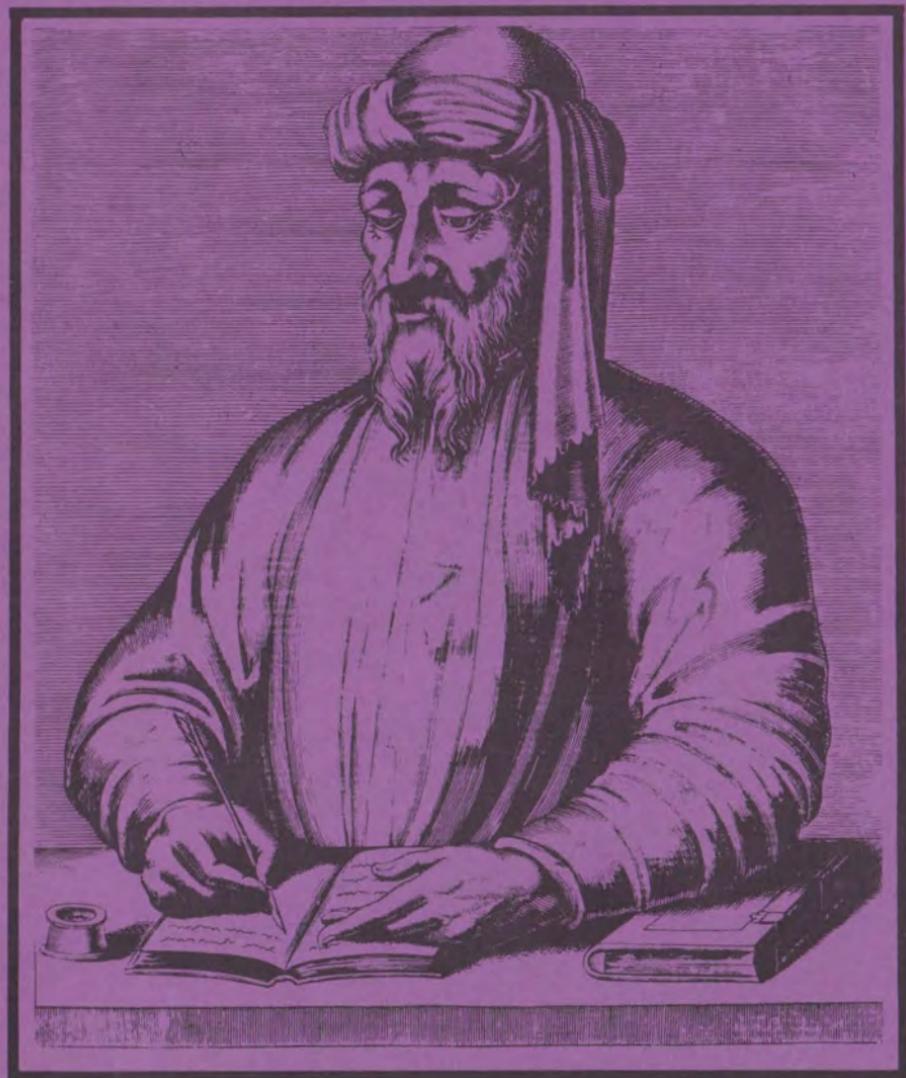


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# THEOSOPHIA

in Neo-Platonic and Christian Literature



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Apart from his scientific professional activities in Paris (he teaches Physics in the field of molecular Biology), Jean-Louis Siémons devotes his efforts to study and presents in their true light the genuine teachings of Theosophy in the Blavatsky tradition. He is also deeply interested in ancient philosophies, both from the East and the West.

As a member of a theosophical Association (United Lodge of Theosophists), for more than 40 years, he is an active lecturer (both in France and other countries) and the author of several well circulated books offering to modern readers the wide and generous answers of Theosophy to the perplexing problems of Reincarnation, Life and Death.

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Cover: Porphyry (Mary Evans Picture Library)

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in Neo-Platonic and Christian Literature

(2nd to 6th Century A. D.)

Dr. Jean-Louis Siémons

THEOSOPHICAL HISTORY CENTRE

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## THEOSOPHIA IN NEO-PLATONIC AND CHRISTIAN LITERATURE

(2nd to 6th century A.D.)

by Dr Jean-Louis Siémons

### Introduction

The problem of the historical origins of the word Theosophy is of particular importance in Europe where the emphasis is very often put on a definite current of theosophical thought, represented by such famous mystic writers as Jacob Boehme, St Martin, Swedenborg, etc. all of them being *Christians*. Some modern authors happen to overlook the fact that the great representatives of the Neo-Platonic school used the term with obviously non-Christian meanings.

In an attempt to clarify the situation, I started several years ago an extensive study through ancient sources, (with the help of my approximate acquaintance with the Greek and Latin languages), by using all available references including those given by H.P. Blavatsky in the *Key to Theosophy*. An appreciable amount of original quotations could thus be gathered, with the help of Jean-Paul Guignette - to whom I am greatly indebted for his zealous work of research through the treasures of the Bibliothèque Nationale, and other Paris libraries. With many documents in hand, it became easier

to trace the history of the word Theosophy from the first centuries of our era to our modern times, through the various metamorphoses it underwent.

By the end of 1986, I was invited by a French magazine (generally dealing with historical matters) to write a paper on the subject<sup>1</sup> for the general public.

Now that a new interest has been raised among readers of the Theosophical Movement, both by Professor James A. Santucci and Jean-Paul Guignette<sup>2</sup>, I propose to present some of the main points of the above article, augmented with quotations and comments that may be of interest for modern theosophists.

This is also an opportunity to bring further light on the subject, since Prof. Santucci presented the results of his research.

In his very interesting note ("On Theosophia and related terms") is given a long list of findings in early literature, obtained from the formidable data bank of the University of California, the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* (TLG). In his conclusion, Prof. Santucci expresses his "hope to supply the actual passages in a future article".

In view of the fact that a number of references either escaped the reach of the computer<sup>3</sup>, or appear somewhat questionable (to my knowledge of the texts, which could be recently checked in libraries<sup>4</sup>), and also because the crude TLG data will not provide the relevant philosophical and religious background of each quotation, I believe that the following remarks may afford a useful contribution to the question.

Indeed, with the numerous occurrences collected to this day (amounting to 69 in the present state of this collective research) a much better understanding of Neo-Platonic and Christian conceptions of *Theosophia* can be reached; particularly, the analysis of each quotation in its own context greatly helps to point out the necessary distinctions between the various uses of the term in the first centuries of our era.

