

“Theosophia”: Origins of a Name

James A. Santucci

ANY
PARTICIPANT
IN
“DIVINE
WISDOM”—
PROPHET,
SHAMAN,
POET—
MAY BE
CALLED
A
THEOSOPHIST

IN THE MINUTES TO THE September 13, 1875 meeting of the formative period of the Theosophical Society, we find this statement:

At the suggestion of the Committee it was upon motion Resolved, that the name of the Society be “The Theosophical Society.”

The circumstances surrounding the formation of the society and the choice of the adjective employed in the society’s name are fairly clear in broad detail but not in specifics. For instance, the person who first suggested “theosophical” is not known. Henry Steel Olcott, the first president of the society and one of its founders, simply states that it was “one of us.”

Some have suggested that Charles Sotheran found the word in a dictionary; he was a member of a committee (which also included Olcott, Henry J. Newton, and H. M. Stevens) assigned to draft a constitution and by-laws—and to propose a name—for the new society. But these accounts are unsupported by any evidence so far as I am able to determine.

Be that as it may, “theosophical” was selected from a dictionary used by the committee members after numerous suggestions were proffered, including “Egyptological,” “Hermetic,” and “Rosicrucian.”

In 1895, after the publication of Olcott’s account of the formation of the Theosophical Society in *Old Diary Leaves* (volume I), Newton felt compelled to

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add details and correct misleading statements contained in Olcott's account. In an article published in the journal *Light*, Newton confirms the dictionary account and adds that the dictionary employed in selecting the name of the society, Webster's unabridged (American edition), contained a definition of "Theosophy" that aptly expressed the object of the society, which was to be "the searching, by physical means, for knowledge with regard to the Infinite." The definition contained therein was the following:

supposed intercourse with God and superior spirits, and consequent attainment of superhuman knowledge by physical processes, as by the theurgic operations of ancient Platonists, or by the chemical processes of the German fire philosophers.

Four years later, Mme. Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, one of the founders of the Theosophical Society and author of the two masterpieces of theosophical teaching, *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine*, repeated this definition in her article "What is Theosophy?" as an example of a "poor and flippant explanation" of the term despite the fact that it did mirror the opinions and goals of at least a majority of those participating in the meetings of September 8 and 13 that led to the formation of the Theosophical Society. For instance, the definition clearly illustrated the two goals of the new society: the practical and theoretical understanding of occult or esoteric truth.

Furthermore, the individual directly responsible for generating the enthusiasm and promise in achieving *both* goals was George Henry Felt, a man variously described as an engineer and architect and as a professor of mathematics, who was shortly to become the first vice-president of the new society. Felt claimed to have discovered the "canon of proportion of the Egyptians" which was the "key to the architecture of Nature," as well as the coincidental

secret of evoking the elemental or original spirits.

The latter "theurgic" claim seemed to have excited Olcott and others more than the "truth" that it demonstrated. It was Blavatsky herself who moved the early society away from this former tendency to emphasize instead the theme of the rediscovery of that esoteric wisdom shared by all ancient peoples. Still in all, the term "Theosophy" at present refers at once to the ancient "Wisdom-Religion" embodying the "higher esoteric knowledge" and to the methods that demonstrate the existence of such.

Theosophy was a searching for knowledge of infinite.

We turn now to the Greek origins of the term "Theosophy." In this regard, I have discussed elsewhere (*Theosophical History*, July 1987:107f) an ongoing project that has made it possible to call up complete and accurate information on the ancient Greek lexicon from Homer to approximately 600 C.E. The project, the Thesaurus Linguae Graecae (TLG), centered at the University of California at Irvine, is in essence a data base containing over 60 million words from the writings of some 2900 authors and 8400 texts. The original goal of the Project was to include no texts beyond 600 C.E., but funds were recently made available to continue the project until all texts up to 1453 were included. To my knowledge no researcher has ever consulted the TLG regarding occurrences of the Greek root *theosoph-* in the literature.

The information supplied by the TLG on the root reveals a number of forms occurring in the works of some twenty-two authors for a total of sixty-three occurrences. Authors employing the root all

Photo: USA Archives



H. P. Blavatsky

One reference, however, which remains in doubt regarding authorship is a fragment of a text contained in Felix Jacoby's *Die Fragmente der Griechischen Historiker*. The TLG ascribes the passage to the second century B.C.E. philologist Apollodorus but with hesitation. If indeed it is Apollodorus, then unquestionably this passage contains the oldest reference to the root *theosoph-*.

