

THEOSOPHY IN CHRISTIANITY

By Arthur M. Coon

The Divine Wisdom

Never, since the infancy of the human race, has there been a time when the light of wisdom has been absent from our earth. This statement may be difficult to prove, yet we know that from earliest religious beginnings there have been clear evidences of an inner source of sacred teachings. Every civilization upon our planet has left traces upon the pages of its history, which indicate that a few of its people were in possession of a knowledge unknown to the majority of its citizens. Most ancient example of this fact comes from early India, cradle of the Aryan race. For unknown thousands of years before our Christian era, certain spiritual teachings and codes of living received from a Manu or divine teacher, had been memorized and handed down by guru to disciple by word of mouth. Centuries later these teachings were laboriously scribed upon palm leaf "books" known as the Vedas and Puranas—writings which to this day have been unsurpassed for their purity of thought and beauty of expression.

Ancient Greece also had its mysteries, and when we say ancient we mean an age almost mythical, many centuries before Plato and Pericles, overshadowing their day by its grandeur and culture, and called the Golden Age. Even in that far off civilization there flourished certain schools of wisdom, among which were the Eleusinian and Orphic mystery schools. The keynote of this culture was music, harmony and beauty.

In the valley of the Tigris and the Euphrates, unknown centuries before the Tower of Babel, Chaldean and Babylonian seers studied the stars and gave to chosen disciples the secret wisdom of the heavens. The names Zoroaster, Mithra and Ahura Mazda bring to mind the esoteric cults of the Magi.

In the land of the Nile, many thousands of years before the captivity of the Children of Israel, the Egyptian mystery schools drew to their sacred temples all seekers for the Light. We think of Thoth, known as Hermes Trismegistus (the thrice-greatest) who, as tradition says, gave to the world the Hermetic philosophy, the age-old occult wisdom.

During that period of Hebraic history between the time of the lesser prophets and the birth of Jesus there appeared in Palestine a sect called the Essenes, who were known for their strict purity of life and the profundity of their teachings concerning the spiritual status of the universe and man. It is claimed by some scholars that Jesus, during the unrecorded years of his life, became an initiate in this order and a teacher of its doctrines.

These apparently isolated examples of mystery schools could be multiplied indefinitely, although in varying degrees of type and variations of thought. There was the famous center of learning at Alexandria in Egypt, with an inner group of “healers” known as Therapeutae. In Greece the schools of Plato and Pythagoras gave to the world the light of their wisdom, which will illumine its dark places for untold centuries to come. While these institutions have long since passed from the scene, here and there individuals and groups have arisen, giving proof that amidst the long darkness of superstition and ignorance, the light of wisdom has never been completely extinguished. During the so-called dark ages of our own era certain secret brotherhoods in Europe kept alive the traditions of the true mystery schools. It was in the year 1875 that the Theosophical Society was founded in America, and for the first time in the world’s history the sacred wisdom of the ages has been offered freely to all peoples under the term Theosophy.

The Christian Church

Theosophy, as the two Greek words, *theos* and *sophia* imply, means divine wisdom. It is the synthesis of the wisdom of all ages. It is continually being enriched as man develops faculties for perceiving new truths. Its teachings reveal that the great religions of the world have a common origin, and were given to mankind in form and message to suit his intellectual and cultural needs. Thus from time to time great teachers have appeared in the world, presenting such teachings and revelations to a people or race as may be needed for their particular development and evolution. Theosophy further teaches that the Christ (Greek: *christos*, meaning the anointed) is the title given to the great World Teacher who appeared in Palestine as Jesus to give to the world the religion which bears His name.

It is a most natural thing to identify a philosophy or a teaching with the organization which brings it to the world. What the world thinks of that teaching will be colored materially by the lives and activities of its proponents. The Theosophical Society is an association of people whose common purpose is to form an organization for the dissemination of the concepts and ideals of Theosophy. Like other organizations dependent upon the human element, it has its problems, its weaknesses and its strength. When we attempt to evaluate Theosophy it is important that we distinguish between it and the Society that bears its name.

