

The Lectures of Rudolf Steiner

Esoteric Christianity

The Gospel of St. John and Ancient Mysteries

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The time has now come to make known in wider circles that which has been spoken of throughout the history of the evolution of mankind under the name of the Mysteries or Mysticism, the so-called Esoteric Wisdom.

For in the soul of man, behind what comes to the light of day lies a deeper wisdom which has hitherto remained unknown to mankind in general.

Let us be quite clear what it is men have always understood by the term "Mysteries" or the "esoteric." All that has been brought about in the world through civilisation goes back ultimately to a few great personalities, a few leading individuals. For example, a construction like the Simplon tunnel can be traced back to the mental work of great individuals, who were not themselves directly concerned with the building of the tunnel but who made it possible, by their Intellectual discoveries, for others to build it.

The "practical" man would perhaps be of the opinion that such things are accomplished by an activity that is purely external. It would be the very greatest mistake to accede to such an opinion. Neither the engineers who conceived the plan, nor the workmen who carried it out, are the spiritual originators. If it were not for what is called Higher Mathematics as elaborated by Leibnitz, Newton and others, such works could never be there at all. These thinkers were necessary in order to bring into being what is called "technics." If we go to the root of the matter, we shall find that such works could never have been achieved, nor any goods have been manufactured, without the soul of the Thinker.

If this is so with regard to the outer materialistic culture, it is true in still greater measure of the spiritual currents that flow through human history.

All the Religion and all the Art that has ever been brought to mankind, all the Justice that has ever borne rule in states, all the order and Morality that has lived among men leads back to great Initiates, leads back to hidden sources of Wisdom. This is what we find when we set out to look for the deeper origin of things.

Consider the works of Art which have succeeded each other through the centuries, and you will find that they can all be traced back to deeper sources. Whether we take a poet like Dante, or a mind and spirit like Goethe's, or a painter such as Raphael, or again some great religious event in history — all moral and religious streams, all art and all science, lead back into the hidden places, where was cultivated in secret that which is known as Mysticism or Esotericism.

And as with all other religions so with Christianity too we find its foundations in the esoteric. It is only an evidence of shortsightedness when the objection is raised, that Christianity is for simple hearts and should speak to the feelings and be comprehensible for all. That is a very shortsighted view. All religions, it is true, ultimately clothe their truths in sentences so full of power and impulse that no soul is too simple to receive them. What emerges finally, however, in this simple form, has its origin in the heights, with the so-called Initiates.

Throughout history there have always been Initiates. In ancient India it was the Rishis who taught a primeval Wisdom. In Persia Zarathustra was the teacher of Wisdom. We look to Greece, to Egypt, to Rome, everywhere we find to begin with, a religion of the people, but standing in the midst of the people are always those who may be called spiritual "Giants," unknown to mankind by name. These are they who formed themselves into occult brotherhoods. Whosoever wished to be accepted into such a brotherhood had to undergo a strict and severe probation. The probation had no immediate relation to the intellectual life. It was far more a question of a man's wrestling his way through to an inner freedom of character, where feelings and passions had no power with him. Then he had to learn not to misuse his knowledge. Men who had passed through severe trials and tests of this nature became missionaries to the rest of mankind. They were not allowed to have any other feeling or purpose in their heart, save only this — to serve and help mankind. They had to be men who would make real the words — "He who would be first among you, let him be the servant of all" — And in intellectual striving also they must never lag behind but always press on to find the Higher Truths.

Today it is frequently said to one who believes in the possibility of knowing the Spiritual Worlds: But we human beings have boundaries to our knowledge. But inside the Mystery circles it was said: Thou has capabilities which slumber in thee; if thou develop them, then canst thou strive through to a Higher Knowledge.

The development a man was enabled to undergo by the training of his inner talents and capacities was called in the Mystery Centres a Second Birth. It was said that such a one experienced on a higher plane what a man born blind experiences here in the world of the senses when he has undergone an operation and can see. This "operation" on the soul, the re-birth in the Spirit, was performed for the Mystics in the Mysteries.

That which was called in the Mysteries the Kingdom of Heaven, into which the Mystic was led, was not in some other place. The Kingdom of the Spiritual World is here where man is. As many worlds are around us as we have ability to realize and grasp. It was no dry and abstract Wisdom that was received in the Mysteries, but a Wisdom which was at the same time Religion and Art.

