

The Use of the Secret Doctrine

by Roy Mitchell

If a system of thought is any good at all there is one thing we can say of it: that the book that has been the great inspiration of the system must always lie a little beyond those who have embraced it. No religion is ever greater than its book, nor does any religion ever quite recapture the mood of its first great utterance.

This of course is inevitable. The first mover who has the power to move many people must be stronger than they. If he be weaker he will not move them. Even if in the years that follow a greater one should arise he cannot supersede that first authority. He can only lead a schism and take his own people away with him, leaving the devotees of the first to continue their effort to reach up to their book.

Our Theosophical Society is such a system with such a book, a book suited to our special need, and our chief lament these last few years is that our book is so much too hard for our people that very few of them study it. They content themselves with weak dilutions of it. Even those whose duty it is to urge the study of it and lead in that study are too frequently the authors of the dilutions and it is only a matter of human frailty that the poorer the derived book the less eager the author of it is that it be compared with the original.

Now, after half a century, having found most of the common pitfalls that beset a Theosophical Society, our best workers are casting about for a way back again and have decided that The Secret Doctrine is their means to a recovery of something like the first power of the Society. But habituated by long error to the idea that theosophy is something to study instead of something to use, they find when they turn to its pages that the Doctrine is a hard book, and, although they urge its study and talk of studying it they rarely do so. They go, receptive and vacant, to its pages and bring out nothing worth mentioning.

The Secret Doctrine has the quality of an great occult books. It does not address you; it answers you. It does not offer remarks; it offers rejoinders. It is the other person in a colloquy. It will not speak until it is spoken to. It win not give you a thought, but it will, and this is its index of greatness, adjust the thought you bring to it.

So because we have been for the most part a body of fitful and unsteady receivers instead of a body of fertile producers we have an but missed the point of The Secret Doctrine. It stands, therefore, inert on our shelves or lies vexedly thumbed on our tables, and it will continue so until we learn to use it as it was intended we should.

Our work is not with The Secret Doctrine at all but with the field of general knowledge and the Doctrine

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stands to us in that work as mentor and guide, a mentor that will only serve us as we labour. The task we have to perform and the one by which we will be measured is in its widest aspect the restating of human knowledge in terms of the theosophical attitude to life. It is to renew the theosophical point of view, not as a mere declaration of theory, but as applied to each of the subjects that engages man's attention. It is in effect to make a new encyclopaedia interpreting religion, philosophy, mythology, history, biography, science and the arts in the light of this doctrine that has been restored to the world: We might say many foolish things but the present encyclopaedias say foolish things and we should be hard put sometimes to be more foolish than they. In any case we would be in a position, most of us, to say what we liked, which is more than many supple and subvented professors dare to do. We would have less need to compromise because it would be a long time before anybody cared to pay us money for our work. We would have to work for love and in that way might evoke more active intuitions than they have.

Suppose then, instead of putting the Doctrine in front of us on the table we put it one side --as a means rather than as an end --and devote ourselves to something like The Encyclopaedia Britannica. Suppose, finding something that interests us specially, we test it out by means of The Secret Doctrine, assimilating the facts, weighing the inferences and valuing the interpretation. Then suppose we see if we think it needs rewriting. Perhaps we will decide that it does not, perhaps that it does and we set about making a new statement. Impudence? Oh no. These encyclopaedists are just the same kind of people we are, living on side streets, trying to make ends meet and forgetting their rubbers. They have read extensively and they have the data but once printed on that page the data are as much ours as theirs. Even if all the available data are not there they are easily procurable in other books. A few dollars will buy all the extant data on any subject. After that it is largely a matter of common-sense, which has never been exclusively identified with the pundit. Indeed it is a truism of college halls that the direct route from the student's garret to the professor's study rather deprives the savant of the human contacts that make for common-sense. Certainly the professor is the only living human being who can still say with a straight face. "The Egyptian mind -or the Hindu mind or Greek mind- was incapable of conceiving so-and-so or so-and-so" as if there were anything we could conceive that these others could not conceive.

Proceeding thus comparatively for choice, in order to exercise due vigilance over facts, because these men frequently set down something for a fact when it is only a conclusion, and testing everything as we go by means of The Secret Doctrine we will find that we can profitably revise a great deal of what has been written, on religion, myth and philosophy at least, and in time on many other things, because the writers of the final words of scholarship are frequently adherents of this or that sect or are declared materialists and are bound to write views coloured by their affiliations. Our business would be to stand outside of sect and to resist materialism. It would be our business also to use analogy, which too often the Gradgrinds eschew, chiefly because they do not use it very well. We might use analogy also in the old sense of the Greek philosophers who coined the word as implying correspondences. This the materialists do not use at all. They do not admit the existence of other worlds with which this might correspond.

