

A Commentary on THE COSMIC DOCTRINE

Understanding Dion Fortune's Masterpiece
of Spiritual Creation and Evolution



John Michael Greer

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INTRODUCTION

Books on occultism come and go, but every so often a genuine classic appears. *The Cosmic Doctrine* by Dion Fortune is such a classic. The most important work of occult philosophy to emerge in the twentieth century, it sets out the principles of the Western mystery tradition with a clarity and depth that has rarely if ever been equaled. A foundational text within Dion Fortune's own esoteric order, the Society of the Inner Light, it has been required reading for students of the occult in the English-speaking world since it first became available to the general public in 1956.

The Cosmic Doctrine isn't an easy book to read, however. Its very conciseness makes it hard going, for every sentence requires close attention, but the challenge it offers to its readers goes well beyond this. In a phrase that has become famous in occult circles since its publication, *The Cosmic Doctrine* is intended to train the mind, not to inform it; it attempts to communicate to the reader an unfamiliar way of thinking, and so a great deal of patience and hard work are required to grasp what it has to say. Some of the difficulties, however, can be smoothed out by reframing and rephrasing the ideas Fortune presents, and this is what I have tried to do.

From ancient times through to the Renaissance, it was standard practice for scholars who had a certain amount of experience with a difficult text to write commentaries on that text for the benefit of the reading public. Examples such as Macrobius' commentary on *The Dream of Scipio* and Proclus' mystical commentary on the *Elements* of Euclid played important roles in the Western mystery tradition in earlier days. Since *The Cosmic Doctrine* is as rich and as challenging as either of these two examples, I thought it was high time to revive the commentary tradition. The following chapters accordingly appeared in monthly installments on my blog at ecosophia.net over a period of some three years, beginning late in 2018. The questions and comments of my readers helped me a great deal in revising and clarifying the commentary, and they are responsible for much of what is useful in this volume.

It's probably necessary to say in so many words that my views on the meaning of *The Cosmic Doctrine* make no claim to authority. I am not an initiate of the Society of the Inner Light, and my sole qualifications for writing this commentary are the years I have spent reading, studying, and meditating on this text, as well as Dion Fortune's other works and the literature of the Western mystery tradition generally. I've doubtless made many errors in what follows. If this volume helps students of the Western mystery tradition to understand one of its classic texts a little better, it will have done what I wanted it to do.

Using this book

To make sense of what follows, you'll need to have a copy of *The Cosmic Doctrine* to hand. There are two widely available editions of the text, the Revised Edition, first published in 1966, and the Millennium Edition, first published in 1995, which reprints the original privately printed edition of 1949. Either one can be used to follow the discussion in this book. The text varies somewhat between the two editions, but the concepts and images are the same, and the commentary refers to both. In those places where the Millennium Edition refers to material not covered by the Revised Edition, I have outlined that material in the commentary.

As already noted, *The Cosmic Doctrine* is heavy going, especially for those who don't have any previous exposure to occult philosophy. It's useful to read through each chapter once or twice, trying to get an overview, but after that, it's best taken a little at a time. For most students, it is best to spend an entire month on each chapter, and to set aside five

or ten minutes a day during that month to work on the text. During that daily session, take one short paragraph or half of a long one, read it closely, and think about what you've read, while picturing in your mind's eye the imagery that the text assigns to the concepts under discussion. Let images and ideas surface in response; it is helpful to write these down in a notebook and return to them at intervals. If you have already established a regular meditation practice, of course, exploring the text and its imagery as a series of themes for meditation is highly recommended—this is the method that Fortune herself assigned to the students who received the original version of *The Cosmic Doctrine*, and it has lost none of its value since her time.

A note on authorship

Dion Fortune presented *The Cosmic Doctrine* to her students as a communication from one of the Greater Masters, a being whose soul had long since finished its pilgrimage through material incarnation and had risen to a very high level of spiritual advancement. I have no doubt that Fortune received the text through trance mediumship, as her considerable talents in that branch of occult practice are well documented. In her time, for that matter, receiving texts in that manner was common practice—a great many of the significant figures of the early twentieth-century British occult scene produced texts in this way, with Aleister Crowley's *The Book of the Law* (received 1904) and *A Vision* by Georgie Yeats and William Butler Yeats (received 1917–1925) as two of the most famous examples of the process.

Be that as it may, in the pages that follow I have treated the text as Fortune's own work. This is partly a recognition of the complex nature of trance writings, which (whatever their ultimate source) come through the mind of the individual who copies them down and are inevitably shaped thereby. Partly, however, it reflects the fact that *The Cosmic Doctrine* stands or falls on the value of the ideas that it communicates, not on the source of those ideas. We have had ample experience since Fortune's time, of writing that claimed to be from exalted spiritual personages and turned out to be nonsense or worse. *The Cosmic Doctrine* does not need the additional support of a claim to supernatural origin. Whether it was written by one of the Greater Masters or by Dion Fortune's own subconscious mind, its creator had things to say that are well worth hearing.

A fascinating analysis of the most important work of occult philosophy of the 20th century

Dion Fortune's *The Cosmic Doctrine* is a foundational text which has been required reading for students of the occult since it was first published in 1956. Fortune attempts to explain the meaning and evolution of the cosmos, from the first beginnings to our lives today. John Michael Greer provides a learned and elucidating commentary on this classic text, allowing students and teachers alike to digest and understand this many layered book with more ease.

"This book is essential reading for anyone who would like to increase their understanding of *The Cosmic Doctrine*. John Michael Greer's deep appreciation of this remarkable text enables him to guide the reader step by step through its undoubted challenges. Above all, he respects the spirit of the text by helping readers to reach their own understanding of its meaning - and he does so in an approachable and enjoyable manner!"

Wendy Berg, esotericist, author of *Sparks from the Cosmic Flame: Essays inspired by Dion Fortune's 'The Cosmic Doctrine'*

"When travelling into an unknown territory it is advisable to put your trust in the hands of an experienced and knowledgeable guide. John Michael Greer is a sure-footed guide in the difficult and unfamiliar landscape of the occult imagination. This commentary offers an accessible and authoritative curriculum in which the author has undertaken the herculean task of placing inspired teaching in the hands of a new generation. It is a job very well done."

Naomi Ozaniec, author of *The Kabbalah Experience: The Practical Guide to Kabbalistic Wisdom*

"Through his commentary, John Michael Greer invites readers to enter and work creatively with this seminal text. He breaks new ground by taking us into the living geometry of the book, making these abstract seeming forms tangible to our minds. Right at this heart of this commentary is a contemplative process based on the mystery of the living. For anyone interested in the work of Dion Fortune and modern expressions of the Qabalah, I cannot recommend this book highly enough."

Ian Rees, author of *The Keys to the Temple: Unlocking Dion Fortune's Mystical Qabalah Through Her Occult Novels*

John Michael Greer is the award-winning author of more than fifty books, including *The Celtic Golden Dawn* and *Circles of Power: An Introduction to Hermetic Magic*. An initiate in Freemasonry, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, and the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids, Greer served as the Grand Archdruid of the Ancient Order of Druids in America (AODA) for twelve years. He lives in Rhode Island with his wife Sara. Greer is also the author of eleven fantasy and science fiction novels and ten nonfiction books on peak oil and the future of industrial society, and blogs weekly on politics, magic, and the future at www.ecosophia.net.

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