

A black and white photograph of a marble bust of a man with thick, curly hair. The bust is shown in profile, facing right. The hair is carved in a dense, swirling pattern. The man's face is smooth and features a slight smile. The background is a plain, light color.

Theosophy and Theosophism:

Response to a Criticism of Theosophy by René Guénon

Paris: Publications Théosophiques, 1922

by Paul Bertrand

Translated, with an Introduction
by Joscelyn Godwin

FOTA

NEWSLETTER OF THE FRIENDS OF THE THEOSOPHICAL ARCHIVES

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Newsletter of the Friends of the Theosophical Archives

FOUNDER: Leslie Price | EDITOR: Erica Georgiades

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ABOUT FOTA

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Foreword by the Editor of FOTA Newsletter

This Special Edition of FOTA Newsletter, features Joscelyn Godwin's translation —from French to English— and introduction to *Theosophy and Theosophism: Response to a Criticism of Theosophy by René Guénon* written by Paul Bertrand a pseudonym of Georges Méautis.

Godwin is a remarkable multi-lingual researcher of musicology, esotericism and the occult. Among his œuvre we find other papers, assessing Guénon, such as his translation —from Italian to English— of *Agarttha: A Guénonian Manipulation?* By Marco Baistrocchi, published on the *Theosophical History Journal* (see *Theosophical History Occasional Papers 2009*: v. xii), as well as his paper *The Beginnings of Theosophy in France* (1989).

Godwin's translation and introduction to *Theosophy and Theosophism* is a must read for researchers of Theosophical history.

Erica Georgiades



René Guénon, 1925. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ren%C3%A9_Gu%C3%A9non#/media/File:Rene-guenon-1925.jpg

Preface by the Translator

In June 1920, René Guénon (1886-1951) finished writing *Introduction générale à l'étude des doctrines hindoues* (General introduction to the study of Hindu doctrines).¹ It would be his first published book, but by no means his first publication, since he had been writing under various pseudonyms for over a decade. He had high hopes for it. If it could be accepted as a doctoral thesis, it might lead to an academic career, instead of the schoolmastering which he had found almost unbearable.

For all his interest and expertise in Hinduism, Guénon was now moving in a different direction. Having already made the rounds of the Parisian occultist and masonic underworld, he had gravitated to traditional Catholic circles of a neo-Thomist variety, dominated by the celebrity philosopher and convert Jacques Maritain. Whatever his personal commitment, this environment served him well. The book on Hinduism was accepted for publication by Marcel Rivière, also the publisher of a monthly *Revue de philosophie* with Catholic and scholastic leanings. Soon afterwards, Guénon was invited to contribute to the journal by its founder and editor, Révérend Père Peillaube, and that is where his history of the Theosophical Society first saw the light.

Émile Peillaube was a psychologist of international repute, superior of the Séminaire St. Thomas d'Aquin, and professor at the Institut Catholique de Paris. We do not know whether it was he who suggested an attack on Theosophy for Guénon's next project, or whether Guénon already had it in mind. At all events, the work went forward quickly, as Guénon already owned, or was given, a large dossier of rare materials, old spiritualist journals, and a small library of books in French and English. He met Peillaube in October 1920 to formalize the plan. The first installment appeared in the *Revue de philosophie* of January 1921, to be followed by further parts through July. In November 1921 the whole work came out as a book, in a series under the general editorship of Jacques Maritain himself.² Thus one motivation behind *Le Théosophisme, histoire d'une pseudo-religion* (Theosophy, history of a pseudo-religion) was the distaste with which Catholic intellectuals viewed the growing influence of the Theosophical Society in the years following the First World War. Guénon's protest at the end of the book that "we are not associated with any organized campaign; we do not even want to know whether one exists, and we rather doubt it"³ shows an incredible blindness about his backers.

While his work on Theosophy earned him patronage and led to the writing of a companion book debunking spiritualism (*L'erreur spirite*, published by Rivière in 1923), this was not a happy period for Guénon. In March 1921 the university turned down his thesis on Hindu doctrines, so that he failed to

¹ Historical sketch based on Marie-France James, *Esotérisme et Christianisme autour de René Guénon* (Paris: Nouvelles Éditions Latines, 1981), I, p. 194; Jean-Pierre Laurant, *Le sens caché dans l'oeuvre de René Guénon* (Paris: L'Age d'Homme, 1975), pp. 66-67, 265.

² René Guénon, *Le Théosophisme, histoire d'une pseudo-religion* (Paris: Nouvelle Librairie Nationale, 1921). In the present work I cite the posthumous edition which includes all Guénon's supplementary notes as well as his other writings on the subject: *Le Théosophisme, histoire d'une pseudo-religion. Réédition augmentée de textes ultérieurs* (Paris: Éditions Traditionnelles, 1982), hereafter "Théosophisme." There is an English translation: *Theosophy: History of a Pseudo-Religion*, trans. Alvin Moore, Jr., Cecil Bethell, Hubert and Rohini Schiff (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2003).

³ *Théosophisme*, p. 308.

gain his hoped-for *doctorat ès lettres*. The experience soured him for ever after against the academic world, though in retrospect it was his salvation, for he was now free to build his own mental universe and to follow wherever his intuitions led.

