

# The Lectures of Rudolf Steiner

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## Spiritual Wisdom in the Early Christian Centuries

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Translator Unknown

I have said on many occasions that at the time when medieval culture had reached its prime, two streams of spiritual life were flowing through the ripest souls in European civilisation — streams which I have described as knowledge through revelation and knowledge acquired by reason, as we find it in Scholasticism. Knowledge through revelation, in its more scholastic form, was by no means a body of mystical, abstract or indefinite thought. It expressed itself in sharply defined, clear-cut concepts. But these concepts were considered to be beyond the scope of man's ordinary powers of cognition and must in every case be accepted as traditions of the Church. The Church, by virtue of its continuity, claimed the right to be the guardian of this kind of knowledge.

The second kind of knowledge was held to be within the scope of research and investigation, albeit those who stood wholly within the stream of Scholasticism acknowledged that this knowledge acquired by reason could not in any sense be regarded as knowledge emanating from the super-sensible world.

Thus when medieval culture was at its prime, it was realised that knowledge no longer accessible to mankind in that age must be preserved as it were by tradition. But it was not always so, for if we go back through the Middle Ages to the first Christian centuries we shall find that the characteristics of this knowledge through revelation was less sharply emphasised than they were in medieval culture. If one had suggested to a Greek philosopher of the Athenian School, for instance, that a distinction could be made between knowledge acquired by reason and knowledge through revelation (in the sense in which the latter was understood in the Middle Ages), he would have been at a loss to know what was meant. It would have been unthinkable to him that if knowledge concerning super-sensible worlds had once been communicated to a man by cosmic powers, it could not be communicated afresh. True, the Greeks realised that higher spiritual knowledge was beyond the reach of man's ordinary cognition, but they knew too that by dint of spiritual training and through Initiation, a man could unfold higher faculties of knowledge and that by these means he would enter a world where super-sensible truth would be revealed to him.

Now a change took place in Western culture between all that lived in the centuries when Greek philosophy came to flower in Plato and Aristotle, and the kind of knowledge that made its appearance about the end of the fourth century A.D. I have often referred to one aspect of this change by saying that the Mystery of Golgotha occurred in an age when very much of the old Initiation-wisdom was still living in men. And indeed there were many who applied their Initiation-wisdom and were thus able, with super-sensible knowledge, to realise the significance of the Event on Golgotha. Those who had been initiated strained every nerve to understand how a Being like the Christ, Who before the Mystery of Golgotha had not been united with earthly evolution, had passed into an earthly body and

linked Himself with the evolution of man. The nature of this Being, how He had worked before His descent to the earth — such were the questions which even at the time of the Mystery of Golgotha men were trying to answer by means of the highest faculties of Initiation-wisdom.

But then we find that from the fifth century A.D. onwards, this old Initiation-wisdom which had lived in Asia Minor, Northern Africa, in Greek culture, had spread over into Italy and still further into Europe, was less and less understood. People spoke contemptuously of certain individuals, saying that their teachings were to be avoided at all costs by true Christians. Moreover, efforts were made to obliterate all that had previously been known of these individuals.

It is strange that a man like Franz Brentano should have inherited from medieval tradition a hatred of all that lived in personalities like Plotinus, for example, of whom very little was known but who was regarded as one with whom true Christians could have no dealings. Brentano had allowed himself to be influenced by this hatred and vented it on Plotinus. He actually wrote a polemical thesis entitled *Was für ein Philosoph manchmal Epoche macht*, and the philosopher is Plotinus, who lived in the third century A.D. Plotinus lived within the streams of spiritual life which were wholly exhausted by the time of the fourth century A.D. and which in the later evolution of Christendom people tried to cast into oblivion.

The information contained in text-books on the history of philosophy in regard to the outstanding figures of the early Christian centuries is usually not only scanty in the extreme but quite incapable of giving any idea of their significance. Naturally it is difficult for us in modern times to have any true conception of the first three or four centuries of Christendom — for example, of the way in which the impulses living in Plato and Aristotle were working on and of thought which had in a certain respect become estranged from the deeper Mystery-wisdom, although this wisdom was still possessed by certain personalities in the first three or four centuries after the coming of Christ.

