

WHAT THEOSOPHY IS

There is a school of philosophy still in existence of which modern culture has lost sight." In these words Mr. A. P. Sinnett began his book, *The Occult World*, the first popular exposition of Theosophy, published thirty years ago. During the years that have passed since then, many thousands have learned wisdom in that school, yet to the majority its teachings are still unknown, and they can give only the vaguest of replies to the query, "What is Theosophy?"

Two books already exist which answer that question: Mr. Sinnett's *Esoteric Buddhism* and Mrs. Besant's *The Ancient Wisdom*. I have no thought of entering into competition with those standard works; what I desire is to present a statement, as clear and simple as I can make it, which may be regarded as introductory to them.

We often speak of Theosophy as not in itself a religion, but the truth which lies behind all religions alike. That is so; yet, from another point of view, we may surely say that it is at once a philosophy, because it puts plainly before us an explanation of the scheme of evolution of both the souls and the bodies contained, in our solar system. It is a religion in so far as, having shown us the course of ordinary evolution, it also puts before us and advises a method of shortening that course, so that by conscious effort we may progress more directly towards the goal. It is a science, because it treats both these subjects as matters not of theological belief but of direct knowledge obtainable by study and investigation. It asserts that man has no need to trust to blind faith, because he has within him latent powers which, when aroused, enable him to see and examine for himself, and it proceeds to prove its case by showing how those powers may be awakened. It is itself a result of the awakening of such powers by men, for the teachings which it puts before us are founded upon direct observations made in the past, and rendered possible only by such development.

As a philosophy, it explains to us that the solar system is a carefully-ordered mechanism, a manifestation of a magnificent life, of which man is but a small part. Nevertheless, it takes up that small part which immediately concerns us, and treats it exhaustively under three heads – present, past and future.

It deals with the present by describing what man really is, as seen by means of developed faculties. It is customary to speak of man as having a soul; Theosophy, as the result of direct investigation, reverses that dictum, and states that man is a soul, and has a body – in fact several bodies, which are his vehicles and instruments in various worlds. These worlds are not separate in space; they are simultaneously present with us, here and now, and can be examined; they are the divisions of the material side of nature – different degrees of density in the aggregation of matter, as will presently be explained in detail. Man has an existence in several of these, but is normally conscious only of the lowest, though sometimes in dreams and trances he has glimpses of some of the others. What is called death is the laying aside of

the vehicle belonging to this lowest world, but the soul or real man in a higher world is no more changed or affected by this than the physical man is changed or affected when he removes his overcoat. All this is a matter, not of speculation, but of observation and experiment.

Theosophy has much to tell us of the past history of man – of how in the course of evolution he has come to what he now is. This also is a matter of observation, because of the fact that there exists an indelible record of all that has taken place – a sort of memory of Nature – by examining which the scenes of earlier evolution may be made to pass before the eyes of the investigator as though they were happening at this moment. By thus studying the past we learn that man is divine in origin and that he has a long evolution behind him – a double evolution, that of the life or soul within, and that of the outer form. We learn, too, that the life of man as a soul is of what to us seems enormous length, and that what we have been in the habit of calling his life is in reality only one day of his real existence. He has already lived through many such days, and has many more of them yet before him; and if we wish to understand the real life and its object, we must consider it in relation not only to this one day of it, which begins with birth and ends with death, but also to the days which have gone before and those which are yet to come.

Of those that are yet to come there is also much to be said, and on this subject too a great deal of definite information is available. Such information is obtainable, first, from men who have already passed much further along the road of evolution than we, and have consequently direct experience of it; and, secondly, from inferences drawn from the obvious direction of the steps which we see to have been previously taken. The goal of this particular cycle, is in sight, though still far above us; but it would seem that, even when that has been attained, an infinity of progress still lies before everyone who is willing to undertake it.

One of the most striking advantages of Theosophy is that the light which it brings to us at once solves many of our problems, clears away many difficulties, accounts for the apparent injustices of life, and in all directions brings order out of seeming chaos. Thus while some of its teaching is based upon the observation of forces whose direct working is somewhat beyond the ken of the ordinary man of the world, if the latter will accept it as a hypothesis he will very soon come to see that it must be a correct one, because it, and it alone, furnishes a coherent and reasonable explanation of the drama of life which is being played before him.

