

Book Review: *The Key to Theosophy*

Published in 1889 by the Ukrainian mystic Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy* serves as her attempt to explain the core beliefs of the Theosophical Society (T.S.) in plain language. The short book was written as a dialogue between an enquirer and a Theosophist, a style that brings to mind such classics as Plato's Socratic dialogues and those of Hermes Trismegistus and his son Tat.

Blavatsky begins with the distinction that theosophy, many thousands of years old, is not to be understood as the "Wisdom of God" but as "Divine Wisdom" such as that possessed by the gods. She traces the origination of the term to Ammonius Saccas' system of Eclectic Theosophy, founded to "reconcile all religions, sects and nations under a common system of ethics, based on eternal verities." She quickly acknowledges a major difference between the exoteric and esoteric schools, and asserts that Jesus' "only intention was to purify the ancient religion." She offers the four principles of Theosophy as: universal Unity and Causation, Human Solidarity, the Law of Karma, the Law of Reincarnation.

Blavatsky explains the important distinctions between Theosophy and Buddhism, with the esoteric version of the latter containing "the secret knowledge of the ancient Brahmins of the Mahayana school of Northern Buddhism." Throughout the book, she focuses on the importance of ethics, and warns that once people "see that none of them [the religions] has the whole truth, but that they are complementary, that the complete truth can only be found in the combined views of all."

Blavatsky next describes the Theosophical understanding of deity, which she states "is the eternal incessantly evolving, not creating, builder of the universe...the ever-becoming." The

human soul is discussed in great detail, and she marks an important distinction between individuality and personality. The septenary constitution of the planet is outlined, with the upper or spiritual being composed of three “principles” or aspects and a lower physical quaternary completing the seven. The earth’s evolution is described, with its chain of globes, rounds, and races, as is mankind’s septenary nature which she equates to the teachings of Plato and Pythagoras. She addresses the after-life states and notes important distinctions between soul and spirit, as well as between kamaloka, devachan and nirvana.

In an effort to standardize the use of Theosophical terms, Blavatsky defines the Higher Self as Atma or spirit, while the Spiritual or Divine Ego is equated to Buddhi or the Spiritual Soul. The Inner or Higher Ego is Manas, the permanent Individuality or the Reincarnating Ego. The Lower or Personal Ego is given as the animal instincts and passions that are associated with lower manas, the Kama-rupa and the physical body. She describes the “complex nature of manas” and explains their place in the allegories of the gospel of St. John.

Reincarnation and karma are treated extensively as “the Ultimate Law of the Universe,” which, though we “do not know what Karma is per se...we do know how it works, and we can define its mode of action with accuracy.” She moves through personal, filial, national, and racial karmas, as well as the problem of evil (theodicy), stating that “Evil is an infraction of the laws of harmony governing the universe, and the penalty thereof must fall upon the violator of that law himself.” She states “The doctrine of karma is that we have made ourselves what we are by former actions, and are building our future eternity by our present actions.”

Blavatsky devotes the final chapters to a discussion of practical Theosophy, which involves a strong sense of character with the “full recognition of equal rights and privileges for all, and

without distinction of race, colour, social position, or birth.” She also speaks of a strong sense of duty, but says of politics that Theosophists “carefully avoid them” because “to seek...political reforms before we have effected a reform in human nature, is like putting new wine into old bottles.” She asserts that it is the duty of every Theosophist to “control and conquer, through the Higher, the lower self; to purify himself inwardly and morally; to fear no one, and nought, save the tribunal of his own conscience.”

1. Blavatsky, H.P. *The Key to Theosophy*. London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1893.

<https://www.amazon.com/Key-Theosophy-Helena-P-Blavatsky/dp/1987718194>.