

Theosophy, the Golden Dawn and the seeds of the New Age movement

1875 to the 1960s and from the 1980s to the present

The nineteenth century brought incredible changes in how people viewed reality. Only a short time before, Copernicus had turned the old world view on its head with the theorem that the Earth revolved around the Sun. Supported by Galileo and further enhanced by the work of Kepler, the old Aristotelian cosmological paradigm of celestial forces gave way to Newton's singular force of gravity.

A theologian, James Usher 1581 - 1656, had, using the life spans of the patriarchs given in the bible, calculated the time of the creation of the Earth: 28th October 4004 BCE. Imagine the shock to the system to then go on to discover great ancient civilisations in the dust of Egypt and Mexico, and then to find the remains of huge lizards, millions of years older than the Earth is thought to be.

It only needed Darwin, at this tumultuous time, to propose evolution through natural selection, and the stage was almost set for the grand finale of Freud. No more disruption to the world order, established for centuries, could have been wreaked in such a relatively short period of time. The cosmos, the creation of the world and the intrinsic nature of man: all now radically different from before. The effects must have been astounding, astonishing and fantastic to live through.

Just prior to Freud, sandwiched between the discoveries of electricity and anaesthesia, the stage was set for a spiritual revolution: Theosophy.

Modern theosophical esotericism began with Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891) usually known as Madame Blavatsky.

Madame Blavatsky was a world traveller who eventually settled in India. She became the focal point, the conduit for the meeting of all of these radical changes to the perceptions of what constituted reality.

Young men in the Queen's service were bringing home mystical religions from the east. Egyptology was in its infancy: these ancient civilisations pouring into the western mind that also held electricity, evolution, gravity and philosophers such as Nietzsche, created a melting pot of ideas that became unified under a single banner which came into existence because it was possible to find threads of common ground between all these differing perspectives. Madame Blavatsky held a vision of universal truth, and all things emanated from this Truth.

The Truth, from this viewpoint, sits at the meeting point where the Hindu reincarnation of returning as a befitting animal, joins with Darwin's evolution to

become the evolution of the Soul, experiencing a succession of human lives along the path to enlightenment and perfection.

In Theosophy, nature does not operate by chance. Every event, past or present, happens because of laws which are part of a universal paradigm. Theosophists hold that everything, living or not, is impregnated with *consciousness*.

Theosophists believe that all human beings are comprised of a Higher Self and a lower, or earthly self; the personality. The Higher Self retains awareness of the true spiritual nature of life, while the personality is often unconscious of its link with divinity. Theosophists believe it is vital to unite the two.

While belief in reincarnation is universal among the different pathways of spirituality, within Theosophy it takes a unique form. Like esoteric Buddhism, from which much of theosophical thought springs, it is taught that beings have attained the human state through a myriad of reincarnations, passing through the mineral, plant and animal stages since the birth of life on earth. However, theosophists that humans cannot be regressed into plant or animal form, except in rare cases. While being human is considered to be the epitome of physical life on earth it is not final stage of a Soul's evolution.

There is a similarity to the Hindu beliefs of Karma, Dharma and cosmology. Theosophy teaches that evil and good are the result of the differentiation of spirit and matter, which co-exist in a cycle of 'becoming'. The Soul journeys into the material realm, taking a path of evolution to reunite with spirit. Everything flows outward from one divine source.

The society believed that religion, philosophy, science, the arts, commerce, industry, and philanthropy are pathways that bring the Self closer to the divine.

As different religions and philosophies were blended and distilled into theosophy, attempts were made to cross reference them wherever possible. A great list of correlations grew, some of which may be familiar to you: for example, that between gem-stones and planets and signs of the zodiac, deities and herbs, aromatherapies with Gods and Goddesses, trees with days of the week, chakras with colours, colours with musical notes, the twenty two cards of the major arcana in the tarot with the twenty two branches of the tree of life of the Kabala.

There were many famous theosophists, it appears that all the great minds of the day found their way to its door:

William Butler Yeats, Annie Besant, Gurdjieff, Blok, Pasternak, Anna Kingsford, WT Stead, Sepharial, Edmund Russell, George W Russell (AE), Constance Wilde (Oscar's wife), Elliot Coues, composer Alexander Scriabin, composer Cyril Scott, L. Frank Baum (wrote Wizard of Oz), Manley P Hall, Jiddu Krishnamurti, painter Bertram Booker, Kadinsky Dane Rudhyar, Ezra Pound, Paul Klee, James Joyce Paul Gauguin, Arnold Schoenberg, Katharine Mansfield, Jean Sibelius, Elvis Presley (honest)¹. DH Lawrence wasn't a member but attended meetings, TS Eliot showed an interest but also was not a member. Einstein owned a copy of Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine*.

The Theosophy Society produced two distinctive and yet related off-shoot societies: The Golden Dawn and The Astrological Lodge of London.

The Golden Dawn:

The original *Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn* was a magical fraternity founded in London in 1888 by Dr. William Wynn Westcott and Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers. The original order ceased to exist under that name in 1903 and continued under at least two spin-off organizations which were known as Matutina and the Alpha et Omega, as well as a renamed faction headed by Arthur Edward Waite.

