

JOHN ALGEO

The Three Truths of the White Lotus

WE live in an age of science and technology. Within our lifetime, we have seen scientific and technological progress of a kind and of an intensity never witnessed before on our planet. We have sent space-probes to the boundary of the solar system and beyond. We have split the atom and thereby unleashed forces of unimaginable power and danger. We have developed computers that can do in a few seconds what would otherwise take years of labour. We have broken the genetic code within the protein molecule and so can create new forms of life. We have made ourselves, it would seem, the lords of the universe.

Yet with all this progress, we have failed to deal with some of the most difficult questions a human being can ask. How did we, who have made so many discoveries and inventions, come to be here, midway between the immense smallness in the heart of an atom and the infinite vastness of interstellar space? What can we do to assure our survival and continued development on this green earth among the potentially devastating powers to which we hold the key? What is our future, as individuals and as a species? And do these questions make any

difference to the universe around us? Have we any importance beyond our own self-esteem? Stephen Crane, an American writer, wrote a poem that raises that last question:

A man said to the universe:

'Sir, I exist!'

'However,' replied the universe,

'The fact has not created in me

A sense of obligation!'

Why are we here? where did we come from? where are we going? and how do we set about it?

Our marvellous scientific and technological progress has no answers to these questions, and so some contemporary thinkers have dismissed the questions as unimportant or unreal. But they are of vital, eternal importance. Our simple low-technology ancestors asked these same questions—and answered them. Can they have known something that we have forgotten?

The people of older times were not as primitive as we sometimes think they were. The skyscrapers that are characteristic of modern cities are possible only because the lift was invented; yet lifts were used more than

Dr John Algeo, a lecturer in English at the University of Georgia, is a member of the National Education Committee of the Theosophical Society in America and editor of the journal, *American Speech*.

two thousand years ago by the Romans. We associate the theory of evolution with the nineteenth-century scientist, Charles Darwin, but the idea of evolution was common centuries ago in the East. An awareness of time and the measurement of its passing is often thought to be a hallmark of modern society, but the ancient inhabitants of Middle America developed a calendar that was simpler, more regular, and more accurate than any known to European civilizations. They used it to measure immensely long cycles, both past and future, at a time when some learned men in Europe still believed that the world was less than six thousand years old.

But the greatest discoveries of our predecessors were not in science and technology. They were rather about the human mind and soul. Sometimes we fail to understand what the ancients were actually doing. We tend to think of the alchemists only as misguided chemists who attempted to change lead into gold. But the alchemists, who practised their Great Work in ancient Greece, China, Egypt, India, and the Arabic world were not mainly concerned with the transmutation of base metals into gold. Their chief preoccupation was, as the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* puts it, 'to discover the relationship of man to the cosmos and to exploit that relationship to his benefit'. Hence, they were chiefly interested in intellectual transmutation—making spiritual gold out of the base metal of our personalities. That is a nobler and more significant aim than physical transmutation, and it is one that may help us to survive the dangers to which we are exposed by our own discovery of nuclear reaction.

Thus it is especially in the intellectual and spiritual realms that the ancients anticipated us. Indeed, Western philosophy has been called 'one long footnote to Plato'. The great thinkers and mystic geniuses of the Hellenistic world, the Near East, India, and the Far East long ago asked all the questions that puzzle us today about the meaning, origin, and purpose of life, and they arrived at answers that have not yet been improved upon. It is a great thing to travel into the outer space of the cosmos and to probe the inner space of the atom; it is a greater thing to discover the psychic space inside ourselves. It is good to know the world; it is best, as the inscription at Delphi tells us, to know ourselves.

Theosophy and the wisdom tradition

Theosophy sees all religions as equally important and as peculiarly adapted to the varying cultures in which they are found. Each one—from the austere elegance of Zen Buddhism to the emotional ecstasy of Caribbean voodoo—is a partial expression of one Truth and serves the needs of its adherents.

