

November 2010

DOCTRINE WITHOUT DOGMA

From time to time, members of the Theosophical Society need to be reminded that although the Society has no dogma, it does not follow that it has no doctrines. More to the point, it is the body of teachings known as the Ageless Wisdom, or Theosophy, which has a number of cardinal principles often referred to as “doctrines.” In some circles, doctrine becomes crystallized into dogma, and is then generally accepted without question. This is unfortunate since a dogmatic attitude tends to discourage free and open-minded inquiry. It occurs in organizations ranging from religious institutions to military academies, from political organizations to organized labor. A distinguishing feature of the Theosophical Society, however, is that its members are free to form their own understanding of Theosophical teachings. They are encouraged to study, ask questions, and interpret, because Theosophy is not a creed to be accepted as an article of faith.

Yet, in spite of this approach, which the Society has taken since its inception, the very word *doctrine* seems to make some people uncomfortable and even a bit feisty. In the November 1987 issue of the *American Theosophist*, then frequent contributor Richard Ihle dismisses the whole idea of doctrine without dogma as a “somewhat oxymoronic opinion.” Others take a different view.

Shirley Nicholson, author of *Ancient Wisdom—Modern Insight*, writes in the October 1983 *AT*, “It is obvious then that there is a coherent body of teachings in Theosophy, a doctrine which can be studied.” In the June 1987 *AT*, world traveler and Theosophical lecturer Joy Mills states, “It is scarcely possible to deny the existence of such a doctrine in a society that calls itself *Theosophical*.” She then cites the Theosophical World View as an example of a well-crafted statement of Theosophical doctrine.

This is not to suggest that there is no room for creative inquiry. “Obviously, there can be an endless number of ways to interpret and apply Theosophical principles” says Theosophical scholar Emily Sellon in the July 1983 issue of the *AT*. There is no limit as to how one chooses to explore key ideas such as unity, polarity, involution, evolution, cycles, reincarnation, and karma.

Statements of Theosophical doctrine are offered, therefore, not to establish a rigid orthodoxy of verbal formulations, but to assist the open-minded inquirer in discovering the reality of eternal and living truths.

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