The next development deserves to be introduced in Guénon's own words. In 1925 he issued the first of several "augmented editions" of *Le Théosophisme*, which included supplemental information, corrections, and self-defence. There he writes:

In 1922, the Theosophists published a brochure entitled *Théosophie et Théosophisme* and signed Paul Bertrand (the pseudonym of Mr Georges Méautis, professor at the University of Neuchâtel and president of the "Société Suisse de Théosophie"), intended as a reply to our book. In it, the author brought up some supposed errors contained in our first hundred pages, without giving a plausible reason for this arbitrary limit. We have already replied in these notes to most of the criticisms in the brochure in question, which is certainly the most pitiful defence imaginable, of which the Theosophists have no reason to be proud.⁴

The Swiss scholar Georges Méautis (1890-1970) had the sort of career that Guénon briefly aspired to. A graduate of several European universities, he passed his doctorate in 1918 at the University of Neuchâtel, and by 1922 was already a professor there. He held the chair of Greek language and literature from 1930 to 1961. Many prizes and honors came his way, and it does not seem to have hurt his reputation that he was a prominent Theosophist and a declared believer in reincarnation, as befitted his speciality of Pythagoreanism. Méautis contributed frequently to *Le Lotus Bleu*, the journal of the French Theosophical Society, sometimes in the 1920s as "Paul Bertrand" but more usually under his own name, so there was no question of Guénon's "outing" him by revealing his identity.

In the same year as the present brochure, Méautis published a short but dense book, *Recherches sur le Pythagorisme* (Neuchâtel: Paul Attinger, 1922). Its object was to show that there was continuity between the Neo-Pythagoreanism of the post-Christian centuries and the original movement of six centuries before. Méautis reproaches the scholars who swallow any anecdote about Pythagoras, yet ignore the principle of esotericism (p. 26). He emphasizes the practical side of the Pythagorean life, and takes seriously their use of dreams, music, and perfumes as methods of access to alternate realities (pp. 31-37). He analyzes the different parts of the human being (body, soul, spirit, daimon, p. 99) and the misunderstandings of other scholars, drawing parallels from Brahmanism and the *Bhagavad Gita* (p. 100), from Neo-Platonism and Hermetism. Among recent instances of similar ideas, he cites the English writers Algernon Blackwood and Rudyard Kipling (p. 37). While the book is a fine display of classical erudition, to the alert reader it exemplifies the Theosophist's confidence in the continuity of esoteric currents and the concordance between traditions.

The present brochure of 32 pages was published from 4, Square Rapp, the headquarters of the Theosophical Society in Paris, and was thus a quasi-official rejoinder to Guénon's book. Guénon's flippant dismissal of it (belied by his careful "augmentation") was somewhat justified, for as refutations go, Méautis's is not a powerful case. Nor does the closing section, with its appeal to the emotions, sit well with the previous scholarly demolition.

³ *Théosophisme*, p. 321.

Perhaps it was too early for Méautis to spot the essential weakness of Guénon's work, which was to lump together Blavatskian Theosophy—already an entity with distinct evolutionary stages—with later developments by Annie Besant and Charles W. Leadbeater that some call “Neo-Theosophy.” Méautis's strength lies in pointing out Guénon's selective use of available sources; by picking out the most egregious examples, he saps the whole foundation and demonstrates that *Le Théosophisme*, in short, is no “history.” In Leslie Price's words, “Guénon is a case study in the misuse of archival material. He was given a dossier, but employed it not as a historian, weighing up the contents, but as a polemicist.”⁵

That said, historians of the Theosophical movement have had Guénon to thank for alerting them to that dossier, especially concerning the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor and developments in France. Every chapter contains signposts inviting further and more impartial research. Likewise, historians of the Traditionalist movement (if not the Traditionalists themselves) recognize how much Guénon owed to Theosophy. Richard Smoley writes, in a balanced evaluation of Guénon's book:

Ironically, one reason for Guénon's attitude may be that he and Blavatsky were in many ways not so far apart. In fact scholar Mark Sedgwick, whose book *Against the Modern World* is the best introduction to the impact of Guénon's thought, sees Theosophy as one of Guénon's chief influences (Sedgwick, 40–44).⁶ We have already seen that Blavatsky and Guénon agreed about the existence of a universal esoteric tradition. They both made liberal use of Sanskrit terms in expounding their ideas, and they agreed about the dangers of spiritualism, arguing that spiritualistic séances do not enable one to make contact with dead individuals but merely with their astral shells, which have been shucked off as the spirit ascends to higher planes.⁷

To these common grounds we could add the reconciliation of religious differences through their esoteric roots; a cyclical concept of history including a former, more subtle state of matter; the encouragement of Oriental studies as giving access to a wisdom largely lost in the West; the analysis of the multiple states of the human being; and the use of symbolism, especially geometric, to explain metaphysical realities.

I thank Leslie Price for the suggestion of translating Méautis's brochure, and Muriel Pécastaing-Boissière for providing a photocopy.