Every religion has both an outer and an inner side. Although both are natural and necessary, the two sides are very different from each other. The outer or exoteric side of a religion is what is usually thought of as the religion itself. It includes church organizations and clergy, doctrines and beliefs, rites and practices, and everything that marks one religion as obviously different from another. Those who know only the exoteric side think of it as the only true faith and its distinctions as of paramount importance. To be 'saved' one must believe in Jesus, or acknowledge Mohammed to be the only

Prophet, or walk the path of Buddha. The more extreme believe that all other religions are evil, inspired by the devil, or that they spring from the ignorance of barbarians. The more tolerant hold that other beliefs are either mistaken or limited to a lesser portion of the truth. But whether those who know only the outer side are tolerant or narrow-minded they are unaware that their religion has also a vital inner side.

The esoteric side of a religion is often associated with its mystics or with those whom the exoteric church looks upon as heretics. It treats the special doctrines of the religion as limited and relative statements of the ultimate Truth which no one can ever put fully into words. It regards the special practices as useful and symbolic expressions of an inner way.

There is a certain secrecy about the esoteric side of religion, not because its followers want to perplex others, but because the mysteries that lie deep within the human soul and are central to the Reality of the universe cannot be put into words that everyone can understand, but must be hinted at under parables and metaphors. As Jesus said to his disciples, 'Unto you [who have experienced them] it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God: but to others [who know only the outer forms] in parables' (Luke 8, 10). The way of inner religion may be walked; it cannot be described.

Those who hold to the inner side of their own religion tend to be sympathetic to all other religions for they recognize that these, too, are paths to the same goal. While they are far from the goal, the many paths differ greatly from one another. Some pass, as it were, straight over wide plains; others lead up

mountains and along valleys; some follow winding rivers through ancient forests; others are faint tracks across the desert. But however different the paths are at a distance, as they approach their common goal they draw nearer to one another and become more alike. Finally they merge into a single way which has been called the Wisdom Tradition, the Perennial Philosophy, or the Secret Doctrine.

We may also think of the Wisdom Tradition as a vast underground river which flows unseen and unknown by most persons, but which is the source of the life-giving water that springs up here and there across the landscape of history. Some of the well-springs that arise from it flow long enough to give water to a parched land and then, their mission completed, dry up again. These are the intense but relatively short-lived religious movements like the monotheism of the Egyptian Pharaoh Akhenaton in the fourteenth century BC or the community of the medieval Cathars in France and Italy. Other well-springs flow so plentifully and over such a wide area that their water spreads out to form great lakes and seas. In these cases, even when the vigour of the original spring is lost, hidden in the depths of the water they themselves have produced, the immense bodies of water remain to refresh and give life to many peoples. These are the great world religions like Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam.

Modern Theosophy is a present-day well-spring of the timeless Wisdom Tradition. It naturally shares some beliefs and attitudes with all other expressions of that same tradition for there is, after all, only one water, however different it may taste when drawn from different wells.

Three truths

Theosophy deals with human beings, their origin, evolution, and destiny. One statement of these ideas is to be found in the Three Truths from the book, *The Idyll of the White Lotus*, which is an allegorical story based upon history. The book was written over a hundred years ago by an Englishwoman, Mabel Collins, who is herself a figure of some interest.

Mabel Collins was born in 1851 and died in 1927. Her father, Mortimer Collins, was a well-known mathematician and writer. In 1871 she married Kenningale Robert Cook, but she kept her maiden-name for the many books she was to write.

Beginning in the 1870's, she wrote over forty books, many of her early works being three-volume novels which contributed mightily to the insatiable appetite of the late Victorians for fiction. The titles of some of her novels suggest their contents: *An Innocent Sinner*, *Our Bohemia*, *In This World, Too Red a Dawn*, *In the Flower of Her Youth*, *The Prettiest Woman in Warsaw*, *Lord Vanecourt's Daughter*, *Juliet's Lovers*. She was, it seems, the Barbara Cartland of the nineteenth century!

