

## Schopenhauer and the *Philosophia Perennis*

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In a paper investigating Schopenhauer's earliest encounter with Indian thought Dr. Urs App has written that, "[m]ost available evidence points to the *Oupnek'hat* as the match which definitely lit Schopenhauer's fiery interest in Indian philosophy and religion".<sup>1</sup> Most scholars would agree with this statement. But the question remains, *why* did Schopenhauer seize upon Anquetil Duperron's translation of fifty Upanishads in the way in which he did, and continue to study it throughout the remainder of his life?

I would like to suggest that there are two reasons for this. One is well recognized and was in fact put forward by Schopenhauer himself: it is that he discovered in these ancient Indian writings, coming to him from a great distance both in space and in time, insights into the nature of the world and of human existence which seemed to anticipate philosophical positions established by Kant, and which Schopenhauer himself was engaged in further developing and had to some extent already formulated in his earliest publication.

This reason is well enough known; but the second cause of Schopenhauer's immediate and great interest in the *Oupnek'hat* has drawn much less attention. Yet it was, I would suggest, equally and perhaps even more important. It is this second reason which I wish to explore in the present paper. Put very briefly, it is that in the *Oupnek'hat* Schopenhauer found the expression of a worldview which he thought to be perennially and universally valid. This view, he believed, was to some extent perceived – and expressed with very varying degrees of clarity – by the mystics and certain of the great philosophical thinkers of the past (notably Plato), and forms the real content of their teaching.

This worldview has two main aspects: first, an epistemological position, namely that of idealism – in Schopenhauer's words "the merely apparent existence of this world that is presented to our senses".<sup>2</sup> And secondly, it contains an ethical and soteriological teaching, regarded by Schopenhauer as "beyond all comparison the most important truth there can be", and described by him as:

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1 App, Urs: Schopenhauer's Initial Encounter with Indian Thought. In: *Jb.* 87 (2006), 63.

2 Schopenhauer, Arthur: *On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason* (tr. Payne), La Salle 1974, 187.

“that great fundamental truth contained in Christianity as well as in Brahmanism and Buddhism, the need for salvation from an existence given up to suffering and death, and its attainability through the denial of the will, hence by a decided opposition to nature”.<sup>3</sup>

Schopenhauer believed that in the work of Kant – and subsequently in his own philosophy, which clarified for the first time the role of the will – this ancient and profound worldview was expressed with a conceptual precision and completeness never before attained, but that nonetheless the fundamental insights had long, and perhaps always, been known to the profoundest minds. In the first volume of *The World as Will and Representation* he claims that the essential truth and importance of the doctrine of the denial of the will is shown by the fact that it is not in reality new, other than in the mode of expression, but corresponds to the deepest ethical precepts both of Christianity and of “the sacred books of India”.<sup>4</sup> Again, he notes in the *Manuscript Remains*, “I confess that I do not believe my doctrine could have come about before the Upanishads, Plato and Kant could cast their rays simultaneously into the mind of one man”.<sup>5</sup> Thus for Schopenhauer, the Upanishads, Plato and Kant, as well as Christianity when understood in its profound meaning, are all pointing in the same direction: towards the great truths which his own philosophy now expresses with a fresh completeness and clarity.

Scattered throughout Schopenhauer’s writings we find many other passages in which he claims that the soundness of his philosophical ideas is shown by the fact that significant thinkers of the past – mystics and religious thinkers, as well as philosophers – have arrived at essentially similar conclusions, though often unable to express them adequately in terms of abstract conceptual thought. A significant passage occurs in the second volume of *The World as Will and Representation*, when Schopenhauer writes:

And if, in the judgement of contemporaries, the paradoxical and unexampled agreement of my philosophy with quietism and asceticism appears as an obvious stumbling-block, yet I, on the other hand, see in this very agreement a proof of its sole accuracy and truth.<sup>6</sup>

Here we see that the insights resulting from quietism and asceticism provide a standard by which philosophy may be judged. Moreover, the negative knowledge

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3 Schopenhauer, Arthur: *The World as Will and Representation*. Vol. 2 (tr. Payne), New York 1966, 628. Abbreviated hereafter as WWR.

