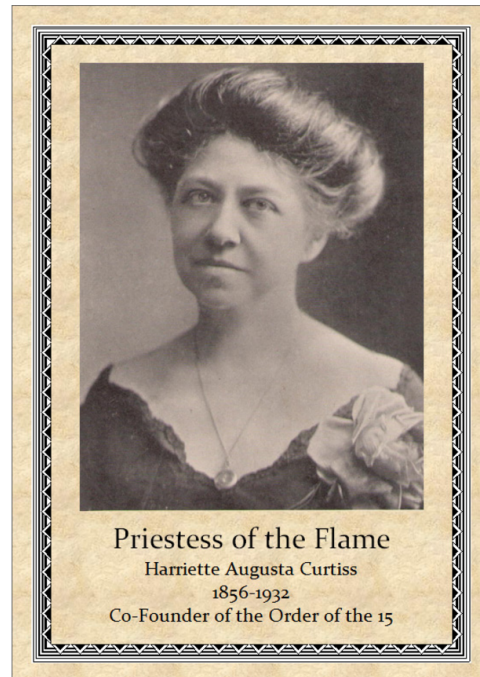
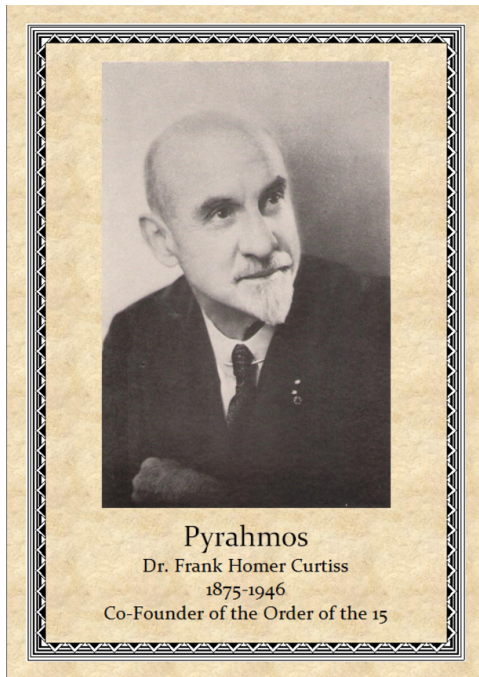


## Great Esotericists

# Harriette Augusta Curtiss (1856–1932) and Frank Homer Curtiss (1875–1946)

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The path of discipleship is often portrayed as a solitary one. Personal relationships are sacrificed to group service, and romantic “entanglements” are viewed as distracting and wasteful of energy. Helena Blavatsky, for one, emphasized the need for celibacy; it is impossible, she declared, “for him to divide his attention between the pursuit of Occultism and a wife.” She added: “let me remind you, practical Occultism is far too serious and dangerous a study for a man to take up, unless he is in the most deadly earnest, and ready to sacrifice all, himself first of all, to gain his end.”<sup>1</sup> Not incidentally, major world religions require monks, nuns, and in some cases clergy, to take vows of celibacy.

Some of the great esoteric teachers never married (for example: Éliphas Lévi, Tallapragada Subba Row, Jiddu Krishnamurti, Charles Leadbeater), or found their voices after failed

marriages (Blavatsky, Annie Besant, Alice Bailey). Several others had spouses who showed minimal or no interest in their esoteric work (Anna Kingsford, Arthur Waite, Max Heindel, Katherine Tingley, Dion Fortune). In a few cases esotericists formed close, extramarital relationships with coworkers.<sup>2</sup>

Notwithstanding the possible distractions of intimate unions, several married couples made significant contributions to modern esotericism. MacGregor and Moina Mathers, Rudolf and Marie Steiner,<sup>3</sup> Helena and Nicholas Roerich, Alice and Foster Bailey,<sup>4</sup> Corinne and Theodore Heline, and Geoffrey and Sandra Hodson<sup>5</sup> immediately come to mind. Less well-known, but deserving of more attention was the American couple Harriette and Homer Curtiss.