However, in addition to her fiction, Mabel Collins had an interest in the metaphysical, including Spiritualism, which was fashionable in Europe and America during the second half of the century. Indeed, she is said to have had some mediumistic ability herself. She wrote three books under the inspiration of a spiritual teacher, a dreamlike or visionary figure whom Colonel Olcott and Madame Blavatsky identified as one of the initiates with whom they themselves were familiar.

These three books were *The Idyll of the White Lotus*, *Light on the Path* and *Through the Gates of Gold*. *The Idyll* was written in 1884 before Mabel Collins joined the Theosophical Society. The second book, *Light on the Path*, is one of the great spiritual classics of modern Theosophy. It consisted originally of forty-two 'rules' or aphorisms which Madame Blavatsky recognized as being drawn in part from *The Book of the Golden Precepts* from which she also derived the fragments that were to make up *The Voice of the Silence*, her own guide to the spiritual life.

The Three Truths were first printed in *The Idyll of the White Lotus*, and are quoted also in *Light on the Path* which has been called a commentary on those Truths. *The Idyll* is the tale of a boy named Sensa, in ancient Egypt, through whose clairvoyance and spiritual sensitivity the corrupt priesthood of the dark goddess was overthrown and the veneration of the bright goddess, the Lady of the White Lotus, re-established.

The story has been interpreted (for example, by the learned nineteenth-century Brahmin, T. Subba Row) as an allegory of the soul's turning away from the darkness of egoism to the brightness of its own inner glory. A Jungian interpretation of the two goddesses as dark and bright Anima archetypes is also an obvious possibility. The story may even reflect an earlier life of the spiritual teacher who inspired it. It is doubtless a mixture of history, allegory, and entertaining fiction, in varying proportions.

The Three Truths are those which, as T. Subba Row says, 'underlie every religion'.

The text is as follows:

The soul of man is immortal, and its future is the future of a thing whose growth and splendour has no limit.

The principle which gives life dwells in us, and without us, is undying and eternally beneficent, is not heard, or seen, or smelt, but is perceived by the one who desires perception.

Each man is his own absolute law-giver, the dispenser of glory or gloom to himself; the decreer of his life, his reward, his punishment.

These Truths, which are as great as is life itself, are as simple as the simplest mind of man.

Each of the Three Truths has in it a wealth of implications, but at their simplest they are about human immortality, divine immanence, and self-responsibility. They contain seven concepts that are the elements out of which all theosophical thought can be constructed: reincarnation, evolution, unity, the Plan, the Path, free will, and karma. These seven elementary concepts are a summary of everything in modern Theosophy and in the Wisdom Tradition that has come down to us from the ancients. They are the essence of the inner side of all religions. They are closely connected with one another, each implying all the rest.

The statement begins with a prologue: 'There are Three Truths which are absolute, and cannot be lost, but yet may remain silent for lack of speech.' Thus we learn that they are not merely temporary or local statements of truth, but are a true expression of Truth itself.

First truth: human immortality

The first Truth declares that in each of us there is something that survives death

and has an unimaginably glorious spiritual potential. 'The soul of man is immortal' because his spiritual core returns to earth and is born again in a new human body and develops a new personality. And that process is repeated until he finally outgrows the need and desire to take birth again.

Some people find the idea of reincarnation acceptable; others dislike the thought of yet another life filled with the frustrations of human existence. Our experiences grow stale and repetitious and we ask, in the words of a popular song, 'Is that all there is?'

The first Truth assures us that there is a great deal more to life than mere repetition, for our future 'is the future of a thing whose growth and splendour has no limit'. Reincarnation has a purpose, and that purpose is the evolution of consciousness to a state we cannot even imagine; our growth is inevitably towards a beauty and wisdom and goodness that outdazzles our powers to conceive them.

In stating that our future 'growth and splendour *has* no limit' rather than '*have* no limits', the first Truth implies that growth and splendour go together as a single process. True growth is always in a 'splendid' direction, and the only way to reach the state of splendour is to grow beyond our temporary limitations and be transformed into a new person.

