

WHAT SHOULD THEOSOPHICAL GROUPS STUDY?

PART ONE

By John Algeo

Questions often arise about what is appropriate for Lodges and other Theosophical groups to study, specifically whether there are objections to studying this or that author, this and that subject, and so on. Such questions are asked probably because the Society is a non-dogmatic organization and because the term "Theosophy" is not mentioned in the Society's three Objects. Nevertheless, Theosophy is explicit in the name of our Society, so the existence of a body of teachings under that term can hardly be doubted. Because no person speaks authoritatively for the Society, anyone can give only a personal view of these matters, yet the view that follows is based on resolutions of our General Council and, I think, on common sense.

The international governing body of the Theosophical Society is the General Council, consisting of the General Secretaries of all Sections, the international officers, and a limited number of additional members. Over the years the General Council has made various statements, two of which are of special importance. These two, called "Freedom of Thought" and "Freedom of the Society," are complementary; joined together, they address questions of the sort mentioned above. Because of the importance of these resolutions, they are worth considering in detail and paying attention to.

FREEDOM OF THOUGHT

As the Theosophical Society has spread far and wide over the civilized world, and as members of all religions have become members of it, without surrendering the special dogmas, teachings, and beliefs of their respective faiths, it is thought desirable to emphasize the fact that there is no doctrine, no opinion, by whomsoever taught or held, that is in any way binding on any member of the Society, none which any member is not free to accept or reject. Approval of its three Objects is the sole condition of membership. No teacher or writer, from H. P. Blavatsky downwards, has any authority to impose his teachings or opinions on members. Every member has an equal right to attach himself to any teacher or to any school of thought which he may choose, but has no right to force his choice on any other. Neither a candidate for any office, nor any voter, can be rendered ineligible to stand or to vote, because of any opinion he may

hold, or because of membership in any school of thought to which he may belong. Opinions or beliefs neither bestow privileges nor inflict penalties. The Members of the General Council earnestly request every member of the Theosophical Society to maintain, defend, and act upon these fundamental principles of the Society, and also fearlessly to exercise his own right of liberty of thought and of expression thereof, within the limits of courtesy and consideration for others.

The “Freedom of Thought” statement (written by Annie Besant in 1923 and passed by the General Council in 1924) is a clear, unambiguous affirmation of the non-dogmatic nature of the Theosophical Society, guaranteeing individuals the right to accept or reject whatever Theosophical (or other) ideas they like and to belong to whatever organizations or schools of thought outside the Society they may wish. Exclusivist organizations and belief systems seek to prohibit their members from affiliating with any other group or being exposed to other ideas; the Theosophical Society is not one of those. On the contrary, the Theosophical Society is firmly committed to the great principle of individual liberty and responsibility. In a world threatened by narrow-minded fundamentalism on many sides, this principle of “Freedom of Thought” is a precious one.

The Freedom of Thought statement, directed primarily towards guaranteeing individual rights, is complemented by another, directed primarily towards guaranteeing collective rights:

FREEDOM OF THE SOCIETY

The Theosophical Society, while cooperating with all other bodies whose aims and activities make such cooperation possible, is and must remain an organization entirely independent of them, not committed to any objects save its own, and intent on developing its own work on the broadest and most inclusive lines, so as to move towards its own goal as indicated in and by the pursuit of those objects and that Divine Wisdom which in the abstract is implicit in the title the Theosophical Society.

Since Universal Brotherhood and the Wisdom are undefined and unlimited, and since there is complete freedom for each and every member of the Society in thought and action, the Society seeks ever to maintain its own distinctive and unique character by remaining free of affiliation or identification with any other organization.

The “Freedom of the Society” statement (adopted in 1949) was motivated by a desire to affirm the independence of the Society from any other organization, including

historically related movements such as Co-Freemasonry and the Liberal Catholic Church, which have had a sizable overlapping membership with the Society. Its wording, however, clearly applies to linkage of the Society with any other less closely related organizations or organized systems of thought however worthy the latter may be in themselves.

The Theosophical Society, H. P. Blavatsky says in *The Key to Theosophy*, “was formed to assist in showing to humanity that such a thing as Theosophy exists, and to help them to ascend towards it by studying and assimilating its eternal verities.” Although the Society has no dogmas incumbent on its members to accept, it is the repository of an ancient Wisdom Tradition, formulated for our time by H. P. Blavatsky and her successors. In its teaching function, the Society exists to receive, rearticulate, and transmit that Tradition. The “Freedom of the Society” statement asserts the unentanglement of the Society with other organizations and affirms its fidelity to its own purpose of showing that “Theosophy exists.”

