

The Emblem of the Theosophical Society



The emblem or seal of the Theosophical Society consists of seven elements that represent a unity of meaning. It combines symbols drawn from various religious traditions around the world to express the order of the universe and the spiritual unity of all life.

OM

ॐ

At the top of the emblem is the Sanskrit word *Om*, a very sacred word in India, being used by Hindus, Buddhists, and others. It cannot be translated into English because it has symbolic rather than ordinary meaning. It is pronounced as a single syllable, “om,” but is written with three letters in Sanskrit: *a*, *u*, and *m*—*au* being the way Sanskrit writes the sound *o*. It is thus the ultimate Unity manifesting itself in a threefold way. It is the trinity, which is found not only in Christianity, but in Hinduism, Buddhism, and indeed all over the globe in many religions.

As a Sacred Word, *Om* is like the Greek term *Logos*, adopted by the early Christians to symbolize the divine order manifested in the universe: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” It is the word that creates, sustains, and transforms the whole cosmos: the word eternally spoken by God.

Even the shape of the Sanskrit letters is interesting symbolically. What looks like a “3” connected to what looks like the Greek letter pi (Π) is the Sanskrit letter *a*, which is thus written in two dimensions. The small curved line over the pi-like part of the letter *a* is the letter *u*, which is one-dimensional. And the small dot is the letter *m*, having no dimensions. As the letters of the word *Om* progress from one to the next,

they become smaller in dimensions, finally ending with the primal point, the singularity from which the whole universe expands at the time of the Big Bang.

The *Om* is at the top of the seal because it symbolizes the Absolute expressing itself as the three-in-one divine intelligence or Logos from which the universe emanates and to which, at the end of time, it returns. The great Hindu devotional work, the Bhagavad Gita, says that the word *Om* should begin everything, because it symbolizes the divine origin of all things.

The Whirling Cross



Below the word *Om* is a whirling cross within a circle. It is a very ancient symbol, found all over the world—in India, among American Indians, and in many other cultures around the globe. In Sanskrit it is called a *swastika*, meaning “good.” It comes from the word *swasti* “welfare,” in turn from *su* “well” and *asti* “it is.” In popular use in India, it is thought to be a sign of good luck. In medieval Europe it was used by Christians and called a *gammadion* (because it is made of four Greek gamma letters) or in England a *fylfot* because it was used as a design to fill (*fyl*) the foot (*fo*) of stained glass windows.

The Nazis adopted this ancient holy symbol (which they called *Hakenkreuz* or “bent cross”) and perverted its meaning, much as the Ku Klux Klan in the United States adopted the cross and perverted its meaning as a sign of hate and intimidation. But the swastika is still used as a holy symbol all over the world, for example by the Jains of India, whose religion is devoted to harmlessness.

All crosses symbolize some aspect of manifestation. The swastika is a whirling cross, its clockwise (righthanded, sunwise, or deasil) motion suggesting the dynamic forces of creation. So the swastika represents the great process of becoming, which produces the world in which we live. It symbolizes what astrophysicists call the expansion of the universe. When the swastika is represented as turning in the opposite direction (that of the Nazi *Hakenkreuz*), it symbolizes the forces of contraction or destruction that bring about the end of a world when it has completed its evolution. The reverse turning swastika is not evil, but merely a symbol of the winding up of creative energies and of the process of coming to an end.

The circle that encloses the swastika is what is called the “ring-pass-not,” that is, the boundary around our universe and within which the creative forces constantly swirl and evolve life. The center of the whirling swastika, however, is still. When we are there, we are, as T. S. Eliot said in *Burnt Norton*, “at the still point of the turning world.” It is the point of calmness and peace in the midst of the constantly changing world all around us.

The encircled swastika, symbolizing the world in its dynamic aspect of becoming, is just below the *Om* symbol, which represents the eternal and absolute from which the world emanates. Their arrangement in the seal is therefore meaningful. This changing world depends on or hangs from the unchanging absolute. Moreover, the rest of the seal, which represents particular aspects of this evolving world, expands from the encircled swastika. The rest of the seal gives us, as it were, a closer look at the process symbolized by the whirling cross, the process going on within it.

