

Does Theosophy Have Core Doctrines?

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Some theosophical students have written that *true* Theosophy does not have core teachings. These students have characterized those who believe Theosophy has definite teachings as “Core Theosophists” and labeled them as “dogmatists,” “fundamentalists,” and other negative terms.

In response, I have appended excerpts from a 1975 article by Boris de Zirkoff, the editor of HPB's *Collected Writings*. I believe de Zirkoff's words reflect common sense and a practical approach to the study of Theosophy. I have also appended a number of excerpts from HPB's first great work, *Isis Unveiled*, which, in my opinion, confirm much of what de Zirkoff has written. First, Boris de Zirkoff:

For some years past, a tendency has existed among some [theosophical] students . . . to consider theosophy as some sort of *generalized approach* to truth, a tradition, often somewhat uncertain, concerning various aspects of the Universe and man, a system of ideas and concepts which can hardly be defined with any degree of exactness or clarity. It is most likely that this tendency owes its origin to a desire to avoid any dogmatic attitude or the creation of any kind of creed. The motive may have been laudable, but the methods employed have been rather dubious. We should never lose sight of the fact that the Esoteric Philosophy is a very definite doctrine, a system of thought based on specific postulates, on well-defined propositions. . . . Even a cursory glance at the pages of *The Secret Doctrine* would confirm this fact. That work contains innumerable instances where H.P.B. (and the Adept-Brothers speaking through her) uses such expressions as: “the Secret Doctrine teaches,” “secret records declare,” “the Esoteric Philosophy states that . . .,” “it is the teaching of the ancient occult doctrine,” and others. If the student cared to underline these passages and then read them consecutively, or place them in juxtaposition, he would see at a glance that the “Secret Doctrine,” as a system of thought, is about as definite as any science or philosophy is ever apt to be, and stands in direct oppo-

sition to a large number of other ideas which have become current in the world under the name of one or another religion or philosophy. It is perfectly true that the objects of the organized body known as the Theosophical Society have never contained any definition of what Theosophy is or is not; but it is equally true that the teachings promulgated by the Founders and their Superiors are defined in no uncertain language throughout the length and breadth of the original theosophical literature, leaving no room whatsoever for doubt as to what the system of thought known as theosophy is all about, what it teaches and what it does not. If this state of affairs is at any time considered to be credal in nature, and therefore dogmatic, then we will have to assume that the statement of ‘two and two making four’ is also a creed, or that the laws governing gravitational and magnetic energies are dogmatic. The propositions of the Esoteric Philosophy may *seem* to be dogmatic or may be interpreted as a creed by those of us—probably the overwhelming majority of us—who are yet unable to prove them to ourselves experimentally. This situation is not much different from the fact that a beginner in chemistry can hardly prove to himself the *alleged* fact that water is H₂O, until he has grasped the methods necessary to verify it experimentally. If we are prepared to comply with the conditions necessary for a personal investigation of the facts of nature defined by the Occult Doctrine, we shall be in a position to prove to ourselves experimentally the validity of its propositions. How many of us are ready to do so? In the meantime—and far from any acceptance of ideas on merely a blind belief—we can investigate the coherence of that system of thought, its logical interrelatedness, its appeal to both reason and intuition, its application in both great and small ways, and its practical value in relation to others. Thereby we may become gradually convinced of the truth of the propositions and postulates of the Esoteric Philosophy, long before the time when it will have become possible for us to undertake a “clinical” investigation of the laws involved therein and to manipulate the forces and energies of the occult aspects of Nature.

