

# Religion in the Age of Aquarius

by I. M. Oderberg

It would be foolhardy to suggest, let alone state, what forms of religion might emerge in the next two or three centuries -- but perhaps we may suggest what could be the new expressions of the religious spirit. We can look back at the development of religious and related systems of thought born and developed during the 2,155-year period identified with the zodiacal sign Pisces (Latin for fish, Greek *ichthys*, a term adopted by very early Christians as a symbol for their Savior). This is one-twelfth of a larger cycle of approximately 26,000 years known also as a Platonic Year (cf, *Timaeus* §39d), called by H. P. Blavatsky a Messianic cycle. In ancient days each of the twelve arcs was named for one of the zodiacal constellations. The one we are entering is the Age of Aquarius, the Water-carrier.

Significant developments at the transition to the Aquarian zodiacal cycle include the widespread sharing of hitherto hidden or esoteric traditions from many parts of the world, including Tibetan and other Oriental sources as exemplified by Pabongka's *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand* (edited by Trijang Rinpoche, trans. Michael Richards, Wisdom Publications, Boston, 1991) This massive book is an English translation of a lecture series delivered in 1921. Pabongka (1878-1941) was Tibetan Rinpoche so highly regarded among his peers that auditors flocked from many parts of Tibet to hear him. His theme was Tsong-kha-pa's masterpiece *Lam-rim Chen-mo*: "Stages on the Path to Enlightenment."

These lectures provided an intense study covering full, daily discourses spread over a period of twenty-four days, dealing mainly with expositions of tantric texts and practices used in the Vajrayana, the path called by some "the highest level of practical Mahayana." However, the goal or crowning achievement -- enlightenment -- is the outcome only of becoming one with, and the embodiment of, the "Six Perfections."

H. P. Blavatsky presented her own distillation of the Buddha's message in *The Voice of the Silence*, her translation of a portion of an old text known to her as the "Book of the Golden Precepts." This work charts the path to enlightenment through the portals of the Buddhist *paramitas*, virtues or perfections. Her text advises avoiding the practice of psychic powers or *siddhis* (Sanskrit), and also the dry area of intellectualism, into which the spirit of the quest cannot enter without being stifled. [In a letter to an American Convention of theosophists in 1891 HPB warned against the rise of psychism in our century if ethical, mental, and spiritual growth did not accompany it to keep excesses in check.] As the Voice states: "To live to benefit mankind is the first step. To practise the six glorious virtues is the second."

The Sanskrit word *paramita*, among other translations, means "that which has gone beyond." Blavatsky lists seven: 1) *dana*, charity or love; 2) *sila*, harmony in word and act; 3) *kshanti*, patience; 4) *viraga*, indifference to pleasure and pain, the pairs of opposites; 5) *virya*, dauntless energy; 6) *dhyana*, meditation, contemplation, or concentration which has two aspects: to eliminate idle thinking, and concentrate the mind in a way that will separate it from bondage to appearances; and 7) *prajna*, intuitive wisdom. *Viraga* is omitted in most lists of the *paramitas*, including Pabongka's. (cf G. de Purucker, *Fountain-Source of Occultism*, pp. 43-50.)

Through these essential qualities is the sustaining presence of "Alaya's Self," the "Soul of the Universe," which is compassion itself. To the extent we embody it -- are compassionate in all our relationships -- we enable it to manifest throughout our cosmos. If we ask ourselves, what can best lead to the goal of human betterment? a suggestive answer is conveyed in the Buddhist term *bodhicitta*, or enlightenment achieved

by "altruistic resolve" -- our dedication to achieve the goal for the sake of all beings and not merely for ourself alone. This is the foundation of the Mahayana or Northern Buddhism.

Another tradition's "hidden" teachings are becoming increasingly available through the efforts of a few Qabbalists. They feel that ours is the century for sharing previously secret and well-guarded material with those who are prepared to study and reflect upon the meaning of the Jewish heritage. Despite advertisements that there are shortcuts to acquiring special knowledge, study is still necessary and also commitment to the good of mankind. The way was opened up by the late Dr. Gershom Scholem, Professor at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, whose books present the Zoharic or theosophic tradition. Other scholars, such as Dr. Moshe Idel, are exponents of the Merkabah or "Chariot" lineage, symbolized by the fiery chariot that wafted the prophet Elijah heavenward. (2 Kings 2:11; the chariot figures also in commentaries on the Book of Ezekiel wherein Jewish youth were forbidden to read the first chapter (called the merkabah), and the concluding sections (40 and 48) until they reached 30 years of age, clearly pointing to the esoteric nature of the chariot symbol.) Both traditions concern the oral teaching known in ancient days to provide keys for understanding the Old Testament.

Dr. Philip Berg, present head of the "Research Centre of Kabbalah" operating from New York and Jerusalem, has been issuing good English translations of seminal works going back to the Middle Ages and even earlier, when they were studied and protected by scholars. They include texts stemming from Rabbi Isaac Luria, who taught first from Spain then from Safed in Palestine (now Israel), and also from his successors, such as his brilliant follower Rabbi Hayim Vital, author of the Tree of Life -- the Sephirothal Tree setting out the interconnections of the elohim, architects and builders of the cosmos and humanity. Dr. Berg stated recently that as our century marks the beginning of a new cycle it has become his responsibility to make available the texts to which he has access.