The same must be true of Christianity. Much of the criticism leveled against it in the past has been due to the particular interpretation or presentation of its teachings by those who claim to be its adherents. The history of organized Christianity has many pages that we would fervently wish could be torn from the book. The question is often asked—why should Christianity be split up into so many sects and churches? Why not one denomination? But which one? What single church or group of churches could

possibly express the breadth and depth of that system of faith and worship which bears the name of Christianity? The fact that the Christian Church is broken up into many denominations is in a very real sense its strength; for it is upon so cosmopolitan a base that this variety of sects can fill the spiritual needs of the many layers and types of humanity.

And what is Christianity? There are at least as many answers as there are denominations and sects. Possibly as many answers as there are adherents. Is it belief in and a worship of God? Other faiths besides Christianity do that. Is it the acceptance of a certain creed? Is it ceremonialism with its sacraments and rites? Mysticism—God within; or Transcendentalism—God without? Faith, philanthropy and charity? Christianity is truly *all* of these, yet not all of them together make up Christianity.

To learn its true nature we go to the source of its teachings, to the words of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels and to the Epistles. Nor must we overlook the Old Testament which forms the background for the New. If we search diligently, we discover that the Bible contains two—perhaps many more, but at least two—sets of values. One is what we read on the surface, the obvious meaning of the words and their literal interpretation—taken at their face value. Millions of people read the Bible with the outer eye and find comfort, consolation and hope.

That there is an inner value, purposely and cunningly hidden beneath allegory and symbol, becomes obvious to one who searches with an unbiased mind. Many guideposts and hints distinctly indicate this. We shall find that many of the stories and parables were written as for children, while beneath their surface there are depths of truth and wisdom undreamed of by the many.

The Challenge of Modern Thought

During the latter part of the nineteenth century a tide of scientific thinking swept over the intellectual world and began to exert a disturbing challenge to the entrenched dogmatism of the Christian Church. Charles Darwin's evolutionary theory on the origin of life upon our planet and the pedigree of man caused churchmen by the thousands to rush to the defense of the Bible story of creation. Later geological discoveries pushed the age of the earth backwards from a few thousand years to unknown millions. Archeologists found evidences of civilizations which made our era seem like a moment on earth's historical clock.

Following these discoveries a wave of doubt and skepticism swept over the thinking world. "Higher critics" everywhere pounced upon the Bible to pull it off its pedestal of reverence as the inspired word of God because of its many unscientific stories: the garden of Eden, the talking serpent, Noah's ark and the animals, Joshua and the walls of Jericho, and many others. Nor was the New Testament free from these

critical attacks. The miraculous birth of Jesus with its attendant phenomena, His death, three days in the tomb and resurrection—these and the entire structure of theology built around His life and death came under the scrutiny of these rationalists. In the wake of this criticism came a trail of doubt and confusion as to the worth of the Bible and the value of Christianity. Atheism and materialism gained a strong foothold in the colleges and universities throughout the world.

Along with this upsurge of scientific thinking with its attendant criticism of the Bible, there came into the world what we might call a revival of spiritual research. A number of organizations came into being which aroused an objective interest in an inner or spiritual reality behind all phenomena. We can readily recall certain groups such as Spiritualism, Christian Science, New Thought, and others that have since grown into worldwide institutions. One such organization was the Theosophical Society, which accepted the challenge of materialism, and atheism by giving the world a new set of values, and to Christianity a new interpretation of its sacred scriptures.

Many scholars have done valuable research work on the Bible, finding broader and deeper meanings to its seemingly unscientific records. Moreover, archeologists, particularly in the very land where Biblical history was enacted, have unearthed tablets and ancient parchments, which reveal valuable evidences to prove that many of the Bible stories have a pattern and origin in common with those of older religions. Today many of the churches have liberated their theologies to conform to this advancement in knowledge. Even the older established churches have so broadened certain firmly entrenched doctrines to conform to the facts of modern science.

Creation and Evolution

Today the wave of atheism in the world of science and in our institutions of learning has been checked. Many of our foremost scientists, having pushed their search beyond the borders of the infinitely remote, as well as the infinitely minute, stand in humble reverence before the great unknown cause and source of existence. Across the chasm separating religion and science, Theosophy has erected a bridge. The light which it has shed upon the Bible has once more restored that book to the level of the greatest of sacred literature. What appears outwardly as history or biography, sometimes absurd and naive, becomes allegory and symbol. Instead of trying to reconcile the impossible, we find cleverly concealed allusions to cosmic creative processes, and the evolution of life and form.

