

ROBIN AMIS

A  
Different  
Christianity

EARLY CHRISTIAN  
ESOTERICISM  
AND MODERN  
THOUGHT

# A Different Christianity

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David Appelbaum, editor

A Different Christianity  
Early Christian Esotericism and Modern Thought

Robin Amis

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*Now seekers after knowledge must know exactly how to make out true orthodoxy for themselves by using natural examples; and especially such as are drawn from our very selves, for they are surer and are a true means of proof.*

Saint Gregory the Sinaite, *Discourse on the Transfiguration*



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## Preface

# The Forgotten Christian Inner Tradition

“The tradition is one,” says Boris Mouravieff in his book *Gnosis: Study and Commentaries on the Esoteric Tradition of Eastern Orthodoxy*. And today, despite claims to the contrary, my observations have convinced me that this links with the fact that Christianity possesses and always has possessed an *inner tradition*: not a system, but what might be called a discipline. To those with sufficient experience in investigating this field, I believe that this book will convey the same conviction. In addition, I would add to the idea that the inner tradition is one although with local variations certain other observations about it:

1. All the major religions of the world possess a complete tradition of inner knowledge (or a version of the one tradition), although it has only reached a small percentage of the most able individuals within that faith.
2. Many or all of the great civilizations of the world are formed by the great faiths of the world.
3. In each case of a civilization formed by one of the great faiths, the inner tradition is a fundamental element in the structure of the associated civilization.

Yet today there are fundamental differences between the attitude of Christianity to its inner tradition and that of the other great faiths to theirs. For example, faiths such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam are today attempting to make their inner tradition better known, yet the Western churches either claim that there is no tradition of inner or esoteric

knowledge, or reserve it to a clergy who themselves are not expected to give too much credence to it. This has forced countless thousands to turn to Eastern faiths for no other reason than because their inner teachings are more accessible than our own: because although Christianity has always possessed its own tradition of inner knowledge, looked at through intellectual eyes, that tradition has been relegated to the status of an intellectual curiosity. As a result some of it has been irrevocably lost, much mislaid, and the remainder has reached only a very small proportion of the population. Consequently because knowledge acts only through being known it has had little effect on our civilization.

This is one reason why many people no longer regard ours as a Christian civilization. But the truth is not Nietzsche's 'death of God,' nor has Christianity failed. What actually happened was that, due to the difficulties of conveying the inner tradition through the barbarous centuries following the decline of the Roman Empire, and due to the limited classical education of most Westerners, this key element of Christian teaching has never been common knowledge in the Western world.

## An Accident of History

The focus of the problem exists at the point where the Roman Empire split. Physically, this is represented by a line that passes through the Balkans and to this day marks an area of recurrent conflicts, 1 which have now emerged again after a few decades of uneasy peace. Let me risk here a complex image for what has occurred by describing it as a "balkanization of the mind." This inner balkanization has entailed several successive stages of psychological and spiritual fragmentation, beginning in the Roman era but bearing problem fruit today. It is this fragmentation, this "balkanization of the mind," that concerns this book, and it is this that has led to our times being described as "the age of specialization." And each of these stages was as catastrophic as that described in the following paragraph:

When bishops, a generation after Hobbes's death, almost naturally spoke the language of the state of nature, contract and rights, it was clear that he had defeated the ecclesiastical authorities, who were no longer able to understand themselves as they once had. It was henceforward inevitable that the modern archbishops of Canterbury would have no more in common with the ancient ones than does the second Elizabeth with the first.<sup>2</sup>

At that time, the emergence of science against the opposition of the church led to an intellectual worldview that shaped the thought of an age,

resulting in a massive change of thought in the Christian religion. Instead of the sciences, law, and morality fitting into the Christian worldview as once they did, Christian thought was relegated to a form of specialization that was expected to fit into the scientific worldview. Observation suggests that two ideas that developed in the biological sciences can be applied to this: one, that specialization limits adaptability, and two, that ability to adapt defines intelligence. If this is so, then this specialization can be seen as limiting the adaptability of the faith, and even as limiting human intelligence. This situation, I believe, is directly responsible for many of the problems of the churches today, and if we accept that religion does have a function in human society we may see that its narrowing is also responsible for our inability to adapt to the problems of our present time. Even more it explains our inability to understand ideas that were greatly valued by past ages.

One of the implications of this is that if Christianity is a single coherent truth, as the early Fathers would have said it is, one of the signs that a book like this is genuinely Christian would be its ability to convey its central message to different types of people with very different questions, with very different specializations, and coming from very different places in themselves. This book intends to do just that, but faces the problem, already met in discussing the draft with different people, that to satisfy so many different types of individual, the book has to offer something meaningful to each and offer it right at the beginning of the book. Otherwise readers will assume that this text has nothing for them, and, sensibly enough, will set the book aside.

To develop this, let me try to describe how I imagine certain of the most important specializations of our contemporary Western world might come to discover what this different Christianity means to them:

Devout Christians of all denominations who have shown an inclination to seek a deeper understanding of inner Christianity, many of whom today can understand that an inner tradition might have therapeutic aims

Seekers after truth, whatever form their search has taken, if they are sufficiently rigorous and careful in their search, as long as they take the special kinds of care necessary to keep their search free of the prejudices formed in early life

Those who have joined in earlier attempts to recapture the inner spirit of their faith, or simply to find expression for their own inner impulse in organizations studying material that as we have discovered was once the subject matter of Christian thought and discipline, but now is more often studied in forms that are externally very different from its early Christian forms.

## The Modern Situation

Since the meaning of esotericism is “inner,” this book necessarily touches on personal and psychological questions which individuals must face in their lives, but which for a century or more they have had to face in private, since the study of such questions has for a while not been the open and accepted discipline it once was. It touches on the historical, in order to show that in early stages of our history there existed a detailed knowledge of these inner questions which we in our time have been taught to ignore, and because, as I suggested, by uncovering this history we rediscover the lost or balkanized territory in our own inner lives as we expose to view the inner truths and inner struggles of those earlier times. Past struggles toward unity, especially when successful, can help us toward inner unity today. This clearly relates to a particular idea in spiritual history, the idea of the periodic reemergence of an inner tradition that is repeatedly lost. It touches on the philosophical, in the sense that it touches on the roots of the new or reconstituted doctrines that, in the past century or so, have emerged on the borderline of philosophy, theology, and psychology, in that balkanization of the mind to which I referred earlier, in which the original terms coined in that ancient world have become a direct cause of certain present-day confusions.

My investigations have uncovered previous searches of the same kind, some of which have led me to individual successors of ancient streams whose knowledge and capabilities still survive. I have identified certain groups and schools some of them in the West that have come from such studies, but which seem in every situation to have reached the same point of obstruction: a stage, always the same or very similar in character, where their progress, the progress of all their participants, appears to go no further; a threshold, a point of decision they are not motivated enough, nor well enough equipped, to pass; a barrier between change of mind and change of heart. As my later researches have made clear, there was good reason why seekers like ourselves as a whole, and not only advanced students needed to make further contact with the Tradition the Tradition of the light referred to in Matthew 6: “The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!” (Matthew 6:23).

At this point it appears necessary to me to deal specifically with the relation of esoteric forms of Christianity to certain events earlier in this century, especially the ideas of Gurdjieff, Ouspensky, and those who have followed their lead, teachings whose sources are difficult to trace but in which the first hinted and the latter openly stated, more than once, that they in fact formed a reemergence of a lost ancient tradition

or traditions of inner truth several times described as esoteric Christianity. 4 The Postscript at the back of the book gives additional information about the recent history of those ideas for those who lack basic information.

Either to study this tradition in order to regain our own inner tradition as Christians, or to discover that esoteric Christianity referred to by Gurdjieff and Ouspensky and not easily visible in the Western churches and so to make use of its great armory of practical methods, we find that we have to adopt what will be, to most modern individuals, an unfamiliar way of thinking about the world. This unfamiliar way of thinking about the world is itself part of Christian tradition. Because of this way of seeing the world, Christianity had, in its first century or so, the power to enlighten and transform; it then answered just those questions that today take people to other lands, other times, other faiths for their answers. It is now unfamiliar because today most people judge by intellectual criteria and expect to verify everything against what can be weighed, measured, or in some way perceived by the senses.

In such a world, it would be foolish to expect everyone to see, behind the troubles of our times, the need for a new spiritual vision, and even more unrealistic to expect them to adopt that new-old vision. But because it is such a world, a whole class of knowledge has been almost entirely lost to modern man. Yet inner and spiritual problems can only be resolved by inner and spiritual interpretations, and because of this the tradition of which I speak is a tradition of interpretation, a way of distilling the meaning from the gospel teaching, using the tools of understanding provided by that tradition itself. Many people who are aware of the need for them will find both personal solutions and general answers not in the religions of other civilizations, where so many have already searched without success, but in the roots of our own world. They will make this discovery if they take a new look at an ancient and transforming interpretation of the Christian faith, an interpretation that is little known and even less valued today. As this book will show, there is also little doubt that most of those answers still exist within Christendom, but tucked away in its inaccessible corners and I have slowly become certain that with sufficient effort these answers can be rediscovered and restored to use for modern man, as part of a spiritual reawakening that has already begun but has not yet taken definite form.

This book is written for the many who have become aware that the most viable solution may not be to invent or reinvent a new religion, nor to explore the religions of other civilizations and import them to our shores as seeds of future division, but to take a look at some other aspects of Christianity that are little known today.

To understand this and the possibilities it offers, we need, as suggested earlier, “new eyes,” a new yet very old way of thinking about the world. To approach this, I must first write of experience, as I shall do from time to time throughout the book, for in our times, experience, and a strange and little-known relation between experience and faith, form the latchkeys to new insights and even to the rediscovery of the inner meaning of the old. From direct experience, we can pass to ways of drawing on traditional sources for our own spiritual needs, and through this we may not only discover ourselves, but rediscover the seedbed of certain aspects of Western civilization which have long been in decline, and perhaps learn how these key streams in the river of our life can be restored for use by modern man.

