

Colonel Olcott — An Ever-Inspiring Example

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WE are commemorating the 100th anniversary of the death of our President-Founder, Colonel Henry S. Olcott, and these articles are the means for gratefully expressing the blessings resulting from his life's effort. It is not easy to speak about past Theosophical leaders. On the one hand, some people tend to be over-critical, pointing out whatever errors they think one or the other leader made in his struggle to uplift humanity. They do not realize they are judging situations from a distance, with the hindsight of challenging actions and decisions that were very difficult to make at the time. We should have only respect for all those who have given their lives for the benefit of others, following their example to the best of our ability. On the other hand, we should try to avoid idealizing their character and creating a myth that departs from reality, which also has undesirable consequences. In fact, Olcott himself said:

As the Co-Founder of the Society, as one who has had constant opportunities for knowing the chosen policy and wishes of our Masters . . . I protest against the

first giving way to the temptation to elevate, either them, their agents, or any other living or dead personage to the divine status, or their teachings to that of infallible doctrine. Not one word was ever spoken, transmitted, or written to me by the Masters that warranted such a course, nay, that did not inculcate the very opposite.¹

With this in mind, let us examine some features of Col. Olcott's character and actions, which serve as an inspiring example for all of us aspirants to become true Theosophists.

Col. Olcott's selection

During his multifaceted professional career, Col. Olcott had shown great courage, unimpeachable honesty, and considerable ability for organization. He was a great man but yet, apparently, he was just a 'normal' human being. That is, he neither had any special intellectual or psychic gift (except, maybe, his almost inexhaustible vitality and magnetic healing power), nor was he an Initiate as were H. P. Blavatsky (HPB), Annie

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Besant and C. W. Leadbeater, among others. Nevertheless, Col. Olcott was chosen as one of the main actors in the creation and establishment of the Theosophical Society (TS), a movement meant to spread esoteric knowledge and encourage the spiritual upliftment of humanity. HPB wrote in her *Scrapbook*, in July 1875: ‘Orders received from India direct to establish a philosophico-religious society and choose a name for it, also to choose Olcott.’² This may seem a bit strange, especially taking into account that people with apparently more occult knowledge and ability than him were attracted to the TS, even during its initial years, and one might have thought that some of them could have provided a better alternative for a movement such as this. But Master M. said:

So, casting about, we found in America the man to stand as leader — a man of great moral courage, unselfish, and having other good qualities. He was far from being the best, but (as Mr Hume speaks in HPB’s case) — he was the best one available.³

And Col. Olcott’s life demonstrated that the Masters were right.

But it is interesting to note that They had originally chosen not only two (Olcott and HPB) but three persons to form the nucleus of a movement in its period of gestation. The third one was an American, E. G. Brown, then editor of the *Spiritual Scientist*, who was interested in understanding the occult laws behind spiritualistic phenomena. He was a good option

because the Masters wanted to begin the Theosophical Movement by improving the Spiritualistic theories (which were the only power in the West fighting against the reigning materialism) and gradually turning them towards the Esoteric Philosophy. Master S. said in a letter to Col. Olcott:

This cause — in your country — depends entirely on the closest unity between you three — our Lodge’s chosen Triad — you, verily so, you three so utterly dissimilar and yet so closely connected to be brought together and linked in *one* by the never-erring Wisdom of the Brotherhood.⁴

But notwithstanding the ‘never-erring Wisdom’ of the Masters, Man — having free will — chooses his own destiny, and E. G. Brown, after having worked for a short time for the Masters’ project, failed to continue with it. HPB wrote about him: ‘The man might have become a *Power*, he preferred to remain an *Ass*.’⁵ This fact shows us that there is nothing we can take for granted about a man’s future and decisions, which highlights all those Theosophists who succeeded in fulfilling their task, apart from their innate potentialities.

