

**EASTERN UTOPIA — HOPES AND DISILLUSIONMENTS. WINCENTY
LUTOSŁAWSKI'S OPINION ON THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY'S
MOST INFLUENTIAL LEADERS**

By education, Wincenty Lutosławski (1863–1954) was a chemist (he started his studies at the Riga Polytechnikum) and a philosopher. He completed both courses at the University of Tartu; in 1885, he became a chemistry and philosophy candidate, and in 1887, he received his degree in philosophy. As observed by Adam Pawłowski, he was a prolific author of “scientific, popular-scientific, political and para-scientific” works (Pawłowski, 2010, 59). Lutosławski was a polyglot, publishing in a number of different languages — mainly Polish but also English, Russian, German, French, Spanish, and Italian. His works were printed in Europe and the United States. In scientific circles, his name is now recognised mainly due to his studies on Plato's dialogues — Lutosławski's stylometric method allowed him to delineate the chronology of the works, leading to the publication of his famous monograph *The origin and growth of Plato's logic. With an account of Plato's style and of the chronology of his writings* (London et al. 1897)¹.

It was probably Platonism that inspired Lutosławski, already in the early days of his career, to take an interest in theosophy and the theosophical movement. The preoccupation was neither consistent nor methodical. Nonetheless, it did have a certain opinion-forming effect due to the author's fascinating personality, his high status in the scientific circles of the day, and the number of his publications.

The main reason why I wish to mention his comments on the theosophical movement is the fact that the then still young researcher was one of the first to disseminate information about the views and works of the members of the New York Theosophical Society established in 1875. Shortly after graduating from the philosophy department, he published an article of a dozen or so pages devoted to this topic and entitled *Współczesny ruch teozoficzny w Anglii, Ameryce i Indjach wschodnich* [The contemporary theosophical movement in England, America, and East India].

¹ In the opinion of Tomasz Mróz, for many years, the book was what elevated Lutosławski to the position of the only Polish philosopher of global repute (Mróz, 2008, 98).

The text, which constitutes the main focus of the present article, was published in the popular Warsaw scientific journal “Ateneum”² in May 1888.

The “Ateneum” monthly, subtitled as a “Scientific and Literary Journal”, was created in 1875 by historian Adolf Pawiński (1840–1896) and lawyer Włodzimierz Spasowicz (1829–1906). Although topics related to Poland were predominant, the journal’s authors also aimed to familiarize their readers with advances made worldwide in a variety of areas — the concepts of literature and science mentioned in the subtitle were understood far more broadly back in the day. The editors were particularly interested in accounts from England, although a considerable number of texts were also published with regard to the USA. Lutosławski’s contributions to “Ateneum” consisted mainly, although not exclusively, of philosophical reviews (Kmieciak, 1985, 19, 39, 219). The philosopher was a well-travelled man, he conducted research in a number of great libraries and participated in numerous conventions, and was prone to share his observations, impressions and thoughts with the readers, both in journalistic texts and later his own standalone books.

The article on theosophy begins with general remarks on the newly emerging (in Lutosławski’s opinion) spiritual needs observed in the West. He writes: “In England and America there is now a curious movement in the sphere of religious belief and philosophy. The desire for religious belief is so overwhelming that many people are keen to join any sect whatsoever simply as a way out of the unbearable predicament of indifference and uncertainty. Some of those sects, despite the fact that the answers to the mysteries of existence and life they offer are highly unsatisfactory, are nonetheless able to attract numerous followers, e.g. the Salvation Army, while others are limited in their reach to but several parishes” (Lutosławski, 1888, 204). Lutosławski suggested two reasons for the state of uncertainty and frantic search for answers observed in the sphere we now refer to as “spiritual”. The first was the social stratification inherent in all civilisation. Those leading successful lives can turn to problems other than the satisfaction of their most immediate needs. Here, Lutosławski perceives an analogy to the situation observed in Ancient Rome, where such a search led to the more widespread interest in Christianity, which in turn precipitated its eventual dominance. In Lutosławski’s opinion, Christianity, in its various denominations, is no longer able to serve its original purpose: “Today, religions derived from Christ have lost much of their former appeal and fail to satisfy everyone; they are too full of myths and too far removed from the Master’s original teachings. Therefore, what is needed is a new Gospel suited to the new people, which is the reason why the social and religious movement so thrives in our European civilisation” (Lutosławski, 1888, 204).

