

*The following article was originally published in the American Theosophist of October 1967. It discusses the role of the TS in response to civil and political unrest that the United States was facing during the Civil Rights Movement, and examines the question of whether the Theosophical Society – the Theosophist – should engage in social and political reform. Its interest for TOS workers is obvious.*



## Brotherhood: A Forgotten Object?

Joy Mills

Elsewhere in this issue appear a number of statements written by members who feel an increasing concern that the Society, through its membership, is not speaking or acting boldly enough in these days of civil and racial unrest. The ideal of brotherhood is given vocal allegiance, they suggest, but is not implemented by action. Certainly all who read the history of this Movement, since the inception of the Society in 1875, will recognize that its most prominent leaders, its most influential officials, never hesitated to speak out on behalf of *human* rights and, when necessary, to act in support of their convictions.

The first public activity of the new Society, undertaken by Colonel Olcott and HPB, was the cremation, in 1876, of the body of Baron de Palm – an action that drew public condemnation and threatened the reputation of the fledgling organization as well as that of its “hapless founders.” As Josephine Ransom, in *A Short History of the Theosophical Society*, suggests: “It would seem as if the real significance of the whole affair lay in the fact that it was the Society’s first trial of its willingness and courage as a body to face public opinion and institute a reform in convention...” Examples are countless to indicate that the founders were tireless in acting out in their very lives the convictions to which they had given full allegiance in establishing the Society: the little known incident in New York, when they befriended thirteen stranded Muslim Arabs in a demonstration of practical brotherhood; the taking of *Pansil* or *Pancha Sila* [the Five Precepts] to become lay-Buddhists, devoted to promoting religious understanding and effecting brotherhood among differing religious groups. Today, the most respected and honoured name in all of Buddhist Ceylon is that of an American – the President-Founder of the Theosophical Society, Colonel Olcott. Others who followed the founders gave no less noble examples: Damodar, high caste Brahmin, breaking with all caste customs in an acknowledgement of genuine brotherhood; Annie Besant and George Arundale, interned for supporting home rule in India; Clara Codd jailed with other leading suffragettes in the fight for women’s rights.

The list could be continued. Each one who has stood unequivocally for the betterment of humanity, for the redress of social wrong, and the alleviation of human suffering – whether their name be emblazoned among the leaders of the Society or recorded simply on its rolls among the thousands whose names are unremembered in the passage of time – each one who has thus committed themselves heart, soul, and body to the primary objective of this Movement has answered the clarion call of the Adept: “The *Chiefs* want a ‘Brotherhood of Humanity’, a real Universal Fraternity started...” The same Adept wrote further: “The term ‘Universal Brotherhood’ is no idle phrase. Humanity in the mass has a paramount claim upon us... It is the only secure foundation for universal morality. If it be a dream, it is at least a noble one for mankind: and it is the aspiration of the *true adept*.”

The stormy career of Dr Annie Besant presents the most dramatic evidence of personal involvement in the great social and human issues of an age. In reply to criticisms directed against her for her work on behalf of India during her presidency of the Society, and the consequent possible involvement of the Society in the home rule movement, Dr Besant cited the *Articles of Association* of the Society, sub-clause (d), wherein it is said that one of the ways in which the Objects are to be pursued is “The doing of all such things as are incidental or conducive to the attainment of the above objects or any of them.” In her opinion, she said, this sub-clause secured “to the Society as such, the right to do *collectively* all things incidental or conducive to the formation of a nucleus of the Universal Brotherhood of humanity without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste or colour.”

