lives pass through a long period of embodiment in successive vegetable forms which have increasing complexity of organisation and powers of adaptation and response. Then comes a period of embodiment in animal forms.

In these pre-human stages, the lives or Monads do not express themselves in separate individualities ; and minerals, vegetables and animals are animated by group souls and have large parts of their experiences in common. This offers an explanation of some of the remarkable co-ordinations seen in

the actions of flocks of birds or of the fact that, if a large group of rats or other small animals is taught to react to stimulus in a certain way, subsequent generations of the rats can learn the same reaction rather more quickly. The experience is being assimilated by the group soul which animates them all.

As animals become more individual in their responses, the group souls split up and serve a decreasing number of animals, or rather, are expressed through a decreasing number of animals. When a particular animal expresses his individuality strongly through affection, intelligence or strength of individual volition, he becomes permanently dissociated from his group soul and is individualised. The first Aspect of the Solar Deity becomes dimly alive deep within his nature, and in his next incarnation he will be human, probably of a very primitive type governed by instinct and by tribal patterns of behaviour. But even at the level he is capable of displaying excellent human qualities, as anybody who loves and understands domestic animals can well imagine.

Beyond the human stage in evolution lies a superhuman stage or many superhuman stages.

CHAPTER IX: THE PURPOSE OF EVIL**THE PROBLEM OF EVIL**

For the religious mind evil presents a great problem. Religion declares that God is good and also that God is all-powerful. But if God is all-powerful, He must be responsible for everything, either by His direct action or by His non-intervention in what occurs. But, since things that happen are often evil, how then can He be good?

The problem is rendered still more acute by various sayings in the scriptures of the world's great religions. Thus, turning to the Bible, we read the following words in Isaiah, chapter 45, verse 7. "I form the light and create darkness: I make peace and create evil. I the Lord do all these things." Are we then to take it that a good God made a bad world?

If an all-powerful Deity has created not merely people of evil character but people born to pain, frustration, moral deficiency and congenital idiocy, if He permits the strife in nature and the cruelties in man, how then can He be good? An eastern version of God as a Trinity describes Him as Creator, Preserver and Destroyer. Many people feel that they can tolerate creation and preservation and can attribute them to God; but many do not like the idea of destruction. A rather preposterous piece of verse by Browning, in which he describes a man murdering a woman, ends with the words:

"And all night long we have not stirred,
And yet God has not said a word."

The pious person, who regards God as an external and intervening agency, may well feel that God has not said a word about a lot of things that have happened about which He ought to have had something to say.

The view held by so many theosophists, that we create our own destiny and that God is not an external intervening agency, but the very life within us, can answer a part of these problems, but not all. For example, if we say that suffering arises for an individual from wrong action in a past life, we do not solve the problem but only push it back a stage further. We have still to discover why the individual should have been permitted to perform that wrong action in the past. Or, if we say that all that happens to us is the choice, not of an external Deity, but of Divinity dwelling within us, then we are driven to wonder why Divinity should choose the way of pain and friction in so many cases.

One's appreciation of evil is an individual matter; but there is one view of evil which most theosophists would accept. They would agree that evil is simply a negation, the absence of something. We tend to think of evil as something positive because it will often express itself in some positive thought or word or act or even personality which we regard as evil; but even here second thoughts will show us that we can interpret the positively evil and harmful act as arising from the absence of something.

A simple example at the ethical level will show this. We might take the case of a man who has cleverness, courage, a capacity for gaining people's sympathy, all good and worthy qualities. But we might imagine that at the same time he is lacking in benevolence and a sense of responsibility for the happiness of others. Through that absence of something, his other qualities, though good in themselves, are drawn into a disharmony, and he becomes a fraudulent company promoter, a confidence trickster or something else that we should classify as evil.

Similarly we could argue that evil of some other kind is also due to the absence of something. We could agree that evil in the form of ill-health is due to the absence of something. We can see that injury of any kind from some outside force is always due to the fact that we have been unable to produce some appropriate counterbalancing and therefore harmonising force.

So, humanly speaking, an evil person is a person with something lacking, something negative and undeveloped. An evil act is one in which all the necessary factors have not been taken into consideration, an act which has sprung from the motives of an incomplete human character and personality or an inadequate perception of reality.

But incompleteness in itself is not the whole story, for if we look about us in human society we see many people who are very incomplete, primitive people who are not merely incomplete but, one might almost say, fragmentary so far as conscious self-control is concerned.

And yet it would be very harsh to describe such people as evil. The world is full of drifting, negative, rather futile people who are certainly incomplete in many ways, but who are certainly not evil in any normally accepted sense of the word.

What really characterises the strong figures of evil is not incompleteness alone but also contrast. There are people who retain elements of negation or incompleteness in themselves when they have advanced very far in the development of positive powers and qualities. It is in these cases that the disharmony and the evil seem greatest and most sinister. It is not only the negation, not only the shadow that makes for what we look upon as strong and positive and purposeful evil as distinct from the futile drifting inadequacy of the average incomplete person. It is not the shadow alone which gives power to the "powers of darkness" or blackness to the practitioner of the "black arts". It is the harsh contrast between the light and the shadow.

