

Defining Theosophy in the Twenty-First Century

‘**W**hen we use the term theosophy we should be specific about the sense in which we intend it’ (Faivre 2000: 3). What Faivre refers to in this quotation, is that the concept *theosophy* has been used by different theological and philosophical positions with different meaning throughout western history as far back as Porphyry (234–305). The concept can therefore not be understood as a trans-historical or universal one, but must be specified whenever it is applied, since several *theosophies* have existed over time.

Nonetheless, a specification is seldom provided when the term is and has been applied in recent decades by scholars as well as the general public. Most often when used today, the term is applied as synonymous to the theosophy introduced by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–91), co-founder of the Theosophical Society (TS) established in 1875; consequently tending to include only the TS as tradition when evaluating a given theosophical theme. However, focussing on tradition rather than on theology—that is, focussing on the founding tradition rather than also including groups practising according to theosophical dogma—can give rise to a number of problems, particularly when considering the theosophical situation today. One such problem is that the TS has for decades experienced a significant setback in memberships, making scholars tend to consider theosophy as a dying enterprise,¹ although a recent mapping project showed that several off-shoots, or sects, to use a more technical term, from the TS have experienced a significant increase in membership and activity in the last 20–30 years (Pedersen 2005: 41–7). In other words, using a wider perspective when evaluating the theosophical situation today reveals a different picture—one that shows that theosophy is not dying out, but rather, experiencing a renaissance.

1 Contemporary theosophy is still an area of study that only very few scholars have looked into. The position presented here is therefore primarily the one I have hitherto received at different conferences where this theory has been presented.

One obvious question evolving from these reflections is whether *this* theosophy experiencing a renaissance is the same theosophy as the Blavatskian or ‘modern’ theosophy, as Emely B. Sellon and Renée Weber have classified it (Sellon & Weber 1993: 312), or if it is to be considered as a new type or kind. The aim of this article is to discuss this question, looking at how theosophy has developed in Denmark over the last century; a country in which a theosophical renaissance has indeed been observed in recent years. Assuming that part of the answer lies in the ability of the various groups to accommodate certain societal conditions forming different periods since the founding of the TS, we will first be drawing attention to theories from some of the more prominent social scientists, who in recent decades have focussed on the societal transformations in the western countries in the nineteenth and twentieth century.

The ‘After-Modernity’

The late modern, high modern, post-modern, the other modernity, the post-industrial, hyper complex, information society and/or risk society—despite the vast number of concepts used to classify the present era and the even greater number of articles and books describing it, the majority of researchers who study social conditions to a large extent agree that western society particularly during the last couple of decades has been leaving the era of modernity and heading for another. In relation to the history of the TS this means that social conditions forming our society today are different from those during the golden age of the TS in the first decades of the twentieth century.

In spite of the vast numbers of different terms used to classify the present era, there seems to be general agreement as to why this transformation is occurring.² For many, such as Anthony Giddens, Zygmunt Bauman, David Lyon, Lars Qvortrup and others, one essential reason is the speed in which technological advancement has taken place over

2 The intention of this article is not to add to or even enter the discussion about which term most accurately captures the societal tendencies of the present era. However, since the majority of scholars seem to support the idea that western societies are situated in a transitional period, leaving modernity, I prefer and will in this article primarily use the term late modern and only apply other terms in the case where scholars referred to specifically prefer another.

the last centuries. This advancement has, for one thing, paved the way for the production of more efficient and inexpensive consumer goods, which in turn has generated a generally higher standard of welfare and hence consumerism. Furthermore, technological advancement has had a catalytic effect on another prime reason for the development away from modernity—that is, the increasing globalization occurring due to the development of better means of communication and transportation. Both of these reasons, technological advancement and globalization, are however not just late modern phenomena. According to the Canadian sociologist David Lyon, these were occurring already during the early modern era. According to him, what characterizes the difference between modernity and post modernity is the different speed in which the development of both the technological advancement and globalization is happening in the respective eras. In his own words: ‘Post modernity is a kind of interim situation where some characteristics of modernity have been inflated to such an extent that modernity becomes scarcely recognizable as such’ (Lyon 2000: 7).

