# 4

# *Theosophy*

If THEOSOPHY, in the broad, phenomenological sense we have defined it, has its origins in a way of being that is precisely a transcendence of history, as may be seen in the Platonism, Hermetism, and Christian gnosticism of the early centuries—including such authors as Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Dionysius the Areopagite, as well as in later Islamic theosophy as discussed by Henry Corbin and in such medieval Christian authors as Dante, Hadewijch, Eckhart, Tauler, and Ruysbroeck—then its appearance for us moderns is best represented by the tradition of Jacob Böhme. After Böhme, Christian theosophy takes on its most historically aware form, and far from being a forgotten province suitable only for scholars, in fact represents in an era of unparalleled spiritual confusion and forgetfulness an essential spiritual alternative within Christianity.

Böhme is certainly a figure often misunderstood. Indeed, even some modern authors who style themselves "mystics," and who ought therefore to know better, have seen fit to label Böhme "demented," a "deluded shoemaker." In so doing, however, without realizing it, they merely reveal their own



gnorance of what Böhme and the Christian theosophical tradition, of which he was a central figure, really signify.[1] Of course, one wonders what is worse—the calumnies of those who don't understand the theosophical school, or those who simply ignore it, relegating it thereby to the hidden body of knowledge that the West possesses, but does not recognize.

To understand Böhme and the theosophical school to which he is central, we need to recognize their historical context and significance. Böhme (1575–1624) was born on the cusp of the Reformation, and hence represented a mystical possibility inherent in Protestantism itself, as evidenced by the fact that Luther edited and arranged for the publication of the *Theologia Germanica*, a mystical work arising from the stream of German theosophy represented earlier by Eckhart and Tauler. Most people are taught that Protestantism originated merely as a revolt against Roman Catholic excesses or corruption, seeing it as a paring away of the ritual elements of the Catholic tradition and little else, save perhaps a focus on laypeople reading the Bible. But Böhme represents a profound dimension of Protestantism that is altogether too seldom discussed.

Originally, and particularly in the theosophical school, Protestantism represented a completely nonsectarian Christianity. This is of course ironic, given the proliferation of often bitterly oppositional sects into which Protestantism fragmented and congealed, and by which it is known today. But Jane Leade (1623–1704), the English theosopher, wrote of her spiritual mentor Dr. John Pordage (1608–1681) that he cared not at all for schismatic names like Luther and Calvin; he sought rather to focus only on what it means to be truly a

1. Figures as diverse and as purportedly "mystical" as Arthur Edward Waite and Annie Dillard have written very harshly of Böhme, thus advertising their ignorance of what he actually taught. Indeed, Waite frankly admitted that he had no idea what Böhme or Saint-Martin meant by, for instance, the Virgin, openly confessing why he denigrates Böhme, whom he did not understand.

Christian and to awaken the inward vision of the heart.[2] Indeed, all our theosophers either supported the sect or tradition to which they were born, or ignored sectarianism altogether. The following are only a few of the major instances: Böhme was Lutheran, Louis Claude de Saint-Martin (1743–1803) and Franz von Baader (1765–1841) were Catholic, and Johann Georg Gichtel (1638–1710) and John Pordage were nonsectarian.

All these theosophers were linked by a common understanding of what it truly means to be a Christian. All were rooted in the gnostic, visionary spirituality of Jacob Böhme; and all followed what must be called the "path of the heart." In their presence, we are far indeed from the exoteric fundamentalism currently associated with much of Protestantism—after all, one of Böhme's largest works is *Mysterium Magnum*, a massive commentary on the esoteric or theosophic meanings of Genesis that is probably about as far from literalist Bible-reading as one can imagine.[3] And yet, at the same time, Böhme impelled an enormously powerful and popular "underground" spiritual movement, called "radical pietism," which, based in simple faith, reverence, and profound mysticism, swept through Northern Europe and carried all the way to America.

In other words, theosophy highlights the complementary relationship between esoteric and exoteric, between spiritual practice and religious forms in Christianity. Without a gnostic or esoteric dimension—and the spiritual practice that informs this dimension—Christianity often becomes a matter of forms

2. See John Pordage, *Theologia Mystica* (London: 1683), pp. 12–13.
3. *Mysterium Magnum* represents the somewhat cloudy relationship between Jewish kabbalism and Christian esoterism: in it, one sees a kind of kabbalistic exegesis of the Bible, but in Christian theosophic terms. Much work remains to be done on the interfertilization of Christian and Jewish mysticism, a mutual influence much deeper than superficial histories would suggest, stretching all the way back to Jewish and Christian Gnosticism of the early centuries in the present era.



alone, just going to church on Sundays. Religious form without spiritual practice is what Böhmeans railed against, calling it "Babel." Conversely, because theosophy reveals the spiritual meaning of these religious forms, our theosophers affirmed the traditions to which they belonged—Tauler a Catholic, Böhme a Lutheran—seeing in formal religion not an opposition to gnosis, but its ritual complement and fulfillment.