Most of the people among whom we move in this world have a good deal of shadow about them. But they are usually commonplace, mediocre people in whom the contrast of light and shadow, of positive qualities and negative qualities, is not very great or even very ungracious. But the great historic figures of evil show deep contrasts, contrasts which are harsh and shattering to those who have opposed them. The area of shadow may be relatively small and the light may be broad and bright, but it is the fierceness of the contrast that makes such people powerful, sinister and full of stress and sorrow.

Such people have left some part of their evolution incomplete. Somewhere far back they dropped a stitch, as it were. In some part of their natures they remain children or adolescents and are not fully adult, though they may have very highly developed adult powers and qualities in other directions. Generally the lack of completeness is in the emotional nature, so that we find the sort of individual who meets life with a vigorous intellect, a wide range of talent, a strong will, great self-control and sometimes considerable charm, but with the cold irresponsibility of a self-centered child. In such a case we have intense separative pride and a career of brutal self-assertion at the expense of others, though the brutality and selfishness are often cleverly veiled, and such individuals can often purchase the aid of others in their schemes by the distribution of well calculated concessions, benefits and flatteries.

And so it is in other matters. Evil for anybody involves negation and contrast. And since nature makes provision for the protection of young growing things, this humanity of ours is normally shielded from exposure to some of the great negations and contrasts in nature on the physical plane and upon others. For each human life and for each community there is a limit set, a sort of protective web,

within which karma operates and which protects the individual or the community, from more than a certain due measure of stress, limiting alike the power to do mischief and the liability to suffer pain. But the limit can be broken or the web torn by sustained and deliberate effort directed to such objects as the grasping of power or the inflicting of cruelty ; and then forces too powerful for humanity to cope with break in and result is ghastly diseases, the horrors of war, lunacy and other tribulations which cannot quite be paralleled in the case of plants and animals.

Yet, granting all these things, the problem remains as to what function negation or evil can have in life, and why it is that "the Lord" should be willing to "create evil".

THE MANIFESTED UNIVERSE

Theosophy asserts that there is one Universal Self in whom all particular selves are ultimately one. That one

Universal Self, for the purpose of satisfying His creative desire, has embarked upon this mysterious work of art which we call the universe. The Unity has, as it were, put on a robe of multiplicity by putting forth these myriads of separate lives, each made in His own image. And the great process of evolution consists in all these separate lives gradually discovering that they are really one Life. In that process there is much friction, much breaking of forms, many discontinuities, much conflict and destruction; but that is only in the outer forms. In the ensouling life there is perfect continuity. For all the seeming conflict there is no waste and no loss. There is a perfect ordered economy by which all the separate lives pass through this school of experience which the universe provides. And until all have entered individually into the full experience of the unity of life, there will be for each some degree of incompleteness and hence evil.

If we think of evolution as taking place in time and as being progressive in its nature, something that advances and develops, we are bound to realise that evolution implies friction. For nothing can move on without friction somewhere. Even in the most everyday physical operations we depend upon friction. We cannot walk along the street without friction. If there was no friction, one's feet would slither to and fro but there could be no forward movement. In our efforts to gain control over the forces of nature and construct mechanisms of various kinds, we direct our attention, not to eliminating friction altogether, but to confining it to useful places. We may lubricate the bearings of a machine, but we do not remove the cogs from the gear wheels. So in more metaphorical senses we try to extend our conquest over the resources of life not by eliminating friction, but by seeing that it is our servant and not our master. It would seem that similarly the supreme Being uses friction in His work of art and submits to limitation for the purpose of reaching His mysterious objective.

The world's great religions have all asserted this underlying Unity of life in some fashion. They have asserted that although this Unity which we call life has donned this robe of multiplicity which we call the universe, yet nevertheless the Unity is still there underneath the robe. And in the religions that Unity is often portrayed as God.

"All are but parts of one tremendous Whole Whose body Nature is, and God the Soul."

Sometimes, or in fact in most cases, God is thought of as something or somebody external to us. But if we examine some of the more profound assertions of religion, particularly of those aspects of religion which theosophists most particularly seek to interpret and re-state, we find it declared repeatedly that God is within us. In the Christian tradition it is often asserted that the Second Person of the triune Deity dwells within us, so that St. Paul writes of "Christ in you the hope of glory". And Jesus

is recorded as quoting the 82nd Psalm, saying, "Ye are gods and all of you are children of the Most High." In Hindu tradition, the Bhagavad Gita, declares: "The Lord dwelleth in the hearts of all beings, by His illusive power causing all beings to revolve, as though mounted on a potter's wheel."