The Golden Dawn was influenced by freemasonry, theosophy, the occult writing of Eliphas Levi, Papus and medieval grimoire magic. The synthesis of these works is attributed to Mathers, who often taught that evening what he had only learned that afternoon. He was responsible for the establishment of the Rosicrucian inner order of the Golden Dawn, which taught practical magic.

The Golden Dawn was probably the single greatest influence on twentieth-century western occultism. While it existed, it was the focal point of the development of magical thinking in Europe. It is here that the guiding principles of magic and ritual that have since become the core elements of Wicca, Thelema, western mystery schools and other forms of magical spirituality were first formulated.

In its heyday, many cultural celebrities belonged to the Golden Dawn. Some well known members include: Algernon Blackwood, Aleister Crowley, Arthur Edward Waite, Arthur Machen, Charles Williams, Dion Fortune, Evelyn Underhill, Florence Farr, Pamela Colman Smith, William Butler Yeats and more.

After its dissolution, Israel Regardie published a large part of the order's documents, in an act that was a breaking of his vow of secrecy. Before his death he was involved in re-activating the order in the US. Today, numerous organizations claim heirloom to the Golden Dawn tradition. Although the order is generally known as the *Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn*, it originally had two names; *The Esoteric Order of the Golden Dawn* or *The Golden Dawn (in the Outer)*. Two of its most famous members were Aleister Crowley and Dion Fortune.

Aleister Crowley, (12th October 1875 - 1st December 1947), was a British occultist, mystic, writer, poet, astrologer, sexual revolutionary, painter, and social critic.

He was the son of a Plymouth Brethren preacher and heir to a small fortune. Crowley spent most of his adult life seeking out, writing about, and teaching a syncretic form of mysticism.

As a young adult, he had been involved in the Golden Dawn, where he first studied mysticism, and made enemies of William Butler Yeats and Arthur Edward Waite. His friend and former Golden Dawn associate, Allan Bennett, introduced him to the ideas of Buddhism, which would be a continuing influence on his beliefs. In October 1901, after practising raja yoga for some time, he claimed to reach a highly evolved stage of evolution which he called 'dhyana'.

In 1902 Crowley wrote an essay entitled *Berashith*, the first word of Genesis, citing meditation as the path for attaining his goal. The essay describes ceremonial magic as a means of training the 'Will', and of constantly directing one's thoughts to a given object through ritual. In *Science and Buddhism*, Crowley urged an empirical approach to Buddhist teachings.

A mystical experience in Cairo led to his founding of the religious philosophy known as Thelema. Crowley claimed the text *Liber AL vel Legis*, or *The Book of the Law*, was dictated by the spirit of Aiwass. The book's philosophy incongruent; calling in places for peaceful and erotic discovery of magik, and in others for violence and war. Portions of it are in numerical cipher, which Crowley claimed was unable to decode.

He was notorious in his lifetime; frequently attacked in the tabloid press, which labelled him, to his amusement, as being 'The Wickedest Man in the World'. It was claimed he was an avowed atheist, openly kept mistresses, favoured the Germans in World War I and sacrificed hundreds of babies in black magic rituals.

The religious or mystical system which Crowley founded, into which most of his non-fiction writings fall, he named Thelema. The word is the ancient Greek θελημα, 'Will', from the verb εθελω, 'ethel', meaning 'to will' or to wish. Thelema combined a radical form of philosophical libertarianism, akin in some ways to Nietzsche, with a mystical initiatory system derived in part from the Golden Dawn.

Chief among the precepts of Thelema is the sovereignty of the individual *Will*: 'Do what thou *wilt* shall be the whole of the Law', is the primary belief. Crowley's idea of *Will*, however, is not simply the individual's desires or wishes, but also incorporates a sense of the person's destiny or greater purpose: what he termed the *Magikal Will*.

Much of the initiatory system of Thelema is focused on discovering one's true will, purpose, or Higher Self.

The second directive of Thelema is, 'Love is the law, love under *Will*', and Crowley's meaning of love is complex. It is frequently sexual: Crowley's system, like elements of the Golden Dawn before him, sees the dichotomy and tension between the male and female as fundamental to existence, and sexual magik and metaphor form a significant part of Thelemic ritual.

Thelema combines western and eastern traditions. Its western influences include the Golden Dawn, Kabbalah, and elements of Freemasonry. The Eastern; aspects of Yoga, Taoism, and Tantra. Crowley used a scientific method to study spiritual experiences, making the 'Method of Science, the Aim of Religion', the catchphrase of his magazine *The Equinox*. He believed that mystical experiences should be experimented with and critiqued in order to arrive at their underlying religious meaning.

Within Crowley's magical and initiatory system lies, amongst its innermost teachings, a philosophy and series of ritual on sex magik. He frequently expressed views about sex that were radical for his time and published numerous poems and tracts combining pagan religious themes with sexual imagery both heterosexual and homosexual. Sex Magik captures the moment of orgasm as a point upon which to focus the will or magical desire for effects in the non-sexual world.