All of this also suggests that Christian theosophy of the modern era is by no means a phenomenon that can be dismissed as easily as it usually is by scholars of theology, history, political science, and above all, the history of spirituality. Modern Christian theosophy embraces a unique combination of popular influence and profound metaphysical heights, of deep learning and enormous spiritual consequence among ordinary people in Europe and America. Certainly it is a rare spiritual movement that combines not only these two apparently dissonant elements—faith and intellectual power—but also an ecological or, dare we say, an *ecosophianic* perspective of nature and its meanings; a profound cultural conservatism (especially a preservation of medieval cosmology) and at the same time, a remarkable insistence on spiritual experience, not dogma—on spiritual realization, not institutional preservation.

Given all this, then—what was European theosophy, its doctrines, and effects? In essence, European theosophy stood for a radical emphasis upon the inward transmutation effected by a "new birth" in Christ. There are many other dimensions to theosophy, of course, and different theosophers each focused on particular aspects of theosophic spirituality, but all of them emphasized and drew upon a fundamental concentration on the inward transmutation of the soul and upon the revelation of spiritual truth. Indeed, one could even say that the whole of the theosophical tradition was an elaboration of the soul's nature, transmutation, and illumination.

This central focus on the nature of the soul is why the theosophical movement could incorporate—paradoxically—such

apparently diverse elements as both the incredibly learned treatises of Gottfried Arnold or Franz von Baader, for instance, and the popular movement of "radical pietism," which was not particularly intellectual, but was deeply concerned with leading a spiritual life in a community of like-minded spirits. If writers like Arnold or Baader represent the formidable intellectual power sparked by theosophy—Baader sprinkled French, English, Russian, Greek, Latin and other languages through his writings —"radical pietism" represents the as yet only partially mapped effects of theosophy in people's lives, the effects of a very profound and far reaching "underground movement."

Indeed, "radical pietism"—based directly in Böhme—resulted in many spiritual communities being formed in Germany and other European countries, as well as in America. Some of these communities were admittedly somewhat odd—one thinks of the eighteenth century German couple Ann Catherina vom Büchel and Elias Eller who, convinced that they were to inaugurate the kingdom of God on earth, developed a secretive community, Ronsdorf, where all the members lived in buildings oriented toward the Eller home, to which they prayed. The Ellers and their followers were convinced that the Eller's son Benjamin was Jesus himself. Their community continued for many years, eventually provoking something of a scandal when it was revealed to the wider public. On the other hand, most of the pious communities were not so sensational as Ronsdorf.

The most well known of these Böhmean associations in England was one centered around Dr. John Pordage (1608–1681) and his wife after their spiritual illumination in the early 1650s. It continued later around the remarkable mystic Jane Leade, whose visionary treatises were published from the 1680s until her death in 1704. Leade founded a nonsectarian group called the Philadelphians, which was controversial among its German affiliates because by assigning the group a name, they feared that Leade and her friends were



creating a kind of nonsectarian sect. The English and German theosophers of this time worked together informally, and there were a number of such associations or orders, many of which did not organize into formal communities.

Some of the more organized German communities emigrated to America during the eighteenth century, and it is remarkable that there were among the earliest settlers in America pious Böhmean theosophists, who lived in the American wilderness as part of lay, quasi-monastic orders. Among these emigrés was Johann Conrad Beissel, who sailed to America at age thirty, in 1720, and lived as a hermit in the American wilderness until a group of followers developed around him. Beissel, who was deeply influenced by Johann Georg Gichtel, organized a "Melchizedekian priesthood"—as he called the householders at "Ephrata"—who were celibate, and wore a modified Capuchin garb. Count Zinzendorf wanted the Ephrata community to become part of his own plans for an American community, but they declined, preferring their spiritual independence. [4]

It is interesting and perhaps instructive to consider that the greatest representatives of medieval theosophy—including Tauler and Hadewijch—were associated with or founded spiritual orders that were neither lay nor clerical orders, but like Beissel's group occupied an intermediate ground and were open to all according to their spiritual proclivities. Tauler was instrumental in the "Friends of God," for instance, an order that, like Hadewijch's order for women, engendered controversy because it was not directly a church institution. But this is precisely the point: theosophy itself is not institutional but experiential, and any *ecclesia* it embraces is necessarily an *ecclesia spiritualis.*

So it is not surprising that the German theosophers also engendered informal groups devoted to spiritual practice. One

4. See Chauncey David Ensign, "Radical German Pietism (c. 1675–1760)" (Ph.D. diss., Boston University, 1955), pp. 270 ff.

thinks for example of Johann Georg Gichtel's "*Engelsbrüder*," or Angelic Brethren, a name that recalls Dionysius the Areopagite and Origen, both of whom, as we will recall, suggested that human beings and angels were not so distant as some might think, and that the earthly hierarchy reflects its origin in the angelic hierarchy. We are reminded, too, of Jane Leade's English "Philadelphians." Some of these German theosophical groups were based on a twofold order like that of the medieval Cathars, who distnguished between the believers and the "*perfecti*" (those who were devoted wholly to spiritual practice), and one wonders if this kind of twofold order isn't inherent in theosophic spirituality generally. In any case, certainly the informal theosophical orders or groups were focused not at all on institutional hierarchy, but wholly on degrees of gnosis or piety.