Another scholar in this field is Z'ev ben Shimon Halevi whose *Kabbalah: Tradition of Hidden Knowledge* is more than a mere introductory. He opens his treatise with a quote from *Pirke Hekalot*, Babylonia, 6th century AD:

Rabbi Ishmael said: All the companions [the initiated] liken it to a man who has a ladder in the midst of his house whereby he can ascend and descend without anyone to prevent him. Blessed art Thou Lord God, Who knowest all secrets and art the Lord of hidden things.

Halevi explains in his Preface that "Kabbalah is the inner and mystical aspect of Judaism. It is the perennial Teaching about the Attributes of the Divine, the nature of the universe and the destiny of man, in Judaic terms. In this book he gives the usual diagram of the Tree of Life, showing the permutations thereof to yield various meanings applicable to a human being, a planet, and so forth.

The marvel of our century is the publication of such works for all to see, read, and try to grasp -- the revelation that within many religious traditions there is the secret sacred heart. Islam has its Sufi lines, but not many of them have escaped Moslem fundamentalism. Some transmissions continue, however; for instance, the school founded by Hazrat Inayat Khan as Sufi for the West, carried on under the leadership of his elder son Pir Vilayat Khan. Omar Khayyam, a former astronomer-royal of Persia, is now best remembered for his quatrains, the *Rubaiyat*. He was a Sufi and instilled the Sufi philosophy into his verses in coded language. Other Persian poets such as Rumi also expressed in their verses mystical interpretations of the Koran and Hadith, works ascribed to Mohammed. There are other streams, such as that by Idries Shah and his followers, while still others, mostly stemming from old Persia, are condemned in modern Iran (see "The Sufis of Today" by Jean Van Mater, Sunrise, July 1964, for an illuminating

survey).

The esoteric roots of Christianity are also coming to light as the public is introduced to its earliest material, before the Papacy was established and crystallization set in. That material has been given new life with the publication of the gnostic books found at Nag Hammadi in Egypt in 1945, two years before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Against the onslaught of the Orthodox party whose religion was based on blind belief, a gnostic Christian sect hid the main texts of its library, among them the Gospel of Thomas. It is obviously an initiatory text leading the aspirant to the deeper Christian mysteries, with passages that have baffled such scholars as Johannes Leopoldt, who confesses he lacks the key "to the allegory." The cryptic utterances are placed in the mouth of Jesus, and translator and commentator Howard M. Jackson states that "Jesus bids 'the reader of these words' to seek for the inner meaning."

For the most part, the texts of the gnostic Christians are not antagonistic to the New Testament, only to certain dogmatic interpretations of them. In many respects, they add to our understanding of the *essence* of the original teaching. The New Testament's importance lies not in its historicity, but in the fact of its being the story of every human being who seeks to evoke the real human qualities locked up in all of us. Jesus is reputed to have said, in effect: carry out my teaching, then greater things than I do shall you be able to do.

The New Testament narratives take on new life if we relate them to events transpiring within ourselves, while the characters can be seen as facets of our nature. As for the central figure of the New Testament, we see that inexplicable happenings relate to the initiation into a stage of self expression, i.e., of the innate spiritual/divine qualities locked up within. When Jesus called upon his followers to benefit from his presence by beginning to live his teachings before the close of the Aion (a Greek word meaning age or period of time), he referred to the end of his Aion -- not the "Doomsday" of the whole planet, but to the ending of the Piscean Age, after which would be "a new Dispensation," a new presentation of the ever-living ancient wisdom.

What is yet to emerge in the Age of Aquarius not yet fully born out of a past swamped by religious and other dogmas? New expressions might well follow the germination of seed ideas and concepts contained in H. P. Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine*. Its two volumes, covering the birth, growth, and evolution of the universe and humanity, were intended to be an introduction for our age to certain themes flowing into our times from a remote antiquity -- seminal ideas that would be better understood in the coming centuries.

The thrust of her message is that the universe is ensouled and that humanity is spiritual in essence. Letters written in the late decades of last century by two of her teachers, hinted that the objective of her work was to initiate another attempt to elevate the spirit and mind of the human race. This would be a fresh presentation of an ancient wisdom that would emerge more fully in years to come, expressed in the language of the new period now still in its gestation stage. This version of the periodic restatements would be appropriate for that future era because it would be clothed with the psychology of the generations following ours.

The newly flowing stream associated with Aquarius has been merging with the old waters of the Piscean cycle. What will be distinctively "Aquarian" in *form* will be recognizable as such only in the coming centuries; only then will the seeds sown in our own times and years before, have germinated, sprouted,

and begun to show their own characteristics. What has been happening during the early decades of this century resembles what follows after a plowing of an old and tired soil, to enable the new seeds sown to take root and grow sunward. The growth will be colored by the qualities of the particular cycle: in the present case, the Aquarian slowly coming out of its chrysalis. Instead of the old era of competition that has bedeviled human life in our age, perhaps we are entering an era of cooperation, dependent upon our recognition that we all belong to one family.

These words of Blavatsky strike a keynote for the coming era:

No one is so busy or so poor that he cannot create a noble ideal and follow it,. Why then hesitate in clearing a path towards this ideal, through all obstacles, over every stumbling-block, every petty hindrance of social life, in order to march straight forward until the goal is reached? -- "The New Cycle," *La Revue Théosophique*, Paris, March 21, 1889; reprinted in H. P. Blavatsky Collected Writings, 11:135

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