Despite it primarily being the speed at which technological advancement and globalization are occurring that differentiates modernity from post-modernity,³ this speed nevertheless has had an immense impact on the conditions in which individuals manoeuvre through life. Today, both the technological advancement and globalization have led to a shrinking world, metaphorical speaking, where people are experiencing a far more pluralistic world than just a few generations ago. The increasing welfare, consumerism and pluralism have opened up for a whole new set of existential options, forcing tradition as the previously major identity-forming factor to lose its importance—it is no longer tradition that decides what one should do for a living or what to believe in etc. These questions increasingly become issues that everyone must struggle with individually. The absence of tradition as a guideline raises the necessity for guidance from so-called experts; from someone who can help the individual manoeuvring through the tasks and challenges of everyday

3 Post-modernity is the term preferred by David Lyon and Zygmunt Bauman to categorize the present era. Although the term initially indicated that a mere split between the modern and the present era had occurred, in latter years particularly David Lyon has stressed that a clear-cut dichotomy between two such eras has not been observed. Although preferring the term *post*-modernity he still considers the present period to be a transitional one (for further discussion see Lyon 2000: 37 ff.).

life, where tradition as an explanatory framework is dissolving. Some need help in making the best decision in various situations, others in coping with the ontological uncertainty that the lack of an existential framework can cause.⁴

While institutionalized religion was previously the main framework within which to cope with ontological uncertainty, the multiplicity of choices individuals are encountering in their everyday lives has changed that situation. Under these circumstances people expect a high degree of freedom for self-realization or identity-formation, and it tends to be a difficult task for religion in its 'traditional' form to accommodate these expectations. To quote Zygmunt Bauman: 'Uncertainty postmodern-style begets not the demand for religion; it gestates instead the ever rising demand for identity-experts. Men and women haunted by uncertainty postmodern-style need not preachers telling them about the weakness of man and the insufficiency of human resources. They need reassurance that they *can* do it—and a brief about *how* to do it' (Bauman 1997: 179). In an effort to give religion a last stroke, David Lyon takes a step further than Bauman. He says: '. . .the older religious institutions that were once the conduits of meaning have drifted into decline, with the result that they are often little more than containers for cultural conservations' (Lyon 2000: 91).

Even though the future of religion according to Bauman and Lyon from an emic perspective does not look prosperous, several projects mapping religion in recent years have shown a different picture—one that indicates that institutionalized religion is still alive and well. As an example: religious and/or spiritual activities are practiced in more than 3,000 different places on a regular basis in a small country like Denmark with roughly 5,000,000 citizens. According to the experiences from the Danish Pluralism Project mapping the religious landscape since 2002, one reason why religions are still flourishing, is that the various institutions to a wide extent are willing to change according to new demands and the new societal situation (Qvortrup 2004: 14). This is reflected in both the way in which religions are organized, and in their ritual practices. The organization shows a tendency towards decentralization, where responsibility and authority, previously concentrated on a few

4 This dissolving of tradition is a process that Giddens refers to as *disembedding*, as a "'lifting out" of social relations from local context and their rearticulation across indefinite tracts of time-space' (Giddens 1991: 18).

central leading figures, are now distributed to local institutions. Some movements have even reorganized into networks where each local group has become an autonomous institution.

This tendency toward decentralization has the effect of the individual being placed at the centre of attention. With authority being spread onto local 'shoulders', experts are moving in closer, we could say. People no longer have to travel to exotic destinations for existential guidance, but can receive it at a local branch near their home or through the internet. Often decentralization also increases the possibility for the individual to become more engaged in and thereby exert influence on the activities of the local institution. To sum up, organizational decentralization of religions increases the possibility of the individual to form his or her own identity within these institutions (see Pedersen 2005: 198). The tendency of decentralization is also supported by the Danish scholar of cultural studies Lars Qvortrup. He states: '... the old ideal about the rational, top-down organization is on its way to the theoretical cemetery. In an era where channels of information and communication are of no short supply . . . , there are no reasons to—and will probably for long no longer be possible—to monopolize or centralize leadership' (Qvortrup 1998: 255).