These spiritual orders or communities common to early Christianity, to medieval Christianity (surrounding such figures as Tauler, Ruysbroeck, and Hadewijch), and to Protestant theosophy (surrounding such figures as Böhme, Gichtel, or Beissel), remind one of nothing so much as Sufi communities or *tariqahs* in Islam, which are also organized around gnostic figures, according to degrees of gnosis and piety, and are also often more or less "hidden orders" composed of people who maintain their outward place in society, but who are inwardly devoted to spiritual practice. What is more, like the Sufi orders, these Christian theosophical groups exist on the border between the institutional religious figures and the lay populace; and like the Sufi orders, they focus entirely on individual spiritual experience or gnosis.

The historian of theosophy may be tempted to focus primarily on its intellectual doctrines and its publications, thereby excluding the whole "hidden" *practical* dimension of the tradition that was effective in people's lives and not just an abstract intellectual influence. We must beware in considering theosophy that we not reduce it to mere cosmological doctrines that we can force into an unholy alliance with, for example,



modern physics.[5] Such an attitude would have greatly distressed Böhme, who was above all a pious man, not at all a "heretic," but someone who profoundly influenced many people toward *actually living* a more spiritual and inward life.

Indeed, while those interested in Böhmean doctrine may be inclined toward Böhme's first book, *The Aurora*, those interested in precisely how one moves toward a spiritual state in which one is capable of realizing those doctrines and truths inwardly for oneself will turn to Böhme's last book, *The Way to Christosophia*. In *The Aurora*, we see the germinal structure of Böhme's cosmological insights and metaphysical understanding, but in *The Way to Christosophia*, we see those insights applied to actual spiritual practice. We see how we should dedicate our life through daily prayers, and we see the soul's dialogue with the holy Sophia, the glory and presence of God.

It is surely an unusual book that, like the medieval *Cloud of Unknowing*, includes a consistent warning to the reader to approach its words with caution and with a pure heart, as we are repeatedly warned in *The Way to Christosophia*. Indeed, such words as these give the lie to those who would make of Böhme merely someone with cosmological insights derived from alchemy. Beware, Böhme warns, that "these words do not ignite the Wrath of God in your soul," for "this little book belongs only to those who wish eagerly to repent, and who have a desire to begin."[6] Whether one is an intellectual who finds in Böhme an elaboration of the same spiritual truths espoused by the other great theosophers of the Christian tradition, or a seeker of spiritual sustenance and gnosis (and sometimes these two

---

5. See for instance Basarab Nicolescu, *Science, Meaning, and Evolution, The Cosmology of Jacob Böhme* (New York: Parabola, 1992) a remarkable book by a French physicist that reveals a deep humility before, and an admiration of, the works of Böhme. See also Versluis, *The Hermetic Book of Nature* (Phanes Press, forthcoming), where I discuss this subject in much more detail.

6. See Jacob Böhme, *Christosophia*, "Vorrede des Autoris"; see also *The Way to Christ*, trans. P. Erb (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), p. 27.

are identical), Böhme's words apply: what matters first of all is your orientation, your piety, your spiritual intention.

Given this emphasis on actually experiencing the spiritual truths our theosophers espoused, one well may wonder how their lives reflected what they understood. While we cannot offer here a comprehensive overview of European theosophers, we can nonetheless offer an introduction to some of the major figures, and can certainly show how their lives and works manifested the same spiritual attitude or orientation found in Böhme's work, albeit in surprisingly diverse ways. While all the theosophers we have just spoken of may be termed nature-mystics, and all emphasized the soul's illumination by spirit, each represented a particular aspect of the school as a whole.

Certainly the most influential theosopher was Jacob Böhme himself, the "cobbler from Görlitz" who, born to humble circumstances in Germany, experienced a wonderful illumination while still in his twenties. Based on this experience he produced *The Aurora*, a manuscript that circulated among his circle and finally reached the hands of Richter, the local minister, who proclaimed Böhme a heretic and forbade him to publish. For seven years Böhme obeyed, but during this time deepened and elaborated his original insight even while he met friends who helped him develop his terminology and his scholarly background, writers such as Valentin Weigel and Jacob Spener.

After seven years, Böhme and his friends began to circulate and publish his later works. This outraged the Lutheran pastor Richter, but also drew to Böhme a widening circle of admirers and gnostics. Böhme continued to publish and to give spiritual counsel until his death, and although he died a member of the Lutheran church, local citizens saw fit to destroy his humble grave marker soon afterward. While Böhme's influence as a spiritual guide continued to expand after his death, so too the invective against him continued, and more than one observer has noted the parallels between



Böhme's own reception in this world, and the reception that Christ himself received.

