

### *Theosophia*

An interesting and significant connection between philosophia perennis and theosophia has been made by Professor Karl von Fritz, a lexicologist, in *Paulys Real-Encyclopädie der Classischen Altertumswissenschaft* (Stuttgart, 1934). There he states in a two-and-one-half-page explication under the heading *Theosophia* (θεοσοφία):

Certain fragments from this excerpt can be found, furthermore, in various other mss. as well as in the one of Laur. 32.16 and related mss., and in the 1540 published work of Bishop Agostino Steuco, *de perenni philosophia*, prior to the time that K. I. Neumann discovered the complete excerpt in the Tübingen ms.; this was published by G. Wolff in the supplement to his issuance of *Fragments of Porphyry* (Berlin 1856) *de philosophia ex oraculis haurienda*.

To have found a single sentence in which the fragment alluded to (viz., “jetzt meistens zitiert als, ‘Tübinger Theosophie’”), Steuchus’s *De perenni philosophia*, and Porphyry were each mentioned is certainly fortuitous. But the connection between the terms cannot rest solely on the strength of one citation. Rather, a closer examination of the substantive content of the terms is needed.

Regarding both the concept and the term *theosophy*, one finds two very distinct notions, more often confused than not by those who are only vaguely aware of what the term and concept signify. The confusion stems from indiscrimination between the pristine, etymological usage and the later, sectarian usage that equates the term to the doctrines disseminated by leaders of the Theosophical Society, established in 1875. Hastings’s *Encyclopedia of Religions and Ethics* serves as a good example to illustrate this difference and/or confusion in usage: it contains *two* entries under “Theosophy.” The first is written by Annie

Besant, then international president of the Theosophical Society, and the second and more scholarly entry was written by Paul Oltramare, professor of the History of Religions at the University of Geneva. Furthermore, the entry for Theosophy in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1979), written by Professor Carl T. Jackson, contains a succinct formulation of this problem:

Confusion may be avoided by a recognition of two usages of the word. In modern times it has been widely identified with the doctrines promoted by the Russian-born religious mystic Mme. Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–91) through the Theosophical Society, founded by her and others in 1875. The term may also be employed in a more general sense to refer to a certain strain of mystical thought to be found in such thinkers as . . . [here a long descriptive list follows, which includes the names of Pythagoras, Plato, Valentinus, Plotinus, Proclus, Eckhart, Cusanus, Paracelsus, Bruno, Böhme, et al.].

Most indicative of all, with regard to this dual application of the term theosophy, is Webster's definition. It is indicative because of Webster's wide use and accessibility and the fact that the second edition is a descriptive—as opposed to prescriptive—dictionary. There it lists two meanings. The first is the generic usage: "1. any of various philosophies or religious systems that propose to establish direct, mystical contact with divine principle through contemplation, revelation, etc." The second is the specific or sectarian usage: "2. often T—the doctrines and beliefs of a modern sect (Theosophical Society) of this nature that incorporates elements of Buddhism and Brahmanism." Thus we have in the generic sense the *theosophia antiqua*, and in the sectarian sense "modern Theosophy." The two are, however, not wholly distinct and separate in meaning. The latter is simply the latest doctrinal reformulation of the former with its own culturo-linguistic idiosyncrasies and ideological permutations.<sup>55</sup> This distinction is not lost to modern Theosophists either: in a book entitled *Modern Theosophy* (Adyar, 1952), Hugh Shearman points directly to the distinction in his introduction, and then devotes the book to an examination of modern Theosophy.

One can today legitimately speak of "theosophy" without necessarily or particularly referring to the doctrines promulgated by the

renowned expositors of the Theosophical Society, just as one can speak of the Tradition, metaphysics, or the philosophia perennis without referring to these expositors. With regard to the philosophia perennis, however, there exists a greater similarity between it and theosophy (both antique and modern) than is normally supposed, and so, by correlation, between theosophy and the Tradition as well. This assertion would no doubt have met with stiff resistance by Coomaraswamy and particularly Guénon, as we shall see, but to borrow the metaphysical terminology of the latter, it is the objective of what follows to show that the differences between theosophy and the philosophia (sophia) perennis are more “substantial” than “essential.”