## I. Greek terms related to Théosophia

Usually, standard Greek dictionaries<sup>5</sup> give 4 related terms, with their (very approximate) translations:

1. *théosophia* (θεοσοφία)<sup>6</sup>  
substantive = wisdom or knowledge in things divine
2. *théosophos* (θεόσοφος)  
adjective = wise in things divine, in the things of God  
substantive = one who is wise in things divine
3. *théosophôs* (θεοσόφως)  
adverb = with knowledge in things divine
4. *théosophhein* (θεοσοφείν)  
verb = to have knowledge of things divine

### Note on the declension of the terms

1. *théosophia* occurs only in the singular. The cases found in the texts are :

nominative : θεοσοφία (théosophia)  
accusative : θεοσοφίαν (théosophian)  
genitive : θεοσοφίας (théosophias)  
dative/ablative: θεοσοφία (théosophia)

2. *théosophos* occurs in both numbers:

singular :

nominative : θεόσοφος (théosophos)  
accusative : θεοσόφον (théosophon)  
genitive : θεοσόφου (théosophou)  
dative/ablative: θεοσόφῳ (théosophô)

plural :

nominative : θεόσοφοι (théosophoi)  
accusative : θεοσόφους (théosophous)  
genitive : θεοσόφων (théosophon)  
dative/ablative: θεοσόφοις (théosophois)

As will be seen, the meaning of these words greatly depends on the context.

## II. About the origin of the word

*Théosophia* is one of the 190 odd terms derived from *théos* (god) to be found in a dictionary. Most certainly, the ideas embodied in it had been known in Greece for a long time, in the days of classical authors, who could express the same ideas with the help of other verbal combinations, including the divine (*to théion*) or things divine (*ta théia*), together with terms denoting wisdom (*sophia*), science (*épistèmè*), knowledge (*gnôsis*), wise intelligence (*phronèsis*), etc. Even in the 1st/2nd centuries A.D., Plutarch made use of different expressions where we could expect to find the word *théosophia*<sup>7</sup>. Curiously enough, the origin of the latter will perhaps remain unknown to us<sup>8</sup>, while it is on record that Pythagoras coined the term *philosophos* (philosopher), and Plato himself created the word *théologia* (theology). In his *Republic*, *théologia* appears to be the research concerning the divine essence, by the application of pure reason (*logos*) to the problems relating to what appertains to gods, and to the God above all; it is *the culmination of true philosophy*, which precisely deals with the essence of things, both in the natural world and in the divine (where it reaches the level of *théia philosophia*<sup>9</sup> - divine philosophy).

With *théosophia* a still higher level seems indicated, as will appear later on, since this "divine wisdom" either belongs to a divine being *per se* or to a man enlightened by a direct familiarity with the divine, through spiritual exercise, contemplation and ecstasy.

In course of time, the meanings of theology varied according to the diverse religious currents to finally signify, with the Christians, a disciplined reflection upon the truth of biblical Revelation. In the absence of any initial definition, the term théosophia was also bound to know many historical avatars.

## III. Occurrences in Neo-Platonic writings.

By perusing Prof. Alexander Wilder's booklet *New Platonism and Alchemy* (published in 1869 and quoted by Mme Blavatsky in the *Key*) one could imagine that the Neo-Platonists, who are said to have developed the

"Eclectic theosophical system" (in Wilder's terms), largely used the term theosophy in their writings. Unfortunately, through all their vast literary production still available, the number of occurrences of *théosophia* (or any one of related terms) does not seem to exceed 20.

After Ammonius Saccas (who died in the beginning of the 3rd century A.D.), leaving after him no written record, his most famous disciple, Plotinus (c. 206-270) made no allusion to *théosophia* in his copious *Enneads*. It is admitted that Porphyry (c. 234- c. 305) was the first to introduce the term in his writings. After him, it is to be found in the Neo-Platonic texts, down to the last days of the school at Athens, with Damascius (5th-6th century).

Let us now examine the particular context of the various occurrences in Neo-Platonic literature.

### 1. Porphyry.

Like many learned men of his time, he was not only fully conversant with the doctrines of Greek philosophers, but also deeply acquainted with "barbarian" (non-Greek) systems of thought and religion. In him could find room both a deep veneration for Plato, a high esteem for the Egyptians ("the most learned of all", in religious matters), and a keen interest for the occult lore of Chaldaean Magi, whose fame was gaining ground in the West, through the *Chaldaean Oracles*, (a collection of spiritual teachings attributed to a Julian the Theurgist<sup>10</sup>) brought over to the Mediterranean world, after the Roman campaigns in Asia.

a - In *De Abstinencia* (D.A.) appear the most interesting references. In Book II, Porphyry tries to draw a picture of the real philosopher: he is in fact a "priest of the supreme God", and tries, "by himself, to elevate himself, alone to alone, to a communion with the divine" (D.A.II.49,1). Such a "priest of the Father" who is "an expert in the art of making of himself a statue in the image of God" (49,3), is clearly one of those *théosophoi* alluded to a few paragraphs before.

Speaking of ritual purity, Porphyry states that it is the fact of *men divine and divinely wise* (*théiôn kai théosophôn andrôn*) (II,45,2). Then he proceeds to describe such a divine man (*andros théios*), in contrast with exoteric worshippers (II,45,4):

While "fasting", by discarding passions and any food that excites passions, he makes of *divine wisdom* his food (*sitouménou théosophian*),

he makes himself like to the divine, through right thinking concerning the divine,

he sanctifies himself by the sacrifice of the *noûs* (pure intellect),

he approaches the divine with a white garment and a pure soul, freed of all passions, etc.

In these passages, the *théosophos* appears as an ideal man, uniting in himself the qualities of a philosopher, an ascetic and a priest of the highest description. Assuredly, he is an initiate. In the Orient, he would correspond to an adept of the spiritual yoga of the *Bhagavad Gîtâ*.

Although he has an extended knowledge (*histôr pollôn*, II,49,2) through the philosophical exercise of his *noûs*, *théosophia* is not for him a matter of academic learning but a spiritual food for his soul. Thus, in Porphyry's mind, the true *théosophos* is a mystic thinker, engaged in an ardent inner life of purification and contemplation, in view of a return to the divine source from which all emanated. But this return is accomplished *through his own exertion*.

Very probably, Porphyry had in mind his own master, Plotinus, who reached divine ecstasy four times while the disciple stayed with him at Rome (see *Life of Plotinus*, §23) and who declared on his death-bed that he attempted "to unite the divine in himself with the divine in the universe" (*ibid.* § 2).

