

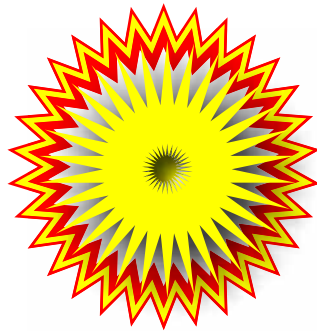


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CREATIVITY



COLLECTIVE

ENLIGHTENMENT

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SAHLAN MOMO



SPANDA



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STANISLAV PANIN

## NOTIONS OF EVOLUTION AND ENLIGHTENMENT IN THE LATE NINETEENTH AND EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY ESOTERIC LITERATURE



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### INTRODUCTION

**F**ROM THE 19TH CENTURY ONWARDS THE IDEA OF evolution has been playing an important role in Western culture. Charles Darwin successfully propagated it in the academia and today scholars discuss about “the evolutionary paradigm” in the sciences as the idea of evolution is nowadays related not only to biological evolution, but also to social evolution, regarded as a part of a more general process of evolution of the entire nature.

The Darwinian notion of evolution was not possible without a proper philosophical background provided by German classic philosophy, including the works of Shelling, Hegel and Schopenhauer. Hegel’s dialectics as well as Shelling’s *Naturphilosophie* popularized the idea of development as an internal quality of the universe itself. As well documented, Hegel’s works were inspired by esoteric sources<sup>1</sup>, and the idea of evolution was popular not only in the academia, but also among the different esoteric circles of that time. The prominent figures who focused on the idea of evolution and were involved into esoteric circles of the late nineteenth and the beginning of twentieth century, were Helena Blavatsky (1831-1891), Carl du Prel (1839-1899) and Konstantin Tsiolkovskii (1875-1935). In their works, the idea of evolution in biological sense developed into the idea of collective transformation of humankind that will lead to a new state of being. Blavatsky and her fellow theosophists called this future state of humanity “the sixth race,” whereas for

Tsiolkovskii it was a *luchistoe chelovechestvo*, a radiant humanity.

Although the terms were different, the concept itself was common in many senses, and the idea of enlightenment played a crucial role in it. Throughout the history of Western culture, the term “enlightenment” had different meanings, among which three concepts of enlightenment were especially influential: the Augustinian notion of enlightenment; the notion developed by the Enlightenment movement in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; and the Western acquired notion derived from the Eastern religious and philosophical doctrines.

### VARIETIES OF NOTIONS OF ENLIGHTENMENT

Augustine developed the concept of divine illumination (Latin *illumino*, literally to bring light) that became central to Christian philosophy and mysticism. By definition, divine illumination is a doctrine according to which, in order to gain the truthfulness, humans require divine assistance in their cognitive activities. In other words, Augustine maintains that the only way to access truth is through God’s direct intervention with the light of knowledge.

This Augustinian notion of enlightenment as a divine participation in the process of cognition became a widespread philosophical approach in the Middle Ages. However, Augustine did not conceive it himself and, moreover, it was not even Christian in its origins. The author who influenced many aspects of Augustine’s philosophy was Plato, and the theory of knowledge was not an exception. Parallels to the theory of divine illumination can be found in Plato’s doctrine of knowledge as recollection of the truth that implies direct perception of pure ideas, as well as in the talks of his teacher Socrates in which he told about the spiritual voice of the *daimon* that guided him in life<sup>2</sup>. On the other hand, Aristotle, who was a student of Plato, provide one more parallel to Augustine’s ideas, as he coined a concept of “active intellect” as an inner (“formal” in Aristotle’s own terms) part of human intellect and a source of all knowledge that he compared with light.

