

Rebuttal of Rene Guenon's Critique of Modern Theosophy

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The objective of this article on René Guénon's critique of Modern Theosophy, which he terms Theosophism is to outline his analysis in *Le théosophisme: Histoire d'une pseudo-religion*, and not to react to it defensively. Guénon calls the theosophy of the Theosophical Society generally pseudo-Theosophy (Theosophism) and 'pseudo-Christianity.' He specifically terms Mrs. Annie Besant's theosophy, 'pseudo-Christianity' and 'neo-Christianity.' The T.S. in his time after Blavatsky's death took on the strange amalgamation of a quasi-Catholic, Neo-Hindu theology, which provided him the arsenal for his critique.

Critique of Guénon's Critique

So, with the use of the term Pseudo-Theosophy, that Blavatsky herself coined, used by Guenon to describe Modern Theosophy in general, we're all creating similar terms now. The result from the analysis is at best a conjectural study of modern Theosophy.

Guenon's critique does not separate the periods or put the conflicts within the T.S. into perspective, because Guénon doesn't view the T.S. associated Theosophy as "genuine (traditional) theosophy."

Wikipedia's article on Theosophy also for example speaks of certain Theosophists themselves using the term pseudo-theosophy or neo-theosophy as "originally derogatory," which is gaslighting, ignoring the fact H.P. Blavatsky coined it herself to describe new fanciful, exaggerated beliefs taken from Theosophy in her time she was defending against.

The term theosophy, the Preface of *Le théosophisme: Histoire d'une pseudo-religion* (Theosophy: History of a Pseudo-Religion) explains, is a common denomination for a wide variety of doctrines, that are all of the same type, or originating from the same basic ideas.

The commonality between the systems maintaining those doctrines involves their esoteric conceptions of a religious or mystical mode of conveying knowledge through *hypónoia*, or inner meanings. They are of Western tradition, it is argued, and its basis is Christianity under its variety of forms. Therefore, the traditionalists maintain the historical significance of the term, as opposed to the Theos. Movement, which Rene Guénon dubs 'Theosophism.'

Guénon's work is vitriolic, Richard Smoley said in his *Against Blavatsky: Rene Geunon's Critique of Theosophy*. This was similar to the works of Buddhist convert, Arthur Lillie's *Madame Blavatsky and Her "theosophy": A Study* (1895). In a very different manner, Arthur Lillie argued that Theosophy was a constructed "pseudo-religion."

Famed persons of this parochial line of schools are named, despite there being not a single 'eastern' philosopher on the list. As René Guénon's thoughts on the crisis of the modern world was that the West's anomalous advancement, which he considered a regression, had a certain disdain for eastern civilization. It was due to the assertion, that the "Westerners," i.e., Europeans, only considered itself to be a civilization, and the pinnacle exemplar of a civilization, based on purely material lines, which he rejected. Since the nineteenth-century Theosophists were getting the peoples of Europe and the Americas to comprehend the same, despite the research of the Orientalists and adventurers, what was the angst of the Traditionalists?

Well, firstly Guenon was a sheikh of the Islamic tradition, and H.P.B. thought that Islam was obstructionist along with Christianity, particularly Catholicism/Jesuitism dueling for rule with the Muslims. Is the 'Theosophy' of the Theosophical Associates and Mahatmas a counterfeit "Pseudo-Theosophy" (theosophism), or is that which Guenon calls Traditional Theosophy (or Perennialism) the genuine line for our study?

Jakob Boehme, Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin, Swedenborg, are seen as traditional theosophy, but they only arrived on the scene less than five centuries prior. For those more grounded in orthodoxy, there are other influences and sources they rely directly upon. Guénon's critique, or those that acquire his views towards Theosophy have aided in the consequent fall in the repute of both 'Theosophists,' and 'Traditionalists.'

Traditionalists today, even Julius Evola and the Perennialists have been somewhat adopted by the New Right intellectual milieu. The same respects are however not extended to the pioneers of modern Theosophical Movement, with those of the Radical and Traditionalist Right (see Perennialism and Fascism) of course rejecting Theosophy and any scent of Liberalism, and alternative Western spirituality on the other hand.

According to the opinions expressed by Rene Guenon then, we are supposed to retire 'modern Theosophy' to the dust bin of history.

The Preface adds, Theosophism, or the Theosophical Society makes pretensions to esotericism it cannot verify, and its original tendency being "anti-Christian," does not put it doctrinally in line with the schools, especially the Neoplatonic nor the 'Philadelphian Society,' to which are claimed to be its predecessors. Guénon aims to dismantle the whole of Theosophical influence.

