

Hilma af Klint,
Altarpieces, No. 1,
 Group X, 1915.

THEOSOPHY, ANTHROPOSOPHY, RUDOLF STEINER AND THE ZEITGEIST AROUND 1900

Helmut Zander

When Hilma af Klint was born, in 1862, Rudolf Steiner had probably just learned to walk: he was born in 1861, a year and a half before her.¹ They were part of the same generation, they shared similar experiences and – something that makes a brief comparison of their biographies fascinating – they sought, in part, answers to the same questions posed by the *Zeitgeist*.

Steiner was the child of an ambitious petty bourgeois family; his father worked for a railway company in the Habsburg Empire. In 1879 he began a course of study in the natural sciences at the Technical University of Vienna, which he abandoned after the linguist and critic Karl Julius Schröer introduced him to the work of Goethe. While still young, Steiner edited Goethe's writings on natural philosophy, and in the process developed his own philosophical position, which he maintained his entire life. He arrived at the conviction that Goethe's philosophy made it possible to overcome all limits to knowledge; eventually, he came to believe that such a philosophical understanding was just as objective as the empirical findings of the natural sciences.

A second important experience in Vienna was his encounter in 1889–90 with a circle of occultists centred on Marie Lang, a campaigner for women's rights. In this group, members of the Vienna *bohème* concerned themselves with Helena Blavatsky's theosophy, which had been emerging and developing since 1875. At least some of the group's members were spiritualists, and theosophy became a point of departure for them to move beyond spiritualism, with its ghostly apparitions and mediumistic pronouncements. Instead, they sought to attain higher knowledge through the study of texts from all religious traditions, and perhaps through meditation as well. It was here that Steiner first met theosophy, though at this stage he was not attracted – he did not become actively involved in theosophy before 1900. Hilma af Klint joined a similar circle of people orientated towards religious alternatives. Unlike Steiner, she was active in spiritualist practice. Between 1879 and 1882 she took part in séances, perhaps particularly after the death of her sister Hermina in 1880. She continued to practise these spiritualistic, mediumistic techniques over the years, into the 20th century. They became the basis of her claim to create art grounded in spiritual revelations.

Back to Rudolf Steiner. In 1890 he moved from Vienna to Weimar, to work in the Goethe and Schiller archive there, but the result was a midlife crisis. He read David Friedrich Strauss and Friedrich Nietzsche, became an atheist, moved to Berlin and immersed himself in the city's bohemian culture. In 1900 he found a new purpose to his life in theosophy. As early as 1902 he became secretary general of the newly founded German section of the Theosophical Society Adyar. Here he encountered a new perspective on life and the world.² At its core were the beliefs that, contrary to the claims of materialism, a spiritual world did in fact exist; that theosophy offered a sure path to knowledge of it; and that one could utilise spiritual energies. To theosophists this spiritual, divine world was comparable to an empirical reality and they were naturally of the opinion that theosophy was in a position to document, indeed to prove its existence, in a manner similar to the research methodologies of the natural sciences. By attending the Esoteric School of Theosophy, one could become clairvoyant, gaining access to higher worlds. For example, one might read the entire history of the world in a universal memory, the Akasha Chronicle – this was, to theosophists, something like a book in the spiritual world, which contained all knowledge of all times and which should be accessible through meditation. This perspective – and this is an important point about theosophy's view of itself – provided an answer to the question of which religion was the highest and best, though in principle (I will address the specifics in what follows) the answer is: “No religion is higher than truth” – fully in the tradition of Enlightenment deism.

With theosophy, new parallels to Hilma af Klint's life emerged, since her path also took her from spiritualism to theosophy. At present we do not know what her relationship was to the Swedish branch of the Theosophical Society, which had been founded in 1889. In any event, she persisted with the mediumistic techniques of spiritualism, although many theosophists, including Steiner, rejected these as “atavistic” and sought to supersede them (though Steiner's case is decidedly complex, since he evidently worked as a medium even after the First World War,³ possibly making up for having prematurely ended a spiritualist phase which had seen him attend séances in 1904–05). In any event, for both of them the path to theosophy involved encounters with spiritualism.