We find, for instance, that in the first chapters of the book of Genesis, there is portrayed the formula of the great cyclic sweep of involution and evolution—of a cosmos, of a universe and of a world. The seven days in the creative process are the

seven great schemes of evolution, the seven planetary rounds, or the seven geological ages in which living forms appeared upon our earth, and in the exact order as related.

One of the unsuspected truths uncovered in the Book of Genesis is that there are really two creation stories instead of one. These stories are so casually superimposed, one upon the other, that the fact that there are two has escaped notice for many centuries. We ordinarily read these accounts as though they were one and as happening in sequence. The idea of two distinct stories was perhaps first brought to the attention of scholars when it came to their notice that two different words were used for the name of the Creator. It was as though the accounts were actually written by different authors. H. P. Blavatsky in *The Secret Doctrine*, gives many examples of Chaldean, Babylonian, and older creation stories. It would seem that the writer of Genesis must have been familiar with these earlier accounts and adapted them to fit the history of his own people. The only alternative to this theory is that they are all of them versions of a universal formula. At any rate, the many similarities between the Genesis account and these earlier stories are too significant to be accidental.

But getting back to the two names for the Creator: in the first chapter of Genesis and the first three verses of the second, the name of Deity is the Hebraic word *Elohim* and is translated God. According to Fabre D'Olivet in his book, *The Hebraic Tongue Restored*, this is a plural word, denoting three or more. An effort to make a literal translation of this word would be something like this: The Creative Hierarchies (Principles) who are Emanations from, yet who forever remain identified with, the One Absolute Being.

The other word used to designate Deity found for the first time in the fourth verse of the second chapter, and thereafter throughout the book, is the Hebrew word *Jehovah* (IHVH), translated Lord God. From this point there begins a detailed account of the "generations" of the heavens and of the earth.

It should not seem strange to the Christian to think of these two signatures of Deity as referring to two aspects or phases of work of the Supreme. In the first story of Genesis—and here the accounts of the ancient Aryans, Chaldeans and Babylonians are in agreement—we have an account of creation as taking place on the highest or spiritual levels. Here, the Divine Creative Intelligences (*Elohim*), who are Emanations of the One Absolute Being, project thought images of things-to-be into the heaven or causal worlds.

To attempt to describe a process so metaphysical in nature, we can only say that these images or patterns of things-to-be descend or condense into the lowest strata of matter, where for untold ages they lie buried and dormant. There follows a long, slow process wherein these images begin, vaguely at first, to take form and shape. Through long ages (days), these forms evolve into the likeness of the seed idea which was in the mind of the Creator. That verse in the second chapter of Genesis, wherein it is stated,

“The Lord God made . . . every plant of the field *before* it was in the earth, and every herb of the field *before* it grew,” takes on new significance. Clearly this is the statement of a formula to the effect that all living forms that make their appearance upon earth had first their origins in inner states of being. The reader will recall that “Ideal” world of Plato from which the realities (noumena) are projected into this lower world as objects (phenomena).

The tremendous importance of this discovery to the Christian world is that it gives a new viewpoint on the subject of creation and evolution. Indeed it furnishes a reconciliation between these two apparently contradictory ideas, for in the first creation story is told the coming down of the Divine Life into manifestation. This Theosophy terms *involution*. The second creation story depicts in allegorical terms the appearance of the many differentiated forms of life upon our planet. This science calls evolution. Thus involution and evolution may be viewed as two sides of the one creative process.

The Christian Mysteries

The particular contribution that Theosophy has for Christianity is the light of understanding which it sheds upon the New Testament. It has indeed restored to Christianity its ancient heritage as custodian of the divine wisdom of the ages in the form of the Christian Mysteries. St. Augustine, the father of Christian theology, is reported to have said, “for the thing itself which is now called the Christian religion, really was known to the Ancients, nor was wanting at any time from the beginning of the human race, until the time when Christ came in the flesh; from whence the true religion, which had previously existed, began to be called Christian.”[†] By this statement he acknowledged the existence of a universal religion, which, with the advent of Christ, became known as Christianity.

