

## SOME LATTER-DAY HERESIES.

## IV. MODERN THEOSOPHY.

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THE wise man of old said of his own day and generation :  
 "There is no new thing under the sun" (Eccles. i. 9). Our modern discoveries and investigations, in spite of our supposed progress in many matters, lead us sometimes to fancy that his words apply in some things even to our own times. Does the tale of the ill-fated Icarus imply that Crete, that mysterious isle, had, thousands of years ago, her airmen? Must not the crane have been used in building Mycenæ, Stonehenge, and even the Pyramids, in spite of Herodotus? We cannot answer with certainty; but this we know that all our latter-day heresies bear such a striking resemblance to age-old errors, long since confuted and believed outgrown, that to meet them it is hardly necessary to do more than to put into modern shape and phrase what the early defenders of the Faith said and wrote long years ago. The revival in our own time of outworn ideas under the guise of new discoveries is due to more causes than one, but one is that among us, as in Athens in St. Paul's time, there are many who "have leisure for nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing"—or at least something they imagine to have the charm of novelty. Hence, through want of moral earnestness and desire to know the Truth that they may do it, they are "ever learning and never able to come to the knowledge" of the one thing needful.

There is now prevalent in certain circles a weird system of pseudo-philosophy known as Theosophy, a term which ought to mean "Divine Wisdom," but which has about as much right to this misnomer as "Christian Science" or "The Holy Roman Empire" have to their respective appellations. It is a clear case of *lucus a non lucendo*. It claims considerable antiquity and therefore assumes the name of an ancient system of philosophy with which it has little in common. Some of the errors and absurdities of that effete system it has, it must be confessed, endeavoured to revive, but in essentials its errors are more modern. What is to-day styled

Theosophy is in the main of recent origin. Yet it already possesses a considerable literature in various modern languages, and no inconsiderable number of adherents. Its aim is the ambitious one of supplanting Christianity everywhere. Its motto is: "There is no religion higher than the Truth," which is, of course, a platitude. The claim which it makes to have anticipated many of the discoveries of modern science are based upon the pretence that in its teachings it is the lineal inheritor of the old-time theosophists, Photinus and his followers. By cleverly perverting their rather enigmatical utterances, and making them mean what they cannot possibly signify, the modern system gives plausibility to its assertions, at least in the opinion of the half educated and the credulous. It professes to reveal not only the future destiny of mankind but also to disclose much of the lost history of the past. Moreover it asserts that it has removed the fear of death, the torments of remorse, the terrors of an awakened conscience, and belief in God, in the Christian sense of this great word. It affirms that its self-appointed hierophants receive instruction in mysterious ways from beings vastly superior to man, and that such instruction is of very great value to the human race at large. These are lofty demands to make upon our credulity. It is only fair to examine the evidence which is adduced to support them, for the Christian principle is, "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good." Hence we proceed to inquire into the history and the chief tenets of modern theosophy, and then to draw the inevitable conclusion as to the truth of its claims.

### I. HISTORY.

Modern theosophy originated with a Russian adventuress, Madame Blavatsky, and an American called Col. Olcott, whose reputation does not stand very high. The Theosophic Society was founded in New York in 1875, both its founders being spiritists. Madame Blavatsky had previously been exposed in Egypt for defrauding her dupes of money at spiritist *séances*. Col. Olcott was afterwards acquitted of the charge of fraud by the Society for Psychical Research on the ground of his "extraordinary credulity and inaccuracy in observation and inference," as evidenced by the inquiries they had made. In America Madame Blavatsky earned the title of "the champion impostor of the age." Mr. Maskelyne

describes her theosophy as "the greatest fraud of the present day," which is saying a good deal. Yet we think that he is not far out in the statement. Her campaign in India ended in an *exposé* by one of Mme. Blavatsky's confederates, Mme. Coulomb. From the published correspondence between the two the adventuress's unscrupulous contempt for her dupes and the barefaced impostures she practised on them are completely revealed. The "Mahâtâmâs" of whose aid she boasted were "Koot Hoomi" and "Morya," the latter being simply the Greek word for "folly" (*μωρία*), and the former a name composed of an amalgam of the last syllable of Col. *Olcott's* and the Indian attempt to pronounce Mr. *Hume's* name, that of another dupe.

