

Conveyance of Esoteric Truths

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Christianity, as with each of the major religious traditions, makes a distinction between those of her teachings that are *exoteric* - the outer teachings, accessible to all - and those that are *esoteric*, or accessible to initiates solely, reserving for its esoteric teachings those matters which are both among the most spiritually powerful and also the most controversial.

It should not be thought that the esoteric and exoteric aspects of Christianity are necessarily in conflict with a Catholic and Orthodox viewpoint, even if through the centuries the Church authorities have on occasion spoken out against this or that manifestation of esotericism. Often, those same authorities are fully aware and indeed tacitly accepting of the very esotericism they condemn outwardly, provided it is confined within the secret practice of the innermost circles of the Church and indeed maintained within a proper understanding of the faith by those of sufficient expertise. The difficulty with all such matters, as with mysticism, is the commonly-held view that, if promoted together with (or indeed instead of) the exoteric teachings of the church, they will lead the spiritually immature into confusion and danger. There are certainly good reasons for such a fear, but as we will see, if the matter is viewed in the light of the changing role of the church in our time and the emergence of specific and robust ministries devoted to the esoteric traditions, we may gain a more progressive perspective that was necessarily unknown to the more constrained world of our forebears.

To be entrusted with esoteric matters is no small charge. Reserving such matters for initiates is an immediate admission that not all are capable of understanding esoteric teachings, or of placing that knowledge in its proper context. A degree of spiritual control is required in the seeker; such maturity cannot be accelerated by external forces, but is dependent on the individual, his or her karmic destiny and the willingness of the initiate to accept the discipline required by the esoteric path. The spiritual power inherent in esoteric Christianity is capable of doing great harm if misused, and must be approached with caution and appropriate guidance lest the seeker release forces that he or she has not the resources to manage, with psychological damage often the consequence.

In many respects, the best place for such guidance has always been and (to some extent) remains the various initiatic orders dealing with different aspects of the inner traditions. Here, the seeker finds a structured path towards enlightenment, along with the support of experienced adepts. However, such orders are as vulnerable to human

weakness in the form of conflict, artificial barriers to the seeker of various kinds, and indeed the simple dwindling of their inner life as any similar exoteric organisation. Furthermore, in our New Age, advances in human communication, education and religious freedom mean that the human species is more ready and capable to absorb complex and difficult matters than in previous years.

Not merely this, but from the nineteenth-century onwards, the spread of the Apostolic Succession beyond the Roman Catholic Church proper has made it possible for actual *churches* teaching the esoteric mysteries to be created and sustained. Here we find a new form of initiatic order; one which is not merely an adjunct to a church (or indeed which professes independence from religious matters as a free-standing body) but that possesses in and of itself the necessary goods for a complete sacramental life. This seismic shift has expressed itself through a greatly diversified movement that synthesises a number of historical strands.

The expression of the church through the occult Templar lineage at the time of the French Revolution led in due course to the merger of that lineage into the Eglise Gnostique founded by Jules Doinel, the first such inner church with validly Catholic orders to emerge into the public sphere, albeit in an understandably somewhat limited fashion. The further development of the Gnostic lineage along with that of Old Catholic archbishop Joseph-René Vilatte (1854-1929) occurred simultaneously with the genesis of the Liberal Catholic Church as a continuation by Theosophists of the Old Catholic movement in England led by Archbishop Arnold Harris Mathew (1852-1919). The merger of these heritages and others deriving from the historic communions by the 1940s, along with a renewed post-war interest in esoteric exploration as undertaken by such bishops in the Orthodox heritage as John van Ryswyck (1899-1963) and Richard, Duc de Palatine (1916-77) brought about a notable expansion of small, independent churches, often working semi-covertly and often with a primarily Masonic membership, which breathed new life into the esoteric teachings. Further intellectual energies derived from the independent work of Carl Jung and Rudolf Steiner.