One of the truths which Theosophy reveals to the world, based upon the sacred scriptures of all ages, is that there has existed upon our planet from time immemorial, a spiritual hierarchy, composed of a body of “just men made perfect” (Heb. 12:23). Many passages in both the Old and New Testaments refer to the Saints as intercessors on behalf of men, and the Christian Church recognizes them in seasonal festivals and special prayers. Theosophy refers to these men as Masters and Adepts—men of humanity who through the perfection of their own natures and for their service and sacrifice for mankind have risen to the level of the immortals. The Heart of this Brotherhood is One who is the embodiment upon our planet of the Lord of Love.

It is from this Hierarchy that great Teachers from time to time come out into the world to present a new aspect of the one eternal truth in the form of a new religion. Each religion then becomes a way by which men discover this great truth, and each

[†] St. Augustine, *Retractions*, i, 13, quoted in Pike, Albert, *Morals and Dogma*, 1871, p. 262.

who discovers it finds a Path which leads him to the heart of this inner Brotherhood. This is true no less of Christianity.

Yet it is difficult for the average Christian of today, as it always has been, to realize that beneath the outer teachings of his religion there may be found an inner and secret wisdom. It is not until it is brought to his attention that he sees in the New Testament, both in the sayings of Jesus and in the writings of St. Paul, the many allusions to an esoteric teaching. Dr. Annie Besant, in her book *The Ancient Wisdom*, said of the Christian scriptures that “they contained shallows in which a child could wade, and depths in which a giant must swim.”

The existence of this inner or hidden teaching was openly recognized by the Church in the early centuries. There were a few scholars, known as Gnostics (knowers), who sought to preserve the esoteric wisdom of the Essenes, as a definite part of the Christian teachings. The leaders of this group were among the early Church Fathers—bishops and elders. Among them were such well-known names as Origen and St. Clement. Later, as the orthodox or popular group in the church grew in numbers and hence held the balance of power, the Gnostics were submerged and their teaching branded by those in authority as heretical. The result of this tragedy was that for many centuries that followed, the Christian mysteries were forced underground.

Theosophy and The New Testament

It remained for Theosophy to restore to the Christian world this lost wisdom. It should be understood that Theosophy is not a religion and in no sense does it take the place of Christianity. Rather does it bring to that religion a new depth and richness through its unbiased searchings into the sacred scriptures of the world. It has found in many of their teachings and rituals a common pattern. Throughout the Epistles and Gospels have been discovered certain key words and phrases, certainly not accidentally placed, which give notice to the searcher that herein are buried gems of spiritual wisdom. In this day of scientific enlightenment and independent thinking, countless thousands, who might otherwise have left their church, find new inspiration in a fuller understanding of the Bible.

Jesus often reminded his disciples that he had many things to tell them which he could not tell the throng. To a few of His chosen disciples he said, “Unto you it is given to know of the mystery of the Kingdom of God; but unto them that are without, all these things are done in parables” (Mark 4:11). And it is recorded that, after having talked to the multitudes in parables, “when they were alone, he expounded all these things to his disciples” (Mark 4:34). At another time “when much people were gathered together,” and he had finished the parable of the sower, “His disciples asked him, saying what might this parable be? And He said, “Unto you it is given to know the

mysteries of the kingdom of God; but to others in parables" (Luke 8:9-10). St. John records his Master as making this significant remark, "I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now" (John 16:12).

St. Paul, in his Epistles, makes frequent allusions to the fact that Christianity has a hidden or esoteric side not evident on the surface. He said, "We speak the wisdom of God (*theo sophia*) in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, . . . but God hath revealed them to us by His Spirit" (I Cor. 2:7-10). To a group of the "brethren" in Corinth, Paul wrote, "I could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but . . . as unto babes in Christ. I have fed you with milk and not with meat for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able" (I Cor. 3:1-2).

What is this hidden wisdom which the world will not, or cannot receive—now? Or that mystery which can be told to the many only in parables? I think John comes closest to expressing it when he writes, "Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is" (I John 3:2). For it is true that even His immediate disciples did not see Jesus as He was. The three whom He took up into a mountain (high state of consciousness) beheld Him only in His more glorious body.

How can one tell of this wisdom or describe its mystery unless he himself has experienced and his own eyes have seen? It must be a knowledge of the existence of inner worlds whose dimensions extend into infinity; of a life essence emanating from the One Life and inherent in every form; of a power issuing forth from the One Will, pervading all space and existing, though latent, in every man. Beyond all, it must be the realization that Life is One, whatever diversities there may appear; that from the One Absolute, in descending orders, there are revealed vast hierarchies of beings, angels and archangels, who act as channels and agents of His life, His will and His intelligence throughout the far flung universe. Most glorious of all, is the realization that within each human soul there exists, in embryo, all divine potencies. For, as John concludes in his most significant declaration, "Every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself even as He is pure" (I John 3:3).