In *Hypatia* Charles Kingsley has told us how the theosophy of the school of Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus, Proclus and other Neo-Platonists failed as the last effort of dying paganism in the Greco-Roman world in endeavouring to resist the incoming flood of Christianity. Its adherents "descended deeper and deeper, one after the other, into the realms of confusion—confusion of the material with the spiritual, of the subject with the object, the moral with the intellectual; self-consistent in one thing only, namely their exclusive Pharisaism; utterly unable to proclaim any good news for man as man or even to conceive of the possibility of such, and gradually looking with more and more complacency on all superstitions which did not involve that one idea which alone they hated—namely the Incarnation (of Christ); craving after signs and wonders, dabbling in magic, astrology, and barbarous fetishisms." In utter decrepitude the original theosophy died out during the sixth century. It sprang up again in the Dark Ages, was found a profitable means of imposition in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the hands of Paracelsus and Jacob Boehmen, and then again became extinct, having exhausted the credulity of the age. Our own age, the age of credulity *par excellence*, witnesses a recrudescence of the disease.

Reverting to the rôle of the earlier theosophists, its modern supporters are striving to do in India, Japan, Ceylon and the East generally what the Greco-Roman disciples of Porphyry failed to accomplish. Following Mme. Blavatsky, Mrs. Besant has for years tried to revive dying Hinduism, Buddhism and other Eastern religions and enable them to withstand Christianity. The

completely anti-Christian character of this pseudo-philosophy is thinly veiled in England, and an attempt is made to persuade its adherents that what they are taught is a higher and esoteric type of Christianity, at once "broader" and "more liberal" than that accepted by the orthodox Churches. No one who has studied the New Testament can honestly accept this statement, however. But in India the veil is boldly cast aside. In Northern India the Theosophic Society "stands as the champion of Hinduism against what it represents as a merely Western religion." It adopts and encourages Hindu idolatry. In Madras it has frequently made bitter attacks upon the Christian Faith. In Ceylon there is open war between the two faiths, while Western converts there publicly profess to be Buddhists. In the literature of modern theosophy all the attacks that have ever been made on Christianity in the past are renewed, from the scurrilous tales in the Talmudic Töledôth Yeshu' to the works of Haeckel, Grant Allen and Wrede. In spite of this an attempt is made to claim the Lord Jesus Christ Himself and His Apostles as secretly teaching the doctrines of modern theosophy. The effort made to delude ignorant people into fancying that St. Paul's use of the word "mystery" shows that he in secret taught doctrines very different from those openly inculcated in his Epistles would be amusing if it were not so insolently mendacious. The same method of "reasoning" would as convincingly prove that he was a Roman recruiting sergeant. Does he not urge his converts to "put on panoply," that is to take up the shield, sword, helmet and all the other accoutrements of a legionary? This is a fair imitation of the method employed by theosophic ingenuity to prove anything from the Bible they desire. Those who know their Bible are not so readily deceived, but the careless and ignorant are so easily imposed upon that some of them now call themselves "*Christian* theosophists." They might just as appropriately entitle their creed "*Christian* atheism." [For modern theosophy is practically atheistic, a fact which accounts for Mrs. Besant's rapid conversion from Bradlaughism to Blavatskyism. The *Theosophist* for September, 1882, says: "We do not at all deny the charge of atheism, the word being used in an ordinary theistic sense." Nor is this contradicted by the statement made a little later, "The founders maintain that they *do* believe in the very divine principle taught in the Vedas, in that principle which is 'neither entity nor nonentity' but

an abstract entity, which is *no* entity liable to be described by either words or attributes."

The explanations which are given of the tenets of Oriental religions in many theosophic works are often as erroneous as those given of Christian doctrines in the same books. This may sometimes be due to ignorance, but occasionally it is designed. In either case theosophic works are unreliable as exponents of Oriental religion or philosophy. Hence the late Professor Max Müller says regarding some of the early writings of the founders of modern theosophy: "There is nothing that cannot be traced back to generally accessible Brahmanic or Buddhistic sources, only everything is muddled or misunderstood. If I were asked what Mme. Blavatsky's esoteric Buddhism really is, I should say it was Buddhism misunderstood, distorted, caricatured. There is nothing in it beyond what was known already, chiefly from books that are now antiquated. The most ordinary terms are misspelt and misinterpreted." A good example of such blundering is found in the passage from the *Theosophist* just quoted. The Vedas do not speak of the Divine as "neither entity nor non-entity" (by which the writer probably meant *sadâsat*, "the existent non-existent," a term pertaining rather to the Bhâgavata Purâna), but recognizes thirty-three gods, though, in what is said about Varuna and even Dyaus, traces of a still earlier belief in one personal God may be thought to linger. In the same way it is incorrect to speak of "esoteric Buddhism," as Mr. Sinnett, for instance, does in his book bearing that title. In the *Mahâparinibbânasuttam* Buddha himself declares to Ānanda that he has set forth the law "having made nothing esoteric and nothing exoteric," and not having kept back from the community even "a teacher's handful," that is to say a little information retained by the teacher so that he may remain somewhat in advance of his pupils. In later times, indeed, there did arise in India a system which may be termed esoteric Buddhism, and which is taught in the "Tathâgata Guhyaka," otherwise known as the "Guhya Sâmagha," one of the Nipalese Buddhist canonical sacred books. Of this system Râjendralâl Mitra says in his edition of the *Lalita Vistara* (Introduction, pp. 11, 12): "Theories are indulged in and practices enjoined which are at once the most revolting and horrible that human depravity could think of. . . . Among the practices enjoined, which promote the attainment of perfection, debauchery of the most bestial character

