

Theosophy

By Viola Larson

Founder: Helena Petrovna Blavatsky

Founding Date: 1875

Location: New York

Unique Terms: Mahatmas, Clairvoyant Knowledge, Karma, Reincarnation.

Publications: Magazines: *Quest* (The Theosophical Society in America), *Sunrise: Theosophic Perspectives* (The Theosophical Society); Books by Helena Blavatsky, Henry Olcott, W. Q. Judge, Annie Besant, Grace Knoche and others.

History

Theosophy, as a religious sect, began in the nineteenth century. It developed out of the growing interest in Spiritualism and is a belief system grounded in occult and Eastern thought. Moreover, it is totally Gnostic possessing the two important tenets of Gnostic religion: knowledge as a way of salvation and a hierarchy of beings based on the possession of such knowledge. Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, with the help of William Q. Judge, Henry S. Olcott and others, founded the original Theosophical Society in New York, in 1875. Although now numerically small, Theosophy's philosophy has influenced the New Age movement of today. The prolific writing and influence of Blavatsky and others in the society are perhaps more important than the organization itself.

Helena Petrovna Blavatsky was born in Russia in 1831. As a young woman she was involved in Spiritualism. She moved to New York in 1873. In 1875 she founded the Theosophy Society. When first organized the Society's basic text was *Isis Unveiled*, written by Blavatsky. In 1879 Blavatsky and Olcott visited India. Theosophy's main headquarters was established in Adyar, India. Since that visit both Buddhist and Hindu concepts have influenced the ideology of Theosophy. J. Gordon Melton writes, "[A]t this time, the concept of the mahatmas came to the fore." Melton elaborates: "From a special altar in her home at Adyar and a few other places, letters from the masters in the spirit world began to arrive."¹ Blavatsky used the extrasensory messages as a means of ascertaining truth.

Several charges of scandal plagued the early organization. One important charge concerned the messages Blavatsky claimed to receive from spiritual Masters. Melton writes that the newly formed Society of Psychical Research, after investigating her home, charged that Blavatsky's messages were fraudulent.² Blavatsky moved to London in 1887 where she wrote *The Secret Doctrine*. She also wrote *The Key to Theosophy* and *The Voice of Silence*.³ Blavatsky died in 1891 and the Theosophy Society splintered into several groups in the succeeding years:

- 1 The Theosophical Society in America: Its international headquarters is in Adyar, Chennai (Madras) India and its American headquarters in Wheaton, Illinois. The early leaders of this group were Henry S. Olcott and Annie Besant. Their magazine is *Quest*.

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- 2 The Theosophical Society is headquartered in Pasadena, California. The early leader of this group was W.Q Judge. It is now headed by Grace F. Knoche. Theosophical Press and *Sunrise: Theosophic Perspectives* are part of the Theosophical Society.
- 3 United Lodge of Theosophists: This group publishes material through The Theosophy Company of Los Angeles.⁴

DOCTRINES

Monism & Pantheism: Theosophists do not believe in a personal God. They are monists believing all reality is one. There is no individuality. They are also pantheists believing all reality is God. In *The Key to Theosophy*, Blavatsky writes, “We believe in a Universal Divine Principle, the root of All, from which all proceeds, and within which all shall be absorbed at the end of the great cycle of Being.”⁵ Additionally, Blavatsky explains that prayer is not addressed to a distinct being since, “all are one.”⁶ A more recent writer explains, “A primary idea [of Theosophy] is the essential oneness of all beings.”⁷

Added to the idea of the universe as impersonal deity evolving into individuality is the belief that the physical world is unreal. Blavatsky explains how that can be true—“occultists and Theosophists, see in [the universe and its evolution] the only universal and eternal reality casting a periodical reflection of itself on the infinite Spatial depths.” She adds, “this reflection, which you regard as the objective *material* universe, we consider as a temporary *illusion* and nothing else. That alone which is eternal is real.”⁸ Therefore, Theosophists believe the material universe is only a reflection while individuality is unreal, “flitting personalities, to-day one person, to-morrow another.”⁹

Karma and Reincarnation: Reincarnation is the belief that after death an aspect of the person is re-embodied. Theosophists believe that humanity began their evolution as lower creatures; once they reincarnate into human form they do not return to the lower forms. The idea of reincarnation is closely tied to the concept of karma. Karma is allegedly a universal law confirming the expression “we reap what we sow.”