Even if the fundamental difference between modernity and post-modernity according to Lyon primarily lies in the speed in which technological advancement and globalization is occurring, several other scholars point out that the difference is more profound. As an example Bauman accounts for the difference between modern and post-modern man by looking at the two 'types' as travellers. He describes the modern man as a pilgrim and the post-modern as a tourist: 'The point of tourist life is to be on the move, not to arrive; unlike those of their predecessors, the pilgrims, the tourists' successive stopovers are not stations on the road, since there is no goal beckoning at the end of life's travels which could make them into stations' (Bauman 1997: 90). In this near-limitless freedom of existential choice that individuals are facing today, the only real choice one has is to *choose*. Choosing gives the impression of being in control but at the same time requires being constantly on the move, to progress. That is why Bauman makes use of the tourist as a metaphor for post-modern man instead of the pilgrim, as for modern man, for whom arriving at a certain destination is in focus. After this brief stroll through the theoretic differences between modernity and late modernity, let us now turn the attention to theosophy as practiced today.

Theosophy Today—from the Few to the Many

'Blavatskian' Theosophy

Many scholars—among others, as mentioned above, Sellon and Weber—have during recent years emphasized the categorization of the theosophy introduced by Blavatsky as modern. If supporting a definition of modernity which regards the wave of globalization and technological advancement progressing in the second half of the nineteenth century as the starting point for modern society, several characteristics can also be pointed out that support this classification. Parting from a traditionalised, pre-modern society with Christianity holding almost a monopoly on belief and religious power, and into a growing pluralism,⁵ the TS established itself as a syncretistic new religion with a theology that incorporated several of the flourishing worldviews of the period, new as old—apart from inspiration from Christianity it included material from eastern religions such as Buddhism as well as from the rapidly evolving modern sciences. In contrast to pre-modernity, theosophy managed to handle several worldviews instead of only one, as previously had been the case when Christianity was claiming the monopoly on explaining existence. Another characteristic that supports the classification of the 'Blavatskian' theosophy as modern is the fact that the TS was not limited by local or even national borders and interests—as had typically been the case in the era of pre-modernity, where lack of technology and means of transportation reduced the ability to communicate with people outside of one's local environment. Having a thorough knowledge of different cultures worldwide and simultaneously regarding these as being part of the same eschatological evolution, the former leaders of the TS considered it their task to evolve and expand their insight and activities globally—not in the former manner of progressively convert-

5 Exactly when Christianity of any given national denomination formally lost monopoly in the western society differs from country to country. In the case of Denmark Lene Kühle has pointed out, that the Evangelic Lutheran Church lost its monopoly with the Danish Constitution of 1849 which granted freedom of religion in Denmark (Kühle 2004: 87). Although several minor religious groups had been present in Denmark prior to that year, such as Jews, Catholics, Quakers etc., religious diversity rapidly evolved in the decades that followed (Kühle 2004: 110).

ing people of another belief, but in engaging in what they themselves considered enlightening dialogue.⁶ Despite theosophy being a holistic, syncretistic religion formally considering religions worldwide to be different historical and cultural expressions deriving from the same divine source, and that it therefore ought to hold a high degree of tolerance towards different expressions of religion, it was still evident for the majority of theosophists that the theosophical road was *the* one to travel. Theosophy was by theosophists experienced to be more genuine and further evolved than previous/other religions, and therefore a ‘truer’ way or religion/ideology to follow. In that sense the TS can be said to be theologically exclusive. Furthermore, and probably as a result of this exclusiveness, the TS was a distinctly top-down organisation, where the few guided the many. This is a trace which, as mentioned above, can be characterised as a modern one.

Even if the TS in its first years in New York found it difficult to establish itself and to find members, it experienced a massive expansion in the following decades after moving its headquarters to Adyar in India. In the 1920s, which might be called the golden age of the TS, the Society counted more than 40,000 members worldwide.⁷ This expansion was partly due to several charismatic leaders in the first decades—particularly H. P. Blavatsky and the Society’s first two presidents Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907) and Annie Besant (1847–1933)—but also to its holistic theology and the way in which it was organized. Both accommodated the tendencies of that era very well. One could stretch the argument a bit and state that the TS in its first decades was successful in being modern. . .