A few pages before, (D.A. II,35,1) Porphyry had complained that people should agitate themselves around

religious statues without taking pains to learn the right attitude to adopt from "persons possessed of a divine knowledge". The term used is *théosophoi*, not *théologoi*. Such persons who could give proper advice are not only expert in talking about religious things - they know through their own practice what is the best conduct.

b - In Book IV (§9) of the same work, Porphyry speaks of Egyptian sages : he praises their wise intelligence and *deep divine wisdom (agan théosophian)* that led them to worship certain symbolic animals. Here, the term involves a thorough acquaintance with the occult correspondences between such animals and universal powers in Nature. In fact, the Egyptians gained this knowledge "through their prodigious wisdom (*ék périttès sophias*) and constant relationship or familiarity (*suntrophias*) with the divine".

In his *Letter to Anebo* (4th paragraph) Porphyry inquires of his correspondent how Egyptian *théosophoi* came to represent the gods as (apparently) capable of passion. Clearly, the meaning of the term is the same as above.

c - Again in *De Abstinencia* (IV,17), he speaks of foreign sages, this time in India: "there is a certain kind of men, comprising people possessed of divine wisdom (*théosophôn*), whom the Greeks are used to call Gymnosophists". Among them, a first category, the Brahmins, receive by succession this *théosophia*, with the sacerdotal charge; as to the second, the *samanaioi* (the Hindu *shramana*, ascetics) are elect people, exclusively desirous to "theosophize". The latter verb is *théosophein*, which is derived from *théosophos*, like *philosophein* (to "philosophize") from *philosophos*.

The author proceeds to explain how they "theosophize"; in fact, they live like modern Hindu sannyasins, in communities far from towns, and they spend all their time in applying their thoughts to the divine.

Here we have an example of a Hindu approach of *théosophia* depicted with a great tolerance and respect by the Grecian writer.

For another occurrence of *théosophia* in Porphyry's writings, see under Apollodorus (p.17).

## 2. Iamblichus (c.250 - c.325)

The direct successor of Porphyry, he introduced in the pure mystical philosophy of his predecessors the occult doctrines and practices of theurgy, leading to illumination (*ellampsis*) "which is a gift of the gods", and to *époptéia*, a direct spiritual vision, which is the highest degree of initiation.

In his *De Mysteriis*, he answered Porphyry's *Letter to Anebo*. In Book VII,1, he states that the solution to certain questions would necessitate the help of "the same divinely inspired Muse" (*théosophos Mousè*). It is the only known allusion to *théosophia* in the famous author's works. But it is clear that, with him, the term becomes closely united to theurgy, so that after him a confusion will be often made between the two words. Still Iamblichus attempted to harmonize the various currents and to discover the same inner meaning under the apparently different doctrines.

## 3. Emperor Julian (Flavius Claudius Julianus (331-363) )

Born a Christian, Julian reverted to paganism, as a Neo-Platonist and a great admirer of Iamblichus, who was for him a really "divine master - the third after Pythagoras and Plato". In a letter to a friend (*Epistulae in Galliis scriptae*, 12), he said: "I am really fond of Iamblichus in *philosophia*, and of my homonym (i.e. Julian the Theurgist) in *théosophia*". Here we see the term specially used to indicate the occult doctrines and practices taught in the *Chaldaean Oracles* (of which the author is next to unknown to us). Possibly, this kind of practical theosophy made a greater appeal to eager souls like Julian's (perhaps, on account of quicker results to be obtained) than the pure mystical philosophy of Plotinus and Porphyry. Julian had undergone a kind of initiation with Maximus of Smyrna.

#### 4. Proclus (412 - 485)

A famous master of the Neo-Platonic school at Athens, he wrote many commentaries on Plato's works. In the passages where they occur, *théosophia* and *théosophos* relate to specific doctrines and to representatives of such doctrines.

a. *In Platonis Theologiam* (Book V, 35). Concerning the sacred order of the Curetes (the priests of Zeus in Creta), Proclus asks: "Of those who have heard anything of the 'Hellenic theosophy' (*Héllènikès théosophias*) who shall ignore that...", meaning by *théosophia* the sacred arcana of the Greek religion.

b. *In Platonis Timaeum* (Book II, 57, 10)<sup>11</sup>. Reference is made to the "foreign theosophy" (*hupérorios théosophia*); from the context, the Chaldaean doctrines are meant. The same "foreign theosophy" is alluded to elsewhere (*In Plat. Rem. Publ.*) in two passages:

(II, 225, 4) "the disciples of the 'barbarian theosophy' (*Ek tès barbarou théosophias*)",

(II, 255, 22-23) "the term 'angel' does not come only from the 'barbarian theosophy' (*barbarou théosophias*)",

meaning, in both cases, the teachings of the *Chaldaean Oracles*.

c. *In Platonis Rem Publicam* (Book II, 180, 24)<sup>12</sup>. Proclus refers to those "expert in things divine" (*théosophoi*) who give certain symbolic descriptions of *post mortem* life. Without further indications, they may be taken as some creators of myths in the Grecian religion. The same may be said of those *théosophoi* (possibly the Orphics) who celebrated the year-cycle as a mystic reality (*In Plat. Tim.*, III, 41, 16).

d. Damascius (c.480 - 1st half 6th century)

The last chairman of the Athenian Academy, who took refuge in Persia, when Justinian prohibited the teaching of pagan philosophy, in 529.

In his *Dubitaciones* (350 vol.II, 212-19) there is but one reference to "Chaldaean theosophy" (*chaldaikè théosophia*); in a discussion about obscure passages in Plato's *Parmenides*, a suggestion is drawn by the author from the Chaldaean system (to be found in the *Oracles*).

#### IV. Occurrences in Christian writings

In the abundant works of Christian authors still available<sup>13</sup> the term *théosophia* itself is not to be found before the time of Ammonius Saccas.

Obviously, for Church leaders, the meaning of the term must have been different from the one Neo-Platonists gave it. For them, *sophia* (wisdom) belonged to the One God of Abraham, Moses and Jesus. Here and there, in their writings, they recalled St Paul (I. Cor.1,24): "We proclaim... Christ as power of God and wisdom of God" (*Christon Théou dunamin kai Théou sophian*); and also (I. Cor.2,7): "We speak of God's wisdom (*Théou sophian*) in the mystery". The distance was not great between *Théou sophia* (θεοῦ σοφία) (God's wisdom) and *théosophia* (θεοσοφία): thus, with all Christian writers, the term more or less referred to a hidden transcendental wisdom, far above men's wisdom (or worldly *philosophia*). Obviously, for believers, in the course of history the elect of the Church had received its high inspiration -the best examples being the prophets. And for this reason, the latter duly deserved the qualificative "*théosophoi*" (enlightened by God's wisdom).