To understand, we also need to recognize the existence of a contemporary obstacle to research of this kind. Like so many of our problems, this is a result of modern thought, perhaps exacerbated by modern methods of funding research. The sheer difficulty of gaining acceptance now means that to establish the value of a single document may take a person half a lifetime or even almost a whole lifetime’s work. This has created a situation where almost everybody is afraid to draw general conclusions, or to publish a general study of the whole subject area, unless they can join it seamlessly to what has been said before.

Yet under such conditions, when people are forced to conform to outside opinion rather than their own insight, a slight deviation from accuracy can become compounded over the years and, because no alternative view will be acceptable as a basis for comparison, this deviation may remain unrecognized until the situation has gone so far that everyone outside the field can see the inaccuracy, although it remains invisible to those within the “charmed circle” of the discipline in question. This is a double bind: in any discipline there have got to be criteria and detailed investigations, which must contribute to the shaping of a consensus, and there must be work on the broader outline. All these together create the climate for further studies. When both become too insistent, and Western thought itself tends to be insistent by its very nature, how does one free oneself from such a trap?

This is the situation in which this book was written: the twelve years of exact research on which it has been based are a distillation of those longer and slower researches of others on the many separate subjects, and yet the book is based on a clearly seen need at this time to look in from outside, by taking certain tools of modern reason and the lessons learned from other, non-Western spiritual traditions, by looking to previous researches of the same kind, some of them previously rejected,

and finally, by standing not on the platform of scientific objectivity, but instead on that different platform of the attitude of faith and of knowledge derived from faith, in which these ideas were originally written down or passed on.

Specifically, it is an attempt to use an awareness of the intentions of the texts as a tool for the interpretation of those texts.

In other words, this work is an effort not of analysis, nor of proof, but of understanding: an attempt to understand, in modern terms, the ancient ideas that have been rediscovered over the past century or so.

After all, an inner tradition that cannot speak for itself when necessary cannot expect to be recognized. To put this differently, there is little doubt that the same inner tradition has been expressed in certain texts such as the recently discovered text known as the Gospel According to Thomas, from which the following passage could well set the correct tone for this study:

These are the secret words which the Living Jesus spoke and Didymos Judas Thomas wrote: And He said: Whoever finds the explanation of these words will not taste death. Jesus said: Let him who seeks, not cease seeking until he finds, and when he finds, he will be troubled, and when he has been troubled, he will marvel, and he will reign over the All. Jesus said: If those who lead you say to you: "See, the Kingdom is in heaven," then the birds of the heaven will precede you. If they say to you: "It is in the sea," then the fish will precede you. But the Kingdom is within you and it is without you. If you will know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will know that you are the sons of the Living Father. But if you do not know yourselves then you are in poverty and you are poverty.



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# Introduction

## Searching in the Ruins

In investigating ancient traditions, the question is always, How can one begin? Some ancient ideas can first be understood only by seeing the reality behind them - one can learn much even by seeing the physical changes that have occurred alongside the changes in ideas. So first I shall write of how our world has changed, of how our faith has changed, and for this it is certainly better to speak of experience, for at this moment we begin to build a bridge over the very boundaries of the world of ideas.

This was what took me to the great monastery of Saint Andrew, beside the road into Karyes, capital town of the monastic republic of Mount Athos (known as the Holy Mountain), a forty-kilometer peninsula off the mainland of northern Greece, which is still today an autonomous monastic republic, although under the protection of the Greek government. When I walked into the courtyard, the monastery lay empty of monks, as it has since a plague in 1926. Greek schoolboys in black monastic robes came and went to one wing. Elsewhere, nobody stirred. Earlier that week, the first liturgy since the monastery had closed in 1926 had been held in the enormous Katholikon church. With my friend, the American monk Germanos, I walked up to the marble portico and hammered on the rusted iron-framed glass doors. Nobody answered. Eventually, one of the boys came over to see what we were doing there, and explained that in

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The reader will note that in the text of this book certain monks are referred to by name, while others are given only an initial. There is a reason for this: out of respect for the Fathers of Mount Athos we have agreed with certain of them to avoid giving names of living monks whose anonymity might thereby be threatened. Monks (and abbots) whose names are given are either deceased or already publicly known.

all that enormous complex there were only two caretakers. Often they would not answer the door. Often they were out.

The marble portico was badly cracked. Once it had been magnificent. Now it was heading for ruin. Carved into the stone was the date of its building: 1910. Although I failed to get into the monastery, in the fallen roofs, the neglected, empty buildings I gained a sense of something hidden everywhere else. This was the visible result of what had happened in 1918, since frozen in time. That was when a world had come to an end, and here at the monastery of Saint Andrew, nothing has really happened since, except wind and weather; here time has done its work unstayed by human hands. Here you can see the end of that world, the tremendous change whose form has been hidden elsewhere by renewed activity.

Here the disaster that everyone ignores, the collapse of an age, is clearly visible to the eye, giving an image that is a surprisingly appropriate introduction to the detailed study that follows, a summary of years of investigation into the esoteric Christian tradition. It will help to set the scene and to give depth of meaning to our theme. For this book summarizes investigations that I have now been working on almost full time since the beginning of the 1980s. In that time, my investigations have led me to certain places where ancient truths still dwell, as well as to connections with surviving students of those who have sought the same knowledge in the same way, in faraway places. In time they led me to certain important sources in which this ancient tradition survives, at least in part, to the present time - particularly around the eastern end of the Mediterranean, in Greece and Egypt.

By now the conceptual and psychological climate of the West has gone so far from the inner meaning of early Christianity that to restore these ideas to their original meaning at first seems almost impossible. Speaking on television at the New Year heralding 1994, Archbishop Carey (of Canterbury, primate of the Anglican Church) clearly interpreted one of the many scriptural passages promising peace of mind to those who turn to God as a promise to be kept after death. In so doing, he denied one of the great promises of the inner church, the promise of *present help*, specifically defined throughout the early Fathers, although admittedly often referred to in the Bible with the kind of ambiguity that allows such mistakes.

Yet the inner truth and its psychological components, which find their justification in the gospel passage that says "They that are whole have no need of the physician" (Mark 2:17) survives, or persistently reemerges. This therapeutic view survived in medieval Europe in the attitude that treated Christ as the "doctor of souls." It survives in Greece today in the mountain fastnesses where hermits hide. One Athos hermit once explained

his role to me by saying that his work was like that of a doctor, but not a doctor for the body. Today this attitude is reemerging as a growing movement<sup>1</sup> that seeks to distinguish between inner and outer interpretations of Christian doctrine, and refers to the outer form as “moralistic” or sometimes “legalistic.” By this they mean a faith that judges, that asks things of us, without giving us the means to achieve those things. The ancient inner tradition took a view opposite this; it gave people the means to be moral, then allowed the form of that morality to emerge naturally. It survives in the Orthodox Church, dispersed from its homelands into the West, custodian not only of the empty monastery of Saint Andrew on Mount Athos, but of many still active monasteries on the same peninsula, and of the true keys to the forgotten tradition that was once taught there. Truth it may have, but its resources and its capabilities were and still are generally swamped by lonely exiles, who ask it to speak not primarily of God but of some inexpressible motherland.

It began to reassert itself almost spontaneously in the 1930s but failed to do so because of war. The German phenomenologists asked the right questions, but the breakdown of their world stopped them short of finding a resolution to the desperation inherent in their formulation, and this robbed them of any coherent answer that would have broken them out of their subservience to the subjective images of phenomena, any hint of something out of sight of the mind, of something more than an image, a genuine hint of which might have ended their ridiculous assumption that the ego is no more than an image of an image. There was the impasse of the physical sciences, in which Eddington, in the 1920s, could already see the need for a “new epistemology” that might reconcile human thought with the paradoxical perceptions of quantum physics. By the late 1930s, quantum physics was to have a more sinister role, and it was the late 1960s before this arcane knowledge again began to interest the postwar world in implications other than weapons technology. By then, Eddington’s question had been forgotten and little did Eddington know, anyway, that the key to this enigma—a new epistemology that encompasses our contemporary view without being limited to it—had already been provided more than a thousand years before, in the second-century works of Gregory of Nyssa, an ancient Christian author totally ignored by modern philosophy. Even the great physicist and philosopher Erwin Schroedinger and the highly religious Albert Einstein remained unaware that the questions they debated had been answered by Fathers of the church long before the fall of Byzantium. Even now, few can see the direct connection between the paradoxes of particle physics and the ancient Russian philosophical method of antinomies, a philosophical tradition preserved intact to the present but finding its roots in the gospel itself.

The First World War ended an age, and cutting off the prime of our youth it cut off our innate access to the strengths of the past. The time before the Second was too brief for new growth to go deep enough to root itself. After the war, the unfinished new growth that had begun in the thirties but never come to term was rooted out and cast aside, to be forgotten by the generation that followed. Only now, sixty years later, can we begin again to repair the ruins of even the recent past, to pick up the pieces of that era in relation to the deeper questions of life. Only now can we say a prayer for those forgotten pathfinders of the thirties, and only now can we make yet another attempt to cultivate the soil of the human spirit remembering that we are ourselves children of our century, so that in any such cultivation we must begin with ourselves.

So, as with others before us, it was from an awareness of that situation that my researches into the early church and the survival of its ideas began shortly after 1980, and it is a few of the surprisingly large number of discoveries made during those researches that I am going to describe in this book as well as drawing on some of the less well-known discoveries of those who have preceded us in this search, particularly those of Boris Mouravieff, Russian émigré, historian, and little known teacher of esotericism who worked in France and Switzerland at the time of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky, and whose three-volume work *Gnosis* - although for many still difficult to understand - provides the most comprehensive and precise primer on this difficult subject.