Harriette Augusta—who in adulthood bore a striking resemblance to Eleanor Roosevelt—

was born in Philadelphia in 1856. After a good education she planned a career on the stage; but her mother dissuaded her, and eventually she developed abilities as a clairvoyant. In 1907, at the age of fifty-one, she married the much-younger Homer Curtiss, a medical doctor who had graduated from the University of Pennsylvania. By that time both had developed a strong interest in the teachings of the Theosophical Society.

Soon after their marriage the Curtisses formed an esoteric study group in Philadelphia; its first meeting was on January 1, 1908. The group grew in size and became known as the “Order of the 15,” a name explained many years later as capturing “its cosmic and numerological designation.”<sup>6</sup> Harriette Curtiss assumed the role of “Teacher” and adopted the pseudonym Rahmea, interpreted as “Princess of the Flame”; Homer Curtiss served as the order’s secretary, taking the name Pyrahmos.

The Order’s goal was to build bridges between Theosophy and orthodox Christian teachings. The Curtisses acknowledged their debt to Helena Blavatsky, co-founder of the Theosophical Society. Their first book, *Letters from the Teacher* (1909), bore the following dedication:

To that Great Teacher who brought the Wisdom-Religion to the Western World, known on earth as HELENA PETROVNA BLAVATSKY, this volume is affectionately dedicated by her loving pupils and disciples Pyrahmos and Rahmea.<sup>7</sup>

Authorship was listed as: “Transmitted by Rahmea, Priestess of the Flame. Edited by F. Homer Curtiss, B.S., M.D., Secretary of the Order.” Perhaps that style provides a clue to respective roles in their work as a whole; but all subsequent books were published under “Harriette Augusta Curtiss and F. Homer Curtiss.”<sup>8</sup>

The Order of the 15 relaxed the Theosophical Society’s insistence on vegetarianism but preserved most of its other teachings, including universal brotherhood, reincarnation, and the return of the World Teacher. As the rift between the Adyar and American branches of the Theosophical Society grew wider, the Curtisses sided with the American branch and the

“back to Blavatsky” movement. In so doing they cut themselves off from the Christianization movement in the Adyar Society, in which Besant and Leadbeater played prominent roles. Moreover, there is no evidence of close connections with Steiner, whose own interest in the esoteric aspects of Christianity was demonstrated in 1902 with the publication of *Christianity as Mystical Fact*. The Curtisses’ work on Christian esotericism seems to have developed independently from comparable work in progress elsewhere during the period.

The teachings of the Order of the 15 were promulgated through monthly lessons and correspondence with students.<sup>9</sup> The monthly lessons were designed to be accessible to entry-level students, “yet they also contain so much deep understanding and occult lore that the most advanced students find much that is new . . . [but] put in a new light, *i.e.*, the light of the new day.”<sup>10</sup> In due course the monthly lessons were gathered into the basic text, *The Voice of Isis* (1914), and the more advanced text, *The Message of Aquaria* (1921). Edited correspondence was published in the two volumes of *Letters from the Teacher* (1909, 1926).

Over time the Curtisses’ path began to deviate from Blavatskian Theosophy, and as their focus changed, so did the name of their organization. The Order of the 15 became the Order of Christian Mystics, which embraced the objective of promoting advanced Christian mysticism in accordance with the Western mystery school tradition. “It is Christian,” they explained, “in that it seeks the universal Cosmic Christ Principle, no matter by what name that Universal Principle is known in other lands; and in that it bases its teachings on the Christian rather than on Oriental scriptures.”<sup>11</sup> We should note that “mystics” must be interpreted in the sense of the practical mysticism of modern esoteric teachings rather than the traditional contemplative mysticism of both West and East.