Second truth: divine immanence

If we are evolving and growing, the question of where we came from in the first place and where we can expect to find our goal naturally arises. The second Truth holds that there is one divine Reality immanent in the universe and that every part of the universe is alive with it. 'The principle which gives life dwells in

us, and without us.' That principle is us, and we are it. There is but one principle in the universe, and that principle is the principle of Life. Everything in the universe is alive, and everything is one. People call this Unity by various names—God, the Ground, It, the divine immanence. But whatever they call it, it is One.

The concept of unity is the most important of all theosophical insights for from it all the other teachings are derived. And it underlies the first object of the Theosophical Society: 'To form a nucleus of the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste or colour.'

Since life is the product of that one principle that is 'undying and eternally beneficent' it is not an accident that happened once by chance and will as suddenly disappear. The divine immanence is conscious, purposeful, and loving, ordering all things for an ultimate good. The universe is not aimless; it follows a plan, of which human evolution is a part, that cannot be deflected but leads surely and joyfully to a goal that is goodness itself.

The second Truth ends by telling us that the principle 'is not heard, or seen, or smelt, but is perceived by the man who desires perception'. Although the principle and the plan it follows are beyond the reach of our senses and mind, we can nevertheless perceive the one Life and grasp the outline of its plan through our intuition and by meditation. Because each of us is a drop in the ocean of divine life, there is a path by which we can come to know it. We cannot study that principle scientifically because it is beyond our senses; and we cannot under-

stand it philosophically because it is (as H. P. Blavatsky wrote) 'beyond the range and reach of thought'. But if we truly desire to perceive it, we shall for, since we are it, we can discover it within ourselves.

Third truth: self-responsibility

We have a choice: we can begin, whenever we will, consciously to develop our intuition so as to perceive in us and without us the one principle which gives life. The third Truth emphasizes that we have the free will to choose our own path: 'each man is his own absolute law-giver, the dispenser of glory or gloom to himself'.

Some people think that everything in life is determined by forces outside ourselves and that are beyond our control; that we are really automata responding to stimuli. Others think that pure chance reigns in the universe, that everything comes about accidentally and that life is without purpose. The Wisdom Tradition rejects these views and says that we determine our own lives and create our own chances; we, and we alone, decree the laws of our own being. The 'we' here spoken of is not, of course, the limited personality with which we usually identify ourselves, but rather that limitless 'we' that lies at the core of our being and which is identical with the one principle of life.

The third Truth concludes that we are each 'the decreer of [our] life, [our] reward, [our] punishment'. It maintains that through our responsibility for our own actions we create the circumstances in which we find ourselves, for there is an unwavering moral law that keeps all things in balance and harmony. We choose the circumstances in which we

shall find ourselves tomorrow by the way we respond to the circumstances in which we find ourselves today. Karma is thus not so much punishment and reward as opportunity. By the life we are now living, we sow the seeds of what we shall reap, if not in this incarnation then in another. And so the seventh of the concepts in the Three Truths brings us back to the first.

Although the Three Truths are profound in their implications since they lead to the greatest mysteries of life, they are yet easy enough for anyone to understand: 'These Truths, which are as great as is life itself, are as simple as the simplest mind of man.' For all great truths are fundamentally simple. Any truth that can be put into words can be

put simply. Whatever can be stated only in a complex manner is not truth but falsehood masquerading as profundity.

These Three Truths with their seven concepts form the most important ideas in the world. Because from each of them we can draw many conclusions and corollaries, everything said about Theosophy or the Ancient Wisdom is simply an elaboration of these ideas. This 'body of truths' has been transmitted, reinterpreted and added to over the centuries, and is still being studied and enlarged by students today. Theosophy is thus as old as the collective memory of mankind and as new as the needs of today and the goals of tomorrow. Theosophy is the Three Truths of the White Lotus. □

Regard the three truths. They are equal. These written above are the first of the rules which are written on the walls of the Hall of Learning. Those who ask shall have. Those that desire to read shall read. Those who desire to learn shall learn.

Light on the Path, Mabel Collins