

BESANT LECTURE
‘Gandhi’s Faith – and Ours’
Prof. Ramachandra Guha
(Delivered on 26 December 2009)

Prof. Guha mentioned that Annie Besant as one of the most remarkable persons to have lived in Chennai or walked the soil of the Indian subcontinent. She was full of energy and campaigned in so many fields. He said he was interested in Gandhi from a young age and tried to ‘repackage’ Gandhi as a nonviolent Socialist. Gandhi’s life was one of utter simplicity, he befriended many and worked, for example, with Dalits and for the upliftment of women.

Gandhi was born ten years after Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* was published, a book that struck a blow at the orthodox Christian view of the origin of the world. Gandhi’s attitude towards faith and religion was a distinct one as he was neither an atheist nor a religious dogmatist. In order to understand Gandhi’s faith four steps are suggested: 1) the religious influences on Gandhi; 2) what he made of them; 3) his theology on the place of religion in the world; and 4) the role of faith and belief in the Indian freedom struggle in which Gandhi was a very important leader.

He was influenced by the Jain philosophy of detachment and disregard for material belongings. People of different faiths visited his home. His closest school friends were Muslims and his closest friend was a white Christian priest. He befriended people from various religious traditions who visited his ashram, which was an ecumenical one.

Gandhi did not believe that either any religious tradition, or any interpretation of one, was supreme. He believed that religious traditions were a mixture of truth and error, and rejected conversion and missionary work. Gandhi encouraged interfaith dialogue, mentioned that Muslims and Hindus should cultivate a relationship of friendship and understanding towards each other, emphasized respect for each other’s religion and that they should not even secretly thinking ill of the other.

EXCERPTS OF AN ADDRESS BY N. SRI RAM

(Adyar, February 1960)

The character which the Society assumes and its effectiveness depend not only upon the President, but upon every single member who calls himself a Theosophist. The Society has to be a united spiritual republic in which there is harmony and co-operation but each one finds that law within himself, really the law of his uniqueness, by which his action and thought should be governed. Each one should discover the light that is in himself, and when he does so, he will shine with that light.

Brotherhood means unity, and the first and most definite Object of the Society is the realization of the Universal Brotherhood, which is easy to speak of but much more difficult to accomplish in every aspect of one's living, in every context in life. It is not enough merely to realize our unity in the abstract; it must inspire us to action with a wisdom which applies to existing situations and problems.

The spirit of the Wisdom, which is always more important than any letter, than any doctrine, should be manifested not merely in talks from the platform, in what we say to others, but also in the way we conduct our work. As I have said at other times, in such a movement as The Theosophical Society, it is inconceivable to me that any individual who is a true Theosophist can push himself forward, to the detriment of another. Above all, there should be a feeling of brotherhood, which means no rivalry, no competition, no attempt to outshine another, no seeking of any success except the success of Truth. I am saying this because such a spirit will greatly help the Society, giving it dignity and strength, whether in a Section, Lodge, or the Society as a whole.

It has been said by a Master of the Wisdom that the movement was brought into existence in order that the crest-wave of intellectual advance may be guided into channels of spirituality. One has only to look at the world, with its bombs, missiles, experimentation on animals, and other brutalities to see that the advance of modern civilization is sure not running in that direction. Yet there are aspects of modern thought and knowledge which are of value.

In every conceivable case he himself [the Theosophist] must be a centre of spiritual action, and from him and his own daily individual life must radiate those higher spiritual forces which alone can regenerate his fellow-men.

H. P. Blavatsky

THEOSOPHY AROUND THE WORLD

The Indian Section continues to have the largest membership, which has increased from 12,418 to 12,698 during the past year. It has been very active throughout the year, not only at its headquarters in Varanasi, but also through its numerous Federations and Lodges around the country. The 118th Indian Section Convention was inaugurated on 27 December 2008 at Adyar by the International President. It was presided over by Dr Kannan, National Lecturer. On 29 December 2008, a symposium on 'Compassion is the Function of Wisdom' was held, and presided over by Prof. C. A. Shinde, National Lecturer.