II

The materialist's world is a world of differences. He is suspicious of similarities, He likes to think of a universe that goes on and on, and never, if he can help it, of one that goes round and round. So when he sees that cycles, either in time or space, repeat themselves it irks him. He is committed to the idea that progress is from generation to generation, in which case it can only be of bodies. He is annoyed at a

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progress that is of souls and that demands of him that he imagine a pattern in the fabric of human events, as of a great stream of souls returning at intervals and taking up their work where they left off.

H. G. Wells is an on-and-on thinker. In that remarkable passage in "The Outline of History" where he dismisses reincarnation as the childish notion of primitive peoples he assures us that return is not the law of life. Ongoing is the law. He does not explain why the earth disobeys the law and returns once a day, or the moon returns once a month, or the planets each in its year. Nor does he explain how the blood manages to return to the heart, nor breath, nor thoughts, nor cyclic disease, nor cyclic insanity, nor sleepiness, nor hunger, nor the rise and fall of races, nor the recrudescence of ideas, nor the rebirth of flowers, nor the cycle of water and cloud and rain. All these in defiance of his straight line of ongoing. Perhaps by now Mr. Einstein has persuaded him that his straight line itself is a curve and must return.

So our workers, being round-and-round thinkers, with a sense of the importance of cycles, will have the advantage of knowing how to make one department of life work for another, one religion explain another, and one tendency in history throw light upon another, as one might piece out an obscure bit of a pattern by reference to its earlier and later appearances in the scheme.

It would be a useful thing to restore this process of analogy even in historical matters, and more useful still, if we could do it, to restore some measure of analogy to the examination of functions of life, of realms of being and of the relation of man to the life processes around him. Our encyclopaedists, however, will not use analogy, even in the simplest things. Mostly they are dull. Sometimes they cloud important issues. Here is the sort of thing I mean:

Professor Grant Showerman, an eminent and impressive American classicist, contributes to the eleventh edition of The Encyclopaedia Britannica, its article on Mithraism. Now, there is a curious underground struggle about Mithraism. The ninth edition of Britannica dismissed the whole subject with a column and received stinging reproof from J. M. Robertson and others of the rationalists, for its cavalier treatment of one of the most vital commentaries on early Christianity. In the new edition the editors have enlarged the article but throughout there is the same wariness that marks Cumont and the other writers on the subject. The indications are that somebody or other would rather you did not say too much about Mithraism or make too many deductions. It is in a sense the tendon Achilles of modern Christianity and is heavily guarded. You can write about almost anything else and nothing much will happen to you, but when you discuss Mithraism the theological polemicists, particularly the Romans, are in the field at once.

Professor Showerman starts out, presumably, to give you all that scholarship has to say on the subject. He is very authoritative and the documentation of his article is precise and convincing. It is when he draws his conclusions that we wonder most whether he is merely stupid or under pressure. He tells us that the Mithraic religion held its gatherings in subterranean "temples," each of which was called a mundus or world; that the "temples" were differentiated from other temples in several things. They were long, rectangular rooms, never very large, and each had adjoining it two other rooms. One of these latter, he says, was a pronaos to the "temple" where the "worshippers" gathered, and one a kind of sacristy or room for the "priests." These "priests" of the "God Mithras" sat at the end of the temple towards the rising sun. Extending along the sides of the mundus and facing each other were two low benches or platforms, called podia. In the middle and between the podia was an open space for "ministrants." Above was a ceiling depicting the heavens.

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The worshippers of Mithras, he would indicate, were not very steady in their religious ideas, because they admitted other religions to have merits of their own, and along the walls of the mundus they permitted statues of the divinities of other systems. Mithraism, he shows, was also remarkable for the fact that it did not admit women to its number although it did admit boys. The religion was carried throughout the Roman Empire by the legionaries and traces of its temples are to be found in Britain, Germany, France, Switzerland and out to the frontiers of the Eastern Empire. He notes also that men who belonged to other religions, also "worshipped" Mithras, and Rome herself so far forgot her ancient faith as to allow the worshippers of the Persian God to dig a "temple" under the Capitoline Hill. Constantine, himself Christian, encouraged the Oriental sect because it was warlike and suited to armies. Professor Showerman goes on to tell how wealthy the Mithraists were (neglecting, of course, to say how the early Christians looted their places of meeting) , how charitable and how they were organized as a legal corporation under a kind of charter. They never built the great temples that might have been expected of them, but in one city - Ostia - they had five. He is puzzled that their clergy and officials were more like a committee and were laymen of sorts.