This conception leads to the idea that God is the very self of every one of us, that we are all gods in the becoming, that all of us, however degraded and incomplete we may be, are dwelling places of the one divine Life. The idea that God is the ultimate doer in every action has been strangely expressed in some of the great scriptures. In the Bhagavad Gita, for example, the supreme Self is caused to say, "I am the gambling of the cheat." If we think of some dishonest, futile and degraded person playing cards for money in some disreputable place and trying to win by trickery, and then consider that that person's activity is a manifestation of the divine, an expression of a godhead evolving in and through him, a godhead which is his very self, we have a good example of the implications of such a conception. The same idea is expressed by Emerson in a well-known line, when he made the supreme Self say, "When Me they fly I am the wings." There we have the idea that even the denial of the one Life, the apparent opposition and the revolt against the one Life, are themselves part of that Life, sustained by that Life and made possible by It and used by It as a mode of expression.

From this it follows that, since the one supreme Self is the ultimate very self in each of us, everything that happens to us our own choice. Through our unity, our identity with the one Life which en-souls the whole universe, we have chosen all the laws of that universe and have accepted them in our innermost being, including such frictions as they may involve for us. And the laws of the universe necessarily imply friction since they are laws of limitation and hence of incompleteness.

We know things only because they have frontiers. The universe can become manifest only through limitation, through having frontiers of some sort, whether temporal, spatial, qualitative or quantitative. Manifestation can take place only because the Deity within makes a sacrifice of self-limitation. Hence in the Christian tradition He is referred to as the "Lamb slain from the foundation of the world".

From the point of view of our separate personalities, of course, the idea that everything that happens to us is the choice of our own innermost self is not acceptable. In so far as we identify ourselves with temporary and separate personalities, that choice of the supreme Self within us will often seem inimical to us. But to the individual in whom the sense of separateness and the competitive instinct have been eliminated by universal love, the conception will no longer seem strange or disturbing. Indeed such an individual will have entered the company of the saints and mystics who know by direct experience that it is true. He will have identified himself with the great sacrifice which is the choice of the supreme Being in bringing the universe into manifestation, and friction will become his servant and instrument and no longer his master.

The paradoxes of the conflict between the personality self and the immortal Self within, and the final surrender of the former to the latter, are described as follows in the *Bhagavad Gita*: "Let him raise the self by the Self and not let the self become depressed; for verily is the Self the friend of the self, and also the Self the self's enemy. The Self is the friend of the self of him in whom the self by the Self is vanquished; but to the un-subdued self the Self verily becometh hostile as the enemy. The higher Self of him who is Self-controlled and peaceful is uniform in cold and heat, pleasure and pain, as well as in honour and dishonour."

THE MORAL PROBLEM

Granted this conception of the place of evil in the universe, there remains the problem of -what the individual human being is to do about it.

The first principle with regard to the attitude of the individual towards what he conceives to be evil has been expressed long ago in the words, "Resist not evil." This does not mean that we are not to cope with evil or that we are to do nothing about it. But if we take the view that evil is a negation, the absence of something, a condition of incompleteness, then it would evidently be futile to try to negate a negation. The proper course is to be positive, to find out what is lacking and try to supply it or evoke it. Mere denunciations of evil are singularly ineffective. For psychological reasons connected with their own incompleteness, many people enjoy engaging in such denunciations, but they are not very helpful to the world and can be actively harmful. We cannot create good-will by directing a campaign of hatred and denunciation against forms of ill-will. We cannot create peace merely by being passionately opposed to war. If we are to be effective we must contribute of ourselves the element that is lacking. We must ourselves be full of good-will or peace or kindness or whatever the quality may be whose absence is causing evil. By thus approaching the problem positively we have also a better chance of evoking those qualities in others.

Theosophists lay much stress upon the conception that thoughts are things. Every thought, every passing emotion, takes embodied form as an objective entity on the plane on which it is created. Thought expresses itself as a vibration and as a form. It is the vibration which gives rise to what we call "atmosphere," the feeling that surrounds places and people and which is peaceful or disturbed, helpful or unhelpful. The form is capable of attaching itself to another person and reacting powerfully upon him. Thus it is not only what we say or do that is effective for good or ill, but also all our thoughts and feelings and our attitude towards everybody with whom we have to do.

We ourselves are liable to be disturbed by other people according to what constitute our customary mental and emotional vibrations. If we yield often to anger and excitement, we are easily hurt or upset and quickly lose our calm when we are brought within range of another person who is suffering from these emotional failings. On the other hand, if we have learnt to be calm and detached, we shall then be able to control ourselves in the presence of another person's emotion and even exert a calming influence upon him. If we think of other people in the light of their evil qualities, the gaps in their natures, then we exert a steady invisible influence tending to push them into still greater unbalance. But if we think of others from the point of view of the immortal higher Self within, who is steadily striving to take control of his personality and express his completeness and his beauty of character through that personality, then we are giving real help and are rendering easier the growth of self-control and wisdom in the other person.

