

**A vision of greatness: the Theosophical view of the afterlife**  
**A talk by Rikky Rooksby who has also written this summary**

*The religious life is not a dull, grim drive towards moral virtues, but a response to a vision of greatness.*

Thomas F. Green, 1952. Quaker Faith and Practice (2.07)

**Limited concepts of the afterlife**

Concepts of the afterlife encountered in everyday conversation and in the media tend to be impoverished. One only has to think about how quickly in discussions sceptics evoke pictures of angels with harps on clouds in order to rubbish the very idea of survival. They also tend to fudge the question of whether the deceased person properly exists as a self-conscious being.

A common example is when people talk about living on in other people's memories of you, as if this were a consolation. This is clearly inadequate. First, each of us is only partially known friends and family. Second, their memories are themselves mortal. Third, this dodges (where it doesn't deny outright) the question: where is the 'I' who has died? Is he/she aware? If so, aware of what? A second example is the sentimental idea becoming part of nature; that we 'live on' in nature and become one with it. What does that really mean? The physical process is seen as a parallel for some kind of psychic decomposition. How can that be acceptable in terms of what we – let alone God - value about human individuality and the evolved, complex human person?

Likewise, in popular understandings of Christian belief there is much talk about the soul, and of 'saving' the soul, etc. But the relationship of this soul to our everyday consciousness is often unclear, leaving it almost as a kind of balloon we drag around with us.

**What would make a heaven?**

This makes an interesting alternative to the question: what is heaven like? and can assist our thinking. Sometimes we need to ask different questions about the afterlife.

A fascinating poem about the afterlife is Charles Causley's 'Eden Rock'. It describes a vision of his parents, apparently after death, looking as they did when they were young adults. The poem uses beautiful and mundane details (She pours tea from a Thermos, the milk straight / From an old H.P. sauce-bottle, a screw/ Of paper for a cork ...). The image of crossing the river at death is part of traditional Christian symbolism and also Greek mythology. But in the poem it isn't difficult to 'come across'. Some critics of the afterlife mock what they consider to be the

banality of accounts of meeting deceased friends and family. Causley's poem demonstrates that that is an inadequate response. Our connectedness to other people is a profound truth and therefore must be a component of what a heaven state would be. Instead of clouds with angels and harps we have (at least to begin with) an HP Sauce bottle and a picnic! This challenges our assumptions. The scene stands for all those good things in us which are personal and bound up with the life we've led. Spiritualism is full of accounts of a place called the 'Summerlands' which seems like a thought-created copy of familiar landscapes from physical life. It has always seemed to me a deeply plausible idea that, on a plane capable of being moulded by desire and thought, human beings at that level should go about creating an environment like an improved version of the one they once lived in.

But such a vision – recovering contact with people lost to us - cannot be the whole of heaven. Beautiful as it is, it could not satisfy us for ever.

### **Maps of the afterlife**

Maps are not only descriptive, they embody an intention. A map expresses an intention to look for something, to make a particular type of journey. A map of the London Underground helps a traveller get round London but it doesn't describe the surface of the city. This talk introduces the Theosophical map of the Inner Worlds which I have found both subtle in conception and useful. I consider it not as a definitive truth, but a good working hypothesis. It is an interesting map to work with when dealing a variety of spiritual experience and the content of various types of communications, etc. Granted a provisional credence, it can be worked with to see what clarity it can bring and how it might change your thoughts on this topic.

### **A brief introduction to Theosophy**

Theosophy was a late nineteenth century movement founded by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-91). She was a much-travelled medium with a philosophical turn of mind, who, with a small number of other people, set up the Theosophical Society in 1875. Belief in Christianity was by the 1870s suffering from the effects of Darwinism and evolutionary theory. People were looking for an alternative religious philosophy that could take the place of the Christianity that they had grown up with and which they thought had been fatally underlined. (The Society for Psychical Research is a similar late nineteenth century phenomenon.) Madame Blavatsky wrote a number of substantial books on esoteric philosophy, the best known of which is *The Secret Doctrine* (1888).

The Theosophical Society had three objectives.

1. To form a nucleus of the universal brotherhood of humanity, without distinction of race, class, creed, cast, sex or colour – quite a reasonable and progressive outlook for 1875!

2. To encourage the study of comparative religion, philosophy and science.
3. To explore the unexplained mysteries of nature and the powers latent in man.

Three fundamental propositions underlie early Theosophy:

1. There is an omnipresent, eternal boundless and immutable reality of which spirit and matter are complementary aspects.
2. There is a universal law of periodicity or evolution through change cyclical change.
3. All souls are identical with the universal oversoul which is itself an aspect of the unknown reality.