The Ouroboros



Immediately connected with the whirling cross is a serpent swallowing its own tail. This symbol was called by the ancient Greek Gnostics and alchemists *ouroboros*. The circle it forms is a restatement of the circle around the swastika, representing the boundary of the universe, and the fact that it passes through the encircled swastika suggests that the serpent and everything it encircles are part of the creative energy of the whirling cross.

The serpent swallowing its tail also represents the cycles of nature, the bounded eternity of the world, and the infinite order of life. One of the ideas it suggests is that which T. S. Eliot expressed in his poem *East Coker*: “In my beginning is my end,” that is, law and orderliness are to be found everywhere in the universe and in human life, so the end of everything is implicit in its beginning.

In the West, the serpent or the dragon is sometimes interpreted as a symbol of evil or temptation, but in the East, it is generally a symbol of wisdom, longevity, and happiness. In China, the dragon or winged serpent is a very favorable figure. In the Hindu tradition, the nagas or serpents are guardians of the good, and holy men are called “nagas.” Even in the West, the serpent is associated with wisdom; Christ advised his followers to be “wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.”

The serpent is also a symbol of healing, that is, of wholeness. Moses cured the sick among the Children of Israel in the desert by having them gaze upon a fiery serpent set upon a pole. Christian Church fathers interpreted that serpent as a type or anticipatory symbol of Christ on the cross. And one or two serpents intertwining a staff are even today a symbol of the healing professions. The fact that the serpent sheds its skin each year makes it an emblem of the cyclical process of the world and of the renewal of life, that is, of resurrection. And so in that way again the serpent is an analog of Christ and of the transformative process we will all pass through.

The Two Triangles



The area inside the serpent's circle represents the whole universe and everything in it. In colored versions of the seal, it is usually blue, passing from a light sky or baby blue at the top to a dark, almost navy blue at the bottom. That blue represents the cosmic sky, not just the physical sky we see, but the whole range of material substance in the universe, from rarefied, subtle matter at the "top" of the universe to gross, dense matter at the "bottom." This colored background is not really a part of the seal, but it lends its own meaning to the whole symbol, as do the various other colors used in some versions of the seal.

Upon that background of the universe are two interlaced triangles, another worldwide symbol. The hexagram or six-pointed star that they form is universal and has many meanings. It is found in Judaism as the Seal of Solomon or the Shield of David (*magen david*), but the symbol is also found in India, among the Gnostics and alchemists, and elsewhere around the world.

The upward-pointing triangle, which is light in color, symbolizes spirit or consciousness. The downward-pointing triangle, which is dark in color, symbolizes matter or substance. The fact that the two triangles are interlaced is a statement of the interdependence of spirit and matter. It is a basic Theosophical concept that every particle of matter has consciousness in it and that every spark of consciousness functions through a material form. Matter and spirit are mutually dependent. Neither can exist without the other.

The idea that matter and spirit are the two sides of one coin is reflected also in traditional Christian theology. It holds that at the end of time there will be a "general resurrection," when all dead bodies will be brought to life and united with the souls from which they were separated at the moment of death. So in eternity,

Christian theology says, our souls and bodies will again be conjoined, just as they now are. The inner meaning of the Christian doctrine of the last, general resurrection is the same as the Theosophical teaching of the mutual coexistence of matter and spirit. Reality is a whole, a unity expressing itself as both spirit and matter while remaining essentially One. That fact is expressed by the interlaced triangles, which, although two, form an interrelated whole just as spirit and matter or consciousness and substance do.

It is significant that triangles rather than some other geometrical shape are used to symbolize spirit and matter. Spirit and matter are both threefold in their natures. Spirit or consciousness has three aspects: the reality of being, awareness of others, and joyful activity. In Hinduism those are called *sat* (being), *chit* (awareness), and *ananda* (bliss), three terms often run together as *sat-chit-ananda* to symbolize the unity of these three aspects. In Platonic philosophy they are called the Good, the Beautiful, and the True. In Freemasonry they are called Wisdom, Strength, and Beauty. In Christianity they correspond to the three divine Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and to the three supernatural virtues: faith, hope, and love.