After Böhme came Johann Georg Gichtel who did more to make theosophy a living, experiential spiritual praxis than perhaps anyone since. Gichtel, born in 1638 in Regensburg, Germany, was a religiously inclined, even visionary youth, who went on to study theology at Strassburg, but was unhappy with the rationalistic manner of thought espoused there and later became associated with a Protestant "Society of Jesus" (not to be confused with the Jesuits). Traveling to Holland after having studied law, Gichtel became acquainted with the writings of Angelus Silesius and, most importantly, of Jacob Böhme, an encounter that was to inform the rest of his life.[7]

From this encounter until his death in 1710, Gichtel was an indefatigable and deeply spiritual interpeter and practitioner of Böhmean theosophy. The informal center of a spiritual group called, as we have said, the "*Engelsbrüder*," Gichtel was in fact the spiritual guide or adviser to many Christians. After Gichtel's death, his friend Ueberfeld published a large collection of Gichtel's letters and other writings under the title *Theosophia Practica*, a classic work that was to deeply impress Louis Claude de Saint-Martin, the great French theosopher, nearly a century later.

Gichtel lived an outwardly quiet life, reliant on the largesse of friends and admirers, but inwardly his life was one of deep spirituality. He was convinced of prayer's efficacy by the spiritual rescue of a friend who had committed suicide, and whose soul Gichtel—through years of earnest prayer—saw freed from suffering. Gichtel and his friends subsequently formed a "Melchizedekian priesthood," whose prayers they recognized as having a powerful effect in this world and in the next, as intercession for the dead. Gichtel, though he was approached

7. See Bernard Gorceix, *Johann Georg Gichtel, Théosophe d'Amsterdam* (Delphica: L'Age D'Homme, 1975).

over the years by many women, remained celibate and unmarried, faithful to the holy Sophia, the Virgin Wisdom who appeared in revelations to him, as indeed she did to many theosophers both male and female.

Gichtel's was a very rigorous and profound spirituality, with many levels. His spiritual group, the "*Engelsbrüder*," had two levels, the *vollkommen*, or "completed," who were contemplatives, and the *fleischlichen*, or "fleshly ones," the householders. The latter were married, the former celibate, and Gichtel never tired of exhorting the faithful toward ascetic spiritual practice, not unlike the classic Eastern Orthodox teachers. In his writings, Gichtel revealed the most elaborate understanding of the "subtle human body" to be found in Christian esoterism, including a developed recognition of such subtle centers as the heart, the throat, and the crown of the head—as well as of the spagyric or Hermetic medicine using tinctures or essences. Gichtel's spirituality included all levels: bodily, subtle, and spiritual.

Gichtel was discerning in his assessment of other Christian esoterists—for example Jane Leade, the English leader of the Philadelphians. Philadelphian supporters tried to enlist Gichtel in their cause, but he declined after some consideration, opposing Leade's support of the *wiederbringung* or "restoration of all things" doctrine (essentially a belief in *apocatastasis*) observing that Leade had "knowledge of astral spirits, but had not penetrated to the 'light' region."[8] Louis Claude de Saint-Martin later reached similar conclusions, not only about Leade, but also about Swedenborg.[9]

8. Moreover, her works "can be suitable only for women who follow the same road." One can differentiate slightly male and female spiritual practice, which of course is reflected in sophianic and christic erotic mysticism respectively, since the former often attracts men more, and the latter women. Mysticism draws on and transcends erotic polarity. See Ensign, "Pietism," 111.

9. See *Theosophic Correspondence*, trans. E. B. Penny (Exeter: Roberts 1863), pp. 139 ff. on Gichtel; p. 146 esp., p. 161.



If Gichtel was among the greatest of the practical theosophers, Gottfried Arnold, born in 1666 in Annaberg, Saxony, was among its greatest scholars. Arnold was influential above all for pointing out with enormous erudition how the theosophical doctrines of the Böhmean school are in fact found also in the writings of the early Church fathers and mystics. In his book *Das Geheimnis der Göttlichen Sophia*, [*The Mystery of the Holy Sophia*] Arnold scarcely mentions Böhme, relying almost totally on quotations from early Christian writers. Gichtel, who was of course an advocate of the holy marriage with Sophia, the feminine aspect of the Divine—and of celibacy—was quite taken with Arnold's learned book on this great spiritual mystery.

However, Arnold got married—a bad enough mistake in Gichtel's eyes—and then, even worse, had children, about which Gichtel remarked, amusingly, that Arnold "ist in Kinder gefallen (has fallen into [having] children)." Arnold, of course, argued in reply that marriage is the "blesséd middle road," not at all a spiritual failing, and that while Gichtel's asceticism was no doubt admirable, it was not the path for everyone. This clash of views certainly has its analogues in other religious traditions: there are many ascetic Buddhist writings, but also such *sutras* as the *Vimalakirti Nirdesa*, which champions the householder *bodhisattva* Vimalakirti. There are many ascetic writings in Eastern Orthodoxy, but these can be coupled with the recent works of Philip Sherrard on the sacrament of marriage.[10] Or again, one thinks of the many Sufi orders that enjoin a householder life, combining marriage and asceticism. In the end, one suspects it will not be possible to conclusively resolve such a conflict, save perhaps to observe that Böhme himself was married and had children.