This explosion of new spiritual life was never geographically confined, but it was in the United States that it developed with the most widespread results. The counterculture of the 1960s, with its interest in the expansion of personal horizons and in the consequent betterment of mankind drew many into the orbit of such seminal esoteric bishops as Herman Adrian Spruit (1911-94) and Joseph Vredenburg (1933-), both of whom gave birth to many new communities and ministries. At the same time, Rosicrucian and alchemical work expanded in Europe under Roger Caro (1911-92), whose Eglise Universelle de la Nouvelle Alliance was highly influential in esoteric circles. Moving more closely into our own time, bishop Michael Paul Bertiaux (1935-) has been responsible for the fusion of the Apostolic heritages with those of the Thelemic bodies succeeding the work of Aleister Crowley, and thus fusing both Christian and Thelemic practice and traditions. A distinct contemporary expression of Gnosticism has also increased in visibility in both the United States and Europe, with such bishops as Stephan Hoeller (1931-) and Rosamonde Miller (1942-) establishing prominent public profiles.

This expression of the fusion of the initiatic and exoteric aspects of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church is of unique spiritual potential and significance. On a purely practical level, esotericism within the context of the Christian faith offers a context that is much more likely to provide a stable and productive platform for the seeker than any general or random exploration of the occult without such a framework. At the centre of that conclusion is the Christian principle of love for one's neighbour and the allied determinations to honour God and help mankind in as far as one is capable of doing so. These precepts point to the value of esotericism within the Christian faith as well as the essential compatibility of its esoteric and exoteric approaches. The esoteric paths are means by which one may access the wisdom of centuries for the purpose of self-improvement; ultimately with the aim that by doing so, one draws closer to an experience of God and to being able to convey that experience to others through example.

Anyone who has travelled even a little way on these paths, however, can attest to the fact that the work involved is essentially solitary, and indeed wholly dependent on the individual concerned. Given the general guideline in all things of "first, do no harm", it is held by many that to use esoteric or theurgic techniques to affect the lives of others is inherently immoral, since such powers risk changes to the karma of others that cannot be properly known or accurately predicted. To use those techniques upon oneself carries no such moral danger provided the work undertaken stands in accordance with the precepts of the Christian faith and the candidate is genuinely spiritually ready.

Yet here again we come to the need for support and guidance. In our age, not only the initiatic orders, but the esoteric churches join in this endeavour. Their capacity for the task is considerable. Unlike most initiatic orders, they have access in the Sacraments and particularly in the Mass to a potential for shared theurgic experience that is of the greatest spiritual significance. We see this experience advanced most clearly in such occult masterworks as C.W. Leadbeater's "The Science of the Sacraments" (1920), but the later and contemporary creative incorporation of occult aspects and interpretation into liturgical celebration continues in many independent sacramental communities. Further, the interpretation of Holy Orders as explicitly initiatic - wholly independent from issues of jurisdiction, but standing purely as indicators of recognised spiritual maturity - points to a viewpoint whose radicalism has transcended concepts of exoteric ecclesial structure and moved wholly within the area of direct response to the Divine at work within us as individual beings.

We may well see the contemporary esoteric church as transcending in its potential the initiatic order as a means for the conveyance of its wisdom. But this is not all. In our age, that which was previously secret, or at the least remarkably difficult to obtain for anyone outside an established group, has become widely available. The internet and the efforts of scholarly independent publishers have brought us easy access to major esoteric texts from the earliest days onwards. The man or woman wanting to read widely in this field, and often at no or modest cost, is truly spoilt for choice. With this

universal access, the role of the esoteric institution has again changed, from gatekeeper to facilitator; from controlling the dissemination of knowledge to ensuring that knowledge is placed in its proper context within a particular tradition or emphasis. This development is a transfer of power to the individual, and with it comes also a set of demanding choices. Those who seek out a church or order to make sense of those choices will in turn find that the internet has made visible the full spectrum of these groups, in which a surprisingly high level of discrimination is often necessary to separate the wheat from the chaff.