

The meaning of Tradition.

The word *Tradition* is observed recurrently in writings focusing on esoteric topics, although at times assuming significantly different, and often contrasting, meanings depending on the author by whom it is used. As previously undertaken for the term ‘*Esotericism*’, the concept of ‘*Tradition*’ will be analysed both from an academic perspective, that of the *esoterologist*, and a strictly “initiatic” point of view, that of the *esoterist*, placing particular emphasis on the so-called ‘Perennialist’ current.

According to French historian Antoine Faivre, the term *Tradition* possesses two complementary meanings: “*On the one hand, it represents the means (books, institutions, chains of masters) through which norms of beliefs and practices are transmitted; in this case it can be used as a synonym of “transmission”. On the other hand, the term represents the same norms, or the authorized sources on which these norms are based*”.¹ In another paper entitled *L’ésotérisme*, Faivre provides a historical *excursus* aimed at demonstrating that *Tradition* is no more than a reintroduction, albeit with different terms depending on the context and historical period, of the same *Sophia Perennis* which subsequently gave form to all Religions and sacred expressions. To this regard Faivre remarks that: “*During the Renaissance the prisca theologia of the Middle Ages underwent a transformation. It became philosophia occulta and philosophia perennis, terms that were not interchangeable, but that were applied to a nebula endowed with relative autonomy in the mental universe of the epoch, and detached from theology properly speaking. It already constitutes, give or take a few nuances, what some starting from the beginning of the 19th century would call “Tradition”.*”² Faivre starts his analysis with the renowned doctrine of Renaissance philosopher Marsilio Ficino, according to whom Zoroaster, Hermes

¹ Antoine Faivre, *Esoterismo e tradizione*, Editrice Elledici, Turin, 1999, p.5.

² Antoine Faivre, *L’Esoterismo*, Sugarco, Carnago (Varese), 1992, p.19.

Trismegistus, Orpheus, Pythagoras, Plato and the Sybils were viewed as the exponents of an uninterrupted chain sustained by a single source of *Truth*, which later gave rise to all other sources. As a consequence, only by investigating the *common denominators* of all historical expressions of the *Sophia Perennis* will it be possible to identify this unique source.

The term *Philosophia Perennis* most likely derives from an engaging text dated 1540 by the Italian philologist and philosopher Agostino Steuco, entitled *De perenni philosophia*. Steuco, an avid interpreter of biblical texts, attempted to highlight the ‘conformities’ (*conformationes*) between Pagan traditions and the Jewish-Christian Revelation, based on the assumption that the only true *Truth* had originally been imparted without any particular connotations, a sort of common *metaphysical language* which only later acquired different attributes according to the context in which it was used. After a period of obscurity (no clear references to the *Sophia Perennis* were found in the German Theosophy of the 1500s and 1600s, and in Rosicrucianism), the term appeared again more than a century later, having been transformed into ‘Primitive Tradition’ in an essay from 1784, entitled *Le Monde Primitif*, by Antoine Courte de Gébelin, whose ambition was to represent the traditions of all civilizations known at the time, hinting at the existence of a shared ‘primitive tradition’. Another Frenchman, Fabre d’Olivet, would later introduce an idea of ‘Primordial Tradition’, which better resembled the idea of *Tradition* subsequently proposed by the Perennialist current.

Among those who approached *Tradition* in the sense of *Philosophia Perennis*, British writer and essayist Aldous Huxley is particularly worthy of mention. Huxley was not only a successful science fiction novelist, but also took a great interest in philosophical mysticism. In 1944, he wrote *The Perennial Philosophy*, an anthology in which he studied the metaphysical principles and peculiarities of the traditional thought, promoting

the creation of an *ideal society*, clearly based on the diffusion and general acceptance of one of the forms with which the *Perennial Philosophy* historically and doctrinally presented itself. It should be underlined that Huxley made reference to the distinction between the *Perennial Philosophy* in itself, interpreted as the ‘Principles’ deriving from Divinity, and the ‘metaphysical schemes’ which tried to define it, albeit in an approximate manner. Divine Reality, he wrote, cannot be directly and immediately apprehended “*except by those who have chosen to fulfil certain conditions*”; its ‘Principles’ are scattered across the different historical expressions, from the traditions of the primitive populations to the more sophisticated theological doctrines, but in substance: “*It is the metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man’s final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being. Rudiments of the Perennial Philosophy may be found among the traditional lore of primitive peoples in every region of the world, and in its fully developed forms it has a place in every one of the higher religions. A version of the Highest Common Factor in all preceding and subsequent theologies was first committed to writing more than twenty-five centuries ago.*”³

According to Huxley, *Perennial Philosophy* should therefore be considered as the only divine Reality substantial to the manifold world of things and lives and minds. But the nature of this one Reality is such that it cannot be directly apprehended except by those who have chosen to fulfil certain conditions, making themselves “*loving, pure in heart, and poor in spirit*”. In every age there have been some men and women who chose to fulfil the conditions upon which alone such immediate knowledge can be had; of these few have left accounts of the Reality they were thus enabled to apprehend and have tried to relate, in one

³ Aldous Huxley, *La Filosofia Perenne*, Adelphi, Milan, 1995, p.11.

comprehensive system of thought, the given facts of this experience with the given facts of their other experiences. To such first-hand exponents of the *Perennial Philosophy* those who knew them have generally given the name of ‘saint’ or ‘prophet’, ‘sage’ or ‘enlightened one’.⁴ In this book they will be referred to simply as “Initiates”.

⁴ Aldous Huxley, *Ibidem*, p.13-14.