10. See *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakirti*, trans. R. Thurman (University Park: Pennnsylvania State Univiversity Press, 1976); see also Philip Sherrard, *The Sacred in Life and Art* (Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1990), pp. 108 ff., "The Nuptial Mystagogy."

During his productive life, Arnold wrote many influential books, including extensive Christian histories, in particular his *Unparteiische Kirchen- und Ketzerhistorie* (1699), the first modern theological history to take some forms of early Christian Gnosticism—particularly Valentinian Gnosticism—seriously. For Arnold, as one might expect, what mattered in theological history was whether a given writer manifested correspondences with the theosophic views we have been elaborating in this work. The true history of the Church was that of the *wiedergeborene*, those who are spiritually *reborn* through gnostic experience, a concept that includes and transcends phenomena connected with being "born again" in contemporary Protestantism.[11] The titles of his later works are indicative of the same perspective: *Historie und beschreibung der Mystischen Theologie* (1703), and *Theologia Experimentalis* (1714).

The next pivotal figure we will discuss is Louis Claude de Saint-Martin (b. 1743), a French theosopher whose works were published under the name "The Unknown Philosopher," or *"le philosophe inconnu."* Saint-Martin did not come to the works of Böhme until relatively late in life; his early works were written from the perspective of his theurgic school, founded by Martinez-Pasquales, a sect that employed theurgic rituals and "operations." Adherents of this school, called Martinists, or later, *Elects Cohens*, fought vigorously the growing atheism of contemporary France, and in this battle Saint-Martin played a major role.

Saint-Martin's public role began with his books *Des erreurs et de la vérité, ou les hommes rappelés au principe universel de la science*, (1775), and *Tableau naturel des rapports entre dieu, l'homme, et l'univers* (1782). In these works Saint-Martin explained the

11. Being "born again" in contemporary Protestantism has taken on a relatively superficial meaning, suggesting an emotional catharsis, and while Böhmean pietism certainly includes this dimension, it is part of a more profound *metanoia* one can affiliate with the Buddhist "turning about in the deepest seat of consciousness" as a definition of spiritua awakening.



traditional doctrine of correspondences between man and nature, and the idea of man as a microcosm. He sought to oppose the reductionist atheist assertion—which has by no means disappeared since—that religion originated in mere delusion inspired by a fear of nature's powers. His works alluded to the Scriptures, but were couched in a parabolic Hermetic language that was designed to lead a materialistic, atheistic or scientistic readership back toward authentic religion through its reference to God, for instance, as the active intelligent cause.

It was not until the mid 1780s that Saint-Martin was introduced to Böhme's works, but he immediately recognized in the theosopher "the greatest human light that had ever appeared," and the revelation *in toto* of what he had glimpsed in his earlier theurgic school. From this time on, Saint-Martin's works and life were increasingly informed by Böhmean theosophy, seen especially in such books as *De l'esprit des choses, ou coup-d'Iil philosophique sur la nature des êtres, et sur l'objet de leur existence*, (1800), and *Le ministre de l'homme-esprit*, (1802). In the latter book especially, one sees Saint-Martin emphasizing the necessity for human regeneration in the Logos, which is the Gospel way and the simple key to wisdom—something not seen in the spiritism of the day nor in authors like Swedenborg. In his later years, Saint-Martin learned German and translated several works of Böhme into French, not only as a service to French readers, but also to incorporate more fully those pivotal works into his own being.

During the years 1792 to 1797, Saint-Martin also corresponded with the Baron de Kirchberger of Bern, and in this correspondence, published in English by E. B. Penny in 1863, we see the gentle wisdom of Saint-Martin and his fellow traveler, the Baron, most clearly displayed. Here we get a sense of what it was like to live during the severe social and political upheaval of the French Revolution—which dispossessed Saint-Martin, a nobleman, and caused all manner of disruptions in his life. Yet he remained wholly devoted to the spiritual path

represented by Böhmean theosophy. We see Saint-Martin and Kirchberger learning of and differentiating among such diverse authors as Jane Leade and Eckartshausen, whom they saw as not having fully realized the higher levels of theosophy, and Gichtel, for whom they had the highest respect. The affection and mutual understanding of Saint-Martin and Kirchberger, who never actually met, is perhaps the best and certainly the most touching introduction to theosophy as a spiritual path.

If we were to characterize the overarching significance of Saint-Martin's work beyond what we have here suggested, it would be to say that in him one sees how an extraordinarily chaotic social milieu need not be a barrier to the theosophic path. This is a significance that should not be overlooked in the present era, itself not the most stable nor the most spiritually inclined of ages. Indeed, while we may not be experiencing quite what Saint-Martin called a prefiguration of the Last Judgment—the French Revolution—still we are faced today with unprecedented ecological, social, and religious fragmentation. The serene spiritual path of a Saint-Martin has something to offer in such a time.

