

## Why Freedom of Thought?

Pedro Oliveira

Why has freedom of thought been an important policy of the Theosophical Society since its beginning in 1875? Why is it that the books published by the different publishing houses within the Society, over more than a hundred years, have not been presented as its thought and teaching? And why have the writings of Madame Blavatsky – the main co-Founder of the TS – not been adopted as the official teaching of the Society? In order to address these questions we may have to go back twenty-five centuries.

### Buddha and the Ending of Views

In the *Aggivacchagotta Sutta* ('To Vacchagotta on Fire') the Buddha explains to the wanderer Vacchagotta, who was questioning him, the reason why he did not cling to any form of views:

Vaccha, the speculative view that the world is eternal is a thicket of views, a wilderness of views, a contortion of views, a vacillation of views, a fetter of views. It is beset by suffering, by



Source: Wikimedia Commons

vexation, by despair, and by fever, and it does not lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbāna. ... Seeing this danger, I do not take up any of these speculative views.<sup>1</sup>

Let us return to the twenty-first century. In spite of great advancements in the many fields of science and technology, religious and ideological wars have darkened the world. In Europe, political parties with openly racist and xenophobic platforms are gaining momentum amongst sections of the electorate. So-called 'Islamic' extremists are attempting to hold

the world to ransom and wreaking havoc in different countries, causing indescribable suffering, particularly to women and children. Business dominated social media are enlarging the limits of hedonism to unprecedented levels – they have become a kingdom of ‘selfies’. In the midst of all this scenario daily relationships are still plagued by confusion, inflexible attitudes and a hardened sense of self. At the heart of every conflict at the present time is a world view dominated and activated by relentless, undiminished self-centredness.

Vacchagotta replies to the Buddha: ‘Then does Master Gotama hold any speculative view at all?’ The Master explains:

Vaccha, ‘speculative view’ is something that the Tathāgata has put away. For the Tathāgata, Vaccha, has seen this: ‘Such is material form, such its origin, such its disappearance; such is feeling, such its origin, such its disappearance; such is perception, such its origin, such its disappearance; such are formations, such their origin, such their disappearance; such is consciousness, such its origin, such its disappearance.’ Therefore, I say, with the destruction, fading away, cessation, giving up, and relinquishing of all conceivings, all excogitations, all I-making, mine-making, and the underlying tendency

to conceit, the Tathāgata is liberated through not clinging.<sup>2</sup>

Working with ideas and concepts is a necessary part of many aspects of life. If you are a surgeon, an engineer, a physicist, a teacher, a student or even a handyman, learning how to deal with concepts and ideas is important. The problems arise when we try to convince others that *my idea, my solution or my concept* is the only right one. Division and fragmentation set in and communities and relationships suffer. In the search for Truth any attempt to dictate terms to others is not only unhelpful – it renders such a search devoid of meaning.

### Absolute and Relative Truth

This is what HPB wrote when considering the question of absolute and relative truth:

To sum up the idea, with regard to absolute and relative truth, we can only repeat what we said before. *Outside a certain highly spiritual and elevated state of mind, during which Man is at one with the UNIVERSAL MIND – he can get nought on earth but relative truth, or truths, from whatsoever philosophy or religion.* Were even the goddess who dwells at the bottom of the well to issue from her place of confinement, she could give no man

The mind is constantly enamoured with its own creations, its own content. As the great mystics throughout the ages have declared, the experience of Truth – whether we call it Brahman, Nirvana, God or the Eternal – is a profoundly transformative one, from which the personal self – pride, envy, comparison with others, attachment to desire – does not survive.

more than he can assimilate. Meanwhile, every one can sit near that well – the name of which is KNOWLEDGE – and gaze into its depths in the hope of seeing Truth’s fair image reflected, at least, on the dark waters. This, however, as remarked by Richter, presents a certain danger. Some truth, to be sure, may be occasionally reflected as in a mirror on the spot we gaze upon, and thus reward the patient student. But, adds the German thinker, ‘I have heard that some philosophers in seeking for Truth, to pay homage to her, have seen their own image in the water and adored it instead.’<sup>3</sup>

The mind is constantly enamoured with its own creations, its own content. As the great mystics throughout the ages have declared, the experience of Truth – whether we call it Brahman, Nirvana, God or the Eternal – is a profoundly

transformative one, from which the personal self – pride, envy, comparison with others, attachment to desire – does not survive. Instead of hankering after that experience we are advised by the sages to purify our hearts and to learn how to listen to life’s perennial song. Humility is a cornerstone of a real search for Truth.