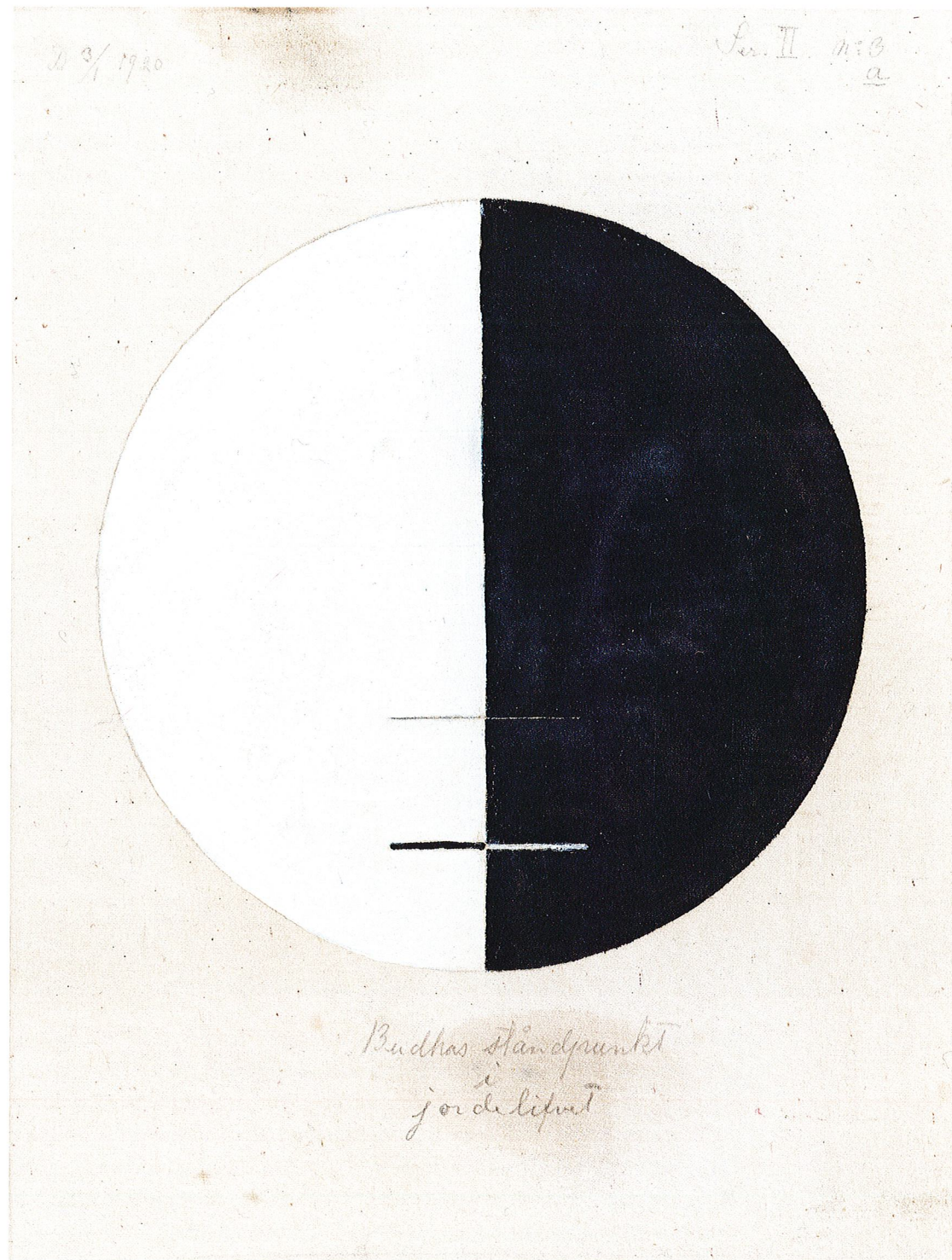
In Hilma af Klint's case, there are indications of a deepening preoccupation with theosophy before the First World War. Her use of the term “astral plane” and her concept of a “temple” in all likelihood derive from theosophical influences. The cycle *The Paintings for the Temple*, which she began in 1906, coincided with intensive discussions in the Theosophical Society about new temples.⁴ Since 1904, when Annie Besant established rituals for men and women for which temple-like spaces were required, practices deriving from Freemasonry had frequently been the backdrop to this search for temples. In 1908, Steiner also presented a concept for a theosophical temple, which was eventually built after 1913 in Dornach, near Basel in Switzerland: the Johannesbau – renamed the Goetheanum in 1918.