The Nature of Christ

Not the least contribution of Theosophy to Christian understanding is the light which it throws upon the nature of Christ. Among the religions of the world, Christianity is unique in the emphasis that it places upon the Incarnation, of God descending in human form, and of the divine sacrifice. These concepts are dramatically portrayed in the life of Jesus.

One day, walking along a country road with his disciples, Jesus asked them, "Whom do men say that I am?" And when they answered, "John the Baptist, Elias or

one of the prophets," He asked, "But whom say ye that I am?" And Peter answered, "Thou art the Christ" (Mark 8:29).

When we consider the Christ in His highest aspect, we think of the Second Person of the Trinity, the Word or Logos. He is that aspect of God which is Love. It is His Sacrifice which has brought all forms of life into manifestation; and it is His life which animates every organism, whether it be an amoeba or a saint. He is the "Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (Rev. 13:8). In a very real sense it is by "His eternal sacrifice" that the universe is nourished and sustained.

Closely linked with this cosmic aspect is His embodiment upon our planet as the Christos, partaking both of the nature of God and of man. As man, He became truly the "first fruit of them that slept" (I Cor. 15:20). As the divine teacher, He appeared again and again in the world to establish its great religions. In His life in the body of Jesus, He fulfilled on earth the pattern of the heavenly drama of the divine sacrifice. It was surely from this point of view that Jesus said, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, before Abraham was, I am" (John 8:58).

By far the most important to man is the aspect of Him as the Mystic Christ within each human heart. So often in the gospel of John do His words take on this meaning. "I am the bread of life. . . . If any man eat of this bread, he shall live forever" (John 6:35 and 51). It was surely this Mystic Christ which St. Paul meant when he said, "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me" (Gal. 2:20). Referring to this great mystery in man, he said, "even the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations . . . which is Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col. 1:26-27). He further emphasizes this indwelling Mystic Christ "that Christ may dwell in your hearts" (Eph. 3:17). "Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ . . ." (I Cor. 15:18). And he concludes, "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature" (II Cor. 5:17).

Christianity and Reincarnation

One of the fundamental teachings of Theosophy which many Christians find difficulty in accepting, is that of the rebirth of the soul, on the grounds that it is not taught in the Bible. While it is true that the Bible does not specifically teach reincarnation, there are nevertheless several instances where the subject comes up, and no denial of it is made. Instead, it is accepted as a general truth. One such instance occurred when Jesus was talking to the multitude about John the Baptist. He said, "And if ye will receive it, this is Elias, which was for to come" (Matt. 11:14). He referred to the words of the prophet Malachi, "I will send you Elijah the prophet" (Mal. 4:5). Had this idea been foreign to them, this statement certainly would have been challenged. Then a little later,

He further emphasized his statement, referring again to John, He said, "Elias is come already and they knew him not" (Matt. 17:12).

On another occasion Jesus came upon a man who was blind from his birth and his disciples, ever ready to argue points of Jewish law, asked Him, "Master, who did sin, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" The inference was that the man may have sinned in a previous life thereby causing his blindness at birth. Had this inference been untrue, Jesus would never have let it go uncorrected. He answered, "Neither hath this man sinned nor his parents, but that the works of God should be made manifest in Him" (John 9:1-4).

"There Is No Religion Higher Than Truth"

The Christian, through his study of Theosophy, will discover many truths in the Bible, formerly concealed in parable and symbol. He will find his faith re-established and his devotion rekindled with the fire of understanding. He will learn that ceremonial, though not a means of salvation, is nevertheless a marvelous mechanism for the invocation and dissemination of spiritual power, and that worship may become an intelligent cooperation with an invisible kingdom, human and angelic, in a great work. Above all, he will see in every man's religion, *that* man's own path to perfection and union with God.

Theosophy is not a religion. Nor does it take the place of one's religion. Rather does it throw the light of understanding upon all religions. Its one aim is the search for Truth and since Truth is infinite, it proclaims the slogan, "There is no religion higher than Truth."