

The Theosophical Society Mission and Future



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Suggested reading for students.

From our Theosophy and Theosophists Series. 19



¹ Frontispiece by Vitaly Urzhumov.

Emile-Louis Burnouf on Theosophy¹

It is another's fault if he be ungrateful; but it is mine if I do not give. To find one thankful man I will oblige many who are not.

— SENECA

. . . The veil is rent
Which blinded me! I am as all these men
Who cry upon their gods and are not heard,
Or are not heeded — yet there must be aid!
For them and me and all there must be help!
Perchance the gods have need of help themselves,
Being so feeble that when sad lips cry
They cannot save! I would not let one cry
Whom I could save! . . .

— *The Light of Asia*, end of Book III

True Buddhism is neither a sect nor a religion. It is rather a moral and intellectual reform, which excludes no belief, but adopts none. Yet the Buddhism of today is nonetheless a rather dogmatic religion, split into many and heterogeneous sects.

First published in *Lucifer*, Vol. II, No. 12, August, 1888, pp. 421-433; republished in *Blavatsky Collected Writings*, (THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY: ITS MISSION AND ITS FUTURE) X pp. 63-81.

It has seldom been the good fortune of the Theosophical Society to meet with such courteous and even sympathetic treatment as it has received at the hands of Émile Burnouf, the well-known Sanskritist, in an article in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*² — “Le Bouddhisme en Occident.”

Such an article proves that the Society has at last taken its rightful place in the thought-life of the XIXth century. It marks the dawn of a new era in its history, and, as such, deserves the most careful consideration of all those who are devoting their energies to its work. Émile Burnouf's position in the world of Eastern scholarship entitles his opinions to respect; while his name, that of one of the first and most justly honoured of Sanskrit scholars (the late Eugène Burnouf), renders it more than probable that a man bearing such a name will make no hasty statements and draw no premature conclusions, but that his deductions will be founded on careful and accurate study.

¹ [Curiously enough, Émile Burnouf's remarks on The Theosophical Society and its work in the world were translated into English and published by Col. H.S. Olcott as the leading article in the October number of *The Theosophist*, almost at the same time when H.P. Blavatsky was inserting her own essay in the pages of *Lucifer*. In reviewing the August 1888 issue of *Lucifer*, the Colonel said:

“By a curious coincidence the number under review commences, as does our own Magazine of this month, with a translation of part of É. Burnouf's courteous and sympathetic article on the Theosophical Society. Had not the earlier portion of our issue been in type before the arrival of *Lucifer*, we should have added some of Madame Blavatsky's comments in the form of foot-notes for the benefit of our readers; but that being now impossible, we append a few of the more important remarks in this place.” (*The Theosophist*, Vol. X, October 1888, p. 66)

In a footnote appended to the translation, Col. Olcott says also:

“ . . . the appearance of such an article by such a man and in such a magazine undoubtedly shows that the Theosophical Society has already attained a position in the world of Western thought which its most ardent supporters could hardly yet have expected, considering the tremendous forces against which it has to struggle.”

— *Boris de Zirkoff*.]

² Vol. 88, July 15th, 1888

His article is devoted to a triple subject: the origins of three religions or associations, whose fundamental doctrines É. Burnouf regards as identical, whose aim is the same, and which are derived from a common source. These are Buddhism, Christianity, and — the Theosophical Society.

As he writes, page 341:

. . . This source, which is Oriental, was hitherto contested; to-day it has been fully brought to light by scientific research, notably by the English scientists and the publication of original texts. Amongst these sagacious scrutinizers it is sufficient to name Sayce, Poole, Beal, Rhys-David, Spence Hardy, Bunsen. . . . It is a long time, indeed, since they were struck with resemblances, let us say, rather, identical elements, offered by the Christian religion and that of Buddha. . . . During the last century these analogies were explained by a pretended Nestorian influence; but since then the Oriental chronology has been established, and it was shown that Buddha was anterior by several centuries to Nestorius, and even to Jesus Christ. . . . The problem remained an open one down to the recent day when the paths followed by Buddhism were recognised, and the stages traced on its way, finally to reach Jerusalem. . . . And now we see born under our eyes a new association, created for the propagation in the world of the Buddhistic dogmas. It is of this triple subject that we shall treat.

It is on this, to a degree erroneous, conception of the aims and object of the Theosophical Society that É. Burnouf's article, and the remarks and opinions that ensue therefrom, are based. He strikes a false note from the beginning, and proceeds on this line. The T.S. was not created to propagate any dogma of any exoteric, ritualistic church, whether Buddhist, Brāhmanical, or Christian. This idea is a wide-spread and general mistake; and that of the eminent Sanskritist is due to a self-evident source which misled him. É. Burnouf has read in *Le Lotus*, the journal of the Theosophical Society of Paris, a polemical correspondence between one of the Editors of *Lucifer* and the Abbé Roca. The latter persisting — very unwisely — in connecting theosophy with Papism and the Roman Catholic Church — which, of all the dogmatic world religions, is the one his correspondent loathes the most — the philosophy and ethics of Gautama Buddha, not his later church, whether northern or southern, were therein prominently brought forward. The said Editor is undeniably a Buddhist — *i.e.*, a follower of the esoteric school of the great "Light of Asia," and so is the President of the Theosophical Society, Colonel H.S. Olcott. But this does not pin the theosophical body as a whole to ecclesiastical Buddhism. The Society was founded to become the Brotherhood of Humanity — a centre, philosophical and religious, common to all — not as a propaganda for Buddhism merely. Its first steps were directed toward the same great aim that É. Burnouf ascribes to Buddha Śākyamuni, who "opened his church to all men, without distinction of origin, caste, nation, colour, or sex,"¹ adding, "My law is a law of Grace for all." In the same way the Theosophical Society is open to all, without distinction of "origin, caste, nation, colour, or sex," and what is more — of creed.