From Saint-Martin we turn back to Germany, and to a theosophical current about which we have as yet said little, this being the confluence of Judaic Kabbalism and Christian theosophy. Jewish Kabbalism includes a whole range of esoteric traditions, from spiritual practices like the recitation of Divine names to various millennialist sects.[12] In Christian theosophical Kabbalism, however, we are in a primarily intellectual realm: whereas Gichtel and Saint-Martin were concerned with how to live the theosophical life, the theosophical Kabbalists focused on the intellectual speculations of Kabbalism in relation to Christianity, and on the ways that Kabbalism provided ammunition against contemporary materialism and

12. See Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1974) for an overview of Kabbalism, its doctrines and sects.



atheism.[13] This was also true of such earlier Christian Kabbalists as Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494), who held Kabbalism to confirm Christianity, and his student Johannes Reuchlin (1455–1522), who used Kabbalism in a similar fashion.[14]

In a sense, Kabbalism has been like Platonism and Hermetism within Christianity—absorbed into Christianity as a way of expressing theosophical truths. There was of course a "practical" Kabbalism as seen in the *De occulta philosophia* of H. Cornelius Agrippa, and in many other "underground" books that emerged later and were responsible for the widespread and often erroneous connection between Kabbala and magic or witchcraft. This connection was strengthened in the nineteenth century by groups like the Golden Dawn, who focused on the kabbalistic "tree" of the Sephiroth as a center of magical practices. But such groups notwithstanding, there was a Kabbala much more given to speculative theology and mysticism, and it is to this "higher Kabbala" of writers like Isaac Luria that our German authors were drawn, just as Mirandola and Reuchlin before them were drawn to the doctrines associated with the *Zohar*.[15]

The first German theosopher in the Böhmean tradition to be learned in Christian Kabbalism was Friedrich Christoph Oetinger (1702–1782). As a young theological student, Oetinger encountered Böhme's theosophy and recognized in it

13. This is not to say that theosophers like Oetinger were uninterested in spiritual praxis—far from it. But Kabbalism appears in their writings primarily as a confirmation and deepening of spiritual truths in Christianity.

14. See Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man and Other Works*, trans. C. Wallis et al. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965); see also Johannes Reuchlin, *De arte cabalistica*, [*The Art of the Kabbala*], trans. M. and S. Goodman (New York: Abaris, 1983).

15. It is sometimes said that Reuchlin was attracted to a "practical Kabbalah," which is of course true; but he would have been less than enthusiastic about the unreligious use to which the Kabbalah was put by those less interested in religion than in magic. Reuchlin was certainly more interested in Christian Kabbalistic mysticism than in what we see appearing later in groups like the Golden Dawn.

"the true theology." His publications on this subject followed for nearly fifty years, from his *Aufmunternde Gründe zur Le-sung der Schriften Jakob Böhmes* (1731) to *Versuch einer Auflösung der 177 Fragen aus Jakob Böhme* (1777). But it is in his com-bination of various theological currents that Oetinger was most original, for he wrote not only on Böhme, but also on Swedenborg, alchemy, and various kinds of Kabbalism, of which he was made aware by Koppel Hecht of Frankfurt am Main.[16]

Oetinger certainly was not alone in his interest in Kabbalism, which was no doubt supported by such books as Knorr von Rosenroth's vast *Kabbala Denudata* (1677–1684), and Georg von Welling's *Opus Mago-Cabalisticum* (1735). Oetinger offers above all a confluence of Böhmean theosophy and alchemical symbolism with the speculative doctrines of Lurianic kabbalis—about which he wrote in, for instance, *Die Lehrtafel der Prinzessin Antonia*—drawing attention to very abstruse doctrines, including the concepts of Adam Kadmon, or the universe conceived as a cosmic human being, and of the essence of the Godhead.[17]

In this book Oetinger discusses the kabbalistic doctrines of the Zohar and of Isaac Luria: he writes of the doctrine of the "ain-soph, God the Infinite, before creation took place," and of the doctrine of the *tsim-tsum*, the Lurianic "contraction" and "opening up" in God himself necessary in order that Creation could take place. God the Infinite had to do this in order to allow for freedom of will; and through this contraction came about the Adam Kadmon, the macroprosopos: the Word that was with God in the Beginning.[18] Oetinger affirms the traditional kabbalistic doctrine of God's emanation of the world, and "Hence Light, the worlds of Azilut, Briah, Jezirah,

16. See A. Faivre, "Le Courant Théosophique (Fin XVI–XX Siecles)" in *Politica Hermetica* 7 (1993): p. 22.
17. Friedrich Christoph Oetinger, in his *Die Lehrtafel der Prinzessin Antonia*, ed. Reinhard Breymayer and Friedrich Häussermann (Tubingen, 1763; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1977), I.131 ff.
18. John1. See also Prov. 8.30 on Wisdom.



Asiah, and Adam Kadmon himself are not created, but rather flow out of God, so that they cannot ultimately be separated from their Origin."[19]

Oetinger, in affirming that "the things of the spiritual world described in the Bible are realities in the highest sense, more real than what seems real on this earth,"[20] expressed what may well be called a crowning achievement of his theosophical writing, the union of Christian Kabbalism and Böhmean theosophy, including the many theosophical streams that fed into these, as well as the work of writers like Swedenborg. For one may say that in a broad sense—and taking into account their many differences—all these visionary or esoteric schools were certainly affirming the reality of the spiritual and subtle worlds.