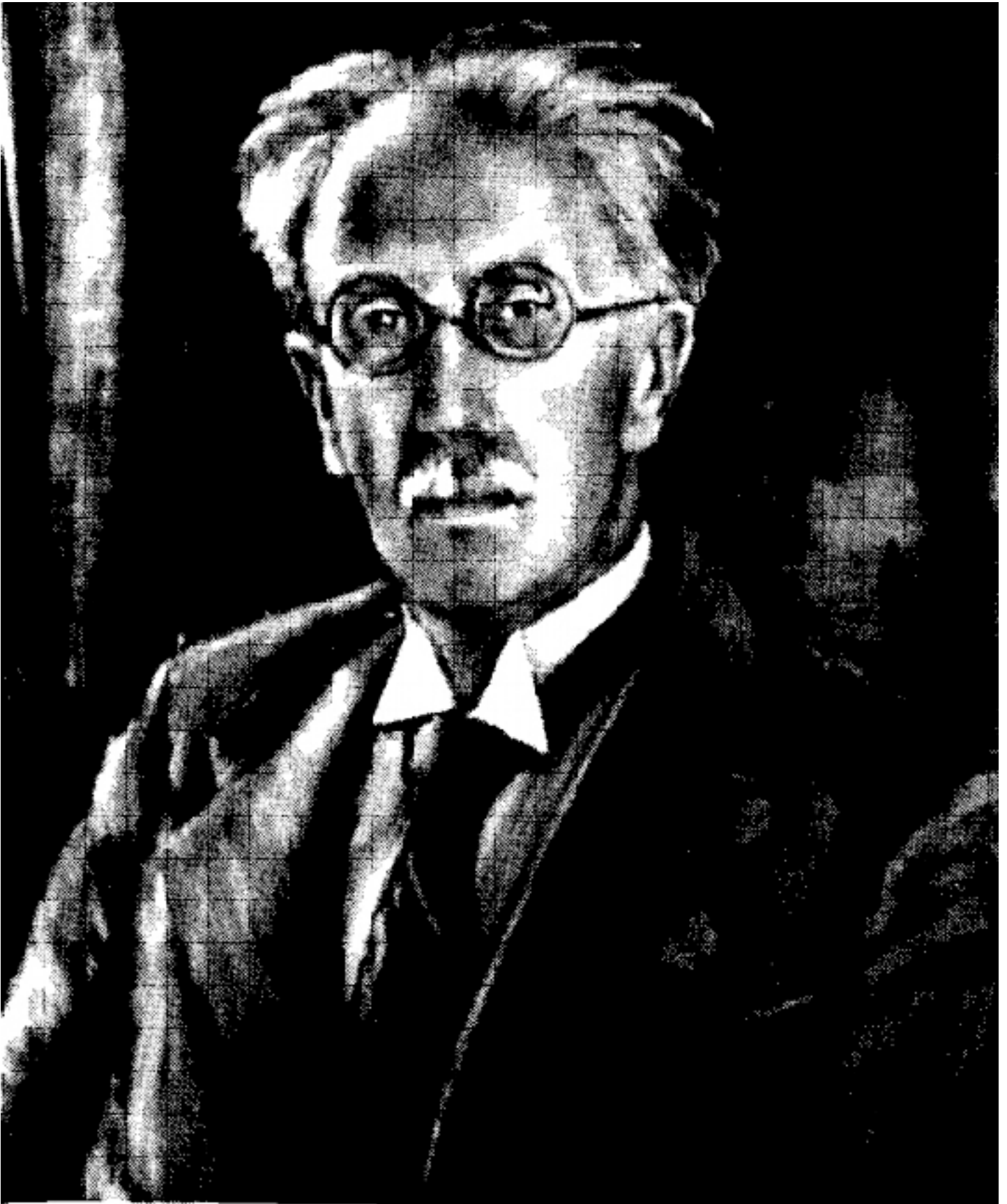
Joscelyn Godwin

⁵ Personal communication, 16 December 2016.

⁶ Reference is to Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁷ Richard Smoley, “Against Blavatsky: René Guénon's Critique of Theosophy,” *Quest Magazine* 98/1 (Winter 2010), pp. 28-34.

Theosophy and Theosophism



Portrait of Georges Méautis by Liliane Méautis, pastel circa 1950.
Image Source: <http://doc.rero.ch/record/20920/files/meautis.pdf>



Any religious movement can be studied in two different ways. One can envisage it from the philosophical point of view, examining its doctrines and theories, seeing what is original in them and how they satisfy the religious needs of an epoch or a people. One can also study it from the historical standpoint alone, collecting and sorting the documents relating to its origins or its progress, criticizing the authenticity or the authority of witnesses. The essential condition for every study of this kind is not necessarily sympathy, for that cannot be made to order, but at least *impartiality*. A work that is partial to one side or the other carries no guarantee of scholarly objectivity. If too favourable to the movement that it purports to study, it becomes more of an apology than a history. If hostile, it is no more than a polemical pamphlet, unworthy of serious attention.

Under the title *le Théosophisme, histoire d'une pseudo-religion* [Theosophism, history of a pseudo-religion], Mr René Guénon has published a volume of over three hundred pages which aims to inform the public about the history of the Theosophical Society. We will say straight away that it contains documentation which, if not very serious, is at least plentiful, and more so than in any of the articles or books against the Theosophical movement published in recent years.

It is extremely regrettable, then, that this book is inspired solely by documents hostile to Theosophy. It quotes them without a moment's doubt about their truthfulness, while systematically passing in silence over everything that could show Theosophy in even the least favourable light.

A few examples will serve to prove this. In order not to try the reader's patience, I have chosen them exclusively from the first hundred pages of the book, though I could easily have multiplied the examples. If there is one important book for the history of the Theosophical Society's beginnings, it must be A. P. Sinnett's *Incidents in the Life of Madame Blavatsky*, translated into French as *la Vie de Madame Blavatsky* (Librairie de l'Art indépendant, 1921). The great value of this book is that it largely reproduces the memoirs of Madame Jelihowsky, Madame Blavatsky's own sister, and gives a host of details and information that would be difficult

to find elsewhere. Guénon must have known the existence of this book, since he cites it, but only once (p. 87),¹ on a question of detail. Yet in twenty pages he refers more than ten times to Solovyov's pamphlet, *A Modern Priestess of Isis*: the work of a man who dishonourably abused the confidence that Madame Blavatsky had placed in him.² Elsewhere (p. 18), intending to characterize Colonel Olcott, the founding President of the Theosophical Society, Guénon states that the title of colonel is easily obtained in the United States, but carefully omits mentioning that after the Civil War, Olcott was commissioned with the denunciation and pursuit of all those who were guilty of misappropriating funds while supplying the armies.³ Such a commission could only have been given to a man whose honour and probity were beyond all suspicion. The way Olcott discharged it is shown in the Assistant Secretary of the United States Treasury's letter to him, cited by Leadbeater (*Occultisme dans la Nature*, II, p. 411), which I cannot resist quoting here:

I wish to say that I have never met with a gentleman intrusted with important duties, of more capacity, rapidity and reliability than have been exhibited by you throughout. More than all, I desire to bear testimony to your entire uprightness and integrity of character, which I am sure have characterized your whole career, and which to my knowledge have never been assailed. That you have thus escaped with no stain on your reputation, when we consider the corruption, audacity and power of the many villains in high position whom you have prosecuted and punished, is a tribute of which you may well be proud, and which no other man occupying a similar position and performing similar services in this country has even achieved.⁴

We can add that when Olcott went to India, he had the exceptional favour of receiving a personal letter of recommendation from the President of the United States to the American ministers and consuls. This is the man of whom Guénon wonders (p. 19): "whether he tries to deceive others, or whether he himself plays the part of dupe," and asserts that "his good faith is certainly subject to caution."