While Aristotle’s “active intellect” had obvious divine nature, Cicero wrote about *lumen naturale*

(natural light) or *lumen naturalis rationis* (light of natural reason)<sup>3</sup>, a much more mundane concept. In medieval philosophy these two notions of enlightenment coexists, and Thomas Aquinas in concluding his *Summa Theologica* that “[...] the light of natural reason [...] is nothing else than an imprint on us of the Divine light.”<sup>4</sup>

However, not all philosophers agreed with Aquinas’s understanding of correlation between natural and divine light. Moreover, the most common modern notion of enlightenment, which emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and provided the period with its name – the Age of Enlightenment, was quite opposite to those of Aquinas and Augustine. Authors of that time were often very critical about both church and religion and looked for a way to “replace theism with the light of reason<sup>5</sup>.” Therefore, the “light of natural reason” was praised at that time, while divine light was expelled from this new concept of enlightenment.

Although many authors of the period insisted on secular understanding of enlightenment and concentrated on scientific exploration of the nature, F. Yates has shown that their ideas have roots in such Western esoteric currents, such as Rosicrucianism. Yates describes Rosicrucianism as a movement that belongs to a period in the history of ideas “intermediate between the Renaissance and so-called scientific revolution of the seventeenth century<sup>6</sup>.” People involved in the Rosicrucian movement were sure that through the scientific study of the nature they could better understand God and his plan about the creation. They combined Hermeticism and Christian Kabala developed during the Renaissance with medieval alchemy and rationalistic philosophy providing a philosophical background for many seekers of that time.

On the other hand, in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, European thinkers adopted a new concept of enlightenment from Eastern religions, particularly from Buddhism, Hinduism and Taoism, where enlightenment “involves a release from endless cycles of existence.”<sup>7</sup> The Eastern notion of enlightenment as a spiritual insight resulting in liberation from mundane world influenced a number of Western philosophers, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Active cultural contacts with Eastern cultures took place in Europe as early as the seventeenth century, mostly through Catholic missionaries. In the seventeenth century, these contacts were mainly with China; the *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus*, a compendium of Confucian texts, appeared in Paris in 1678<sup>8</sup>.

Throughout the Age of Enlightenment, China was object of constant interest among Western thinkers. Christian missionaries tended to draw near Chinese philosophy like medieval philosophers approached those of Ancient Greece. They describe them as “Christians before Christ,” trying to draw a correlations between Chinese and Christian thought. As J.J. Clarke mentions, “one of the consequences of this was that they tended to portray the Chinese as a morally and politically sophisticated people, governed by wise and educated rulers who had established basic philosophical principles concerning morality and society on the basis of universal human reason<sup>9</sup>”, a portrait quite popular among philosophers of the Enlightenment. Leibniz, Voltaire, Adam Smith and many other thinkers of that period, shown sympathy to Chinese educational system, to their state governance and ethics.

In the nineteenth century, the interests of Western intellectuals moved towards at the time yet little known India, a very mysterious place, in harmony with critics of too rationalistic approach to the universe antagonized by Romantic Movement. Authors of that time often used references to Indian culture, as Arthur Schopenhauer, who was explicitly influenced by Buddhist and Hinduism. Authors of that time concentrated on Indian religion and mysticism. With Schopenhauer, the Eastern notion of enlightenment was transformed in Western philosophy, joining with more rationalistic notion of philosophical enlightenment through the means of human reason. Nevertheless, Schopenhauer’s understanding of enlightenment incorporated both a rationalistic philosophical approach and a spiritual one, as “St. Francis of Assisi and Jesus emerge [...] as Schopenhauer’s prototypes for the most enlightened lifestyle, as do the ascetics from every religious tradition.”<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, authors of the nineteenth century chose India to name it as a source of esoteric wisdom. However, they were not exclusively focusing on the Indian notion of enlightenment, rather they merged all three notions of enlightenment into one whole. They were not only interested in Eastern philosophy, but also thought about themselves as successors of the seventeenth century Rosicrucian and Ancient Greek philosophers.

#### ESOTERIC DREAMS OF COLLECTIVE ENLIGHTENMENT AND EVOLUTION

Although the three notions of enlightenment seems to be incompatible at the first glance, authors of esoteric literature of the nineteenth century looked for ways to bring them together. It was not too a com-

plex problem, as all of these notions had already something in common. Principally their sources in some esoteric and mystical currents. It was only natural that people belonged to such movements in the nineteenth century were aware of this link.