² “Ateneum” was published between 1876 and 1901, new series: 1903–1905, reissued in 1908 (Kmieciak, 1985).

It is worth considering what — apart from the interest in a new, popular movement — may have influenced the choice of the topic for the article. Undoubtedly in the West, the popular interest in the Theosophical Society was relatively widespread — Lutosławski mentions e.g. lengthy articles published on the topic in French journals, as well as numerous publications by the Theosophical Society itself (Lutosławski, 1888, 206, 217). However, far more significant reasons seem to be related to directly to the author as such. In the late 1880s, due to a profound experience he described as a “metamorphosis of self”, Lutosławski’s interests turned to matters which also preoccupied members of the Theosophical Society. As mentioned in his rather lengthy autobiography entitled *Jeden łatwy żywot* [One easy life] (Warszawa 1933), in 1885, while reading through Plato’s *Symposium*, he experienced a transformation which left him as an “eternal and perennial spirit, diametrically separate from the flesh and therefore immortal and invincible” (Lutosławski, 1933, 109). As a consequence, he rejected the materialist standpoint that he had originally adopted in 1880 (Lutosławski, 1933, 123). The moment also marked the beginning of his new-found interest in the relationship between materialism, idealism, and spiritualism (Lutosławski, 1933, 120), it also inspired him to take up, after graduating from the philosophy department, an in-depth study of Plato. The “metamorphosis of self” did not directly prompt a return to Catholicism, it took another fifteen years for him to go down that path, and even at that point — as should be emphasized — Lutosławski refused to give up his belief in reincarnation (indeed, he continued to believe in it for the rest of his life). Although he turned back to Catholicism in 1901, for a time he continued to perceive the western tendency to draw inspirations from the East with relative sympathy.

In the article, when pondering the possible ways of coping with existential uncertainty, he pointed out that in their search for answers, people of the West tend to choose one of two paths: sects, which (as he ironically notes) “chew up” the Bible, or the thinking man’s path (the expression itself clearly suggests an evaluative bias) offered by psychology. As an example of the latter, he mentions the activity of the Society for Psychical Research established for the “study of spiritual phenomena” concluding that its search may provide an insight into human nature. One has to add, however, that the Lutosławski understood “spiritual phenomena” rather literally as “spiritualistic phenomena” or attempts to photograph ghosts, rather than as the actual study of psychological phenomena. He illustrates his comments by evoking spiritualistic experiences reported by the physicist and chemist William Crookes³, and the physician and bacteriologist Paul Gibier⁴,

³ William Crookes (1832–1919), English chemist and physicist, discoverer (e.g. thallium), inventor (e.g. Crookes radiometer), author of *Spiritualism Viewed by the Light of Modern Science* (“Quarterly Journal of Science” 1870), member of the Society for Psychical Research, Theosophical Society and The Ghost Club.

as well as the research (concerning among other things the question of will) conducted by Polish psychologist, philosopher and inventor — Julian Ochorowicz (1850–1917).

The establishment of the Theosophical Society and its branches in France, Germany, and Russia was also perceived by Lutosławski as related to the search for answers to the most profound questions. He supported this opinion by quoting the main objectives of the organisation: “1) to bring about the universal brotherhood of humanity; 2) to study and disseminate knowledge about the old Aryan civilisation and philosophy; 3) to investigate and develop certain powers of the soul, presently latent and undeveloped in most people” (Lutosławski, 1888, 205). With a hint of surprise, he notes the theosophists’ particular inclination towards “Aryan civilisation” — juxtaposing the same with the views of European researchers who, despite acknowledging its historical significance and value, nonetheless perceive it as inferior to later forms of civilizational development. Interestingly, in his works written two decades later (e.g. the book *Rozwój potęgi woli* [Developing the power of will], 1909), Lutosławski would adopt a standpoint similar to the one criticised in the discussed article and note the presence in European culture of the “Aryan spirit” manifesting itself through individualism. Moreover, he would argue Catholicism to be an “Aryan religion” and identify “Aryan contributions” in Catholic mysticism (Lutosławski 1909, 3–5).