Very little real understanding of Plato is shown in modern text-books on the history of philosophy. Those of you who are interested should read the chapter on Plato in Paul Deussen's History of Greek Philosophy, and the passage where he speaks of the place assigned by Plato to the Idea of the Good in relation to the other Ideas. Deussen says something like this: Plato did not admit the existence of a personal God because, if he had done so, he could not have taught that the Ideas subsist in and through themselves. Plato could not acknowledge God as a *Being* because the Ideas are primary and subsistent. True — says Deussen — Plato places the Idea of the Good above the other Ideas, but he did not thereby imply that the Idea of the Good stands above the others. — For what is expressed in the Idea of the Good is, after all, only a kind of family-likeness which is present in all the Ideas. — Such is Deussen's argument.

But now let us scrutinise this logic more closely. The Ideas are there. They are subsistent and independent. The Idea of the Good cannot be said to rule or direct the other Ideas. All Ideas bear a family-likeness but this family-likeness is actually expressed through the Idea of the Good. Yes — but whence are family-likenesses derived? A family-likeness is derived from *stock*. The Idea of the Good points to family-likeness. What can we do except go back to the father of the stock!

This is what we find to-day in famous histories of philosophy and those who write them are regarded as authorities. People read such things and never notice that they are out-and-out nonsense. It is difficult to imagine that anyone capable of writing such absurdities in connection with Greek philosophy could have anything very valuable to say about Indian wisdom. Nevertheless, if we ask for something authoritative on the subject of Indian wisdom to-day we shall certainly be advised to read Paul Deussen. Things have come to a pretty pass!

My only object in saying this is to show that in the present age there is little real understanding of Platonic philosophy. Modern intellectualism is incapable of it. Nor is it possible to understand the tradition which exists in regard to Plotinus — the so-called Neo-Platonic philosopher Plotinus was a pupil of Ammonius Saccas who lived at the beginning of the third century A.D. It is said that Ammonius Saccas gave instruction to individual pupils but left nothing in writing. Now the reason why the eminent teachers of that age wrote nothing down was because they held that wisdom must be something living, that it could not be passed on by writing but only from man to man, in direct personal intercourse. Something else — again not understood — is said of Ammonius Saccas, namely that he tried to bring about agreement in the terrible quarrels between the adherents of Aristotle and of Plato, by showing that there was really no discrepancy between the teachings of Plato and Aristotle.

Let me try to tell you in brief words how Ammonius Saccas spoke of Plato and Aristotle. He said: Plato belonged to an epoch when many human souls were treading the path to the spiritual world in other words when there was still knowledge of the principles of true Initiation. But in more ancient times there was no such thing as abstract, logical thought. Even now (at the beginning of the third century A.D.) only the first, elementary traces of this kind of thinking are making their appearance. In Plato's time, thoughts evolved independently were unknown. Whereas the Initiates of earlier times gave their message in pictures and imaginations, Plato was one of the first to change these imaginations into abstract concepts and ideas. The great spiritual picture to which Plato tried to lift the eyes of men was brought down in more ancient times merely in the form of imaginations. In Plato, the imaginations were already concepts — but these concepts poured down as it were from the world of Divine Spirit. Plato said in effect: the Ideas are the lowest revelation of the Divine-Spiritual. Aristotle could no longer penetrate with the same intensity into this spiritual substance. Therefore the knowledge he possessed only amounted to the substance of the ideas, and this is at a lower level than the picture itself. Nevertheless, Aristotle could still receive the substance of the ideas in the form of revelation. There is no fundamental difference between Plato and Aristotle — so said Ammonius Saccas — except that Plato was able to gaze into higher levels of the spiritual world than Aristotle. — And thereby Ammonius Saccas thought to reconcile the disputes among the followers of Aristotle and Plato.

We learn, then, that by the time of Plato and Aristotle, wisdom was already beginning to assume a more intellectual form. Now in those ancient times it was still possible for individuals here and there to rise to very high levels of spiritual perception. The lives of men like Ammonius Saccas and his pupil Plotinus were rich in spiritual experiences and their conceptions of the spiritual world were filled with real substance.

Naturally one could not have spoken to such men of outer Nature in the sense in which we speak of Nature to-day. In their schools they spoke of a spiritual world, and Nature — generally regarded nowadays as complete and all-embracing — was merely the lowest expression of that spiritual world of which they were conscious.