A brief survey of the root in its inflected nominal, adjectival, verbal, and adverbial forms reveals that "divine wisdom" is not limited to any one people. The "wisdom," for instance, is possessed by the Egyptians, Jews, Chaldeans, and the Barbarians. The "mystical theosophy" of the Egyptians mentioned by the Christian writer, Eusebius, refers to their worship of wolves, dogs and lions. The same author also states that the Jews are "full of all theosophy." Of special interest regarding the Barbarians is a passage from the Gnostic Bardesanes' *History of India* in which the theosophists of India, commonly known as gymnosophists, are divided into two groups, the brahmans and Samanaeans. The first group passes its "theosophy" on through heredity, whereas members of the second group elect to receive the wisdom.

Individual theosophists are also mentioned, most notably the Evangelist John, David, Dionysius, Plato, Penelope, Porphyry, and Iamblichus. Why they are theosophists is explained in two passages from Didymus' and Eustathius' writings. Didymus, in his *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, explains that David was a theosophist because of the passage in the text that has Solomon say: "You revealed to me the hidden mysteries of your wisdom." Elsewhere, Eustathius, the twelfth-century archbishop of Salonica, writes in his *Commentary on the Odyssey* that Alcinoos was a theosophist because he "knew the counsels of the gods." Or to put it more directly, a theosophist is one who "derives his knowledge from the gods." The Greek bard, therefore, is a theosophist according

belong to the Common Era, and include Clement of Alexandria (Clemens Alexandrinus, c. 150–211), Origen (Origenes, c. 185–254), Bardesanes (second and third centuries), Porphyry (Porphyrius Tyrius, c. 234–305), Iamblichus (Chalcidensis, c. 250–330), Didymus the Blind (Caecus, c. 313–398), Eusebius (fourth century), Themistius (fourth century), Flavius Claudius Julianus Imperator (fourth century), Cyril of Alexandria (Cyrillus Alexandrinus, c. 375–444), Joannes Stobaeus (fourth and fifth centuries), Salaminius Hermias Sozomenus (c. 400–450), Proclus (c. 410–485), Damascius (c. 480–550), John of Damascus (Joannes Damascenus, c. 675–749), Photius (820–891), and Eustathius (twelfth century). In addition, *theosoph-* appears in the *Concilia Oecumenica* (The Ecumenical Council at Chalcedon of A.D. 451), the *Doctrina Patrum* (seventh and eighth centuries), the *Papyri Graecae Magicae* (i.e., magical papyri texts; the dates vary), and the *Suda* (tenth century).

to Eustathius because of a comment in the *Odyssey* that explains the source of his songs: "a god planted songs of all kinds in my soul."

These passages from Didymus and Eustathius offer some insight into the grammatical relationship between the two members that constitute the compound: *theo-* and *sophia-*. "Divine Wisdom" entails a knowledge—not rational or speculative, in other words not derived from human cogitation—that originates from a "divine" source and presumably is concerned with some aspect or quality of the "divine." Thus, any practitioner who participates in "divine" wisdom for whatever purpose—the Hebrew prophet, the shaman, the poet or bard, indeed any individual who displays a wisdom that is judged to be suprahuman or paranormal—may be termed a "theosophist." An interesting example of one who possessed such wisdom was the hunter Scamandrius, the reason being that he was taught by the divine huntress Artemis to become the most proficient of hunters.

What conclusions can be made from the foregoing? From a strictly linguistic perspective, an idiomatic shift takes place in the compound *theosoph-* when used in its modern setting: modern here referring to the interpretation that H. P. Blavatsky, her colleagues and disciples have given to the term. To put it as succinctly as possible, *theosoph-* is a root that is best understood in Greek as a syntactic compound having few, if any, idiomatic overtones. In other words, the principal task for the reader of Greek is simply to determine the syntactic relation between the members of the compound. Would the compound, for instance, be a genitival compound (wisdom of . . .), a dative compound (wisdom for . . .), or an

ablative compound (wisdom from *theo-*). As shown above, the compound would best be considered in a majority of cases an ablative compound although it need not always be such.

Individual theosophists included Dionysius, Plato, Penelope, Porphyry.

With regard to the number of the first member of the compound, *theo-*, we would have to determine from the religious context whether it is singular (God; a god; god) or plural (gods; [some] gods; [all] gods). Sometimes, it would appear that the best rendering for *theo-* is as a qualitative adjective, "divine," thus setting up an appositional relationship with the second member of the compound. In all instances, however, the context will invariably give sufficient clues to the intent of the author.

Such is not the case, however, for the modern use of the term. Although there is a passing resemblance between the ancient and modern uses of *theosoph-*, the creation (or from another perspective: reestablishment) of an erudite and complex system as contained in *Isis Unveiled*, *The Secret Doctrine*, and other writings by Blavatsky and others under the label of Theosophy indicates considerable semantic aggrandizement. Consequently, the compound becomes more idiomatic. Thus, *theosoph-* is transformed from a semantically restricted, literal sense to a title for a particular system that encompasses and encapsulates this branch of knowledge. □