### I: THEOSOPHIA ANTIQUA

#### *The Concept*

The distinction between *concept* and *term* that we observed in relation to the philosophia perennis applies equally to *theosophia*. Jackson states that “The beginnings of theosophical speculation may be traced back at least to Pythagoras in the sixth century B.C.” Noting the universality of the concept, he further states, “it may be traced from the earliest Vedas . . . through the *Upaniṣads* . . . and the *Bhagavadgītā*.”<sup>56</sup> Thus, in West and East, the *concept* of theosophy, by which we mean the *content* of its definition as distinct from the term that now defines that content, goes back to the earliest records of speculative thought and, allowing a similar detemporalization and despatialization of ontological predicates for theosophy as for metaphysical principles, theosophists conclude that it also has no distinct historical etiology, that it is immemorial. However, its expressions, as Coomaraswamy observed about the philosophia perennis, do admit of historicity, so that historically we may say that theosophy had its beginnings in the West with Pythagoras and in the East with the *Vedas*.

Yet, depending upon the exegesis of the fragments remaining to us from antiquity, among other factors, there arise differences of opinion about both the origins and various expressions of theosophy. “Writers have generally fixed the time of the development of the Eclectic theosophical system during the third century of the Christian era.” So wrote Professor Alexander Wilder in 1869, six years prior to the formation of the Theosophical Society, in a treatise titled *New Platonism and Alchemy*. But this is disclaimed in his following sentence: “It appears to

have had a beginning much earlier, and, indeed, is traced by Diogenes Laertius to an Egyptian prophet or priest named Pot-Amun, who flourished in the earlier years of the dynasty of the Ptolemies."<sup>57</sup> Regardless of when the "theosophical system" just described by Wilder was first developed in the West, the point most relevant is that like the *philosophia perennis*, the concept of theosophy is far older than the term, the neologism. The "mystical contact with divine principle" has existed in recorded forms since protohistory. The concept of theosophy, though perhaps ill formulated and amorphous in structure in its earliest known manifestation, has no empirically traceable history prior to the early Mediterranean, Near Eastern, and South Asian records, according to theosophists.

Theosophy has a close relationship to what is commonly referred to as the "mysteries" or the "ancient mysteries." Various "mystery schools" or mystery religions flourished in the Near East and the Levant literally for millennia, going far back into antiquity with the Orphic and Mithraic mysteries, the Eleusinian mysteries, and those of the Kabeiroi, the cults of Osiris and Serapis, and extending up to the Ophitic schools of late antiquity; namely, those within the Gnostic worldview. Paul Schmitt, for example, in a paper entitled "Ancient Mysteries and Their Transformation," refers to the cult of Serapis as the "universal mystery religion," and claims that it, along with others in the late Hellenistic era, had undergone a major transformation: "This Alexandrian, late Hellenistic, late Roman theosophy (as we may call this kind of wisdom or *sophia*) embraced—and so annulled—all things; a mystical philosophy had gradually become the content of the mysteries."<sup>58</sup> Hugo Rahner, in a paper entitled "The Christian Mystery and the Pagan Mysteries," also connects theosophy with the mysteries:

We need only think of the systems of philosophy that in this period [first century C.E.] grew out of the work of Posidonius, all of them tending to become a substitute for religion, a consolation for this life, promising a life beyond the grave: theosophy and Neopythagorean theurgy, *sominum Scipionis*. The actual mysteries of the period, however, were still limited to particular circles and localities.<sup>59</sup>

Olttramare, on the other hand, spends almost all of his lengthy contribution to Hastings's *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* discussing

the Eastern expressions of theosophy. He says there that “The theosophical spirit has left a very deep mark upon Indian thought,” and proposes to trace the development of this thought in “Brahmanism (the *Upaniṣads* and the Vedānta, the Sāṅkhya, and the Yoga)” in addition to showing “the transformation of theosophy into religion (into Jainism and Buddhism).”