In the article published in “Ateneum”, the depiction of the theosophical circles was generally rather favourable and critical comments are far outweighed by sometimes almost childish naivete which leads him to idealise the portrait of Helen Blavatsky (1831–1891). Lutosławski describes her as a “wife of a high-ranking Russian official who has spent a dozen or so years in East India and Tibet where she managed to gain the trust of the few eastern wise men still preserving the secret, esoteric teachings of Buddhism” (Lutosławski, 1888, 205). He also accepted — without a hint of disbelief — the claim that said wise men were indeed responsible for establishing the Theosophical Society through the agency of Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott (1832-1907).

The deliberations on the activity of the Theosophical Society led the author to a comparative analysis of the specificity of eastern and western science. Lutosławski identified differences both in terms of methods employed and the way in which the described phenomena are classified (in doing so, he evoked the history of logological thought, e.g. Immanuel Kant). Eastern science employs direct intuition to things, while western science investigates phenomena (not things, as the same are considered beyond reach) through the sensations they stimulate. The East relies on

⁴ Paul Gibier (1851–1900) French bacteriologist, who founded the New York Pasteur Institute, member of the Theosophical Society and author of *Le Spiritisme ou Fakirisme oriental* (Paris 1887).

the spiritual, the West — on the mind. A genius is capable of directly grasping the truth (in Europe, associated with art and morality), whereas talented people tend to verify laws⁵.

He continued by making a fairly approving, although not without certain reservations — reference to the book *Esoteric Buddhism* (London 1883) by Alfred Percy Sinnett (1840–1921), whose author — in Lutosławski's opinion — presented the advances in eastern science as consistent with Buddhist philosophy. A relatively lengthy part of the discussed article was devoted to the presentation of said book, it could in fact be concluded that the *Współczesny ruch teozoficzny...* was actually a review of Sinnett's work. One should, however, take note of Lutosławski's observation that the study of even the most ridiculous views, especially those enjoying considerable popularity, can also be a source of valuable knowledge.

His general opinion of the most prominent members of the Theosophical Society was, at the time, decidedly favourable. Lutosławski could at times be critical, but — in my opinion — to a highly insufficient extent. His main criticism of the works published by such authors as Helen Blavatsky, Henry Steel Olcott, or Alfred Percy Sinnett was that they lacked knowledge on European philosophical tradition: “Therefore, we would be hard pressed to find in these theosophical works a clear definition of their standpoint on any of the major systems that have been so vital to our civilisation. The theosophical works are written with deep conviction, zeal and devotion, but in the absence of complete knowledge. Neither Olcott, nor Sinnett⁶, nor Ms Blavatsky are philosophers, they but reiterate and translate into English the wisdoms of their eastern teachers”. In the article's conclusion we can read that “some of the [theosophical] works contain deep and noble thought, alongside claims that we may find unsubstantiated” (Lutosławski, 1888, 217).

Lutosławski's opinion of theosophy would change rather soon; in 1889–1890 and 1893–1894, he was engaged in intense scientific work in London. Some of that time was also devoted to occult literature which he then began to perceive in decidedly critical light. During his second stay in London he had a chance to become personally acquainted with Helen Blavatsky — a fact he would later recall in his autobiography. Lutosławski's memory clearly failed him in that instance (one should bear in mind that the autobiography was written some four decades after the described events and the author was nearly seventy years old at the time) — as Blavatsky had died

⁵ This distinction would have been highly satisfying to Lutosławski — he considered himself a genius capable of grasping “the golden thread linking the true thinkers of any descent and from any epoch”; the comment was made when the author compared himself to William James, whom he described as a man of “virtue and exceptional intelligence”, but not a genius (Lutosławski, 1933, 201–202).

⁶ All names of the Theosophical Society members in translations of the quotes from Polish language were unified according to the English spelling.

in 1891. Let us nonetheless assume that the error was merely chronological⁷. His account of the event read as follows: “I also became personally acquainted with Blavatsky and her retinue which seemed to me rather untrustworthy. As we conversed in her native tongue, i.e. Russian, I noticed her disregard for the her English and American admirers and that her only concern was with the funds she was there to collect” (Lutosławski, 1933, 207). The encounter further strengthened his scepticism, or indeed aversion towards theosophists.