However, Guénon's work should be now put into considerable repute, in that first, *Le théosophisme: Histoire d'une pseudo-religion*, alluding to this neologism, 'Theosophism,' is mostly aimed at the changes in policy, doctrine, and expression beginning right in the time, H.P. Blavatsky died, that exploded soon after. Alice Bailey was a member at Adyar. Charles W. Leadbeater and Annie Besant were members. The latter two joined the T.S. in the time H.P.B. was alive, and interacted with her, but their actions and beliefs must not be glossed over.

Rene Guénon does not utilize other works. K. Paul Johnson, in his books argued that the Mahatmas were dupes, prestidigitators and confederates, or H.P.B. herself. An author and theosophist, Jeanine G. Miller, in her "The Blazing Dragon of Wisdom," puts researchers to difficult task, in asking how could a single person do all she did at a time where scholarship on the topics she covered were either scarce, or plainly not even known yet.

Guénon's answer: H.P.B was a master at suggestion (a hypnotist), with aiding confederates and dupes.

Le théosophisme: Histoire d'une pseudo-religion does raise some legitimate points to consider, and there are problems, but it is conjectural. You would have to already believe she was just a dupe.

The Miracle Club in Cairo

From 1870-72, H.P. Blavatsky became known as a medium in Cairo (Egypt), helping to form a society of spiritualists composed of other mediums, with member meetings, a reading room, and a library of spiritual works. It was called, 'the miracle club.' The profession as a medium Guenon argues, already puts her into repute for him, whether real phenomena or not, since the phenomena of spiritualists are known to have been simulated by hoaxes. This spiritualist dupery has transferred in the contemporary

period into the ideas and practices of self-identified 'star-seeds,' who purport to having channeled intergalactic extraterrestrials. They don't even use cheese-cloth now.

When accused of fraud, the Miracle Club fell, and H.P.B. left Cairo, returning to Paris, but lived with her brother intolerably until leaving to the United States.

Two years later, Blavatsky founds the Theosophical Society. This is the beginning of the high suspicion of Guénon.

H.P. Blavatsky claims to have been sent to America to demonstrate the fallacy and deception of the spiritualist theory in a letter to Stain Moses, and in a letter to Solovyof in February 1886 to try out her psychic abilities. Guénon leaves no source for the Solovyof letter, and the latter himself forged letters of Blavatsky from within the T.S. as a member, in hopes of exposing her. It is merely the narrative of Blavatsky, that Guénon has accepted, as opposed to any other narrative. So the view of Guénon is simply, that H.P.B. was a con, and thus Modern Theosophy is a fraud.

Vera Petrovna de Zhelihovsky relays in her letters sent to her by her sister, Blavatsky. H.P.B. says to Vera:

"Humanity has lost its faith and its higher ideals; materialism and pseudo-science have slain them. The children of this age have no longer faith; they demand proof, proof founded on a scientific basis – and they shall have it. Theosophy, the source of all human religions, will give it to them." (Vera Petrovna de Zhelihovsky, "Helena Petrovna Blavatsky," Lucifer, London, Nov. 15, 1894, April 15, 1895)

Soon after, Vera says her sister began sending letters more on the abuses of spiritism, spiritual materialism, medium séances, etc.

Vera adds later, that her sister had wrote:

"If I have attached myself to a certain group of Theosophists, a branch of the Indo-Aryan Brotherhood, which has been formed here," she wrote to us from New York, "it is precisely because they fight against

all the excesses, the superstitions, the abuses of the false prophets of the dead letter – against the numberless Calchases of all the exoteric religions, as well as against the maunderings of spirits. We are spiritualists, if you choose so to call us, but not after the American manner, but after the ancient rites of Alexandria.” (Vera Petrovna de Zhelihovsky, “Helena Petrovna Blavatsky,” Lucifer, London, Nov. 15, 1894, April 15, 1895)

Western Occultists rejecting Reincarnation

It is precisely this link to the Alexandrian Neoplatonists, that Rene Guenon rejects Theosophy, to refuse its legitimacy. It is true, that the strength, condition and literature of Theosophy depends upon the collective knowledge and skill of the scholars of its associations. If they are not up to par, this brings Theosophists into question. Rene Guenon speaks of the H.B. & L., while describing the Theosophical doctrines as attempts to pervert the Western mind. He claims, that the “real Adepts” do not teach the doctrines of karma and reincarnation. Reincarnation is a modern doctrine Guénon believed, as he so casually brushed everything about the Theosophists. Did he learn this animosity from the Catholics? This isn’t true, and the doctrine of reincarnation existed in the Middle East.

So, the argument is that, the Theosophical doctrines can’t claim the torch from the Alexandrian school, because it adopts a special conception of evolution, which he argues is wholly modern.