Another example, perhaps even more characteristic of the way Guénon uses documents, is

¹ References to sources and page numbers are as given in the original, to facilitate checking against the French editions used by Méautis. Likewise his titles are retained, e.g. Olcott's *Histoire authentique de la Société Théosophique* for *Old Diary Leaves*. However, the quotations that originate in English are given in their original versions. The translator's additions and notes are indicated as "Tr."

² Guénon responded as follows in the later edition of his book: "We have been reproached for making ample use of what is called 'Solovyov's pamphlet, *A Modern Priestess of Isis*: the work of a man who dishonourably abused the confidence that Madame Blavatsky had placed in him.' We reply that Solovyov was at least a philosopher of some worth, perhaps the only one that Russia has ever had, and that persons who knew him well have assured us that his intellectual probity was above all suspicion. His very Slavic tendency towards a certain mysticism has sometimes been held against him, but one would certainly not be supported from the Theosophical side in making that reproach." *Théosophisme*, pp. 319-20. Guénon mistakenly conflated Vsevolod Sergueyevich Solovyov (also transliterated Solovyoff, Soloviof, Solovieff, etc., 1849-1903), novelist, poet, and author of *A Modern Priestess of Isis* (trans. Walter Leaf, London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1895), with his more famous brother, the philosopher Vladimir Sergueyevich Solovyov (1853-1900) who wrote a favourable review of Blavatsky's *Key to Theosophy* for the *Russkoye Obozreniye* (Russian Review), vol. IV, August, 1890. See Boris de Zirkoff's annotations in *Blavatsky: Collected Writings* (Wheaton: Theosophical Publishing House, 1966-1991), vol. VI, p. 446; vol. VII, p. 334n.Tr.

³ In a note to the second edition of *Théosophisme*, Guénon acknowledges this omission, but adds that "if the Theosophists find the function of a denunciator 'honourable,' we regret not being of the same opinion on this point." *Théosophisme*, p. 312. Tr.

⁴ C. W. Leadbeater *Theosophical Talks at Adyar*, second series (Chicago: Rajput Press, 1911), pp. 386-87. Tr.

on p. 80. Wanting to demonstrate Madame Blavatsky's power of fascination, this is how he quotes a passage from Olcott's *Old Diary Leaves*:

No one fascinated better than she when she wanted to, and she wanted to when she desired to draw persons into her public work. Then she made herself caressing in tone and manners, giving the person to feel that she regarded her⁵ as her best, if not her only friend. . . I could not say that she was loyal. . . We were for her, I believe, nothing more than pawns in a game of chess, for she had no sincere friendship.⁶

Guénon does not cite the page from which he has taken this passage, which does not simplify the search through *Old Diary Leaves*' three volumes of over 400 pages. It is in fact in the first volume of the French translation (*Histoire authentique de la Société Théosophique*, I, p. 440), and I think is worth reproducing despite its length:

H.P.B. made numberless friends, but often lost them again and saw them turned into personal enemies. No one could be more fascinating than she when she chose, and she chose it when she wanted to draw persons to her public work. She would be caressing in tone and manner, and make the person feel that she regarded him as her best, if not her only friend. She would even write in the same tone and I think I could name a number of women who hold her letters saying that they are to be her successors in the T.S. and twice as many men whom she declared her "only real friends and accepted chélas." I have a number of such certificates, and used to think them treasures until, after comparing notes with third parties, I found that they had been similarly encouraged, and I saw that all her eulogies were valueless. With ordinary persons like myself and her other intimate associates, I should not say she was either loyal or staunch. We were to her, I believe, nothing more than pawns in a game of chess, for whom she had no heart-deep love.⁷ She repeated to me the secrets of people of both sexes—even the most compromising ones—that had been confided to her, and she treated mine, such as they are, I am convinced, in the same fashion. But she was loyal to the last degree to her aunt, her other relatives, and to the Masters; for whose work she would have sacrificed not only one, but twenty lives, and calmly seen the whole human race consumed with fire, if needs be.⁸

As one can see, by only quoting sentences or parts of them, Guénon has completely denatured the meaning of the passage as found in Colonel Olcott's volume.⁹

⁵ The reference in Guénon's French version is to *personne*, which is a feminine noun, hence obliges the following pronoun to be feminine, too. The author however translates "person" as *quelqu'un*, which incurs the masculine pronoun, as in the original English. In translating this extract I have kept as closely as possible to Guénon's version of the English text, whose original appears below. Tr.

⁶ In original: *amitié sincère*. Tr.

⁷ In original: *profonde affection*. Tr.

⁸ H. S. Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves*, first series (Adyar: Theosophical Publishing House, 1941), pp. 462-63. Tr.

⁹ Guénon responded in the augmented edition of his book as follows: "[Bertrand's book] contains 'rectifications' of the clumsiest kind, especially concerning the passage from *Old Diary Leaves* which we have cited here. The claim is that we 'completely denatured' the sense of this passage, which is restored as follows, from the French translation in three volumes published under the title *Histoire authentique de la Société Théosophique*. [the relevant passage follows, with minor differences both from Guénon's and the author's French versions. Tr.] This more complete text contains phrases that are even harder on Madame Blavatsky than the ones we reproduced from a partial translation that appeared in the *Lotus Bleu!*" *Théosophisme*, pp. 321-22. Tr.