**Note:**for many Christian authors J.-P. Migne's *Patrologia Graeca* is an important source of reference. It is hereafter denoted as P.G.

##### 1. Clement of Alexandria (c.150-c.215 A.D.)

Speaking of the policy of a wise writer (in fact himself, confronted with his task) he uses the adverb *théosophôs* (driven by divine inspiration) in *Stromata* (Book I, end of chap.I, cf. P. G., VIII, 708 A).

## 2. Origen (c.185-254)

This Christian successor of Clement, who attended Ammonius' lessons, must not be confused with a pagan Origen who was a disciple of the great Neo-Platonist, together with Plotinus and others.

According to information obtained from computer research (through the TLG data bank) the term *théosophian* appears in Origen's comment on Psalm 118 (in *Fragmenta in Psalmos*). Unfortunately, this occurrence could not be verified by a perusal of the Greek text relating to said Psalm, although *sophia* is found there quite a number of times.

## 3. Methodius (end of 3rd century)

Bishop of Patara and an adversary of Origen. In his *Sermo de Simeone et Anna* (§12, P.G. XVIII, 377 C) he uses the adverb *théosophôs* (with a divine prescience).

## 4. Eusebius (265-340)

The well known bishop of Caesarea. As Porphyry had attacked the Christians in his *Kata Christianôn* (a work in 15 books, burnt later on by imperial order), Eusebius tried to denounce Porphyry's own weaknesses and (apparent) superstitions. In his *Praeparatio Evangelica*, he quotes (III, 4, 14) Porphyry's own words *agan théosophia* (cf. supra) and he proceeds (III, 5, 4) to deride this kind of "mystical théosophia" (*théosophias mustikês*) which led those "marvellous" Egyptians to worship animals. Elsewhere (IV, 6, 3), he again refers to Porphyry and to "what he pleases to call *théosophia*", as a subject for men's consideration. Finally (IV, 9, 7), Eusebius calls his adversary the "marvellous" (or "admirable") *théosophos*.

In the same Book (IV, 2, 10) he alludes to the recent imposture of some pseudo-hierophants and false prophets who were famous for this "divine science" of theirs (*épi tē théosophia tauta*). Elsewhere (IX, 10, 1) for the defence of the Jews, he does not refrain from quoting the *théosophia* of the Greeks. He cites Porphyry's *Philosophy of the Oracles* praising the wisdom of the

Hebrews, Egyptians, Chaldaeans, etc., and in one passage, echoing Porphyry, he writes: "to preceding aphorisms concerning sacrifices ... Apollo adds further oracles, which one should follow with diligence, seeing that they are 'full of all divine wisdom' (*hate méstois ousi pasés théosophias*)".

In another context, Eusebius makes a distinction between Hellenism or even Jewish practices, and Christianity which, he affirms, is "a new and a real *théosophia*" (i.e. a divinely inspired religion).

Also, opposing "divine wisdom" (*théosophia*) to human philosophy, he states that the "latter is useless where the former already prevails" (XIV,9,1).

In another passage (XI,5,1) he gives a kind of definition of the *théosophoi*, in an allusion to those (among the Hebrews) "whose souls, illuminated by the divine light have apprehended truth itself, and received its instructions".

#### 5. Didymus the Blind (c.311-c.398)

One of the most learned men of his century, and a faithful follower of Origen. In most cases, he used the term *théosophos* to designate a biblical character (like a prophet or inspired writer).

From *In Zacchariam*:

- (I,140) he alludes to men instructed in divine mysteries (*théosophoi andrès*) and, above all, Moses;
- (II,270) Solomon, the inspired Sage (*théosophos*), is quoted;
- (III,297) in an allusion to the oppressors of the Jews, Didymus states that the refutation of their maleficent counsels is only in the hands of those who can speak "with the science of things divine" (*théosophòs*). (N.B. the latter word being broken in the original text could also be read *théosophoi* - "those who are divinely instructed")
- (IV,59) referring to the divine preceptors (*théioi paidoutai*), Didymus cites the "divinely inspired" (*théosophos*) evangelist John;

(IV,201) biblical prophets (*théosophoi*) are again alluded to.

From *In Ecclesiastem* (cf. German translation published by R. Habelt, Bonn):

(5,10) referring to the father of Solomon (the alleged author of the *Ecclesiastes*) he says: "David, was wise (*sophos*) as no one else, and in particular divinely wise" (*théosophos*). In fact, he was Solomon's father, both by the flesh (*kata sarka*) and by his (*divine*) instruction (*kata paideusia*). Here reference is made to David's *Psalms* (51,8). "The obscure secrets of thy Wisdom Thou hast revealed unto me". Elsewhere (163,16) Didymus states: "God gives wisdom" (*didōsin ho théos sophian*) and likewise "the goods that reside in wisdom".

In a passage (33,24/34,2), the distinction is clearly made between the human wisdom (*anthrōpinè sophia*) which is "terrestrial, psychic, devilish" (cf. *James* 3,15b) and the true spiritual wisdom that comes from God (*apo théon sophian*), or is sent by God (*théopempton*). Enlightened by the latter wisdom, the *Ecclesiastes* is a *theosophos* (34,2), a real Sage (*sophos*).

(203, 14/15) an important passage again confirms the nature of the true *théosophos*:

"The divine word (*théios logos*) of the Scriptures is wise (*sophos*) and each one of those who keep it is "wise according to God" (*sophos kata théon*), he is divinely wise or "wise in things relating to God" (*théosophos*).

(204,8) the biblical Suzanna is alluded to, when she was falsely suspected of adultery. Being a wise and prudent soul (*sophèn psuchèn*), she acted as "one inspired by God" (*théosophos*); instead of defending herself she turned to God, in a fervent prayer.

## 6. Cyril of Alexandria (c.376-444)

A sectarian defender of orthodoxy, Cyril was accused of having shared a responsibility in the murder

of Hypatia<sup>14</sup> by the populace, excited against her by Christian monks.

As far as we know, among all the authors of the first centuries, he was the only one to have the audacity to call himself a *théosophos*.

At the end of the 1st book of his refutations *Against Julian* (the emperor), he signs himself - the *théosophos* Cyril, evidently confusing *théosophos* and *théologos*.

