

# **THEOSOPHY AND WORLD RELIGIONS**

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# Contents

1. Introduction: Theosophy and Religion .....	1
2. What is Religion? .....	7
3. Primal Religion .....	15
4. Primal Religion: Shamanism and Archaic Agriculture .....	23
5. The Hindu Vision .....	29
6. Yoga, Tantra, and Vedanta .....	35
7. The Buddha's Life and Message .....	43
8. Varieties of Buddhism .....	51
9. Vajrayana and Zen .....	57
10. Chinese Religion .....	65
11. Confucianism .....	71
12. Taoism .....	79
13. Shinto and Japanese Religion .....	87
14. Western Monotheism .....	95
15. The Hebrew Scriptures and Zoroastrianism .....	101
16. Judaism .....	109
17. Jesus and Early Christianity .....	117
18. Christianity from the Apostles to the Reformation .....	125
19. Varieties of Christianity and Christian Mysticism .....	133
20. Muhammad and Islam .....	141
21. The Life and Practice of Islam .....	149
22. Islamic Mysticism .....	155
23. New Religious Movements .....	163
24. The Religious World in the Twenty-first Century .....	171

# THEOSOPHY AND WORLD RELIGIONS

## Chapter I

### INTRODUCTION: THEOSOPHY AND RELIGION

#### RELIGION

Helena P. Blavatsky, in *Isis Unveiled*, said that “Truth remains one, and there is not a religion, whether Christian or heathen, that is not firmly built upon the rock of ages—God and immortal spirit” (I:467). In the same source, there is also reference to “the remote past, during those ages when every true religion was based on a knowledge of the occult powers of nature” (I:25).

However precisely one defines these terms, the basic idea seems incontrovertible. All that is usually called religion implies “God and immortal spirit”—that is, that there is something more to both the universe and ourselves than what is plainly visible, and that this “something more” has to do with the universe’s ultimate origin, and with our own role as bearers of some common essence with the infinite source, or deepest nature, of all reality.

The universe, all religionists hold, is not merely out there, impersonal and indifferent, but is also humanly significant. Since we are children of the universe, we obviously came out of it in some way, and therefore some resemblance between parent and offspring must exist, and some form of family communication must be possible. If we have consciousness, a potential at least for consciousness must rest in the universe as a whole. If we communicate by word, sign, or symbol, we must also be able to communicate with the matrix out of which we are born, though it may take effort to crack its code.

Religion, then, is based on the awareness that we and the universe have two interlocking natures, which may for convenience be called material and spiritual. The spiritual relates to consciousness, thought, and will. On the universal scale it may be called God (or, for example, the Absolute, Ultimate Reality, the Unknown Root, or another name). On the individual level, it may be called soul, immortal spirit, or something else; names are less important than the reality. The essential concept is that the two, God and individual, are of similar essence, and are in inward and outward contact. Thus each religion in its own way tries to teach what channels of spiritual communication are most valid or effective.

Religion means something else too, suggested by the second quote above from *Isis Unveiled*, referring to a time in the remote past when every true religion was based on occult or secret knowledge of the powers of nature. A general characteristic of almost any religion is the belief that it is the custodian of a wisdom, which has come to us today from out of the past, either from a past revelation or from the immemorial tradition of the culture in which the religion is situated. This wisdom may be preserved in a sacred book, or in the lore guarded and taught by a sacred institution, or both.

## THEOSOPHY

The Theosophical tradition shares the same fundamental assumptions expressed above for religion. Basic to Theosophy is the affirmation that life is more than its material, mortal manifestation in the realm of appearance. Theosophy tells us also that knowledge about the God-and-immortal-spirit foundation of the universe and its varied life was known, at least intuitively, by the first beings who could be called human as they gazed wide-eyed upon their starry and sunlit world; that is why it is called Ancient Wisdom. But there the narratives of religion and Theosophy diverge.