We can form some idea of how such men were wont to speak, if we study Iamblichus, a man possessed of deep insight and one of the successors of Ammonius Saccas. How did the world appear to the soul of Iamblichus? He spoke to his pupils somewhat as follows: — If we would understand the universe let us not pay heed to space, for space contains merely the outward expression of the spiritual world. Nor let us pay heed to time, for only the illusory images of cosmic reality arise in time. Rather must we look up to those Powers in the spiritual world who are the Creators of time and of the connections between time and space. Gazing out into the expanses of the cosmos, we see how the cycle, repeated visibly in the Sun, repeats itself every year. But the Sun circles through the Zodiac, through the twelve constellations. It is not enough merely to observe this phenomenon, for

three hundred and sixty heavenly Powers are working and weaving therein, sending forth the Sun-forces which flood the whole universe accessible to man. Every year the cycle is repeated. If these Powers alone held sway, there would be three hundred and sixty days in a year. But there are, in fact, five additional days, ruled by seventy-two sub-heavenly Powers, the planetary Spirits. I will draw (on the blackboard) this pentagonal figure, because one to five is the relation of seventy-two to three hundred and sixty. The five remaining days in the cosmic year which are abandoned, as it were, by the three hundred and sixty heavenly Powers, are ruled by the seventy-two sub-heavenly Powers. But over and above the three hundred and sixty-five days, there are still a few more hours in the year. And these hours are directed by forty-two earthly Powers. — Iamblichus also said to his pupils: The three hundred and sixty heavenly Powers are connected with the head-organisation of man, the seventy-two sub-heavenly Powers with the breast-system (breathing-process and heart) and the forty-two earthly Powers with the purely earthly system in man (e.g. digestion, metabolism).

In those times the human being was given his place in a *spiritual* universe, whereas nowadays we begin our physiological studies by learning of the quantities of carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, sulphur, phosphorus, lime-stone, etc., within the human organism. We relate the human being to a *lifeless* nature. But Iamblichus would have taught how the organism of man is related to the forty-two earthly Powers, the seventy-two sub-heavenly or planetary Powers, and the three hundred and sixty heavenly Powers. Just as to-day man is said to be composed of earthly substances, in the time of Iamblichus he was known to represent a confluence of forces streaming from the spiritual universe. Great and sublime was the wisdom presented in the schools of learning in those days, and one can readily understand that Plotinus — who had reached the age of twenty-eight before he listened to the teachings of Ammonius Saccas — felt himself living in an altogether different world. He was able to assimilate some of this wisdom because it was still cultivated in many places during the first four centuries after the Mystery of Golgotha. With this wisdom men also tried to understand the descent of the Christ into Jesus of Nazareth and the place of Christ in the realms of the spiritual Hierarchies, in the great structure of the spiritual universe.

And now let me deal with another chapter of the wisdom taught by Iamblichus. He said: There are three hundred and sixty heavenly Powers, seventy-two planetary Powers, forty-two earthly Powers — in all, four hundred and seventy-four Divine Beings of different orders. Look to the far East — so said Iamblichus — and you will there find peoples who give names to their Gods. Turn to the Egyptians and to other peoples — they too name their Gods. Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans — all will name their Gods. The four hundred and seventy-four Gods include all the Gods of all the different peoples: Zeus, Apollo, Baal — all the Gods. The reason why the peoples have different Gods is that one race has chosen twelve or maybe seventeen Gods from the four hundred and seventy-four, another race has taken twenty-five, another three, another four. The number of racial Gods is four hundred and seventy-four. And the highest of these Gods, the God who came down to earth at a definite point of time, is Christ.

This wisdom was well suited to bring about reconciliation between the different religions, not as the outcome of vague sentiment but of the knowledge that the different Gods of the peoples constitute, in their totality, one great system — the four hundred and seventy-four Gods. It was taught that all the choirs of Gods of the peoples of ancient times had reached their climax in Christianity and that the crown of wisdom was to understand how the Christ Being had entered through Jesus of Nazareth into His earthly activity.

