

Book Review

ALCHEMY

Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul

By Titus Burckhardt, (Stuart and Watkins, 35s.)

Translated from the German by William Stoddart

Review By Seyyed Hossein Nasr

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INTEREST in alchemy has been greatly enhanced during this century through studies and research carried out in this field by historians of science and also by psychologists. The historians of science have thought in their studies to discern in alchemy a primitive chemistry and the roots of the modern science whose name derives from alchemy. The psychologists, beginning with C. G. Jung, who devoted two works to the subject, regard alchemy as a psychology couched in the language of metallurgy. Rarely has a study been made of alchemy as a science of the soul in the light of a spiritual principle that manifests itself at once in the soul and in the cosmos and therefore relates soul and cosmos, or the microcosm and the macrocosm, intimately to one another. In fact one can say that the book under review is the first work in which integral alchemy, as a spiritual science of the soul but related both in language and inner correspondence to the cosmos, has been elucidated both with precision and in depth. As the author says, "spiritual alchemy was not necessarily involved in outward metallurgical operations, even when it made use of them as similes. It is nevertheless to be supposed that originally the inward and outward work went hand in hand, for, within the framework of an organic civilization orientated towards man's highest goal, a craft can only have meaning when it serves a spiritual way" (p. 92). In this as well as many other passages the author has expounded not only the principles of alchemy but also of all traditional cosmology, and even of art which is closely connected with it.

To penetrate into the meaning of alchemy would require under normal conditions, when this tradition was fully alive, an initiation into the "mysteries" through which the meaning of its symbols and method and its often extremely abstruse and complex language would become revealed. In the absence of an actual possibility of following such a way, the only alternative is to begin from where alchemy ends and thence come "downward," if one may so express oneself. That is, alchemy seeks to lead man by stages from the *materia prima* to the state of purity which makes possible the wedding of soul and Spirit, the moon and the Sun. Now, if one possesses knowledge of the spiritual life through other means, through the "Greater Mysteries" rather than through the "Lesser Mysteries" of alchemy, and if one also possesses an intuition of the spiritual significance of traditional art, then it is possible to descend from the spiritual to the material and to unravel many of the mysteries of alchemy without being taught its language stage by stage. It is noteworthy that the author of this work has written several outstanding books on Islamic esotericism or Sufism as well as on the traditional art of East and West. He has applied knowledge of both the above subjects as well as his intimate knowledge of the metaphysical and cosmological doctrines of other traditions (especially of Hinduism, where Tantrism presents

many striking resemblances to alchemy) to the clarification and elucidation of basic alchemical symbols and doctrines. In this manner he has made clear certain questions which no other contemporary book had been able to explain satisfactorily.

The chapters of the book, starting with a short historical introduction, deal with nearly every aspect of alchemy, from an explanation of its language to the discussion of planets and metals, the elements, the *materia prima*, sulfur, quicksilver and salt and the alchemical marriage. There is also a very important chapter devoted to the "alchemy of prayer," while several chapters are devoted to specific alchemical authors or works such as Nicolas Flamel and the "Emerald Tablet."

One of the most important chapters of the book is on the "stages of the work" and its correspondence to the stages of the spiritual life as taught in different traditions, proving without doubt the inner nexus between alchemy and the spiritual way. The discussion here of the technique of invocation, so central to spiritual realization in many traditions, and its connection with the actual "spiritual technique" of alchemy is very revealing.

In addition to the text, the book abounds in illustrations from different alchemical manuscripts, some made available for the first time in this work. The meaning of these illustrations is given wherever they appear, adding a very helpful "visual" commentary to the text.

The appearance of this book in English should correct once and for all many errors prevalent in this field. It should make clear to historians of science, of whom at least some would agree with this point of view, that although alchemy did give birth indirectly to chemistry, yet if we are to study it scientifically we must take full account of its unified world view according to which the events in the soul of man and in nature are inextricably connected; this inner correspondence between man and nature is something that has been forgotten by modern man including the chemists. It should also show up the serious limitations and errors of any purely psychological interpretation of alchemy such as would seek to study the psyche without reference to the luminous world of the Spirit which alone can comprehend the soul, in the sense of both encompassing and understanding. For students of art and comparative religion in general this work is also of great significance.

From the point of view of translation this book has been well done; its presentation is also excellent, with very few errors. A short list of the names and dates of alchemists and a bibliography of works on the subject add to its usefulness. One could wish, however, that some of the sentences which appear only in Latin had been followed by their English translation thus making this easier to read for all and sundry.