In the Mysteries of Greece the spiritual eye of the Mystic was opened. It was shown to him how once in primeval times man had been half animal and how the soul had striven upwards to that stage of humanity upon which he now beheld himself. Three stages were shown to him. He saw first forms as they lived in a very distant evolution of mankind, then forms half animal and half man, and finally perfect human forms. These three types of the evolution of mankind stood before him in the Greek Mysteries and they found their expression in Greek sculpture. There was (1) the Zeus type, with the straight nose and with the eyes rounded out upwards; (2) the type of the God Mercury with woolly hair and snub nose; and (3) the type of the Satyr, with quite different eyes, different nose and different corners to the mouth. These three types stand before us in Greek art as an image of the stages of the evolution of mankind. At another time it was shown to the Mystic how the God himself descended into nature, how he evolved upwards through the mineral kingdom, plant kingdom and animal kingdom to the human kingdom and was then born anew out of the human heart. That was

called the descent of the God, his Resurrection and his Ascension. The whole process was represented in the Greek drama. All that was represented in the drama came originally from the Mysteries.

Just as the trunk of the tree divides itself into different branches, so did religion, science and art become divided in the Mysteries. The ancient Mysteries which were celebrated in Greece — the Eleusinian — and the Mysteries of the Egyptian Priest-wisdom were called Mysteries of the Spirit. Those who stood high in these Mysteries as teachers and leaders had attained to the spiritual worlds; they associated with Spirits, they had intercourse with Spiritual Beings. Iamblichus shows us how the Gods descended in the Mysteries. Only after moral purification, and only when the intellect had been made clear and lucid, could one obtain admission into these places of wisdom.

This is how it was in the ancient heathen times, in the times of the Mysteries of the Spirit. Never without the most wonderful enthusiasm and the most inward devotion did the Mystics speak of that which could be experienced in the Mystery-schools. Aristides speaks thus: "I thought I touched the God and felt him near, I myself being at the time in a condition between waking and sleeping. My spirit was light, so as none can describe or realise who has not himself been initiated." And in another passage he says: "It was as if the Spiritual World flowed and poured around me." Plutarch says, "He who had received initiation in these Mysteries greeted the Godhead with the greeting of eternity." Whoever had had this experience was called "re-born."

We must now say a little about what formed the last act in every such Initiation into the Mysteries of the Spirit.

There had first to be the moral purification and the clarifying of the intellect. Then the pupil must learn to see with the eyes of the Spirit. Behind the consciousness which accompanies us through the waking condition, there is another consciousness. This consciousness does not sink into complete darkness when man falls asleep. Man remains conscious at night, he is there present. But the consciousness which accompanies him from morning until evening, that does not remain. There is however a way of overcoming the unconsciousness man has in sleep; there are methods whereby this end can be attained. By a culture of the soul which brings about certain intimate processes in the innermost being of the soul, man can win through to the possibility of finding new revelations in his dream life; he can experience things which he recognises in another way than with the eyes and ears of the senses. It is immaterial whether a man recognizes the truth in sleep or by day when awake; in either case he must learn to carry over into reality the world which he there experiences. When in this way he has come into the position of being able to see the Spiritual in the whole world, then he has attained the first stage of initiation.

At the second stage he has an experience which is like living in a flowing ocean of colour. At this stage there is a higher initiation; a consciousness is developed wherein is revealed to him a still higher Spiritual world. Today in ordinary life man is not capable of awakening the consciousness which lies behind the physical world.

In the last act of the Mysteries of the Spirit the pupil was put into a kind of sleep. Care had been taken in the preparation that when the day consciousness sank down, consciousness did not cease. For three days and three nights the man lay in another state of consciousness in the Mystery temple, citizen and participator in another world. Then he was awakened by the Priest. He received a new name. He was an Initiate, he had been "born again." One could say of the Mysteries of the Spirit: "Blessed are they who have experienced them, blessed are they who now behold in the Mysteries of the Spirit."

At the time of Christ Jesus, to the Mysteries of the Spirit were added the Mysteries of the Son, and these have been ever since the time of Christ. The Mysteries of the Father — the Mysteries of the Future — are only cultivated in a very small circle. The Mysteries of the Son are cultivated in the Rosicrucian Mystery which is also Christian, for those who require a Christianity that is armed to meet all Wisdom.

Today we will concern ourselves with the Mysteries of the Son, and see how they differ from the ancient heathen Mysteries. If we would grasp what a mighty step forward has been taken by the coming of Christianity, we must learn to understand two important utterances. The one is: "Blessed are they who believe, even when they do not see," and the other: "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life." If we comprehend these utterances in all their depth, then we understand the very foundation of Christianity.