The North India Study Camp was held at Varanasi from 15 to 19 October 2008 and was directed by Mrs Radha Burnier, International President, with the help of Dr N. C. Ramanujachary, Director of Studies, and Bro. P. K. Jayaswal, National Lecturer. This event was attended by 141 members. A programme of Indian classical music and the ritual of the Mystic Star added greatly to the event. A Study Camp was held at Bhowali from 19 May to 6 June 2009 during which *The Voice of the Silence* was studied under National Lecturer, Prof. C. A. Shinde, and Bro. M. L. Gupta. Thirty-five students benefited from this in-depth study. The 86th South Indian Theosophical Conference was held at Adyar between 9 and 12 April 2009, on

the theme 'The Way of Wisdom'. Talks were given by Mrs Radha Burnier, Mrs Linda Oliveira, International Vice-President, National Lecturers Prof. R. C. Tampi and Prof. C. A. Shinde, and Bro. Pedro Oliveira.

The General Secretary, Mr S. Sundaram, and his wife, Mrs Manju Sundaram, visited many Federation Conferences during the year and travelled to various parts of India to inspire members and stimulate further work. The Vice-President, Mrs Linda Oliveira, accompanied by Mr Oliveira, spoke at Varanasi and other places. The National Lecturers spoke at many places in the country. Mr H. K. Sharan, apart from work done in Calcutta, translated part of the *Dhammapada* into Hindi, and took the initiative to bring closer relations between the Mahabodhi Society and the Indian Section, as a result of which the President visited the Society in Calcutta and a number of people from the Mahabodhi Society joined the Theosophical Society.

The Section published six information pamphlets which have been sent to the Federations for wider circulation. The financial year ending on 31 March 2009 left the Indian Section with a modest surplus of Rs 6.75 lakhs. The General Secretary's appeal for funds is still valid as more funds are required to renovate the buildings at the Section Headquarters. During the

year 56 members of the Indian Section passed away. The Section paid rich tribute to the former General Secretary, Dr C. V. Agarwal, who passed away on 19 June 2009 while working as the International Secretary at Adyar.

The membership of the Singapore Lodge has increased to 344, including new members and many students; these are attracted through a course in Theosophy. Meditation courses and study of the Mahatma Letters took place. Many talks and lectures were organized, and videos on Theosophy were screened. A Theosophical retreat was organized at Turi Beach Resort on the island of Batam, and a workshop on Self-realization and development was held there.

The Philippines Section has chartered two new Lodges and three Study Groups. The Theosophical Publishing House published a two-volume collection of articles by Geoffrey Hodson. Conferences, seminars and lecture tours were organized. The Golden Link School run by the Section has now become a college and has 432 students. The Bacolod Lodge is setting up a new school and Bohol Lodge has purchased land to set up a new school.

The Nippon Lodge in Tokyo, Japan, held regular monthly meetings. The members studied translations of HPB's books. The Lodge also publishes *The Japanese Theosophist* bimonthly, containing translations of the works of Annie Besant, C. W. Leadbeater,

H. P. Blavatsky, etc.

Dr Dara Tatray took over as President of the Australian Section on 18 January 2009 from Mrs Linda Oliveira. Dr Edi Bilimoria has also joined the Section headquarters as its Education Coordinator in July 2009. The Section has now 1289 members and has been very active during the year. Dr Ravi Ravindra and Prof. P. Krishna visited the area on lecture tours. The National Convention was held in Perth during January 2009. The Section's website and journal *Theosophy in Australia* have both been redesigned. The 'Union Index of Theosophical Periodicals' is now available, with 170,000 entries from international theosophical periodicals. The Campbell Theosophical Research Library has also undergone renovation and its contents have been rearranged, improving the layout. Two Study Papers have been issued and a course on 'Theosophy and Science' is being designed. The Section is financially sound and has provided increased support for TS work outside Australia.