### **The Masters on Freedom of Thought**

While corresponding with the members of the London Lodge of the TS in 1883, Mahatma KH gave them a practical demonstration of why freedom of thought is important in the TS. He also showed them that he knew how to walk the talk:

It seems necessary for a proper study and correct understanding of our Philosophy and the benefit of those whose inclination leads them to seek esoteric knowledge from the Northern Buddhist Source, and in order that such teaching should not be even virtually imposed or offered to those Theosophists who may differ from our views, that an exclusive group composed of those members who desire to follow absolutely the teachings of the School to which we, of the Tibetan Brotherhood, belong, should be formed under Mr. Sinnett’s direction and *within* the ‘London Lodge T.S.’ Such is, in fact, the desire of the Maha Chohan. ... Every Western Theosophist should

learn and remember, especially those of them who would be our followers – that in our Brotherhood all personalities sink into one idea – abstract right and absolute practical justice for all. ... Thus, the Theosophists of Mrs. K.'s [Anna Kingsford's] way of thinking, – were they even to oppose some of us personally to the bitter end, – are entitled to as much respect and consideration (so long as they are sincere) from us and their fellow-members of opposite views, as those who are ready with Mr. Sinnett to follow absolutely but our special teaching. A dutiful regard for these rules in life will always promote the best interests of all concerned. It is necessary for the parallel progress of the groups under Mrs. K. and Mr. S. that neither should interfere with the beliefs and rights of the other. And it is seriously expected that both of them will be actuated by an earnest and sleepless desire to respect the philosophical independence of each other, while preserving at the same time their unity as a whole – namely the objects of the Parent Theos. Society in their integrity – and those of the London Lodge, in their slight modification.<sup>4</sup>

When universal brotherhood – the oneness of all humanity and indeed of all life – begins to become a reality in our hearts it will naturally generate the acceptance of differing views, while keeping the focus on the purpose for



which the Theosophical Society was established: to let people 'know that such a thing as Theosophy exists'.

### **Annie Besant's View**

In a statement from 1913, Annie Besant elaborates this point in a passionate presentation of one of the pillars of the TS work – Freedom of Thought:

Before dealing with investigations, let me make clear my own position with regard to all questions of opinion and belief within the Theosophical Society itself. Some of our members echo the statements of one seer or another, and seem to consider that such a statement ought to preclude further discussion. But no one in the TS has any authority to lay down what people shall think, or not think, on any subject. We are not in the position of an orthodox Church, which

has certain definite articles of faith, which imposes certain definite creeds in which all faithful members are bound to believe. The only point which we must accept is Universal Brotherhood, and even as to that we may differ in our definition of it. Outside that, we are at perfect liberty to form our own opinions on every subject; and the reason of that policy is clear and an exceedingly good one. No intellectual opinion is worth the holding unless it is obtained by the individual effort of the person who holds that opinion. It is far healthier to exercise our intelligence, even if we come to a wrong conclusion and form an inaccurate opinion, than simply, like parrots, to echo what other people say, and so put out of all possibility intellectual development.

In fact, differences of opinion among the members ought to be regarded as safeguards to the Society rather than as menaces, for our one greater danger, as HPB recognised, is the danger of getting into a groove, and so becoming fossilised in the forms of belief that many of us hold today; ... The Society is intended, always has been intended, to be a living body and not a fossil, and a living body grows and develops, adapting itself to new conditions; and if it be a body which is spiritually alive, it should be gaining continually a deeper and fuller view of truth. It is absurd for

If the Society is to live far into the future, as I believe it will, then we must be prepared to recognise now, quite frankly and freely, that our knowledge is fragmentary, that it is partial, that it is liable to very great modifications as we learn more and understand better; and especially is this true of everything which goes under the name of investigation.