#### 7. Sozomen (c.400 - 443)

A contemporary of Cyril, he dedicated his *Historia Ecclesiastica* to emperor Theodosius II. In Book I,13,3, the adjective *théosophos* appears in his description of an ascetic "who tried to tame the passions of the soul by a determination full of divine wisdom" (*théosophô proairései*).

#### 8. Theodotus Ancyranus (? - 446)

Bishop of Ancyra (Ankara). In his *Expositio* of the Nicene Symbol (P.G. LXXVII, 1345 D) he states that the incarnation of the Son was not due to a kind of mutation in the divine nature but to "the ineffable miracle-working power of God's wisdom" (*aporrhotos théosophias thaumatourgia*).

#### 9. Theosophia Tübingensis

This Christian manuscript (end of the 5th century) has been published under various titles. In his *Klaros*, (Leipzig 1889) Karl Buresh edited the Greek text, with the title: *Oracles of the Hellenic Gods*. In the whole, it is an attempt to demonstrate the conformity of these oracles, in their sublime conception of God, with the Christian doctrine. Porphyry is severally quoted.

The term *théosophia* appears six times, either as a reference to the title ("he who wrote the book entitled '*Théosophia*', §§1,5,124) or to signify a particular religious system; for instance (§10): "Aristobulus, the Jewish peripatetic philosopher, in a correspondence with

Ptolemy, admitted that it was from the Hebraic theosophy (*ek tēs Hēbraïkēs théosophias*) that the Hellenic drew its inspiration".

The author (probably Aristokritos) also uses the phrase *Théou sophia* (God's wisdom) (§5).

10. Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (end of 5th century-6th century)

This mysterious writer, long confused with St Paul's first convert at Athens, is generally considered as a Christian disciple of Proclus (412-485). The influence of the latter's works is evident in his own books.

For him the Holy Scriptures are the source of divine wisdom (*théosophia*) and of theological science (*théologikè épistèmè*): we should not neglect this knowledge of the divine secrets which are within our reach, and this task is indeed a "divine philosophy" (*théia philosophia*). In fact, with this Christian Neo-Platonist, it is not easy to distinguish between *théologia*, *théosophia* and divine *philosophia*. For him, the true philosopher is he who is "instructed about God by God himself". This kind of revelation demands both an intellectual reflection and an inner metamorphosis obtained by leading a life of consecration to the divine. Thus many favourite themes of Plotinus and his successors are clearly present in the literary production of the Pseudo-Dionysius - the more so that he drew a strong inspiration from Iamblichus and Proclus for his descriptions of the angelic universe depicted in his *Celestial Hierarchy*.

In the latter work, the term *théosophos* appears several times:

(II,5): in connection with the symbolic representation of the Most High, "all the *théosophoi* (men instructed in divine things) and all the interpreters of the divine inflatus" are quoted for their prudence and wisdom.

(IX,3) the *théosophoi* "who called Melchisedec not only a friend of God but a priest", represent collectively the biblical authors.

(XV,2) again, the *théosophoi* are referred to as men whose divine knowledge enabled them to represent celestial essences by pure symbols, like fire.

The term *théosophia* is also present more than once, in other works.

*Mystica Theologia* (Introduction I,1): the holy Trinity is invoked as "presiding over the *théosophia* of the Christians", i.e. the divine wisdom permeating Christianity, or simply, the religion of that name.

#### *Divinis Nominibus*

Chap.II (P.G. III,640 A) - the question is raised: "If a man does not care for the "divine wisdom" (*théosophias*) of the Holy Scriptures, how will he care to be taken by hand by the author, to the theological science"?

End of chap.VII (P.G. III,873 A) - the author refers to the very first masters in 'divine knowledge' (*katégémonés tès théosophias*).

This unknown remarkable writer had a deep influence on many mystics of the Christian world several centuries after his death, when his works came to light again; in the latter half of the 9th century, they were translated by John the Scot Erigena, an Irish scholar, who lived in France at the court of Charles the Bald.

#### 11. Leontius of Byzantium (c.485 - c.542)

In *Contra Nestorianos et Eutychianos* (P.G. LXXVI,1), Leontius professes (p.1280 C) to accept the testimony of "inspired theologians" (*théosophoi*) in their writings. (Here, the *théosophoi* are no longer just biblical authors). Elsewhere (p.1368 D) he alludes to those who are far from the "divine religion" (*théosophia*) of the Christians. Now, in his *Sermo I - In*

*mediam Pentecostem* (P.G. LXXXVI, 1, p.1977 B) he calls the two Evangelists, John and Luke, "brothers-théosophoi" (i.e. divinely inspired co-propagators of the holy doctrines).

## V. Other sources

Among TIG data reported by Prof. Santucci are cited various authors who were neither Neo-Platonists nor Church leaders. Most important are the following:

### 1. Apollodorus of Athens (2nd century B.C.)

The interesting passage appears in Stobaeus' *Anthologium* (volume I, pp. 418-429, §§ 50-54 of C. Wachsmuth's recension). This long excerpt taken from Porphyry's writings (on the Styx) gives long quotations of Apollodorus (at least in the beginning).

Says Porphyry: "In Book XX of Apollodorus' *Péri tôn Theôn* ("On the gods") we find the following concerning the Styx..." (Note the plural: *we*, to be found nowhere else in the text). Some scholars attribute only with hesitation the *whole* of the quoted material to Apollodorus. However, at the end (p.429), after some considerations on the state of souls in the Hades, the conclusion comes abruptly: "All these (things) being full of all divine sapience (*Hôn pantôn pollès théosophias gemontôn*), we proceed..." Note again the plural *we* (which is strengthened by the personal pronoun *héméis*): this strongly suggests that Porphyry is the author of these last few lines - not Apollodorus.

Now, the very same text is also contained in Jacoby's *Fragmente der Griechischen Historiker* (Berlin 1929) as an excerpt of Apollodorus. Still, here the above conclusion appears *between brackets*, with a footnote by the German editor: *Worte des Porphyrios* (these words are Porphyry's). This (for the moment) puts an end to our hope to find an occurrence of *théosophia* before our era.

## 2. Bardesianes (c.154 - c.222)

A Gnostic heretic who lived in Mesopotamia, under the Christian king Abgar IX. His works written in Syriac were translated into Greek by his disciples. Eusebius reproduced some passages in Greek, and Porphyry quoted Bardesianes as his source concerning the Indian sages (*De Abst.* IV,17).

According to TLG data, fragments of Bardesianes include the terms *théosophôn*, *théosophian* and *théosophhein*<sup>15</sup>.