¹ See Art. I in the *Rules* of the T.S.

The introductory paragraphs of this article show how truly the author has grasped, with this exception, within the compass of a few lines, the idea that all religions have a common basis and spring from a single root. After devoting a few pages to Buddhism, the religion and the association of men founded by the Prince of Kapilavastu; to Manichaeism, miscalled a “heresy,” in its relation to both Buddhism and Christianity, he winds up his article with — the Theosophical Society. He leads up to the latter by tracing

(a) The life of Buddha, too well known to an English speaking public through Sir Edwin Arnold’s magnificent poem to need recapitulation;

(b) By showing in a few brief words that Nirvana is *not annihilation*;¹ and

(c) That the Greeks, Romans and even the Brahmans regarded the *priest* as the intermediary between men and God, an idea which involves the conception of a *personal God*, distributing his favours according to his own good pleasure — a sovereign of the universe, in short.

The few lines about Nirvana must find place here before the last proposition is discussed. Says the author:

It is not my task here to discuss the nature of nirvāna. I will only say that the idea of annihilation is absolutely foreign to India, that the Buddha’s object was to deliver humanity from the miseries of earth life and its successive reincarnations; that, finally, he passed his long existence in battling against Māra and his angels, whom he himself called Death and the army of death. The word *nirvāna* means, it is true, extinction, for instance, that of a lamp blown out but it means also the absence of wind. I think, therefore, that *nirvana* is nothing else but that *requies aeterna*,² that *lux perpetua*³ which Christians also desire for their dead. . . .⁴

With regard to the conception of the priestly office the author shows it entirely absent from Buddhism. Buddha is no God, but a *man* who has reached the supreme degree of wisdom and virtue.

Therefore Buddhist metaphysics conceives the absolute Principle of all things which other religions call God, in a totally different manner and does not make of it as being separate from the universe.⁵

The writer then points out that the equality of all men among themselves is one of the fundamental conceptions of Buddhism.

He adds moreover and demonstrates that it was from Buddhism that the Jews derived their doctrine of a *Messiah*.

¹ The fact that Nirvana does *not* mean *annihilation* was repeatedly asserted in *Isis Unveiled*, where its author discussed its etymological meaning as given by Max Müller and others and showed that the “blowing out of a lamp” does not even imply the idea that Nirvana is the “extinction of consciousness.” (See Vol. I, p. 290, and Vol. II, pp. 116-17, 286, 320, 566, etc.)

² [eternal rest]

³ [perpetual light]

⁴ [p. 343]

⁵ [p. 345]

The Essenes, the Therapeuts and the Gnostics are identified as a result of this fusion of Indian and Semitic thought, and it is shown that, on comparing the lives of Jesus and Buddha, both biographies fall into two parts: the ideal legend and the real facts. Of these the legendary part is identical in both; as indeed must be the case from the theosophical standpoint, since both are based on the Initiatory cycle. Finally this “legendary” part is contrasted with the corresponding feature in other religions, notably with the Vedic story of Viśvakarman.¹ According to his view, it was only at the council of Nicea that Christianity broke officially with the ecclesiastical Buddhism, though he regards the Nicene Creed as simply the development of the formula: “the Buddha, the Law, the Church” (Buddha, Dharma, Sangha).

The Manicheans were originally *Samanas* or Śramanas, Buddhist ascetics whose presence at Rome in the third century is recorded by St. Hippolytus. É. Burnouf explains their dualism as referring to the double nature of man — good and evil — the evil principle being the *Māra* of Buddhist legend. He shows that the Manicheans derived their doctrines more immediately from Buddhism than did Christianity and consequently a life and death struggle arose between the two, when the Christian Church became a body which claimed to be the sole and exclusive possessor of Truth. This idea is in direct contradiction to the most fundamental conceptions of Buddhism and therefore its professors could not but be bitterly opposed to the Manicheans. It was thus the Jewish spirit of exclusiveness which armed against the Manicheans the secular arm of the Christian states.

Having thus traced the evolution of Buddhist thought from India to Palestine and Europe, É. Burnouf points out that the Albigenses on the one hand, and the Pauline school (whose influence is traceable in Protestantism) on the other, are the two latest survivals of this influence. He then continues:

Analysis shows us in contemporary society two essential elements: the idea of a *personal God* among believers and, among the philosophers, the almost complete disappearance of charity. The Jewish element has regained the upper hand, and the Buddhistic element in Christianity has been obscured.

Thus one of the most interesting, if not the most unexpected, phenomena of our day is the attempt which is now being made to revive and create in the world a new society, resting on the same foundations as Buddhism. Although only in its beginnings, its growth is so rapid that our readers will be glad to have their attention called to this subject. This society is still in some measure in the condition of a mission, and its spread is accomplished noiselessly and without violence. It has not even a definitive name, its members grouping themselves under eastern names, placed as titles to their publications: *Isis*, *Lo-*

¹ This identity between the *Logoi* of various religions and in particular the identity between the legends of Buddha and Jesus Christ, was again proven years ago in *Isis Unveiled*, and the legend of Viśvakarman more recently in *Le Lotus* and other Theosophical publications. The whole story is analysed at length in *The Secret Doctrine*, in some chapters which were written more than two years ago.