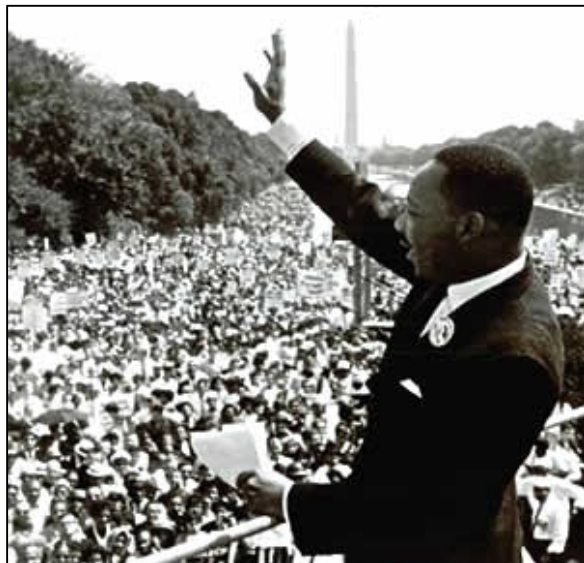
Can the Society, should the Theosophist, engage in social and political reform? This is the question that inevitably arises, and the Society’s traditional neutrality in political affairs, as well as its official declaration of full freedom of thought for every member, is often quoted as evidence for collective non-involvement and even as an excuse for personal lack of concern for social ills. Yet while staunchly defending these fundamental positions of the Society, the founders (both those referred to as the Inner Founders and those who acknowledged full allegiance to the Adept impetus) did not evade the essential responsibility inherent in the early directives concerning brotherhood. In her *Key to Theosophy*, HPB responds to the question as to whether the Society is a political organization: “Certainly not. It is international in the highest sense in that its members comprise men and women of all races, creeds, and *forms of thought*, who work together for one object, *the improvement of humanity*; but *as a society* it takes absolutely no part in any national or party politics.” When asked further if the Society then stands aloof from social questions, HPB replies: “The *very principles* of the T. S. are a proof that it *does not* – or, rather, that most of its members do not – so stand aloof.” In a memorable letter from one of the Adept Founders of the Society appear the words: “The only object to be striven for is the amelioration of the condition of *man* by the spread of truth...” and the Master K. H. states that the truths of occultism must prove “constructive of new institutions, of a genuine, practical Brotherhood of Humanity.”

In the United States today, we are experiencing, as we all know too well, an explosion of violence unprecedented since the days of the Civil War. Our cities have become open wounds revealing the long festering sores of injustice, misery and human degradation as portions of our population have been forced to live in circumstances of poverty, persistent unemployment and rat-infested slum housing. We are learning the price of unfulfilled and broken promises. No section of our nation has been exempt from the storm of too long pent-up bitterness, fear, frustration and despair; north, south, east and west the fires have blazed – red flares against a static past to announce a new day of justice must be born. We deplore the violence that destroys, maims, cripples, or kills; we cannot condone the violence that spawns riots, sets fire to property, looses angry mobs to pillage and to rob. But there have been other types of violence too long condoned: the violence of pride and prejudice, the violence of the mind and heart set against the liberation of the human spirit in another human being. What of the violence done to human dignity, to human rights, to human needs, through long years of injustice and indifference?

Are we not, as members of the Theosophical Society in this nation, at this time in our perilous experiment of democracy which guarantees the same right to *all* people, which protects individual liberty and secures individual freedom, are we not especially challenged to speak forth and to act on behalf of the human – the whole human being, as revealed in the ageless wisdom of Theosophy, seen in the stupendous vision of our god-like potential – without reference to color, creed, national origin? What role shall it be our privilege to play in these days of national and international crisis? To stride forward at the pace set by our past leaders or to wait quietly in the backwaters of history for the storm to pass? Has the First Object become only words to be repeated by chairpersons at our public lectures, or is it to be implemented by our lives? Words alone are frail packages for human hopes, but words can also stir the conscience of humankind; they can incite violence or they can point the way to the constructive achievement of a genuine brotherhood.

It is my own conviction that we cannot – we dare not – evade our present responsibilities as Americans and as Theosophists to speak to the issues of our day, and the gravest of those issues is the one of human rights. *How* we may speak and *how* we act in this present hour of crisis are questions to which there are no single answers, and each of us must determine for ourselves the nature and extent of our commitment. The Society's First Object is a declaration of purpose; let us not forget it nor obscure it by standing aloof from its practical implementation.

In the famous letter from the Mahachohan, given as Letter 1 in Mr Jinarajadasa's compilation of *Letters from the Master of the Wisdom* (First Series), there appear these challenging words: "The white race must be the first to stretch out the hand of fellowship to the dark nations. ... This prospect may not smile to all, but he is



no Theosophist who objects to this principle." And the Adept writer continues: "He who does not feel competent enough to grasp the noble idea [of the Brotherhood of Humanity] sufficiently to work for it, need not undertake a task too heavy for him." However heavy the task, however long or difficult the way to its accomplishment, dare we shirk the burden?