So he proceeds to a neat conclusion, missing the one vital point about it all, and darkening counsel with its iterations of the w o r d s "worshipper," "priest," "temple," "God" and the like. The vital point is that from every bit of evidence he offers Mithraism was not a religion at all but a Masonic brotherhood. Did nobody tell Professor Showerman, if he could not guess it for himself, that the mundus is nothing but a Masonic lodge, the symbol of the world, with its firmament of stars above? His vestibule of the temple, the universal anteroom for the brethren? His priests' room, the familiar "convenient room adjoining"? His podia along the sides, the seats for the brethren? His priests' dias, the Master's dias in the east? These men were not worshippers in a temple: they were brethren in a lodge and their priests were the masters and past-masters of it. Their limitation to male members was the old Masonic practice and the boy members are the "lewises," or Mason's sons of our own older Masonry .The Mithraists admitted all religions as modern Masons do and there is nothing more marvellous in a Roman senator being a Mithraist than there is in a member of the British Commons being a Craftsman. How the reincarnated Professor Showerman, who is now puzzled by Constantine's interest, will marvel a few hundred years from now at the anomaly of the Christian King Edward VII, being the Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of England, and encouraging the worship of the "God" Hiram.

I wonder if he has ever guessed that all such systems are carried by the officers of armies; that the military lodges are the means whereby the modern Masonic brotherhood has been carried throughout the world. And surely there was somebody at hand to tell him that if a group had millions of dollars to spend it would not build a larger lodge room than would just hold the brethren.

What does it matter today whether we believe the Mithraists of a couple of thousand years ago were eclectic lodge brother's or rapt devotees of an Oriental cult? It does matter, and Theosophists are not, seemingly, the only people who think it matters.

The fact in itself is trivial, but its implications are not. Mithraism was not a rival of Christianity, but its child was. Manichaeism, the religion growing out of the Mithraic mystery, ran along several centuries into the Christian era, a tolerant and leavening force that was stamped out as organized Christianity waxed and became intolerant. The parallel is not between Mithraism and Christianity, but between Manichaeism and Christianity. Mithraism is the parent mystery .

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And its parallel? The parent mystery of Christianity. What was that ritual of which Paul speaks when he reminds the Galatians that they have seen Christ crucified amongst them? Do exoteric religions always come thus out of a mystery? How long does a mystery lie germinating before its time to be given to the world as a religion? How is the seed carried? Who carries it? Was there ever a religion which was not first a mystery? Were those rationalists of a few years ago right when they said the episodes from Gethsemane to the Ascension are not a record of events at all but a description of the progress of a mystery drama? Might we not say, therefore, rather than that a Great One did this and that, that a Great One does this and that, and when the right season comes, the s t o r y of it emerges? Mithra was not. He is. In the Vedas he is Mitra; in the Zend books he is Vohumano -poised mind. In early Christian days he is Mani. He never came. He always comes.

A trifling adjustment. Yes, but fertile, and giving seed for further adjustments. Establishing cumulative proof that might go a long way to straighten out life for us and for those to come after us. We might be wrong? That would be nothing new for the human race. We might also be right sometimes. That would be more nearly new. We would have to work hard to go further astray than some of the accredited pundits.

The task of readjusting Mithraism awaits some Theosophist. The rationalists of whom I spoke tried it a few years ago, but they had little of a constructive nature to offer, and except for some forcible truth-telling about the facts, they accomplished nothing but to raise a storm. And Mithraism is only ~ one of a thousand subjects that need us.

III.

The problem of this Theosophical Society as of every other is to determine to what extent we should endeavour to popularize theosophy and to what extent we should leave t h a t popularization to the play of natural forces. To what extent should we endeavour to remain an available reservoir for material and to what extent should we try to thin our ideas down for general use?