The Order of Christian Mystics was the most successful of the Curtisses’ endeavors. At its peak, it enrolled thousands of students in over seventy countries. But the teachings were aimed primarily at the American esoteric community, for it was believed that America

would remain the spiritually dominant nation on earth for many years to come. The Curtisses' vision was to present a system of mysticism suitable for the western culture and mindset, encompassing a new interpretation on all former teachings given under the names of Rosicrucianism, Gnosticism and the western mystery school teachings.

Among much else the Order promoted a system of personal regeneration, referred to as spiritual alchemy, which involved transmuting the base sexual creative energy. By way of clarification:

Transmutation does not mean suppression or refusal to use the usual normal functions which have been given to man . . . . But it does mean that all thought in connection with this question must be metaphorically laid upon the altar of the Most High and blessed.<sup>12</sup>

During the first half of the twentieth century a number of esoteric teachers established religious affiliates of their esoteric schools or religious organizations through which their teachings could expand. For example, Leadbeater helped found the Liberal Catholic Church, and became its second presiding bishop. Steiner co-founded the Christian Communities. Ernest Holmes formed the Church of Religious Science after purposely remaining, for many years, outside the realm of organized religion.

The Curtisses' did likewise; during World War I they formed the Church of the Wisdom Religion, soon incorporated as the Universal Religious Foundation. By the 1930s more of the Curtisses' work was channeled through the Foundation than through the Order of Christian Mystics.

Through these various organizations the Curtisses published twenty-seven volumes of mystical teachings, answered thousands of let-

ters, and delivered thousands of lectures across the United States. All their books ran through multiple editions.

The Curtisses' most influential books were *The Key to the Universe* (1917) and *The Key of Destiny* (1919). The

unifying theme of the two-book series—each more than 300 pages in length—is number symbolism. *The Key to the Universe* focuses on the numbers zero through ten, *The Key of Destiny* on the numbers eleven through twenty-two. Numerology obviously played a major role, and the authors began the first book with the observation: “Mathematics is the only exact science. . . . Words are symbols of ideas, but numbers are realities.”<sup>13</sup> Pythagoras

symbols of divine would have agreed.

To bring each number to life the authors drew upon the perspectives of mathematics, astrology, Greek mythology, Vedic religion, the Hebrew alphabet, esoteric teachings on the human constitution, and more. Importantly, they related each number to a Major Arcanum in the Tarot, providing a brief but clear exposition of Tarot symbolism. To illustrate these latter discussions they provided monochrome reproductions from the Dodal and Convey Marseille Tarot decks, the “St Germain” Egyptian deck (attributed to the late nineteenth-century Edgar de Valcourt-Vermont), and the Waite-Smith deck.<sup>14</sup>

Each number was discussed at length. For example, the Curtisses devoted sixty-six pages to the number seven. By way of introduction they characterized seven as

the most sacred of all numbers and for several reasons is so considered in all theologies. *1st*, because it relates to the mystery of the manifestation of the Godhead, the *Mystery of Creation*; *2nd*, because the number 7

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governs the equally divine *Mystery of Gestation*, and 3rd because it is the *Number of Perfection*.<sup>15</sup>

From the perspective of the Tarot the Curtisses wrote:

In the Tarot the 7th card is called The Chariot, and is represented by a conqueror crowned with a coronet, composed of 3 pentagrams of gold. He stands in a chariot having the form of a cubic stone, having over him an azure canopy supported by 4 columns, and having 14 stars over his head. . . . [Two] sphinxes, 1 black and 1 white, draw the chariot, each straining in an opposite direction, yet both looking toward the right and under the absolute control of the driver.<sup>16</sup>

They interpreted the Chariot card thus:

The card symbolizes the main characteristics of the sacred septenary. It represents man who has become the Conqueror, master both of himself and the elements, making the cube—now become the Philosopher's Stone—his chariot; the heavens his canopy; the 2 sphinxes . . . his servants to bear him onward.<sup>17</sup>