Religion is the outward path. Over countless centuries, few human institutions have been more diverse and visible than the religious. Religious institutions have held immense social and political power, and at other times they have been powerless or even persecuted. The stories, exaltations, and agonies of the religious spirit have animated the literature of many nations. Religious art has dominated the painting, sculpture, architecture, music, and drama of innumerable traditional cultures in the East and West. The tenets of religion have helped billions decide how best to act when ethical choices present themselves. Buddhists ask themselves how, or if, a Buddha would go fishing or sell stocks. Christians inquire, “What would Jesus do?” Muslims may refer to the Hadith, texts retelling what the Prophet did in various life situations.

Theosophy has a very different place in the world, though one as intimately related to religion as inner to outer, or back to front. For it is based on what is, or was, known inwardly about the universe and our own nature—God and immortal spirit—though perhaps some of this knowledge has been superficially forgotten, in the busy years since the birth of human consciousness.

The supreme drive behind wisdom realizations, as Plato, that great philosopher of inward vision knew, is the sense of wonder—and he added that he was sometimes made dizzy with amazement at the significance of things. Wonder can be the child's silent awe at the beauty of a sunset or in the love of a mother's arms, just as it can be an adult's stillness before the majesty of a spiral nebula or the beauty of a child. But though wonder may begin beyond words, it then weaves its own webs of language and symbols. In ways relevant to Theosophy, these appear particularly in what are called esoteric forms of religion, such as the Kabbala in Judaism, Gnosticism in Christianity, the Ismaili and Druze forms of Islam, and Tantrism in Hinduism and Buddhism. (Esoteric or “inner” forms of religion may require special training and initiation for full access, and involve practices that communicate special knowledge not only factually, but also through mystical techniques by which they are experienced.)

The esoteric visions of hidden reality that start with wonder and a sense of oneness, and then proceed to unfold the behind-the-scenes structures that make the world, have a striking overall similarity despite great diversity in name and form. One key purpose of the Theosophical enterprise is to lift out and study that basic similarity, demonstrating its significance for understanding the meaning of human and planetary life.

## COMMON ESOTERIC THEMES

Thus esoteric patterns throughout the religious world articulate the idea of a “great chain of being,” or series of emanations linking the One to the several levels of creation, from the highest gods, archangels, “Dhyān Chohans,” and logoi or creative energies, through the spirits of worlds and nature to human beings, and then on to the animal, vegetative, and mineral realms. These patterns of thought emphasize that all beings on all levels, emanations of and so not separate from the One, contain the divine spark within; however dormant or well concealed it may be, it can awaken and transform its bearer. Esoteric wisdom also tells us that human beings are “microcosms” or miniatures of the whole, containing in their nature something of all levels. Thus we have in ourselves and accessible to consciousness the material realm and also several planes of consciousness up to the divine spark. The commonality of such ideas in the esoteric traditions of world religions, often concealed behind “exoteric,” or outward, symbols, myths, and doctrines, is a major motif in the writings of H. P. Blavatsky and other modern Theosophical writers.

## THEOSOPHICAL CRITICISM OF RELIGION

Yet the relation of Theosophy and esoteric teaching to the exoteric religions of the world that are the subject of our study may seem perplexing. Despite the inner connection, some Theosophical writing, including many vehement passages in the works of H. P. Blavatsky, appear harshly condemnatory of outer religion, or at least of certain very important religious institutions and doctrines. There is a famous passage in the *Mahatma Letters* (#10 in Barker edition; #88 in the chronological edition) in which a Master says roundly, “I will point out the greatest, the chief cause of nearly two-thirds of the evils that pursue humanity ever since that cause became a power. It is religion under whatever form and in whatsoever nation.” The letter goes on to decry the workings of this evil no less in India than in Europe, and to declare that “It is the sacerdotal caste, the priesthood and the churches; it is in those illusions that man looks upon as sacred, that he has to search out the source of that multitude of evils which is the great curse of humanity and that almost overwhelms mankind.”

This statement may sound surprising—even shocking—at first glance, yet a moment's reflection will reveal its truth. It is not an attack on religion as such. Rather, it is a blunt observation of how religion, broadly defined (“under whatever form and in whatsoever nation”), far too often functions in human life.