. . . is reckoned as most essential." We are glad that Mr. Sinnett has spared us the revelation of what the only " esoteric Buddhism " deserving of the title really teaches : but that very fact shows that he has not given a correct account of the system. What modern theosophists call by that name is an *olla podrida* of their own concoction, to which they have no right to apply the term at all.

Students of Zoroastrianism, Vedântism, the ancient religion of Egypt, and other systems of religion and philosophy, can bear witness to the fact that, in theosophic books such as *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine*, the references to and pretended explanations of the tenets of these systems are an exhibition of shameful ignorance on the subject. Even opponents of Christianity, such as Mr. Arthur Lillie (in his *Mme. Blavatsky and her Philosophy*) admit this. Swâmi Dayânand Sarasvati, the founder of the Ārya Samâj, who was at one time recognized by the Theosophic Society in India as its " lawful director and chief," soon discovered this in reference to the Hindu philosophy with which he was best acquainted. Hence he wrote to the *Bombay Gazette* to " inform the public that neither Col. Olcott nor Mme. Blavatsky knows anything of *Yoga Vidya* (occult science) as practised by the Yogis of old."

The history of the modern theosophic movement, therefore, does not lead the earnest student to put much trust in its teachings or to credit its leaders with any excessive regard for the truth.

## II. CHIEF TENETS.

In the first place modern theosophy inculcates pantheism, with the denial of a personal God. In this it agrees with Plotinus' teaching, for he speaks of the " One Thing " ( $\tau\acute{o}\ \acute{\omicron}\nu$ ) which can be described only in negative terms, and which, can be attained only by mystic contemplation and the exclusion of the evidence of the senses. It is devoid of thought, ignorance, will ; it cannot be truly known, and can have no name. Both Neoplatonism and modern theosophy probably adopted this idea from Hinduism, for in Plotinus' time Alexandria was the meeting-place of East and West. In the Chhândogya Upanishad the ground principle of Hindu philosophy is thus stated, " Ekam evâdvitiam." " There is just one thing, without a second." Mrs. Besant accordingly takes Hinduism as the basis of her own system. " I regard Hinduism," she says, " as the most ancient of all religions, and as containing more fully than any other

the spiritual truths named Theosophy in modern times." With still less correctness she adds : " Theosophy is the ancient Brahma-Vidya of India. Of this Hinduism is the earliest and best esoteric presentment."

A somewhat notorious theosophist states the doctrine of pantheism and of man's supposed relation to the unconscious. All in these words : " Of the Absolute, the Infinite, the All-Embracing, we can at our present stage know nothing, except that It is. . . . In It are innumerable universes : in each universe countless solar systems. Each solar system is the expression of a mighty Being whom we call the Logos, the Word of God, the Solar Deity. He is to it all that men mean by God. He permeates it ; there is nothing in it which is not He : it is the manifestation of Him in such matter as we can see. Yet He exists above it and outside it, living a stupendous life of His own among His Peers." " Out of Himself He has called this mighty system into being. We who are in it are evolving fragments of His life, sparks of His divine fire ; from Him we all have come, into Him we shall all return." This passage illustrates the way in which modern theosophy borrows theological terms from both Christianity and other faiths and uses them out of their true meaning. It has well been described as an attempt to persuade people " to accept the exploded beliefs of the Dark Ages, as well as the existing superstitions of African and Australian savages, in the name of Theosophy or Divine Wisdom." It is " a new combination of old heresies," such as Ebionism, Docetism, Gnosticism, mingled with Orphicism, Nature-worship, Buddhism, and Hinduism. The Theosophic Publishing Society's catalogues printed in Madras and in London contain books on Spiritism, the Art of Casting Horoscopes, Geomancy or divination by means of numbers, Cartomancy or fortune-telling by cards, " Occult Science," Clairvoyance, Astrology, Palmistry, Oneirology or the science of dreams, Magic white and black, and other subjects as well worthy of being studied in the twentieth century of Grace. Besides these are books by Jacolliot & Schuré, whose ignorance and mendacity have been already brought to light by such men as Prof. De Harlez. Modern Theosophists have used such books as *authorities*, as they have the Zohar and quite a number of others, which no scholar of our time would venture to quote.