One of the reasons why it is often difficult for people to think constructively and take this integrative and peace-creating attitude towards others is that the greater part of mankind is at present engaged in developing the lower mind which deals with separate, concrete objects and is analytical and on the whole destructive in its operation until it is brought under the control of a still higher principle in man. Most people, too, have very little control over their minds and feelings and cannot keep them on any one theme for more than a few seconds at a time unless impelled by some strong motive of self-interest. This is really as it should be, for, if thought is a power, it is not good that it should yet be under the self-conscious control of the mass of humanity until ethical growth has gone a good deal further. Like every form of power, this also can be an intensifying factor in life and can intensify evil as well as good. Thought power used for a selfish purpose and to exert power over another person

greatly contributes to the disturbed state of the world and brings much suffering and frustration upon the individual who uses it thus.

Already active efforts have been made to use the power of thought for the purpose of selling unwanted objects, spreading political or religious doctrines or satisfying the desire of individuals for power and gratification; and these efforts have produced much social disorder and great psychological and sometimes great physical distress. Even the use of thought with a desire to help can sometimes be harmful until people have learnt that real help can never take the form of interference or the substitution of one's own judgment for that of another.

Into this whole uncontrolled area of thought and feeling a positive attitude must be brought. The attitude of opposing evils, of hating either sins or sinners, is unhelpful and largely unavailing. Evil itself is part of life, and though its elimination is steadily to be striven for as part of evolution and a natural aspect of our growth, it need not arouse disgust or indignation or lamentation. The good physician is kind, gentle and sympathetic, but he does not become angry or display excited emotion directed against the disease which he is attempting to end. He goes on quietly with his job, not immoderately elated and certainly not filled with vain self-congratulation in success and not depressed in failure.

The attitude of not resisting evil has been found very helpful in the face of many kinds of external troubles, such as physical pains, noises, interruptions and the like. If an individual accepts these things, lets the pain or noise or interruption pass through him without trying to resist, he suffers much less. To admit a failure or a mistake, also, quite simply, without regret or self-justification, is another form of acceptance which is psychologically cleansing as well as being wise and dignified.

While judgment on the subject is entirely a matter for the individual, theosophists have generally not been pacifists and some of them have had distinguished careers in the fighting services. Conflict is part of life and is not to be evaded. In other forms of conflict, too, theosophists have often taken an active and effective part. In relation to their numbers, a remarkably large proportion of theosophists have found their way into active politics, which is inevitably a negative as well as a positive and constructive career. Complete harmlessness is impossible for any human being. To drink a glass of water or take a walk across a field may bring death to millions of little microscopic creatures. In a given set of circumstances the conscientious individual will strive to see what course of action will best serve the great plan of evolution and will concern himself less with keeping his own hands prudentially clean. Many theosophists are vegetarians or at least refrain from eating the corpses of animals, and many are extremely active in movements for creating good-will and understanding among nations and communities; but they have not been afraid to drop some of these activities and abstinences to meet the crisis of a war or similar emergency.

A war, of course, does not remove the evil. It is only a way of flattening out a crisis, like the giving of a drug at the height of a dangerous illness. The drug may enable the patient to survive the crisis of his illness, but it may make it necessary for him to face a number of aftereffects which might not have come to him otherwise. In the long run he will have to make the full payment. So, in the theosophist's view of war, the destruction of our enemy by bombs or starvation does not end the conflict. We shall have to meet our enemy again sometime or other and solve the problem in an entirely positive way, by love alone. By that time perhaps both we and our enemy will be better able to reach that solution.

Viewing man as an evolving creature, the theosophist accepts the fact that the mass of mankind has hardly yet grown up enough to think of settling conflicts otherwise than by some degree of vio-

lence and suppression. To blame mankind for this would be as unreasonable as to blame a child of six for not being sixteen or sixty. And living among the communities of mankind, many theosophists have endeavoured to be helpful by taking part in every ordinary human activity and trying to lead on towards the next step in humanity's progress towards wise and humane living rather than make an ineffectual stand for a standard of behaviour that is beyond the comprehension of the average man.

THE INDIVISIBILITY OF EXPERIENCE

There is a further problem connected with choice of good and evil, of right and wrong. We tend to make this choice in the light of our own personal separate existence and forget the larger whole of which we form a part. Thus, looking at it from this limited and personal point of view, we think that good consists of the things which we like and evil of the things which we dislike. When we are told to prefer that which is good to that which is evil, we imagine that this means to cling to one part of life and reject another part. And yet theosophy asserts that life is one and ultimately indivisible; and there is the law of karma which declares that this unity of life makes itself known through the fact that if, as personalities, we cling to something and attach ourselves to it by desire, we shall be granted our desire at some time but we shall also receive its opposite. In fact we cannot have something for nothing. We shall pay for everything we receive. Only if we act as one with life, impersonally, with perfect love and perfect detachment, can we become karmaless and free from the pairs of opposites.