Simple selfishness and thoughtless hedonism do not account for the greatest and most pervasive evils of history. The most terrible crimes have not been done merely when pandering to ordinary lust, hate, or greed, but for the sake of something supposedly higher, often by zealots who see themselves as having sacrificed much for the sake of their cause. The object of their fanaticism may take many forms—God or the gods, pride of tribe or class or country, the idols of ideology or faith.

In the past these causes were usually identified with religion in the conventional sense, with the will of God or of a tribal fetish. In more recent times, the names of the gods have changed to such abstractions as nation, race, or political creed. But surely such modern “religions” as distorted nationalism or ideology come under the rubric of “those illusions that man looks upon as sacred,” and surely one can find a modern “sacerdotal caste” in the propagandists and secular messiahs who served such false faiths all too well in the twentieth century. In that century, the evil brought about by plain greed, great as it was, fades beside that produced by such faiths as imperialism, nazism, communism, nationalism, and resurgent fundamentalism within a number of religions.

Yet we must also remember that, as the Master says in the same letter, “evil is the exaggeration of good.” Religion, however defined, is not evil per se. Indeed, it may be a matter of the worst being a corruption of the best. Religion, insofar as it represents a yearning for more than mere material existence—that “something more” of which we spoke before—is an effort of the divine within to break free and be itself.

Such religion is an assertion that ultimate causes and ends are spiritual and is the impulse to truth. But how easily this aspiration becomes satisfied with partial truths, which become idols clung to with all the passion proper to the whole truth, and becomes diverted into the evil of which religion is capable!

It must be noted that Theosophical teachings are no less capable of idolatrous and evil misuse than those of exoteric religion. The concept of root races has sometimes been employed to support despicable forms of racism, and karma has been made a justification for indifference to suffering on the grounds it is “deserved.”

It is not the content of a teaching or practice so much as the depth of understanding behind it that makes it good or bad. Any notion not conjoined with the sense of Oneness, and with the love and compassion that is the ethical expression of Oneness, quickly becomes divisive, an idol, and a potential source of evil.

## CONCLUSION: RELIGION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

In today's twenty-first century world, we still see numerous and diverse religious symbols pointing, like the Zen finger pointing at the moon, toward God and immortal spirit. Indeed, in the wake of the collapse of fascism, communism, and other pseudo-religious ideologies of the last century, it may seem that, apart from sheer consumerism and secularism, religion in something like its traditional form is what is left standing. That makes it all the more important for us, as Theosophists, to understand the world's religions and their connection to the timeless inner truths known to the wise from the beginning. But religion's capacity for evil is no less apparent today.

Not for a long time—perhaps not since the Reformation or even the Crusades—has religion so energized and demarcated clashing masses of humanity. In the absence of any other cohesive of comparable strength after the end of the cold war, religion emerges as divisive and war-prone as any force on earth. Its power

for wickedness now seems almost as mammoth as its potential for good. Surely this is a world condition that calls for the deepest and subtlest understanding of religion in a way that is both respectful and critical.

How then do we study Theosophy and the world religions in such a situation? That is the difficult and important challenge facing Theosophists, and all persons of good will, today. In this course we will try to look at the timeless spiritual heritage — the God and immortal spirit side — of each world religion, yet also put each in context of our troubled planet and its combative cultures. More specifically, we will reflect on:

- What to look for when studying a religion in terms of its teaching, spiritual practices, and social organization.
- Finding the core experiences of each, and their doctrinal expressions. Correlating this core to Theosophy.
- Why, on the other hand, religions give people a sense of identity they often feel they need to define and defend over against others.
- How to promote inter-religious understanding and harmony.

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#### QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. How would you define religion? (Be sure to distinguish between a personal definition and a general descriptive definition that covers what are traditionally or conventionally called religions.)
2. How would you define Theosophy?
3. What is the distinction between exoteric and esoteric religion?
4. How can religion be capable of both great evil and great good?
5. How do you now understand the role of religion in the world today?

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