[The most likely passage meant occurs in Vol. II, p. 559, although no lengthy analysis of this subject can be traced anywhere. — *Boris de Zirkoff*.]

tus, Sphinx, Lucifer. The name common to all which predominates among them for the moment is that of *Theosophical Society*.¹

After giving a very accurate account of the formation and history of the Society — even to the number of its working branches in India, namely, 135 — he then continues:

The society is very young, nevertheless it has already its history . . . It has neither money nor patrons; it acts solely with its own eventual resources. It contains no worldly element. . . . It flatters no private or public interest. It has set itself a moral ideal of great elevation, it combats vice and egoism. It tends towards the unification of religions, which it considers as identical in their philosophical origin; but it recognises the supremacy of truth. . . .

With these principles, and in the time in which we live, the society could hardly impose on itself more trying conditions of existence. Still it has grown with astonishing rapidity. . . .²

Having summarised the history of the development of the T.S. and the growth of its organisation, the writer asks “What is the spirit which animates it?” To this he replies by quoting the three objects of the Society, remarking in reference to the second and third of these (the study of literatures, religions and sciences of the Āryan nations and the investigation of latent psychic faculties, &c.), that, although these might seem to give the Society a sort of academic colouring, remote from the affairs of actual life, yet in reality this is not the case; and he quotes the following passage from the close of the Editorial in *Lucifer*.³

He who does not practise altruism; he who is not prepared to share his last morsel with a weaker or a poorer than himself; he who neglects to help his brother man, of whatever race, nation, or creed, whenever and wherever he meets suffering, and who turns a deaf ear to the cry of human misery; he who hears an innocent person slandered, whether a brother Theosophist or not, and does not undertake his defence as he would undertake his own — is no Theosophist.

. . . This declaration [continues É. Burnouf] is not Christian because it takes no account of belief, because it does not proselytise for any communion, and because, in fact, the Christians have usually made use of calumny against their adversaries, for example, the Manicheans, Protestants and Jews.⁴ It is even less Mussulman or Brāhmanical. It is purely Buddhistic: the practical publications of the Society are either translations of Buddhist books, or original works inspired by the teaching of Buddha. Therefore the Society has a Buddhist character.

¹ [p. 366]

² [p. 367]

³ Vol. I, November 1887, p. 169

⁴ And — the author forgets to add — “the Theosophists.” No Society has ever been more ferociously calumniated and persecuted by the *odium theologicum* since the Christian Churches are reduced to use their tongues as their sole weapon — than the Theosophical Association and its Founders. — Editor, *Lucifer*.

Against this it protests a little, fearing to take on an exclusive and sectarian character. It is mistaken: the true and original Buddhism is not a sect, it is hardly a religion. It is rather a moral and intellectual reform, which excludes no belief, but adopts none. This is what is done by the Theosophical Society. . . .¹

We have given our reasons for protesting. We are pinned to no faith. In stating that the T.S. is “Buddhist,” É. Burnouf is quite right, however, from one point of view. It has a Buddhist colouring simply because that religion, or rather philosophy, approaches more nearly to the TRUTH (the secret wisdom) than does any other exoteric form of belief. Hence the close connexion between the two. But on the other hand the T.S. is perfectly right in protesting against being mistaken for a merely Buddhist propaganda, for the reasons given by us at the beginning of the present article, and by our critic himself. For although in complete agreement with him as to the *true* nature and character of primitive Buddhism, yet the Buddhism of to-day is none the less a rather dogmatic religion, split into many and heterogeneous sects. We follow the Buddha alone. Therefore, once it becomes necessary to go behind the actually existing form, and who will deny this necessity in respect to Buddhism? — once this is done, is it not infinitely better to go back to the pure and unadulterated source of Buddhism itself, rather than halt at an intermediate stage? Such a half and half reform was tried when Protestantism broke away from the elder Church, and are the results satisfactory?

Such then is the simple and very natural reason why the T.S. does not raise the standard of exoteric Buddhism and proclaim itself a follower of the *Church* of the Lord Buddha. It desires too sincerely to remain within that *unadulterated* “light” to allow itself to be absorbed by its distorted shadow. This is well understood by É. Burnouf, since he expresses as much in the following passage:

. . . From the doctrinal point of creed, Buddhism has no mysteries Buddha preached in parables; but a parable is a developed simile and has nothing symbolical in it. The Theosophists have seen very clearly that, in religions, there have always been two teachings; the one very simple in appearance and full of images or fables which are put forward as realities; this is the public teaching, called exoteric; the other, esoteric or inner, reserved for the more educated and discreet adepts, the initiates of the second degree. There is, finally a sort of science, which may formerly have been cultivated in the secrecy of the sanctuaries, a science called *hermetism*, which gives the final explanation of the symbols. When this science is applied to various religions, we see that their symbolisms, though in appearance different, yet rest upon the same stock of ideas, and are traceable to one single manner of interpreting nature.