Pantheism has been described by Coleridge as " Painted Atheism."

Original Buddhism was an atheistic philosophy, not a religion. In Ceylon especially theosopists call themselves Buddhists and openly profess Atheism. In a Buddhist Catechism which he published in Ceylon, Col. Olcott says: "A personal god Buddhists regard as only a gigantic shadow thrown upon the void of space by the imagination of ignorant men." Such is the blasphemous system with which silly people in this country are trifling.

Pantheism, like Buddhism of the old type (as distinguished from the idolatrous religions now called by that name in the Far East), denies any true distinction between good and evil. Yet modern theosophy has adopted from Hinduism and Buddhism the doctrine of *Karma*, which is described as "the first basic law, the Law of Action and Reaction." To avoid admitting the existence of a Divine Lawgiver, who has enacted that man shall reap what he has sown, however, all three systems have adopted the doctrine of transmigration. Early in our era Christianity met and vanquished this theory, which has always been associated with immorality. It is, like most other theosophic tenets, entirely destitute of proof, but is also contradicted by the scientific fact of heredity. The rise of the theory of transmigration in India was closely associated with the development of the caste system, which Maine styles "the most disastrous and blighting of human institutions." Theosophy approves of caste in India, and thereby, as a Madras Hindu has said, has put back India half a century.

Modern theosophy professes to teach the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. But these Christian doctrines are absolutely contrary to the very basic ideas of modern theosophy. How can the "Shadow thrown upon the void of space by the imagination of ignorant men" be called our Father? Again, if we and all other forms of life, human, animal and vegetable, are alike "fragments of Divinity," then our brotherhood is not worth very much. Moreover, the caste system entirely negatives it. Its pseudo-philanthropy is therefore on a par with theosophy's pseudo-piety. In fact the prefix *pseudo* is thoroughly descriptive of the whole system.

Modern theosophy affirms that the ultimate destiny of all men and of all other beings is to be swallowed up in the All. In Mr. Lillie's words, it teaches that—

"There is no God.

Miracles are performed in His Ineffable Name.

The reward of the just is Annihilation.

The punishment of the wicked is Annihilation."



## III. CONCLUSION.

The more carefully we study theosophic literature the less are we persuaded of the value of this system of pseudo-philosophy. It is merely a jumble of ill-digested ideas from various systems of religion and philosophy, its tenets are inconsistent with one another, and it is entirely destitute of proof. It is worthy of the age of credulity in which we live. It promises its dupes the Bread of Life ; it gives them a stone. Even for history it substitutes the legendary Etheric or Âkâšic Records, which tell of the fabulous Atlantis and still less real Lemuria. The Orpheus and Hermes of Greek mythology appear as historical characters, though we are spared Queen Mab and Jack the Giant-Killer. These records resemble the golden tablets on which the Book of Mormon was stated to have been inscribed. The "Mahâtâmâs," said to be the instructors of Mme. Blavatsky, Mrs. Besant, Mr. Leadbeater, etc., though styled the "Thibetan Brothers," have been proved ignorant of their own supposed habitat. The attempt to train the Hindu boy Krishnamurti to claim divine honours as "the Lord Maitreya, Krishna, the Christ," and who was to be taken possession of by "the Supreme Teacher of the worlds, who was last manifest as the Christ in Palestine," seems to have failed : but it shows the extent to which its authors were prepared to carry the blasphemous farce. But some new delusion will soon be invented, doubtless, for the leaders of the theosophic imposture are not to be deterred from running to any extreme of falsehood and folly.

The rise and temporary success of such delusions as Theosophy, "Christian Science," Bahâism, Spiritism, *et hoc genus omne*, are a noteworthy sign of the times. Many are restless and unsatisfied, many long for "some new thing." The only thing that *can* satisfy any earnest seeker after truth is what gave rest and peace to one of old who long wandered in the deserts of Neoplatonism and kindred delusions, but at last found the truth which he long had sought in vain. It was Augustine who wrote : "O God, Thou madest us for Thyself, and restless is our heart until it rest in Thee." One only could say of old, One only can now say : "Come unto Me, all ye that are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

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