Still, by checking the relevant reference recently communicated to me by Prof. Santucci (in Felix Jacoby's *Fragmente der Griechischen Historiker*, Dritter Teil C. p.645) it is clear that the beginning of the text (including said three terms) is of Porphyry himself, the excerpt from Bardesianes' writings only starting after some three lines introducing the Syriac author; unmistakably the fragment of Bardesianes opens only then, with quotation marks (added by the editor) and covers two pages (pp.646-647) also ending with quotation marks.

Now, in an English translation from a Syriac original manuscript of *The Book of the Laws of Countries* attributed to the Gnostic author (found at the Paris Bibliothèque Nationale), the precise passage alluding to the "Laws of the Brahmins which are in India" fails to contain anything connected with *théosophia* (nor does the Greek translation appended to the text). The same passage is also (incompletely) quoted in Jacoby's *Fragmente*.

## 3. Magical papyri

We have found one magical papyrus which may not be included in the references obtained from the TLG. It is known as the *Leiden Magical Papyrus J 395*, edited in Leipzig (1891) by A.Dieterich. Very probably found in an Egyptian tomb (3rd-4th century), it belongs to a kind of documents in use from the 1st half of the 2nd century. It purports to be the *Eighth Book of Moses on the Sacred Name*. The addressee of this curious text is called

*teknon* (child, son or dear one); in a passage, it promises to "fill him with divine wisdom (*théosophia*) in the temple of Jerusalem". The whole has a Gnostic flavour.

#### 4. Themistius (317-388)

A famous Greek (non-Christian) orator and philosopher held in great esteem by Constantius II and several other emperors (including Julian). In an official discourse given at the Senate of Constantinople he alludes to the exemplary life of a man who would stay at home, performing his religious duties while properly exercising both his body and mind. "Would such a man", he asks, "appear to you less pious and *théosophos* (religiously inclined) than those... (who celebrate Egyptian rites)?"

#### 5. Joannes Stobaeus

A Greek anthologist of the latter half of the 5th century. As seen before, the passage of his *Anthologium*, originally indicated by the TLG data as containing *théosophia* was erroneously attributed to this author, it being in fact a quotation of Porphyry.

### VI. After the 6th century

Once the great Neo-Platonists departed from the scene, the only sources left to be examined were mostly ecclesiastical texts – apart from the later encyclopedia of Suidas. All the new witnesses that we could find (particularly with the help of G.W.H. Lampe's *Patristic Greek Lexicon*) use *théosophia*, and related terms, *much in the same ways as their Christian predecessors* (still with a tendency to apply them at a lower level, to qualify hierarchical superiors).

#### 1. Sophronius of Jerusalem (6th-7th century)

In a letter to the patriarch of Constantinople, *Epistola synodica ad Sergium CP* (P.G. LXXXVII) Sophronius exclaims: "Just as we hold, concerning Faith, we write and inform you who are "instructed in things divine" (*théosophois humin*).

## 2. Maximus the Confessor (580 - 662)

Byzantine monk and spiritual writer. He leaned much upon the pseudo-Dionysius, and influenced Erigena. In his *Opuscula theologica et polemica* (P.G. XCI, 245C), he writes: "We share the hope of this (immortal life) owing to his (Christ's) divine prayers and "doctrines full of divine wisdom" (*tais théosophois didaskaliais*).

## 3. Joannes Damascenus (c.675 - 749)

The last of the Greek Fathers. In *Sancti Artemii Passio* (P.G. XCVI, 1277) the "corrupted and fetid words" of Hermes Trismegistus (and Pythagoras) are strongly opposed to the veridical testimonies of the "divinely inspired" Scriptures (*ék tôn théosophon logiôn*) announcing the coming of Christ.

## 4. Theodorus Studita (759 - 826)

Abbot of the monastery of the *Studion* (Constantinople). In a letter to the patriarch of Jerusalem (P.G. XCIX, 1164 D), he requests his illustrious correspondent: "I pray that you examine these (writings of mine) in the light of "your divine sapience" (*para tès sès théosophias*)".

## 5. Photius (c. 820 - 891)

An accomplished scholar, and patriarch of Constantinople. In a commentary on St Paul (2 *Cor.* 11,6), he recalls the opposition between (divine) science (*gnôsis*) and human speech (*logos*) suggested in the Epistle: whereas speech remains foreign to *divine wisdom* (*théia sophia*), science (or true spiritual knowledge) reaches its apex in *théosophia* (the science of things divine).

## 6. Suidas (byzantine epoch, c.10th cent.)

The hypothetical author of the *Suda*, a kind of Greek lexicon-encyclopedia. Under the entry *Epictetus* (§ 2424), Theosebios, a Greek philosopher, is said to have written a short tract about Plato's great *Republic*, in which he extolled the "divine wisdom" (*théosophian*) that came from the gods.

## VII. Later variations from the original meanings

In the Preface to his *Lives*, Diogenes Laertius recalls Pythagoras' opinion that the term *sophos* (sage) should never be applied to a man but to the Godhead alone. This did not prevent the Greeks from using it with a variety of meanings, to qualify *human* features.

A standard Greek dictionary will give the following translations for *sophos*:

1. *skilled in any handicraft* (carpentry, sculpture, chariot-driving, medicine, surgery, etc.)  
hence : *clever in any art* (music, poetry, divination, etc.)
2. *clever in practical matters, wise, prudent, judicious*  
hence: *wordly-wise, shrewd*
3. *learned, instructed, wise*  
hence: *universally and ideally wise, sage*
4. *ingenious, fine, subtle*  
hence: *cunning, crafty*

The term *sophia* ("wisdom"), being correlated with *sophos*, has the corresponding shades of meanings. Generally, in a compound word like *théo-sophos*, only the third sense is in view, (divinely wise), or rarely the second, as in the case of Suzanna who was "prudent and wise", with the help of God (cf. *supra*, p.13).

In the works of a 12th century writer, Eusthatus, appear some (rare) examples of the other meanings of the adjective.

As a professor at the University of Constantinople (before he became archbishop of Thessalonica, in 1175) Eusthatus wrote commentaries on Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. In these poetical rhapsodies, as is well known, the immortal gods are constantly meddling with human affairs, to save heroes or precipitate their doom. Every great character is compared to one of the gods who stand as the archetypes of all human excellence. For Homer,

if any one mortal was possessed of an outstanding quality, towering over his fellow-men, it was due, beyond question, to a divine gift.

Hence the peculiar use of the adjective *théosophos* by Eusthatus, to qualify any individual exceptionally (or "divinely") *sophos* (i.e. skilled, inspired, wise or cunning), on account of a special gift granted by a god (*théos*), or the gods.