4 WWR I: 408.

5 Schopenhauer, Arthur: *Manuscript Remains*. Vol. 1 (tr. Payne), Oxford, New York 1988, 467 (Para. 623). Compare WWR I: 417, “I confess [...] I owe what is best in my own development to the impression made by Kant’s works, the sacred writings of the Hindus, and Plato”.

6 WWR II: 615.

of ultimate truth, which is all that philosophy can provide, can be supplemented and enriched by works such as the *Oupnek'bat*, the *Enneads* of Plotinus, Scotus Erigena, passages in Jacob Böhme, the writings of Madame de Guyon and of Angelus Silesius, Meister Eckhart and the Sufis of Islam.<sup>7</sup> Thus there exists an ancient and universal tradition of knowledge of the highest value. It is supported by the insights of the mystics and by the inner teachings conveyed by – or perhaps one should say, concealed within – the major religious traditions. Schopenhauer writes:

Nothing could be more surprising than the agreement among the writers who express those teachings, in spite of the greatest difference of their age, country, and religion, accompanied as it is by the absolute certainty and fervent assurance with which they state the permanence and consistency of their inner experience. They do not form some *sect* that adheres to, defends, and propagates a dogma [...] on the contrary, they generally do not know of one another; in fact, the Indian, Christian, and Mohammedan mystics, quietists, and ascetics are different in every respect except in the inner meaning and spirit of their teachings.<sup>8</sup>

This idea of the existence of an esoteric and hidden knowledge, of the highest value and great antiquity, and yet appearing only sporadically and often in a veiled or incomplete form, was not new, nor was it unique to Schopenhauer. It forms a recurring theme in European thought and it is of interest to glance back for a moment to the Renaissance, during which time the same idea may be found in a particularly prominent and clear form and went under such names as *prisca theologia*, *pia philosophia*, or *philosophia perennis* – the perennial philosophy.

For the men of the Renaissance, as for those of classical antiquity, human history was not an evolution upwards towards an ever-brighter future, but a degeneration from a nobler past. Truth, beauty, and goodness were to be found by rediscovering the divine principles upon which this ancient Golden Age had rested, and so bringing it to a rebirth, a *renaissance*. The quest for truth was therefore of necessity a search into the past when humanity had been of a purer nature, and thus a search for the ancient and the remote. Thus from its earliest days in Florence, the Renaissance was inspired by the longing to rediscover the primordial wisdom of humankind in search of which philosophy, it was held, is always though often blindly striving.<sup>9</sup> This was the motive which led Cosimo de Medici to commission Marsilio Ficino to translate the works of Plato, and Ficino tells us that he believed himself divinely inspired to present to his contemporar-

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7 WWR II: 612.

8 WWR II: 613.

9 The idea of an ancient tradition of pagan theology stemming from Zoroaster, Hermes Trismegistus, Orpheus and Pythagoras can be traced back to Gemistus Pletho and the Council of Florence in 1438/39. See Kristeller, Paul Oskar: *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino* (tr. Conant), Gloucester, Mass. 1964, 15.

ies the philosophy of Plato and Plotinus.<sup>10</sup> But beyond Plato, it was thought, beyond even Pythagoras, lay other yet more primary and inspired sources, if only they could be recovered. “They say”, wrote Ficino’s friend, Pico della Mirandola, in his celebrated *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, “that the words of Pythagoras are called holy only because they flowed from the teachings of Orpheus”.<sup>11</sup> Orpheus, it was believed, had been in contact with the ancient wisdom of Egypt, and besides him there were other equally imposing figures such as Hermes Trismegistus (identified with Mercury and the Egyptian god Thoth), Aglaophemus, and Zoroaster – we may note in passing that Nietzsche’s *Thus Spake Zarathustra* is a last echo of this tradition. Thus, when in 1462 a Greek manuscript of texts originating in Egypt and believed to be by Hermes Trismegistus himself came into his possession, Cosimo at once instructed Ficino to set aside the writings of Plato and concentrate his efforts on this still more pristine and important source.<sup>12</sup> Ficino did so, approaching the words of Trismegistus with an attitude of profound awe and wonder, writing in the preface to his translation “there is one ancient theology (*prisca theologia*) [...] taking its origin in Mercurius and culminating in the Divine Plato”.<sup>13</sup>