## A Research Report

This book, then, is a report on the researches I have just introduced so dramatically, a study of certain ideas and methods known in the early church but lost, in one way or another, to modern Christianity. (This loss is, of course, at the root of the idea that *esoteric* means *secret*. Nothing could be further from the truth.)

At the same time as being a properly documented study of these lost ideas, this is also of necessity the summary of a personal search, and links the discovered ideas to personal experience. It does this not so much to provide a final definition as to suggest to readers how they should develop their own understanding of the same ideas. This is because the esoteric tradition is so easily misunderstood that, to avoid dangerous mistakes, actions should only be taken on the basis of recognition, of a clear personal understanding in which the teaching is verified by direct experience. I should also add that although these researches have been supported to a degree unusual in such a work, sometimes by taking them to a point of

academic accuracy, it is in large part a study of an unwritten tradition, and it has been found - not surprisingly - that documentary evidence of an unwritten tradition is not always available. 2

It began with a search for the springs of Christian sanctity, a search for the source that I believe is found in the esoteric or inner teachings of the early church. Not for a different gospel, but for a different way of understanding the gospel.

So what do I mean by sanctity? At a workshop in New York recently, I asked about this in the form of a question that now provides the basis of this book.

My question was this: Which of you has ever met a saint?

This is how my own investigation began. But the question has of course been answered, and even evoked answers, many times in the past, and I must have something more to say about how those have emerged over the years. Before you buy the animal, you must read the pedigree.

Several centuries ago, there was a move in the West, probably not the first, to rediscover in the writings of the Fathers of the church writings that then were inaccessible to most of those who sought - Christian truths that were no longer a part of Western Christian teaching. Again in Europe, in the nineteenth century, some of these works were translated and made generally available, and were clearly valued by a few souls who glimpsed the treasures hid in them. But none of these attempts succeeded in restoring this knowledge to the "mainstream." The time was not right, and what these texts contained was so different from what is now generally understood as Christianity, that by that time, practically nobody possessed the tools with which to grasp those ancient truths.

In Russia, the story was different, because "the times" were different. In the nineteenth century, Russia was still in the throes of the Westernization forced on her by Peter the Great; Western or at least Westernized philosophical and scientific thought existed alongside surviving streams of thought and spirituality in an Eastern Church that later survived the revolution itself. The interaction between these two powerful rivers gave rise to similar investigations and these, the discovering of these ideas by people in active contact with the spiritual practices that endure, almost unchanged over the centuries, in certain corners of the Eastern Church, bore different fruit: a greater valuation of the ideas discovered, which led as a result to more active and sometimes more successful attempts to apply this ancient knowledge. In the nineteenth century certain teachers appeared to transmit this knowledge; some of them, such as Saint Theophan the Recluse, were conventional, others, laymen with more Western backgrounds, were highly unconventional both by the standards of Eastern Christendom and Western humanism.

An important work in the esoteric tradition is the Philokalia. Its origin came from a key event during the history of this path. Part of the meaning of these teachings has been lost more than once even by the monasteries. Then it has had to be restored. The major example is that of Paisios Velitchkovsky, who restored the original meaning of the text in the eighteenth century, long before this work was translated into English. The text used in the earliest version of this work sparked a major renewal in the inner tradition that shaped the form it now takes in Eastern monasticism. This renewal of the inner tradition, led by Velitchkovsky, began on Mount Athos and then spread, carried by Velitchkovsky, first to Moldavia and afterwards to Russia. The Greek version of the Philokalia, formed by Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain primarily from the texts collected by Velitchkovsky, provides a primary technical instruction for the monks of the Eastern Church who carry on the same tradition to this day on Mount Athos, as well as in many other parts of the world. 3

Since then, the parallel volume to the Philokalia, the Gerontikon - teaching-stories about the same early Fathers, in very Middle Eastern style - has been translated several times with varying degrees of success. Thomas Merton selected from this collection stories that are meaningful to modern man.<sup>4</sup> Another émigré, almost certainly a direct successor to the Russian seekers of the nineteenth century, Boris Mouravieff, wrote in the 1960s, in French, his own attempt to summarize his own discoveries in this field and discoveries unpublished by those who had gone before him. I myself have had the honor to publish the three volumes of his main work between 1990 and 1993.<sup>5</sup>

Other key texts have been published recently, as a result of an initiative by Father Nikon, P. D. Ouspensky's friend who was a hermit on Mount Athos: Unseen Warfare, also by Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain, later reedited by Saint Theophan the Recluse (see list on pp. 1112) one of the greatest spiritual teachers of the Russian church who died as recently as the 1890s and the Art of Prayer, by Abbot Chariton of the monastery of Valamo, an ancient and at one time enormous monastery which preserved its spirituality in difficult times by moving across the border from Russia to Finland.

Thus, many of the ancient texts are now more readily accessible. Their readership is increasing, because many, many readers obtain sudden insights from within their pages. But their message in full nobody in the West can read, for it is a message of repentance, metanoia, and it cannot be read in any depth and then ignored. So the gap in understanding still remains between Christian East and Christian West. All of this great effort has not yet revealed anything clearly, but it has definitely shown that there

is something here to discover, although it is very difficult to discover it in full. The idea of *metanoia*, of the possibility of such a change, as far as I know was first reintroduced to the West in the 1930s by Maurice Nicoll. 6 The meaning and specific methods were described in a fragmentary way,7 in the Philokalia translations among other places,8 but *metanoia* - repentance - is the essence. This one word is not understood until we realize that it distills the underlying principles, the practical objective, of a complete discipline, one that reaches its goal through a myriad of variations and alternative methods.

Although today *metanoia* still forms the basis of the practical work of the monks of the Eastern Church, few even of the more important methods of approaching it are understood in the West, and the basic principles, in the form of a complete Christian worldview - based on faith, but not on blind belief - seem to have been almost entirely forgotten.

Once read, understood, *and accepted*, these basic principles, and the commandments or rules that accompany them, form the foundation of the whole process. They lead although normally not without a struggle, not without a strong resistance from past habits to a true reversal of direction in the reader, bringing the catechumen to the threshold, the point of entry, of the path of transformation, the path of *metanoia*. But to enter the path of *metanoia* is to seek to pass through the strait gate of the gospel, and "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God" (Matthew 19: 24). Its import is so difficult, it demands such efforts, such struggles by those who try to apply it, that instead it is often rejected. If this principle were accepted by enough people, so that we could say that it was once again understood by the churches, especially at the present time, it could only lead to a true change of direction by those churches. If understood at the basic level, it could lead to the creation of methods suited to modern individuals and to the situation in which we live. If assimilated by Western civilization at large, which would only happen if many individuals came to understand it and its importance, it might even change the direction of that civilization. (But what kind of change that might be is the subject of my Postscript, and should rest for the moment.)

The purpose of this book, then, is not simply to introduce valuable texts, but to explore the meanings that occur, often many times and expressed in many ways, not only in texts now being translated into English, but in early texts that have already been made available. I also hope to show, where possible, how these early meanings link with and very often answer our own questions about ourselves and our world, and how they relate to modern thought on this same subject.

In the time of growth from those early beginnings something changed, and the idea behind this book is that this change must concern us now. As our relation to Christianity has changed, our Christian worldview and our idea of Christianity have both also changed until we can no longer recognize their original forms in them. If we look at the great faiths of the world all the major faiths have an inner tradition exceptat first sightChristianity.

But is this true? The thesis of this book is that Christianity too has or had such a tradition, but that in the development of reason, humanism, and then the physical sciences, that inner tradition has been effectively forgotten or lost. 9 I should expand too on the idea that this tradition has been effectively lost. The fact is that the Christian inner tradition is not entirely lost, but its significance has been lost to sight and, as a result, its actuality has been neglected or reduced to a curiosity. Its practical application has been restricted to a few hundred monks, most of them in Eastern Christendom; its texts are few of them translated with their original practical significance in mind; its exercises are mostly forgotten; even its usefulness is no longer understood; its importance to society as a moral restorative is entirely unknown to the majority of thinking men and women.

This, as we understand it, has been the fall of Christendom. This tradition that has fallen or been lost in fact forms the context of the personal fall and the personal resurrection to which we referred above, the background against which monastic writers of the Eastern Church speak continually of the monk's many falls. As Saint John of the Ladder says, "He falls, and gets up again, falls and gets up again."

This book, then, is an attempt to rediscover that tradition of consciousness and make it generally known. As it refers to consciousness, it applies even to those who, unable to follow the way of the monk, walk the esoteric path by methods generally unknown to the monks: they will fall, and they must get up again, day after day and year after year. Those who regard a single rising of this kind as being born again must realize that to be Christian in the full sense of the word, to be Christian as the Fathers understood the word, they must reach the point where they are born again not once, nor even many times, but many, many times each day and then must pass this point. These many awakenings, many little rebirths, are part of the process by which we can eventually be "born from above."

With the Fall, man was cast out of the "garden" of the inner life to till the earth. As the higher faculties are lost, the higher vision, the higher consciousness, is lost to sight, as a recent commentator says about the Fall something that we should perhaps memorize, so clearly does it define our times: that today "The heavenly world has disappeared from man's field of vision and has become an invisible world. There remains only the sensory, material, visible world, like an island in the ocean of the invisible world." 10

## A Method of Therapy

What we can say, at this point, is that in studying the inner life of man, this material constitutes a true psychological science - and an effective system of therapy - that is older by many centuries than anything that passes today by that name. More to the point, as I hope I shall show in this book, once adapted to the different conditions of modern life, it is also a very precise and workable science, despite certain basic differences from modern psychology. All the great religions of the world have a tradition that exists just to meet man's need for inner renewal, for healing of the soul - what has been called a therapeutic tradition, a means of making saints. Hinduism has its Yoga. Islam has Sufism. Buddhism has a number of meditation traditions including Zen. Only Christianity, at first sight, lacks such an "organ."