And from *Isis Unveiled*:

The work now submitted to public judgment is the fruit of a somewhat intimate acquaintance with Eastern Adepts and study of their science . . . we came into contact with certain men, endowed with such mysterious powers and such profound knowledge that we may truly designate them as the sages of the Orient. To their instructions we lent a ready ear. [1:v-vi]

From the first ages of man, the fundamental truths of all that we are permitted to know on earth was in the safe keeping of the adepts of the sanctuary. . . . those guardians of the primitive divine revelation, who had solved every problem that is within the grasp of human intellect, were bound together by a universal freemasonry of science and philosophy, which formed one unbroken chain around the globe. [1:37-38]

There are, scattered throughout the world, a handful of thoughtful and solitary students, who pass their lives in obscurity, far from the rumors of the world, studying the great problems of the physical and spiritual universes. They have their secret records in which are preserved the fruits of the scholastic labors of the long line of recluses whose successors they are. [1:557]

The esoteric doctrine . . . teaches . . . that the one infinite and unknown Essence exists from all eternity, and in regular and harmonious successions is either passive or active. In the poetical phraseology of Manu these conditions are called the "day" and the "night" of Brahma. The latter is either "awake" or "asleep." . . . Upon inaugurating an active period, says the *Secret Doctrine*, an expansion of this Divine essence, *from within outwardly*, occurs in obedience to eternal and immutable law, and the phenomenal or visible universe is the ultimate result of the long chain of cosmical forces thus progressively set in motion. In like manner, when the passive condition is resumed, a contraction of the Divine essence takes place, and the previous work of creation is gradually and progressively undone. The visible universe becomes disintegrated, its material dispersed; and "darkness," solitary and alone, broods once more over the face of the "deep." To use a metaphor which will convey the idea still more clearly, an outbreathing of the "unknown essence" produces the world; and an inhalation causes it to disappear. *This process has been going on from all eternity, and our present universe is but one of an infinite series which had no beginning and will have no end.* [2:264-5]

Gautama, no less than all other great reformers, had a doctrine for his "elect" and another for the outside masses. . . . Gautama left the esoteric and most dangerous portion of the "secret knowledge" untouched. [2:319]

The Secret Doctrine is the Truth. [2:292]

Many are those who . . . will remain in doubt and mortal agony as to whether, when man dies, he will live again, although the question has been solved by long bygone generations of sages. . . . except the initiates, no one has understood the mystic writing. The key was in the keeping of those who knew how to commune with the invisible Presence, and who had received, from the lips of mother Nature herself, her grand truths. [1:573]

This "secret doctrine" contains the alpha and omega of universal science; therein lies the corner and the keystone of all the ancient and modern knowledge; and alone in this . . . doctrine remains buried the *absolute* in the philosophy of the dark problems of life and death. [1:511]

Thus is it that all the religious monuments of old, in whatever land or under whatever climate, are the expression of the same identical thoughts, the key to which is in the esoteric doctrine. . . . And the clergy of every nation, though practicing rites and ceremonies which may have differed externally, had evidently been initiated into the same traditional mysteries which were taught all over the world. [1:561]

The Northern seer, Swedenborg, advises people to search for the LOST WORD among the hierophants of Tartary, China and Thibet; for it is there, and only there now. . . . the four Vedas; the *Books of Hermes*; the *Chaldean Book of Numbers*; the *Nazarene Codex*; the *Kabala* . . . ; the *Sepher Jezira*; the *Book of Wisdom* . . . ; the *Brahmanas*; the *Stan-gyour*, of the Thibetans; all these volumes have the same groundwork. Varying but in allegories they teach the same secret doctrine which . . . will prove to be the Ultima Thule of true philosophy, and disclose what is this LOST WORD. [1:580]

The "secret doctrine" or wisdom was identical in every country. [1:444]

What we desire to prove is that underlying every ancient popular religion was the same ancient wisdom-doctrine, one and identical, professed and practiced by the initiates of every country, who alone were aware of its existence and importance. . . . A single glance . . . is enough to assure one that it could not have attained the marvelous perfection in which we find it pictured to us in the relics of the various esoteric systems, except after a succession of ages. A philosophy so profound, a moral code so ennobling, and practical results so conclusive and so uniformly demonstrable is not the growth of a generation, or even a single epoch. Fact must have been piled upon fact, deduction upon deduction, science have begotten science, and myriads of the brightest human intellects have reflected upon the laws of nature, before this ancient doctrine had taken concrete shape. The proofs of this identity of fundamental doctrine in the old religions are found in

the prevalence of a system of initiation; in the secret sacerdotal castes who had the guardianship of mystical words of power, and a public display of a phenomenal control over natural forces, indicating association with preterhuman beings. . . .