Such figures were for the men of the Renaissance the *prisci theologi*, the primordial religious teachers of mankind comparable to Moses in antiquity and authority. The truths they promulgated were not in conflict with one another, nor with the deepest insights of Christianity.<sup>14</sup> Ficino believed that the ancient esoteric knowledge did not conflict with the revealed truth of scripture but paralleled and confirmed it; it would lead humanity towards a *docta religio*, a “learned faith” that would reconcile the ancient Platonic wisdom with Christian revelation, and in doing so renew the human spirit and “save holy religion from detestable ignorance”.<sup>15</sup>

Such was the theme of many Renaissance writings. Prominent among them was Agostino Steuco’s book of 1540, *De Perenni Philosophia*, and this same phrase was employed in the following century by Leibniz.<sup>16</sup> The *philosophia per-*

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10 Levi, Anthony: Ficino, Augustine and the Pagans. Paper read at the conference “Marsilio Ficino: his sources, his circle, his legacy”, London, June 1999.

11 Pico della Mirandola, Giovanni: *On the Dignity of Man, On Being and the One, Heptaplus* (tr. Wallis, Miller, Carmichael), Indianapolis 1965, 33.

12 These texts were the *Corpus Hermeticum*. They were called by Ficino the *Poimandres* (or “*Pimander*”), the name of the first treatise of the collection.

13 Yates, Frances: *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, London 1978, 13.

14 Thus in 1488 the powerful image of Hermes Trismegistus could be placed without qualm in the great mosaic pavement at the entrance of Siena cathedral. See Yates, *op. cit.*, Frontispiece and 42–43; also Cust, Robert: *The Pavement Masters of Siena*, London 1901, 23.

15 Copenhaver, Brian and Schmitt, Charles: *Renaissance Philosophy*, Oxford, New York 1992, 146–149.

16 See Schmitt, Charles: Perennial Philosophy: From Agostino Steuco to Leibniz. In: *Journal of the History of Ideas* 27 (1966), 505–532. Similar ideas persisted into the twentieth century. We find

*ennis* was not for the Renaissance a marginal interest; it was a major element in the thought of the period. During the religious wars of the sixteenth century it was seen by many thoughtful persons as offering a means by which the fratricidal struggle of Protestant and Catholic might be transcended;<sup>17</sup> a notable example was the group in Antwerp known as The Family of Love, which included the celebrated printer Christopher Plantin, the geographer Abraham Ortelius, and quite possibly the painter Pieter Bruegel. Schopenhauer mentions on several occasions the far less happy fate of Giordano Bruno, who died at the stake after taking matters to extremes the Church could no longer tolerate.

Although the importance attributed to the Hermetic texts was challenged by later scholarship,<sup>18</sup> the central idea of a *perennial philosophy*, the origins of which were hidden somewhere in the East – the Renaissance favoured Egypt – survived with remarkable persistence. It is for this reason that in the middle of the eighteenth century we find the future author of the *Oupnek'hat*, the youthful Anquetil Duperron, boldly setting out for India to search for the lost writings of Zoroaster. And when, in the preface to *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer suggests that the influence of Sanskrit literature will result in a new Renaissance, it is this which he has in mind. For him, as for Duperron, behind the exploration of Indian thought lies the same powerful motive which more than three centuries before had operated upon Ficino: the recovery of the primordial esoteric wisdom from its hidden source in the East.

In the years when Schopenhauer was growing to maturity this idea was very much alive among the philosophers and poets of the Romantic movement. Novalis, Schelling, Friedrich Schlegel and others were bound together by the idea of a rediscovery, perhaps even a recreation, of the universal and perennial wisdom, by which the flame of the European spirit, almost extinguished by the corrosive rationalism of the Enlightenment, would again blaze forth. “I see already a few significant figures initiated into these secrets, returning from the holy place, who have only to purify and adorn themselves before they come forth in priestly garments”, observed Schleiermacher in 1799.<sup>19</sup>

For the Romantics, writing well before the idea of evolution had gained acceptance, there was nothing strange in the idea of primordial mankind enjoying

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the distinguished scholar of Buddhism, Edward Conze, writing of “the great and universal wisdom tradition of mankind” (Conze, Edward: *Buddhism, Its Essence and Development*, Oxford 1957, 26). R. Guenon, A. K. Coomaraswamy, T. Burckhardt and Aldous Huxley are among other names which could be mentioned in this connection.