*

From what we have seen, we can already tell what method Guénon is using: only citing documents that can arouse in the reader's mind the idea that he wants to give of the Theosophical Society. And what is this idea? That its directors are either crooks who stop at no fraud or hoax, or else the playthings of mysterious unknown beings; that the Theosophists themselves are either victims of suggestion, or extraordinarily credulous. There is nothing new in such a theory. It goes straight back to the Encyclopedists, who also tried to explain religious phenomena by "priestly deceit." I do not think it necessary to point out the shortcomings of such an explanation. The nineteenth century's discoveries have shown that the religious sentiment is something more complex, more subtle, and also more lofty than anything Voltaire and Diderot could imagine.

In order to make more plausible the picture that Guénon seeks to draw of the Theosophical Society's evolution, he endeavours to show that it was much more the result of chance, or of the various influences playing on Madame Blavatsky, than of a clearly defined will. If there are any *facts* going against his theory, Guénon is content not to mention them. Thus he asserts (p. 43) that Madame Blavatsky did not begin talking about the existence of the Tibetan Mahatmas until after arriving in India. Before that she had only been under the influence of "spirit guides" like those of mediums (pp. 21, 27). Yet in her famous reply to Hiraf, published in the *Spiritual Scientist* in July 1875, *hence prior to the foundation of the Theosophical Society*, Madame Blavatsky affirmed the existence "from her personal knowledge" of occult schools in India, Asia Minor, and other lands. The true Cabala, she says, "is in possession, as I said before, of but a few oriental philosophers; where they are, who they are, is more than is given to me to reveal... The only thing I can say is that such a body exists, and that the location of their Brotherhoods will never be revealed to other countries, until the day when Humanity shall awake" (Cited by Olcott, *Histoire de la Soc., Théos.* I, p. 112; see also p. 64).¹⁰ Moreover, in a letter published in the *Spiritual Scientist* and quoted by Olcott (*Histoire* I, p. 323), J. O. Sullivan, who visited H. P. Blavatsky long before she left for India, already speaks of an adept from Tibet.¹¹ Colonel Olcott himself speaks twice in his first volume of an Adept who, according to Guénon's theory, should not have appeared until after the arrival in India (pp. 236, 361). Olcott even cites a fragment of a letter received on June 22, 1875, which contains these words: "I am not a disembodied

¹⁰ As explained in note 1, references in parentheses are the author's. The source of this quotation is Blavatsky: *Collected Writings*, vol. 1 (Wheaton: Theosophical Publishing House, 1977), p. 112. Tr.

¹¹ "I believe (though not quite certain) that her idea, and Olcott's is that these phenomena are produced in some way by a great brother 'adept' in Thibet." *Old Diary Leaves*, first series, p. 337. Quotation given as a footnote in the original. Tr.

spirit, Brother, I am a living man; gifted with such powers by our Lodge as are in store for yourself some day.”¹² One can see how unfounded is the hypothesis of Guénon, who would make H.P.B. a medium like any other, “controlled” by “spirit guides” and not mentioning Mahatmas until after her arrival in India.

All the testimonies I have cited are easily accessible. A responsible historian, writing a serious work, could not have passed them over in silence, whereas Guénon makes not the slightest allusion to them.

Even more characteristic of his method is the question of Madame Blavatsky’s various travels before her departure for America in 1873. Guénon is extremely firm in this regard. In his opinion, Madame Blavatsky had never been to India before 1878, and her initiation in Tibet is a “pure fable” (p. 27). Guénon even believes that he has proof of this. He cites (p. 32) a letter of Colonel Olcott which contains these words: “This lady (it’s a question of a certain Madame Thompson) offers (Madame Blavatsky) money and everything if she will only go to India and give her a chance to study and see for herself.”¹³ Anyone can see, without being expert in the methods of historical criticism, that Olcott is reproducing Madame Thompson’s idea, not that of Madame Blavatsky. This does not prevent Guénon from writing: “Madame B. had never been to India before 1878; this time we have the formal proof of it.” Yet Olcott (*Hist. Soc. Théos.* I, p. 113) cites the letter from a woman who certified to him that already in 1873, she had heard Madame Blavatsky assure her that she had been in Tibet. The following passage in the same volume (p. 255) reveals even more strongly how much trust Guénon’s assertions deserve:

How easy it would have been for her, for example, to have told Mr Sinnett that, when trying to enter Tibet in 1854, *vià* Bhutan or Nepál, she was turned back by Capt. (now Maj.-Genl.) Murray, the military commander of that part of the frontier, and kept in his house in his wife’s company a whole month. Yet she never did, nor did any of her friends ever hear of the circumstance until Mr Edge and I got the story from Major-General Murray himself, on the 3rd March last, in the train between Nalhati and Calcutta, and I had printed it.¹⁴

Here is a formal evidence that neither Mr Edge nor General Murray have ever denied. It is a pity that Guénon never made use of it. True, it does fit the idea that he wanted to give of Madame Blavatsky.

¹² *Old Diary Leaves*, first series, p. 237. Tr.

¹³ Parentheses inserted by the author in his reproduction of Guénon’s already adapted quotation. Source of letter: Letter no. 8 in W. Stainton Moses, “The Early Story of the Theosophical Society,” *Light*, July 9, 1892, pp. 330-32; July 23, 1892, pp. 354-57. Tr.

¹⁴ *Old Diary Leaves*, first series, p. 265. Tr.

