

A Lay Chela on the Secret Doctrine



From *Five Years of Theosophy: Mystical, Philosophical, Theosophical, Historical, and Scientific Essays selected from "The Theosophist."*¹ London: Reeves & Turner, 1885; pp. 473-81. Frontispiece: The Gordian Knot, by Martin-Georg Oscity.

FEW EXPERIENCES LYING ABOUT THE THRESHOLD of occult studies are more perplexing and tormenting than those which have to do with the policy of the Brothers as to what shall, and what shall not, be revealed to the outer world. In fact, it is only by students at the same time tenacious and patient — continuously anxious to get at the truths of occult philosophy, but cool enough to bide their time when obstacles come in the way — that what looks, at first sight, like a grudging and miserly policy in this matter on the part of our illustrious teachers can be endured. Most men persist in judging all situations by the light of their own knowledge and conceptions, and certainly by reference to standards of right and wrong with which modern civilization is familiar a pungent indictment may be framed against the holders of philosophical truth. They are regarded by their critics as keeping guard over their intellectual possessions, declaring, “We have won this knowledge with strenuous effort and at the cost of sacrifice and suffering; we will not make a present of it to luxurious idlers who have done nothing to deserve it.” Most critics of the Theosophical Society and its publications have fastened on this obvious idea, and have denounced the policy of the Brothers as “selfish” and “unreasonable.” It has been argued that, as regards occult *powers*, the necessity for keeping back all secrets which would enable unconscientious people to do mischief, might be granted, but that no corresponding motives could dictate the reservation of occult philosophical truth.

I have lately come to perceive certain considerations on this subject which have generally been overlooked; and it seems desirable to put them forward at once; especially as a very considerable body of occult philosophical teaching is now before the world, and as those who appreciate its value best, will sometimes be inclined to protest all the more emphatically against the tardiness with which it has been served out, and the curious precautions with which its further development is even now surrounded.

In a nutshell, the explanation of the timid policy displayed is that the Brothers are fully assured that the disclosure of that actual truth (which constitutes the secret doctrine) about the origin of the World and of Humanity — of the laws which govern their existence, and the destinies to which they are moving on — is calculated to have a very momentous effect on the welfare of mankind. Great results ensue from small beginnings, and the seeds of knowledge now being sown in the world may ultimately bear prodigious harvest. We, who are present merely at the sowing, may not realize the magnitude and importance of the impulse we are concerned in giving, but

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that impulse will roll on, and a few generations hence will be productive of tremendous consequences one way or the other. For occult philosophy is no shadowy system of speculation like any of the hundred philosophies with which the minds of men have been overwhelmed; it is the positive Truth, and by the time enough of it is let out, it will be seen to be so by thousands of the greatest men who may then be living in the world. What will be the consequence? The first effect on the minds of all who come to understand it, is terribly iconoclastic. It drives out before it *everything* else in the shape of religious belief. It leaves no room for any conceptions belonging even to the groundwork or foundation of ordinary religious faith. And what becomes then of all rules of right and wrong, of all sanctions for morality? Most assuredly there are rules of right and wrong thrilling through every fibre of occult philosophy really higher than any which commonplace theologies can teach; far more cogent sanctions for morality than can be derived at second-hand from the distorted doctrines of exoteric religions; but a complete transfer of the sanction will be a process involving the greatest possible danger for mankind at the time. Bigots of all denominations will laugh at the idea of such a transfer being seriously considered. The orthodox Christian — confident in the thousands of churches overshadowing all western lands, of the enormous force engaged in the maintenance and propagation of the faith, with the Pope and the Protestant hierarchy in alliance for this broad purpose, with the countless clergy of all sects, and the fiery Salvation Army bringing up the rear — will think that the earth itself is more likely to crumble into ruin than the irresistible authority of Religion to be driven back. They are all counting, however, without the progress of enlightenment. The most absurd religions die hard; but when the intellectual classes definitively reject them, *they die*, with throes of terrible agony, may be, and, perhaps, like Samson in the Temple, but they cannot permanently outlive a conviction that they are false in the leading minds of the age. Just what has been said of Christianity may be said of Mahomedanism and Brahmanism. Little or no risk is run while occult literature aims merely at putting a reasonable construction on perverted tenets — in showing people that truth may lurk behind even the strangest theologic fictions. And the lover of orthodoxy, in either of the cases instanced, may welcome the explanation with complacency. For him also, as for the Christian, the faith which he professes — sanctioned by what looks like a considerable antiquity to the very limited vision of uninitiated historians, and supported by the attachment of millions grown old in its service and careful to educate their children in the convictions that have served their turn — is founded on a rock which has its base in the foundations of the world. Fragmentary teachings of occult philosophy seem at first to be no more than annotations on the canonical doctrine. They may even embellish it with graceful interpretations of its symbolism, parts of which may have seemed to require apology, when ignorantly taken at the foot of the letter. But this is merely the beginning of the attack. If occult philosophy gets before the world with anything resembling completeness, it will so command the assent of earnest students that for them nothing else of that nature will remain standing. And the earnest students in such cases must multiply. They are multiplying *now* even, merely on the strength of the little that has been revealed. True, as yet — for some time to come — the study will be, as it were, the whim of a few; but “those who know,” know among other things that, give it fair-play, and it must become the subject of enthusiasm with all advanced think-

ers. And what is to happen when the world is divided into two camps — the whole forces of intellectuality and culture on the one side, those of ignorance and superstitious fanaticism on the other? With such a war as that impending, the adepts, who will be conscious that they prepared the lists and armed the combatants, will require some better justification for their policy before their own consciences than the reflection that, in the beginning, people accused them of selfishness, and of keeping a miserly guard over their knowledge, and so goaded them with this taunt that they were induced to set the ball rolling.