Theosophy is very much a synthesizing philosophy, drawing ideas from Ideas were drawn from Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity. It argued that the major religions were imperfect revelations of an underlying spiritual reality. Theosophy tried to provide the blueprint which underlay those revelations. It is possible to combine Theosophy with any of the major religions; they are not necessarily inimical to each other. It was not intended to replace those religions, as add knowledge to their practice. It had some popularity in intellectual circles at the beginning of the twentieth century. The poet W.B. Yeats, the Russian composer Scriabin, and the English composer Cyril Scott were influenced by it, and there are brief mentions of its concepts in E. M Forster's fiction and in the poetry of T.S. Eliot. It influenced later writers like Rudolph Steiner and Christmas Humphreys. Theosophy offers a fascinating and subtle map of the afterlife.

[First diagram 'The Planes'. ]

Theosophy is based on a view of existence as being divided into seven planes. The names come from Sanskrit. (English equivalents go up the right hand side of the diagram.) The first (lowest) plane is the world as we know it through the five senses, the material world of three dimensions and time. Then we move into the worlds / planes of the Unseen. These planes are composed of increasingly subtler forms of energy.

The second plane (going upward) is the Astral Plane. This is the plane of emotion, feeling and desire. It encompasses crude emotions such as hate and anger as well as elevated, refined emotions such as an appreciation and response to beauty, many forms of love and affection. Most of what we read about in the NDEs, after- death studies through mediums, psychic studies, etc., occurs at the level of the Astral.

The third plane up is the Mental Plane, which Theosophy divides into two. The Lower Mental Level is the level of the concrete mind, so normal learning, thinking,

using language and specific concepts, takes place on this plane. The upper Mental Plane is known as the Causal Level and is a more abstract level of consciousness which we touch more rarely.

The (fourth) Buddhic Plane is the level of Christ consciousness and the true beginning of the spiritual realms. Something of the Astral Plane's feeling is present but raised to an inordinate power here. What we think of as 'feeling' is actually a component of every plane, it's just that it is experienced in a more and more refined form as consciousness ascends the planes. Feeling and its higher equivalents is a bonding force that connects us to other people.

The Atmic Plane is a much more exalted level, and then at the top there are two planes which are more what we would consider to be a God level.

Moving up the planes consciousness becomes broader, more selfless, more blissful, and more meaningful. What makes the Theosophical map so potent is that it is continually saying to us: 'You think that was good: wait until you get to the next level!' repeatedly. This is a vision of greatness. It is a very inspiring vision.

In the Theosophical literature there are descriptions of what conditions are like on the various planes. I have added a little colour to the diagram to differentiate the planes.

[Diagram 2: Spark, Self and personality]

This map of the inner planes is missing one essential component. To remedy this, we have a second diagram which shows the human person as they always exist on the planes, from the divine spark on the highest but one level which projects from itself a Higher Self (called in Theosophy the Individuality) which in turn projects a small part of its consciousness into incarnation as a Personality. The Personality or lower self lives only one life and is mortal; the Higher Self experiences many lives and is immortal. This model emphasizes that we exist on these planes at this moment. This is important for concepts of the afterlife.

It has always seemed to me implausible that the self we experience in life could be introduced into a place called Heaven and will suddenly feel blissful for the rest of eternity.' In fact, even the very best of our experiences would be less than satisfying if prolonged and concentrated on. However brilliant they were, you wouldn't want to go on with them for ever. I was told once of a committed Christian who didn't believe in the afterlife on the basis that it would be awful to have to be yourself for the rest of eternity!'

There is no experience in this life which would give the measure adequate to be a heaven state for the rest of eternity. We're not equipped at the moment to have that kind of experience. That is one aspect to Buddhist talk about existence as suffering.

It does not mean we suffer all the time, but that there is a 'grit' in physical existence which we can never quite get rid of. There's always an irritant. In this life we have limited consciousness.

But suppose there are those brilliant worlds and heaven states, how do we get into the advanced state? The answer is that on every level we are already there. Death is the switch in consciousness from one level of the self to another. We couldn't be in a heaven state if we didn't already have the capacity of responding on that level. It is as if we're actually in a Formula One sports car but we think it's a Robin Reliant. This is for evolutionary reasons, to make us focus on the challenges of the here and now. We're supposed to do the small stuff. Too big an expansion of consciousness would be too powerful a distraction.

The human person taken as a totality is a being which exists on every level on the map, and always has done. Milton Thomas Benedict's NDE (mentioned by Rhonda Riachi in her talk) went radically further than usual. His centre of consciousness had moved rapidly up the planes because of his illness to a level that looks like the Buddhic Plane; for example, what he says about the 'web of life' and the inter-connectedness of consciousness as a lived reality. The human person in Theosophy is an extraordinarily large entity.

In diagram 2 the lower triangle is the human personality. This is the totality of your consciousness as expressed in the physical life. The term 'Ego' in Theosophy means the Higher Self of an individual. It is a projection from a divine spark which is one with the Godhead. The word 'Intuition' on the Buddhic Plane does not mean the limited faculty we associate with this term but something a thousand times greater.

In the Theosophical model, at death the physical body stops working; consciousness can no longer express itself through a physical body in time and space. You become conscious on the Astral plane. It doesn't seem entirely unfamiliar to be in this body because we're used to it in life, but we just haven't moved it anywhere. We know that experience is intensified by removing the physical body which blocks out so much by its density.