And so, as we look back to an earlier Spiritual Science (which although it no longer exists in that form to-day, indeed cannot do so for it must be pursued now-a-days in a different way), the deepest respect grows up within us. Profound wisdom was taught in the early Christian centuries in regard to the super-sensible worlds. But knowledge of this spiritual universe was imparted only to those who

were immediate pupils of the older Initiates. The wisdom might only be passed on to those whose faculties of knowledge had reached the stage where they were able to understand the essence and being of the different Gods.

This requisite of spiritual culture was recognised everywhere in Greece, in Egypt and in Asia Minor. It is, of course, true, that remnants of the ancient wisdom still existed in Roman civilisation. Plotinus himself taught for a long time in Italy. But a spirit of abstraction had crept into Roman culture, a spirit no longer capable of understanding the value and worth of *personality*, of *being*. The spirit of abstraction had crept in, not yet in the form it afterwards assumed, but adhered to all the more firmly because it was there in its earliest beginnings.

And then, on the soil of Italy at the beginning of the fourth century A.D. we find a School which began to oppose the ancient principle of Initiation, the preparation of the individual for Initiation. We see a School arising which gathers together and makes a careful record of everything originating from ancient Initiation-wisdom. The aim of this School — which lasted beyond the third on into the fourth century — was to perpetuate the essence of Roman culture, to establish historical tradition as against the strivings of individual human Beings. As Christianity began to find its way into Roman culture, the efforts of this school were directed to the elimination of all that could still have been discovered by means of the old Initiation-knowledge in regard to the presence of Christ in the personality of Jesus.

It was a fundamental tenet of this Roman School that the teaching given by Ammonius Saccas and Iamblichus must not be allowed to pass on to posterity. Just as in those times there was a widespread impulse to destroy the ancient temples and altars — in short to obliterate every remnant of ancient Heathendom — so, in the domain of spiritual life, efforts were made to wipe out the principles whereby knowledge of the higher world might be attained. To take one example: the *dogma* of the One Divine Nature or of the Two Divine Natures in the Person of Christ was substituted for the teaching of Ammonius Saccas and Iamblichus, namely, that the individual human being can develop to a point where he will understand how the Christ took up His abode in the body of Jesus. This dogma was to reign supreme and the possibility of individual insight smothered. The ancient path of wisdom was superseded by dogma in the culture of the Roman world. And because strenuous efforts were made to destroy any teaching that savoured of the ancient wisdom, little more than the names of men like Ammonius Saccas and Iamblichus have come down to us. Of many other teachers in the Southern regions of Europe not even the names have been preserved. Altars were destroyed, temples burnt to the ground and the ancient teachings exterminated, to such an extent indeed that we have no longer any inkling to-day of the wisdom that lived in the South of Europe during the first four centuries after the Mystery of Golgotha.

Again and again it happened, however, that knowledge of this wisdom found its way to men who were interested in these matters and who realised that Roman culture was rapidly falling to pieces under the spread of Christianity. But after the extermination of what would have been so splendid a preparation for an understanding of the Mystery of Golgotha, it was only possible to learn of the union of Christ with Jesus in the form of an abstract dogma laid down by the Councils and coloured by the Roman spirit. The living wisdom was wiped out, and abstraction, albeit working on in the guise of revelation, took its place.

History is well-nigh blank in regard to these things, but during the first centuries of Christendom there were a number of men who were able to say: "There are indeed Initiates — of whom Iamblichus was one. It is the Initiates who teach true Christianity. To them, Christ is Christ indeed, whereas the Romans speak merely of the '*Galileans*.' " This expression was used in the third and

fourth centuries A.D. to gloss over a deep misunderstanding. The less men understood Christianity, the more they spoke of the Galileans; the less they knew of the Christ, the more emphasis they laid on the human personality of the 'Galilean.'

Out of this milieu came Julian, the so-called Apostate, who had absorbed a very great deal from pupils of men like Iamblichus and who still knew something of the spiritual universe reaching down into every phenomenon of Nature. Julian the Apostate had heard from pupils of Iamblichus of the spiritual forces working down into every animal and plant from the three hundred and sixty heavenly Powers, the seventy-two planetary Powers and the forty-two earthly Powers. In those days there were still some who understood what was, for example, expressed in a most wonderful way in a deeply significant legend related of Plotinus. The legend ran: There were many who would no longer believe that a man could be inspired by the Divine Spirit and who said that anyone who claimed to have knowledge of the Divine-Spiritual world was possessed by a demon. Plotinus was therefore carried off to the temple of Isis in Egypt in order that the priests might determine the nature of the demon possessing him. And when the Egyptian priests — who still had knowledge of these things — came to the temple and tested Plotinus before the altar of Isis, performing all the ritual acts still possible at that time, Lo! instead of a demon there appeared the Godhead Himself!