There is no question, be it understood, as to the relative merits of the moral sanctions that are afforded by occult philosophy and those which are distilled from the worn-out materials of existing creeds. If the world could conceivably be shunted at one *coup* from the one code of morals to the other, the world would be greatly the better for the change. But the change cannot be made all at once, and the transition is most dangerous. On the other hand, it is no less dangerous to take no steps in the direction of that transition. For though existing religions may be a great power — the Pope ruling still over millions of consciences if not over towns and States, the name of the Prophet being still a word to conjure with in war, the forces of Brāhmanical custom holding countless millions in willing subjection — in spite of all this, the old religions are sapped and past their prime. They are in process of decay, for they are losing their hold on the educated minority; it is still the case that in all countries the camps of orthodoxy include large numbers of men distinguished by intellect and culture, but one by one their numbers are diminishing. Five-and-twenty years only, in Europe, have made a prodigious change. Books are written now that pass almost as matters of course which would have been impossible no further back than that. No further back, books thrilled society with surprise and excitement, which the intellectual world would now ignore as embodying the feeblest commonplaces. The old creeds, in fact, are slowly losing their hold upon mankind — more slowly in the more deliberately moving East than Europe, but even here by degrees also — and a time will come, whether occult philosophy is given out to take their place or not, when they will no longer afford even such faulty sanctions for moral conduct and right as they have supplied in times gone by. Therefore it is plain that something *must* be given out to take their place, and hence the determinations of which this movement in which we are engaged is one of the undulations — these very words some of the foremost froth upon the advancing wave.

But surely, when something which must be done is yet very dangerous in the doing, the persons who control the operations in progress may be excused for exercising the utmost caution. Readers of Theosophical literature will be aware how bitterly our adept Brothers have been criticized for choosing to take their own time and methods in the task of partially communicating their knowledge to the world. Here in India these criticisms have been indignantly resented by the passionate loyalty to the Mahatmas that is so widely spread among Hindus — resented more by instinct than reason in some cases perhaps, though in others, no doubt, as a consequence of a full appreciation of all that is being now explained, and of other considerations beside. But in Europe such criticisms will have seemed hard to answer. The answer is really embodied, however imperfectly, in the views of the situation now set forth. We ordinary mortals in the world work as men travelling by the light of a lantern in an un-

known country. We see but a little way to the right and left, only a little way behind even. But the adepts work as men travelling by daylight, with the further advantage of being able at will to get up in a balloon and survey vast expanses of lake and plain and forest.

The choice of time and methods for communicating occult knowledge to the world necessarily includes the choice of intermediary agent. Hence the double set of misconceptions in India and Europe, each adapted to the land of its origin. In India, where knowledge of the Brothers' existence and reverence for their attributes is widely diffused, it is natural that persons who may be chosen for their serviceability rather than for their merits, as the recipients of their direct teaching, should be regarded with a feeling resembling jealousy. In Europe, the difficulty of getting into any sort of relations with the fountain-head of Eastern philosophy is regarded as due to an exasperating exclusiveness on the part of the adepts in that philosophy, which renders it practically worth no man's while to devote himself to the task of soliciting their instruction. But neither feeling is reasonable when considered in the light of the explanations now put forward. The Brothers can consider none but public interests, in the largest sense of the words, in throwing out the first experimental flashes of occult revelation into the world. They can only employ agents on whom they can rely for doing the work as they may wish it done — or, at all events, in no manner which may be widely otherwise. Or they can only protect the task on which they are concerned in another way. They may consent sometimes to a very much more direct mode of instruction than that provided through intermediary agents for the world at large, in the cases of organized societies solemnly pledged to secrecy, for the time being at all events, in regard to the teaching to be conveyed to them. In reference to such societies, the Brothers need not be on the watch to see that the teaching is not worked up for the service of the world in a way they would consider, for any reasons of their own, likely to be injurious to final results or dangerous. Different men will assimilate the philosophy to be unfolded in different ways: for some it will be too iconoclastic altogether, and its further pursuit, after a certain point is reached, unwelcome. Such persons, entering too hastily on the path of exploration, will be able to drop off from the undertaking whenever they like, if thoroughly pledged to secrecy in the first instance, without being a source of embarrassment afterwards, as regards the steady prosecution of the work in hand by other more resolute, or less sensitive, labourers. It may be that in some such societies, if any should be formed in which occult philosophy may be secretly studied, some of the members will be as well fitted as, or better than, any other persons employed elsewhere to put the teachings in shape for publication, but in that case it is to be presumed that special qualifications will eventually make themselves apparent. The meaning and good sense of the restrictions, provisionally imposed meanwhile, will be plain enough to any impartial person on reflection, even though their novelty and strangeness may be a little resented at the first glance.