Unlike the biblical view of reaping and sowing, the law of karma is not based on belief in a personal God who rewards or punishes, or on the idea that humans respond in like kind to the actions of others. Rather, it is considered a law like the law of gravity; built into the universe, it cannot be broken. According to this view those who die return to the next life to work out their karmic debt. A person’s condition in life, good or bad, is based on actions in their former life. They cease returning when they have reached a state of perfection and/or perfect knowledge. These two concepts, karma and reincarnation, are basic to the Theosophists way of viewing humanity and ethics.¹⁰

In some sense, in Theosophy, there are those who can in some way readjust karmic pressure and alleviate suffering, but fundamentally each individual must suffer for their own actions. Contrasting her view of redemption with that of Christianity, Blavatsky writes:

We believe neither in vicarious atonement, nor in the possibility of the remission of the smallest sin by any god, . . . What we believe in, is strict and impartial justice. Our idea of the unknown Universal Deity, represented by Karma, is that it is a Power, which cannot fail, and can, therefore, have neither wrath nor mercy, only absolute Equity, which leaves every cause, great or small, to work out its inevitable effects.¹¹

The Mahatmas and Clairvoyant Knowledge: The Mahatmas have several titles according to Theosophists. They are referred to as Masters, Initiates, Adepts and Great Souls. They are believed to be humans who have reincarnated, evolving to such a state that they have moved beyond humanity in matters of spiritual knowledge and holiness. Like the Bodhisattvas of Buddhism, they are, supposedly, those who have reached enlightenment and are able to impart knowledge as an aid in the evolution of humanity.

Blavatsky and other Theosophy writers claim their work is in some way guided by the Mahatmas. Blavatsky wrote of Theosophy's books, "there are passages entirely dictated by them and *verbatim*, but in most cases they only inspire the ideas and leave the literary form to the writers." Blavatsky also wrote of the difficulties the Mahatmas had communicating with humanity. She believed Theosophical knowledge was based on devotion to and faith in the Mahatmas. That knowledge is considered occult knowledge. Some of the practical technologies of Theosophy, such as meditation and vegetarianism, are meant to enable the Masters to impart occult knowledge.¹² (The practice of meditation and vegetarianism is mostly confined to the Esoteric Section of Theosophy, headquartered in Ojai, California.)¹³ Various Matatmas were named by Blavatsky and Olcott. Blavatsky's main communicator was Kuthumi, but there were many more with some Masters over others.¹⁴

BIBLICAL RESPONSE

God: God, although intimately related to the world, is not the world. God has created the universe from nothing. Creation is a separate entity, neither all nor a part of God. The Scripture states, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth"(Gen. 1:1). Nehemiah states,

Thou, even thou, art LORD alone; thou hast made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth, and all things that are therein, the seas, and all that is therein, and thou preservest them all; and the host of heaven worshippeth thee (Neh. 9:6).

Hebrews 11:3 is clear concerning God's creating from nothing: "Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear." Derek Kidner explains, "In the beginning God... is equally grammatical, is supported by all the ancient versions, and affirms unequivocally the truth laid down elsewhere (e.g., Heb. 11:3) that until God spoke, nothing existed."¹⁵

From Genesis to Revelation we read of a personal caring God. He loves and tends His creation. This is a multifaceted truth. God shows His love with justice and mercy toward the evildoer. God is Father and shows His love with the care of a gardener, shepherd, etc. God's questions to Job, "Wilt thou hunt the prey for the lion? or fill the appetite of the young lions.... Knowest thou the time when the wild goats of the rock bring forth?"(Job 38:39; 39:1a) are questions from a caring personal God. In the New Testament, Matthew and Luke write of how God feeds the birds and dresses the flowers in beautiful clothing (Matt. 6: 25-34; Luke 12:22-34). The God of Scriptures is a personal God. God as creator means the material world is real, not shadows or illusion. When He finished each creative day God looked at His creation and saw that it was good (Gen. 1). The physical world is important in both the Hebrew and Christian worldview. Jesus was resurrected bodily (Luke 24:38,39; 1 Cor.15: 3-8). Believers in Christ Jesus are promised a resurrection body (1 Cor. 15:42). The earth is promised redemption (Rom. 8:20, 21).

