

Cults, the Occult, and Theosophy

Cults and the occult are much in the news these days. We see reports of religious groups that are planning for some Armageddon or are brainwashing young people. Occasionally such stories refer to Theosophy as a cult. The occult, which Theosophical literature often refers to, is mistakenly reported as devil worship, animal sacrifice, and the desecration of churches or graveyards. What connection is there really between cults, the occult, and Theosophy?

The words *cult* and *occult* are often confused because they sound alike, but they have no more to do with each other than do *cur* and *occur* or *pine* and *opine*. And in the senses in which these two words are often used today, neither has anything to do with Theosophy.

Cults

The word *cult* comes from the Latin *colere*, meaning “to cultivate” or “to worship.” At first it meant quite innocently “a particular system of religious worship.” Then it came to mean “excessive and unreasoning devotion to a person or cause.” Nowadays it is often used for a religious group that demands the complete subservience of its members.

Cults, in this new sense, are religious groups that tell people what to think and how to act. The cult leader demands unquestioning obedience and loyalty. Cult members may be expected to leave their families behind, to give their money to the cult leader, and to dedicate themselves exclusively to the service of the cult. They are often subjected to a form of brainwashing that is intended to make them willing and docile followers.

Cult behavior, however, is not limited to fringe organizations. Any religious group that claims the right to interpret its scriptures dogmatically and infallibly, imposing its authority on all its members and allowing no other interpretation, is acting like a cult. Cults demand uniformity of belief and action. They stifle freedom of conscience.

Theosophists find that their view of life is expressed in some basic writings, but the official policy of the Theosophical Society is that all its writings and teachings are open to individual interpretation and that no one has the right to dictate what others believe or do. Thus Theosophy teaches that cult-behavior and cult-mentality are the opposite of true spirituality.

According to the Theosophical tradition, we each have within ourselves a spark of the divine life, the One Life that expresses itself in every being of the universe. All

human beings are therefore fellow pilgrims on a great journey of self-discovery. Although Theosophists respect and benefit from the wisdom of the Theosophical tradition, they recognize that we must each discover our own way for ourselves. And we should honor the right of others to do likewise.

It is only by the exercise of our minds and consciences that we can grow and progress. Our only sure guide to right action is the Voice within, which teaches us to love and respect and honor one another. Theosophy says that altruism, or a concern for the welfare of others, is the key to right living. If we are concerned for the welfare of others, we try to convince them, not by dominating them or imposing our beliefs on them, but by living our altruistic principles in daily life.

The Occult

The word *occult* comes from the Latin *occulere*, meaning “to cover, to hide, to conceal.” Originally it meant simply “hidden.” Later it was used to refer to something that is not available to the ordinary senses or reasoning, being too deep or too great for words, something transcendental. Theosophists sometimes use the word in that latter sense.

Theosophy teaches that the world is a marvelously complex place where there are (as Hamlet told his friend Horatio) “more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” Today we know that the atmosphere all around us is full of radio and television waves that we cannot see or hear directly, as well as many other sorts of energy that escape our eyes and ears. All such waves and energy are “occult” —that is, hidden from our ordinary senses—but they nevertheless affect us, and we can learn to use them.

To say that something is “occult” is merely to say that it is beyond our range of perception or understanding—not that it is supernatural (outside of nature) or even abnormal. It is only a part of nature that is not obvious to us, such as the way one person’s thoughts can influence another, or the ability some people have to anticipate the future. *Occultism* is the study of such hidden aspects of nature. For centuries the word *occult* has been used in this sense.

In recent times, however, the words *occult* and *occultism* have been given new, debased, and even sinister meanings. They are often connected with such phenomena as devil worship, animal sacrifice, drugs, ghosts, fortune telling, and a variety of other things. For this reason, the “occult” section in a bookstore is likely to include books dealing with a hodgepodge of subjects—some respectable, some foolish, and some trashy, if not actually wicked.

Theosophy has nothing to do with this new meaning of occult, which has sprung

up only during the past few decades. The Theosophical view is that the devil of popular lore is a myth and a misunderstanding of a symbol. Theosophy also teaches that the first step to spiritual progress is a clean life, which includes honoring the sacredness of all life.

Many Theosophists have extended this idea to become vegetarians and do not wear furs because they believe that killing animals needlessly is morally wrong. Theosophy teaches that we should be very careful not to alter our consciousness by artificial means, so many Theosophists shun the use of drugs, including alcohol and tobacco, except under a doctor's orders.

Theosophy

Theosophy acknowledges and respects the hidden side of life—energy fields surrounding all living beings, the power of thought, intuitive understanding, and so on—and expects that one day human beings will learn to deal with those things more directly than we can now. At that future time, what was once “occult” will cease to be hidden, having become instead a part of our conscious knowledge.

Theosophy teaches that we can evolve and develop toward future knowledge only through our own actions and that no one should interfere with our right and responsibility to make our own decisions and discover truth for ourselves. This attitude is expressed in the motto of the Theosophical Society:

There is no religion higher than truth.

The “religion” spoken of in that motto is not just the creeds and dogmas of churches. It is instead any system of belief that limits and confines the human mind. We can make a religion out of science, politics, our own prejudices, or even Theosophy itself.

Theosophy teaches the unity of all life, the fundamental order of the universe, and the purposefulness of existence. It teaches that we as human beings have an unlimited potential within ourselves, that we have the ability to realize our potential, and that the way to that realization is available to all of us. The basic ideas of Theosophy can be summarized in several ways, one of which is called “The Three Truths of the White Lotus”:

1. The human soul is immortal, and its future is the future of a thing whose growth and splendor has no limit.
2. The principle which gives life dwells in us and around us, is undying and eternally beneficent, is not heard or seen or smelt, but is perceived by the one

who desires perception.

3. We are each our own absolute lawgiver, the dispenser of glory or gloom to ourselves, the decreer of our life, our reward, our punishment.

Theosophists are Christians and Jews, Muslims and Zoroastrians, Hindus and Buddhists, agnostics and free-thinkers. They acknowledge the goodness of the universe, honor the potential within each human being, and respect the diversity and responsibility of every person. They believe that the words spoken by the great Indic teacher Gautama Buddha to his followers when he was on his deathbed can inspire all human beings, of every culture: "Work out your own salvation with diligence."