

MONTESSORI WAS A THEOSOPHIST

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In October 1947 *Time* magazine reported that world famous educationist Dr. Maria Montessori, though 'almost forgotten', was none the less very much alive in India where she was continuing to give lectures in the grounds of the Theosophical Society's magnificent estate at Adyar on the outskirts of Madras.¹

Accompanied by her son Mario, Montessori had gone to India at the invitation of Theosophical Society President, George Arundale, in November 1939 and had been interned there as an 'enemy alien' when Italy entered the Second World War in June 1940. The Dottressa was permitted however, to remain at Adyar to continue her teacher training courses and later to move to a more congenial climate in the hills at Kodaikanal.² At the end of the War she made a short visit to Europe but returned to India to undertake the first teacher training course at the new Arundale Montessori Training Centre.³ The Centre was established as a memorial to former Theosophical Society President, Dr. Annie Besant, whose centenary was being celebrated at Adyar in October 1947.⁴

In view, no doubt, of her continued residence at Adyar and the generous support the Theosophical Society extended to Montessori and Mario during the War years, the Dottressa was asked on one occasion under the shade of the famous giant banyan tree at Adyar, whether she had in fact become a Theosophist. The imperious Montessori retorted, 'I am a Montessorian'.⁵

Whilst in India Montessori appears to have disclaimed any close personal associations with Theosophy. Indeed, George Arundale was careful to note in his report of the 64th International Convention of the Society, that although Montessori had addressed the Convention on 30th December 1939, she was 'not actually a member of the Theosophical Society'.⁶ Theosophists, however, had always attended her training courses, adopted her Method in their schools, and found much in her educational thought that accorded with their own beliefs.⁷

Following her death in 1952, the Society President, C. Jinarajadasa, reported that Dr. Maria Montessori did in fact join the Theosophical Society on May 23 1899. Her original application had been found by the Recording Secretary's Office at Adyar. There being no Italian Section at the time, Montessori joined the European Section and was admitted by the General Secretary, Mr. Otway Cuffe.⁸ Her membership was later dropped, although the date is not known. Hidden within the pages of *The Theosophist*, knowledge of Montessori's membership of the Society appears to have escaped the attention of historians of education until the writer came across reference to it whilst researching material for a history of the Montessori movement in

India.⁹ A subsequent search in the Recording Secretary's Office at Adyar revealed Montessori's original application.

In the religious atmosphere pervading at Adyar, Montessori gave full voice to the spirituality which had always been inherent to her work. Elsewhere it has been inferred that Montessori's speeches at Adyar were purposefully 'couched in language appreciated by the Theosophical Community'.¹⁰

Kramer also refers to 'the deepening mysticism of her later years when she was associated with the Theosophists'.¹¹ It is now clear, however, that Montessori's connection with Theosophy was older than the Method. The Dottoressa thus may have been influenced by early Theosophical literature on education.

Indeed, in 1889 one of the Society's founders, the Russian mystic Madame Blavatsky, seemed almost to prophesy the future Montessori Children's Houses in the slums of Rome:

I quite agree that there is a great advantage to a small child bred in the slums, having the gutter for playground, and living amid continued coarseness of gesture and word, in being placed daily in a bright, clean school-room hung with pictures, and often gay with flowers. There it is taught to be clean, gentle, orderly; there it learns to sing and play; has toys that awaken its intelligence; learns to use its fingers deftly; is spoken to with a smile instead of a frown; is gently rebuked or coaxed instead of cursed. All this humanizes the children, arouses their brains, and renders them susceptible, to intellectual and moral influences.¹²

Montessori, however, made no reference to any early contact with Theosophical works. In India, Mario Montessori claimed that his mother 'introduced Theosophy to Italy by bringing an English woman, a patient of hers in touch with the cultural world in that country, and by collaboration in the translation of the first Theosophical books brought into Italy'.¹³ This evidence, never the less, sits uneasily with Montessori's admission to Theosophists that she had read Madame Blavatsky's educational writings - exactly when is not clear - but, 'she was surprised that so long ago there were educational ideas so similar to her own of today'.¹⁴