- 6 That this position is central to the TS is evident in several of the TS’s writings. In *Isis Unveiled*, Blavatsky’s first important work, she states that ‘the many faiths of man have all derived from a single, primitive source’, and that all religions therefore are believed to be based on the same truth. They might appear different but are essentially the same (Campbell 1980: 36). Similarly one of the three declared objects of conduct that guides the TS also expresses this position. Quoting the first of the three which, among other places, is listed on the Society’s homepage, one aim of the Society is: ‘To form a nucleus of the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste or colour’ (www.ts-adyar.org).
- 7 On the homepage of the TS Adyar (www.ts-adyar.org/history) it is stated that the Society at its 50-year jubilee in 1925 worldwide counted 41 national sections, 1,576 lodges and 41,779 members.

As several scholars have documented (see e.g. Campbell 1980, Johnson 1995, Kirkebø 1998), the golden age of the TS was brought to an end around 1930 causing a constant decline in membership thereafter. Several reasons for this decline can be mentioned, but one in particular has been considered by many to be the primary cause: the problem in finding a successor to Besant as president of the TS. The Indian-born Jiddu Krishnamurti (1897–1986) whom Charles Leadbeater (1854–1934), the ideological partner of Besant, more than 20 years earlier had pointed out to be the vehicle of the coming spiritual world teacher and therefore also the natural heir to Besant's position, decided to abdicate in 1929, claiming not to be the one that Besant and Leadbeater stated him to be. When Besant died only a few years later there was nobody with the same charismatic authority to take over. As mentioned above, the membership dropped in the aftermath of this crisis in leadership and the TS has never since experienced the same level of membership as in the 1910s and 1920s.

Liberation and Decentralization

Despite a continuing decrease in membership within the organization of TS Adyar worldwide since the 1920s, other groups/other religions whose theology is fundamentally based on the theology of the TS have experienced expansion during the last 20 to 30 years—as, for example, in Denmark. Here, in contrast to the TS Adyar, such theosophical groups have experienced a fourfold increase in membership from 1980 to 2000 (Pedersen 2007).⁸ In order to find an explanation for this rather massive expansion it needs to be examined in the light of a discrepancy that occurred between the international section of the TS, TS Adyar, and its Danish section—a discrepancy that sparked initially in the 1970s, ending up in 1989 in a final split between the two institutions. Since then several theosophists have claimed that the discrepancy occurred because of a disagreement as to whether the works of the American theosophist Alice Bailey (1880–1949) could be applied in a TS setting. Since Bailey's exclusion from the TS in the 1920s for claiming to be a channel for the spiritual master Djwhal Kuhl, TS Adyar did not support the idea

8 From the 1930s till 1980 the number of members has with only temporary exceptions been between 250 and 350. Since then the number rose close to 1,200 members in the year 2000.

of applying her work, as several members of the Danish section desired during the 1970s. More than merely a disagreement on which sources to include in the 'canon' of the TS, the discrepancy gradually became a question of loyalty. The Danish section had to choose on which side to stand.

But the split that occurred between TS Adyar and the Danish section nonetheless seems to be more than just a result of a discrepancy of loyalty. It can also be seen as a discrepancy in the desire to accommodate the changing social conditions in the 1970s and 80s, and the claim that it was difficult for the TS to 'keep track of the times'. As during the presidency of Besant, the TS was in the 1970s and 1980s still a centralized and internationally oriented organisation, with its Adyar headquarters as the primary seat of authority. This meant that the presidency had and still today under the leadership of Radha Burnier has an extensive influence on how both the national sections and the local groups organize themselves and what activities they offer. Several members of the Danish section found this system too rigid and not corresponding to their interests.⁹ Thus, beneath the discrepancy about loyalty lay a growing desire within the Danish section for a higher degree of local autonomy.

Even though this desire for local autonomy pertained to most aspects of the activities of the Danish section, it was particularly the element of practice that was in focus. Up till then the main activity of the Society had been meetings involving various presentations and debates. The perception was that these meetings would develop the theosophists' spiritual consciousness, gradually turning them into role models for people outside the theosophical milieus. In other words, participating in these meetings would make one a better, more enlightened person, subsequently influencing others in their daily lives and actions. During the 1960s and 1970s an interest arose among the Danish theosophists to take further initiatives to advance the emanatory evolution—others than just creating role models for others to follow. Like several earlier theosophists, they now wanted to include the spiritual masters in their efforts to advance the universal development. Inspired by Alice Bailey and Geoffrey Hodson (1886–1983), another prominent theosophist