The eighty-six pages devoted to the number twelve in *The Key of Destiny* are prefaced by the comment that it “pertains primarily and fundamentally to the complete expression or Fruition of the Divine Trinity within the circle of its manifestation.”<sup>18</sup> The twelfth Major Arcanum, the Hanged Man, is described and analyzed, as before. But the discussion of “twelve” focuses more on the tribes of Israel and Christ's twelve disciples. No fewer than thirty-eight pages address the labors of Hercules. The Curtisses end their discussion of Hercules' final labor—conquest of the hell-hound Cerberus—thus:

Hercules brought Cerberus up into the light of day, thus proving . . . that the Goat of Medes is not the devil, nor is the dog Cerberus in reality the fearsome creature usually depicted, for by the power of the Christ both can be conquered and made the friends of the man who has accomplished, i.e., the Sun Initiate.<sup>19</sup>

Like Kingsford, Besant, and others, the Curtisses acknowledged the role of the Divine Mother. The Curtisses noted the near-universality of a divine feminine personage among world religions, while reproaching Christianity—except “The Catholic Church”—for paying the least attention to her.<sup>20</sup> Their teachings on the Divine Mother evidently sought to remedy that inattention. She is, they explained,

that mighty Passive Principle which gathers up the Light as it penetrates Chaos and cherishes it in her bosom. It is forever the tender, brooding Mother-force which works on the germs of good in all things that they may ultimately bring forth that good. It is That unseen Mother-love of the Godhead, hovering like a dove over its nestlings . . . . It is that mysterious force of healing which makes every wound, be it of the physical body, the mind or the heart, tend to heal . . . . It is that love which makes Time the great healer of all woes, the soother of all sorrows, the adjuster of all inharmonies; that brings sunshine after rain, laughter after tears, and joy, deep and abiding, after sin, sorrow and repentance.<sup>21</sup>

The Divine Mother clearly has her being at the highest levels of the Godhead; indeed she is co-equal with God the Father:

The great Divine Mother is not something apart from God, but a definite and necessary manifestation or expression of God as Divine Love. It is from this eternal truth that all great religions have recognized and immortalized the Mother-aspect of the Divine as co-equal with the Father-aspect.<sup>22</sup>

One section of *The Message of Aquaria* (1921) describes the evolution of the early root races. Members of the first root race, “beings of an incorporeal and ethereal substance half astral and half physical,” had not yet reached the lowest arc of [their] cycle of descent into matter. Forms in the second root race “became more and more dense by the gradual absorption of a new element. But only “toward the middle of the Third Race (Lemurian) did solid bones develop, the sexes separate, the body

become ‘clothed with coats of skin’ and take on human form as we know it today.”<sup>23</sup>

Not surprisingly, given its title, *The Message of Aquaria* focuses to a large extent on the coming Aquarian Age. In the New Age many of the world’s problems will be solved by religion, but it will be led by a priesthood of initiates:

Such an initiated priesthood was founded by Melchisedec, and only when a priesthood “after the order of Melchisedec” has been re-established and humanity again gladly follows the Divine Law—not as children, but because they recognize its authority—can the problems of mankind be truly solved and the conditions under which humanity is suffering today be finally readjusted.<sup>24</sup>

One of the problems with conventional Christianity, the Curtisses noted, was confusion between the Master Jesus and the Christ:

Jesus the man was an Avatar who, as He himself says, ‘came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me,’ while the Mystic Christ is not a personality, but a Divine Essence. It is a spiritual emanation from the Godhead, the Son of God or the Godhead in its creative aspect; that mystic Power or Principle which fructifies and animates all manifestations of life.<sup>25</sup>

The student, in the Curtisses’ view, was better served in this regard by the Pauline epistles than by the gospels.