The characteristic feature of Buddhism is precisely the absence of this hermetism, the exiguity of its symbolism, and the fact that it presents to men, in their ordinary language, the truth without a veil. . . . This it is which the Theosophical Society is repeating²

¹ [p. 369]

² [pp. 369-70]

And no better model could the Society follow: but this is not all. It is true that no *mysteries* or esotericism exists in the two chief Buddhist Churches, the Southern and the Northern. Buddhists may well be content with the dead letter of Siddhārtha Buddha's teachings, as fortunately no higher or nobler ones in their effects upon the ethics of the masses exist, to this day. But herein lies the great mistake of all the Orientalists. There is an esoteric doctrine, a soul-ennobling philosophy, behind the outward body of ecclesiastical Buddhism. The latter, pure, chaste and immaculate as the virgin snow on the ice-capped crests of the Himalayan ranges, is, however, as cold and desolate as they with regard to the *post-mortem* condition of man. This secret system was taught to the *Arhats* alone, generally in the Saptaparna (*Mahāvamśa's Sattapani*) cave, known to Fa-hien as the *Cheta* cave near the Mount Baibhār (in Pali, Webhāra), in Rājagriha, the ancient capital of Magadha, by the Lord Buddha himself, between the hours of *Dhyāna* (or mystic contemplation). It is from this cave — called in the days of Śākyamuni, Sarasvatī or “Bamboo-cave” — that the Arhats initiated into the Secret Wisdom carried away their learning and knowledge beyond the Himalayan range, wherein the Secret Doctrine is taught to this day. Had not the South Indian invaders of Ceylon “heaped into piles as high as the top of the coconut trees” the *ollas* of the Buddhists, and burnt them, as the Christian conquerors burnt all the secret records of the Gnostics and the Initiates, Orientalists would have the proof of it, and there would have been no need of asserting now this well-known fact.

Having fallen into the common error, É. Burnouf continues:

Many will say: It is a chimerical enterprise; it has no more a future before it than has the *New Jerusalem* of the Rue Thouin, and no more *raison d'être* than the *Salvation Army*. This may be so; it is to be observed, however, that these two groups of people are *Biblical Societies*, retaining all the paraphernalia of the expiring religions. The Theosophical Society is the direct opposite; it does away with figures, it neglects or relegates them to the background, putting in the foreground Science, as we understand it to-day, and the moral reformation, of which our old world stands in such need. What, then, are to-day the social elements which may be for or against it? I shall state them in all frankness.¹

In brief, É. Burnouf sees in the public *indifference* the first obstacle in the Society's way. “Indifference is born from weariness; weariness of the inability of religions to improve social life, and of the ceaseless spectacle of rites and ceremonies that the laity does not understand and which the priest never explains.” Men demand to-day “scientific formulae stating laws of nature, whether physical or moral. . . .” And this indifference the Society must encounter; “its name, also, adding to its difficulties: for the word *theosophy* has no meaning for the people. . . . and, at best, a very vague one for the learned.” “It seems to imply a personal god,” É. Burnouf thinks, adding: “Whoever says personal god, says creation and miracle,” and he concludes that “the Society would do better to become frankly Buddhist or to cease to exist.”²

¹ [p. 370]

² [pp. 370-71]

With this advice of our friendly critic it is rather difficult to agree. He has evidently grasped the lofty ideal of primitive Buddhism, and rightly sees that this ideal is identical with that of the T.S. But he has not yet learned the lesson of its history, nor perceived that to graft a young and healthy shoot on to a branch which has lost — less than any other, yet much of — its inner vitality, could not but be fatal to the new growth. The very essence of the position taken up by the T.S. is that it asserts and maintains the truth common to all religions; the truth which is true and undefiled by the concretions of ages of human passions and needs. But though Theosophy means Divine Wisdom, it implies nothing resembling belief in a personal god. It is *not* “the wisdom of God,” but *divine* wisdom. The Theosophists of the Alexandrian Neo-Platonic school believed in “gods” and “demons” and in one *impersonal* ABSOLUTE DEITY. To continue:

Our contemporary habits of life [says É. Burnouf] are not severe; they tend year by year to grow more gentle, but also more boneless. The moral stamina of the men of to-day is very feeble; the ideas of good and evil are not, perhaps, obscured, but the *will* to act rightly lacks energy. What men seek above all is pleasure and that somnolent state of existence called comfort. Try to preach the sacrifice of one’s possessions and of oneself to men who have entered on this path of selfishness! You will not convert many. Do we not see the doctrine of the “struggle for life” applied to every function of human life? This formula has become for our contemporaries a sort of revelation, whose pontiffs they blindly follow and glorify. One may say to them, but in vain, that one must share one’s last morsel of bread with the hungry; they will smile and reply by the formula: “the struggle for life.” They will go further: they will say that in advancing a contrary theory, you are yourself struggling for your existence and are not disinterested. How can one escape from this sophism, of which all men are full to-day?