The New Zealand Section held its National Convention at Wellington in January 2009, with the theme 'Intuition on the Path'. The School of Theosophy was held at the Tauhara Centre on 'The Perennial Philosophy'. Dr Dara Tatray and Ms Rosanne DeBats from Australia visited New Zealand on lecture tours. The *TheoSophia* magazine and the website have acquired new looks, while work on a new website is moving ahead.

Occultism is the science of life, the art of living.

H. P. Blavatsky

OPENING OF THE CONVENTION

1248 delegates from fourteen countries are attending the 134th
International Convention

The Convention was inaugurated at 8 am on 26 December with the Prayers of the Religions, followed by the Universal Prayer which was led by the President. The International Secretary, Mrs Kusum Satapathy, read out greetings received from overseas. The General Secretary of the Indian Section, Mr S. Sundaram, conveyed messages received from Federations, Lodges and individual members from different parts of India.

General Secretaries and other representatives of the Theosophical Society in various countries then passed on greetings from their members, as listed below:

Mr S. Sundaram, India
Dr Dara Tatray, Australia
Aroon Parshotam, New Zealand
Govert van der Wal, Netherlands
Antonio Girardi, Italy
Markku Kemppi, Finland
Jan Keppler, Belgium
Marcos Resende, Brazil
Bhupendra Vora, East & Central Africa
Colin Price, England
Dr Dusan Zagar, Slovenia
Mr. D. A. Jayewardene, Sri Lanka
Maria Mengelt, Mexico
Agnes Gasemyr, Norway

Following the greetings the President, Mrs Radha Burnier, requested the Vice-President, Mrs Linda Oliveira, to welcome the gathering. Mrs Burnier then proceeded to deliver her Presidential Address, which include a comprehensive report about the work of the Society around the world. At the end of her address the president declared the Convention opened.

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The pendulum has swung from the extreme of blind faith towards the extreme materialistic skepticism, and nothing can stop it save Theosophy. Is not this a thing worth working for, to save those nations from the doom their ignorance is preparing for them?

Letters from the Masters of the Wisdom

SOCIAL WELFARE CENTRE

Pre-Convention preparation and key activities during Convention 2009:

The three major contributions of the Social Welfare Centre during the Convention are the Vocational Training Centre stall in the TS, an Exhibition at the Social Welfare Centre and a cultural programme by the Social Welfare Centre children and Vocational Training Centre students.

Both Centres have been displaying their products for sale at their stall by the main road near the Convention's Enquiry Office. Products include handcrafted items (greeting cards, silk cotton pillows, wire baskets, terracotta vases, wall hangers); woven items (napkins, bath towels, jute mats, yoga mats, meditation mats, carpets), and tailored items (emblem bags, travelling bags, ladies hand bags and purses). The stall was opened on Saturday, 26 December 2009.

From 27 to 30 December, the SWC and VTC will also hold an exhibition on their premises. There will be creative activities, also charts and models of teaching aids on display. Importance is

given to physical development, language and intellectual development, also personal and social development. Basic stitching, embroidery, cutting and sewing as well as albums, charts and models, as learnt in the classes, will be on display.

All Convention delegates are welcome to attend the cultural programme on Tuesday, 29 December 2009 from 1.30 to 3.30 p.m. It will include a number of dances (Welcome, Kollattam, Gypsy Jalra, Folk, Action song, Hindi rhymes), also speeches in Tamil by VTC students. A Certification ceremony will also be held.

The Social Welfare Centre is located to the left of the main gate of the TS compound. The Daycare Centre trains 80 children aged between two and five years in classroom and outdoor activities and the Vocational Training Centre trains twenty students (women) in cutting, designing, drafting and preparing patterns, layout and estimates of cloth requirements for children and ladies dresses. It is a one-year Certificate course.

PUBLICITY

The activities at the International Headquarters have been projected through the newspapers, radio and television in Chennai and in India. This has made an impact on the public, which realizes that apart from holding meetings with speeches and talks, the TS continues to engage itself as before in educational and social activities, and to help ease the suffering of people and animals.