From time to time the Curtisses’ moved their headquarters to different locations. Initially in Philadelphia, it moved to California prior to World War I, and around 1925 to Washington, D.C. Homer Curtiss continued the work after Harriette made her transition from natural causes on September 22, 1932. After his own death in 1946, the headquarters moved to Hollywood, California, but the Order of Christian Mystics and the Universal Religious Foundation soon ceased operations.

With the collapse of the Curtisses’ organizational structures there was a risk that their works would be forgotten. In recent years,

however, their books have received new prominence and are readily available in printed form and online.<sup>26</sup> Harriette and Homer Curtiss’ marriage of twenty-four years came to an end with Harriette’s death. It would be inappropriate for us to speculate on the nature of their relationship at the personality level, though most of us would hope that they were fulfilled in their the marital state. There is every reason to believe that their union was laid “upon the altar of the Most High.”

We also acknowledge that, on the mental and spiritual levels, they were highly effective coworkers who achieved much, touched many lives, and left a legacy of writings, which are as relevant to us today as they were to their students in the first half of the twentieth century. Along with Kingsford, Steiner, Besant, Leadbeater, Bailey, and others, they helped lay the groundwork for modern esoteric Christianity.

Contributed by John F. Nash  
Johnson City, Tennessee

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<sup>1</sup> Helena P. Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy* (London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1987), 263.

<sup>2</sup> Anna Kingsford formed a close spiritual relationship with widower Edward Maitland, apparently with the blessing of her husband, the Rev. Algernon Godfrey Kingsford. Katherine Tingley formed a similar relationship with William Q. Judge while married to her third husband Philo B. Tingley.

<sup>3</sup> Rudolf Steiner formed a spiritual relationship with Marie von Sivers while separated from his first wife Anna Eunicke Steiner. He and Marie married after Anna’s death.

<sup>4</sup> Alice Bailey was divorced from her first husband the Rev. Walter Evans.

<sup>5</sup> Geoffrey Hodson married Sandra Chase after the death of his first wife, the former Jane Carter. Both helped in his esoteric work, but Sandra Hodson assumed responsibility for the posthumous publication of some of his most valuable teachings.

<sup>6</sup> Harriett A. Curtiss & F. Homer Curtiss, *The Key of Destiny* (San Francisco: Curtiss Philosophic, Book Co., 1919), 183.

<sup>7</sup> Harriett A. Curtiss & F. Homer Curtiss, *Letters from the Teacher (Of the Teacher of the*

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- 8 *Order of the 15*) (Denver, CO: Curtiss Book Co., 1909), unnumbered Dedication page. Capitalization in original.
- 9 Copyrights, however, were usually registered in Homer Curtiss' name.
- 10 A similar format was adopted by Alice Bailey for the Arcane School.
- 11 Curtiss & Curtiss, *The Key of Destiny*, 183. Italics in original.
- 12 Ibid., 191.
- 13 Harriett A. Curtiss & F. Homer Curtiss, *Letters from the Teacher*, vol, II (Hollywood, CA: Curtiss Philosophic, Book Co., 1926), 156.
- 14 Harriett A. Curtiss & F. Homer Curtiss, *The Key to the Universe: or a Spiritual Interpretation of Numbers and Symbols* (San Francisco: Curtiss Philosophic, Book Co., 1917), 17-18.
- 15 For more information on Tarot decks, see John F. Nash, "The Origins and Evolution of the Tarot," *The Esoteric Quarterly*, Spring 2017, 67-98.
- 16 Curtiss & Curtiss, *The Key to the Universe*, 219. Capitalization and italics in original.
- 17 Ibid., 281.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Curtiss & Curtiss, *The Key of Destiny*, 29. Ibid., 114.
- 20 Devotion to Mary in Roman Catholicism is often attributed to people's yearning for a goddess. Evidently the Curtisses were unaware of the more explicit reverence of the Divine Mother in Eastern Orthodoxy.
- 21 Curtiss & Curtiss, *The Key to the Universe*, 192-193.
- 22 Harriett A. Curtiss & F. Homer Curtiss, *The Divine Mother* (San Francisco: Curtiss Philosophic, Book Co., 1921), 13.
- 23 Harriett A. Curtiss & F. Homer Curtiss, *The Message of Aquaria: The Significance and Mission of the Aquarian Age* (Washington: Curtiss Philosophic Book Co., 7/e, 1947), 73. Parenthesis in original.
- 24 Ibid., 427-438. Embedded quote in original.
- 25 Harriett A. Curtiss & F. Homer Curtiss, *The Mystic Life, An Introduction to Practical Christian Mysticism*, 2/e, (Curtiss Philosophic Book Co., 1936), 73-74.
- 26 Particularly useful is a website registered in South Africa: "Teachings of The Order of Christian Mystics, 1908-1946,": <http://orderofchristianmystics.co.za/> (accessed April 30, 2017). The website provides online facsimiles of most of the Curtisses' publications.