This confluence is why a modern critic can say of Oetinger that his *naturphilosophie* "derives not from abstract concepts or bloodless ideas, but rather out of concrete reality. Against the rationalistic and idealistic thought of his time, his work provides an excellent and healthy sense of reality."[21] This sense of concrete reality derives precisely from the nature-symbolism of alchemy inherited from Paracelsus, Weigel, and Böhme; it recognizes that nature is herself sign and symbol of the spiritual truths informing all existence. So even though Oetinger's work includes the heights of Kabbalistic speculative theosophy, it remains grounded in the cosmological insights of alchemy and spagyric medicine.

In Oetinger we begin to see a current that was to grow even stronger in Christian Kabbalistic theosophy: opposition to

19. Oetinger, I.133. He also writes, interestingly, "Abba ve Imma, or Father and Mother." These are masculine and feminine powers or heavenly *water of life*, which is part fire, part light, but with the intelligence of spirits. He refers also to the "woman Malkuth," and to the "birth of Rahel [sic] and Lea." *Lehrtafel*, I.134. See Gershom Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah* (Princeton University Press, 1987).
20. See Wehr, *Deutsche Mystik*, p. 290.
21. W. Hauck, in Wehr, op. cit., p. 292.

materialism, atheism, and mere rationalism, all of which are in fact linked together and emerge in Europe at precisely the time Oetinger was writing. Oetinger's use of kabbalism was, like his use of alchemical principles, designed to show that Christianity was not a matter merely of "belief" as opposed to rational knowledge, but rather consisted in principles to be found "outside" Christianity proper, in Judaic Kabbalism and in the Hermetic disciplines traceable to Hermes Trismegistus as well.[22]

Certainly the crowning achievement in the fusion of Christianity and Kabbalism in the battle against materialism was the work of Franz Josef Molitor, whose four volume series *Philosophie der Geschichte, oder Über die Tradition* [*Philosophy of History, or On Tradition*] (1827–1853) was the most erudite and profound consideration of Kabbalism's significance for Christians through the nineteenth century.[23] Even in the twentieth century, with the many discoveries of more recent scholarship, Gershom Scholem affirmed the importance of this work and the insights it contains for scholars.[24]

Molitor argues that although all orthodox Christian theology derives from Judaism, more or less, this relation between the two traditions is not alive or sufficient any more. In the battle against formal rationalism and the scientistic worldview, he asserts, we need a spiritual rebirth of theology. Judaism alone can explain certain aspects of Christendom's world-historical nature, and can open for us the natural world as understood in antiquity.[25] He discusses "the speculative way of the common principles of theosophy, namely the teaching of the

22. See Ernst Benz, "Die Naturtheologie Friedrich Christoph Oetingers," in *Epochen der Naturmystik, Hermetische Tradition im wissenschaftlichen Fortshritt*, ed. A. Faivre (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 1979), p. 275.
23. Molitor, *Philosophie der Geschichte*, op. cit. Direct quotations from Hebrew, II, pp.242 ff.
24. See Scholem, *Kabbalah*, op. cit., 200–201.
25. Molitor II, pp.6–10.



eternal absolute Godhead, . . . the teaching of the original Creation and of the primordially pure relation of the Creature to the Godhead."[26]

The modern, scientific, materialistic worldview derives, Molitor writes, from an extension or intensification of the primordial Fall of Humanity that resulted in our human existence, and our task is to "reverse" this Fall. Theosophy is the path to such a reversal. "With this inward separation [of the Fall]," Molitor asserts, "the outward man is bound in earthly space and time relationships; and thereby separate for him are the outer from the inner, the earthly from the heavenly realm."[27] Hence, he affirms, writing of the transcendent archetypes reflected in nature:

> Each really-existent creaturely essence exists thus in a living Form. However, in our current fallen condition, it is no longer easily possible to know the inner qualitative essence of things. . . which is only possible via the holy language. We have become concerned only with the outward "objective," quantitative relationships among things; we have forgotten that the outer forms or signatures of things reveal the world of their inner, spiritual qualities.[28]

True science consists in coming to realize these inner, spiritual qualities and in moving from a condition of disunion, quantification, and confusion to a condition of qualitative awareness and spiritual unity.

Authentic philosophers and scientists, then, focus their attention not on quantity, but on quality, and this leads inevitably toward spiritual rebirth. Molitor writes:

26. Ibid., II, p.10.
27. Ibid., II, p. 224, §354.
28. Ibid., II, p. 82, §128.

> There are essentially two kinds of philosophers: those who study forms, and those who pay attention to actual content. These latter strive to more or less completely divest their speculation from pantheistic and naturalistic elements, try to follow further into the hyperphysical world their glimpse of it, and seek to clarify the true philosophy of the revealed religion. . . and so theirs is the science that leads to rebirth. This new grand approach has its richest, most preëminent exponent in Franz von Baader.[29]

It is not surprising that Molitor should offer such an endorsement of Franz von Baader, arguably the greatest expositor of Böhmean theosophy. While Molitor and Oetinger—drawing on Kabbalism and theosophy—were profound critics of atheism and materialism, it was Baader who offered the most complete synthesis of traditions, and it is to him we now turn.