THE MAHACHOHAN'S LETTER – EXCERPTS

(From *Letters from the Masters of the Wisdom*)

For our doctrines to practically react on the so-called moral code, or the ideas of truthfulness, purity, self-denial, charity, etc., we have to popularize a knowledge of theosophy. It is not the individual and determined purpose of attaining oneself Nirvana (the culmination of all knowledge and absolute wisdom) which is after all only an exalted and glorious *selfishness*—but the self-sacrificing pursuit of the best means to lead on the right path our neighbour, to cause as many of our fellow-creatures as we possibly can to benefit by it, which constitutes the true theosophist.

It is time that theosophy should enter the arena; the sons of theosophists are more likely to become in their turn theosophists than anything else. No messenger of truth, no prophet has ever achieved during his lifetime a complete triumph, not even Buddha. The Theosophical Society was chosen as the cornerstone, the foundation of the future religions of humanity. To achieve the proposed object, a greater, wiser, and especially a more benevolent intermingling of the high and the low, of the Alpha and the Omega of society, was determined upon. The white race must be the first to stretch out the hand of fellowship to the dark nations, to call the poor despised 'nigger' brother. This prospect may not smile to all, but he is no Theosophist who objects to this principle.

Rather perish the T.S. with both its hapless founders than that we should permit it to become no better than an academy of magic, a hall of occultism. That we the devoted followers of that spirit incarnate of absolute self-sacrifice, of philanthropy, divine kindness, as of all the highest virtues attainable on this earth of sorrow, the man of men, Gautama Buddha, should ever allow the T.S. to represent the *embodiment of selfishness*, the refuge of the few with no thought in them for the many, is a strange idea, my brothers.

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 *civilized* 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 prove their competence to offer it, then the world will be quick to confess *that* must be the true philosophy, the true religion, the true light, which gives *truth* and nothing but the truth.

THE RITUAL OF THE MYSTIC STAR

The Ritual of the Mystic Star was created in 1911 at the behest of Dr Annie Besant, by C. Jinarajadasa. The ritual begins with censuring and the 'Six Remembrances' of Buddhism. It then goes on to invoke the four Devarajas, who are the Lords of the four elements, with the five points of the Star standing for Power, Beauty, Wisdom, Love and Joy. The complementary professions are Judge, Craftsman, Scientist, Healer and Servant. These ten, with the Thurifer and Starbearer, comprise the twelve participants around the circle. Ten of the participants carry tools of 'daily labour' during the ceremony. The ritual highlights the important teachings of the great World Teachers and other Messengers of the Brotherhood of Adepts. Each teaching is marked in the ritual by lighting a candle and pledging one's faith in the name of each messenger of truth.

An important and interesting part of

the ceremony is the reading of the 'Greatest Blessings' in Buddhism. The altar cloths used have special colours that represent the signs of the Zodiac, the universe, the colours in the aura of the Lord Buddha and the colour blue, which is associated with the Bodhisattva Maitreya. The blue altar cloth also carries an image of the Star. The invocation to the Master of The Great White Lodge is the climax of the ritual, and it is marked by the lighting of the tallest candle in the centre. This is followed by the distribution of holy water to the congregation, which has an active participatory role in the ritual. The ritual concludes by invoking the 'Powers that be', asking for peace in the world.

The ritual was held at the Headquarters Hall on the evening of 26 December. The main aspects of the ceremony were explained by Mr Pedro Oliveira.



It is perhaps necessary, first of all, to say, that the assertion that 'Theosophy is not a Religion', by no means excludes the fact that 'Theosophy is Religion' itself. A Religion in the true and only correct sense, is a bond uniting men together – not a particular set of dogmas and beliefs. Now Religion, *per se*, in its widest meaning is that which binds not only *all* MEN, but also *all* BEINGS and all *things* in the entire Universe into one grand whole. This is our theosophical definition of religion.

H. P. Blavatsky