## Book Review

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*The Soul of Psychosynthesis: The Seven Core Concepts*, by Kenneth Sørensen, first edition, Kentaur Publishing, 2016. Paperback, 192 pages. List price US \$19.52. Available at: Amazon.com.

Summarizing Roberto Assagioli's contributions to the field of personal and spiritual growth is a daunting task. He was a pioneer in the field of psychology, a novel writer in spiritual and metaphysical subjects, a serious researcher and student, a teacher and a loving human being. Not surprisingly, introducing the main concepts of Psychosynthesis, Roberto Assagioli's major contribution to the world, is an equally challenging project.

In *The Soul of Psychosynthesis: The Seven Core Concepts*, Kenneth Sørensen achieves this in an original book that is both informative for readers in the psychological field and also accessible to readers from other backgrounds seeking to learn Psychosynthesis. To help the reader find their way through the labyrinth of Psychosynthesis ideas, Sørensen gives the reader a thread of Ariadne, a suggestion made by Assagioli himself that the Seven Core Concepts of Psychosynthesis are:

- 1) Disidentification;
- 2) The personal self;
- 3) The Will: good, strong, skillful;
- 4) The Ideal Model;
- 5) Synthesis;
- 6) The Superconscious; and
- 7) The Transpersonal Self.

Sørensen's book examines and illustrates these concepts devoting a chapter to each and showing their application in professional settings and in everyday life. He contextualizes his discussion with some clinical vignettes from his own therapeutic practice and by sharing examples drawn from his research and personal experiences with Psychosynthesis. The book includes seven interesting appendixes with exercises and additional information about Roberto Assagioli's life and work. Sørensen's contribution is grounded in

years of work in the field and can be trusted. He's a trained Psychosynthesis psychotherapist and has been serving as the director of the Norwegian Institute of Norway.

To readers of *The Esoteric Quarterly*, the book's main title *The Soul of Psychosynthesis* will surely look significant. Psychosynthesis is well-known as a humanistic and transpersonal approach that has helped refocus psychology around the Soul. This was no easy task at the time Assagioli (1888-1974), was writing, when positivistic and psychoanalytic approaches were more prevalent in Europe. Assagioli, along with other prominent exceptions such as Jung, Maslow and Keyserling, was a pioneer in a new land. He had studied the Ageless Wisdom traditions of East and West, and wanted to use an inclusive language that would convey the perennial truth to a wider audience, including the scientific milieu. He introduced the study of the Superconscious and the Transpersonal Self to psychology (indeed he's said to have coined the word "transpersonal psychology") and he was a complete forerunner in the psychological study of the Will. He also expanded the study of the evolution of consciousness by expanding the number of psychological functions to seven and by introducing "seven psychological types," each associated with certain transpersonal qualities.

