

# Is Theosophy Authentic? (Excerpts)

By Franklin Merrell-Wolff

Is Theosophy authentic? This question has arisen many times since the founding of the movement, and many answers have been given. Yet the question has arisen again by individuals who are genuinely oriented to the Enlightened Consciousness, who therefore must be viewed as entirely sincere. As a consequence the writer has felt himself called upon to face once more this query, which had been one in his own mind in earlier years. . . .

First, in order to clear the field, it will be desirable to determine in what sense "Theosophy" is to be understood. This is necessary since the word is old and can be traced at least to the time of Plotinus, and is not always employed in the same sense. The word has been used from time to time by various societies belonging to the Christian milieu, once at least as early as the seventeenth century. Vaughan has identified "Theosophy" with philosophic mysticism, thus placing it in contrast with the non-rationalistic forms of mysticism.

If, then, Theosophy is not identical with Buddhism, Vedanta, or any other openly known philosophy or religion, what is it? The source works are definite on this point. Considering Theosophy in the sense of a doctrine or teaching, rather than in the other sense of "way of life," it is said to be a partial statement emanating from pure Bodha or the Eternal Wisdom of which every authentic religious movement or philosophy is, in its origin, a partial statement. Bodha, in its essence and purity, is beyond name, form, and symbol, and is eternal; but, in variable degree and in less pure form, it is revealed in name, form, and symbol. The degree in which it can be revealed to the individual consciousness depends upon the purity and evolutionary development of the latter. Consequently, the higher aspect of the Revealed Bodha is unavoidably esoteric for most men. The open religions and philosophies are in the nature of stepped-down or exoteric statements, not for arbitrary reasons, but from the necessities imposed by the limitations of the understanding of most human beings.

The esoteric Bodha has existed in this world as long as man has existed. From time to time exoteric presentations have appeared throughout the whole history of mankind, but all such presentations have been only partial and, apparently, have always been subject to corruption and decay. From this source came Buddhism, the Vedanta, and all the other great religious and philosophical movements ever known among men. Theosophy, in its primary meaning, is identical with both the utterly pure Root-Bodhi and its esoteric manifestation, while, in the more objective sense, as a movement starting in 1875, it is another opening of the door of presentation. Such is the statement one finds in the source material.

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It may well be that a scholarly study of the source literature of Theosophy would find a predominance of the Buddhist approach and language. If so, this is quite understandable, since the two intelligences most responsible for Theosophical literature are self-confessed Buddhists in their personal consciousness and background. Nonetheless, they do not affirm Truth as being the exclusive monopoly of historic Buddhism. It is also possible that there does exist some Buddhist sect in which the formulated Dharma exists in a greater state of purity than elsewhere. In any case, Theosophy is not identical with the whole of exoteric Buddhism, nor with any other Oriental philosophy or religion. It ties in with occidental currents as well.

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The question of the use of terms in a different sense by Theosophy as contrasted to Buddhism, in the form available to Orientalists, proves nothing as to the authenticity of Theosophy. If once we grant the thesis that formulated Theosophy is derived from an enduring esoteric wisdom that, among other things, is identical with the hidden meaning of Gautama Buddha, then the fact that basic terms are interpreted in different ways is not only not surprising, but to be expected. The one all-important question is: "Is Theosophy what it claims to be?"

An objective and definitive answer to this question is impossible on exoteric grounds alone. A presumption one way or the other can be built, but that is all. To go beyond this, one must be willing to gamble his life in faith, though prior testing in every way that is possible is not only everyone's right, but is perfectly proper.

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Let us recall the primary thesis of Theosophy that it is a formulation of a portion of the Esoteric Doctrine COMMON to the great religions and philosophies. Assuming the truth of this thesis, does it not follow that traces of the Doctrine will be found in the different systems? Naturally we would expect identity of conception underlying different terms and different approaches and organizations. Let us not forget that Theosophy aims at integration rather than an exclusive approval of one preferred extant system. It does not say that one must become a member of such and such a Buddhist or Vedantist sect, or he is hopelessly lost. Rather it says: "Clear the conceptions of the systems to which you are oriented of false and extraneous growths and then you will find revealed a facet of ultimate Truth. But remember that this is equally true of the outwardly different Systems to which some of your brothers belong."

By learning to see identity of meaning in seemingly quite different terms, progress is made toward unity and brotherhood. The effect would be quite different if it were said that everyone must become Buddhist, or everyone must become a Vedantist, or Cabbalist in the exclusive and separative sense. That spirit is definitely alien to Theosophy.

The complaint is often made by the reader of The Secret Doctrine that it uses so many words for the same thing and departs so often from the line of pure teaching into side-excursions, that the total effect is that of confusion. The writer can sympathize with this feeling and he admits that he would have found a clear-cut line more comfortable. But he who would find gold must go to nature and delve for it in the forms in which nature has provided it, and this is seldom upon a "silver platter."

Now, the ultimate Doctrine is half revealed and half concealed, and to understand it at all the student must work. He is spared long years of sitting cross-legged in a sealed-up cave, but he must use his mind and have patience. He must overcome prejudice. Thus it may be more

natural for one to speak of Archangels, but he might learn to accept the fact that when others say "Elohim," "Kumara," "Dhyan Chohan," "Dhyana Buddha," "Ahi," or "Tathagata," they mean, knowingly or not, with greater or less understanding, the same thing.

The extensive side-excursions one finds in *The Secret Doctrine* are not intended to increase confusion, but mainly to build up presumptive evidence, not only to support, but also to render more acceptable the primary thesis. To be sure, the excursion that helps one may not help another, and vice versa, but the announced purpose is to help all, as far as may be, and not merely a preferred few. Further, the central doctrine is largely in the form of fragments and hints, partly because there were reasons why all could not be given explicitly, and also partly because the student must earn the right to understanding by work.

Part of *The Secret Doctrine* is obsolete today because a cross-sectional view of Western science now is different when compared with what it was in 1888. As a result, quite an amount of the polemical material would no longer be needed or would have to be changed as to form. The writer is convinced that the positive help or support from science today would be far greater, but all this involves no change in the meaning of the central Doctrine.

Some temperaments object to the lengthy arguments that run all through the basic Theosophic literature. They would have preferred definite categorical pronouncements. But on this point the announced policy of the real founders was definite and for reason. Bare assertion of conceptions, no matter how true they may be, implies upon the part of the reader blind acceptance or rejection, and injects the spirit of authoritarianism. The founders were emphatically opposed to this. To be sure, there are individuals who need little more than bare statements to awaken the "Inner Eye," but the Theosophical writings are not aimed at these who need little or no help at all. For the rest, the policy was to build as convincing a case as possible, leaving the student free to decide, in the light of the presented evidence and reason, what appeared true to his uncoerced consciousness. To many, the writer among them, this attitude constitutes one of the strongest appeals of Theosophical literature.