9 Among other places expressed in Hardy Bennis' letter to the Danish members of the TS where he informed that he as Secretary General had dissolved the Danish section, and instead invited members of the TS to join the TF (Bennis 1989: 1).

within the TS during the twentieth century, they therefore started experimenting with different forms of meditation. Here, groups of theosophists gathered with the intention to establish contact with these spiritual masters to be able to channel energies to global relief and/or development.¹⁰

Establishing contact with spiritual masters was not a new phenomenon within the TS. Several of the earlier leaders of the Society, like Blavatsky, Leadbeater and Besant, claimed such abilities. It is fair to say that in the early decades these contacts were more or less considered to be required as management tools. Although required of leaders, the ability to contact spiritual masters was in that era considered to be possible only for particularly developed theosophists—the vast majority that did not possess this ability then had to be content with seeking inspiration from these mediators. During the presidency of Besant the expectation that leaders were in contact with and/or guided by spiritual masters changed, however. As a result of previous experiences with claimed contacts to masters resulting in fatal splits within the Society and therefore evidently being a troublesome leadership strategy, or a result of a mere routinization process, as Max Weber could have stated, the TS in the 1910s and 1920s underwent a democratization process. Among other things, this had the effect that contact with spiritual masters after Besant's presidency was no longer an essential requirement for leaders of the TS to possess. Insight into the spiritual world was nevertheless still considered essential. But instead of seeking guidance from spiritual masters through contemporary theosophists, the Society turned to the vast literature of the previous leaders. In other words, contact with spiritual masters was a 'dead enterprise' for the TS after Besant. When the Danish theosophists in the 1970s and 1980s started experimenting with a new meditation practise, they were causing a stir in the fundamental TS dogma. Not only did they reintroduce contacts with masters, they also claimed that anyone was able to establish or at least participate in establishing such contacts. Since the split with the TS Adyar, the meditation practise has developed even further, and is now one of the primary activities of the different theosophical groups in Denmark today.

As mentioned above, the discrepancy between the TS Adyar and the Danish section of the TS had existed for years before the majority of the

10 In *Theosofia*, the monthly journal for the TS Denmark, it appears in the activity plans for the local lodges that these meditation services were initiated in the late 1970s and that the number of them increased during the 1980s.

Danish members in 1989 decided to leave the TS to join the then newly established Teosofisk Forening (in English: Theosophical Association, below referred to as TF). Only a few members of the TS remained, which in practice meant that the TF took over the activities of the TS in Denmark. Apart from going national with this split, the TF in the years that followed experienced a further decentralization, since the local groups also requested a higher degree of autonomy. They also wanted influence over their local organisation, their practice and not least their economy. After some turbulent years trying to find a form in which to work as a common institution, the TF ended up dissolving itself in 2000. Several of the local groups stayed active however and continued cooperating, and over the years other theosophical groups became part of this informal contact between associated groups. The efforts to formalise this loosely organized cooperation resulted in the founding of the so-called Theosophical Network (TN) in 2004.

Modern or Late Modern Theosophy?

Looking back on the differences between the TS and the development of the TF in the light of the characteristics of modernity and late modernity presented in this article, this distinction also seems traceable in the theosophical institutions presented. If the TS in its first decades could be characterized as a modern institution, or as modern theosophy, several things indicate that this might still be the case. The TS is still a centralized organisation based on a theology that can be said to be exclusive—the theosophical worldview alone is accepted as a guideline. Other worldviews or theologies may be considered to be offshoots from the same source as the TS. Nonetheless this has hardly ever led the TS to cooperate with other religions. Compared to the TS, an organization such as the TF and lately the TN seems less modern—or actually more modern, one might say!—for example, because of the network-based structures of these institutions, which, among others, Qvortrup has pointed out as a late modern characteristic. Every local group participates in both the TF and the TN as autonomous partners. At the same time there is among these groups a widely held openness towards other religious communities. This has, for instance, resulted in the founding of the URI (United Religious Initiative) by the TN, in which representatives from Buddhist, Islamic, Christian, theosophical and other denominations are involved.