But that is not so. Christianity has its ways, an almost forgotten mystical science, a *science of metanoia* sometimes called "the Royal Road," that is akin to psychological means of therapy yet more than merely psychological in character, and this ancient and forgotten science not only parallels these Eastern traditions, but it is entirely Christian in character.

This early Christian psychology reflected the gospel statement that: "They that are whole have no need of the physician, but they that are sick: I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Mark 2:17).

The problem is that this therapeutic tradition has been suppressed as a result of the pietism and moralism that dominate modern Christianity. These tendencies to *externalize* the faith exist in all churches and all faiths. They are characteristic not of one religion but of a particular type of human immaturity: they belong to the lower stages of spiritual life, when people are using only one of the functions of their psychological life they are driven by the senses and by what has been formed within us through the senses.

But this practical method creates a true or spiritual morality by developing *conscience*.

The therapeutic interpretation is not any moralistic or legalistic doctrine, but a practical method aimed at specific results. This interpretation is exact and has its own scientific method.

One Greek author wrote: "Sanctity does not have a moral meaning, but an ontological one." 11 In this the truthfulness of what is believed is subject to the test of praxis, the test that asks: Does it work?

This uses an essentially Christian definition of sickness, for Christ was concerned with the spiritually sick, with man in his fallen state. Directly because of this difference, it aimed not at manipulation but at *liberation*. This Christian psychology was very different, and its morality was not enforced but emerged naturally from within the individual,12

whereas the modern equivalent frequently views ethical activity as having to be imposed on individuals from outside.

It was P. D. Ouspensky who pointed out that modern psychology is primarily a tool of a medicine which studies pathologies, so that it sometimes calls itself “abnormal psychology,” or of the “social sciences” which have sprung from this stream.

This ancient psychological method, then, was a form of *traditional knowledge*, having different rules for verification from those of modern psychological science, but they are genuine working rules. In its time, it had its own *consensus*, and this evolved over time as does any modern scientific consensus, but was very different from that of contemporary psychology because it had very different goals. The esoteric tradition necessarily used words with quite specific meanings different from their general usage. Divergence from this tradition led to these meanings being forgotten. Once this point is reached, and it was reached more than a millennium ago, a new process enters in: readers find themselves faced with words in a context in which these words appear meaningless. The result is that people regard such words as superstitions, in the sense that they seem to have no recognizable meaning. Thus what is first forgotten is afterwards discredited.

Words can be transmitted in writing, and this can be a dead process, but the meanings must also be transmitted, and this must be a living process.

Without the transmission of meaning from the same source, the particular meaning of the words is lost, and then, in that context, the words themselves become meaningless.

This was the reason for the researches that led to this book, and the purpose of this book is to restore some of those lost meanings.

This whole concept leads to a practical way of presenting these ideas. This can be put in modern terms by utilizing the word *recognition*. The goal of texts in this tradition, and the characteristic by which texts that genuinely belong to this tradition can be identified, is that they are written for recognition. The meaning of an idea must be understood and recognized (and the meaning of this particular idea too must be understood and recognized). We are not using the word *recognition* here in the sense of *public recognition*. Usually nothing was further from the minds of practitioners of this ancient science. They taught a traditional knowledge, and in it, their scientific method depended on the student's accepting the truth of what they taught, by discovering for himself and then *recognizing* what it was they were describing. The fact that they had in general a consensus about what was true makes it clear that they all in fact although step by

this situation, carried out rigorously, eliminates all possibility of doubt.

## Saints are Always Somewhere Else

For Westerners, the visible sign of the loss of the early kind of Christianity, of the loss of metanoia as a way of spiritual life, especially for those belonging to Protestant churches who today do not formally recognize new saints, is that saints always seem to live somewhere else or to have lived in some other time. Many of us, indeed, see this fact simply as a sign that we have outgrown such ideas as religion and sanctity. But this tells more about the person who believes it than about any wider reality. In this, young children often know better than their elders, for this mystery of the missing sanctity is really a most serious question for us all, and the sophistication, the cynicism that hides the question, is no more than a tissue of self-deception.

But to go back to that question with which I began. If you answer no, you have never met a saint, my next question for you would be: Why not? If you honestly believe you can answer “yes” not “almost,” or “there’s someone I think is a saint,” but an unequivocal “yes” to this question my next is instead to ask you: How many saints have you met? The point of all this is to take a serious look at this question. Many of us will already realize that, whatever their own answer, many people now believe that the time of saints is past, that they do not occur any more, and have not occurred for many centuries. This is almost but not entirely true.

What did I know when I began my researches? I knew that some genuine saints have been recognized within the last century, more since 1800, particularly in Russia but also in Greece. But many of the list below were only canonized in 1988, with the millennium celebrations of the Russian Church. In fact, in this world the list of recent saints is actually considerably longer than one might expect it is not the reality, but our view of it, that I am questioning. An incomplete list of recent saints includes:

Saint Theophan the Recluse, born 1815, died 1894, canonized 1988 as part of the millennium celebrations of the Russian Church. As a young man he became a monk, then hieromonk (priest-monk), bishop, abbot, and finally anchorite. He guided thousands by mail and edited two of the world’s greatest books on the life of prayer, as

well as writing several other important works. His teachings help to clarify the inner tradition in modern terms, and are referred to frequently in this book.

Saint Seraphim of Sarov, died 1833, whose teachings help to clarify one important factor of the inner tradition, so that they too are referred to in this book.

Saint Therese of Lisieux, died 1897, who was called to the life of prayer as a child and became one of the great spiritual inspirations of the Roman Church. Her writings are referred to in this book.

Saint John of Kronstadt, died 1908, a priest in the Russian naval town of Kronstadt, whose ability to help people reached so many that a series of guest houses had to be built to accommodate those who came to him.

Saint Nektarios, died 1920, whose shrine on the Greek island of Aegina has in the past few years been the scene of many miracles, including miraculous conversions.

Saint Arsenios of Cappadocia, died 1926, a saint who said very little, but who, over many years, worked a great number of miracles to assist those living around him.

Saint Silouan of Athos, died 1933, a massive Russian peasant who nearly murdered someone in Russia, became desperate about his lack of self-control, and went to see Saint John of Kronstadt. From there he went to Athos on the advice of Saint John, and became a man of impressive abilities and very great spirituality. His teachings are referred to in this book in order to clarify one inner aspect of Christian tradition that is difficult to understand by drawing only on earlier sources.

Several saints have also been canonized by the Roumanian Church, but we have listed enough examples of recent Eastern saints.

In particular, you will notice that in this list there are no Protestant saints. It would be interesting to ask the Protestant churches whether, indeed, they believe that saints are created today or, more specifically, whether they have under consideration the canonization of any of their recent members. One might even ask what they imagine the significance of saints to be, beyond the obvious: that they are often very good role models, if only they weren't so impossible to follow. Certainly the Protestant churches have some very splendid people, but in the early church, that was not quite what the word *saint* meant; to the early Christians, a saint was "something else."

In fact, all the individuals listed above were in some sense direct followers of the early Fathers of the church. Nearly all of them (as well as

certain others who will appear later) referred at some time to the Royal Road or Royal Way. The significance of both these facts will become increasingly apparent the further we read into this book.

When I asked my original question, I turned the question toward the audience as individuals, asking them another question that every sincere seeker should ask himself or herself. I asked them then, as I ask you now, which of you who think of yourselves as Christians has not asked the catch question: How can I be more Christian than I am now?

Or to put it another way:

How can I free myself from my own bad habits?

How can I learn to live to my own highest principles?

How might I feel growing in my own heart the qualities described in the Sermon on the Mount?

How can I learn to turn the other cheek?

How can I love my enemies?

Behind this is a basic answer given by my researches. If people understood what my researches have confirmed that saints are made holy, not born holy then it would be possible at least to begin to answer these other questions, and that in such a way that we could understand how we ourselves might change if we wanted to.

Saints are made: with the help of our Lord, certainly, but made, not born holy. Those of us who want to see a better world might be well advised never to forget this.

## From Investigation of the Past, a New Vision

As the Abbot of an Athos monastery wrote recently: "When the monk possesses the grace of repentance he knows the true God, not some idea of God." 13 In actual fact, the Christian esoteric or inner tradition is in every respect a true tradition that is the equal of the great inner traditions of the East. Unfortunately, due to certain accidents of history, the texts of the tradition have been so long unknown in the West that although they are now becoming available, their special meanings have failed to reach us. This has left them meaningless, which in turn has seemed to confirm the facile idea that they have now been disproved by science. Diluted to the point where it lost its power to produce results, and with its credibility weakened because its meaning has been lost, the inner tradition has proved an embarrassment to churches who wanted to appear "scientific," wanted to be accepted in circles that also *appeared* scientific. Because of this, the

very idea of an inner tradition has been swept under the carpet when nobody was looking.

Yet it was the strength of psyche this part of Christian tradition gave to many individuals that explains the way the early martyrs of the church made such an impression on those who saw them, so that the Christian church in its early centuries before it became divided almost entirely supplanted competing faiths.

The initial growth of the early church was the direct result of its inner power to transform the individual. As this ability has declined below a certain point, the church itself has begun to lose membership.

Whether we believe that, as I shall suggest later in the book, a spiritual reawakening is now taking place, or believe only that it *should* do so, with either of these viewpoints we will see the value of recovering a lost Christian tradition of knowledge about the inner experience that some of the most valued members of the church among them saints, bishops, abbots, monks, hermits, and “learned doctors” have accumulated over nearly twenty centuries, but particularly what they learned in the early days of the church, when the initial energy given by gospel and resurrection was still at its most intense.