It is unlikely that the fiercely independent Dottoressa would have enabled Theosophists to claim her as their own by admitting that she had once been a member of their Society, or that she had been inspired by the writings of Madame Blavatsky. Montessori had also returned to Catholicism and Theosophy, with its belief in *Karma* and reincarnation, 'has been categorized "as being at heart Hindu" and hence antithetical to Catholic orthodoxy'.¹⁵ Indeed Jinarajadasa presumed that Montessori failed to acknowledge the efforts of the Theosophical Society in furthering her work, particularly in India, 'because she was a Roman Catholic, and to have mentioned the work 'The Theosophical Society', would have drawn upon her the wrath of the Catholic hierarchy'.¹⁶

Mahatma Gandhi once met Madame Blavatsky during his student days in London and actually became an associate member of the Theosophical Society for six months from 26 March 1891. Through reading *The Key To Theosophy*, he was stimulated to read Hindu literature and was thus inspired by India's an-

cient heritage.¹⁷ The fact that Maria Montessori once joined the Theosophical Society does not prove that her educational ideas derive from Theosophy. As with Gandhi, however, the evidence does suggest an early and possibly quite powerful influence on the development of Montessori's educational thought and practice. The assumption that Montessori's early work reflected nineteenth century Positivism needs therefore, to be reassessed. The apparent irreconcilability of her professed scientific approach with her mystical leanings, can now also be viewed in a new light. No doubt the discovery that Maria Montessori was a Theosophist, before she commenced her work in the Children's Houses, will stimulate further reexamination of the life and work of this most enigmatic educator.¹⁸

REFERENCES

1. 'The First Progressive', *Time*, 20 October, 1947, p.29.
2. Rita Kramer, *Maria Montessori: A Biography*, New York: Capricorn Books, 1977 ch.23.
3. 'Reception To Dr. Maria Montessori', *The Hindu* (Madras), 8 August, 1947 p.8.
4. 'A Life Dedicated to Service', *The Hindu*, 3 October, 1947 p.5 p.9.
5. 'The First Progressive', p.29.
6. George S. Arundale, 'A Review of The Convention', *The Theosophist* (Adyar), 61, 1939-1940, p.415.
7. See M.D. Lawson, 'Theosophy and Education', unpublished M.Ed. (Hons) Thesis, University of Sydney, 1972. ch.8.
8. C. Jinarajadasa, 'Dr. Montessori', *The Theosophist*, 73, 1952, p.217.
9. This will be a PhD. thesis, 'Montessori in India: A study of the application of her Method in a developing country' to be submitted to the University of Sydney.
10. M.D. Lawson, 'Montessori: The Indian Years', *The Forum of Education*, 33, 1974 p.40.
11. Rita Kramer, p.179.
12. H.P. Blavatsky, *The Key To Theosophy*, Los Angeles: The United Lodge of Theosophists, 1920 p.209.
13. Mario M. Montessori, 'The Knight of the Child', *The Montessori Magazine*, (Pilani), 1, 1, 1946 p.11. The Italian Section of the Theosophical

Society was not founded until 1902 under Captain O. Boggiani. See, J. Ransom, *A Short History of The Theosophical Society*, Adyar: Theosophical Publishing House, 1938, p.345. Boggiani's name appears in support of Montessori's original application to join the Society.

14. Rukmini Devi Arundale, 'Dr. Montessori's Ideals', *The Young Citizen*, (Adyar), 21, 1946, p.29.
15. M.D. Lawson, 'Montessori: The Indian Years', p.36.
16. C. Jinarajadasa, 'Maria Montessori', *The Theosophist*, 73, 1952, p.150.
17. James D. Hunt, *Gandhi in London*, New Delhi: Promilla, 1978, p.34.
18. Bob Petersen has presented a case for the revision of 'the canon of great educators': some educators have to be let go (as the Catholic Church dumped St. George), most of them have to be critically reassessed and presented anew, and a number of new great educators have to be brought into the canon', in 'Minimalist Schooling Educational Ideas of Vinoba Bhave', paper presented at A.N.Z.H.E.S. Conference, University of Melbourne, 1984.