This law shows itself in some of the troubles that afflict good and earnest people who try to choose the good and reject the evil. They find that as eagerly as they strive to grasp the good and pleasant things to themselves, the evil and unpleasant things come following in their wake. They try to meditate upon peace and beauty and find that ugly and turbulent thoughts also rise up in them. They participate in beautiful ceremonies and then find themselves suffering from depression, irritability and various other forms of emotional instability.

Their mistake has been to grasp their ideals and their happy and beautiful experiences to themselves as personal possessions, instead of letting these things flow on through them as gifts to the world. If they are to suffer no rebound from an uplifting experience they must not try to hold it to themselves or make their personalities receptacles for it. They must become impersonal channels through which the experience will freely flow, not for them but as part of the economy of the great whole of life.

An ethic based only on the division of experience into categories of good and evil cannot endure. Theosophy asserts that life is one, and the process of evolution is the bringing of all this outward diversity and multiplicity into more and more intimate and purposeful relationships and ultimately into perfect unity. The real beauty and goodness of life lies in this inter-action of relative completeness and incompleteness which is always going on, this process of evolving relationship. It does not lie in our personal and partial prejudice for some object or situation which, in the light of our own incompleteness, seems to us to be complete. "We cannot tear an experience out of its full setting in the great flowing process and appropriate it to ourselves.

This might be expressed by saying that there is in life a greater good which overshadows, enfolds and integrates both the good and evil. We might imagine this as expressed in a triangle. At the base of the triangle we have the two corners, representing good and evil seen from a personal point of view as a pair of opposites. They are inseparably bound together, and we cannot have one- without the other. But at the apex of the triangle we have that greater good, the good which is the essence of life and

which draws into unity both aspects of this universal conflict of relative completeness and incompleteness. If we are to live happily, positively and creatively, we have to learn how to live increasingly according to that greater good, the good of the whole.

The part which friction plays in the successful operation of a machine is a good illustration of this. As we saw, we seek to eliminate friction at certain places, but we seek to retain it at others. We try to eliminate it at the bearings but retain it where the gear wheels grip each other. We seek the blend of these two elements which is appropriate for the purpose that we have in view. So in human life there is for every individual in every set of circumstances an entirely appropriate action. No system of ethics can quite lay down what that action will be. If it is to be perfectly performed it must spring from an inner harmony, a one-ness with life, so that we act, as it were, hand in glove with life.

The ethics of theosophy lay stress upon living in the present. It is at the point of the present moment that something of the eternal can enter into time. If an individual tries to erect some kind of goal or ideal for the future, it may not serve him well, for he is very likely to create it in the image of his own present in-completeness, and the reality, when he reaches it in the future, will be quite different from that image. A sense of direction he must of course have, but not a rigid standard of conformity. If the demands of the present are fully met, the future of itself is born. It is unnecessary to rush forward anxiously to abort the future. The present moment contains all that is necessary for the next step.

It is for these reasons that the Theosophical Society imposes no creed upon its members. On this subject Mrs. Besant once made the following comment:

“We are evolving creatures; we have not reached the end of evolution; we do not know the whole of truth. Truth is infinite as God is infinite; and an infinite universe within us and without us stretches beyond all bounds of space and time. How shall we at this early stage of evolution, how shall we dare to formulate a truth to impose upon our brethren, when we only know a fragment of any truth, and often that fragment but imperfectly? We may make a statement of a truth. It is a milestone on the road of evolution. As a milestone it is interesting; it shows the point to which human thought has travelled on some particular truth in nature; but the place of the milestone is on the side of the road to mark out how far a man has travelled; and if, instead of placing the truth as a milestone on the road, you take it and place it as a dogma, a barrier across the road, then how shall future generations win their way to higher and wider knowledge? They will have first to stop, and then to shatter the obstacle. We have done it, many of us, in the bitter day when we found that what we had been taught as truth was crumbling under the touch of reason, and breaking down under our feet like a rotten bridge in the hour of our sorest need. Shall we make this mistake again? We had to break the dogmas of our ancestors. Shall we make new dogmas for our posterity to break, and to suffer in the breaking as we have suffered? Rather let us trust the truth as we trust the sunlight. We do not need to prove the sun. It proves itself by illuminating every object on which it falls; and truth proves itself by illuminating the whole universe of discourse.”

These words have a particular application to the moral problem; for the vices of to-day are nearly always the virtues of yesterday, just as the truths of yesterday can become barriers against truth to-day. Thus the family loyalty which was a virtue in the robber baron of the dark ages has become intolerable in the great world communities of to-day. And the same evolutionary principle applies to moral problems in the individual. Anti-social attitudes arise from failure to grow in some respect. We fail to complete some phase of growth in early childhood and so suffer from a fixation, with consequent disturbance to our harmonious relationship with those about us.