This doctrine is certainly the worst adversary of Theosophy . . . for it is the most perfect formula of egoism. It seems to be based on scientific observation, and it sums up the moral tendencies of our day . . . Those who accept it and invoke justice are in contradiction with themselves, those who practise it and who put God on their side are blasphemers. But those who disregard it and preach charity are considered wanting in intelligence, their kindness of heart leading them into folly. If the Theosophical Society succeeds in refuting this pretended law of the struggle for life and in extirpating it from men’s minds, it will have done in our day a miracle greater than those of Śākyamuni and of Jesus.¹

And this miracle the Theosophical Society *will* perform. It will do this, not by disproving the relative existence of the law in question, but by assigning to it its due place in the harmonious order of the universe; by unveiling its true meaning and nature and by showing that this *pseudo-law* is a “pretended” law indeed, as far as the human family is concerned, and a fiction of the most dangerous kind. “Self-preservation,” on these lines, is indeed and in truth a sure, if a slow, suicide, for it is a policy of mutu-

¹ [pp. 371-72]

al homicide, because men by descending to its practical application among themselves, merge more and more by a retrograde reinvolution into the animal kingdom. This is what the “struggle for life” is in reality, even on the purely materialistic lines of political economy. Once that this axiomatic truth is proved to all men; the same instinct of self-preservation only directed into its true channel will make them turn to *altruism* — as their surest policy of salvation.

It is just because the real founders of the Society have ever recognised the wisdom of truth embodied in one of the concluding paragraphs of Mr. Burnouf’s excellent article, that they have provided against that terrible emergency in their fundamental teachings. The “struggle for existence” applies only to the physical, never to the moral plane of being. Therefore when the author warns us in the awfully truthful words:

Universal charity will appear out of date, the rich will keep their wealth and will go on accumulating more; the poor will become impoverished in proportion, until the day when, propelled by hunger, they will demand bread, not of theosophy but of revolution. Theosophy shall be swept away by the hurricane. . . .¹

The Theosophical Society replies: “*It surely will, were we to follow out his well-meaning advice, yet one which is concerned but with the lower plane.*” It is not the policy of self-preservation, not the welfare of one or another personality in its finite and physical form that will or can ever secure the desired object and screen the Society from the effects of the social “hurricane” to come; but only the weakening of the feeling of separateness in the units which compose its chief element. And such a weakening can only be achieved by a process of *inner enlightenment*. It is not violence that can ever insure bread and comfort for all; nor is the kingdom of peace and love, of mutual help and charity and “food for all,” to be conquered by a cold, reasoning, diplomatic policy. It is only by the close brotherly union of men’s inner SELVES, of soul-solidarity, of the growth and development of that feeling which makes one suffer when one thinks of the suffering of others, that the reign of Justice and equality for all can ever be inaugurated. This is the first of the three fundamental objects for which the Theosophical Society was established, and called the “Universal Brotherhood of Man,” without distinction of *race, colour* or *creed*.

When men will begin to realise that it is precisely that ferocious personal selfishness, the chief motor in the “struggle for life,” that lies at the very bottom and is the one sole cause of human starvation; that it is that other — national egoism and vanity, which stirs up the States and rich individuals to bury enormous capitals in the unproductive erection of gorgeous churches and temples and the support of a swarm of social drones called Cardinals and Bishops, the true parasites on the bodies of their subordinates and their flocks — then they will try to remedy this universal evil by a healthy change of policy. And this salutary revolution can be *peacefully* accomplished only by the Theosophical Society and its teachings.

¹ [p. 371]

This is little understood by Mr. Burnouf, it seems, since while striking the true keynote of the situation elsewhere he ends by saying:

The Society will find allies, if it knows how to take its place in the civilised world to-day. Since it will have against it all the positive cults, with the exception perhaps of a few dissenters and bold priests, the only other course open to it is to place itself in accord with the men of science. If its dogma of charity is a complementary doctrine which it furnishes to science, the society will be obliged to establish it on scientific data, under pain of remaining in the regions of sentimentality. The oft-repeated formula of the struggle for life is true, but not universal; it is true for the plants; it is less true for the animals in proportion as we climb the steps of the ladder, for the law of sacrifice is seen to appear and to grow in importance; in man, these two laws counter-balance one another, and the law of sacrifice, which is that of charity, tends to assume the upper hand, through the empire of the reason. It is reason which, in our societies, is the source of right, of justice, and of charity; through it we escape the inevitableness of the struggle for life, moral slavery, egoism and barbarism, in one word, that we escape from what Śākyamuni poetically called the power and the army of Māra.¹

And yet our critic does not seem satisfied with this state of things but advises us by adding as follows:

If the Theosophical Society enters into this order of ideas and knows how to make them its fulcrum, it will quit the limbus of inchoate thought and will find its place in the modern world; remaining none the less faithful to its Indian origin and to its principles. It may find allies; for if men are weary of the symbolical cults, unintelligible to their own teachers, yet men of heart (and they are many) are weary also and terrified at the egoism and the corruption, which tend to engulf our civilisation and to replace it by a learned barbarism. Pure Buddhism possesses all the breadth that can be claimed from a doctrine at once religious and scientific. Its tolerance is the cause why it can excite the jealousy of none. At bottom, it is but the proclamation of the supremacy of reason and of its empire over the animal instincts, of which it is the regulator and the restrainer. Finally it has itself summed up its character in two words which admirably formulate the law of humanity: science and virtue.²

And this formula the society has expanded by adopting that still more admirable axiom: "*There is no religion higher than truth.*"

At this juncture we shall take leave of our learned, and perhaps, too kind critic, to address a few words to Theosophists in general.