The existence of Perfected Men, and the possibility of coming into touch with Them and being taught by Them, are prominent among the great new truths which Theosophy brings to the Western World. Another of them is the stupendous fact that the world is not drifting blindly into anarchy, but that its progress is under the control of a perfectly organized Hierarchy, so that final failure even for the tiniest of its units is of all impossibilities the most impossible. A glimpse of the working of that Hierarchy inevitably engenders the desire to co-

operate with it, to serve under it, in however humble a capacity, and some time in the far-distant future to be worthy to join the outer fringes of its ranks.

This brings us to that aspect of Theosophy which we have called religious. Those who come to know and to understand these things are dissatisfied with the slow aeons of evolution; they yearn to become more immediately useful, and so they demand and obtain knowledge of the shorter but steeper Path. There is no possibility of escaping the amount of work that has to be done. It is like carrying a load up a mountain; whether one carries it straight up a steep path or more gradually by a road of gentle slope, precisely the same number of foot-pounds must be exerted. Therefore to do the same work in a small fraction of the time means determined effort. It can be done, however, for it has been done; and those who have done it agree that it far more than repays the trouble. The limitation of the various vehicles is thereby gradually transcended, and the liberated man becomes an intelligent co-worker in the mighty plan for the evolution of all beings.

In its capacity as a religion, too, Theosophy gives its followers a rule of life, based not on alleged commands delivered at some remote period of the past, but on plain common sense as indicated by observed facts. The attitude of the student of Theosophy towards the rules which it prescribes resembles rather that which we adopt to hygienic regulations than obedience to religious commandments. We may say, if we wish, that this thing or that is in accordance with the divine Will, for the divine Will is expressed in what we know as the laws of nature. Because that Will wisely ordereth all things, to infringe its laws means to disturb the smooth working of the scheme, to hold back for a moment that fragment or tiny part of evolution, and consequently to bring discomfort upon ourselves and others. It is for that reason that the wise man avoids infringing them – not to escape the imaginary wrath of some offended deity. But if from a certain point of view we may think of Theosophy as a religion, we must note two great points of difference between it and what is ordinarily called religion in the West. First, it neither demands belief from its followers, nor does it even speak of belief in the sense in which that word is usually employed. The student of occult science either knows a thing or suspends his judgment about it; there is no place in his scheme for blind faith. Naturally, beginners in the study cannot yet know for themselves, so they are asked to read the results of the various observations and to deal with them as probable hypothesis – provisionally to accept and act upon them, until such time as they can prove for themselves.

Secondly, Theosophy never endeavours to convert any man from whatever religion he already holds. On the contrary, it explains his religion to him, and enables him to see in it deeper meanings than he has ever known before. It teaches him to understand it and live it better than he did, and in many cases it gives back to him, on a higher and more intelligent level, the faith in it which he had previously all but lost.

Theosophy has its aspect as a science also; it is in very truth a science of life, a science of the soul. It applies to everything the scientific method of oft-repeated, painstaking

observation, and then tabulates the results and makes deductions from them. In this way it has investigated the various planes of nature, the conditions of man's consciousness during life and after what is commonly called death. It cannot be too often repeated that its statements on all these matters are not vague guesses or tenets of faith, but are based upon direct and oft-repeated observation of what happens. Its investigators have dealt also to a certain extent with subjects more in the range of ordinary science, as may be seen by those who read the recently issued book on Occult Chemistry.

Thus we see that Theosophy combines within itself some of the characteristics of philosophy, religion and science. What, it might be asked, is its gospel for this weary world? What are the main points which emerge from its investigations? What are the great facts which it has to lay before humanity?

They have been well summed up under three main heads.

"There are three truths which are absolute, and which cannot be lost, but yet may remain silent for lack of speech.

"The soul of man is immortal, and its future is the future of a thing whose growth and splendour has no limit.

"The principle which gives life dwells in us and without us, is undying and eternally beneficent, is not heard or seen or smelt, but is perceived by the man who desires perception

"Each man is his own absolute lawgiver; the dispenser of glory or gloom to himself; the decreer of his life, his reward, his punishment.

"These truths, which are as great as is life itself, are as simple as the simplest mind of man."

Put shortly, and in the language of the man of the street, this means that God is good, that man is immortal, and that as we sow so we must reap. There is a definite scheme of things; it is under intelligent direction and works under immutable laws. Man has his place in this scheme and is living under these laws. If he understands them and co-operates with them, he will advance rapidly and will be happy; if he does not understand them – if wittingly or unwittingly, he breaks them, he will delay his progress and be miserable. These are not theories, but proved facts. Let him who doubts read on, and he will see.