The background to the loss of this great reservoir of truth is that, in two thousand years, Christianity has built up an enormous corpus of knowledge and ideas. Nobody can know all of this, and so everybody has had to be selective. More than this, there are both historical and psychological reasons why this selective process has developed a particular bias over the centuries, so that some of the knowledge acquired by the church during its early years has for long been forgotten either it has been totally forgotten, or in other cases the words are remembered, but part of their meaning, their significance, has been forgotten, so that they are effectively *misunderstood*. The criteria for interpretation have changed with the times, until what is believed now as a result of reading the gospel is entirely different from what was believed in the early days of Christianity. Now, if the early meanings are made available again, we find them difficult to understand, and if we do get close to them, we discover that it is even more difficult for us to see their value to us, their relevance to our personal questions and to the main questions of the civilization of which we are part.

The connections have worn thin with time, although the problem of the misunderstanding of inner knowledge is not a new one. We no longer have the intellectual tools to recover that early knowledge; we have replaced them with a “newer model.” As long ago as the third century Origen, head of the Alexandrian catechetical school previously led by

Clement of Alexandria, wrote that the Bible should be interpreted in ways other than historical, because in the historical interpretation, the inconsistencies of the text make it look foolish. Sixteen centuries later, vast numbers of scholars now study the Bible simply as a history text and, in the attempt to maintain “scientific objectivity,” regard it is misleading to study it against criteria other than those of history.

But nobody asks the question, If this is only history, why is it studied so much more than other historical texts?

A commentator in the 1993 issue of *Bible Review* claims that to follow the historical interpretation conscientiously it is necessary to disbelieve in basic tenets of Christianity, such as the Resurrection. One can only say of such people that they may believe something, but they have no Christian faith, for Christian faith is not blind belief in all and everything, but only in what Boris Mouravieff would call the objects of faith, objects outlined if not exhaustively defined in the Creed and, for inner Christianity, particularly in the Nicene Creed. “If you do not believe,” nor will you understand the writings of men of faith: this kind of modern interpretation ignores the intentions of the authors of works such as the books of the Bible, assuming that you can interpret a passage in the same way whatever the intentions of those who originally wrote it. It sometimes even assumes that you can interpret it idiosyncratically, from your own personal point of view, and still consider that you are passing on to others a valid view of the text that you are interpreting. Such an approach is only credible to those who are completely ignorant of the process of writing in a conscientious way, or who imagine that earlier authors were such fools that the content even of the great books of the Bible is *accidental*, and that no specific purpose existed for them other than the today fashionable objective of “self-expression.” Those with experience of *intentional* writing, writing for a specific aim, will realize that in such work the aim determines the method of expression, and that only an awareness of that original aim can accurately reveal the *intended* meanings of certain words whose interpretation is determined by their context.

In particular, very great care is needed when interpreting even the most open text about inner teachings. As parables to illustrate inner truths the early Fathers of the church repeatedly used biblical texts that appear to have a purely outer meaning. We must also realize that since the second century, when the inner teaching went underground, those texts which illustrate some spiritual lesson with examples from the lives of those who had passed through the relevant experience in the pastas in Gregory of Nyssa’s *Life of Moses* and other works on the same theme actually were intended to be misinterpreted by anyone who had insufficient inner experience to understand their deeper meaning. The effects of taking such texts

to have merely historical significance is just the confusion we observe in modern theology.

One problem group of Greek words used throughout the history of the early church in the Gospels (particularly Saint Mark), in the epistles of Paul, and in the writings of the early Fathers of the church was that whose common modern form is *gnosis*. We can find records of the use of this word not remotely linked to what is now popularly called Gnosticism, as *gnosis* was originally simply a term for a special kind of *knowledge*, one of the properties of which is that it is not obtained through the senses.

This idea, which will be discussed further in chapter 11, was summarized by the translator of Clement's *Stromata* thus: "By 'gnosis,' Clement understood the perfect knowledge of all that relates to God, His nature, and dispensations. He speaks of a twofold knowledge, one, common to all men, and born of sense; the other, the genuine 'gnosis'.<sup>15</sup> This latter is not born with men, but must be gained and by practice formed into a habit. The initiated find its perfection in a loving mysticism, which this never-failing love makes lasting."<sup>16</sup> And Clement himself wrote: "And the gnosis itself is that which has descended by transmission to a few, having been imparted unwritten by the apostles. Hence, then, knowledge or wisdom ought to be exercised up to the eternal and unchangeable habit of contemplation."<sup>17</sup>

But then, this book exists to help us recreate those old interpretive tools and with them again to make connection with that ancient knowledge, through just those channels used by those holy men of old, through three processes:

To draw on personal observation and direct experience, related to the comments of others, so as to discover certain current concerns, personal as well as those concerning our whole civilization; to take cognizance of the experiences that give rise to them; to give an idea of why they have been forgotten or *ignored* for so many centuries; and finally to show how they are fundamental concerns that have lasted as long as Christendom, and are often rooted in inner and often mystical experiences that have recurred since the earliest days of the Christian era

To illuminate this by study of the esoteric tradition, so as to show how the early Christian tradition of inner knowledge relates to both personal and social concerns and experiences that have become important in our contemporary life

Finally, to comment as necessary on the relation of the two, in keeping with the methods of that early tradition, and analyze them with tools of contemporary but not purely intellectual understanding

It should be noted in this last that this kind of understanding must include a full intellectual content, and with this there is always a danger that, to the untrained mind, such a text will look as if it is pure intellectualism.

As Saint Nilus of Sora once did, I must ask pardon of my reader if anything appears in this work that is “inconsistent with the sense of truth.” To me, this means that if you do not *recognize* something from my description, I would ask you to classify it as untested, until experience makes its accuracy or inaccuracy clear to you. But this is a good point to introduce an ancient practice sometimes described in odd corners of the tradition, known today as *pondering*. To understand this book, certain parts of it - and there may be many of them - need to be *pondered*. Today we are so used to speed-reading and other methods of reading superficially, that we need to know a technique that most people perhaps once knew: what it means to ponder a statement.

To ponder a passage of a book we should first read it with great care, making sure that we have clearly dealt with each of its statements separately. Then we should ponder each statement on its own, comparing it with our own experience, until we *recognize* what it describes. When we have *recognized* what is described in each statement, we may reconsider the passage as a whole. At this point a characteristic sign is that it will seem less interesting. After all, it is not “news,” it is telling only things we already know. This sensation is a sign of success in our pondering.

Without having learned to ponder, one should not read serious esoteric texts.



# Chapter 1

## The Royal Road of the Early Church

The inner tradition is a Christian equivalent of Zen or Raja Yoga, both of which contain extensive psychological teachings, but the technicalities of this Christian equivalent, known in the gospel as the Way, 1 have never been known in the West. Now modern travel and scholarship have given us access to some of the most important of the forgotten psychological teachings of this Christian tradition, but it is almost too late. The very words have lost their meaning, so that new methods of research are now needed to rediscover the inner sense of these texts, the ambitious aim that forms the subject matter of this book. In its full form, the psychological method to which I refer represents what was known in the early church as the Royal Road. This name was once given to certain therapeutic psychological and psycho-spiritual techniques developed by Christians who followed Christ's narrow way.<sup>2</sup> The Royal Road was a science based on the gospel teaching about the cure of the soul - by curing the nous, sometimes known as the eye of the soul. This leads to what was then known as the illumination of the nous, and so develops the hidden potential or talents of the individual, once described by Saint Paul as the Gifts of the Spirit.

The first part of this book gives us glimpses of this Royal Road, as it was described by the church's great masters of spirituality, from Clement of Alexandria in the second century, to Pierre Caussade in the eighteenth and, in our own time, to the enigmatic figure of Boris Mouravieff. Here we will discover that this ancient path is not simply a Christianized form of India's Rajah Yoga, and that the early Fathers of the church regarded the name Royal Road as a direct synonym for the Narrow Way of the gospel.

The similarities and differences between this way and Yoga are important. One is that this Christian Royal Way is entirely in keeping with Christian theology, at least on the level where it is justly said that, whatever their differences in doctrine, the churches are charismatically one.<sup>3</sup> Its most fundamental technique is very different from Yoga, being based on the gospel idea that what is impossible to man is possible to God. More important today, although its practical work is entirely dependent on holding a traditional prescientific Christian worldview, yet it contains a detailed spiritual psychology as great and as precise as any belonging to the religions of the East. It is in truth an ancient science, and the great hesychast master Saint Gregory Palamas wrote about it that “truly this seems to me to be a craft above all crafts, and a science above all sciences, to lead a man, the wildest and most changeable creature.”<sup>4</sup> This craft is said to introduce us to the kingdom of heaven, in the bliss of the uncreated light of God: in the Greek this is *theoria*. So, say the fathers, on this Way the vision of God becomes light, and not fire for us.

The chapters that follow this describe certain practical aspects of this Royal Road and show how certain ideas in Christian doctrine have been misunderstood, a misunderstanding that has had serious consequences for what was once a Christian civilization.

## The Path of Heart

In certain monasteries that are dead to the world yet infinitely alive within, an old kind of Christianity is still understood. It does not speak to us of how to get what we want. It does not offer us heaven in return for taking out membership. It is entirely deaf to our everyday desires. So, against a background of television and consumer goods and easy living, what it offers seems meaningless to most of us, just as it seemed when Jesus offered it in Palestine almost two thousand years ago. But in stillness, in the shade of the Tree of Life, when we begin that inner dialogue with God that is our birthright, but which exists in its pure form only in the garden of the heart-in openness of eye and mind, there we will find the meanings and the joyfulness of those old texts, those doctrines that involve the heart, so that what they convey is not only thought, but felt. This reuniting of the thinking faculty to the heart might be described as the great secret of Inner Christianity, only it is not really a secret so much as something unnoticed because of our lack of understanding.

To read about these things and enjoy, to ponder them and understand, we have to declare a moratorium on analytical methods and avoid debate, even with ourselves. As Socrates once discovered, only when we

recognize that in a special sense ideas are not knowledge - and in what sense this is true - can we link the mind to the heart. It was just these motivations which led monasticism to emerge in the Christian world as a reaction to the establishment of the church. Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh once described this beginning of monasticism in a talk:

the monastic movement began as a reaction of men and women of depth and spiritual intensity against the lukewarm Christian society that had evolved as a result of the imperial edict giving a right of existence and later predominance to the Christian Church. These people left the city, left the countries of their origin to go to places where Christianity was not watered down, and where they could create communities full of ascetic endeavor, of ruthless determination, of radicalism that allowed them to make of the gospel nothing else than the total of their lives.

