

Plato and the Origins of Theosophy

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WITH the Academy of Plato in Athens (founded c. 387 BC), a place was founded to irradiate wisdom to the world, liberating men from ignorance, the cause of evil. Through Alexander the Great who had Aristotle, a disciple of Plato, as his teacher, the rationality of Greek thought irradiated much of the entire world. At Alexandria, the Greek word *Theosophia* was created in the third century of our era, by Neoplatonists such as Ammonius Saccas (c. AD 175–242) and his immediate disciples, particularly Plotinus, Longinus and Origen. But the real meaning of the word ‘philosophy’ originally linked to Pythagoras as a ‘love or aspiration for wisdom’ was already distorted or lost.

Pythagoras (Samos c. 580 BC–c. 500 BC) was the first Western philosopher to uphold the doctrine of reincarnation and, as a consequence, also vegetarianism as a way of compassion for life as a whole, which seems to indicate some influence by Hinduism and Buddhism. He seems to have gone to India just during the period of the flowering of Buddhism. Bishop C. W. Leadbeater (1847–1934) also said:

‘Pythagoras travelled through many of the countries of the Mediterranean basin, studying for some years in Egypt, where he was initiated at Sais. He was also initiated into the Eleusinian, Kabeiric and Chaldean Mysteries, and thus was thoroughly versed in all the hidden knowledge of the ancient world. In addition to his travels round the Mediterranean, Pythagoras journeyed to India, where he met the Lord Buddha and became one of his disciples. He spent some years in India, and it is reported that he had the high honour of an interview with the next World-Teacher.’ About an even more ancient connection with the East, Madame H. P. Blavatsky said: ‘Theosophy is the equivalent of Brahma-vidyā, divine knowledge.’¹

Anyway, it is a fact that Plato upheld the concept of reincarnation. His masterly words were: ‘The responsibility is with the chooser — God is Justified.’² His famous book is a work dedicated to the quest for justice, and rationally we would find a lot of difficulty in any idea of divine justice without accepting reincarnation and

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Nemesis. For example, if in the same family were born an Olympic athlete and a physically deficient person, or a genius and a mentally deficient person, and if those extreme differences are not attributed to Karma from former reincarnations, we would logically need to attribute them to the will of God, but then divine justice would seem to be absent. Obviously, the Laws of Karma and Reincarnation are mutually interdependent.

Madame Blavatsky comments about Karma and its correspondence to Nemesis:

With the early Greeks, 'from Homer to Herodotus, she was no goddess, but a *moral feeling* rather', says Decharme; the barrier to evil and immorality . . . But, with time, that 'feeling' was deified, and its personification became an ever-fatal and punishing goddess. Therefore, if we would connect Karma with Nemesis, it has to be done in the triple character of the latter, viz., as Nemesis, Adrasteia and Themis. For, while the latter is the goddess of Universal Order and Harmony, who, like Nemesis, is commissioned to repress every excess, and keep man within the limits of Nature and righteousness under severe penalty, *Adrasteia* — 'the inevitable' — represents Nemesis as the immutable effect of causes created by man himself. Nemesis . . . is the equitable goddess reserving her wrath for those alone who are maddened with pride, egoism, and impiety. . . . In short, while Nemesis is a mythological, exoteric goddess or *Power*, personified and anthropomorphized in its various aspects, *Karma* is a highly philosophical truth, a

most divine noble expression of the primitive intuition of man concerning Deity.³

Even in the Holy Bible we can find the manifestation of the Divine Law of Karma: 'Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.'⁴ Also the case of reincarnation of Elijah, the prophet of the Old Testament, in the body of John the Baptist is clearly confirmed by the Lord Christ: 'Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding, he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. [Which means that he was not initiated into the Mysteries, and so was still unable to remember his former lives by himself.] And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. [Symbolically, the highly Initiated one who conquers perfection in advance of the race does indeed take the kingdom of heaven by force, even by violence, as a holy battle against his lower ego.] For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if ye will receive it [i.e., if you are able to believe it], this is Elijah, which was for to come. He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.'⁵ The comment of Bishop Leadbeater, of the Liberal Catholic Church, is also very clear: 'Orthodox commentators explain that Christ did not literally mean what He said on this occasion; that He merely meant to say that John the Baptist was a type of Elias, was the same kind of man as the earlier prophet.