In his later works, for instance the very popular “yoga textbook” (as *Rozwój potęgi woli* is somewhat inaccurately described), the first such publication in the Polish language that saw three reissues during the author’s lifetime (1909, 1910, 1923), we will find many mordant remarks about theosophists and (in the 1923 issue) a warning against putting any stock in their claims. In the 1909 and 1910 issues, Helen Blavatsky and Annie Besant (1847–1933) are mentioned alongside people who claim in their books to have been able to discover secrets inaccessible to others through the power of clairvoyance. Lutosławski writes: “The chaotically written works are of little use to their readers, as it is difficult to accept, on the sheer strength of faith, the convoluted musings of people whom common physicians tend to diagnose as somewhat delusional” (Lutosławski, 1909, 13). In the 1923 extended and revised issue⁸, the comments about theosophists (significantly — found already on the third page of the text, i.e. at the very beginning of the book) are even more blunt. Helen Blavatsky is described as an “adventurist” and the subsequent paragraph reads: “I was personally acquainted with Blavatsky and her successor, Annie Besant, I knew Olcott and Sinnett, I know Steiner⁹ and many likeminded false prophets, whose coming was foreseen in St John’s Revelation, and based on this in-depth familiarity with the people and their teachings I hereby warn my fellow countrymen not to put any stock in the exotic companions or nameless spirits making themselves known through those mediums”

⁷ While recounting his stay in London between 1889 and 1990, Lutosławski describes his intensive studies in preparation for classes in psychology, logics, and history of philosophy (at the time, he was an associate professor at the private University in Kazan), during which he investigated religious texts and studied “contemporary sects, the pseudo-philosophies of Ms Blavatsky, and numerous accounts of spiritistic seances” (Lutosławski, 1933, 176-177).

⁸ I discussed the discrepancies between the respective issues in detail in my paper: *Nieśmiertelna dusza, rytmiczne oddychanie i posłannictwo narodu. O podręczniku Wincentego Lutosławskiego* [Immortal soul, rhythmical breathing and national mission. On the textbook by Wincenty Lutosławski], (Gomóła 2017).

⁹ Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) Austrian philosopher, social reformer, theosophist and anthroposophist. Since 1902 he was formally connected to the Theosophical Society (as the head of German section), in 1904 he published *Theosophie: Einführung in übersinnliche Welterkenntnis und Menschenbestimmung*, in 1907 he organized Theosophical Congress in Munich. Around 1913, due to his conflict with Annie Besant, he left the Theosophical Society, and established Anthroposophical Society.

(Lutosławski, 1923, VII). All three issues of the book published during the author's lifetime sold out very quickly and one can assume that their readers were most likely people interested in the topics of "spirituality". Such people would have been familiar with the notion of theosophy — Lutosławski was therefore correct in choosing this particular medium to disseminate his warnings.

Remarks on theosophists can also be found in Lutosławski's last great work — *Metafizyka* [Metaphysics] — completed in 1951 and only published in 2004. Annie Besant is referenced twice in the book as an example of a person showing complete disregard for European philosophy (Lutosławski, 2004, 177, 182).

Lutosławski's depiction of theosophists reveals the development of the Polish philosopher's own thought, but also offers an insight into certain turning points in his biography — spiritual experiences, junctures and conversions. These events led him to reinterpret the works of people who yielded significant (if temporary) influence over western culture. In the discussed works, we will find no reference to the development of theosophical concepts or the evolution of theosophical thought, instead we may trace the transformation of the Polish philosopher's attitude to the movement started by Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott. Lutosławski's growing aversion towards theosophists coincides with his progressing distrust of eastern philosophy and spirituality. In the evening of his life, he seemed to distance himself from even the greatest works: "Philosophies written in distant lands, in days long gone and languages long forgotten, cannot still be accepted as absolute truths in the Europe of today. But were we to draw upon the past, it would be more prudent to put our faith in the words of Confucius or Lao-tse, than in those of Ms Besant or Rudolf Steiner" (Lutosławski, 2004, 177). The East, earlier regarded as a utopian spiritual space, alternative to the Western Christianity, with time became a source of threats for the European identity.

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