17 Yates, *op. cit.*, 176.

18 Isaac Casaubon showed in 1614 that the *Corpus Hermeticum* was written in post-Christian times, and not in ancient Egypt. Yates, *op. cit.*, 398–400.

19 As cited in Otto, Rudolf: *Mysticism East and West* (tr. Bracey, Payne), New York 1957, 219.

profound spiritual insight; thus Schopenhauer's contemporary, the French thinker Joseph de Maistre, writes:

Listen to what wise antiquity has to say about the first men. It will tell you that they were marvellous men, and that beings of a superior order deigned to favour them with the most precious communications. On this point there is no discord: initiates, philosophers, poets, history, fable, Asia and Europe, speak with one voice.<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, Friedrich Schlegel, in his book *On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians*, affirms:

All must be kindled and inspired by ancient memories, instructed by departed genius, and formed and developed by antique power and energy.<sup>21</sup>

Traces of this primordial wisdom, it was believed, compatible with the deepest esoteric truths of Christianity, could yet be found in the fragments of myth, legend, anonymous poetry and sacred song which had come down from the earliest representatives of the human race. Among these early peoples the Indians, with their newly-discovered literature, now figured prominently; thus we find Friedrich Schlegel writing in 1800 that "we must look for the pinnacle of Romanticism in the East, primarily in India";<sup>22</sup> and, some five years later, these words of J. J. Görres:

Towards the Orient, to the banks of the Ganges and the Indus [...] it is there that we go when we follow the silent river which flows through time in legends and sacred songs to its source.<sup>23</sup>

These were the years during which Schopenhauer was beginning to form his ideas. Although in important respects distant from the Romantics, here at least he shared common ground with them. It was not just Greek knowledge which had fascinated the Renaissance, but the possibility of finding by means of it the ancient wisdom of Orpheus and of the Egyptians, the *prisca theologia*, the perennial philosophy – and in much the same way the Romantics, and along with them Schopenhauer, sought in India not for Indian knowledge as such but for "the silent river which flows through time", the lost primordial wisdom of humankind.

Friedrich Mayer, who, as Schopenhauer records, introduced him "without solicitation" to Indian antiquity,<sup>24</sup> was a leading figure in this search for the ancient

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20 De Maistre, Joseph: *St Petersburg Dialogues* (tr. Lebrun), Montreal 1993, 40.

21 Schlegel, Friedrich: *On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians*. In: *The Aesthetic and Miscellaneous Works of Frederick von Schlegel* (tr. Millington), London 1849, 522.

22 *Athenäum* 3 (1800), 103; cited Halfbass, Wilhelm: *India and Europe: an Essay in Philosophical Understanding*, Delhi 1990, 75.

23 Görres, Johann Joseph: *Glauben und Wissen*, Munich 1805. Cited Halfbass, *op. cit.*, 73.

24 Letter to J. E. Erdmann, 9 April 1851.

and perennial knowledge. Strongly influenced by Romantic thought, he was by no means the marginal figure he is sometimes presented as; he was in personal contact with Herder (whose disciple he was, and who wrote the Forward to one of Mayer's books), Goethe, the Schlegel brothers, Klaproth, Schelling, Schleiermacher and many others, and constantly active in promoting the idea of India as the treasure-house of the ancient wisdom. Mayer's German translation of Wilkins' English version of the *Bhagavad Gita* provided Schopenhauer with his first significant encounter with Indian ideas,<sup>25</sup> and among his other writings is *Brahma oder die Religion der Indier als Brahmaismus* (1818), a work which Schopenhauer owned. In its pages we find the following significant passage:

It will no longer remain to be doubted that the priests of Egypt and the sages of Greece have drawn directly from the original well of India; that only Brahmanism can provide those fragments of their teaching which have come down to us with the clarity which they do not [in themselves any longer] possess.<sup>26</sup>

The influence of these ideas upon Schopenhauer can be clearly seen. In *On the Basis of Morality* he tells us that Christian ethical teaching, together with the idea of a god become man, "originates from India and may have come to Judea by way of Egypt, so that Christianity would be a reflected splendour of the primordial light of India from the ruins of Egypt". A few lines later we are reminded that Pythagoras was initiated in the wisdom of the Egyptians.<sup>27</sup> In the important chapter "On Death and Its Relation to the Indestructibility of Our Inner Nature" in the second volume of *The World as Will and Representation*, we find it said of the "sublime authors of the Upanishads" who can "scarcely be conceived as mere human beings" that "we must ascribe this immediate illumination of their mind to the fact that, standing nearer to the origin of our race as regards time, these sages apprehended the inner essence of things more clearly and profoundly than the already enfeebled race, as mortals now are, is capable of doing".<sup>28</sup>