The occurrences are the following :

a. Scamandrius, a warrior in the *Iliad* (V, 50-58) was exceedingly *skilled in hunting*. He had never been trained by any mortal master. For this reason, Eusthatus writes in his *Commentaries on the Iliad* (V, v.49-54) that he was both *thumosophos* (i.e. provided with an innate skill) and *théosophos*, as the goddess Artemis, the huntress, herself had taught him "not by indirect ways, but somehow by infusing her own divine ability into the young man".

b. The *divine art* of bards is celebrated in the *Odyssey* where two of these poets-singers are highly praised: Demodocus (at the court of king Alcinous) and Phemios (at the court of Odysseus). "A muse was your master, or perhaps Apollo" says the hero to the former - who although a blind man, was a clairvoyant, moved by the inspiration of a god. As to the latter, he reveals to Odysseus: "No mortal ever taught me (I am *autodidaktos*); a god infused in my spirit poems of all sorts" (*Od.X, 347*).

To each one of these bards, (just as to Scamandrius) the term *thumosophos* may be applied, according to Eusthatus (*Com. on the Od.2, 158, 46*) and likewise *théosophos*, the divine artist being under the direct guidance of a god. He is not only *automathès* (self-instructed) but *théomathès* (god-instructed).

c. "Wise and prudent among all women" (*péripfrôn*) is the constant qualificative applied to Penelope in the *Odyssey*. Inspired and protected by Athena, she was assuredly *théosophos* for this reason (*Com. on the Od. 1, 87, 3*).

d. Alcinous was a very wise monarch, respected by the Phaeacians. He was like to the gods (*théoéikélos*) (*Od. VIII,256*) and inspired by them: "he was cognizant of their counsels" (*théôn apo mèdeá eidôs*) (*Od. VI,12*). For this reason, he was *théosophos* with Eusthatus (*Com. on the Od. I,234,34*).

e. Finally, Sisyphus (Greek : *Sisuphos*) was the *craftiest* (*kerdistos*) of all men (*Il. VI,153*): he had managed to put Death into fetters and to cheat the god Hades himself. In his disquisitions (*Com. on the Il. VI,631,42*), Eusthatus proceeds to demonstrate that skilled and shrewd he was (*sophos*) indeed, as his name shows, because "with the Ancients, *Sisuphos* had in fact the meaning of *théosophos*, considering that the term *sios* stood for *théos* with the Lacedaemonians, and *sophos* was written *suphos* in Aeolian dialect - hence the compound *sio-suphos*, eventually contracted to *sisuphos*".

The legend does not tell if Sisyphus owed his capacities to some celestial gift. There is however in the *Odyssey* an allusion to a similar character, a matchless expert in robbery and perjury (*Od. XIX,395*) who was supported by a god in his cunning actions: Autolycus, the very grand-father of Odysseus. His excellence in theft and deception was due, Homer suggests, to a kind of compact with Hermes (both his father and the god of robbers): his sacrifices were pleasant to the god who, in exchange, had granted him this strange gift.

Unquestionably, following Eusthatus' logic, Autolycus, who was "divinely" *sophos* in his way, would deserve to be called *théosophos*. Here we see how far we are landing from the lofty meaning originally attached to the term. Porphyry had never thought of such exaggerations.

For the Neo-Platonists (as for the Christians of their time) *théosophia* was completely beyond all worldly matters.

Still, to follow Eusthatus, if we take *sophos* in its highest meaning (ideally sage), we can propose this definition:

a *théosophos* is

- . one divinely (*théo-*) wise (*sophos*)
- . by reason of his familiarity and communion with the divine, or the Godhead (*théos*)
- . who granted him the gift of wisdom (*sophia*) and knowledge of things divine (*gnôsis tôn théiôn*).

This is more or less Porphyry's definition (see p.6). However, the difference with the former cases (in Homer) lies in the fact that, in Neo-Platonism, no one is born a *théosophos*: he becomes such by long exertion, application to philosophy, self-purification and contemplation of the divine.

In monotheistic religions, it is true, the situation is not the same. God (the personalized One Godhead) infuses - as He chooses - something of His eternal wisdom in the souls of His elect, who may transmit the gift to others: the legendary Solomon (who stood for Christians as the ideal model of *théosophoi*) inherited his divine *sophia* from his father David, who had received it directly from God.

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In view of the data made available, the following may be said:

1. The origin of the term *théosophia* is unknown, but certainly posterior to the classical period of Grecian literature. There is no certain evidence of its appearance before our era. At least, the ideas it conveys were familiar to initiated philosophers like Pythagoras, Plato or Plutarch.

2. *It is not the property of any one system*: it may have been used by various currents nourished at the source of the Greek culture.

3. The use of the term by the early Neo-Platonists (Ammonius and Plotinus) remains an open question. There is no evidence of their calling themselves "Eclectic theosophists". Later writers, from Porphyry to

Damascius, never called themselves *théosophoi*. However, in our days, French scholars currently apply the term *théosophie* to one or the other of the Neo-Platonic authors, and allude to their *théosophie*.

4. First of the Neo-Platonists to quote *théosophia*, Porphyry speaks of it with the respect and consideration due to a *really divine wisdom* that can be reached by the elect: the *théosophoi* are for him pure mystical philosophers, made divine by their spiritual discipline. As there was, beyond question, an esoteric side to the Neo-Platonic school (as in many other systems of Hellenic or oriental origins) one can assume that a *théosophos* must have been also an initiate, in Porphyry's mind.

5. With later Neo-Platonists, the Chaldaean (and possibly Egyptian) theurgy added to this initiatic aspect. To disciples and outsiders, the Neo-Platonic masters often appeared as hierophants and thaumaturgists, as much as great philosophers.

6. In the nascent current of learned philosophers among Christians (like Pantaenus, Clement, etc.), Platonic and other doctrines were studied, in order to select the valuable aspects of them - partly for Church propaganda<sup>16</sup>. As they freely used the Greek language (in the Alexandrian metropolis, or Athens), some leading Church Fathers may have taken, quite as freely, the term *théosophia* for their own use, the more so that it reminded them of St Paul's *Théou sophia* (God's wisdom).

7. While with the later Neo-Platonists the term *théosophia* eventually appeared to designate one spiritual doctrine or the other, in the same time its use seemed to spread through the Christian world, but with the latter the difference of meaning between *théosophia* and *théologia*<sup>17</sup> often vanished. Whereas primitively the word *théosophos* served to qualify a God-inspired biblical personage, in later periods it came to be applied even to respected theologians or Church authorities.