Whilst to the world at large Paul spoke in powerful kindling words, he also gave teachings to his intimate pupils which were transmitted first by word of mouth and then in writing, teachings that are connected with the name of Dionysius, who was known as Dionysius "The Areopagite." We have here to do with something founded by Saint Paul himself, wherein was proclaimed the deepest wisdom. These teachings of Saint Paul were written down for the first time in the sixth century, in the writings of the so-called Pseudo-Dionysius. It is not so much the historical fact, but the content of these documents which is of interest for us.

An esoteric Christianity does exist. This is not admitted in certain circles, with the result that a peculiar place has been assigned to the Saint John Gospel. The Saint John Gospel is looked upon by theologians as a book which emanated out of poetic genius. They have however no understanding for what the Saint John Gospel means.

Whereas the three other evangelists relate the exoteric. Saint John relates what he experiences as an initiated seer, who could look into the Spiritual worlds. The writer of the Saint John Gospel wrote from the point of view of an initiate. Whoever looks upon it as a book that one should read and understand in the same way as one reads and understands any other book knows nothing of the Saint John Gospel. He alone has knowledge of it who can experience it. Most translators do not render the Spirit of it at all.

The first words of this Gospel, rightly translated, sound as follows:

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- 1. In the primeval beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and with God was the Word.*
 - 2. The same was in the primeval beginning with God.*
 - 3. All things were made by Him, and without Him was not anything made that was made.*
 - 4. In Him was the Life and the Life was the Light of men.*
 - 5. And the Light shineth in the darkness, and the darkness comprehendeth it not.*
 - 6. There was a man sent from God whose name was John.*

7. *The same came for a witness to bear witness of the Light, that all might believe on it.*
 8. *He was not the Light, but a witness of the Light.*
 9. *For the true Light which lighteth every man, was to come into the world.*
 10. *It was in the world, and the world was made by It, but the world knew It not.*
 11. *It came into each individual man (even into the 'I' man It came) but the individual man (the 'I' man) did not receive It.*
 12. *Those who did receive It, through It they could reveal themselves as Children of God.*
 13. *They who trusted in His Name were not born of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of human will, but of God.*
 14. *And the Word became Flesh and dwelt among us and we have heard His Teaching, the Teaching of the only Son of the Father, filled with Grace and Truth.*
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These words with their mighty content — one should not take them and speculate over them, but rather allow them to work upon one in the same manner as countless human beings have done through the centuries. Early in the morning when the soul was still virginal, they have let these words resound in their soul, up to the passage: "And the Word become Flesh and lived among us ..." as above.

When a man does this day by day, then something shows itself in the soul which gives him new life, he is reborn, he is spiritually transformed. He sees around him a spiritual world of which he had previously no idea.

Everyone who takes the first verses of the Saint John Gospel and lets them work upon him for the education and training of his soul, experiences the Saint John Gospel itself in mighty pictures.

There before his spiritual sight stands John the Baptist, as he baptises the Christ; there he sees the picture of Nicodemus, as he has his conversation with the Christ. He sees how Christ cleanses the Temple, he has before him all the following scenes of the Saint John Gospel, he experiences the "stations" from the thirteenth chapter onwards.

In order for the pupil to receive aright the influence of these words and find the 'word' which is proclaimed by the Saint John Gospel, the teacher spoke as follows: "Thou must fill thy soul for weeks at a time with this one feeling. Think of the plant. It is rooted in the dead stone. If it had consciousness, it would have to bow down to the dead stone and say to it: 'Without thee I could not live; out of thee I drew nourishment and strength: I owe to thee my being, I thank thee.' The animal would have to speak in similar words to the plant: 'Without thee I could not live, I incline myself towards thee in thankfulness, because out of thee I draw that which I require for my existence.' And it is the same with all the kingdom. Man, who has attained to a higher stage of evolution, must also bow down, as the plant to the stone, to those who work for him, and thank them." He who would

become a Christian Initiate must develop this feeling during a period of many weeks — the feeling that he owes gratitude to him who stands beneath him. Then he experiences in the spirit the thirteenth chapter of the Saint John Gospel where this feeling is given sublime and eternal expression by Christ in the Washing of the Feet. Christ means to say: "Without you I could not be, I incline myself to you as the plant to the stone." As an outer symbol the Initiate experienced at this stage a feeling as if water were flowing around his feet. It continued for a long time.

When he had gone through this, the Christian Mystic could experience the next stage of initiation. For this he must cultivate the power to endure all the storms and stresses of life. Then he experienced a second picture. He saw himself scourged, and could feel in his own body something like pain at certain points. This went on for many weeks. He experienced the scourging.