Thus we grow and move on, and, no matter how grand and wonderful we become, there will always be a limitation to be overcome. If there was no limitation we should cease to exist. It is by limitation alone that manifestation is possible. And limitation always implies incompleteness and so evil. That we should ultimately become complete and so cease to exist is beyond our powers of thought and so not worth speculating about. Existence is a state of conditioned being, a state of being in relationship to something else. Unconditioned being is from our point of view non-being.

From the time point of view, the most practical comment on the evolutionary view of life and the problem of ultimate attainment is made in the little mystical treatise *Light on the Path* where it is said, "You will enter the light, but you will never touch the flame."

FATE AND FREE WILL

In so far as an answer can be given to the problem of the apparent conflict of the doctrines of free will and predestination or fate, theosophists find it in the conception that the particular self and the Universal Self are one. The Monad or Spirit, which may be defined as a condition of consciousness in which the particular self experiences his complete identity with the Universal Self, is the point of integration in this as in all other conflicts of opposites.

The Monad is, symbolically, the spark of divinity in each being; and it has been said that all the laws of the universe are the choice of the Monad. That is to say, through our ultimate oneness with the Universal Self, our oneness with God, we choose every experience that comes to us, however adverse it may seem to be from the limited point of view of some separate portion of our constitution, such as mind or body or the whole personality.

Thus the two apparently opposite teachings—that man is free to do as he chooses, and that the whole course of existence is predetermined and bound by fate—tend to be viewed by theosophists not as contradictory but as complementary, two aspects of a single truth which has its reality in the unity of the Self. Both doctrines are regarded as true inclusively, neither as true exclusively.

If this appears to involve problems with regard to causation and the succession of events in time, we must again remind ourselves that in theosophical teachings the familiar physical limitations of time, sequence, position and dimension as we know them are regarded as falling away as the consciousness is gradually attuned to the conditions of the successive planes that lie between the physical and the divine, between the particular and the Universal.

The more an individual clings to the particular and identifies himself with his personality and the cravings of his personality, the less is he free. He then merely reacts to stimulus, becomes a creature of habit; and fate seems to come upon him from outside. Then indeed is "the Self the self's enemy. But if he gives himself to the Universal Reality, lets life live itself through him, surrenders to God, lives his life from nearer the centre, then he becomes free and is capable not merely of reaction but of action. Freedom comes from within and is expressed in actions initiated from within.

The unity of the apparent opposites of free will and fate is recognised in many mystical and metaphysical conceptions, as in the aphorism of the German philosopher that freedom consists in submitting oneself to necessity, or in the words of the Anglican liturgy where reference is made to a Deity "in whose service is perfect freedom

CHAPTER XIII: THEOSOPHY AND CHRISTIANITY**THE INTERPRETATION OF RELIGION**

From time to time theosophy and the Theosophical Society have come under attack from Christian churches and organisations. This attack has usually been most vehement in Roman Catholic countries, where members of the Society have at various times been interfered with in their means of livelihood, have been treated with violence and otherwise persecuted, and have been restricted in their freedom of speech and assembly. In Protestant countries they have been troubled with adverse misinterpretations of their aims and activities. The present writer lately heard, for example, of a Protestant clergyman informing his Bible class that members of the Theosophical Society believe that when we die our souls go into animals and we shall be born again as pigs—a strange belief which the writer has never known any member of the Society to hold.

A difficulty which people have in understanding the Society is that they think of it as a body with a fixed creed. But the sole condition of membership of the Society, so far as acceptance of belief or principle is concerned, is the acceptance of the three objects of the Society; and, although the Society acts in one of its main capacities as a teaching body, yet it is not correct to assume that, because an individual is a member of the Society, he is a believer in any particular doctrine beyond those implied in the declared objects.

In the Society there are practising members of all the world's great religions—Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Parsis, Sikhs, Jains, Jews, Confucianists as well as Christians; and there are Christian members active in all the main Christian churches and attached to the communions of Rome, Canterbury or Geneva or any of several others. And those people have joined the Society without being required to surrender any portion of the beliefs which they may hold as members of those religions or churches. Moreover the Society is open to those who have no religious belief or to those who have a positive disbelief in religion or religions. The atheist or agnostic of any school, the Marxist, orthodox or un-orthodox, is received into full membership, if he accepts the three objects of the Society.

This breadth of view and eclecticism tend inevitably to make many people uneasy for the particular beliefs which they themselves cherish. If people come into the Society and find their own particular beliefs liable to be put on a level with other beliefs that are quite different, exposed not simply to the free air of discussion but to the mere inescapable fact of simple juxtaposition and contrast, it is a very testing experience. Hence many people do not seek that experience.

A committee of the Lambeth Conference of Anglican bishops in 1920 reported that “the committee, while acknowledging that there is nothing in the avowed objects of the Theosophical Society which is in itself incompatible with loyal membership of the church, desire to impress urgently upon members of the church the necessity of the greatest caution in pursuing the study of theosophy.” For anybody not really ready to endure or at least risk the quiet collapse of old values and the strong though gently expressed challenge of new ones, this is quite sound advice.