A few pages later Schopenhauer writes that the Christianity of the New Testament, unlike that of the Old, asserts the eternity of our real inner nature "because it is Indian in spirit, and therefore, more than probably, Indian in origin, although only indirectly, through Egypt".<sup>29</sup> Shortly afterwards a saying of Hermes Trismegistus is cited,<sup>30</sup> and a little after this it is said that belief in metempsychosis was common to the religions of India and to the Egyptians, and that

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25 App, Urs: Schopenhauer's Initial Encounter with Indian Thought. In *Jb.* 87 (2006), 35–76.

26 As cited in Halbfass, *op. cit.*, 73.

27 Schopenhauer, Arthur: *On the Basis of Morality* (tr. Payne), Oxford 1995, 178–179.

28 WWR II: 475.

29 WWR II: 488.

30 WWR II: 490.

from these “it was received with enthusiasm by Orpheus, Pythagoras, and Plato”.<sup>31</sup>

The same perennialist ideas remain very much alive in Schopenhauer’s last published work, the *Parerga and Paralipomena*. Here it is said that the New Testament “must somehow be of Indian origin” and that Christ’s teaching “has sprung from Indian wisdom” and twined around the “quite different trunk of crude Judaism”.<sup>32</sup> Shortly afterwards he writes:

Thus we see the doctrines of the Old Testament rectified and given a fresh interpretation by those of the New, whereby an essential and fundamental agreement with the ancient religions of India is brought about. Everything that is true in Christianity is found also in Brahmanism and Buddhism [...]. For in the New Testament the spirit of Indian wisdom can be scented like the fragrance of a bloom which has been wafted over hills and streams from distant tropical fields.<sup>33</sup>

The last sentence might well have been written by Görres or Friedrich Mayer at the height of the Romantic enthusiasm for India some fifty years before!

It is pertinent that we find the idea of the perennial philosophy, and its association with India, in the writings of the two most significant figures among the early Indologists, Sir William Jones and Anquetil Duperron. The work of both researchers was well known to and admired by Schopenhauer. Jones writes in his essay “On the Hindus”:

Nor is it possible to read the *Vedanta*, or the many fine compositions in illustration of it, without believing that Pythagoras and Plato derived their sublime theories from the same fountain with the sages of India. The Scythian and Hyperborean doctrines and mythology may also be traced in every part of these eastern regions.<sup>34</sup>

As for Anquetil Duperron, his entire life was dedicated to rediscovering the ancient wisdom. As a young man he spent years of hardship and adventure in India searching for the lost writings of Zoroaster, eventually finding texts among the Parsis from which he made the earliest translation of the *Zend Avesta*. Yet for Duperron and many of his readers this remarkable achievement was disappointing; for it was found that after the depredations of Alexander and the Greeks, and later of the Muslims, there survived in the remaining Zoroastrian texts almost nothing of the profound spiritual insights so eagerly awaited. While

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31 WWR II: 505.

32 Schopenhauer, Arthur: *Parerga and Paralipomena*. Vol. 2 (tr. Payne), Oxford 1974, 380. Abbreviated as PP.

33 PP II: 381. Two pages later Schopenhauer offers the conjecture that Jesus was perhaps “educated by Egyptian priests whose religion was of Indian origin”.

34 Jones, William: On the Hindus. In: *The British Discovery of Hinduism in the Eighteenth Century*. Ed. by P. J. Marshall, London 1970, 254–255.



in India, Duperron had become aware that there existed among the Hindus a tradition which seemed to rival in its antiquity that of Zoroaster: here, perhaps, lay another of the ancient and forgotten sources of mankind's earliest wisdom – perhaps, indeed, the earliest of all, since India seemed so remote. Duperron had sought to learn Sanskrit while in India, but could not overcome the prohibition of the brahmans on teaching the sacred language to unqualified persons. Consequently, when some years later a rare manuscript, a translation of the Upanishads into Persian, came into his possession, he fell to translating it with the same eagerness and sense of awe which Ficino had exhibited centuries earlier in the case of the Hermetic writings. This Persian translation was entitled *Sirr-i Akbar*, “The Great Secret”, and in Duperron's hands it became the basis for the *Oupnek'hat* – this title being a Persian corruption of the Sanskrit word *Upanishad*.