The Foundation of the TS

HPB was the Teacher, the main channel for Theosophical teachings to reach the world. But if the Founders were to be a lasting and consistent force in the evolution of humanity, they needed a healthy and strong organization as ‘vehicle’. The

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main task of Col. Olcott was the shaping, administration and expansion of the new-born movement, and the very existence of the Theosophical Society as an international and well-organized institution today, after more than 130 years since its foundation, is a testimony to Col. Olcott's success in his chief task. Mrs Besant wrote to him:

Without you and your work, we could have but a vague congeries of stray individuals, aspiring after the spiritual life, each for himself. With and through you these are welded together into an instrument for uplifting the world.⁶

This was exemplified by what happened with many of those who followed HPB as a teacher but were not interested in the TS as an instrument to spread the teachings. After her death they could not remain united and scattered around the world (some of them founding their own movements, most of which have now disappeared).

The TS was founded at a very critical period in human evolution (at the end of the first 5,000 years of Kaliyuga) to provide opposition to the ever-increasing materialistic forces that threatened to kill the spiritual aspirations of humanity. And Col. Olcott was placed, in HPB's words, 'in the executive lead of one of the most difficult movements in the history of human thought'.⁷ As our President-Founder rightly said in his inaugural address in 1875, the TS was without precedent. Previously, esoteric teachings were given only to the few and in secrecy,

in the Ancient Mysteries or in different secret societies; but now the TS attempted to reveal a relatively large part of this knowledge openly. In the words of Mahatma M.:

One or two of us hoped that the world had so far advanced intellectually, if not intuitionally, that the Occult doctrine might gain an intellectual acceptance, and the impulse given for a new cycle of occult research.⁸

With that in view, the TS published books openly and established a system of 'public education' in esoteric and spiritual knowledge through public lectures and study groups in Lodges. It was a dangerous 'experiment', as the Master said, and, to make things more difficult, the TS was not be a new cult, but freedom of thought was to be one of its pillars. To be successful, the movement obviously required a strong, flexible, and healthy organization, and our President-Founder had a very hard task in organizing the Society, facing many delicate and challenging matters. And that work had to be done in the midst of various influences, apparent and occult, converging directly upon him and his colleague and teacher, HPB. As Master M. wrote in a critical moment for the TS:

Whatever Henry Olcott's shortcomings, we are well pleased with, and *thank him*. Let it be known to *all* what I think, and now state [under] my own signature. Henry Olcott has served and followed his Master 'to the last gasp with truth

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and loyalty' . . . Fools, fools! who do not see that all Asura-dugpas are at work for the destruction of the Society, their only, their last enemy of Salvation, on the present troubled waters of Kali-yug!⁹

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How did he manage to continue among those powerful influences? Although he had some hints from his Master, these were rarely given, and only in special circumstances. For the rest of the time he had to rely on his common sense and intuition. Probably some mistakes could have been avoided if he had been an Initiate, with a wider perception of things in their occult connotations and a more fluent communication with his Master. But what was the reason for his not being an Initiate? The Master M. said:

If he is 'ignorant' of many things, so are his accusers, and because he remains still *uninitiated* the reason for which is very plain: to this day he has *preferred* the good of the many to his own personal benefit. Having given up the advantages derived from steady, serious chelaship by those who devote themselves to it, for his work for other people — *these are those who now turn against him*.¹⁰

He could not be a 'regular' chela mainly because he led a restless life, constantly travelling all over the world giving lectures, founding TS Branches, helping the Buddhist and other causes, etc. And at this point we come to one of the reasons why the Masters chose Col. Olcott for such an enormous task as the foundation

of the TS: this example of self-denial is the proof that he had the mark of a true Theosophist — 'Not for himself, but for the world he lives'; for, this — and not 'occult' abilities — is the main qualification required for the Theosophical Path. As Master KH said:

However well fitted psychically and physiologically to answer such *selection*, unless possessed of spiritual as well as of physical unselfishness, a chela, whether selected or not, must perish as a chela in the long run.¹¹

And this unselfishness was certainly one of his most remarkable virtues, as the Masters, HPB, and nearly all who knew him well, mention incessantly. No more emphatic words than those written by HPB in a letter to him could be quoted: 'Were it not for your gigantic unselfishness, your unparalleled devotion, your kindness, and sincere zeal — I do not know who would be President of the TS.'¹²