Incarnation and Redemption Instead Of Reincarnation and Karma: Because God is personal, and is love, He came in Jesus Christ to show love and give mercy. The incarnation means God is with us. We are not forced into the steel cage of karma; rather, God offers forgiveness because of the cross. Paul writes, "This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief" (1 Tim. 1:15). Peter writes, "For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust" (1 Pet. 3:18a). On the other hand, it is only in this life that we are offered such gracious mercy. "And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment" (Heb. 9: 27). Humanity does not go through ages of reincarnation to finally be absorbed into a non-personal divinity. Rather, those who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb experience eternal joy with God (Rev. 7:15-17).

Scripture: John writing to the Church dealt with this kind of Gnostic view of revelation. He explained that after having received the Holy Spirit at conversion believers no longer needed additional special knowledge from outside of the Christian community (1 John 2:27a). In Christ they had all that was given by God. All revelation in the community would have Christ as its foundation and be available to all. The “knowledge” that the early Christians received was based on the Hebrew Scriptures and on apostolic teaching as the Holy Spirit taught and brought to remembrance the words of Jesus Christ. (John 14:26).¹⁶

Jesus Christ is the final revelation: “God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds” (Heb. 1:1, 2). God’s word also explains, “For though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or in earth, (as there be gods many, and lords many,) But to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him” (1 Cor. 8:5, 6). All that we are to know and live for is found in the person of Jesus Christ.

RECOMMENDED READING

Spirit Wars, by Peter Jones. From the author of the *Gnostic Empire Strikes Back* comes the sequel focusing on the startling growth of the Pagan Revival in America. Details the “New Spirituality” and how it is leading people into a Gnostic revolt against God. 331 pages.

Unmasking the New Age, by Douglas Groothuis. In the last 15 years the New Age has shifted from the counterculture to the mainstream. Today its effects are felt in almost every aspect of life medicine, politics, science, psychology and even in some churches. In this book, Groothuis gives the reader an introduction to New Age theology and its pervasiveness. 194 pgs.

Notes

- ¹ J. Gordon Melton, *The Encyclopedia of American Religions*, Vol. 2 (Wilmington North Carolina: McGrath Publishing Company, 1978), 135.
- ² Ibid., 139. For more detailed account of the debunking of Blavatsky’s psychic abilities, see James Walker, Watchman Fellowship Profile, “Psychics,” 2001, <http://www.watchman.org/profile/psychicspro.htm>.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Three works were used for information on the history of Theosophy and its founder: Jan Karel Van Baalen, *The Chaos of Cults*, third revised and enlarged ed., “Theosophy” (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1960); J. Gordon Melton, *The Encyclopedia of American Religions*, Vol. 2 (Wilmington North Carolina: McGrath Publishing Company); Theosophical Society, “Past and Present; History of the Theosophical Society,” <http://members.aol.com/tstec/hmpage/tshist.htm>; Theosophical Society in America, “Introducing The Theosophical Society,” <http://www.theosophical.org/intro.html> (accessed 2001).
- ⁵ Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy*, “The Fundamental Teachings of Theosophy” (Theosophical University Press), Internet edition, <http://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/key/key-5.htm>, 2, 3 (accessed 2001).
- ⁶ Ibid., 4.
- ⁷ “Some Basic Concepts of Theosophy: An Overview and Resources for Independent Study,” <http://members.aol.com/tstec/hmpage/tsideas.htm>, 1 (accessed 2001).
- ⁸ Blavatsky, *Key to Theosophy*, “Theosophical Teaching as to Nature and Man,” Internet edition, 1.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ “Some Basic Concepts of Theosophy,” <http://members.aol.com/tstec/hmpage>, 1, 2 (accessed 2001).
- ¹¹ Blavatsky, *Key to Theosophy*, “On the Mysteries of Re-incarnation,” Internet edition.
- ¹² Blavatsky, *Key to Theosophy*, “The Theosophical Mahatmas.” Internet edition.
- ¹³ Robert S. Ellwood, Jr., *Religious and Spiritual Groups in Modern America* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1973), 100.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., 94.
- ¹⁵ Derek Kidner, *Genesis: an Introduction & Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, ed. D.J. Wiseman (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1997), 43.
- ¹⁶ F.F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1970), 75-77.



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