Some on the other hand left their place of origin, whether it was the great cities of the empire or small villages, because danger had come upon them, physical danger or moral danger, danger of personal corruption or danger of physical destruction. These people left in a state of frailty, but a frailty which, aware of itself, was not prepared to be used by the surrounding world of people who had authority or power over them to destroy them as human beings, as Christians. Others left their places of origin because, surrounded not only by lukewarm Christians but also by a largely pagan society, they fell into despair at the emptiness of life. This is something which we find now in all the countries where atheism predominates; people who are confronted with despair and therefore move onwards and try to find either an interior situation, the kingdom of God within them, or an outer situation, be it prison, concentration camp, or monastery, where they can find another kind of safety not the safety of the body, not the comfort of the mind and their emotions, but the safety of knowing that they are anchored in God, and that life has a meaning and they went into the desert into solitude, into the unknown into a desert still unknown or still unexplored by others. 5

To this day, a gentle - and occasionally not so gentle - conflict between monasticism and the moralistic element in the church shows that the forces that led to monasticism as a reaction have not yet disappeared. In fact, they have grown stronger, and in this century of politics,

communication, and tourism, 6 the inmost heart of monasticism may not survive this intensified pressure. P. D. Ouspensky, in his early lectures, wrote of this path: “We shall now speak about the conditions necessary for development because it must be remembered that although development is possible, it is at the same time very rare and requires a great number of external and internal conditions. The first is that a man must understand his position, his difficulties, and his possibilities, and must have either a very strong desire to get out of his present state or a very strong inclination for the new, for the unknown state which must come with the change.”<sup>7</sup>

Even today, in the monasticism of the Eastern Church, much is conveyed in unwritten ways. I was once talking to a monk about where they had learned the traditional methods. He listed a few books in Greek. I asked if any of these described the complete tradition. “No,” he replied. I asked again what book contained the basics of the tradition. “None,” he replied. “Where do you obtain these basics?” I asked him, somewhat frustrated. “It’s the tradition,” he replied, and would say no more on the subject.

What is this tradition, and what does it tell those who follow it? Many things, but here is an example of great practical merit from Saint John Cassian, who came from the African deserts to found some of the earliest monasteries in Western Europe. He wrote that to remain on this Royal Road was possible only through persistent efforts to discriminate.<sup>8</sup> He also wrote of many monks he knew who had lost the Way, asking: “What was it, then, that made them stray from the straight path? In my opinion it was simply that they did not possess the grace of discrimination; for it is this virtue that teaches a man to walk along the Royal Road, swerving neither to the right through immoderate self-control, nor to the left through indifference and laxity.”<sup>9</sup>

Throughout the centuries, this path known as the Royal Way has been a common but barely recognized thread in Christianity. A typical example is how Clement of Alexandria linked this Royal Way to the classical narrow way of the gospel, writing: “And as, while there is one royal highway, there are many others, some leading to a precipice, some to a rushing river or to a deep sea, no one will shrink from traveling by reason of the diversity, but will make use of the safe, and royal, and frequented way.” And he also wrote elsewhere: “Whence, ‘Seek and ye shall find,’ holding on by the truly Royal Road, and not deviating.”<sup>10</sup>

When we look for it, we will discover that often the term *Royal Way* or *Royal Road* is not capitalized, nor treated as a proper noun by translators, suggesting that in a time of secrecy, some effort was made to put

this term in such a way that only those familiar with it would recognize its significance. But what, in essence, is this Royal Way? Certainly there is “one way,” but there are many “ways” of walking it. Gurdjieff talked about what he called the “sly man’s pill.” To find salvation, he tells us, the fakir, the man who works with physical exercises, spends sixteen hours a day on them; the monk, taking the way of the heart, spends twelve; the sly man, the man of understanding, simply takes a pill each day. The pill is one of a selection of methods - described in a later chapter - referred to as noetic ascesis.

## Pray for Help

A major element in the esoteric tradition takes the form of teachings of different kinds. Oral teachings help to eliminate error, and at one time these were conveyed by those called to be teachers of whom Saint Paul spoke. Sometimes they are embedded in the liturgies of the early church. And because language is limited in what it can convey, there is a whole unwritten doctrine, much of which is not even spoken. The nonverbal teaching is more difficult to find and to understand, but when found, it greatly reduces the possibilities of error.

Similar methods are described in India in a parable in which a man with a thorn in his foot finds a second thorn with which to extract the first. Once successful in this, both thorns are thrown away. This parable can be understood on several levels, but is not normally presented with any indication that deeper levels of meaning exist, so it conveys only the idea that good ideas or doctrines remove bad ideas; this, although valuable for its breadth, does not have the depth of Macarius’s presentation (see p. 95) and the Christian interpretation he gives. And of course the whole point of this Christian method is that it uses two new thorns, the Word and the Spirit, to extract the single unwanted thorn. The second thorn, the action of the Spirit, is not to be thrown away; the whole aim is to make it permanent. If it stays with us, it keeps us free from involvement in externals.

But in the Christian tradition, there is also a quite different way of looking at this question. At a certain point on the journey-as described in the parable of the prodigal son, where his father comes out to meet the returning prodigal-God will take us by the hand, as it were, and begin to show us the correct meaning of the teaching. In the West, this is called “infused contemplation”: “It is He [Christ] who truly shows how we are to know ourselves. It is He who reveals the Father of the universe to whom He wills, and as far as human nature can comprehend. ‘For no man knoweth the Son but the Father, nor the Father but the Son, and he to whom the Son shall reveal Him.’ ” 11

When we talk about the Royal Way, then, we are talking about an oral tradition based on a psychology of prayer; not prayer used simply as an exercise for the mind, but practiced for transcending the mind through a true synergy, the core of which is a request for the help of an all-powerful God to change in ourselves what we cannot change by our own unaided efforts. Properly practiced, this expands into a two-way flow expressed in the classic formula in which “it is not I who prays, but Christ who prays in me.”

This is well understood in the Eastern Church, where the interpretation and expression of the written teachings have always been shaped by an unwritten tradition coming down through the centuries. Although it is commonly believed that there is a divergence between these methods in Eastern and Western churches, this divergence is more in terminology and contemporary practice than in basic principles. At least one of those who refers to the Royal Road is Roman Catholic in background,<sup>12</sup> although I have not often seen it named in this way outside the Eastern Church. The teachings of Saint John of the Cross, of the Western authors in the tradition of Saint Denys, Thomas à Kempis and Jan van Ruysbroek, and the anonymous author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*, among others, basing their teachings on those of Dionysius the Areopagite,<sup>13</sup> also clearly belong to this type of prayer teaching.

Over the many centuries of its currency, different authors have associated the Royal Way specifically with different aspects of practical esotericism, and in Pierre Caussade’s marvelous book *Abandonment to Divine Providence*, it is abundantly clear that he understood this same Way, by name, where he writes: “O Love eternal, adorable, ever fruitful, and ever marvelous! May the divine operations of my God be my book, my doctrine, my science. In it are my thoughts, my words, my actions and my sufferings. Not by consulting your former works shall I become what You would have me to be; but by receiving You in everything. By that ancient road, the only Royal Road [emphasis added], the road of our fathers, shall I be enlightened, and shall speak as they spoke. It is thus that I would imitate them all, quote them all, copy them all.”<sup>14</sup>

Others in this century have uncovered evidence of this Way: in 1973 a Harvard scholar named Morton Smith summarized certain ideas he said had been described by Clement of Alexandria, both in his *Stromata* and in a letter which Smith attributed to Clement partly on the basis of the extremely close coincidence of such elements. He tells us that this second-century author claimed that, for prepared students, Christianity should:

develop or improve certain psychological qualities of human individuals;

include “development to perfection of gnosis,” which term is

used specifically by Clement and reported by Morton Smith: lead to what the Eastern Church calls theosis or deification. This result of gnosis can be obtained in this life.

And finally, he added that this gnosis is “a result of instruction in three stages.” In all of this, Smith seems to have quite accurately defined the practical aims of esoteric teaching. It is worth noting that he also says in this book that “Progress in this ‘gnosis’ or inner knowledge is then said to be a condition for admission into the ‘greater mysteries.’” 15

## The General Resurrection

Here we come back to the question of the Fall of Adam. In their inner meaning, the Fall and the Resurrection of the dead relate to consciousness. Genesis tells how Adam fell as a result of eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This makes it clear that knowledge played a part in the Fall of man. The idea of the Fall is exactly like the idea of the Resurrection in one way. To external religion it has only one meaning: the Fall happened once, the “General Resurrection” will come on one particular day in the future. But if this is so, then it is a purely external event. Yet certain of the early Fathers of the church, giving an esoteric view of Christianity, have made it clear that, to them, the Resurrection exists in three ways: it does exist outside us, in the past as a single event, and in the future as a universal event, but it also exists now, in any moment, always accessible, always possible if rarely actual within us. The same is true of the Fall, which happens to us time after time. One of the Fathers in the *Philokalia* wrote of the life to come that:

In saying this (that we must seek to enter the Kingdom while we are still alive), we are not forgetting the blessings of the life to come or limiting the universal reward to the present life. We are simply affirming that it is necessary in the first place to have the grace of the Holy Spirit energizing the heart and so, in proportion to this energizing, to enter into the kingdom of heaven. The Lord made this clear in saying: “The kingdom of heaven is within you” [Luke 17:21]. The Apostle too said the same: “Faith is the substance of things hoped for” [Hebrews 11:1]. “Run, that you may reach your goal” [I Corinthians 9:26]. “Examine yourselves whether you are in the faith. Do you not know that Jesus Christ is in you unless you are worthless [2 Corinthians 13:5].” 16

Experience is closely linked with consciousness. The Resurrection is also a raising of consciousness, and the inner meaning of the Fall of man

is a description of a universal fall in our state of consciousness. (But this idea of consciousness is an idea that is easily misunderstood.) It is possible to experience these inner meanings in our own lives; resurrection in fire is an uncommon experience, but to fall again into inner darkness is common enough. Here is the Christian view of the transformation of consciousness, hidden in mythological language.