Sørensen's study has the great merit of introducing each of these main ideas to the reader in a structured and logical fashion, defining each concept, exemplifying them, providing exercises and linking them with each of the other concepts. In addition, Sørensen suggests an original reading of Assagioli's metaphysics as *Evolutionary Panentheism*, a framework that contemplates that divinity's transcendent being "is an immanent presence in creation, and that the universe is created and maintained through involution and evolution." (p.11) This reading is interesting as it positions Assagioli in dialogue with "integral theory" authors like Ken Wilber.

To support this claim, in Chapter 2 (Psychosynthesis Model of the Personality), Sørensen argues that Assagioli's approach is integral as it offers a multidimensional view of the human personality that includes all of the relevant theories available at the time. This is synthesized in Assagioli's well-known "egg" diagram of the human constitution, which is reproduced, expanded and examined from different angles throughout the book. It is important that Sørensen has chosen to keep the position of the Self at the top of the "egg" diagram given by Assagioli and explains why this position gives a sense of orientation, purpose and evolutionary development that would be lost should we choose to retire the Self from the diagram, as it has been attempted by some writers in the field. It would be very interesting to read more about the current state of this debate about the Self in Psychosynthesis and, possibly, a lengthier elaboration of the similarities and differences between Psychosynthesis and Integral Theory. In this master thesis from 2008, Sørensen offers a comparison of Wilber and Assagioli.<sup>1</sup> While the first issue has been discussed in a recent issue of the *Journal of Psychosynthesis* published by the Institute of Psychosynthesis in Florence (October 2015), the second issue merits deeper consideration and Sørensen opens up the dialogue.

Of special interest is the distinction Sørensen makes between the structural and the developmental theory of Psychosynthesis, in Chapter 3. It explains how the levels of the "egg" diagram are levels of personal and transpersonal experience rather than static compartments or contents of the personality. This chapter provides excellent material to think about the links between Psychosynthesis and Humanistic psychology, especially Maslow's theory. Sørensen shows that Psychosynthesis develops Maslow's five developmental stages of human psychology by subdividing the fifth stage into three further stages: (1) the activation and expression of the potentialities in the Higher Unconscious; (2) the direct awareness of the Self and (3) the communion of the Higher Self and the Universal Self. This is clearly one of the greatest contributions that

Assagioli made to Humanistic Psychology. This chapter also introduces the Star Model of the psychological functions, which evokes the Seven Rays in Alice A. Bailey. Diagram 10 concerning the Great Chain also evokes some similarities with Alice A Bailey diagrams about the human constitution that are very thought-provoking.

Another important contribution of this book is the clear distinction between aspects of the Self and how these apply to Psychosynthesis Therapy. In Chapter 6, while discussing the Will in Psychosynthesis, Sørensen shows that the Self is not only Love-Awareness but also Will. The author describes the different stages in the individual development of the Will, technically known in Psychosynthesis as "there is a Will" "I have a Will" and "I am a Will." The Will gives a sense of direction and purpose to our lives, although this Will is usually veiled by the identifications that inform the nucleus of primary and secondary subpersonalities (discussed in Chapter 4). Sørensen explains that discovery of the Will is like a call for freedom and is often connected to a crisis because the pain of crises can trigger a process of dis-identification and discovery of the Will. Additionally, the discovery of the Will provides us with an ethical framework to make choices responsibly. This chapter also summarizes some techniques that Assagioli used for training and evoking the Will, as well as the tripartite model of the strong, the good and the skillful Will. These can be related with the Will to know, the Will to Good and the Will to be in the Ageless Wisdom.

*The Soul of Psychosynthesis: The Seven Core Concepts* is a wonderful companion for readers who seek a serious introduction to Psychosynthesis. The book is also a resourceful handbook for professionals in the psychological field interested in deepening their background in the purposeful approach created by that great Soul, Roberto Assagioli.

Contributed by Miguel Malagrecia  
Turin, Italy

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Sørensen, *Integral Psychosynthesis*, <http://www.integralworld.net/sorensen1.html>.