Finally, with regard to the concept of theosophy, the vast areas between East and West proper have had their expressions, such as the Islamic expressions of the Middle East. Henry Corbin’s use of the concept and the translated term has already been noted; in Islamic studies it is almost always associated with various synonyms in Arabic or Persian found within the texts and treatises of Sufism. In English works and translations, Annemarie Schimmel’s landmark work on Sufism, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, contains a chapter heading entitled “Theosophical Sufism,” and A. J. Arberry, in his work entitled *Sufism: An Account of the Mystics of Islam*, has a chapter heading called “The Theosophy of Islamic Mysticism.” Even Seyyed Hossein Nasr, a proponent of the works of Guénon and Schuon, uses the concept and term theosophy in *Sufi Essays*. Specifically, in reference to the teachings of Ibn ‘Arabī in the Eastern periphery of the Islamic surge, Nasr asserts that “It was here that his doctrines not only transformed the language of doctrinal Sufism but also penetrated into theology and *theosophy or traditional philosophy (hikmah)*.”<sup>60</sup> It is thus appropriate to conclude that the concept of theosophy is both ancient (perennial) and universally widespread, and substituting theosophia for philosophia in Coomaraswamy’s favorite formula, one might as accurately make reference to the “theosophia perennis et universalis.”

### *The Term*

“The origin of the term *theosophia*,” writes Jean-Louis Siémons, “is unknown, but certainly posterior to the classical period of Grecian literature.” Professor Siémons adds that the origin of the term “will perhaps remain unknown to us,” yet also cites what he believes to be a doubtful reference—the earliest alleged use—to the employment of the term by Apollodorus in the second century B.C. that appears in the University of California’s *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*.<sup>61</sup> What is known of the term is that it was first used in a systematic way by Porphyry (ca. 234–305 A.D.), a student of Plotinus in the Neo-Platonic school of Ammonius Saccas, in the late third century. Diachronically, the three

principal expressions of the term, all essentially related, were the Neo-Platonist, the Christian (as used by the Renaissance “German theosophists”), and the modern or late nineteenth- and twentieth-century theosophical movement.

With regard to the first of these expressions, the Neo-Platonic, the use of *theosophia* was within the context of classical Greek (sacred) philosophy, and its major proponents after Porphyry were Iamblicus, Proclus, and Damascius. A major pivot from Greek to Christian theosophy allied to this school was the writing of Pseudo-Dionysius or Dionysius the Areopagite, regarded as a Christian disciple of Proclus, whose work inspired both later generations of Christian mystics of the *via negativa* and the Renaissance European theosophists. Of the latter, the most renowned were Paracelsus, Böhme, Gichtel, Swedenborg, Eckhartshausen, and Saint-Martin. Of note here are Jacob Böhme’s publication in 1620 of *Sex Puncta Theosophica* and the foundation, in 1783, of the Swedenborgian “Theosophical Society” in London, among whose members were John Flaxman, William Sharpe, and F. H. Barthelemon. Finally, the modern expression of *theosophia* began with the writings of H. P. Blavatsky, who cofounded The Theosophical Society in 1875. This latter expression is noteworthy for establishing the ubiquity of theosophic principles, drawing as it did in equal measure on classical Buddhist, Hindu, and other non-Western esoteric traditions, as exemplified in the writings of theosophists like T. Subba Row and Bhagavan Das. It should be added that the modern theosophical movement did not spring into existence in a single leap from the Renaissance, but that a transitional period from the second to the third major expression appears in the historic record and has been well elucidated by Joscelyn Godwin in *The Theosophical Enlightenment* (Albany, 1994).

For the present, etymological origins of the term theosophy remain obscure; one is safe in attributing its origin to the Greek of late antiquity. It is certain that the term was not used by Plato or Aristotle or any of their predecessors, at least based on what survives of them. Among the published sources for tracing the origin of the term is Liddell and Scott’s *A Greek-English Lexicon*. There it gives the first appearances of the nominative term θεοσοφία as being in the *de Abstinentia* of Porphyrius Tyrius, the famous student of Plotinus and scribe of his Enneads, and in an anonymous Hermetic tract now called the *Leiden Magical Papyrus W* whose date is uncertain, though

estimated to be somewhere in the late third century (or early fourth century) C.E.<sup>62</sup> The term θεοσοφία also appears in succession chronologically in the *de Mysteriis* of Iamblicus (260?–330?), the *Theologica Platonica* of Proclus (412–485), and the *de Principiis* of Damascius (485?–545?), but the text in which the term first appears as a neologism must be chosen from the first two mentioned. The Hermetic/Neoplatonic flavor of the term is obvious and helps clarify the reasons for which the term is often found in connection with later theosophists, from the early Renaissance to the present, who have relied heavily on the Neoplatonic system.