This view is confirmed by the way Macarius the Great, whose works are of the highest importance to monastics of the Eastern Church, describes how, in the tradition, Moses is used as an example of a resurrection in life:

In a double way, therefore, the blessed Moses shows us what glory true Christians will receive in the resurrection: namely, the glory of light and the spiritual delights of the Spirit which even now they are deemed worthy to possess interiorly. Because of this, these gifts of the Spirit will then redound also in their bodies. The saints even now possess this glory in their souls, as said above, but it will then cover and clothe their naked bodies. It will sweep them up into heaven and we will at last come to rest, both body and soul, with the Lord forever.

When God created Adam, he did not furnish him with material wings as birds have, but he prepared for him the wings of the holy Spirit. The same he plans on giving him at the resurrection, to lift him and direct him wherever the Spirit wishes. These wings the saints already now are deemed worthy to possess to fly up mentally to the realm of heavenly thoughts.

For Christians live in another world, eat from another table, are clothed differently, prefer different enjoyment, different dialogue, and a different mentality. Therefore, also in the resurrection their bodies will be worthy to receive those eternal blessings of the Holy Spirit. They will be permeated with that glory which their souls in this life have already experienced. 17

## Unchanging Truth

The idea of unchanging truth, encapsulated in the concept of the Perennial Philosophy, has at least three different but related meanings. One reflects the insights of Plato that the truth of the spirit refers to that which is eternal and timeless and hence unchanging. This concept has

gained a special meaning in the Christian Church, whose God - according to the Bible but more clearly in the words of the early Fathers - is eternal and unchanging yet loving and in a special sense personal. The second meaning is that those facts about human life that have to do with the approach of that life to the eternal also tend to show very little change over the centuries. Our spiritual potential changes little, if at all, reflecting the unchanging center of the inner world, while our everyday, worldly nature changes through the years and reflects the changeability of the outside world.

The third meaning is that the true teaching, the esoteric tradition, changes very little and does so, when it changes, organically. Unlike modern scientific thought, esoteric truths are never replaced by new paradigms. The occasional new discoveries that do occur in esotericism are added to those that have gone before.

Those alive today whose experience confirms the conclusions of the inner or esoteric teaching will accept that, as Huxley suggested in the title to his *Perennial Philosophy*, truth does not change, and that the original form of the inner teaching in the early days of the Church was little different from that which appears to be necessary today. The small changes that are needed are due almost entirely to changes in educational and other factors, perhaps evolutionary, that modify human character in different historical epochs.

At the risk of appearing Platonic, one can say that the goal of the spiritual life in the Eastern Church, theosis or deification, is the establishment of a living relationship with the unchanging. But it is necessary to understand this in a way that is both experiential and Christian: not to attempt to define or limit the Lord by this term, nor to demand to see Him "face to face," but simply to "locate" Him, to describe the "direction" in which one can relate to Him a direction more dependent on human limitations than on any illusory possibility of restricting or "placing" the divine in some human scheme. And the New Testament tells us: "If ye fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself, ye do well" (James 2:8).

## Loss of Ancient Knowledge

How did it happen that this psychological knowledge, which was a mature science in the Christian world long before the development of our modern physical sciences, became lost?

Often the inner changes of history have the simplest causes. In this case, for example, with the decline of the Roman Empire, book learning

became the almost exclusive concern of the clergy. This had the effect of an unplanned but effective censorship. To this was added mistranslation and careless copying, and there is frequent evidence as well of deliberate distortion. By the late medieval era these causes had led to an almost total loss of the psychological knowledge of the previous era. The fact of the matter is that most of these teachings never reached the West in usable form. The Christianity of the Fathers has never been tried in the Western world. In summary:

1. What is now known as Gnosticism different from the Christian concept *gnosis* - survived only as a few short-lived sects with conflicting teachings.
2. Much pre-Christian Greek thought was lost by accident or by monastic censorship, although other elements were preserved to the present day in the writings of the early Fathers and those who have followed in their spiritual footsteps.

What survived was understood only by a few. Psychology in those days was regarded as a form of philosophy, and this was so thoroughly lost in medieval times that one of the great scholars of this century, Etienne Gilson, speaking particularly of the Greek form of philosophical thought, wrote that: "there is no philosophy between the end of the 3rd century after Christ and the middle of the 13th century, with the appearance of the *Summa Contra Gentiles*." 19 (It was just then that the inner tradition went underground.) Thus:

3. From the time of Clement, the outer church had become increasingly closed to the inner tradition.
4. From the time of the establishment of the church under Constantine, what survived of the inner tradition had mostly gone into seclusion, so that practice of the Christian inner tradition was almost entirely limited to a few monastic locations, most of them in the eastern marches of Christendom, and the tradition became virtually invisible to most individuals.

The division between Eastern and Western churches became wider, until the inner tradition of the Royal Way barely survived except in the monasticism of the Eastern Church. There it survives today in certain special places and was restored by certain specific individuals. Saint Nilus of Sora, in thirteenth-century Russia, commented on monks of the time by quoting the earlier Philotheus of Sinai on the lack of experience of certain monks (quoted in chapter 9).<sup>20</sup>

This could have been said today, particularly because the Western Church, in which the inner tradition has had less influence on the prevalent

culture, took a different form. In the thirteenth century, it faced an influx of Arab translations from, and commentaries on, the works of Aristotle, and in this form Greek philosophy reentered the mainstream of Western thought in a different way. This faced the Western church with the need once again to resolve problems with conflicting ideas. Because, this time, the inner tradition was distant or hidden from sight, the solution was different.

It was at this point that the debate between the hesychast Gregory Palamas and the Italian philosopher Barlaam, who proclaimed that intellect was the means for knowing God, 21 was resolved schismatically in a literal sense, by forming or reinforcing the rift between Eastern and Western churches. To this day, theologians of the Eastern Church believe that Palamas carried the day, while the Western churches believe that Barlaam proved the primacy of intellect as a basis for faith.

Thus the schism between the two churches was at root a schism between head and heart.

On Mount Athos today, considerably more than a thousand monks follow the Royal Way of the heart as practicing hesychasts. Before the First World War, there were many more. In earlier times, most monks joined in their teens. Now some come in their fifties and sixties, when the process known as “cutting off the will” (described later, chapter 10) - the basic form of obedience for the monk of the Royal Way - has become impossible for them: the way the mind of Western man normally develops with age makes it impossible. Today the modern world is beginning to reach out to those distant monks, as a flood of tourists and pilgrims disrupts monastic life and even creates traffic problems on the tracks of the Holy Mountain. At certain times of the year, large groups of young Greek men visit the mountain with the encouragement of their families, but often with little real interest in what they find there. For monks, as for lay people, for all people in the world, the question now is: How can the Way be found when it is impossible to isolate oneself for so many hours each day? Conditions change and, in the past, ways of seeking God have changed with them. Saint Nilus of Sora in his monastic rule wrote:

In the past it was not only the holy fathers living as hermits in the solitude of the desert who kept themselves under spiritual restraints and attained grace and purity of soul: this discipline was likewise maintained by monks leading a community life, and even by those who had not removed from the world but lived in large cities, such as Symeon the New Theologian and his starets, Symeon the Studite, of the great Studion

monastery in so vast and populous a city as Constantinople, whose spiritual gifts shone like stars.

Blessed Hesychius of Jerusalem says: “Just as it is impossible to preserve life without eating and drinking, so it is impossible to achieve anything spiritual without that guarding of the mind which is called ‘sobering,’<sup>22</sup> even for those who force themselves to avoid sin for fear of the pain of hell.”

The technique of this exquisite, light-giving action, according to Symeon the New Theologian, is communicated to many souls through instruction; but there are some who are enabled by ardent faith to receive it directly from God.<sup>23</sup>

In the modern world, how many of useven monks today, when many Western monks and nuns are forced to take jobs - can give sixteen hours a day to the quest? Yet the ordinary monk in community needs little special knowledge. He just does what he is told. But he must do it for long hours, and the abbot, the confessor, the elder who leads the monk, does need knowledge.

## The Sources of My Investigation

Much of the knowledge of this Way belongs to a time when theology and psychology, philosophy and science, were all one discipline. This ancient *unity of knowledge* was one of the reasons why the modern individual cannot easily come to grips with older forms of the subject: we simply don't approach it in the same way. With the specialization of modern thought have come differences in the classification and expression of knowledge. These form rifts deeper than those caused by the need to translate from different languages, so that we can only bridge them through appropriate experience, and not in merely conceptual ways.

In this, the very types of knowledge are often named differently. Monastics in the Eastern Church today speak of *anthropology*, but to them this is a unitary form of knowledge, fundamentally different in structure from modern knowledge, and containing what were clearly psychological and theological statements. For example, there was a way of seeing theology that was essential to that early Christian psychological understanding. Rooted in the Bible, these teachings used the terminology of their timeincluding a psychological terminology which they had in common with the Greek and Roman philosophers of the Stoic school, a fact confirmed by a number of investigators.

Many differences make those ancient teachings hard to understand today: different terminology, the differences in the questions they asked then, the differences in texts over time and due to errors in copying and translation, and the shift of meaning that occurs when such ideas are not put into practice. Because of this, little of this early knowledge is understood today, and what is still understood has been so totally absorbed into modern thought and so distorted and fragmented by attempting to “correct” it to fit the scientific views of our time that we do not recognize its origins. Yet much of this ancient knowledge has survived in different forms. Some of them remain within the mainstream of the churches, often the Eastern. Some survive in the records of specific developments in the history of the church, and for historical reasons which will become clear, some have gone fully underground, so that when they emerged it was without the form and often without the approval of the church. Nevertheless, if one is willing to break free of the boundaries of specialization, there are a number of sources from which this ancient knowledge can be recovered, and not always in fragmentary form.

