

THEOSOPHY AND METAPHOR

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Theosophy is not an exoteric system of literal statements about facts that we can perceive with our senses and understand with our brain-minds. Theosophy is an esoteric labyrinth of poetic metaphors about truths that lie beyond our senses and even our minds. Theosophy cannot be verified by experiments and tests and logic. Theosophy can be verified in our deep heart's core by an intuitive recognition of its eternal truths. Theosophy carries us beyond our ordinary, limited human perceptions. Theosophy is metaphor.

The fact that Theosophy is basically concerned, not with little facts, but with big truths is implicit in the Theosophical Society's motto: "There is no religion higher than truth." In the original Sanskrit wording, of which our motto is a translation, the word that we render as "religion" is "dharma". "Dharma" has many meanings; among them, it refers to duty, religion, law—in fact, whatever establishes a people as a community, and thus includes all the little facts that are the basis of our social life. Those little facts are important to our group life, but they are not, either individually or collectively, more important than the big truths of life. And it is the big truths that Theosophy seeks to discover and communicate to the world.

One problem that Theosophy has to deal with is how best to conceive of and to communicate those big truths. We cannot express them by literal statements, because literal statements are useful only for little facts, such as "It rained this morning" or "Two and two are four" or "Humans generally have five fingers on each hand." Big truths, such as "All peoples are members of one common family" or "There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of your philosophy" or "The human soul is immortal, and its future is the future of a thing whose growth and splendour has no limit", cannot be expressed by literal statements, but only by nonliteral ones—by metaphor. Why is that?

Big truths are not things we experience directly through our senses, as we do little facts. Big truths have to be inferred, that is, "carried ("-ferred") into (our awareness)" from outside our senses; and that is the job of metaphor, which is what carries ("phor") from beyond ("meta") our senses. Much of Theosophy is beyond our sensory experience, so it can be talked about only with metaphors. Little facts can be stated in prose; big truths have to be veiled in poetry.

If we mistake Theosophy's big truths for little facts—if we interpret its metaphors as literal statements—we will fail to grasp the magnificent scope of the Ancient Wisdom and reduce Theosophy to just another religion. If we encounter two different, conflicting literal statements, one (or both) of them may likely be wrong. But two different, apparently conflicting, metaphors may both be true, that is, valid efforts to formulate a truth that is greater than any literal formulation can capture. Theosophy is full of such different and contrasting metaphors, as a few examples will illustrate.

One of Theosophy's big truths is that the world is a varied, complex place. We express that truth partly by saying that the world consists of seven planes. That is a metaphor. A plane is literally a flat or level surface. If we take the metaphor literally, we will think of the world as a seven-layered gâteau, an erroneous view reinforced by our diagrams showing the planes on lines one above another. We may say that the "planes" all interpenetrate each other, but that is not what "plane" implies literally. So alternative metaphors have been suggested. Some people eschew the metaphor "plane" and talk instead about "fields" (as in field of gravity or electromagnetism). Others talk about "dimensions of reality." But both of

those are metaphors too. "Field" is literally "an open land area free of woods and buildings". And a "dimension" is literally "one of three coordinates determining a position in space or four coordinates determining a position in space and time". There is no way to talk specifically about the complex structure of the world without using metaphors.

A second big truth is that we live more than one life in this world, for which the usual term is "reincarnation," a word that is itself a metaphor for "again coming into flesh". But both "coming" (which is motion from one place to another) and "flesh" are metaphors in that term. And we use other metaphors for the same process: we compare it to waking in the morning and putting on a fresh set of clothing, or to being an actor who performs different roles in a number of plays on the stage of life. There is no way to talk specifically about living more than one life in this world without using metaphors.

A third big truth is that the world results from a complex intermingling of seven forms of energy, which we commonly speak of as the seven "rays." "Rays" are a metaphor from the chromatic continuum of the energy of light, which we traditionally divide into several segments, although in reality wave lengths of the light spectrum merge continuously without segmentation. Seven is different. Other traditions talk about seven creative gods or archangels. Seven-ness is not arbitrary because mathematically there are exactly seven possible combinations of three things, and three-ness is seen as fundamental in all the trinities of human culture and religion. But "rays" are purely metaphorical. And there is no convenient way to talk specifically about the seven forms of energy that produce this world without using metaphors.

A fourth big truth is the repetitive patterning of human and cosmic history. Patterns are reproduced everywhere. Norbert Wiener, who originated the field of cybernetics, famously said, "We are not stuff that abides, but patterns that perpetuate themselves." The same thing can be said of the universe as a whole. Theosophically, we talk about chains of worlds, rounds of the life force on those chains, root races on each world, sub-races of each root race, and so on. But those are all metaphors because there are no "chains" for the life force to go round; races (a term no longer used by science) are not roots, and there is only ONE human race, and so on. But as metaphors, they present a concrete idea of how cosmic history exists as cycles. There is no convenient way to talk specifically about the cyclical patterning of human and cosmic history without using metaphors.