8. With the remarkable Pseudo-Dionysius, a Christian and a pure mystic philosopher, inspired of the lofty views of Proclus and the transcendental pantheism of Plotinus, the history of the term *théosophia* reached a turning

point. He was himself called "the most *théosophos* (divinely inspired) of theologians" (*théosophôtatou én théologois*). His influence was widely spread, even to reach the Sufi mysticism of Islâm. Through the Latin translations of his works, the aura of the Areopagite enlightened many scholars in the West, including St Thomas Aquinas; nearly all learned mystics felt his inspiration (e.g. Eckhart, Tauler, Ruysbroeck, etc.). Through him it is - most probably - that the term *théosophia* was handed over to all the future generations of European mystics who, in course of time, even appropriated the term and called themselves *theosophs* (theosophers or theosophists). With them, the reference to *Theosophie* (or the corresponding terms in various languages) became quite current. The list of Christian theosophists of this new category is very long, including great figures like Paracelsus, Boehme, Gichtel, Eckartshausen, L.-C. de Saint-Martin, etc. The "Philadelphian Society" (which was animated by a Bohemian leader, Jane Leade) is quoted in the *Key to Theosophy* (chap.II).

9. The avatars of the term *théosophia* under its Christian facets, from the Middle Ages to our days, belong to another page of the history of mysticism, that could be outlined in another occasion<sup>18</sup>.

10. When H.P. Blavatsky appeared on the scene, she alluded to *Theosophy*<sup>19</sup> before the foundation of the Theosophical Society in 1875. Apparently she did not herself propose the name for the new society, but in course of time, when she presented her doctrines through articles and books, she adopted for them the general name *Theosophy* - with a capital T. In doing this, most certainly, she referred not to the Christian witnesses of the later European tradition but directly to the illustrious Neo-Platonists whose pure mystical philosophy bears the stamp of the universal *Théo-sophia* of the ages.

Paris, November 1987

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>*De l'Antiquité au XXe siècle: les chemins de la Théosophie*: The publication of this rather lengthy article has been delayed to this day, for technical reasons.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Prof. Santucci's valuable contribution as the first T.H.C. pamphlet (Nov. 1985): "Theosophy and the Theosophical Society". Jean-Paul Guignette's remarks on some material incorrectness concerning the first use of *theosophia* in history, triggered further research leading to a new crop of interesting data, in the form of a reply by Prof. Santucci "On Theosophia and related terms" (*Theosophical History*, July 1987).

<sup>3</sup>For instance, there is no reference to Porphyry's *Letter to Anebo* (cf. English translation by Thomas Taylor).

<sup>4</sup>For instance, in spite of a close inspection of the Greek texts referred to in the list of TLG findings we failed to verify the presence of *theosophia* (or related terms), in the following cases:

- *Symbolum et Canones of the Concilium Oecumenicum Chalcedonense* (451 A.D.)
- *Damascius' Vita Isidori* (from Photius' *Excerpta*)
- *Fragmenta in Joannem* (by Photius).

Further examples will appear hereafter

<sup>5</sup>Cf. Bibliography, p. 30.

<sup>6</sup>For an easier reading, all Greek terms cited in this paper have been transliterated, with accentuated vowels é, è, ô, when necessary, to mark the difference between couples of letters like ε/η (é/è) and ο/ω (o/ô).

<sup>7</sup>At a later period, when *théosophia* was accepted in the vocabulary, it also happened that a Neo-Platonist, like Iamblichus, used other expressions like *théia épistémè* (the divine science), *épistémè péri théôn* (the science about the gods), etc. Porphyry himself (in *De Antro Nympharum*, 32) stated that the cosmos was the work of the divine sapience (*phronéséôs théou*)

<sup>8</sup>According to TLG data, *théosophia* was first used by Apollodorus in the 2nd century B.C. But, as will appear in the discussion that follows, the reference communicated by Prof. Santucci cannot be taken as a conclusive evidence. Also there is some doubt concerning the true authorship of books previously attributed to Apollodorus of Athens, the grammarian.

<sup>9</sup>*Phaedr.* 239 b.

<sup>10</sup>An important reference-book is Hans Lewy's *Chaldaean Oracles and Theurgy*. H.P. Blavatsky herself quoted these Oracles (see *Coll. Writ.* XIII, 229, 267)

<sup>11</sup>According to the edition of E. Diehl, Leipzig 1904

<sup>12</sup>According to the edition of G. Kroll, Leipzig 1899

<sup>13</sup>In course of time, the works of many writers who were judged heretical, or enemies of the Christian faith, were burnt or destroyed. Thus were lost many of Porphyry's books (as well as Origen's).

<sup>14</sup>Hypatia (370-415). The daughter of a very learned man, Theon, she taught with great success at Alexandria astronomy, mathematics and philosophy. According to the ecclesiastical historian Socrates, "she was the authentic heir to the school of which Plotinus had been once the chief". Synesius, who was to become the bishop of Ptolemais, highly praised her as "his true initiator to the mystical feastings of philosophy".

<sup>15</sup>Curiously indeed, the three terms above cited are precisely those found in Porphyry's work (cf. *supra*) in the order of his text. Notice the rare verb *théosophéin*, occurring nowhere else, as far as we know.

<sup>16</sup> In the pagan world of the 2nd/3rd centuries, Christian leaders felt the need to make themselves heard and respected, by using a language that could have an impact in highly civilized cities. But, while appropriating many purely Platonic notions, they often delighted in denouncing apparent or real incongruities in the philosophies of the "Pagans" and even "demonstrating" that, for the better aspects, Plato had... but copied Moses. See for instance Clement's *Stromata*, Book II,I: "the Greeks (are) pilferers of the barbarian (Jewish) philosophy (...) they have plagiarized and falsified (...) the chief dogmas they hold,"...etc.

<sup>17</sup> In later times, many Church writers made the confusion and translated the Greek *théosophia* into the Latin *theologia* - which reduced the meaning to an intellectual speculation about God, when it did not mean God's Thought and Will as expressed through the Scriptures.

<sup>18</sup> I touched upon this question in my French article "Les chemins de la Théosophie" (note 1).

<sup>19</sup> In an article dated July 1875 (*H.P.B. Coll. Writ. I*, p.110), she wrote: "Before that, all the mysterious doctrines had come down in an unbroken line of merely oral traditions as far back as man could trace himself on earth. They were scrupulously and jealously guarded by the Wise Men of Chaldea, India, Persia and Egypt, and passed from one initiate to another, in the same purity of form as when handed down to the first man by the angels, students of God's great Theosophic Seminary."

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