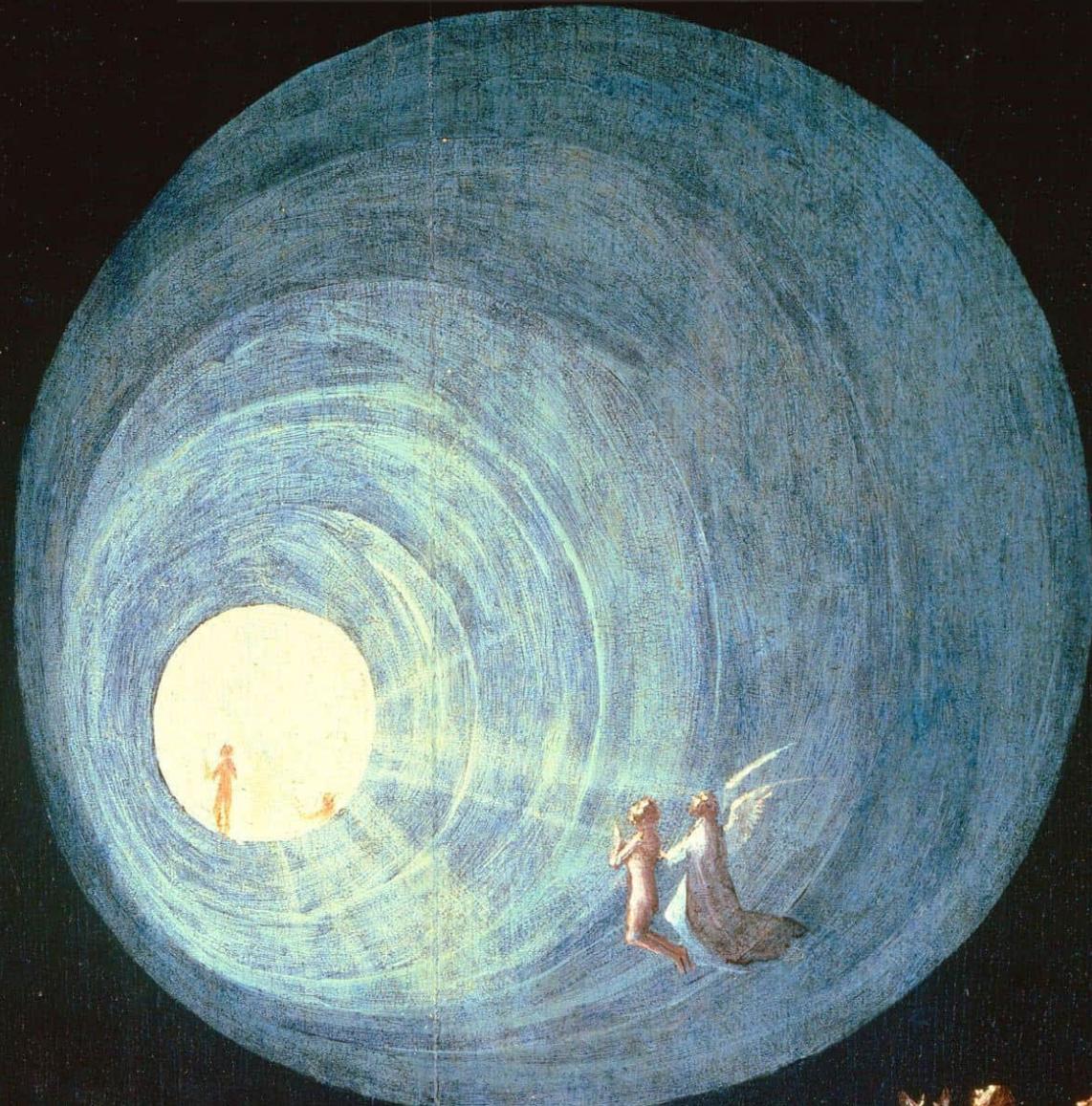


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# THE ANCIENT WISDOM

ANNIE BESANT

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# Introduction

## THE UNITY UNDERLYING ALL RELIGIONS

Right thought is necessary to right conduct, right understanding to right living, and the Divine Wisdom – whether called by its ancient Sanskrit name of Brahma Vidyā, or its modern Greek name of Theosophia, Theosophy – comes to the world as at once an adequate philosophy and an all-embracing religion and ethic. It was once said of the Christian Scriptures by a devotee that they contained shallows in which a child could wade and depths in which a giant must swim. A similar statement might be made of Theosophy, for some of its teachings are so simple and so practical that any person of average intelligence can understand and follow them, while others are so lofty, so profound, that the ablest strains his intellect to contain them and sinks exhausted in the effort.

In the present volume an attempt will be made to place Theosophy before the reader simply and clearly, in a way which shall convey its general principles and truths as forming a coherent conception of the universe, and shall give such detail as is necessary for the understanding of their relations to each other. An elementary textbook cannot pretend to give the fullness of knowledge that may be obtained from abstruser works, but it should leave the student with clear fundamental ideas on his subject, with much indeed to add by future study but with little to unlearn. Into the outline given by such a book the student should be able to paint the details of further research.