The aura of sacrality in the term theosophy is explicit in its etymology. The *theos* (θεός) part of the term is that which helps distinguish it from philosophy and, more particularly, from the philosophia perennis of modern philosophy. In this it shares far more similitude with the Tradition: theosophy is the “innate Religion” described by Schuon in his description of philosophia perennis. And J. J. Poortman, who was Professor of Metaphysics in the Spirit of Theosophy at the University of Leiden, discusses this connection, though he avoids using the term philosophia perennis:

If one does not have in mind modern theosophy, dating from 1875, but the older historic theosophy, then one can observe that this connection between theosophy and profound philosophical thought has often existed. One may think, for instance, of Plotinus’ philosophizing about the One: Plotinus who, on the other hand, also knew religious ecstasies. Jacob Boehme, too, used to ponder on the paradoxes in the relationship of God and the creation of multiplicity, concerning, as he called it, “the contrarium in God.”<sup>63</sup>

The temporal division between this “older historic theosophy” as Poortman describes it and the modern Theosophy that began with Blavatsky’s works is also made by the unassociated phenomenologists. Most modern Theosophists—those at least who are aware of the historical roots of their principles—are for practical reasons proponents of the latest formulation of theosophia perennis, but typically make no distinction between the earlier and later parts of the principial nexus. To them the term covers the whole development of this thought, from pre- or protohistory to the present. Their detractors see it differently, and

thus resist using the term theosophy at all, due to the strong cultural or popular association between the term and the particular worldview commonly found within the Theosophical Society. This, we believe, explains the reluctance of Guénon and Coomaraswamy ever to employ the term, which is a perfectly functional and descriptive one. They were, consequently, obliged to find suitable synonymous terms and phrases, like Primordial Tradition, philosophia perennis, and so on. Furthermore, they were compelled to reintroduce into their terms the element or connotation of sacrality, which the term theosophy has “built in,” so to speak.

In the Avant-Propos of his book *Le Théosophisme: Histoire d'une pseudo-religion*, Guénon distinguishes between “Théosophie et Théosophisme,” claiming that his creation of the latter term was necessary to describe the doctrines of the modern Theosophists, due to their having desecrated the former term by misuse and misrepresentation. And the renowned Orientalist, Professor Max Müller, in the preface to his book entitled *Theosophy, or Psychological Religion*, indignantly flouts the then (1893) popular conception of the term with the following “explanation”:

It seems to me that this venerable name [theosophy], so well known among early Christian thinkers, as expressing the highest conception of God within the reach of the human mind, has of late been so greatly misappropriated that it was high time to restore it to its proper function. It should be known once for all that one may call oneself a theosophist, without being suspected of believing in spirit-rappings, table-turnings, or any other occult sciences and black arts.<sup>64</sup>

Müller grossly exaggerates the issue in this passage, since he was aware that (a) Blavatsky, who was alone in the production of paranormal phenomena, had ceased this activity years prior to this writing, and (b) the publication of Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine*, which was anything but a treatise on spiritualism and “black arts,” was primarily religio-philosophical or metaphysical in content.<sup>65</sup> But, regardless of the hyperbole, Müller's—and Guénon's—apologetics in using the term theosophy points to both this dichotomous “historic” and “modern” meaning, and the reluctance of scholars and writers to use the term for



fear their readers might confuse the former generic meaning with the popular conception of the latter sectarian meaning.