These two statements, on freedom of thought and of the Society, address the perennial and very sensible questions from Theosophical groups about what they should study. Theosophists, as individuals, have the right to study and practice any system of thought they like. Theosophical groups, as official branches of the Society, have the obligation to study and teach Theosophy.

What does “studying and teaching Theosophy” mean? It involves a dual activity. On the one hand, we should deepen our own knowledge of the Theosophical tradition and make it known to others. On the other hand, we should reach out to study and understand from a Theosophical perspective various other cultures, customs, and approaches to life.

An old motto holds that “Theosophy is everything, but not everything is Theosophy,” meaning that everything can be viewed from a Theosophical standpoint, although not all standpoints are Theosophical. We can look at any ideas or any system of thought with Theosophical eyes, and doing so is studying and teaching Theosophy. But if we habitually present non-Theosophical systems of thought on their own terms, we are not “studying and teaching Theosophy,” but propagandizing some other systems of thought within a Theosophical milieu.

A particular example may be helpful. Mormonism has some interesting parallels to (as well as some striking differences from) Theosophical thought. A Theosophical group might want to have as one of its programmes a comparative and contrastive study of Mormonism from a Theosophical perspective, including perhaps a programme examining Mormonism on its own assumptions in an effort to understand that approach to religion. That could be a fair and appropriate Theosophical study.

However, if instead the group were to devote its time to studying the *Book of Mormon*, *The Pearl of Great Price*, *Doctrines and Covenants*, and other Mormon texts, and to holding Mormon-style religious ceremonies, that group would have ceased to function as a Theosophical group and would have become a proselytizing body for Mormonism. The group would then no longer be filling the Theosophical purpose for which it was organized and would, in fact, be violating the “Freedom of the Society” statement. Individual members who are convinced of the value of Mormonism are free to join a Mormon church or organize their own Mormon study group, but not to convert a Theosophical group into a Mormon one.

Exactly the same thing can be said of a large number of other systems of thought, some historically close to Theosophy, for example, Anthroposophy, the Order of the Golden Dawn, the I Am Movement, the Church Universal and Triumphant, the Bailey literature, Astarra, and so on. This is not to say that there is anything wrong with any of those systems, but, although they all have roots in Theosophy, none of them is Theosophy. They have their own particular teachings, practices, and organizations, to which anyone, under the “Freedom of Thought” statement, is free to adhere, but which should not be confused with the Theosophical tradition, which has “its own distinctive and unique character.” That is equally true of other systems such as Kabbalah, Sufism, and so on.

So the answer to the question about what to study is that the focus of every Theosophical group should be centrally on the Theosophical tradition. Otherwise, why should the group be a Theosophical one at all? A very clear Theosophical tradition originated from H. P. Blavatsky and H. S. Olcott, and then was elaborated by others, including Annie Besant and her colleagues and successors right down to our current President, Radha Burnier. None of those persons is either infallible or authoritative. But taken together, their works form a coherent body of exposition of the Ancient Wisdom we call Theosophy.

In addition to that coherent body of teachings, many other things can be studied, provided they are approached from a Theosophical standpoint, because Theosophy is everything. But if the focus of any group ceases to be primarily a Theosophical one and becomes something else instead, it has ceased to serve the purpose for which it was formed, because not everything is Theosophy.

National and regional Sections and local groups quite properly have autonomy in determining what they will study. But if any group wants suggestions, they can consult their national Section or regional association. Many national and regional bodies have extensive information and suggestions about Theosophical subjects and manners of presentation. And they are happy to share those resources with one another. It might be useful for the international headquarters to draw up a finding list for such information,

and if there is interest in its so doing, we can make that a project for the coming year. Abundant and rich resources are available to help in scheduling a group's activities "on the broadest and most inclusive lines," as the "Freedom of the Society" statement says.

The purpose of Theosophical groups is to study Theosophy and make it known to others. That purpose can be realized by focusing on the primary Theosophical tradition, not in any narrow sense, but in all its richness and variety. It can also be realized by applying the Theosophical tradition as a lens through which to view a range of other relevant topics. The keynote to keep in mind is that Theosophy is everything, but not everything is Theosophy.

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