It is admitted on all hands that a survey of the great religions of the world shows that they hold in common many religious, ethical, and philosophical ideas. But while the fact is universally granted, the explanation of the fact is a matter of dispute.

Some allege that religions have grown up on the soil of human ignorance tilled by the imagination, and have been gradually elaborated from crude forms of animism and fetishism; their likenesses are referred to universal natural phenomena imperfectly observed and fancifully explained, solar and star worship being the universal key for one school, phallic worship the equally universal key for another; fear, desire, ignorance, and wonder led the savage to personify the powers of nature, and priests played upon his terrors and his hopes, his misty fancies, and his bewildered questionings; myths became scriptures and symbols facts, and their basis was universal the likeness of the products was inevitable. Thus speak the doctors of “Comparative Mythology,” and plain people are silenced but not convinced under the rain of proofs; they cannot deny the likenesses, but they dimly feel: Are all man’s dearest hopes and lofty imaginings nothing more than the outcome of savage fancies and of groping ignorance? Have the great leaders of the race, the martyrs and heroes of humanity, lived, wrought, suffered and died deluded, for the mere personifications of astronomical facts and for the draped obscenities of barbarians?

The second explanation of the common property in the religions of the world asserts the existence of an original teaching in the custody of a Brotherhood of great spiritual Teachers, who – Themselves the outcome of past cycles of evolution – acted as the instructors and guides of the child-humanity of our planet, imparting to its races and nations in turn the fundamental truths of religion in the form most adapted to the idiosyncrasies of the recipients. According to this view, the Founders of the great religions are members of the one Brotherhood, and were aided in Their mission by many other members, lower in degree than Themselves, Initiates and disciples of various grades, eminent in spiritual insight, in philosophical knowledge, or in purity of ethical wisdom. These guided the infant nations,

gave them their polity, enacted their laws, ruled them as kings, taught them as philosophers, guided them as priests; all the nations of antiquity looked back to such mighty men, demigods, and heroes, and they left their traces in literature, in architecture, in legislation.

That such men lived it seems difficult to deny in the face of universal tradition, of still existing Scriptures, and of prehistoric remains for the most part now in ruins, to say nothing of other testimony which the ignorant would reject. The sacred books of the East are the best evidence for the greatness of their authors, for who in later days or in modern times can even approach the spiritual sublimity of their religious thought, the intellectual splendour of their philosophy, the breadth and purity of their ethic? And when we find that these books contain teachings about God, man, and the universe identical in substance under much variety of outer appearance, it does not seem unreasonable to refer to them to a central primary body of doctrine. To that body we give the name Divine Wisdom, in its Greek form: THEOSOPHY.

As the origin and basis of all religions, it cannot be the antagonist of any: it is indeed their purifier, revealing the valuable inner meaning of much that has become mischievous in its external presentation by the perverseness of ignorance and the accretions of superstition; but it recognises and defends itself in each, and seeks in each to unveil its hidden wisdom. No man in becoming a Theosophist need cease to be a Christian, a Buddhist, a Hindu; he will but acquire a deeper insight into his own faith, a firmer hold on its spiritual truths, a broader understanding of its sacred teachings. As Theosophy of old gave birth to religions, so in modern times does it justify and defend them. It is the rock whence all of them were hewn, the hole of the pit whence all were dug. It justifies at the bar of intellectual criticism the deepest longings and emotions of the human heart: it verifies our hopes for man; it gives us back ennobled our faith in God.

The truth of this statement becomes more and more apparent as we study the various world-Scriptures, and but a few selections from the wealth of material available will be sufficient to establish the fact, and to guide the student in his search for further verification. The main spiritual verities of religion may be summarised thus:

- 1) One eternal, infinite, incognisable real Existence.
- 2) From THAT the manifested God, unfolding from unity to duality to trinity.
- 3) From the manifested Trinity many spiritual Intelligences, guiding cosmic order.
- 4) Man a reflection of the manifested God and therefore a trinity fundamentally, his inner and real Self being eternal, one with the Self of the universe.
- 5) His evolution by repeated incarnations, into which he is drawn by desire, and from which he is set free by knowledge and sacrifice, becoming divine in potency as he had ever been divine in latency.

China which is now a fossilised civilisation, was peopled in old days by the Turanians, the fourth subdivision of the great Fourth Race, the race which inhabited the lost continent of Atlantis, and spread its offshoots over the world. The Mongolians, the last subdivision of that same race, later reinforced its population, so that in China we have traditions from ancient days, preceding the settlement of the Fifth, or Āryan race in India. In the Ching Chang Ching, or Classic of Purity, we have a fragment of an ancient scripture of singular beauty, breathing out the spirit of restfulness and peace so characteristic of the "original teaching." Mr. Legge says in the introductory note to his translation<sup>1</sup> that the treatise –

<sup>1</sup> The Sacred Books of the East