It must be remembered that Christ was familiar with the popular opinion [for example: John 9:2]. He knew quite well that the people were speculating about Himself; that some said He was Elijah, others that He was Jeremiah or another of the ancient prophets reincarnated [Matthew 16:13–14]. He was well aware also that the return of Elijah had been prophesied [Malachi 4:5] and that people were expecting it [Matthew 17:10–13], and so He must have known [John 16:30] how His hearers would take what He said. He made a clear and unequivocal statement. If He did not mean it, it amounted to wilfully deceiving people, and we know He could not do that. Either Christ said it or He did not. If He did not say it, what becomes of the inspiration of the gospels? And if He did say it, then reincarnation is a fact, because there is His statement that John the Baptist was Elijah in a new body.⁶

In fact, Origen (AD 185–253) was a priest and even one of the Church's Fathers, and founder of Patristic Philosophy who sustained the idea of reincarnation in his book *De Principiis*,⁷ as he was also a Neoplatonist, as mentioned before. Unfortunately, the Emperor called Justinian I (AD 483–565) interfered in the matters of the Church and convoked the Council of Constantinople II where Origen's doctrine of the pre-existence of the soul was denied through an anathema⁸ on 5 May 553, which was thereafter generalized, making it impossible for the doctrine of reincarnation to be accepted in Christianity after the sixth century.

Even the Pope Vigil preferred not to attend the Council, justifying his absence by pretending to be sick, as he was indicted by Emperor Justinian I. Perhaps, this was the biggest mistake in the history of Christian philosophy, because the exclusion of the doctrine of reincarnation created ultimately the doctrine of eternal damnation in hell, which has generated much injury and suffering difficult to evaluate in Western history.

It is indeed amazing that this decision of the Council was taken inside the Cathedral of *Hagia Sophia*, built by Justinian I, and it was conquered by the Turks just 900 hundred years after that Council, though it is difficult to speculate if there could be a karmic connection between those events. Although, this means that the doctrine of reincarnation was at least for five centuries tolerated and not denied in Christianity.

Ironically, it was a Byzantine Emperor who destroyed one of the main contributions of Neoplatonist thought to Christianity, which was the doctrine of reincarnation. As a consequence, the doctrine of eternal damnation in hell is one of the most contradictory concepts of traditional Christianity: that God is Merciful, or that Christianity is the religion of pardon and compassion, as Lord Christ himself teaches us. It is too contradictory and unjust to pay eternally, for a mistake committed in one life. If even a human father is able to pardon his son giving him a second chance how can it be understood that a Divine Father could be so cruel as to condemn his sons to eternal damnation.

There is evidence of the existence of an esoteric teaching in Christianity as well as an exoteric one, as Lord Christ said:

Unto you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God: but unto them that are without, all these things are done in parables; that seeing they may see, and do not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand; lest any time they should be converted, and their sins should be forgiven them.⁹ And with many such parables spake He the word unto them, as they were able to hear it. But without a parable spake He not unto them: and when they were alone, he expounded all things, to His disciples.¹⁰

Madame Blavatsky also mentioning and even defining the Mysteries observed they were:

generally kept secret from the profane and uninitiated, in which were taught by dramatic representation and other methods, the origin of things, the nature of the human spirit, its relation to the body, and the method of its purification and restoration to higher life. Physical science, medicine, the laws of music, divination, were all taught in the same manner.

Also the main teachings of karma and reincarnation were emphasized in the Mysteries, and in esoteric Christianity it could not be so explicit in its exoteric aspect, because the emphasis of Christianity is pardon and compassion.

It is very important to mention that the teachings of the Mysteries were not mere speculations or beliefs but were obtained,

after a long course of purification and preparation of initiations, through ecstasies as a main method for research in the field of supersensorial knowledge. Mme Blavatsky defines this according to Occult Science or Gupta-Vidyā, as follows:

The Secret Doctrine is the accumulated Wisdom of the Ages, and its cosmogony alone is the most stupendous and elaborate system . . . but such is the mysterious power of Occult symbolism, that the facts which had actually occupied countless generations of initiated seers and prophets to marshal, to set down and explain, in the bewildering series of evolutionary progress, are all recorded on a few pages of geometrical signs and glyphs. The flashing gaze of those seers has penetrated in the very kernel of matter, and recorded the soul of things . . . It is useless to say that the system in question is no fancy of one or several isolated individuals. That it is the uninterrupted record covering thousands of generations of Seers whose respective experiences were made to test and to verify the traditions passed orally . . . How did they do so? It is answered: by checking, testing, and verifying in every department of nature the traditions of old by the independent vision of great adepts; *i.e.* men who have developed and perfected their physical, mental, psychic, and spiritual organizations to the utmost possible degree. No vision of one adept was accepted till it was checked and confirmed by the visions — so obtained as to stand as independent evidence — of other adepts, and by centuries of experiences.