Helen Blavatsky, one of the most prominent esoteric authors of that time and creator of Theosophical Society, provides a great example of this. At the core of her work there is the doctrine she named “Budhism,” “Ancient Wisdom-Religion,” or “Theosophy,” based on the idea of collective enlightenment. It might be noted that “Budhism” is written with single letter *d* as in the very beginning of her opus magnum she explains that there is “the difference between ‘Buddhism’ – the religious system of ethics preached by the Lord Gautama, and named after his title Buddha, ‘the Enlightened’ – and *Budha*, ‘Wisdom,’ or knowledge (*Vidya*), the faculty of cognizing, from the Sanskrit root *Budh*, to know.”<sup>11</sup> Therefore, Blavatsky’s “Budhism” was not a historical Indian religion, rather “the inheritance of all the nations, the world over.”<sup>12</sup>

According to Blavatsky, humankind is involved into the continuous process of evolution of the whole universe, which developed through several stages, named “races” in Theosophical terms. Nowadays, humankind is moving from the fifth to sixth race. The key to this transformation is concerned with human enlightenment by means of “reawakening” through divine wisdom. That idea, according to Blavatsky, existed in almost all historical religions in their esoteric side, for instance, in the Antiquity in the forms of Hermes or Mercury: “Mercury is Budh, Wisdom, Enlightenment, or ‘Reawakening’ into the divine Science.”<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, Blavatsky was sure that also enlightenment in a more mundane sense is very important, the subtitle of her book was “the Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy.” It’s worth mentioning that Blavatsky’s co-founder of the Theosophical Society, Henry Olcott, created in India the Panchama Free Schools Society (nowadays known as Olcott Education Society), an educational branch of the Theosophical Society aimed to provide a free education in secondary school for underprivileged Indians. Both Olcott and Blavatsky were sincere in their attempts to support educational initiatives and to use academic knowledge to enhance the “Secret Doctrine.”

However, at the same time Blavatsky maintained that the academia itself needed to be “enlightened” by esoteric knowledge, as the academia was wrong when it confused materialism, which is a philosophical position, with the science. According to her, Theosophy can offer another, better and deeper worldview for scientific research that provides it with

a spiritual background and help compensate negative consequences of a materialistic approach to nature and society.

Similar ideas are found in the works of German philosopher Carl du Prel, a contemporary of Blavatsky. For du Prel, the most important question of religion and philosophy was the issue about the human’s place in the universe. If we understand this place, we can understand our primary goals and the future path of evolution. All philosophical and religious systems led us to better understanding this problem. “It cannot be denied, – writes du Prel – that the result of the changing of that systems was that now we understand more clearly if not the answer to the question, at least the question itself”.<sup>14</sup>

A pivotal point in understanding our place in the universe is, according to du Prel, to be able to feel ourselves not only a body, not only material beings, but also a soul, which du Prel calls the “transcendental subject.” This idea of realization of one’s true spiritual nature seems to be very similar to the religious idea of enlightenment in the Eastern sense of the world, although for du Prel it should be a result of philosophic and scientific inquiry rather than of religious experience.

However, this was not enough for du Prel and he further speculated about the place of the Earth and of humankind on a higher cosmological scale. “From the point of view of astronomy, the universe is the unity bind with the force of gravitation. Yet should we really understand the cosmic unity in mechanistic manner only, should all celestial object in fact exist in atomistic disunity? If the most powerful phenomenon of nature is not matter, but the spirit in all its varieties and forms, if nature is obviously simply attached to the spirit, it is difficult to assume that the connection is merely a connection of material masses of celestial objects. The spirit is a useless appendage to the cosmic order if it cannot reach the unity”.<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, the future evolution of the humankind is closely related to the development into the cosmos with the goal of unifying all intellectual beings that may live on other planets into universal spiritual unity. In other words, the evolution should lead the humankind towards the unity both within itself and with all other types of intelligent beings in the universe. No spirit, according to du Prel, can evolve solely. Instead, evolution is a process that implies collective enlightenment of all people about their true nature.