Within the subject of occultism Crowley wrote widely, penning commentaries on the Tarot (The Book of Thoth), yoga (Book Four), the Kabbalah (Sepher Sephiroth), astrology (The General Principles of Astrology), and numerous other subjects. He also wrote a Thelemic translation of the Tao Te Ching, based on earlier English translations since he knew little or no Chinese. Like the Golden Dawn mystics before him, Crowley sought to comprehend the entire human religious and mystical experience in a single philosophy. He publishes many of his books himself. He baited Christians by naming himself 'To Mega Therion', or 'The Great Beast' of the Book of Revelation. Crowley introduced a number of new terms; he spelled magic, magick or magik, and renamed theurgy 'high-magik' and thaumaturgy 'low-magik', words which are still used by contemporary practitioners.

Dion Fortune, 1891 - 1946, born Violet Mary Firth, was a British magician and author.

She was introduced to the occult by the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, and after its break up she launched her own movement, the Society of the Inner Light. She remained active in the occult for the rest of her life.

She wrote a number of novels and short stories that explored various aspects of magic and mysticism; *The Demon Lover*, *The Winged Bull*, *The Goat-Foot God*, *The Sea Priestess*, and *The Secrets of Dr. Taverner*. Of her non-fictional works on magical subjects, the best remembered are *The Cosmic Doctrine*, a summation of her basic teachings on mysticism, and *The Mystical Qabalah*; an introduction to the Kabbalah from the perspective of Western hermeticism. Though some of her writings may seem dated to contemporary readers, they have the virtue of lucidity, and the avoidance of the deliberate obscurity that characterised many of her forerunners.

Dion Fortune allegedly participated in the *Magical Battle of Britain*;ⁱⁱ British magicians and witches were called to the New Forest during the Battle of Britain to repel, magically, the dark forces of Nazism. The effort involved in casting these spells is said to have contributed to her death shortly after the war ended. The Society for the Inner Light continues to this day.

The Astrological Lodge of London took an altogether different path to that of the Golden Dawn.

Theosophists became interested in Astrology, along with everything else esoteric or mystical. Chief among these was the Astrologer Alan Leo.

One of the key tenets of Theosophy was the reverence of the Solar Logos; the archetypal Sun God: Apollo, Osiris, Arthur, Christ. Given that, to the Theosophists, the Sun represented the God-head, the governing principle, it seemed natural that this would be reflected within their perspective of Astrology. Astrology, and therefore the cosmological paradigm, had up to this point considered the Sun as being no less important than other planetary placements within the chart. The new Solar orientated Astrology was completely different.

Leo placed the Sun, rather than the Earth, at the centre, elevating its importance above all other factors. Personality, rather than temperament, had become the dominant factor of his astrology, enabling Leo to make his revolutionary statement,

'Character is destiny'

Think on that statement: Character, not the fates of classical literature, neither the hand of a deity, nor the workings of divine providence ... *character*.

This places the individual firmly into the centre of their world, implying that it is what we do, how we respond, and what we communicate that will determine our fate. As a fellow theosophical astrologer, Dane Rudhyar was later to comment, 'the person happens to the event, rather than the event happening to the person'ⁱⁱⁱ.

This new orientation had a huge impact on the body of Astrological thought. Alan Leo was a canny businessman and sought to open up Astrology to general accessibility; *Astrology for All*. In the Astrology of Leo, the Sign in which the Sun was placed, as well as its House position and Aspects, was of paramount importance. This initiated the birth of the modern Sun Sign (birth sign) phenomenon. It seems so far removed from its more professional cousins: the Nativity, the Horary, Progressions, Transits etc. This new simplistic model of Astrology led to the first Sun sign column of modern times in 1930, and the media throughout the world has featured one ever since.

There is a high probability that any interest you may have in Astrology was first germinated by contact with a Sun sign article or column.

Alan Leo bought Astrology back into public popularity, albeit with a new guise, and among the Theosophists it would prove to be equally dazzling. So much so that, with their meetings giving more and more time to discussing Astrology it was decided to give it its own branch of Theosophy, and the Astrological Lodge of London was born.

The Lodge developed a teaching arm in the 1940s called the Faculty of Astrological Studies and it is one of the most successful teaching bodies of this ancient art in the world today.

The changing face of Astrology continued its journey through the twentieth century with pioneers in Psychological Astrology. Dane Rudhyar blended the spirituality of Theosophy with the Psychology of Jung, initially calling it Humanistic Astrology and in later years Transpersonal Astrology.

The baton for Astrological progress and rejuvenation was taken up by Dr Liz Greene and Howard Sasportas, who together founded The Centre for Psychological Astrology in 1983. Psychological Astrology flourished throughout the 1980s and 90s, its progress only being countered by a new retrospective insight.

In 1993 Project Hindsight was launched by the astrologers Robert Hand, Robert Zoller and Geoffrey Cornelius.

ⁱ Kindly provided by Kim Farnell, librarian of the Theosophy Society, London 2004.

ⁱⁱ Dione Fortune, *The Magikal Battle of Britain*, SIL Trading Ltd, 1993

ⁱⁱⁱ Howard Sasportas, *The Twelve Houses*, Aquarian Press, 1985, p. 17.