Behind all views, religious or other, there lies truth, the reality which all views and beliefs attempt in some way to interpret or explain. That truth is real theosophy. In an official statement of the Society's General Council, theosophy is defined as “the body of truths which forms the basis of all religions and which cannot be claimed as the exclusive possession of any.” Members of the Society have to some extent found theosophy of their own, and they talk and write about it and expound it; but they

are also trying to discover theosophy, a deeper truth, a truth more universally applicable, more free from the limitations which are always present when we try to give truth expression in words.

With this background we can try to understand the body of interpretation which members of the Society have offered with regard to Christianity. It has naturally been principally those who have lived in Christian countries and have grown up accustomed to Christian observances who have attempted to expound Christianity as theosophy or theosophy as Christianity ; but there have also been those here and there who have ventured upon this task from a Hindu or Buddhist or some other background.

There has thus developed within the Society a tradition of Christian living and thought and interpretation of quite a unique character, containing within itself great variety and involving the uncovering of much that is new and valuable and also probably the restoration of much that is old and valuable.

THE CHRIST

Probably the best starting point in trying to examine this interpretation of Christianity is to see what theosophists tend to think about the Christ. That surely is what Christians will seek first in examining anybody's interpretation of their religion. "What think ye of Christ?" is the natural question; or, more intimately, more directly and more solemnly addressed to each individual, is the question, "Who say ye that I am?"

As a broad generalisation it is probably true to say that the last century or so has seen much more stress placed on the man Jesus and his life and teachings than upon the Christ seen as the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, Christ as Deity. The Godhead has been somewhat lost to view as the result of an understandable stress of interest in the manhood.

Theosophists have tended to see several layers of possible interpretation in the tradition of the Christ, several layers or modes of interpretation not mutually exclusive, quite in harmony -with one another, yet responding to different needs of the human mind and heart. We shall briefly review these layers of meaning or interpretation in order, coming first to the most universal and passing to the more particular and localised.

Therefore let it be said first that theosophists have gone a long way towards restoring in our appreciation the significance and reality of the Universal Christ, Christ as Deity.

There are various references to the Universal Christ, the Cosmic Christ, clearly implicit in the scriptures. There is, for example, the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. But the Cosmic Christ, the Christ as Deity, is for most people the Christ of the great historic creeds. In the Nicene Creed we have the Christ referred to as the "only-begotten" or "alone-born" Son of God, indicating that he was not born from a pair of opposites or a syzygy. He is described as "begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God."

To identify that aspect of the Creator of the Universe entirely with an individual who walked this earth about two thousand years ago was quite natural and easy in olden times when people believed that this earth was the centre of the universe and that the sun, moon, stars and planets revolved round the earth fixed to rotating spheres which carried these various luminous objects round not more than a mile or so above our heads. But when that theory of the universe was abandoned and it became possible to gaze into the depths of space and see the myriads of suns and systems greater

than our own, then the focus of values in medieval Christianity was challenged. Hence a discreet vagueness has arisen with regard to identifying Jesus Christ the teacher with Christ as Deity.

Yet theosophists have found a great reality in the mysterious doctrine of the Trinity, which is indeed one of those "truths which form the basis of all religions," for we find it in some form expressed in nearly every great religion. They have perceived in the universal nature of things a Christ aspect. Born, so far as manifestation is concerned, of the interplay of spirit and virgin matter, the Christ aspect of the one imperishable supreme Reality is the integrating life in all things. Yet this aspect of Reality always was, whether there was manifestation or not.

It is useless to discuss or argue about ultimate mysteries of this kind. In times of illumination or deep meditation, we can sometimes get a glimpse of what these things mean and how they respond to the demands of experience. The important thing that follows for theosophists is that there is the Christ aspect, a God the Son aspect, in everything. Since that aspect is an aspect of Life Universal, it has its correspondences in every form and expression of life in all the worlds. That which was slain from the foundation of the world, that which made the great sacrifice of being crucified upon the cross of material existence in order to bring into being this great work of art which we call the universe, is ubiquitously present in all beings within the universe.

The Christ is expressed in collective humanity, particularly in the Great Brotherhood, the Communion of Saints. Among its great hierarchy of exalted Beings is One who in particular represents the Christ aspect of life ; and He is behind the great religions of mankind, either coming into incarnation directly Himself to found them or committing the task to another. In the case of the Christian religion, theosophists have suggested that he worked through the personality of Jesus, and that, at a certain stage in the career of Jesus, the latter was taken possession of by the great Teacher, the Bodhisattva of eastern tradition. That is why some books refer to "the disciple Jesus".