A final parallel between the lives of Rudolf Steiner and Hilma af Klint is their interest in non-European, non-Christian religions. This was a significant area of interest for theosophy: Madame Blavatsky had established the central headquarters



The Theosophical Society's seal.

Photo by Otto Rietmann, the original Goetheanum, Dornach, Switzerland, c. 1920.



Hilma af Klint,
Buddha's Standpoint in Wordly
Life, No. 3a, Series II, 1920.

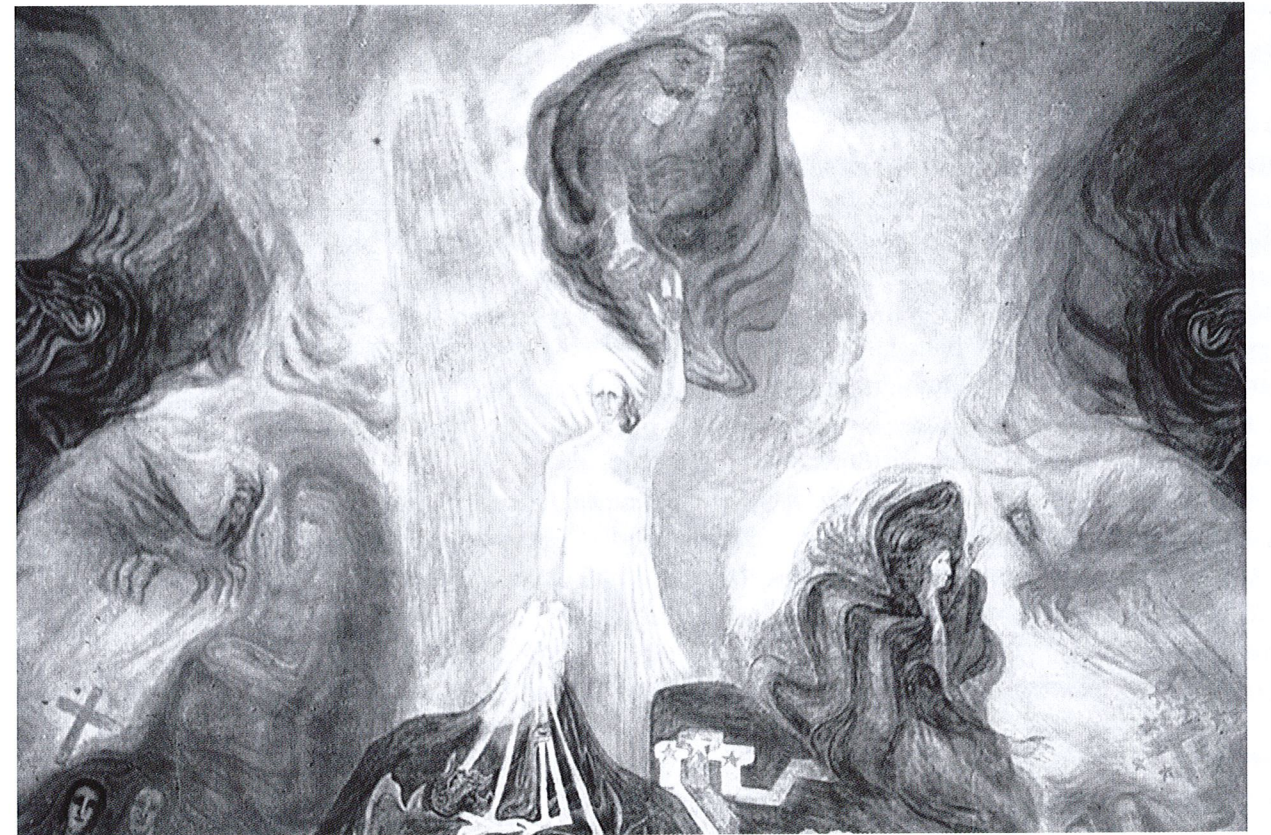
of the Theosophical Society in Adyar, near Madras, and had embraced Buddhism, while Annie Besant, who became president of the Theosophical Society Adyar in 1907, was more closely involved with Hinduism. Underlying this interest in non-Christian religions was a central tenet of the theosophical worldview: that there was one religion behind or above all existing religions. For this reason, theosophists studied religions intensively, collected and edited their texts, and searched for, in Annie Besant's phrase, "the Ancient Wisdom". Theosophy's relationship with Christianity, which had influenced the lives of the founding generation of the Theosophical Society and to which the overwhelming majority of members continued to feel closely connected, became problematic. While Blavatsky was critical of Christianity, or at least of the churches, Steiner's conclusion was that Christianity represented the highest stage in the evolution of religion, and that other religions were mere preliminary stages. This might well have been Hilma af Klint's position too. It is possible that the references to non-European religions in her work, specifically the paintings of the "Standpoints" of 1920, which dealt with Buddhism, Christianity and Islam, were derived from theosophical interests. But such references are rare in her works – presumably these themes were not the focus of her interests; but further study is needed if we wish to understand better the concepts contained in these images.