He always put the interest of the Cause above his own, and even above his honour, and in virtue of that he was ever willing to undo whatever mischief he might have done. As the Master KH wrote: 'He is one . . . who may make innumerable mistakes out of excessive zeal but never is unwilling to repair his fault even at the cost of the greatest self-humiliation.'¹³ These qualities made him a really useful servant of the Cause, and made the Master say in that very letter: 'Him we can trust under *all* circumstances, and his faithful service is

pledged to us come well, come ill.’¹⁴

We can also see how his unselfishness was the shield that allowed him to undergo safely the trials which caused many would-be occultists to fall one by one, because troubles arise (in our life and in the work of the TS) when we are ambitious or self-centred, seeking our own benefit. Karma always plays an important role in our lives, and that is especially the case in our Society, due to its occult nature. Therefore difficulties will come, but if we work with devotion, zeal, and unselfishness, as much as we can, we do not have to fear any situation. Many times we have to work in the midst of complications, some of them not even created by this personality — those seeming ‘personal injustices’. But it cannot be helped, because every would-be Theosophist has to work out to some extent his old karmic debts before being of any real use. Even our leaders had to face criticism and attacks that were nothing but results of old karmic causes. As HPB wrote to Col. Olcott:

Do you suppose you have not a Karma to atone for your previous lives? Your share of abuse, dishonour, vilification in the present drama, in which you at least are quite innocent, can it be the Karma of your actual life? No, it is all the shadow of the past one. So it is with me. I suffer for my misdeeds of centuries ago.¹⁵

Some members of the TS leave the Society when facing criticism or unpleasant circumstances, but if we under-

stand more deeply the nature of those situations, we will handle them with humility and ‘a courageous endurance’.

Coming back to our President-Founder, there is one more thing I would like to mention. He said:

I have been taught to lean upon myself alone, to look to my Higher Self as my best teacher, best guide, best example, and only saviour. I was taught that no one could or ever would attain to the perfect knowledge save upon those lines.¹⁶

He did not wait for external powers to guide him. He learnt to rely on his own limited abilities and he stood up to difficulties, constantly struggling to perceive the right path to follow. Every one of us has to do the same. Our common sense and intuition may not yet be an infallible tool, and many a time we may fail, but the very effort to perceive the truth constitutes our training. As Col. Olcott said, ‘it is when we are thrown upon our own resources that we are enabled to bring out the powers latent in our characters’.¹⁷ Sometimes we forget this fact and we want someone to tell us what to do, or we may complain about why the Masters are not more accessible. But if we realize that Their main work is to help to awaken our spiritual nature, and not to please personalities, we come to the same conclusion as did Col. Olcott:

The very inaccessibility of the Masters is an advantage to all those who wish to acquire knowledge, because in the

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effort to come near them, to get any communion with them, one insensibly prepares in himself the conditions of spiritual growth.¹⁸

If we can work through the Theosophical Society devotedly, humbly offering whatever ability we have, look-

ing at the wonderful aim of our institution — that of uplifting the human condition — forgetting our little personalities, and relying upon our Higher Self, we will be useful servants of the Masters, and we will be paying the best homage we can to the memory of our dear President-Founder. ✧

References

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4. *LMW*, 2nd Series, No. 6, p. 17.
5. H. P. Blavatsky, *Collected Writings*, vol. 1, p. 88.
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7. 'HPB's Defence of H. S. Olcott', *The Theosophist*, Aug. 1932, p. 622.
8. *ML*, No. 45, p. 124.
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11. *ML*, No. 134, p. 441.
12. Letter to Olcott, probably from Torre del Greco in July 1885.
13. *ML*, No. 5, p. 17.
14. *Idem.*
15. Letter to Olcott, probably from Torre del Greco in July 1885.
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17. 'You Have Forgotten', *World Theosophy*, Aug. 1932.
18. *Idem.*

What the Society has hitherto done — its great merit in the eyes of some, and its terrible fault in the estimation of others — is to *make people think*. No one can for long belong to the Theosophical Society without beginning to question *himself*. He begins to ask: 'How do I know that?' 'Why do I believe this?' 'What reason have I to be so certain that I am right, and so sure that my neighbours are wrong?' 'What is my warrant for declaring this action, or that practice, to be good, and their opposites bad?'

H. S. Olcott