CHAPTER 70

Theosophy in Sweden

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Background and Formative Years

Sweden was a particularly fertile ground for the introduction of Theosophy, due to the philosophical idealism that dominated Swedish universities in the second half of the nineteenth century, and which had its roots in the particular version of idealism that had been formulated by the Uppsala philosopher Christopher Jacob Boström (1797–1866). The breakthrough of the Theosophical movement was also prepared for by the wide appeal of religious liberalism, especially among the so-called “believers in rationality”, Sw. fürnuftstroende, a group which had the journal Sanningssökaren (The Seeker after Truth; published in the years 1877–1893) as its main forum. In the last volumes of the journal, the förnuftstroende moved toward an increasingly Theosophical worldview. Several individuals who had actively worked with the journal entered the first Theosophical organisation to be founded in Sweden. One of them was Baron Victor Pfeiff (1829–1901), who came to function as the vice chairman of the Swedish Theosophical Society during the first years of the organisation, and as editor of its journal Teosofisk Tidskrift (Theosophical Journal) during the first two years. Another Theosophist who had been involved in the circle around Sanningssökaren was the writer and social democrat Axel Fritiof Åkerberg (1833–1901). He was the secretary of the society until he left in September 1891.

A person who played an important role in introducing Theosophical ideas in Sweden – without becoming a member himself – was the writer Carl von Bergen (1838–1897), who in 1887 began delivering a series of public lectures on Theosophy. In his earlier writings, he had attacked orthodox dogmatic Christianity, and was in this respect inspired by the critique of the Bible formulated by the Swedish writer Viktor Rydberg (1828–1895). Carl von Bergen had also met Blavatsky personally.

Theosophists themselves tend to single out Viktor Rydberg as the most important person to introduce Theosophy in Sweden. Rydberg was one of the most influential individuals in late nineteenth-century Swedish intellectual culture, and had a particular interest in religion. According to the historiography of the Theosophists, in October 1888 Rydberg invited a number of individuals interested in Theosophy to his home on Karlavägen in Stockholm. Among those present on that occasion was Dr. Gustaf Zander (1835–1920), the
originator of so-called medico-mechanic gymnastics and for three decades one of the leading figures within the Swedish Theosophical movement. The meeting at Rydberg’s home was the first impetus toward the formation of a Swedish Theosophical society, which was formally incorporated at a meeting at Gustaf Zander’s home on 10 February 1889. At this meeting seventeen people participated, most of whom were to occupy leading positions in the Theosophical movement; Rydberg, however, did not attend. Zander was elected chairman of the society. For the next two years, Teosofiska Samfundets Svenska Afdelning (The Swedish branch of the Theosophical Society) was formally a lodge under the European section in London. In 1891 the name of the lodge was changed to Svenska Teosofiska Samfundet (Swedish Theosophical Society). A number of members from Norway, Denmark, and Finland also joined, a fact that was acknowledged in 1893 with yet another change of name to Skandinaviska Teosofiska Samfundet (Scandinavian Theosophical Society), organised as a sub-section under the European section. What were previously conceived of as local branches were now reorganised as distinct lodges.

By the time the Society celebrated its fifth anniversary, it counted eight Swedish, one Norwegian, one Danish, and one Finnish lodge. There were 306 registered members, of whom 266 were Swedes, twelve Norwegians, eight Danes, and twenty Finns. In 1895, the Scandinavian sub-section had grown to such a size that it was promoted to the status of a section organised directly under the international headquarters in Adyar, India, under the name Teosofiska Samfundets Skandinaviska Sektion (Scandinavian Section of the Theosophical Society). In 1909 the name was changed again, to Teosofiska Samfundet i Skandinavien (Theosophical Society in Scandinavia).

For the first several years, the activities of the Society consisted mainly of study sessions, discussions, and lectures. The lectures were often based on articles in foreign Theosophical periodicals, but there were also lectures written by Swedish Theosophists. Quite often, such lectures would later be published in Teosofisk Tidskrift. The society had an official statement of purpose, which included the study of ‘Aryan and other Oriental literature, science and religion’; this was directly borrowed from the statutes of the international Theosophical Society, and was clearly also the main preoccupation of the Swedish branch in these formative years.

Countess Constance Wachtmeister (1838–1910), functioned as an important link between the Swedish and international Theosophical milieus. She knew Blavatsky personally, and had lived with her during the period when Blavatsky wrote The Secret Doctrine. Countess Wachtmeister was also very active in promoting Theosophy via public lectures in much of Sweden.