I fear that I would overtax the reader's patience if I listed all the cases where Guénon omitted to mention important documents because they went against his thesis. Thus he affirms (p. 46) that the investigation of Hodgson, the emissary of the Society for Psychological Research, "amply establishes" that the Masters' letters were faked by Madame Blavatsky with Damodar as accomplice. Guénon does not once mention Madame Besant's little work *H. P. Blavatsky et les Maîtres de la Sagesse* (Paris, 1908), which is the clearest, most illuminating, and most convincing refutation of the Hodgson Report. No more does he cite the *Report on the Result of an Investigation into the Charges against Madame Blavatsky*¹⁵ or Hartmann's *Report of Observations*.¹⁶ Guénon speaks (p. 63) of the correspondence between Madame Blavatsky and the Coulombs, "whose authenticity is impossible to deny." He does not point out that A. O. Hume, who at the time was alienated from Madame Blavatsky but motivated by an admirable feeling for justice, wrote to the *Calcutta Statesman* to confirm that Madame Blavatsky could not have written those letters (letter reproduced in A. Besant, *H.P.B. et les Maîtres de la Sagesse*, p. 80). Guénon also cites (p. 64) the opinion of English experts who affirmed that the Masters' letters were the work of Damodar and H.P.B., while passing in silence over another handwriting expert who stated under oath that her handwriting had nothing in common with that of the Masters (document reproduced in Sinnett, *la Vie de Madame Blavatsky*, p. 199). Guénon also states, relying on a certain Cowes,¹⁷ that Baron de Palm's manuscripts served Madame Blavatsky for writing *Isis Unveiled*. He fails to mention that the editor of the very newspaper that carried Cowes' accusation expressed his regret for having published it, and declared that it was unfounded. (Olcott, *Histoire*, p. 161.) As for the fact itself, here is a letter that I believe will resolve the question once and for all (Olcott, *Histoire*, p. 162):

Consulate of the Argentine Republic, Augsburg, May 16, 1877.

No. 1130.

To William Q. Judge,

Attorney and Counsellor at Law,

71 Broadway, New York.

From your letter of the 7th ult., I gather that Baron Josef Heinrich Ludwig von Palm died in New York in the month of May, 1876.

¹⁵ Published Madras: Theosophical Society, 1885. Tr.

¹⁶ Franz Hartmann, *Report of Observations Made During a Nine Months' Stay at the Headquarters of the Theosophical Society at Adyar (Madras), India* (The Scottish Press and Graves Cookson and Co. 1884). Tr.

¹⁷ I.e. Dr. Elliott Coues. See *Old Diary Leaves*, first series, p. 162. Tr.

The undersigned, Consul Max Obermayer (late United States Consul at Augsburg from 1866 to 1873), happens by chance to be in a position to give you the information desired regarding the deceased in a thoroughly exhaustive manner, and is very willing to do so.

Baron von Palm was in his youth an officer in the Bavarian army, but was forced on account of his many shady transactions and debts to leave the service. He then betook himself to other parts of Germany, but could not remain long anywhere, because his great frivolity, his love of good living and his debaucheries constantly led him to incur fresh debts and involve himself in shady transactions; so that he was even condemned by the courts and sent to jail.

After it became impossible for him to remain longer in Germany, he went to Switzerland to enter on a new course of swindling, and he actually succeeded, by false promises and misrepresentations, in persuading the owner of Schloss (Castle) 'Wartensee' to sell him that property, which he forthwith occupied. His stay there, however, was short; not only was he unable to raise the purchase money, but he could not even pay the taxes, and in consequence the property was sold for the account of the creditors and Palm fled to America.

Whether or not he supported himself in America by frauds is not known here.

Of property in Europe he possesses not *one cent's* worth; all that may be found among his effects to that purport is a *pure swindle*.

The only property on which he had any claim whatever, before he went to America, was a share in the Knebelisher inheritance in Trieste. When he left he had already taken much trouble to obtain immediate payment of this amount, but in vain.

Towards the end of the year 1869, Palm addressed himself to the undersigned in his then capacity of United States Consul, with the request to arrange for the payment to him of his share in the Knebelisher estate mentioned above.

This request was at once complied with, and, as appears from the enclosed copy of his receipt, the sum of 1,068 Thalers $\frac{4}{6}$ = \$3247.53 was placed at Palm's disposal by a consular letter of Jan. 21, 1870, and he availed himself thereof through the banking house of Greenbaum Bros. & Co., as appears from his letter to the consulate of Feb. 14, 1870.

I can only repeat that Palm possessed in Europe neither a single dollar in money, nor a single foot of ground, and that everything which may be found among his papers to the contrary is based solely upon fraudulent representation.

Palm's only known relatives are the two Baroness Van T___ domiciled in Augsburg, both families in every way most respectable, and to whom Palm in the last year of his residence in Europe caused much scandal and annoyance.

The above gives all that is to be known about the deceased Palm in the most exhaustive manner, and probably more even than you may have expected.

(Signed) Max Obermayer.

Consul Argentine Republic.¹⁸

One can see how likely it is that this German officer, cashiered from the army, swamped in debt and something of a crook, could have written a work as original and powerful, for all its unevenness, as *Isis Unveiled*.¹⁹ It is regrettable that a writer as upright and sincere as Maeterlinck should have repeated this accusation in his *Grand Secret*—probably following Papus—without taking the trouble to verify it. Guénon makes no mention of the official declaration that I have transcribed, which is both important and easily accessible.

As one can see from the preceding examples, chosen only from the first hundred pages of Guénon's book, it could never pass as an impartial and complete history of the Theosophical movement. It is strange that an author privileged to have at his disposal those minor spiritualist papers that are almost unfindable today, and who assures us that his only motive for taking up the pen is that "there are no rights higher than truth" (p. 307),²⁰ should have omitted to cite these important and easily accessible documents because they could give a favourable impression of Theosophy.

There are many other facts that could show how Guénon's documentation, which seems so sure and precise, is really a *trompe-l'oeil*. We have seen how he works: choosing among the facts at his disposal those which serve the idea that he has formed *a priori* of the genesis of the Theosophical Society, and systematically ignoring all that does not fit his construct. Thus for him, John King, who was involved with the beginnings of the Society, is a living man who, with Henry de Morgan, is supposed to have "commissioned Madame Blavatsky and prepared her meeting with Olcott" (p. 20). However, we read in Olcott's *Histoire* (p. 20): "I thought it a veritable John King then. . . . But now. . . . I am persuaded that 'John King' was a humbugging elemental, worked by her like a marionette and used as a help towards my education."²¹ As for Morgan, Olcott adds when speaking of John King: "Later on, it said it was the earth-haunting soul of Sir Henry Morgan, the famous buccaneer."²² Another passage (*Histoire*, pp. 431-432) shows quite obviously what John King and de Morgan were, but Guénon prefers to see them as mysterious

¹⁸ *Old Diary Leaves*, first series, pp. 163-65. Tr.