us to pretend, at our present stage of evolution, that we have arrived at the limit of the knowledge which it is possible for men to obtain. It is absurd for us to say that the particular form into which we throw our beliefs at this moment is the form which is to continue for ever after us, and to be accepted by those who follow us in time. ... If the Society is to live far into the future, as I believe it will, then we must be prepared to recognise now, quite frankly and freely, that our knowledge is fragmentary, that it is partial, that it is liable to very great modifications as we learn more and understand better; and especially is this true of everything which goes under the name of investigation.<sup>5</sup>

The essential spirit of the TS is not a set ideology but, as its very name indicates,

Divine Wisdom. Dr Besant's vigorous elaboration makes it clear how vitally important for the Society freedom of thought is. Although now more than a century old as an institution, the TS remains unique by affirming that an open mind is a crucial qualification in the search for Truth.

### A Letter from a Great Adept

However, the core mandate of the TS is not just encouraging an unbiased and undogmatic search for Truth. It seeks to address the fundamental causes of human suffering and fragmentation which have turned the earth into a valley of tears. The well-known 1881 letter from the Mahachohan – the Mahatmas' Master – points to the deeper nature of Theosophical work:

To be true, religion and philosophy must offer the solution of every problem. That the world is in such a bad condition morally is a conclusive evidence that none of its religions and philosophies, those of the *civilised* races less than any other, have ever possessed the *truth*. The right and logical explanations on the subject of the problems of the great dual principles – right and wrong, good and evil, liberty and despotism, pain and pleasure, egotism and altruism – are as impossible to them now as they were 1881 years ago. They are as far from the

solution as they ever were; but to these there must be somewhere a consistent solution, and if our doctrines will prove their competence to offer it, then the world will be the first one to confess that must be the true philosophy, the true religion, the true light, which gives truth and nothing but the truth.<sup>6</sup>

The Theosophical Society became an early custodian of a universal, regenerative teaching. As one of the Mahatmas told Mr Sinnett, 'this Theosophy is no new candidate for the world's attention, but only the restatement of principles which have been recognised from the very infancy of mankind'. Although in its teaching aspect, articulated through ageless concepts, Theosophy studies and explains universal processes – in the human being, in Nature and in the universe – in its deeper, numinous nature, it is Wisdom, a direct, non-mediated perception of the undivided oneness of all existence and a way of life informed by this life-transcending experience.

Freedom of thought is the beginning. If rightly nurtured it can lead to meaningful study and reflection. But even these are ultimately transcended when we truly come to know what Theosophy is in its essential nature, through the full realisation of our first Object.

## Endnotes:

1. *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, a translation of the *Majjhima Nikaya* from the Pāli, original translation by Bhikkhu Nānamoli; translated, edited and revised by Bhikkhu Bodhi, Third Edition, Wisdom Publications, Boston, 2009, pp. 590-594.

2. *ibid.*

3. 'What is Truth?', *H.P. Blavatsky Collected Writings*, Theosophical Publishing House, Adyar, Madras, India, 1962, vol. IX, pp. 40-41.

4. *The Mahatma Letters to A.P. Sinnett*, chronological sequence, edited by Vicente Hao Chin Jr., The Theosophical Publishing House, Manila, The Philippines, 1993, Letter 120, p. 411.

5. Excerpted from 'Investigations into the Superphysical', *Adyar Pamphlets*, No. 36, Theosophical Publishing House, Adyar, Madras, 1913.

6. *Letters from the Masters of the Wisdom*, First Series, trans. and comp. by C. Jinarājādāsa, The Theosophical Publishing House, Adyar, Madras, 1988.



Pedro Oliveira is the Education Coordinator of the Australian Section and a former International Secretary of the TS.

Surely our difficulty is that most of us have lost this sense of creativeness. To be creative does not mean that we must paint pictures or write poems and become famous. That is not creativeness – it is merely the capacity to express an idea, which the public applauds or disregards. Creativeness is not a continuous state, it is new from moment to moment, it is a movement in which there is not the 'me', the 'mine', in which the thought is not focussed on any particular experience, ambition, achievement, purpose and motive.

J. Krishnamurti  
*The First and Last Freedom*