Apart from the network structure and the willingness to cooperate

with other religions, other late modern characteristics seem traceable, too. Even though documentation on to what extent the so-called theosophists participate in the activities of other religious groups is still missing, interviewing both leaders and 'members' indicates a widespread acceptance of members seeking, as they say, inspiration in the activities of others. In other words, for theosophical groups or networks such as the TF and the TN, the end seems more important than the means. It is not *how* you improve that is important, but *that* you improve! In the light of the theories of Giddens, Bauman and several others on late-modernity, the TF and the TN can thus be said to provide the individual freedom of choice that these scholars point out as being essential for late-modern man—something that the increasing focus on members participating in contacting the spiritual masters seems to support even further.

Concluding Remarks

So, there are several characteristics that indicate that in the case of the TS and the TF/TN at least two ways of understanding and practising theosophy are at hand. Where the TS has so far been and still seems to be a modern institution, the TF and the TN seem to show more signs of being late-modern ones. Before finally determining if there indeed does exist a basis for talking about late-modern theosophy, we first have to consider if two such institutions can exist simultaneously. Or, to use the metaphors of Bauman: is it possible for a 'pilgrimage theosophy' and a 'tourist theosophy' to exist simultaneously? In other words, the question here is whether a categorization such as late-modernity should be considered as a time indicator, where everything in a given era is late-modern, or if it is a 'tool' that can be applied onto institutions that succeed particularly well in responding to current tendencies? In case of the latter, modern and late-modern institution *can* exist simultaneously.

Keeping focus on Bauman, to him the concept seems to work more as a time indicator—particularly in his earlier works. According to him, western societies are post-modern, characterized by a fundamental consumerism, in line with which everyone has to operate. In that sense everyone today is post-modern, living in a period of time where one has no choice but to consume. In other words, to Bauman it is the society as a setting that determines a categorization such as modern or post-modern. On the other hand, Lars Qvortrup points out that such time categories are tools constructed to explain tendencies in a given era. According to him we *can* talk about traditional, modern and in his case

hyper-complex periods where certain characteristics can be pointed out to have a particular influence on how people live their lives in the societies in question. It is important though, to emphasize that these periods are not limited or even closed systems (see Qvortrup 1998: 80). Rather, it may and most often it does happen that institutions, which in their practice and organisation can be characterized as traditional or modern, still exist today in a hyper complex era—although he expects that these types of institution will, in due time, be fewer and fewer. . . In other words, it should theoretically be possible, according to Qvortrup, for both a modern and late-modern theosophy to exist side by side.

On the basis of this short presentation of the development of theosophy in Denmark in recent years, I tend to support this idea! Theosophy as practised today in an institution such as the TS is, in my opinion, still to be considered a modern institution, primarily because the degree of change that has occurred since its golden age under Besant is minor. The TS is still a strongly centralized organisation operating with an exclusive theology *and* its activities do not seem to have accommodated the growing demand of late modern man for personal engagement and freedom of choice; or at least not to the same extent as other theosophical groups or late-modern religions in general have done. Although the basic theosophical dogmas developed by the early theosophical leaders are still essential for groups such as the TF and the TN, these *have* undergone a significant development, or one might even say transformation, in recent years. Both groups have opened up organizationally as well as practically for the individual member or 'user' to participate in the activities that they wish to join and as often as they feel like and have the time for. In other words, in recent years such groups have increasingly offered the possibility for each individual to be a conscious consumer. Theologically these groups are therefore typically not exclusive, but claim to be *just* one 'tool' among several others. In my opinion, groups such as the TF and the TN are therefore late-modern and hence practising late-modern theosophy.

The expansion of theosophical theology in recent decades has, as illustrated in the case of Denmark, been significant and in some milieus has undergone such a transformation that vital nuances will be lacking if theosophy is to be used as a meta-term covering the entire field from the late nineteenth century up to the present. In this article I have outlined two types of theosophy being practiced today, each differently accommodating contemporary societal conditions—one that I have classified as modern theosophy and another, evolving during the 1980s through to the present time, as late modern. When dealing with contem-

porary theosophy, late modern theosophy therefore could and should be a term or classification tool to take into consideration, in order to grasp the diversity of theosophical expressions present. In this article I have argued that late-modern theosophy is a category applicable to certain theosophical activities and institutions today. The questions of how widespread this type of theosophy is, and where the limits as to where the term can be applied, will here remain unanswered. Answers to these and other questions that a new classifying tool triggers will be a task for future research to explore.

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