The relationship between Rudolf Steiner and Hilma af Klint is a history of common ideas and contexts, then; but it is also a partly shared life-path. In 1908, when Steiner journeyed to Sweden to give lectures, af Klint invited him to her studio, but Steiner's reaction was evidently chilly; he criticised her "mediumistic", i.e. spiritualist, painting. This is not surprising in the context of theosophical thinking, given that theosophy sought to replace mediumistic, as it were, externally controlled contacts with the spiritual world with an autonomous higher knowledge. But we do not know how af Klint's relationship with Steiner evolved. She does not seem to have reacted when Steiner left the Theosophical Society in 1912 and founded the Anthroposophical Society. In 1920, however, following the death of her mother, she paid a visit to Dornach, where the Anthroposophical Society was based, and met Steiner once again. She must by this time have entered into a close relationship with him and anthroposophy. She spent several long periods in Dornach until 1930, even after Steiner's death in 1925. In 1927 she willed part of her work to the Goetheanum.

Nonetheless, her relationship to anthroposophy was not unproblematic. In 1922 she had begun to replace her abstract, geometric style with a painting style in which she worked with flowing colours. Now, surfaces instead of graphic lines constituted the foundation of her style. This corresponded with Steiner's dogmatically proclaimed doctrine that painting as a spiritual medium must dispense with lines and create a translucent wall. Furthermore, Steiner was a strict opponent of abstract painting, preferring allegorical symbolism, and for that reason was critical of geometric painting. Perhaps Hilma af Klint's pictures in an "anthroposophical style" were largely what put an end to the intensive period of her painting. In 1922 she had evidently tried to adapt Steiner's ideas to her work, but this step into a world of strict painting rules based on "higher insight" seems to have restricted her creativity. This does not exclude the possibility that she found inner peace in anthroposophy.



Hilma af Klint,
Wheat and Wormwood,
On the Viewing of Flowers and
Trees, 1922.



Rudolf Steiner and co-workers.
Central motif of the paintings in the
small cupola of the Johannesbau
(first Goetheanum), 1917–19.

In summary: despite all their differences, Rudolf Steiner and Hilma af Klint were children of a generation that had common spiritual interests; both had experience with spiritualism, both found an intellectual and spiritual home in theosophy and anthroposophy and, above all, both sought higher knowledge and insight. This last similarity, in particular, is the point of departure for the following considerations, which bring us back to my original thesis: that theosophy must be understood as an answer, and that this answer can only be understood if we identify the question that theosophy saw itself confronted with.