¹⁹ In the augmented edition of *Théosophisme*, Guénon writes: "Mr Paul Bertrand declares that 'it is improbable that this German officer... could have written a work as original and powerful, for all its unevenness, as *Isis Unveiled*.'" We never said anything of the sort. On the contrary, we have always said that this work may well have been written by Madame Blavatsky, with the collaboration of Olcott and doubtless others, and it was merely a question of the sources which she used to compile it. Has our contradictor misread us so badly, or should we suspect his good faith?" *Théosophisme*, p. 324. Tr.

²⁰ Echoing the Theosophical motto "There is no religion higher than truth." Tr.

²¹ *Old Diary Leaves*, first series, p. 11. Tr.

²² *Old Diary Leaves*, first series, pp. 10-11. Tr.

unknowns. Likewise, he makes it clear that he thinks that John King is the demon behind the Theosophical Society, as well as being the cause of the spiritualist phenomena.²³

There is the same odd confusion (p. 46) when Guénon, speaking of the Mahatmas, states: “the very word ‘Mahatma’ has never had the meaning in Sanskrit that she (Madame Blavatsky) attributes to it, because what this word really denotes is a metaphysical principle, and it cannot be applied to human beings.” And yet the *Revue de Paris* on April 1, 1922 devoted an article to “Mahatma Gandhi,” in which we read among other things (p. 642) “Gandhi is the Mahatma, the great inspired one, believed to possess extraordinary powers and to command the forces of nature.” We see that in modern India this word can perfectly well apply to a person, and does not just refer to a metaphysical principle.

Thus when it is possible to verify Guénon’s documentation, we can see how little real value it has, for all its apparent certainty. And how many passages we could cite in which he is content to throw out an affirmation or an accusation without any supporting fact or reference, making verification impossible!²⁴

In truth, if Guénon took the trouble to collect his materials himself, we must admit that his choice was neither sound nor impartial. If as he says in his conclusion, thanks to “somewhat exceptional circumstances” he had at his disposal documents that some organization had patiently collected, we cannot say that he rose to the task and fulfilled the hopes placed in him.

But these omissions and unsourced affirmations, serious as they may be, are as nothing beside another passage that, I believe, demonstrates the level of trust that his book deserves. In the chapter where he studies Madame Blavatsky’s sources, Guénon writes (p. 95): “We will add a word that especially concerns the origin of the Tibetan texts, supposedly very secret, that Madame Blavatsky has cited in her works, notably the famous *Stanzas of Dzyan* incorporated into *The Secret Doctrine*. These texts contain many passages that are manifestly ‘interpolated’ or even invented from scratch, and others that have at least been ‘arranged’ to fit Theosophical notions. As for their authentic portions, they are simply borrowed from a translation of fragments of the *Kandjur* and *Tandjur* published in 1836 in the twentieth volume of the *Calcutta Asiatic Researches* by Alexandre Csoma de Körös.”²⁵

No one could overlook the gravity of the accusation. If Madame Blavatsky were really content to borrow the *Stanzas of Dzyan*, which she always maintained were an esoteric work

²³ *Théosophisme*, p. 280. “We do not believe that the Theosophists, nor the occultists and spiritualists, are up to succeeding completely in such an enterprise” (preparing the coming of the Antichrist), “but is there not something equally dreadful behind all these movements, of which their very leaders may be unaware, yet they in turn are nothing but its simple instruments?”

On p. 129, after speaking of the dangers of mediumism and the obsession by certain entities, against which Sinnett warns his readers, Guénon adds “These ‘beings floating in the atmosphere’ are above all, for the author, ‘astral shells,’ but they could well be quite another thing in reality: one needs to know enough about the true nature of the ‘powers of the air’.”

²⁴ It is piquant to record, for example, that the idea of replacing the term *Théosophie* by *Théosophiste* to designate the members of the Theosophical Society, an idea that Guénon develops at the start of his book, was already to be found in an article by Commandant Courmes in the *Lotus Bleu*, 1894-1895, p. 335, under the title “Théosophie et Théosophiste.” Curiously, they both bring up similar arguments, such as the use of the term “Theosophist” in English. Guénon does not cite this article, which he may very well not have known. It is still piquant to see a fierce opponent of Theosophy taking up the ideas of the Theosophists themselves.

²⁵ *Théosophisme*, p. 97. Tr.

of the greatest antiquity, from a volume published in 1836, one could well find it strange that she had never indicated where she took these texts from. The *Asiatic Researches* of Calcutta are a very rare series, owned by very few European libraries. However, they are to be found in the Musée Guimet (no. 7060). Moreover, since the French translation of Csoma's work to which Guénon alludes has been published in volume II of the *Annales du Musée Guimet* (1881), pages 131-573, by Léon Feer, it is quite easy to verify. Readers who wish to take the trouble to do so may assure themselves that Guénon's affirmation is entirely and materially false. Csoma's work consists almost solely of analyses, not of translations, and none of the latter are concordant with the text of the *Stanzas of Dzyan* or *The Voice of the Silence*.

This is not the sole flagrant inexactitude that we could produce; there are more. On p. 20, note 1, Guénon states "that he was unable to have any confirmation of Madame Blavatsky's second marriage," whereas the account of this marriage fills a whole chapter of Olcott's *Histoire* (I, p. 58), and that author affirms that the relevant papers are in his possession.