There will be many persons to take care of the second of these services. There will be first of all those of our own people who think success is a matter of membership, our workers who believe that many adherents, on whatever terms, will be gratifying to the Brotherhood; our writers who estimate the value of a book by editions and our orators who will cheapen their utterances for the sake of a large hall, well filled. There will always be those who get a comfortable feeling by compromising with official Christianity or with official Brahminism. All these within our own ranks on whose materialism we can rely for it that no profitable attenuation or adulteration will be neglected.

We can rely also on those who come into the Society for a time, pick up a few ideas, and then dropping the word theosophy altogether, and as likely as not repudiating the Society, vend fragments of the old wisdom religion, in some easily saleable form. We have had many of these, some of them eminent men now, and if we cannot admire them personally we can be grateful for their service to the spread of theosophical opinion.

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We can rely also on those who have never had the courage to embrace theosophy but who are willing, even while they condemn it, to make liberal use of its concepts - lesser poets, essayists, new psychologists, psychoanalysts, various kinds of adventists, novelists in search of copy, reformers in search of a new argument, preachers in search of a new sensation.

In the hands of these the work of popularization will be widely done. Their service of their own interests will make them greatly pervasive. A little man can crawl in where a bigger one cannot, and traders in ideas learn to display their wares very attractively indeed.

Such an extension of our sphere of influence is inevitable and as with any extension there will be a corresponding diffusion. Subtle distinctions must disappear, niceties which are vastly important in the realms of mind and spirit will be smudged when taken into the regions of emotion. Sentimentalities will creep in and with them gross distortions. False emphasis will be given some things and others will be all but forgotten.

The time seems at hand therefore when a rally must be made, not at one point only, but at many points throughout the world and to provide that as theosophy is extended into the various departments of human activity, the important and powerful! departments of philosophy, comparative religion, anthropology, physics, biology, psychology, archaeology, history and art must not be neglected, as they have been this past quarter of a century. Such a work will not demand cleverer men, it will demand more scrupulous and more patient men who are willing to wait longer for the fruit of their labours. It will demand men who realize that when they serve the working and serving student who will relay the message they are doing far more in the long run than if they filled the biggest hall in the world with ultimate consumers. When we reach the thinker we reach also those for whom he thinks. When we make an appeal below the level of clear thinking we flood this working body of ours with members whose emotional demands kill our useful work. We cannot exclude them but we need not bait traps for them.

In any such task as I have indicated it will be necessary then to keep certain requirements steadily in our minds. The first is that we shall be honest, that we shall not endeavour by clipping our material and conveniently forgetting some of it, to work our way into the good graces of anybody, least of all those pledged to the destruction of the theosophical movement, Even if we succeed the effort is unworthy of us. Since we never do succeed and instead of gobbling the quarry are always gobbled, we might as well drop this kind of propaganda altogether. Our honesty would show itself in a forthrightness of speech and a determination to say our minds at any cost.

A second requirement would be service-ability. We would not be under any obligation to do fine writing nor to voice profound and invincible ideas. Chiefly we would be required to bring order and usefulness into our widely scattered material. To bring into the light of day forgotten and mislaid information, forgotten books. To put two things side by side where they can be compared and allowed to explain each other. We would make a great gain if we could teach our potential students and writers that the major part of academic scholarship is spadework and that a collection like Frazer's Golden Bough is written with a shovel. It is chiefly useful because it gets related material between two covers.

Another requirement will be industry, a steady going forward, sometimes lighter and sometimes heavier

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going, but always with sincerity and as much courage as we can muster. We are not required to be final.: We are only required to do a little better than is being done. That celebrated child who got a school prize for the answer that a quadruped had five legs had missed ultimate truth but he was better than all the rest of his class who said it had six. We need only keep a leg ahead of the other children.

The great requirement upon us is that we make use of our finest tool, The Secret Doctrine, remembering always what I have suggested, that the Doctrine will only trade secret for secret. If we come empty we will go away empty. It works when we do.

There is an old symbol of the lathe of the cycles that shapes the immortal body of man. It is a lathe that spins always, and, as far as we are concerned, must spin in empty air until we put something on it to be shaped. It partakes thus of the nature of all lathes. If we can learn to see our Secret Doctrine, our reshapener, as itself a lathe whereon the things of the mind are reshaped that they may be fit vehicles of the Spirit, we may be able to use it better. We have watched it spin; we have argued about it, and about who made it and why, and whether there was due authority for making it. Suppose now we stop looking at it and vaunting it, and use it as it was meant to be used, as a tool. Suppose we shape something.