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More updated information can be obtained as follows: *Introduction to 'Occult Chemistry': The Amazing Phenomenon of ESP of Nuclear Structure and Subatomic Particles*¹¹ by M. Srinivasan, PhD; *Self-culture — in the Light of the Ancient Wisdom*¹² and *The Science of Yoga*¹³ by I. K. Taimni, PhD, all published by The Theosophical Publishing House, Chennai.

The conditions of life after death was also one of the main teachings in the Mysteries, as C. W. Leadbeater mentions in *Glimpses of Masonic History*:

The myths of the exoteric religion of the country were taken up and studied in the Eleusinian Mysteries, as in the Mysteries of Egypt. Among those relating to the life after death was that of Tantalus, who was condemned to suffer perpetual thirst in Hades: water surrounded him on all sides, but receded from him whenever he attempted to drink; over his head hung branches of fruit which receded in like manner when he stretched out his hand to touch them. This was interpreted to mean that everyone who dies full of sensual desire of any kind finds himself after death still full of desire, but unable to gratify it. Another story was that of Sisyphus, who was condemned always to roll uphill a huge block of marble, which as soon as it reached the top rolled down again. That represents the condition after death of a man full of personal ambition, who has spent his life in making plans for selfish ends. In the other world he goes on making plans, and working them out, but always

finds at the point of completion that they are but a dream.¹⁴

Madame Blavatsky also mentioned in *The Key to Theosophy*:

It does not require metaphysics or education to make a man understand the broad truths of Karma and Reincarnation . . . the masses adopted Buddhism with enthusiasm, while, as said before, the practical effect upon them of this philosophy of ethics is still shown by the smallness of the percentage of crime amongst Buddhist populations as compared with every other religion. The chief point is, to uproot that most fertile source of all crime and immorality — the belief that it is possible for them to escape the consequences of their own actions. Once teach them that greatest of all laws, *Karma* and *Reincarnation*, and besides feeling in themselves the true dignity of human nature, they will turn from evil and eschew it as they would a physical danger.¹⁵

It is amazing how these conclusions are similar to those of Plato in the dialogue about justice in *The Republic*. Blavatsky even considers the Theosophical principles to be applied for social amelioration, as follows:

Let me briefly remind you what these principles are — universal Unity and Causation; Human Solidarity; the Law of Karma; Reincarnation. These are the four links of the golden chain which should bind humanity into one family, one universal Brotherhood.¹⁶

Another important teaching of the

Ancient Mysteries was the perfectibility of the human being. The existence of Perfect Men or Mahatmas, as well as their Great Brotherhood, is a logical conclusion, if one accepts or understands the Laws of Reincarnation, Karma and Evolution. It is beautifully expressed in the traditional words:

There is a spiritual dynasty whose throne is never vacant, whose splendour never fails; its members form a golden chain whose links can never be torn asunder, for they draw back the world to God from whom it came.¹⁷

Also the Lord Christ said as a special commandment: 'Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.'¹⁸

On the other hand, Christianity could

have had a real Neoplatonist development but for the arbitrary interference of Justinian I, excluding the thoughts of Origen and consequently Reincarnation from its teachings, denying freedom of thought on interpretation of the scriptures with all its terrible consequences coming even into the obscurity of inquisition in the medieval age. Unfortunately, Justinian also closed the Academy of Plato in AD 529 and the last place where the Egyptian Mysteries were still active around AD 550.

So, we are here with this great challenge to restore the Greek philosophy and even its Ancient Mysteries to their glorious splendour, restoring their concepts of justice and responsibility for the welfare and amelioration of human life and ultimately for the liberation of human consciousness. ✧

References and Notes

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