Matter likewise has three aspects: stability, activity, and regularity. In Hinduism they are spoken of as three "strands" (*gunas*) out of which matter is woven: *tamas* or inertia, *rajas* or activity, and *sattva* or harmony. They correspond to the three alchemical elements of salt, mercury, and sulfur, and are represented by the three colors black, red, and white (or dark, bright, and light), which are the basic colors found all over the world.

So it is not accidental that triangles are used to represent both spirit and matter. The three sides and three points of the two triangles total twelve, the number of the signs of the Zodiac, the Tribes of Israel, the apostles of Christ, the labors of Hercules, and a lot of other mythological and symbolic dozens. They all refer to the experiences we go through in this world.

The Ankh



At the center of the six-pointed star of spirit and matter is the Egyptian cross or *ankh*, symbolic of life. The six points of the triangles and the ankh at the center represent the seven principles of the universe. Or, if we think of the hexagram as having twelve sides or twelve points (six outward and six inward), the center is the

thirteenth element, corresponding to Christ among the apostles, Hercules in his labors, and so on. The ankh also represents the idea that life results from the interaction of spirit or consciousness (the upward triangle) and matter or substance (the downward triangle).

The ankh is also called an “ansate” cross, that is, a cross “with a handle.” Human or divine figures in Egyptian art are often depicted as carrying the ankh by its loop or “handle.” When we are functioning in a fully human mode, with spirit and matter balanced, we have, as it were, a “handle” on life.

Since the ankh consists of a tau (or T) cross topped by a circle, it combines the meanings of the T-square and the circle. The T-square is an instrument used by draftsmen and architects to draw parallel lines (symbolically, to recognize parallelisms and analogies) and as a support for triangles in drawing angles (symbolically, for serving as the basis for all the triplicities of spirit and matter). Like all square forms, it also represents matter. The circle represents spirit. The T-square and circle combined are thus another representation of spirit and matter interacting and producing life by their interaction.

Thus the ankh repeats on a lower register the symbolism already expressed by the interlaced triangles, the serpent, and the encircled swastika. All of those elements speak of the mutual connections between spirit and matter as expressions of the divine source, symbolized by the crowning *Om*. The repetition, with variation in details, of the same symbolic meanings by these different elements is a statement of the correspondences that exist throughout the universe. The world finally is one and whole, it is coherent, and it is meaningful in all its parts. That is what the seal is also saying in its entirety.

THE MOTTO

Around the bottom of the serpent is a motto: “There is no religion higher than truth.” It is an English translation of a Sanskrit motto, one word of which has special meanings that shed light on the whole motto. The original Sanskrit is *Satyan nasti paro dharmah*, which might also be translated as “Nothing is greater than truth.” The first three words can be literally translated thus: *satyan* “than truth,” *nasti* “is not,” *paro* “further, greater, higher.” *Dharmah* is difficult to translate because it means so many things. Its root meaning is “what is established or firm.” And from that basic root sense radiate such other meanings as “law,” “customs,” “duty,” “morality,” “justice,” “religion,” “teachings or doctrine,” “good works,” and “essential nature.”

The motto is not specifically about what we think of as religion. Instead it is saying that none of our commitments or social conventions or ideas can measure up to the

reality of what truly is. Reality is greater than any of its parts and is beyond all our notions about it. In saying that, the motto at the bottom of the seal directs our attention back to the word *Om* at the top. That word is a symbol of what truly is, of Truth. And so the whole seal, just like the serpent, ends where it began—affirming the supreme Truth that unites all things.

FOR FURTHER READING

The Theosophical Seal, by Arthur M. Coon

Available from the Henry S. Olcott Memorial Library.

Also see the Online Books section at www.theosophical.org under the “Resources” drop-down menu.