Theosophy and the Crisis of Historicism c. 1900

To understand the background to theosophy one must bear in mind a fundamental, almost revolutionary transformation that took place in Europe from the early modern period: the insight that culture is based on history – the essence of what is today called historicism.⁵ Today, the historical foundation of all knowledge seems more than self-evident; but it brought about the downfall of older worldviews according to which ideas, not least concepts of the divine, were the basis of the world and society. If everything was to be interpreted historically, everything arose through processes, everything was shifting and changing, where might certainty be found for conduct, for society, for religion? For many, historicism meant the demolition of traditional values. Theosophy found itself confronted with this uncertainty.

Two developments are central to this turn towards historicism. First, the immense increase in historical knowledge, as sources inaccessible for centuries had become increasingly available. From the 12th century, almost all the works of Aristotle were known via the Islamic world; Plato arrived from Byzantium in the 15th century, along with the Hermetic texts of Neoplatonism; and scholars began to scour Europe's libraries in search of texts of classical antiquity. Then along came the archaeologists, who, particularly from the 19th century, were studying the ancient cultures of the Mediterranean, deciphering unknown languages and in doing so rewriting Europe's prehistory. Here are just three examples:

- In 1822 Egyptian hieroglyphics were deciphered with the aid of the trilingual Rosetta Stone. Egyptian sacred texts could now be read and scholars began to understand in detail the conceptual parameters of Egyptian culture, especially its religion.
- From the 1830s, the Behistun Inscription, discovered in western Iran, made it possible to read cuneiform texts, with the result that over the long term the huge archives of the Assyrian and Babylonian empires would be opened. In 1872, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* was translated for the first time, revealing the close relationship between the thought of ancient Israel and the ancient Middle East.
- In 1851, the *Pistis Sophia* became the first Gnostic work to be published since antiquity. This strand of ancient thought was no longer known only through Christian authors: suddenly an authentic voice of Gnosticism could be heard.

European expansion towards Asia brought about a further widening of horizons. Following merchants and soldiers, missionaries and scholars brought back to Europe unknown texts from cultures that were only superficially known. Here, too, I offer just a few examples:

- In 1785 the British scholar Charles Wilkins translated the *Bhagavadgita*, enabling Europeans to read this section of the great Hindu epic *Mahabharata*.
- In 1848 the French scholar Alexandre Langlois published the first volume of his translation of the *Rig-Veda*, making accessible Hindu texts that were, it was speculated, older than the oldest parts of the Bible.
- In 1879 the Anglo-German orientalist Friedrich Max Müller began publishing his *Sacred Books of the East*. The 50 volumes included texts from the traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, Taoism and Islam. At the beginning of the 19th century, one would have had to spend a lifetime travelling to gain access to the contents of each one of these volumes, uncertain whether one would even be granted access to these texts and if so whether one would be able to translate them. Now they were available to the intellectual world of Europe in inexpensive editions of reader-friendly translations.

This storm of publications was accompanied by a horde of burrowing and gnawing philologists, investigating the genesis of texts, finding first and second versions and patchwork constructions, identifying changes and losses of content through comparison and cross-referencing. For example, they showed that the biblical story of creation was closely related to Babylonian versions; analysis of the Bible revealed at least two creation narratives from different times, with different contents and different contexts.

The consequences of this knowledge of new texts and the application of philological methods were dramatic. One was simply uncertainty. The basis of European culture was now subject to question – for example, the Bible: was the Jewish tradition only a by-product of Assyrian and Persian culture and early Christianity a child of Hellenism? Was the Bible a patchwork of countless traditions without a divine origin? Had Jesus actually existed?