This legend indicates that in those times men still acknowledged that at least it was possible to prove whether a good God or a demon was possessing a human being.

Julian the Apostate heard of these things. But on the other side there came insistently to his ears the words of a writing which passed into many hands in the Roman world during the first Christian centuries and was said to be a sermon of the Apostle Peter, whereas it was actually a forgery. In this document it was said: Behold the godless Hellenes! In very creatures of nature they see the Divine-Spiritual. This is sinful, impious. It is sacrilege to see the Divine-Spiritual in Nature, in animal and in plant. Let no man be so sinful as to believe that the Divine is present in the course of the Sun and Moon. — These were the things that dinned in the ears of Julian, now from one side, now from another. A deep love for Hellenism grew up within him and he became the tragic figure who would fain have spoken of Christianity in the light of the teachings of Iamblichus.

There is no telling what would have come to pass in Europe if the Christianity of Julian the Apostate had conquered instead of the doctrines of Rome, if his desire to restore the Initiation-training had been fulfilled the training whereby men could themselves have attained to knowledge of how the Christ had lived in Jesus and of His place among the other racial Gods. Julian the Apostate was not out to destroy the heathen temples. Indeed he would have been willing to restore the temple of the Jews at Jerusalem. His desire was to restore the heathen temples and he also had the interests of the Christians at heart. Truth and truth alone was his quest. And the great obstacle in his way was the School in ancient Rome of which I have spoken — the School which not only set out to exterminate the old principle of Initiation but did in fact succeed in exterminating it, wishing to put in its place recorded traditions of Initiation-wisdom.

When the moment had arrived, it was easy to arrange for the thrust of the Persian spear which caused Julian's death. It was then that the words were uttered which have never since been understood, not even by Ibsen, but which can be explained by a knowledge of the traditions of Julian's time: 'The Galilean has conquered, not the Christ!' For at this moment of death it was revealed to the prophetic vision of Julian the Apostate that henceforward the conception of Christ as a Divine Being would fade away and that the 'Galilean,' the man of Galilean stock would be worshipped as a God. In the thirtieth year of his life Julian the Apostate had a pre-vision of the whole of subsequent evolution, on into the nineteenth century, by which time theology had lost all knowledge of the Christ in Jesus.

Julian was 'Apostate' only in regard to what was to come after. The Apostate was indeed the Apostle in respect of spiritual realisation of the Mystery of Golgotha. — And it is this spiritual realisation that must be quickened again in the souls of men.

Newer geological strata always overlay those that are older and the newer must be pierced before we can reach those that lie below. It is sometimes difficult to believe beneath what thick layers the history of human evolution lies concealed. Thick indeed are the layers spread by Romanism over the first conceptions of the Mystery of Golgotha! Through spiritual knowledge it must again be possible to penetrate through these layers and so rediscover that old wisdom which was swept away from the domain of spiritual life just as the heathen altars were swept away from the physical world.

Egyptian priests declared that Plotinus bore a God within him, not a demon. But in the West the dictum went forth that Plotinus was assuredly possessed by a demon. Read what has been said on the subject, including the thesis by Brentano which I have mentioned, and you will find the same. According to the Egyptian priests, a God and not a demon was living in Plotinus, the philosopher of the third century A.D. But Brentano states the contrary. He declares: Plotinus was possessed by a demon, not by a God!

And then, in the nineteenth century, the Gods became demons, the demons Gods. Men were no longer capable of distinguishing between Gods and demons in the universe. And this has lived on in the chaos of our civilisation.

Truly these things are grave when we see them as they really are. I wished to-day to speak of one chapter of history and from an absolutely objective standpoint, for what comes to pass in history is after all inevitable. Necessary as it was that for a season men should remain without enlightenment about certain mysteries, enlightenment must ultimately be given, and — what is more — received.

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