*Historical Succession of Theosophists and Theosophic Expression*

If one accepts the proposition that theosophy, like its twin the philosophia perennis, is centered within a detemporalized ontological predicate, then it follows that its proponents regard it as ever present; that is, that no period of history or era is without it. To this proposition theosophists would generally agree, with the exception that it tends to be a matter of degree—that certain periods of history are found to contain more effulgent flowerings of the theosophic worldview than others. Robert Ellwood alludes to these various “flowerings”:

The ideal of powerful cosmic harmony attained by interior illuminative breakthrough born of wonder was well known in antiquity by gnostics, neoplatonists, and mystery teachers. It was heard again in the mouths of Renaissance savants and kabbalists like Ficino, Mirandola, Agrippa, and Paracelsus, before it was fairly drowned out by the voices of the Reformation and modern science and technology. Occasionally the cosmic wonder tradition has emerged again, always in new guise, whether in New England transcendentalism, or in the strange tales through the centuries of European fellowships of Rosicrucians and Illuminati.<sup>66</sup>

If we were to extend the definition of theosophy to include its other Western siblings—for example, metaphysics, Kabbalism, philosophia perennis, Hermeticism, and Primordial Tradition—a chain of continuity much stronger than the one Professor Ellwood mentions could be shown, and it would not necessarily be an alternative to the Christian tradition, but rather at times confluent with it. Such a list of individuals, known to us by their extant writings, would include theosophist-metaphysicist-perennial philosophers from Heraclitus to Frithjof Schuon, though by no means would they all be comfortable with each other's company. Plotinus wrote against the great Gnostics, for instance; and Augustine wrote against the Neoplatonists; Blavatsky wrote against Swedenborg; and Guénon, as we have seen, wrote against Blavatsky. Yet in the compilation of such a list, one thing must

always be kept uppermost in mind: the essential similarities of the fundamental principles espoused by them all outweigh the externalities of their contingent expression—that is, the admitted permutations that do create actual and undeniable differences.

Others could no doubt be included, but the major luminaries in this list from early and late antiquity in the West would be Pythagoras, Thales, Heraclitus, Plato, Mencius, Philo, Clement, Ammonius Saccas, Origen, Valentinus, Plotinus, Iamblicus, Dionysius the Areopagite, Augustine, Proclus, and Boethius. From the medieval period to the present, and excluding the great Islamic doctors who influenced Western thought like Avicenna and Ibn ‘Arabī, the list resumes with Eckhart, Psellus, Ficino, Pico, Steuchus, Bruno, Cusanus, Paracelsus, Boehme, Nostradamus, Fludd, Bacon, Law, Swedenborg, St. Martin, Blavatsky, Mead, Waite, Steiner, Coomaraswamy, Guénon, and Schuon. These individuals may, at first glance, appear to be “strange bedfellows,” as the cliché has it. Yet what they all have in common, to greater and lesser degrees, is that they see certain sublime principles as perennial: they all subscribe to a certain set of interdependent “first principles,” though this set may be of somewhat differing arrangement and emphasis. Moreover, it could be argued that certain of the great schoolmen—Ockham, Bernard, Abelard, Duns Scotus, Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas, Eckhart, Bonaventure, et al.—could be included in this group, as well as the long roster of Christian mystics since Dionysius and the Cappadocian Fathers of whom Dean Inge and Evelyn Underhill have written so extensively, or the similarly profound line of European Jewish Kabbalists of whom Gershom Scholem has written. But the first genus listed above is sufficient to show that hardly two centuries in Western history have elapsed without the presence of a renowned theosophist, metaphysicist, or “magnanimous philosopher.” Thus the theosophia/philosophia perennis can be said to have an almost unbroken continuity of expression from the beginnings of Western thought. The latest and most comprehensive historical treatment of this unbroken continuity to date is Antoine Faivre’s *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany, 1994).