In each of the foregoing examples, as well as in most of our Theosophical language, two dangers exist. One danger is that we will mistake metaphors for literal statements and thus distort big truths by treating them as little facts. That trivializes the Ancient Wisdom and turns Theosophy into just another set of religious dogmas. The other danger is that we will begin to argue with one another about which metaphor is the "right" one, which metaphor represents "real Theosophy". In addition to further trivializing and dogmatizing the Ancient Wisdom, such arguments destroy the nucleus of brotherhood, which is the Society's first object to form.

Instead of mistaking metaphors for literal statements and arguing about which of them are correct and rejecting the others as "wrong", we need to take quite a different approach. First, we need to recognize that every big truth of the Ancient Wisdom is like what Blavatsky says about the first fundamental proposition in the Proem to The Secret Doctrine: on it, "all speculation is impossible, since it transcends the power of human conception and could only be dwarfed by any human expression . . . beyond the range and reach of thought . . . 'unthinkable and unspeakable'." She is talking about the pointlessness of our trying to state the biggest of all truths with a prosaic literalness so that it appears to be just another little fact.

Second, if we want to talk about such big truths, we can do so only as Blavatsky herself did, that is, by using language that is poetically metaphorical. The metaphors of poetry can carry us beyond the limitations of our senses and serve (according to John Keats) as “Charm’d magic casements, opening on the foam / of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.” Some of us may not think of Blavatsky and Theosophy as poetic. But consider that most basic of all Theosophical texts, the Stanzas of Dzyan, which begin: “The eternal parent wrapped in her ever-invisible robes had slumbered once again for seven eternities. Time was not, for it lay asleep in the infinite bosom of duration.” If that is not poetry and metaphor, what is? Poetic metaphor pervades basic Theosophical texts like *The Secret Doctrine*, *The Voice of the Silence*, and *Light on the Path*. Just consider what the titles of those texts would mean in a literal interpretation. The very titles, like the content, of the texts are poetically metaphorical.

Third, once we recognize that Theosophical teachings are basically set forth in poetic metaphors, we can avoid any arguments about which metaphors are “correct” and which are not. Metaphors are neither correct nor incorrect; they are only effective or ineffective. And effectiveness is not an absolute but is relative to individuals and to the circumstances of their use. So a metaphorical orientation promotes, indeed requires, not just tolerance of diversity, but an embrace of variations. Dogmatism is incompatible with Theosophy because it is incompatible with metaphorical discourse. Instead, we can embrace the Chinese concept of “letting a hundred (or a thousand) flowers blossom”. To be sure, that is not to say that all interpretations of Theosophical texts are equally correct. Some interpretations can be wrong because inconsistent with the overall nature of Theosophy. But it is to say that more than one interpretation can be useful and therefore correct. As an old saying has it, Theosophy is everything, but not everything is Theosophy.

Theosophists unfortunately may seem to be divided into contending sects. Some are Blavatsky-ites; others are Judge-ites, Besant-ites, Leadbeater-ites, Tingley-ites, Purucker-ites, and so on. To be sure, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky was the great mother of us all. But from the start, Henry Steel Olcott branched out in his own directions by applying Theosophy to various traditional religious traditions and to the practical service of humanity. And all the leaders and teachers of the various Theosophical groups have worked, each in his or her own way, to restate and apply the Ancient Wisdom to contemporary needs and conditions. Each generation needs its own metaphorical statement of Theosophy. Without such a continuing process of restatement, Theosophy cannot survive as a vital force in the lives of individuals and of society. A recognition of the fundamentally metaphorical nature of Theosophical language can help to overcome sectarianism and promote a decent respect for different “-ites”.

To recognize that Theosophical language is fundamentally poetic metaphor for the big truths of life—rather than merely literal statements of little facts—can have some beneficial consequences. Such recognition can lead us to an appreciative attitude toward others who favour different metaphors from ours and thus promote a realization of the Society’s first object. It can open our own eyes, minds, and hearts to new ways of viewing and responding to life around us, thereby making us more adaptable and effective in all aspects of our lives. Perhaps most important, it can help us to grasp the meaning and implications of the Society’s motto, that there is no religion (or any other human formulation) higher than the Truth that cannot be put into any ordinary human language. As the *Bhagavad Gita* puts it, *Om tat sat*, which has been glossed as “Well, that’s the way it is!”