Thus we cannot doubt that Anquetil Duperron, whose work had so great an impact upon Schopenhauer, was strongly influenced by the idea of a *philosophia perennis* – a wisdom of the highest value, now obscured and lost to Europe yet perhaps recoverable in the East. Wilhelm Halbfass, in his well-known book *India and Europe*, writes of Schopenhauer:

Yet all too frequently, the fact is overlooked that his encounter with the *Oupnek'hat* was by no means a purely ‘Indian’ encounter. It was also an encounter with Anquetil Duperron's own ways of thinking and interpreting [...]. Anquetil himself had repeatedly asserted and attempted to demonstrate that the sages of all countries and all times have basically ‘always said the same’ or at least meant the same, and that the Upanishads in particular have parallels in European doctrines [...]. Schopenhauer's stubborn adherence to the *Oupnek'hat* in the face of all the European translations of the Upanishads which he subsequently became aware of is certainly also an expression of approval for the very personal and explicitly philosophical approach of Anquetil.<sup>35</sup>

It is of interest – it was certainly of great interest to Duperron and to Schopenhauer – that the idea of a primordial and universal wisdom was not confined to the scholars of Europe, for in the *Sirr-i Akbar* there is evidence of a closely similar idea in India. This book was itself a remarkable production; the fifty Upanishads it contains had been translated into Persian in 1657 under the personal supervision of Prince Dara Shukoh, the eldest son and chosen heir of the fabled Shah Jahan, Emperor of India and builder of the Taj Mahal. In spite of his illustrious position, Prince Dara had become a Sufi initiated into the renowned Qadiri order,<sup>36</sup> and like the Sufi and Hindu mystics with whom he consorted

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35 Halbfass, *op. cit.*, 115–116.

36 Prince Dara Shukoh was initiated into the Qadiri order in 1639–40 by Shaykh Mulla Shah, the disciple of the famous *pir* Miyan Shah Mir of Lahore. See Rizvi, Saiyid: *The Wonder that was India*, Delhi 1993, 266 ff.

(and also like his own great-grandfather, the Emperor Akbar) he based his position on the belief that the major religions, if understood in their deepest significance, teach the same perennially valid mystical and moral truths. He wrote a separate work, *The Confluence of Two Oceans*, to show that when correctly understood the teachings of Islam and of the Hindu religion are not only compatible, but essentially one.

We find the identical idea in Schopenhauer, but with Christianity in the place of Islam. In the first volume of *The World as Will and Representation* he writes:

We cannot sufficiently wonder at the harmony we find, when we read the life of a Christian penitent or saint and that of an Indian. In spite of such fundamentally different dogmas, customs, and circumstances, the endeavour and the inner life of both are absolutely the same [...]. So much agreement, in spite of such different ages and races, is a practical proof that here is expressed not an eccentricity and craziness of the mind [...] but an essential side of human nature which appears rarely only because of its superior quality.<sup>37</sup>

And twenty-five years later, in the second edition of the same work, we find: “The innermost kernel and spirit of Christianity is identical with that of Brahmanism and Buddhism”.<sup>38</sup>

The text of the *Sirr-i-Akbar* provides evidence of essentially the same idea applied to the conditions of India. In his introduction to the Upanishads, Prince Dara, referring to himself in the third person, tells us that

he was impressed with a longing to behold the gnostics of every sect, and to hear the lofty expressions of monotheism, and had cast his eyes upon many books of mysticism [...]. And whereas the holy Quran is mostly allegorical [...] he became desirous of bringing in view all the heavenly books, for the very words of God are their own commentary.<sup>39</sup>

Dara means by this, of course, that the scriptures of one tradition may elucidate the true meaning of another. A little later he writes of the Upanishads:

Every difficulty and every sublime topic which he had desired or thought [about] and had looked for and not found, he obtained from these essences of the most ancient books, and without doubt or suspicion, these books are first of all heavenly books in point of time, and the source and the fountain-head of the ocean of Unity, in conformity with the holy Quran, and even a commentary thereon.<sup>40</sup>

Thus in the *Sirr-i Akbar* Anquetil Duperron was able to discover the same idea of a primordial wisdom or *philosophia perennis* which had motivated his own life-

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37 WWR I: 389.