Now he could rise to the third stage. The teacher said to him: "Thou must cultivate a feeling which can endure that all thou holdest highest should be treated with scorn and derision." The scorn and derision must be for him nothing, in comparison with his own inner strength and certainty. Then the pupil experienced two symptoms of Christian initiation. He experienced the crowning with thorns; spiritually he saw himself with the crown of thorns and experienced a kind of pain in the head which is the sign of this stage of initiation. Afterwards, as a fourth experience he had to develop the feeling that his body was no more for him than any other object in the world. He carried the body with him only as an instrument. In many Mystery-schools one learned to accustom oneself to speak in the following way: "My body goes through the door," and so on. In this way the mystic experienced in himself the Crucifixion. He saw himself crucified. The outer symbol was that during the meditation stigmata appeared at the places of the wounds of Christ — in the hands, in the feet and in the right side. This is the blood-trial of the Mystic, the fourth stage of initiation.

After this the pupil rose to the fifth station which is called the mystic death, a sublime experience of a spiritual nature, of which no more than an indication can be given. There are moments for a pupil when the whole of the physical world surrounds him as with a black veil. In these moments he learns to know the origins of evil. This was called the descent into hell. Then came a strange and wonderful feeling as if the whole curtain were torn asunder. The mystic death — followed by the mystic awakening!

The sixth stage is the so-called Laying in the Grave. All that the earth bears must become as precious to man as his own body. The physical body of man could not exist separated from the earth. If it were removed even a few miles from the earth it would wither, as the hand would wither when separated from the body. What my body is for my finger, that the earth is for men. The independence man attributes to himself is an illusion. And just as man is dependent physically on the earth, so is he dependent spiritually on the Spiritual World. When man comes to feel his unity with the whole planet — then is he "laid in the earth," then does he undergo the "burial."

Hereon follows the seventh stage, the "Resurrection" and the "Ascension." Man experiences here the Eternal. This stage does not admit of description. The Egyptian Priests (who were also their Wise Men) did not make use of the symbols of writing to describe such things. The Mysteries must find a way to tell what cannot be expressed in words. Through the power and might, through the magical power of the Saint John Gospel itself, these things can be experienced.

Such an initiation is the initiation of the Son. It has only been possible since Christ came to earth. The outward Christ who walked in Palestine is related to the inward Christ whom the mystic experiences, as the sun is related to the eye. If there were no eye, then could the sun not be perceived. But the sun produced the eye. Where there is no light, the organ for the light is also lost. The eye was gradually created by the Sun. The eye was created for the light by the light, says

Goethe. Whosoever allows the Saint John Gospel to work upon him, develops the inner eye. But, as without the sun the eye would never have come into being, so would spiritual seership never have been there if Christ, the Spiritual Sun, had not walked the earth in person. No Christianity without the personal Christ Jesus: that is the essential and all-important fact.

All other founders of religion could say of themselves: "I am the way and the truth." All were teachers. Christianity has brought no new teaching. But that is not important. The important thing is that Christians feel themselves bound together with the personal Christ Jesus, as in a family. That is what matters — that He was there, and has lived and has said: "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life."

Oriental teachers of religion have exoteric teaching and esoteric, in the same way as Christianity has. Christianity differs from them in that exoteric Christianity is more simple and popular, it speaks to the heart, to the feelings; while esoteric Christianity is essentially deeper than all oriental esoteric. The truth is, the Christian esotericism is the most profound which has ever been brought to mankind.

Christian esotericism was brought to the earth by that very Being Himself with whom one must be united. It is a question of belief in the divinity of Christ. In the ancient Mysteries one had to behold personally during the three days of initiation. What formerly was only present in the Mysteries — that is, in the Mysteries of the Spirit — has in Christianity become an historical fact. The events in Palestine are historical fact and at the same time symbol. Christianity is of such a nature that the simplest heart can grasp it; and yet the wisest man will never outgrow it. For the deepest teachings of Wisdom lie therein.

If we understand the Saint John Gospel as a Book of Life, so that we wish to live with it, and let it come to life within us, then we shall come to know esoteric Christianity. Such esoteric Christianity has always existed, it has always been active wherever Christianity has been able to manifest in a worthy and noble way, wherever Christianity has brought the blessings of culture and civilisation to mankind.

Into all those who had experienced union and fellowship with Christ Jesus there streamed such strength as enabled them to know that life will always gain the victory over death, and that death is never a reality.

Goethe said that the great World Powers invented death in order to have "much life" in the world. Christianity is a proof that there can arise in the soul a consciousness of the fact that Life is continually and always the Victor in the world.

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