¹ [p. 372]

² [p. 372]

Has our Society, as a whole, deserved the flattering words and notice bestowed upon it by Mr. Burnouf? How many of its individual members, how many of its branches, have carried out the precepts contained in the noble words of a Master of Wisdom, as quoted by our author from No. 3 of *Lucifer*? “He who does not practise” this and the other “*is no Theosophist,*” says the quotation. Nevertheless, those who have never shared even their superfluous — let alone their last morsel — with the poor; those who continue to make a difference in their hearts between a coloured and a white brother; as all those to whom malicious remarks against their neighbours, uncharitable gossip and even slander under the slightest provocation, are like heavenly dew on their parched lips — call and regard themselves as *Theosophists!*

It is certainly not the fault of the minority of *true* Theosophists, who do try to follow *the path* and who make desperate efforts to reach it, if the majority of their fellow members do not. It is not to them therefore that this is addressed, but to those who, in their fierce love of Self and their vanity, instead of trying to carry out the original programme to the best of their ability, sow broadcast among the members the seeds of dissension; to those whose personal vanity, discontentment and love of power, often ending in ostentation, give the lie to the original programme and to the Society’s motto.

Indeed, these original aims of the FIRST SECTION of the Theosophical Society under whose advice and guidance the second and third merged into one were first founded, can never be too often recalled to the minds of our members.¹ The Spirit of these aims is clearly embodied in a letter from one of the Masters quoted in the *Occult World*, on pages 71 and 73. Those Theosophists then, who in the course of time and events would, or have, departed from those original aims, and instead of complying with them have suggested new policies of administration from the depths of their inner consciousness, *are not true to their pledges.*

“But we have always worked on the lines originally traced to us” — some of them proudly assert.

“You have not” comes the reply from those who know more of the true Founders of the T.S. *behind the scenes* than they do — or ever will if they go on working in this mood of self-illusion and self-sufficiency.

What are the lines traced by the “Masters”? Listen to the authentic words written by one of them in 1880 to the author of the *Occult World*:

. . . To our minds, then, these motives, sincere and worthy of every serious consideration *from the worldly standpoint*, appear *selfish* . . . They are selfish, because you must be aware that the chief object of the Theosophical Society is *not so much to gratify individual aspirations as to serve our fellow men* . . . in our view the highest aspirations for the welfare of humanity become tainted with selfishness, if, in the mind of the philanthropist, there lurks the shadow of a desire *for self-benefit*, or *a tendency to do injustice, even where these exist unconsciously to himself*. Yet you have ever discussed, but to put down, the idea of a Universal Brotherhood, questioned its usefulness, and advised to remodel

¹ See Rules in the 1st Vol. of *The Theosophist*, pp. 179-80.

the Theosophical Society on the principle of a college for the special study of occultism. . . .¹

But another letter was written, also in 1880, which is not only a direct reproof to Theosophists who neglect the main idea of Brotherhood, but also an anticipated answer to Monsieur Émile Burnouf's chief argument. Here are a few extracts from it.² It was addressed again to those who sought to make away with the "sentimental title," and make of the Society but an arena for "cup-growing and astral bell-ringing":

. . . In view of the ever-increasing triumph and, at the same time, misuse of freethought and liberty, how is the combative natural instinct of man to be restrained from inflicting hitherto unheard-of cruelties, enormities, tyranny, injustice, if not through the soothing influence of a Brotherhood, and of the practical application of Buddha's esoteric doctrines? . . . Buddhism is the surest path to lead men towards the one esoteric truth. As we find the world now, whether Christian, Mussulman, or Pagan, justice is disregarded and honour and mercy both flung to the winds. In a word, how, seeing that the main objects of the Theosophical Society are misinterpreted by those who are most will-

¹ A.P. Sinnett, *The Occult World*, p. 72 [p. 104, American edition].

[This passage may be found on pp. 6-7 in *The Mahatma Letters to A.P. Sinnett*, transcribed from the original letter of Master K.H., now in the British Museum. As there are slight differences, especially in the use of italics and punctuation, we transcribe below the text, direct from the microfilm of the original letter:

"To our minds then, these motives, sincere and worthy of every serious consideration from the worldly standpoint, appear — *selfish*. (You have to pardon me what you might view as crudeness of language, if your desire really is, that which you profess — to learn truth and get instruction from us — who belong to quite a different world from the one you move in.) They are selfish because you must be aware that the chief object of the T.S. is not so much to gratify individual aspirations as to serve our fellow men: and the real value of this term 'selfish,' which may jar upon your ear, has a peculiar significance with us which it cannot have with you therefore, and to begin with, you must not accept it otherwise, than in the former sense. Perhaps, you will better appreciate our meaning when told that in our view the highest aspirations for the welfare of humanity become tainted with selfishness if, in the mind of the philanthropist there lurks the shadow of desire for self-benefit or a tendency to do injustice, even when these exist unconsciously to himself. Yet, you have ever discussed but to put down the idea of a universal Brotherhood, questioned its usefulness, and advised to remodel the T.S. on the principle of a college for the special study of occultism. This, my respected and esteemed friend and Brother — will never do!"

— *Boris de Zirkoff*.]

