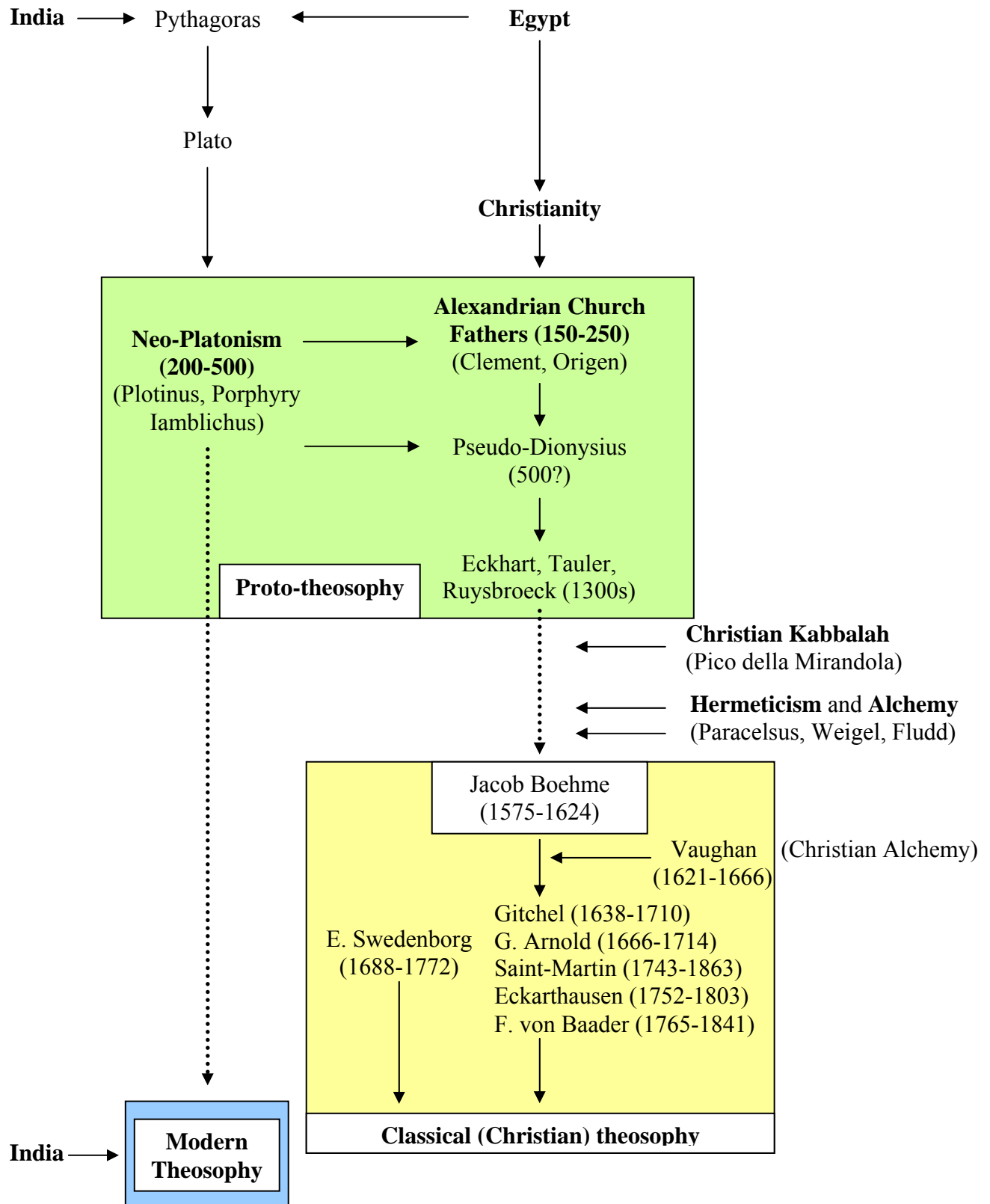


The Roots of Theosophy



1) History and Development of the Term

The term *theosophia* (θεοσοφία) was probably coined by the early Neo-Platonists (a philosophical school founded by Ammonius Saccas, who was born ca. 175), but it is only with Porphyry (234–305) that we find it in writings for the first time. He says that a *theosophos* (θεόσοφος) tries “by himself, to elevate himself, alone to alone, to a communion with the divine.”¹ Porphyry also speaks of Indian sages “possessed of divine wisdom (*theosophia*).” With Iamblichus (250–325), the pure mystical meaning given to the term by Porphyry acquires a more “occult” flavor being related to *theurgy*. He also uses the adjective *theosophos* (“wise in divine things”) as applied to the Indian yogis or sadhus.² With Proclus (412–485), theosophy becomes a name to specific doctrines.

The Christian Church Father, Clement of Alexandria (150–215), who is said to have attended Ammonius’ lessons³, used the word *theosophos* to talk about a writer “driven by divine inspiration.” Although during the Middle Ages the term *theosophia* was sometimes used in Christianity in a lower sense, meaning “theologia,” with Pseudo-Dionysius it regained a lofty meaning and was handed over to the future generations of European mystics who called themselves “theosophers.”