Sylvia L. Cranston’s Reincarnation (A Compilation), 1967 easily dismantles this argument. The Secret Doctrine does not even hold the same popular conception of reincarnation, so that critique is superficial. It has been shown to date to an older position within Vedic atomism.

Traditionalism vs. “Theosophism”

Theosophists gradually shifted from focus on practical occultism to emphasizing the Theosophical Society as a philanthropic and philosophical society. Guénon argued these Theosophists lacked actual knowledge, and that they were not teachers.

“Why come to the theosophists for knowledge?” Guenon asks. Aleister Crowley criticized the Theosophists similarly, defining them as those who speak of Yoga, but do not practice.

If we get technical, the term theosophist does connote a profession, or a professional in the theurgic operations, hence Adepts, and not amateurs, or arm-chairs.

Rene Guénon expected by the dignity of that title Theosophist, which H.S. Olcott in his diary notes reveal was picked out of a number of other ill-fitting titles, that “theosophists” should be masterful teachers. Guénon focuses much on traditional orthodoxies as legitimate. Ultimately, at the end of Rene Guénon’s critique, there is no glory for either the model of Traditionalism or “Theosophism.”

Of Arya Samaj’s Dayananda Saraswati, it is researched by Guénon, that Dayananda broke with H.P. Blavatsky. It is because Dayananda considered her a ‘trickster’ only knowledgeable in the method of mesmerism, and lacking actual knowledge of the occult science of the ancient Yogis, and involved in dexterous conjurations.

The suspicion of Guénon throughout Pseudo-Theosophy is the legitimacy of the Theosophical Society as a claimant in connection with true Adepts of the Orient, particularly in the esoteric lineage of Buddhism. What is strange is that, in the chapter called The Theosophical Society and Rosicrucianism, Rene Guénon settles his whole angst within a few sentences, about true illuminati versus false Rosicrucianism.

“It is not our intention here to go into the controversies related to the origin and the history of the true and false Rose-Cross. These are veritable puzzles that have never been satisfactorily resolved, and about which writers who claim to be more or less Rosicrucian seem not to know much more than others.”
(René Guénon, *Theosophy: History of a Pseudo-Religion*, pg. 31)

On another note, Guénon continues to explain, that he thinks Blavatsky was a passive medium influenced by mind-controlling occult individuals, and that she used mesmerism on her subjects.

“This is an opportune place to point out that the names Mme. Blavatsky’s so-called ‘spiritual guides’—first John King, then Serapis, and finally the ‘Kashmiri brother’—in short only express the various influences that successfully worked on her. This is the very real backdrop to the wild imaginings, with which she surrounded herself (...) one can rightly conclude that in many circumstances Mme Blavatsky was above all a ‘subject’ or an instrument in the hands of occult individuals or groups using her

personality as a cover, while others in turn were instruments in her hands.” (Rene Guénon, *Theosophy: History of a Pseudo-Religion*, Second Impression 2004, pg. 24)

He makes her seem like a woman possessed on the loose! Guénon lastly begins railing on Besant’s ‘neo-Christianity.’

Ramalingam Pillai’s vindication of the T.S.

We end in a similar conundrum with the Theosophical Society. After demonstrating supporting evidence (The Identity of Koot Hoomi of Kashmir, *College and Travels*) that the ‘Kashmiri brother’ was in-fact a real mortal under a pseudonym, René Guénon would be equally confused by other evidences put before him, pointing to the integrity and validity of H.P.B.’s narrative and the Theosophical Movement being inspired by such men of a brotherhood (see Tamil Swami Ramalingam Pillai’s Prophecy). This is even more apparent in Russian Philosophy Vladimir Solovyov and Charles J. Ryan: H.P.B. did not Invent the Adepts.

Despite the influence of Traditionalism, and other Perennialists, Guénon’s critique helped nobody. We continue to see reflections of his attitude in others today towards Theosophy. See 2016’s Special Edition discussed in Georges Méautis: “Theosophy and Theosophism” Dissects Rene Guenon’s Critique (1922 article from *Theosophy and Theosophism: Response to a Criticism of Theosophy by René Guénon*, Paris: Publications Théosophiques. Trans. and Intro., Godwin, Joscelyn. FOTA Newsletter, Special Summer, 2016).

References

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- [3] Jeanine G. Miller, *The Blazing Dragon of Wisdom*.
- [4] Vera Petrovna de Zhelihovsky, “Helena Petrovna Blavatsky,” *Lucifer*, London, Nov. 15, 1894.
- [5] Letter to Dr. Hugo Wernekke, *The Identity of Koot Hoomi of Kashmir, College and Travels*.
- [6] Ramalingam Pillai and the Theosophical Movement