² [The letter from which H.P. Blavatsky quotes a number of passages, is perhaps the most important one ever received from the Adept-Brothers. As pointed out by Master K.H. in an introductory note of a few lines which he appends to it, this letter is "an abridged version of the view of the Chohan on the T.S. from his own words as given last night." Thus it appears that this communication is not exactly a letter written by the Mahā Chohan himself, but rather a report of a conversation between him and K.H. on the subject of which it treats. Both A.P. Sinnett and Allan O. Hume were greatly fascinated with the phenomenal aspect of occultism, and never fully understood the basic need for the idea of Universal Brotherhood and of its application in genuine Theosophical work. This attitude strikes any serious student who reads the Letters addressed by Masters M. and K.H. to Hume and Sinnett. It is most probable that the words of the Mahā Chohan embodied in the communication under review were solicited by K.H. at a time when the situation had become somewhat critical in these respects.

It is very curious that the original Letter to Sinnett, recording the observations of the Mahā Chohan, is nowhere to be found. It is not included among the originals of *The Mahatma Letters* collection, which are now in the British Museum. Copies were made at the time either of the entire communication, or of portions of it (which fact is difficult to ascertain), to be sent to certain selected persons, one such copy being among the papers of C.W. Leadbeater, while another is among the papers of Miss Francesca Arundale. It is from these copies that the text of this communication was published by C. Jinarājadāsa in his *Letters from the Masters of the Wisdom*, First Series (1st ed., Adyar, 1919; 4th ed., 1948; Letter No. I, with explanatory Notes).

C. Jinarājadāsa, in commenting upon this Letter, points out that H.P. Blavatsky speaks of it as having been written in 1880, while the Mahā Chohan speaks of "1881 years ago," which would indicate that this communication was received sometime in 1881. It is probable that this is quite correct as far as those copies which C. Jinarājadāsa had before him are concerned. However, in the text as quoted by H.P. Blavatsky, with slight modifications, in the present article, the Mahā Chohan is made to speak of "1880 years ago." Thus, we are still uncertain as to the exact date of this important communication received through the intermediary of Master K.H.
— *Boris de Zirkoff*.]

ing to serve us personally, are we to deal with the rest of mankind, with that curse known as 'the struggle for life,' which is the real and most prolific parent of most woes and sorrows, and all crimes? Why has that struggle become the almost universal scheme of the universe? We answer: because no religion, with the exception of Buddhism has hitherto taught a practical contempt for this earthly life, while each of them, always with that one solitary exception, has through its hells and damnations inculcated the greatest dread of death. Therefore do we find that 'struggle for life' raging most fiercely in Christian countries, most prevalent in Europe and America. It weakens in the pagan lands, and is nearly unknown among Buddhist populations. . . . Teach the people to see that life on this earth, even the happiest, is but a burden and an illusion, that it is but our own Karma, the cause producing the effect, that is our own judge, our saviour in future lives — and the great struggle for life will soon lose its intensity. . . . The world in general and Christendom especially left for two thousand years to the regime of a personal God, as well as its political and social systems based on that idea, has now proved a failure. If Theosophists say: 'We have nothing to do with all this, the lower classes and the inferior races (those of India for instance, in the conception of the British) cannot concern us and must manage as they can,' what becomes of our fine professions of benevolence, reform, etc.? Are these professions a mockery? And, if a mockery, can ours be the true path? . . . Should we devote ourselves to teaching a few Europeans, fed on the fat of the land, many of them loaded with the gifts of blind fortune, the rationale of bell-ringing, cup-growing, spiritual telephone, etc., etc., and leave the teeming millions of the ignorant, of the poor and the despised, the lowly and the oppressed, to take care of themselves, and of their hereafter, the best they know how? Never! Perish rather the Theosophical Society . . . than that we should permit it to become no better than an academy of magic and a hall of Occultism. That we, the devoted followers of the spirit incarnate of absolute self-sacrifice, of philanthropy and divine kindness as of all the highest virtues attainable on this earth of sorrow, the man of men, Gautama Buddha, should ever allow the Theosophical Society to represent the embodiment of selfishness, to become the refuge of the few with no thought in them for the many, is a strange idea. . . . And it is we, the humble disciples of the perfect Lamas, who are expected to permit the Theosophical Society to drop its noblest title, that of the Brotherhood of Humanity, to become a simple school of Psychology. No! No! our brothers, you have been labouring under the mistake too long already. Let us understand each other. He who does not feel competent enough to grasp the noble idea sufficiently to work for it, need not undertake a task too heavy for him. . . .

To be true, religion and philosophy must offer the solution of every problem. That the world is in such a bad condition morally is a conclusive evidence that none of its religions and philosophies — those of the civilized races less than any other — have ever possessed the TRUTH. The right and logical explanations on the subject of the problems of the great dual principles, right and wrong, good and evil, liberty and despotism, pain and pleasure, egotism and altruism,

are as impossible to them now as they were 1880 years ago. They are as far from the solution as they ever were, but. . . .

To these there must be somewhere a consistent solution, and if our doctrines will show their competence to offer it, then the world will be the first one to confess, that ours must be the true philosophy, the true religion, the true light, which gives truth and nothing but the TRUTH. . . .¹

And this TRUTH is not Buddhism, but esoteric BUDHISM.²

He that hath ears to hear, let him hear. . . .³



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¹ [See “Maha Chohan’s View on the TS,” in The Masters Speak Series. — ED. PHIL.]

² [See “Buddhism is Inner Wisdom,” in our Confusing Words Series. — ED. PHIL.]

³ [Cf. *Mark* iv, 9; *Matthew* xi, 15 & xiii, 9; *Revelation* ii, 7. — ED. PHIL.]

⁴ Young Buddhist Monks, by Zaw Zaw Aung.