2) Meaning

Theosophia is a Greek term composed of two words: *theos*, meaning ‘god’ or ‘divine’; and *sophia*, or ‘wisdom,’ which may be translated as the ‘wisdom of the gods,’ ‘wisdom in things divine,’ or ‘divine wisdom.’ Theosophists (also called theosophoi or theosophers) claim to deal with a knowledge which is not produced by the rational faculty. They postulate there is a power higher than reason (an “interior principle” or spiritual intuition) through which we can reach Divine Wisdom. In other words, the teachings of Theosophy are not theological but Gnostic. In HPB’s words:

But all [sacred] books it [Theosophy] regards, on account of the human element contained in them, as inferior to the Book of Nature; to read which and comprehend it correctly, the innate powers of the soul must be highly developed. Ideal laws can be perceived by the intuitive faculty alone; they are beyond the domain of argument and dialectics, and no one can understand or rightly appreciate them through the explanations of another mind, though even this mind be claiming a direct revelation. (Blavatsky, “What are the Theosophists?” *CW II*, p. 103)

3) Common Elements in various Theosophies

We can talk about Neo-Platonic theosophy, Christian theosophy, and modern Theosophy, but scholars also talk about a Hermetic theosophy, a Jewish theosophy (found in the Kabbalah), a Muslim theosophy (mainly among the Sufis), a Persian theosophy, etc.

There is no doctrinal unity among theosophists, even within the same tradition. Brucker, talking about Christian theosophy, said: “There are as many theosophical systems as there are theosophers.” This is true for all theosophical traditions. According to the scholar Antoine Faivre, however, three common elements can be found in most theosophical systems:

¹ Dr. Jean-Louis Siémons, *Theosophia in Neo-Platonic and Christian Literature*, p. 5

² Iamblichus, *De mysteriis* 7.1

³ Dr. Jean-Louis Siémons, *Theosophia in Neo-Platonic and Christian Literature*, p. 11

- 1- The interest in the relationship between Man, God and the Universe.
- 2- The use of myths to explain reality.
- 3- The possibility of direct access to higher worlds.

Theosophy encourages an inner path, an intimate experience of the theosophist independent of any external framework or church. Man does not find God or the Divine in a temple but in his heart. Maybe this is why classical (Christian) theosophy emerged from Lutheran soil, since the mediation of the church is very important in Catholicism.

4) Differences between Mysticism and Theosophy

Both mysticism and theosophy deal with the inner life and inner states. The mystic is not interested in the workings of the universe and aims at going beyond images, to reach a state of union with God. The theosophist seeks union as well, but he/she is also a spectator of the “mysteries of creation.” He seeks to attain new perceptions, images that are not created by the activity of the intellect.

Theosophical teachings are thus both mystical and metaphysical. Theosophical metaphysics, however, is not an intellectual endeavor or curiosity. Human beings (microcosm) are an expression and reflection of the universe (macrocosm), containing in them every element present in the cosmos. By knowing the universe we get to know our true nature and potentiality.

5) Theosophists, theosophers, and theosophoi

Modern Theosophists and Christian theosophers differ on their style and the reference books they use. Theosophists do not usually accept a personal God. In many aspects, they are more in tune with the Neo-Platonic theosophoi than with the theosophers.

For Theosophists and theosophoi wisdom is *attained*. No one is a born theosophos: he becomes such by long exertion, application to philosophy, self-purification and contemplation of the divine.⁴ In orthodox religion and, to some extent, in Christian theosophy and mysticism, the wisdom is bestowed by God—as He chooses—upon the prophet, in the form of a revelation.

HPB was not concerned with the “academic” way of approaching the subjects. When using the word “theosophy,” she was using it according to its meaning, not according to the traditions that had used it:

The Theosophical Society, then, does not derive its name from the Greek word *Theosophia*, composed of the two words “God” and “wisdom” taken in the dead letter, but rather in the spiritual sense of the term. It is the Society for searching into *Divine Wisdom*, occult or spiritual wisdom . . . (Blavatsky, “What is Theosophy?” *CW II*, p. 505)

Although she never claimed the Theosophical Society to be a continuation of the Christian theosophers, she did say that its work was related to that of the Neo-Platonic theosophoi and Eastern theosophy.

⁴ Dr. Jean-Louis Siémons, *Theosophia in Neo-Platonic and Christian Literature.*, p 24

While, as observed, one of our objects, it yet is but one of many; the most important of which is to revive the work of Ammonius Saccas, and make various nations remember that they are the children “of one mother.” (Blavatsky, “What are the Theosophists?” CW II, p. 100)

The chief aim of the Founders of the Eclectic Theosophical School [the Neo-Platonists] was one of the three objects of its modern successor, the Theosophical Society, namely, to reconcile all religions, sects and nations under a common system of ethics, based on eternal verities. (Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy*, Section 1)

But *real* Theosophy—*i.e.*, the Theosophy that comes to us *from the East*—is assuredly Pantheism and by no means Theism. Theosophy is a word of the widest possible meaning which differs greatly in Eastern and Western literature. Moreover, the Theosophical Society being of Eastern origin, therefore goes beyond the narrow limits of the mediaeval Theosophy of the West . . . (Blavatsky, “The Theosophist’s Right to His God” CW XI, p. 414, fn)

6) Theosophy as a Synthesis of Religion, Philosophy and Science

Theosophical authors usually showed a tendency to integrate different elements (many times even from other traditions) within a general, harmonious whole. Theosophy is globalizing in its essence.

Theosophy has in common with religious mysticism the emphasis on an inner path and direct perception. Also interested in the workings of the universe, the theosophist shares a common element with philosophy and theology. Remember, however, that theosophists do not reach knowledge by reason or faith, but by direct perception or spiritual intuition. The scientific approach is also incorporated in theosophy. Science was present in Christian theosophy through alchemy, and with modern Theosophy, through what is called the “occult science.”

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