38 WWR II: 604.

39 As translated in Hasrat, Bikrama: *Dara Shikub: Life and Works*, Delhi 1982, 264–265.

40 As translated in Hasrat, *op. cit.*, 267.

long search. In the margin of one of his books he wrote, “The *Zend* books and the *Oupnek’hat* present the same truths as the works of the Platonic philosophers, and perhaps these philosophers received them from the oriental philosophers”.<sup>41</sup> In common with Prince Dara Shukoh, he held that the truths of one religion may help to illuminate another, and he believed that in making available to Europe the ancient wisdom of the Upanishads he was contributing to “the cause of humanity”, showing a way out of what he called “the European malaise”, and offering “an incentive to general concord and love”.<sup>42</sup> Thus the old notion of a primordial wisdom, the lost birthright of humanity hidden somewhere in the East yet perennially valid, burst into new life on coming into contact with the rapidly expanding knowledge of Indian thought.

For Schopenhauer this was of lasting importance. All through his life he drew strength from the belief that the ideas he had formulated in his philosophy were in harmony with the primordial wisdom of India, as well as with that of Plato, certain other Greek thinkers, and mystics such as Madame de Guyon. Time and again he draws attention to this in his writings.<sup>43</sup> Why does he do so? It is because it meant that his doctrines were not merely his own subjective invention, but instead belonged to the perennial tradition of human wisdom; that European philosophy, after centuries of wandering in the dark, had, in the person first of Kant and then of Schopenhauer himself, come at last, and with a new and startling clarity, upon the same fundamental insights – that all plurality is apparent, that all individuals are manifestations of a single, uniquely real essence – which had in distant ages been glimpsed by Pythagoras, by Plato, by the sages of the Upanishads, and by other great minds of the past. Schopenhauer writes:

Such a doctrine, of course, existed long before Kant, indeed it might be said to have existed from time immemorial. In the first place, it is the main and fundamental teaching of the oldest book in the world, the sacred Vedas, whose dogmatic part or rather esoteric teaching is to be found in the Upanishads. There we find that great teaching on almost every page [...]. There is absolutely no doubt that it was also the basis of the wisdom of Pythagoras [...]. It is also well known that practically the whole philosophy of the Eleatic School was contained solely in it. Later it pervaded the Neoplatonists [...]. In the ninth century we see it unexpectedly appear in Europe through Scotus Erigena [...]. Among the Mohammedans we again find it, as the inspired mysticism of the Sufis. But in the West, Giordano Bruno had to suffer an ignominious and agonizing death for not being able to resist the impulse to express this truth.<sup>44</sup>

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41 Cited in Schwab, Raymond: *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe’s rediscovery of India and the East, 1680–1880* (tr. Patterson-Black, Reinking), New York 1984, 159.

42 Halbfass, *op. cit.*, 67–68.

43 Examples are found at WWR I: XV, 383, 417; WWR II: 475.

44 Schopenhauer: *On the Basis of Morality* (tr. Payne), Oxford 1995, 207–208.

Here we find Schopenhauer asserting quite consciously, as the reference to Bruno shows, his adherence to the perennial philosophy, and relating it both to the Upanishads and to the Sufi mysticism which guided Prince Dara Shukoh. This, I suggest, does much to explain his immediate and unwavering enthusiasm for the *Oupnek'hat*, as well as the meaning of such otherwise puzzling statements as that which we find near the close of the second volume of *The World as Will and Representation*: "Christianity belongs to the ancient, true, and sublime faith of mankind".<sup>45</sup>

The perennial philosophy mattered to Schopenhauer. It seemed to him that it provided a guarantee that his own thought was fundamentally sound and not merely his personal invention, as with so many other philosophers: not, as he puts it, "some philosophical fable, invented by myself and only of today",<sup>46</sup> but an expression in contemporary terms, and for the first time in the form of a comprehensive abstract philosophical exposition, of the deepest knowledge of mankind, the ancient and perennial truth.

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45 WWR II: 623.

46 WWR I: 383.