Madame Blavatsky on Theosophy and Esoteric Buddhism

Like true Buddhism, Theosophy asserts and maintains the truth common to all religions, pure truth undefiled by the concretions of ages of human passions and needs, and unveils Its majesty to all thinking men.

First published in *Le Lotus*, Paris, Vol. III, No. 18, September 1888, pp. 321-33. Translation of selected passages published in *Blavatsky Collected Writings*, (THEOSOPHIE ET BOUDDHISME) X pp. 110, 121-23.

[This French essay from the pen of H.P. Blavatsky has such close similarity to her *Lucifer* editorial entitled "The Theosophical Society: Its Mission and Its Future," published in August 1888, that it could easily be mistaken for a French translation, especially as it appeared only a month later. A good many of its paragraphs are word for word identical with those of the earlier essay, while others are somewhat different. Some of the material is slightly re-arranged, and the quoted passages from Émile Burnouf are fewer in number than is the case in the *Lucifer* editorial.

To prevent unnecessary repetition, we have translated into English only a few brief passages which contain additional thoughts, or a different presentation of similar ideas expressed in the earlier essay. In this manner no thought of any importance is lost to the reader who may not be familiar with the French language. — *Boris de Zirkoff*.]

Translation of a few passages from the above.

. . . But the Theosophical Society rejects the idea, and not merely for the sake of argument, of having been formed in order "to spread the dogmas of the Buddha." Our mission does not consist in spreading any dogmas, whether Buddhist, Vedic or Christian; *we* are independent of any formula, any ritual, any exotericism. We have been able to counteract by means of the noble principles of Buddhist ethics the attempts at invasion made by over-zealous Christians. The Chief Officers of the Society have declared themselves personally to be Buddhists, and this has been held against them rather strongly. One of them has devoted his life to the regeneration of this religion on its native soil. Let those who do not understand the needs of present-day India, and do not yearn for the upliftment of this ancient fatherland of virtues, throw stones at him. This, however, does not commit the whole body of Theosophists, as such, to ecclesiastical Buddhism, no more than the Christianity of some of its members commits it to any of the Christian churches. Just because present-day Buddhism is in need of being regenerated and disencumbered from all the superstitions and restrictions which have invaded it like parasites, we would be quite wrong in trying to graft a young and healthy shoot on a branch which has lost its vitality, even though it be less withered than some other branches. It is far wiser to go at once to the root itself, to the unalterable and pure source whence Buddhism itself has drawn its powerful sap. We can enlighten ourselves directly with the pure "Light of Asia"; why then should we linger among its deformed shadows? In spite of the synthetic and theosophical character of primitive Buddhism, present-day Buddhism has become a dogmatic religion, and has fragmented itself into numerous and heterogeneous sects. The history of this and other religions is before us as a warning against half-measures. Look at the partial reform called Protestantism: are its results satisfactory enough to encourage us in trying to mend things? The Ārya Samāj itself is after all but a national effort, while the essential attitude of the Theosophical Society

is to declare and maintain the Truth common to all religions, the real Truth, unsoiled by the inventions, the passions, and the requirements of the ages, and to invite all men to partake of it, without distinction of sex, colour or rank, and, which is much more, of beliefs.

É. Burnouf warns us against indifference. Whence does it originate? First from indolence, this scourge of humanity; then from discouragement. And if man is tired of symbols and ceremonies which the priest never explains, while deriving handsome benefits from them, it is not by substituting bonze chapels for our own that we will shake off this torpor. The time has come when all the bells have the same sound: the sound of boredom. To pretend reinstating the religion of Buddha on the ruins of that of Jesus, would be like giving to a dead tree the support of a dried up stick. Our critic himself tells us that humanity is tired of even the words God and Religion. . . .

No, the Sangha of the Buddhists cannot be re-established in our civilization. As to the Buddha himself, we revere him as the greatest sage and benefactor of humanity, and we will not lose any opportunity of claiming for him the right to universal admiration. Faced, however, with that terrible law in accordance with which admiration ever degenerates into adoration, and the latter into superstition, and with that hopeless crystallization which takes place in brains inclined to idolatry, would it be wise to claim for the elder brother of Jesus the narrow confines wherein the latter is subjected to a sacrilegious cult? Alas, is it possible that there be men sufficiently egotistical to love but one being, and sufficiently servile to wish to serve but one master alone?

Now as to the *Dharma*: we have already stated how high we hold Buddhist ethics. Theosophy, however, has to do with something else than just rules of conduct. It achieves the miracle of uniting pre-Buddhist ethics with pre-Vedic metaphysics, and pre-Hermetic science. Theosophical development calls upon all the principles of man, upon his intellectual as well as his spiritual faculties, and the last two objects of our programme have more importance than É. Burnouf seems to grant them. We can assure him that were our Society to receive the support of a large number of people of his own worth, it would become the channel of a torrent of new ideas borrowed from ancient sources; a torrent of artistic, economic, literary, scientific and philosophical innovations, more fruitful for the future than was the Renaissance. It would be far more than just an academic tendency; the Academy itself would learn the alphabet which permits one to read clearly, and between the lines, the obscure and often seemingly insignificant meaning of ancient Scriptures. That key is within reach of those who have the courage to lift their hand to grasp it; Buddha had that key, as he was an adept of very high status. . . .



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- MYSTERY IS NOT UNREVEALED KNOWLEDGE
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