At death you find yourself on the Astral Plane and have to go through the process of gradually working off the more concrete and negative emotions accumulated through life – so it's a purgatorial experience, but not Purgatory in the Catholic sense. It's subjective.

There is no Hell but in the lowest levels of the Astral there are 'hell' states which are very unpleasant, but temporary and not part of most peoples' post-mortem experience. What one person has to purge is different from another because of contrasted life experience and actions. Consciousness gradually becomes more aware and more sensitive to other aspects of the Astral Plane. There are

descriptions of this in the Theosophical literature. The Astral Plane can be so enjoyable in certain respects that it is compared to much earth life as heavenly. But it is not what Theosophy considers to be heaven for the lower self.

The instantaneous Life Review phenomenon takes place as consciousness slips over. Then you go back to review your life at your own speed and digest life experiences. It can take quite some time. Then comes the 'Second Death' where the astral body is shed in the same way that the physical body was shed. It is an entirely painless experience with no terrors - a slipping away / letting go when the time is felt to be right. We have to let emotions go; we can't carry them further. Then a Heaven world becomes possible. The astral body disintegrates as the physical body does, and consciousness moves or re-tunes to the Mental Plane, going immediately to the highest heaven-state on the Mental Plane a person can function in. It is the one which offers the greatest bliss and for doing things that interest you. You find your own level. But this also is not permanent. And note that the true heavens are actually still on the planes above, only to be reached after much development.

Reincarnation is taken for granted in Theosophy. Human evolution has been downward into matter, and goes upwards taking with it all the experience gained. This is true on a collective and an individual level. The time that we spend on the inner planes out of physical life is much longer than the span of an Earth life. Every time consciousness moves up a plane it is also moving up within the self. You are already there but don't yet have the awareness to experience this. After a long time in the Heaven worlds the Higher Self (which is located on the Atmic-Buddhic and Causal Planes) decides it is ready for a new incarnation and part of itself re-enters the process of birth and life. Just before incarnation there is a flash of consciousness as the soul comes out of the heaven worlds. It sees the life it is going to lead spread out before it and something of its purpose. This may leave a residual knowledge in the lower self, which is felt in life as a destiny or a sense of going in the right direction for that person.

The heaven states on the Mental Plane still leave much to be experienced above them. You can learn to rise through meditation, possibly even up to the Buddhic level. At that point you don't just have empathy you actually look out from the eyes of other people – as if you were in their shoes.

Diagram 3 is called 'Unity in Diversity' with spokes radiating out from a centre. (Diagram 3)

In our present consciousness we are distinct from each other. We feel separate. As we ascend in consciousness the spokes become wider and we begin to get an overlap while still retaining our own individuality. A sense of union is experienced. The overlap becomes greater and greater until at the centre there is a merging while individuality still exists. You are looking in a particular direction.

You can look outwards or towards each other. Am I going to be absorbed? No, you're there anyway. You just need to realise it. The diagram shows an abstract spiritual idea given visual form. These images are powerful for meditation and can generate insights.

This model of the Inner Planes and the human person on them casts an interesting light on certain Quaker ideas, for example the admonition to "see that of God in everyone." The Theosophical map shows that this is literally true and not a metaphor. Recently there was some correspondence in *The Friend* which suggested that this should be changed to "That of Good in Everyone". This is a serious misunderstanding, and a dilution of meaning. It would reduce this expression to ethics and at times wishful thinking. Perhaps it is a good idea to try to see the good in people. But to see that of God means seeing more and seeing deeper, and that there may be that of God in someone even when the person has completely lost touch with this inner reality and is guilty of acts of extreme cruelty and evil. Theosophy insists that the Divine Spark is the inner light that lights all who come into the world. To say 'that of God in everyone' is not wishing to think the best of them; it is a statement in the same category as 'I have two arms'. The question is how and to what extent are we manifesting it?

A Biblical quotation that is illuminated by the Theosophical model is "No man cometh to the Father but by me." This need not mean that unless you're a Christian you cannot be 'saved'. It may be an articulation of Christ Consciousness as the Higher Self. You have to go through the initiations of those levels before you can attain to the highest planes.

With Quaker practice again, the saying 'where 2 or 3 are gathered together in my name there I am in the midst of them' can be understood as a description of a powerful and actual spiritual reality. In a Quaker Meeting, as people become still and emotionally calm, their consciousness rises. The possibility exists in a collective group, as minds become linked, that energy is drawn down. Meeting as an act of worship is an act of work. It grounds energy for the people in the room and for the world. Eschewing the emotionalism of some religious activity which is very much Astral in character because it stirs feelings, it can create an abstract thought form on the Mental Plane which attracts an energy from the higher planes which is in turn dispersed to the world.

More information about the Theosophical concept of the self and the afterlife are in A.E. Powell's paperback anthologies: *The Astral Body*, *The Mental Body*, and *The Causal Body*.