Theosophy in Denmark

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The Foundation of the Theosophical Society in Denmark

Modern Theosophy as introduced by Helena P. Blavatsky was brought to Denmark from England by engineer and Councilor of State G. Howitz (1821–1900). Together with Johanne Meyer (1838–1915), a nationally known women’s rights proponent, Howitz founded the first Danish Theosophical Society lodge, the Copenhagen lodge, on 17 November 1893. According to the bylaws of the Theosophical Society (from here on referred to as TS), Danish Theosophists were required to have at least seven lodges in order to form a national section. The TS in Denmark was therefore, in the first decades, formally organised as part of the Scandinavian section of the TS. Initially, progress and expansion was slow. It was not until 1905 that the second Danish lodge appeared, but gradually new lodges were founded, and by 1918, the TS in Denmark and Iceland together counted seven lodges and thus decided to leave the Scandinavian section to form their own section: Teosofisk Samfunds Dansk-Islandske Nationalsamfund (the Danish-Icelandic National Society of the TS). However, the TS expanded rapidly in Iceland at this time, resulting in the foundation of seven Icelandic lodges only two years later. At a meeting on 12 August 1920, these seven lodges decided to end their cooperation with the Danish lodges and instead to gather the Icelandic lodges into an Icelandic “national” section. Despite the fact that Denmark did not yet count the seven lodges required by TS Adyar in order to form a separate section, permission was granted from Adyar to form a Danish national section in the wake of the split with the TS in Iceland.

The Golden Age

The worldwide expansion that the TS experienced during the 1920s took place in Denmark as well, rapidly exceeding the seven lodges required to form a separate section – the number of lodges rose from six in 1918 to fifteen in 1928, and the number of members nearly doubled from 315 to 522 during the same period. Three factors in particular can explain this expansion. First, the
international popularity that Annie Besant (1848–1933) had gained through her different activities worldwide (her work for women's rights, for the liberation of the state of India and, of course, as the president of the TS) had a positive effect on the public interest for and opinion on the TS in Denmark. The popularity of Besant in Denmark became evident when she visited Denmark for the last time in 1927. The public interest in Besant was so immense that a media centre had to be organised in order to cope with the overwhelming attention from various national news media (*Theosophia*, September 1927). The second reason for expansion was the extensive effort devoted by General Secretary Christian Svendsen (1869–1944), who was head of the Danish section during most of the 1920s. His speeches delivered at the growing number of lodges as well as his letters and articles published in *Theosophia* (the Danish section's member journal at the time) helped to increase the commitment of the members in the local lodges and in the national section. This resulted in several new initiatives. For example, (a) public speeches on Theosophical issues were given nationwide, (b) internationally known Theosophists were encouraged to visit Denmark to make speeches and teach courses, (c) jumble sales were held to raise funding for TS Denmark, (d) Theosophical radio shows were broadcast weekly, etc. These new initiatives were highlighted on several occasions as particularly significant for the increase in membership in the Danish section in the 1920s. A third factor for growth in that period was the increasing focus on Krishnamurti and the expectations on him to be the coming World Teacher. Although not all Danish members of the TS supported this idea, the majority seemed to gradually accept that he should play a significant role in the future of the TS. As an example, in the 1920s, when attention on Krishnamurti's role intensified, Christian Svendsen insisted that the work and focus of the TS and Order of the Star (founded in 1925) were different and that they should therefore continue as separate institutions (*Theosophia*, February 1926). Only six months later, however, Svendsen seems to have changed his mind and signed a manifesto supporting Besant's ideas on the development of a world religion initiated by a coming World Teacher (*Theosophia*, September 1926). Despite some internal conflicts concerning this issue within the TS, the idea of Krishnamurti being the World Teacher caught the attention of a wider audience in Denmark, bringing new members to both the TS and the Danish section of the Order of the Star.