As we proceed, we will point out the evidence of this identity of vows, formulas, rites, and doctrines, between the ancient faiths. We will also show that not only their memory is still preserved in India, but also that the Secret Association is still alive and as active as ever. . . . that the chief pontiff and hierophant, the *Brahmatma*, is still accessible to those "who know," though perhaps recognized by another name; and that the ramifications of his influence extend throughout the world. [2:99–100]

Our examination of the multitudinous religious faiths that mankind, early and late, have professed, most assuredly indicates that they have all been derived from one primitive source. It would seem as if they were all but different modes of expressing the yearning of the

imprisoned human soul for intercourse with supernal spheres. As the white ray of light is decomposed by the prism into the various colors of the solar spectrum, so the beam of divine truth, in passing through the *three-sided* prism of man's nature, has been broken up into vari-colored fragments called RELIGIONS. And, as the rays of the spectrum, by imperceptible shadings, merge into each other, so the great theologies that have appeared at different degrees of divergence from the original source have been connected by minor schisms, schools, and off-shoots from the one side or the other. Combined, their aggregate represents one eternal truth; separate, they are but shades of human error and the signs of imperfection. . . .

What has been contemptuously termed Paganism, was ancient wisdom replete with Deity; and Judaism and its offspring, Christianity and Islamism, derived whatever of inspiration they contained from this ethnic parent. Pre-Vedic Brahmanism and Buddhism are the double source from which all religions sprung; Nirvana is the ocean to which all tend. [2:639] ■

Q theosophical words

Naturalized Nirvana

Nirvana is from Sanskrit *nirvāna* (from *nis-* "out" + *vāti* "to blow," as the wind does). According to Monier-Williams's *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, the Sanskrit word means "a blowing out, extinction, cessation, setting [as of the sun], vanishing, disappearance; final emancipation from matter and reunion with the Supreme Spirit"; or among Buddhists and Jains, "absolute extinction or annihilation of individual existence or of all desires and passions"; it also means "perfect calm or repose or happiness, highest bliss or beatitude."

The *Theosophical Glossary* says: "In the esoteric explanations it is the state of absolute existence and absolute consciousness, into which the Ego of a man who has reached the highest degree of perfection and holiness during life goes, after the body dies, and occasionally, as in the case of Gautama Buddha and others, during life."

In ordinary English use, the term has acquired several other meanings, especially, "the best conditions of existence one can imagine," as seen in these uses:

"This [the landing on Mars of the spacecraft Pathfinder] was a textbook entry," [mission deputy manager, Brian] Muirhead said. "This was Nirvana for us space guys. This couldn't be a better experience for all of us." [1997 July 5 *Chicago Tribune* 1-1/3]

Gail M. Dudack chose an arresting title for her 1997 stock market forecast: "Nirvana in the rearview mirror." Even if you didn't know Dudack is one of Wall Street's most bearish analysts, that would suggest her outlook is cautious. "The easy part of this market is over," said Dudack. [1997 July 6 *Atlanta Journal/Constitution* E3/1]

It may seem a long way from the metaphysical state of (non)being in the Sanskrit and Theosophical uses of *nirvana* to a smooth landing on Mars or a bull market. But the latter uses show how once exotic Eastern terms have been naturalized in American use. If our readers notice examples for *nirvana* or other Eastern terms, we would be pleased to have the pages from the newspapers or magazines containing them. The Theosophical Society was the first popularizer of these terms in the Western world. It is appropriate for us to keep tabs on what is happening with them.