It is worth mentioning that the idea of the humankind future cosmic expansion has parallels in the early twentieth century Russian philosophy, mostly, in the cosmism movement represented by Konstantin Tsiolkovskii, a school teacher from Kaluga, Russia,



famous for his works on space travels that anticipated farther development of the field, and for which reason he was praised as the “grandfather” of the Soviet space programme, even though for he himself his technical ideas were only a part of his “cosmic philosophy.” Of note is that in early twentieth century Kaluga was the second important centre of Theosophical movement in Russia after Saint Petersburg<sup>16</sup>. Like the Theosophists, Tsiolkovskii was sure that humankind dwells in the continuous process of development. “The human beings have completed a great path from ‘lifeless’ matter to their current half-animal state. Will they stop on that path? Even if they will, it will not occur now, as we see how science, technology, everyday life environment, and social humankind organization are developing.”<sup>17</sup>

As Tsiolkovskii was a panpsychist, he was sure that every atom of matter – he used the term “atom” in its strictly physical sense – has consciousness. However, consciousness is asleep in atoms until it becomes a part of an intelligent being, like humans. Every atom throughout the time of its existence is a part of an intelligent beings many times. Atoms want to be happy, and it is our moral duty to provide them with a possibility to achieve this happiness. To do so, people should develop themselves to the stage when they overcome illnesses, wars, hunger, crimes and other unwanted aspects of human existence. On their way to this state, humans will transform into new, perfect beings that will be able to live directly in the cosmos and will need no food, but will gain energy directly from solar light. Tsiolkovskii called these beings a “radiant humanity”, in Russian *luchistoe chelovechestvo*, literally, humans consisting of light. In this case, the term “enlightenment” acquires a very literal meaning, because for Tsiolkovskii light is not a metaphor, but an actual substance of the future humans.

It is significant to recognize a number of similar ideas in the works of these three authors: Blavatsky, although born in the Russian Empire, travelled the world throughout her life and lived in the USA and India for a long period of time; du Prel worked in Germany; and Tsiolkovskii in Russia. Nevertheless, they demonstrated their devotion to common ideas, which supports the thought that their works reflected Western culture common aspirations.

## CONCLUSION

Different notions of enlightenment presented in Western culture had common roots in mystical and magical currents of antiquity and ancient East. Although some authors tried to separate spiritual and mundane notions of enlightenment, this common background seems to be highly influential.

Repeatedly it brought these different meanings on enlightenment together, and their linkage was explicit in seventeenth century Rosicrucianism just as well as in the esoteric literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

This is not just a coincidence, rather an internal demand of Western culture. If there is any constructive lesson here, it is, in the first place, that the future humankind progress will not be possible without the recognition that the development of our knowledge and our control over the nature has literally no meaning without our cultural and spiritual development. That development should lead us to a deeper understanding of our responsibility to nature, to our planet and to future generations. At the same time, we can reverse the statement and say that spiritual enlightenment should go hand-to-hand with development of our knowledge of nature, with implementing of the rational and critical approach, which is a great achievement of Western philosophy and science.



<sup>1</sup> Magee 2001, *Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition*.

<sup>2</sup> Pasnau 2015, “Divine Illumination.”

<sup>3</sup> Iannone 2001, *Dictionary of World Philosophy*: 172.

<sup>4</sup> Aquinas 2008, *Summa Theologica*: 2-1, q. 91, a. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Iannone 2001, *Op. Cit.*: 172.

<sup>6</sup> Yates 1978, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*: xi.

<sup>7</sup> Iannone 2001, *Op. Cit.*: 172.

<sup>8</sup> Clarke 1997, *Oriental Enlightenment*: 40.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>10</sup> Wicks 2015, “Arthur Schopenhauer.”

<sup>11</sup> Blavatsky 1893, *The Secret Doctrine*: 2.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*: 513.

<sup>14</sup> du Prel 1885, *Die Philosophie der Mystik*: 500.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*: 510.

<sup>16</sup> Hagemester 2012, “Konstantin Tsiolkovskii and the Occult Roots of Soviet Space Travel”: 143.

<sup>17</sup> Tsiolkovskii 2011, *Pu' k Zvezdam*: 97.



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