At another level the Christ aspect of life has its being in each one of us, "Christ in you the hope of glory." In olden times there was much theological controversy about the two natures in the Christ, the divine and the human. Theosophists would claim that there are two natures in all of us, the divine and the human. In the incarnated historic Jesus Christ, the two natures are thought of as having been expressed together in a perfect harmony. In us the human side has not yet entered into harmony with the divine, the lower self has not yet surrendered to the highest in us. Nevertheless we are gods in the becoming. We have the power ultimately to carry out that exhortation to be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect, to become perfect expressions of the Monad.

We are made in the image of God. Each of us is unique, and has a large measure of free will which increases the more we live from the centre of life rather than on the surface; and each of us has the power within limits to create and to destroy. And we are here to realise that divinity which is in us, the divinity which we are, by the gradual process of experiment, of trial and error within certain limits, a process proper to creatures who have the divine attribute of freedom of will. But each of us has within him an integrating Christ principle which can bring about the union of the two natures in us.

THE FIELD OF CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE

The laws and method of conducting the experiment of self-discovery through free will have been variously interpreted by theosophists. Many have believed that the original Christian view was that the means to attainment through experience were provided by the immortal part of us taking on

many successive bodies or personalities which are helpful or frustrating to us according to the use we have made of previous bodies. As the author of the apocryphal book of the Wisdom of Solomon said of his experience, "Being good, I came into a body undefiled."

It is the power and privilege that we have to deviate from being good, to deviate from the straight road home, which involve the conception of sin. Sin means that we choose to take a course of action which does not lead us forward towards greater realisation of our divinity. But we do not need to sin, for we have a guiding light, the light that lighteth every man. We have the Christ in us which is for us the way, the truth and the life as well as the hope of glory, if we will but heed.

Theosophists have dismissed altogether the crude notion of eternal punishment. The several Greek words which are translated as referring to this certainly do not strictly justify such a translation nor the meaning often attached to them. The word in the scriptures translated as punishment or damnation is in most cases some part of the Greek verb κατακρίνειν which means to judge adversely but does not carry the sweeping and emphatic sense now given to the word damnation. And the word which is translated eternal is the Greek word αἰώνιος, which means for an age, for a time, but has not got the sense of perpetual or eternal.

In the scriptures, the story of the Gospels is regarded by many theosophists as a psychological drama. It may or may not be a historical account of events which took place. Certainly, if it is a historical narrative it is very much condensed and altered. For example, what we call the Sermon on the Mount consists of a whole series of sayings, and it is hard to believe that they were all uttered in rapid succession as a single sermon. Although represented as a sermon uttered on one occasion, it is almost certainly a collection of sayings uttered on widely diverse occasions. Some of the sayings that are to be found in the New Testament can have more meaning if taken as applying to the Cosmic Christ, others as applying to the great World Teacher, others as applying to the Christ dwelling in the hearts of men. And without repudiating other layers of interpretation, theosophists have been particularly interested in the Gospel story as a mystery drama, a drama of the Christ in us, of the birth, growth, trials, painful crucifixion and final triumph of enlightenment within us. Or again the story can be interpreted as a symbolic drama of the progress of the individual soul towards the completion of his human experience and his entry into the company of Those who have attained. It has even been suggested that some parts of the Gospel story are really pieced together from some kind of ritual of initiation.

The tendency to run into figurative and symbolic expressions was much more natural to people in mystical cults in ancient days than it is now, and we probably underrate this element in interpreting ancient religion.

Ancient writers seem to have deviated from the factual into the symbolic, from historical narrative into what we might now call symbols of the unconscious or into figurative turns of speech, in quite an unselfconscious way, hardly realising when they were making these transitions into a wholly different medium of expression. C. W. Leadbeater offered an alternative reading of the Nicene Creed based on this symbolic way of expression. It is said in that creed that Christ suffered under Pontius Pilate. Leadbeater read, instead of ἐπὶ Ποντίου Πιλάτου, the words ἐπὶ πουτου πύλητου which would mean that Christ endured the dense sea. Cosmically this could refer to the sea of virgin matter at the beginning of a universe, or psychologically and mystically it could refer to the dark waters of the unconscious or of the emotional nature, the normal symbol for emotion in our dreams. And in the Latin version of the same creed, the word Maria, which we translate Mary, can mean the seas; and the passage could mean cosmically that the Christ made his descent into seas of virgin matter vivified by the Holy Spirit.'

However this may be, it is the awakening of the Christ in us that the theosophist sees as the main purpose of the existing institutions and sacraments and ethics of the Christian religion. And they are to be judged by their effectiveness in doing this. Yet we cannot judge anything wholly by the standard of something that we have not yet known. Undoubtedly much that is very valuable in Christianity has been injured by a crude zeal for reformation in the light of merely intellectual considerations. For there are many things in religion and in life which are not true in a strictly factual sense nor true by the standards of the lower mind, but they are true psychologically and respond to our needs beyond reason.

We can never, for example, reason our way to the ultimate meaning and value of the cult of Our Lady ; for there again we have a truth which has reality at every level of nature from the universal to the personal, but which is by no means most easily or fully apprehended at the level of stark intellect.