

Theosophy

Introduction

Theosophy refers to a set of ideas and organizations originating with the activities of Russian-born occultist Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891). Embodied in the Theosophical Society, established in New York City in 1875 by Blavatsky, the American military officer and lawyer Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907), and the Irish-American barrister William Quan Judge (1851–1896), Theosophy attracted tens of thousands of students in the late nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, leaving a number of splinter organizations in its wake. The leading branch of Theosophy moved its headquarters to Adyar in Chennai, India, in 1886; an independent American branch has been associated with the activities of Katherine Tingley (1847–1929), including the theosophical commune Lomaland (1900–1942) in Southern California, and is now known as the Theosophical Society Pasadena. In 1913 Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) took most of the German membership with him when he broke out of the Theosophical Society Adyar and formed the Anthroposophical Society, which has since spread Waldorf education, biodynamic farming and anthroposophical medicine to hundreds of thousands of people across the world.

Theosophically inspired groups have had a remarkable impact on contemporary religiosity, but also on a wide array of political, artistic, and social movements of the past 150 years. To sociologists of religion, Theosophy is particularly important for understanding the transnational exchanges that have transformed the modern religious field, as well as the emergence of “unchurched” religion/spirituality (primarily) among the educated middle classes under the pressures of secularization.

Key Ideas

Theosophy is rooted in Western esotericism and displays a creative amalgamation of Neoplatonic cosmologies, Hermeticism, Paracelsism, Rosicrucianism, and Kabbalah, along with more recent innovations such as Mesmerism and Spiritualism. It is, however, better known for mediating “eastern” religious impulses to European and American audiences, shaping western conceptions of terms such as karma, chakras, tantra, and the subtle body.

The foundations of Theosophy were first developed in texts such as *Isis Unveiled* (1875) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), both of which bear Blavatsky’s name but were produced under

heavy editing by other Theosophists. Journals such as *The Theosophist* and *Lucifer*, and books by other members, such as Olcott's *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883), were also influential.

"Eastern" concepts that have become integral to Theosophy through these publications are typically rendered in ways that fit preexisting Western ideas; reincarnation becomes a process of evolutionary progress, and the chakras understood through a biomedical lens as "organs" in the subtle body. Nevertheless, key aspects of Theosophy's "synthesis of east and west" were initiated by Bengali and Tamil theosophists, and aligned with the preexisting tantric revival movement in India stretching back to the eighteenth century.

Perennialism and the doctrine of *secret masters* are fundamental to Theosophy. The perennialist assumption that a hidden, universal wisdom underlies the world's religious and philosophical systems drives Theosophy's programmatic syncretism, creating concordances between unrelated cultural products following basic schemas drawn largely from neopythagorean and kabbalistic ideas. Perennialism is also at work in theosophical discourse on modern science: In *Isis Unveiled*, Blavatsky criticized nineteenth century physics and biology from the perspective of "the unchanging wisdom," all the while using recent scientific theories (such as the luminiferous ether or theories of evolution) to legitimize the ancient wisdom by showing that science is slowly "catching up" with ancient wisdom.

Ultimate authority, however, rests with the hidden masters, or "mahatmas," immortal or near-immortal adepts residing in the Himalayas and communicating with theosophists via astral projection, telepathy, or materialization phenomena. The idea of hidden masters connects specific occult techniques, such as clairvoyance, automatic writing, and mediumship, with an imagined source of spiritual authority. For this reason it has become a central element in conflicts over leadership and doctrinal innovations in Theosophy and post-theosophical movements. The most notable example occurred when Alice Bailey (1880–1949) exited the Theosophical Society in part over her claims to be receiving new revelations telepathically from a master known as Djwal Khul ("the Tibetan"), leading to a body of work that has directly influenced New Age millennialism and the idea of a coming Age of Aquarius.

Theosophy, Society, and Politics

In addition to its role as a synthesizer of esoteric and religious currents, Theosophy has influenced a broad range of political, artistic, and social movements. In India, Theosophists

played a key role in the independence movement, including the formation of the Congress party. Through its second president, the socialist and feminist Annie Besant (1847–1933), Theosophy became associated with women's rights, anti-colonialism and home rule (in Ireland as much as India), and labor and worker's rights movements. At the same time, Theosophy penetrated artistic milieus, becoming a central influence on the development of modern abstract art through figures such as Vasily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian.

Theosophy is thus often associated with "progressive" movements, but it has inspired deeply reactionary currents as well. The "Ariosophy" of Jörg Lanz von Liebenfels (1874–1954) represents a distinctly racist take on Theosophy, which formed part of the extreme-right wing of the *völkisch* counterculture of the early twentieth century. Similarly, theosophical ideas influenced René Guénon's (1886–1951) largely apolitical perennialism, which in turn inspired the distinctly anti-modern (and often anti-feminist and ethno-nationalist) Traditionalist movement associated with Italian occultist and fascist Julius Evola (1898–1974). Like its diverse impact on religiosity, Theosophy's political heritage is ambiguous and multifaceted.

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Cross-references: esotericism, modernization, new age movement, syncretism, westernisation and easternisation of religion.

Further readings:

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