Knowledge of the ancient cultures of the Mediterranean and Asia, together with the application of historical-critical methods, cast doubt on the old certainties with which Europe had lived. At the height of imperialism Europeans were forced to realise that this very encounter with foreign cultures, in which they had subjugated the world through force, posed destabilising questions about their own identity. Military and cultural superiority were no longer identical. The question of what one could rely on was felt as a challenge first by intellectuals; but with the invention of cheap printing methods in the second half of the 19th century, and the publication of popular booklets, this uncertainty spread widely in educated middle-class circles.

The most significant consequence of this uncertainty was relativism. It became

clear that the European tradition was only one small part of the history of religions. Hinduism turned out to be much older than Judaism and Christianity. The biblical description of creation was not only later than similar Babylonian versions, but was one of many such stories – and incompatible with the results of science. The superiority and uniqueness of European culture were being contested. Historians and philologists seemed to be sawing away at the branch Europe was sitting on. Historicism seemed to be destroying the foundations of European culture.

Here lay the problem that theosophy faced; here we have the question it saw itself as answering. In a world in which everything appeared to be just history, where every idea was subject to relativist scrutiny, where it seemed that no absolute truth existed any longer, where no divine ideas existed independently of history, theosophists claimed to provide an unshakeable, reliable, absolute answer once again. They presented Besant's "Ancient Wisdom", a *philosophia perennis* which they believed existed prior to and independent of all history.

In order to attain this goal of knowledge independent of history, they sought to apply concepts from the natural sciences – Friedrich Max Müller mentioned Rudolf Steiner in this connection as well. Steiner, along with many theosophists, believed that one should be able to make statements about cultural matters that were just as empirically founded and objective as those concerning physical phenomena. The successes of the natural sciences and their technical implementation *c.* 1900 seemed to indicate that the methodological standards of the natural sciences ought to be those of the cultural sciences as well.

Meditation, which gave access to "higher knowledge", was to be one important instrument for this purpose. Through meditation one could read the "Akasha Chronicle", in which one would find any and all information, pristine and uncorrupted by philology and historical research, or by burrowing and gnawing intellectuals. There would be no disputes about the reliability of sources; in the view of theosophists, the uncertainty that historicism had brought in its wake was thus resolved.

And so was the problem of cultural relativism, since from the theosophical perspective the higher knowledge attained would also provide insight into the true hierarchy of religions. However, this was not what happened. For Blavatsky, a critic of Christian tradition, Buddhism offered the key to the highest knowledge; Annie Besant tended towards Hinduism, but none the less ascribed an important role to so-called "esoteric Christianity"; whereas Rudolf Steiner placed Christianity, and thus Europe, at the summit of religious evolution. So these solutions to the problem of relativism were themselves laden with potential for conflict. Rudolf Steiner's split with theosophy and Annie Besant involved precisely this conflict between East and West, because – although this was only a small part of the dispute between the two – Steiner questioned the claim to superiority of the Eastern tradition. The theosophical principle that "no religion is higher than truth" was no longer any help.

Although these debates led to schism in the theosophical movement, they did not fundamentally undermine its attractiveness. Theosophical "higher knowledge" was and remained the final answer to philological analysis of religious sources, to the

problems of uncertainty and relativism generated by cultural contact, in short to historicism – that was the theosophists' view. To the outsider, things look decidedly different. Theosophy offered a solution to the problem of historicism, but at the same time reproduced historicism's problems: the Theosophical Society was one of the most significant "suppliers" of historicist uncertainty because of its intensification of cultural contact, because it collected edited and translated religious sources, and because it introduced Europeans to foreign cultures. The theosophical expectation of finding the absolute, eternal religion behind the concrete ones, the spiritual world unthreatened by cultural relativism that Rudolf Steiner and Hilma af Klint both sought, was not to be fulfilled. Instead, this theosophical production of knowledge about religions ended up by magnifying the cultural relativism that theosophy sought to supersede.

HILMA AF KLINT

THE ART OF SEEING THE INVISIBLE

BOKFÖRLAGET STOLPE AXEL AND MARGARET AX:SON JOHNSON FOUNDATION FOR PUBLIC BENEFIT

EDITED BY KURT ALMQVIST & LOUISE BELFRAGE