Notwithstanding the attempts of some less articulate theosophists to establish historical hypotheses by ahistorical means (e.g., Édouard Schuré’s *Les Grands Initiés* [Paris, 1889]), the abundance of extant tracts and codices of theosophic content from the past allows scholars to testify to this continuity, rendering such efforts as

Schuré's unnecessary. Until the last half of the twentieth century, any treatments of the historical continuity of theosophists and theosophic expression seems by a de facto ignorance to have fallen under the aegis of modern Theosophists themselves. In recent years, however, this situation has changed. Mircea Eliade, in a review article entitled "Some Notes on *Theosophia Perennis*: Ananda K. Coomaraswamy and Henry Corbin," defines terms and encapsulates the problematic study of esoterism in academia: "The *philosophia perennis*," he writes, is "the primordial and universal tradition present in every authentic nonacculturated civilization."<sup>67</sup> The scholarly study of these esoterica, the theosophia perennis, has slowly been gaining acceptability in the past five decades, and associations have been formed for this purpose among academicians. J. J. Poortman describes G. R. S. Mead's "Quest Society" as a forerunner to the Eranos conferences: "His further work in his society and magazine, both called *The Quest*, is continued to a certain extent, also chronologically, in the *Eranos-Conferences* of Ascona, Switzerland."<sup>68</sup> In addition to these groups just mentioned is another begun in 1974 by Henry Corbin and other European scholars, which they call the Centre International de Recherche Spirituelle Comparée. The lectures delivered at this annual conference are also published—just as those of the Eranos conferences found in the *Eranos Jahrbuch*—under the title of *Cahiers de l'Université Saint Jean de Jérusalem*. Most recently, the American Academy of Religion instituted a five-year seminar on Theosophy and Theosophic Thought, reflecting the influence of a growing number of professors and scholars who are teaching and/or writing about theosophy within academia.

Somehow, age legitimizes, so that what may be deemed spurious to contemporary thought becomes the subject of legitimate historical concern after it has aged a century or so. Thus, modern Theosophy is no longer so modern, and particularly is H. P. Blavatsky proper material for historical investigation. In the historical succession of theosophists and theosophic expression, both *theosophia antiqua* and modern Theosophy have found sufficient researchers in the current academic environment, to indicate another greater "flowering" of theosophic expression for our own *fin de siècle*. "We should also point out," writes Eliade, "that in the last decade a number of chairs in French universities have been devoted to the study of esoteric traditions."<sup>69</sup> And in a boldly fatidic statement, he further claims:

What interests the historian of religions the most is the resurgence of a certain esoteric tradition among a number of European scholars and thinkers who represent many illustrious universities. One is reminded of analogous events in the scholarly and academic milieu of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>70</sup>

## II: MODERN THEOSOPHY

Sydney Ahlstrom writes, "Theosophy took shape in America as a specific organized religion in 1875, with the founding of the Theosophical Society in New York."<sup>71</sup> This is, from the point of view of modern Theosophists, a mistake: they assert that modern Theosophy is not a religion, despite the common proclivity of scholars to stuff it into such a comfortable pigeonhole. From the very beginning of the Theosophical Society, repeated declarations from its leaders have restated this fact: Modern Theosophy is not a religion. Blavatsky, on the first page of her *Key to Theosophy*, in fact the first line on the page, declares that theosophy is not a religion. "Enquirer: Theosophy and its doctrines are often referred to as a newfangled religion. Is it a religion? Theosophist: It is not. Theosophy is Divine Knowledge or Science." And H. S. Olcott, in his inaugural address as the first president of the Society in 1875, claims it was a "noncommittal society of investigation," a body of "investigators, of earnest purpose and unbiased mind, who study all things, prove all things, and hold fast to that which is good," as opposed to religions that have "dogmas to impart, which under our by-laws we have not." Each international president has asserted the same fact, the latest being no exception: One-hundred five years and six presidents after Olcott, Radha Burnier, the latest in this company, stated in her first inaugural address, "The Theosophical Society is neither a church nor a sect. It has no belief to offer, no opinions or authority to impose."<sup>72</sup>

Yet, in the face of these repeated and unambiguous assertions to the contrary by modern Theosophists, scholars of religious studies still persist in labeling the Theosophical Society a religion, perhaps for the reason that it is something of an anomaly within religious studies and too difficult to "categorize" in any other way. The modern Theosophical Society is in fact comprised of the religious from every major world faith, with no exceptions. The Society's records show Christians, Par-