Another fact of the same type. We saw above that Guénon accepted without checking or verification the statement that *Isis Unveiled* was composed with the help of Baron de Palm's manuscripts, and we showed how unlikely this hypothesis was, given the man's character and life. Guénon assures us (p. 93) that Baron de Palm bequeathed his library to the Theosophical Society, and also writes (p. 86): "Sinnett claimed that apart from his library, he left nothing." If one turns to *Vie de Mme Blavatsky*, p. 121, one will see that there was no question of a library.²⁶

It was not our intention to undertake a refutation of Guénon's whole work. That would be to grant his book an importance and a value which it does not deserve. We have simply wished to show the impartial reader that he would be mistaken to pass judgment on the Theosophical movement after reading that book alone, without seeking to complete his knowledge by reading others, such as Olcott's *Histoire de la Société Théosophique* or Sinnett's *Vie de Madame Blavatsky*, which we have often mentioned; also Madame Besant's *Vers le Temple* or *La Sagesse Antique*, or Mabel Collins' *la Lumière sur le Sentier*. We also wished to show that Guénon's work is incomplete and biased, and does not deserve the name of "history" because it lacks objective and scholarly methods as well as the secure and clear-viewed criticism that one has a right to expect from a work of that type.

²⁶ This is correct; see A. P. Sinnett, *Incidents in the Life of Madame Blavatsky* (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1913), p. 156. However, Guénon also cites Elliott Coues' letter to the *New York Sun*, 20 July 1890, as his source for Palm's reputed library, and in the augmented edition adds: "...it seems that the properties mentione^d in his will were nonexistent, but whatever the Theosophists say, that didn't prevent Madame Blavatsky from being able to use the contents of his library, as Dr Coues has affirmed, which is the only thing that matters here." *Theosophisme*, p. 324. Tr.

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Besides, if the Theosophical movement were what Guénon claims it to be, it would not have enrolled more than 40,000 members in every part of the world, nor given so many souls the strength and light that they could not find elsewhere; it would not have given them a clearer answer to the problems of human destiny. Guénon, in fact, has done for the Theosophical movement what a malicious historian might have done for the Catholic Church if he had only recounted the cruelties of the Inquisition, studied the Massacre of Saint Bartholomew's Day in minutest detail, and completely ignored the magnificent surge of religious faith that built the cathedrals, caused the Crusades, and sent missionaries to evangelize the world.

I can scarcely summarize in a few lines the essentials of Theosophical theories, and prefer for the reader to consult the works mentioned above. Suffice it to say that the fundamental object of the Theosophical Society is "To form a nucleus of the brotherhood of humanity, without distinction of sex, race, rank, or creed." It is this ideal of understanding, of broad tolerance, of sympathy for all that lives, that constitutes the basis of Theosophy. It teaches that each religion is an expression of the divine life, more or less perfect in accordance with the race and the evolutionary point attained. To comprehend the grandeur, the beauty of all that lives, to feel the divine in everything: such is the principal goal of Theosophy.

Obviously such a conception can expect no sympathy from those who claim to possess the plenary, entire, and definitive revelation of divine truth, and who disdainfully or sometimes bitterly reproach those who do not think exactly like them for their "errors." The conception of those who seek to understand what is best in every race, who believe that the commonality of races, with all their religious and artistic manifestations, is summoned to form a harmony (like the harmony of the spheres that the Pythagoreans heard), and that the history of humanity, like that of each human soul in the course of its reincarnations, is the history of spirit evolving in matter—all this is opposed to the conception of an omniscient, transcendent God creating a man for a test that, in his omniscience, he knows the man will fail, and making the whole human race responsible for this unique fault.

Need we add that the daily progress of historical sciences, through which we learn to better know and appreciate the civilizations of the past, fortifies the Theosophical thesis? The doctrine of reincarnation and karma far better satisfies the need for justice which lies at the base of every heart than the hypothesis that a brief human life is followed by an eternal heaven or hell. An eternity of punishments or rewards would prevent any further progress, make everything depend on one's last moment, and put the hooligan and the elite soul on the same footing. "Be ye perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect." How could we understand that marvellous saying if a single life were all we were granted?

The belief in the evolution of the individual and of the race, which is what Theosophy holds, imposes certain duties on man. He must “turn the wheel,” as a great Instructor has said, by lending all his strength to the evolution of the human race, favouring all the attempts and efforts that seek to bring more brotherhood, more solidarity among classes and races.

This is why one finds Theosophists in so many movements to further justice, to raise and to educate the lower classes. Mr Guénon finds these attempts ridiculous and stigmatizes them as “moralism.” If moralism truly consists in wanting to raise the intellectual and moral level of humanity, and to make every man conscious of his solidarity and duties towards others, because all have a spark of the divine life in them, then yes, the Theosophists are “moralists.” But who would dare to reproach them for it? Does one reproach those who struggle against alcoholism? Is that not one of the worst curses afflicting France? Does one reproach those who work for the League of Nations? Isn’t the lack of understanding between races the constant cause of wars, and can’t one hope that the Theosophists’ ideal of understanding and collaboration should become that of all men? Certainly ending wars will not end the effort, the struggle against evil; the goal of the Theosophical Society is not a static well-being, a sort of earthly paradise, because the Theosophist knows that in all domains, as one rises new horizons open up before one. “You will enter the light, but you will never touch the flame,” says *Light on the Path*, one of the most beautiful books ever given to men.²⁷

Theosophy has brought many beings a new life: the man of action finds motives there for acting more nobly; the intellectual finds a system that reconciles his religious needs with the rigorous demands of the scientific method; the religious man sees before him an ideal of abnegation and love which lifts him above himself and teaches him to realize a higher life. This is what Theosophy has brought to a certain number of souls. May these few lines teach those who know little of it, or who think evil of it, to judge it with more equity.

Paul Bertrand.

²⁷ M. C., *Light on the Path* (n.p: The Yogi Publication Society, n.d.; first ed. 1885), p. 8. Tr.





ALCHEMIA