Franz von Baader was born in 1765 in Munich, the son of a physician, and although he was originally trained to take over his father's practice, he went on to study mineralogy and the other sciences under such luminaries as Alexander von Humboldt. He spent four years in England (1792–1796), where he came to see at close hand the results of the industrial revolution and the creation of an industrial proletariat. In 1796 he returned to Germany where, in addition to attaining in quick succession a series of ever higher official positions, he was able through various chemical experiments to develop a patented formula for glass fabrication that brought him a substantial income.

During this time, he was assiduously studying Böhme and Louis Claude de Saint-Martin, as well as other mystics including Meister Eckhart and Tauler. Indeed, so thoroughly did he

29. Ibid., II, p. 51, §81.



come to know Böhme that August Wilhelm Schlegel called him "*Boehmius redivivus*," or "Böhme reborn," a complimentary designation still indissolubly linked to his name. It is of course as a theosopher that Baader is most famous, but his theosophical writings encompass an extraordinary range of subjects, from religious eros to the political concept of "theodemocracy," to a theosophical union of Catholicism, Protestantism, and Eastern Orthodoxy.[30]

As one might expect, given Baader's remarkable personal life and force of character, his ecumenicism did not remain only theoretical. As early as 1815, Baader had hopes of helping create a "holy alliance" between German, Austrian, and Russian leaders, particularly after the ascendence of Tzar Alexander I, who combined a deep spiritual piety with great tolerance. Baader traveled to St. Petersburg in 1822, seeking to establish ties between European and Russian Christianity. But unfortunately, his hopes were dashed in 1825, when Alexander I died under mysterious circumstances, his death linked to fears of the "Westernization" of Russia.

After the death of his first wife in 1839, Baader married twenty-five year old Marie Robel (1814–1877), with whom he spent his last years. During this time he continued to write, of course, and among his writings were attacks on the institution of the papacy. Although he remained Roman Catholic all his life and was not censured, he felt that the papacy was responsible for much of the suffering in Western Christendom, and championed a union of Eastern and Western Christianity that would by its nature entail synodic rather than hierarchic papal authority. Baader died in May 1841, in Munich, but his influence continued and extended far beyond Germany.

30. See Franz von Baader, *Sätze aus der erotischen Philosophie* (Frankfurt: Insel, 1966), introduction.

To this day, Baader remains the most profound model for the fundamental union of Christianity's various forms. His influence on Russian writers like Berdyaev and Solovyov is certain, but his effect was felt on Italian writers like Rosmini and on the continental forms of Romanticism, as well. However, Baader's primary significance is as a Catholic who, by way of his deep understanding of classical Greek sources, Böhmean theosophy, and Eastern Orthodoxy, was able to unite in his writing these various traditions by revealing their fundamental origin from a single source of spiritual experience, a key to which is certainly found in Böhme and Saint-Martin.

In many ways, Baader's work remains the crowning achievement of European theosophy, not least because the vision it offers opens out to wider horizons even today. In his work we see the union of what at first glance appear to be opposites: pious Catholicism linked to the "Protestant" mysticism of Böhme; alchemy and a "paradisal anthropology" linked to a profound sense of social concern; eros revealed as Christian religious aspiration; Orthodoxy linked to Catholicism and Protestantism. At first glance these might seem incompatible, but as we have noticed before in other contexts, seen through the spiritual perspective of theosophy, they are all aspects of a unified understanding as accessible today as in the early nineteenth century.

We have seen before how Gichtel emphasized avoiding marriage and remaining ascetic; and while Baader incorporates into his perspective a traditional asceticism, he also recognizes a higher dimension to human sexuality in his discussion of the "religious erotic." Like the twentieth-century writer Philip Sherrard—who also has sought to convey Eastern Orthodoxy to Europeans—Baader offers a whole "paradisal anthropology" based in a spiritual understanding of human sexuality and an inner "spiritual marriage" that restores to the theosopher the paradisal unity that is every human's birthright.[31]



"Transmutation is the key to Christianity and to the higher Physic," writes Baader.[32]

Here we begin to glimpse the magnitude of the challenge theosophy offers us. For as seen in Baader and the earlier theosophers, theosophy offers nothing less than a restoration of humanity's proper relation to the cosmos, nothing less than a profound science of transmutation through which all nature may be understood not in quantitative, but in qualitative terms. Theosophy offers spiritual understanding of sexuality and a new vision of human culture; a "reversing" of the Fall and a return to the paradise that has always been ours had we but known our true purpose. Far from being merely a footnote in Christian history, theosophy offers the resolution to more crises than we might at first think. To its cosmology and metaphysics we now turn.

---

31. See Sherrard, *The Sacred in Life and Art*, op. cit.
32. See Baader, *Sämtliche Werke* (Leipzig, 1851–1869; Aalen, 1963), XV.598.