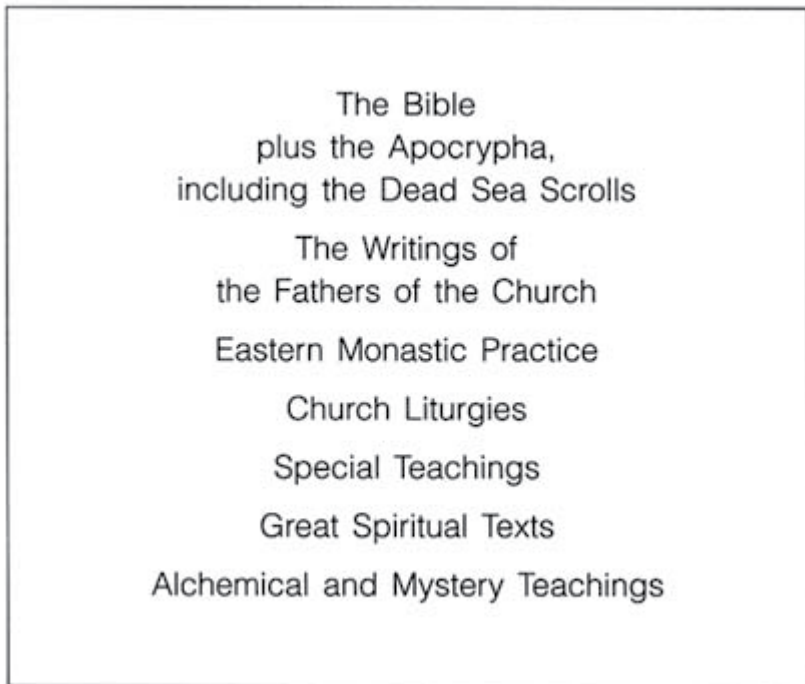


Figure 1.1  
Sources in which the forgotten teachings can be found today.

## *The Teachings of the Bible*

It was said in the New Testament that Christianity will be complete when the gospel is preached throughout the world (Matthew 24:13-14). The Bible has now been readily available throughout the world for some decades, yet in another way the time is not yet come. We have described why the inner tradition which, in the first years of the Christian era, produced a different kind of person, has not yet reached the part of the world in which we live today. That form of Christianity has not been tried and failed, but has never yet been tried. In the first centuries of the church, at the time when Christianity produced its greatest results, men and women such as the Martyr Polycarp were able to withstand torture and fire and continue singing or praising God throughout. The modern individual finds this example unbelievable. Reports in texts such as the second-century *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius are convincing in their detail. The fact is that the Christianity of that time was tried, and it succeeded. But a second fact is that the form of Christianity that produced those results never reached us. It was the inner meaning of the gospel that worked those changes in people's hearts.

One effect of this situation is that if we admit that the Bible does have inner teachings a conclusion that is inescapable if we are honest with ourselves then, because the early inner interpretations have been forgotten, we often describe them as obscure, because narrow or purely invented modern interpretations have more and more become "common coinage." In general, meanings that could previously be discovered with a little effort can now be discovered in the Bible only after we have found clues in the early Fathers.

## *The Apocrypha*

It has been suggested that the discovery of the so-called Dead Sea Scrolls, and particularly of the Gospel of Thomas, at this time of need is little short of a miracle. Indeed, there is little doubt of the value of some of the texts, particularly the *Gospel According to Thomas*, in filling in some of the gaps that remain in the record of early Christian teaching, nor of the fact that that gospel seems to be particularly comprehensible to the intellectual man of the modern era. Certain texts of the classical Apocrypha also repay investigation, but do not play any direct part in this particular study.

## *The Fathers of the Church*

Immediately following the era of persecution, when many devout Christians moved away from the centers of civilization into the deserts and hard places, a great inner tradition grew up in the church concerning ways of achieving the inner states that form part of Christian possibility. That was the Christianity of the early Fathers. It was a small movement, which probably reached *and was understood* by a very small population.

To study the Fathers can provide us with a key that makes the Bible more accessible to us, and so invests it with greater meaning. The meanings assigned in this book to biblical texts are examples of this, and have been generated in the studies on which this book is based. The problem has been the enormous delay. At the time when they were written, these texts never reached the rest of the world at large, although they survived in three forms: in a great collection of texts of astonishing clarity and depth, in a feeble undercurrent that spread through Europe as a sometimes “secret” inner tradition; and in monastic form which preserved the experience better than either of the other two forms.

The fate of the written knowledge is one story. For far more than a thousand years after it was written down, printing did not exist. For an even longer time, modern book distribution and other forms of communications did not exist. Until now, the texts of this tradition have remained little known in and wholly unassimilated by the West. Much of that knowledge was preserved in writing only in the Alexandrian and Syrian churches. Some but not all of this reached the Greeks through Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and the saints known as the Cappadocian Fathers. More written knowledge from these Middle Eastern sources reached Russia about a century ago. Some reached the West from Russia and Greece in the first twenty years of this century, normally in obscure scholarly translations laden with Greek and Latin that made them wholly inaccessible to the majority of men and women.

But this which forms a true discipline in the widest sense of the term has never in two thousand years been generally available in complete form. The unwritten teachings have been even more inaccessible.

The written teachings of the early Fathers exist in two main forms: in the writings of the Fathers themselves, and in those of their successors, more recent teachers or authors in the same tradition, including a very few members of the Western churches who have obviously followed in the same line of work, and including monks and nuns and occasionally other clergy of the Eastern Church right down to the present time. Figure 1.2 shows the relation of a few key figures in this tradition. Now, by modern

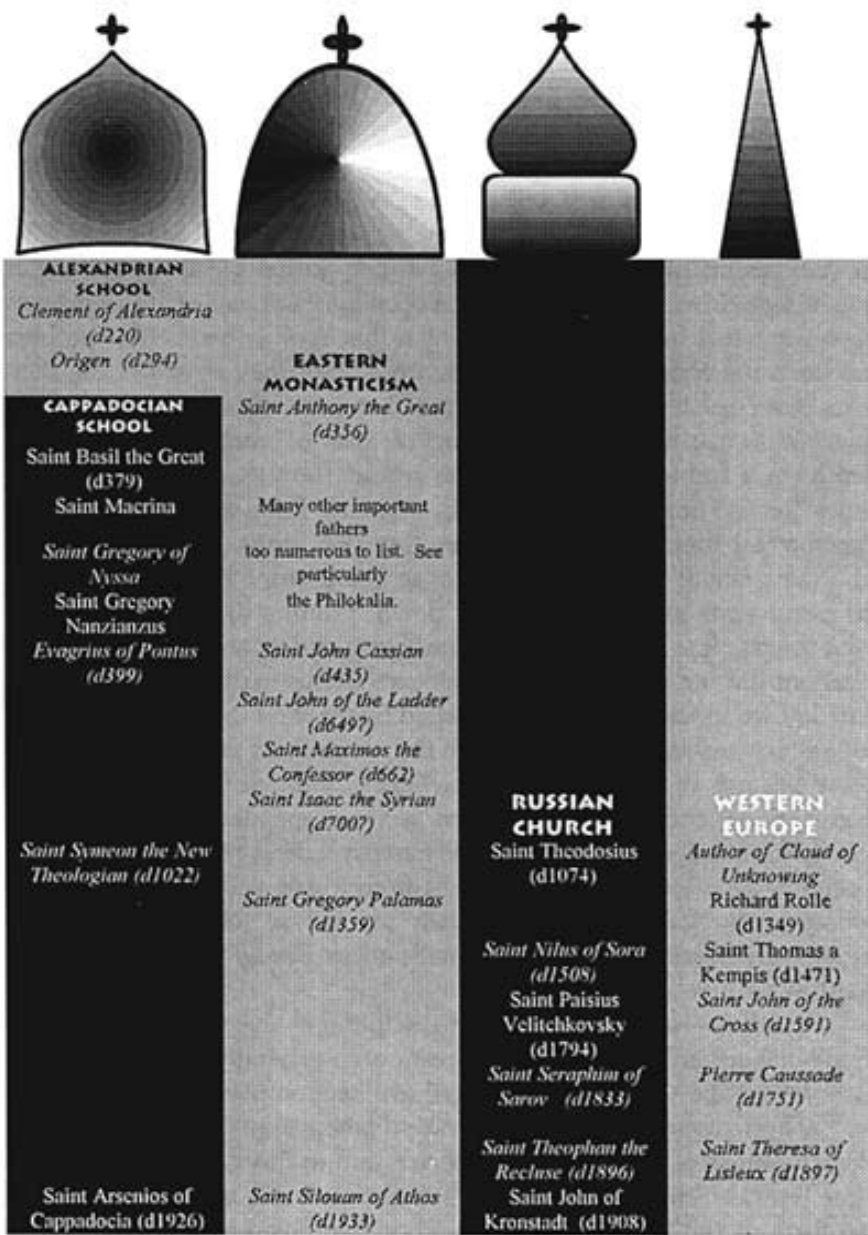


Figure 1.2

Diagram of the history of the tradition. Names shown in italics are quoted or discussed in this book.

ways of publishing translation and explanation, this unique knowledgesome nearly two thousand years old is becoming more readily accessible in its original form, but its assimilation to Western thought is only just beginning. Some texts that are only just being translated into English were available in French in the 1930s or the 1950s. But in the English-speaking world this is still an unknown teaching.

In view of the difficulties in reaching this knowledge today, what seems to be only an accident of history may be a greater miracle still. In this second half of the twentieth century, more than seventeen hundred years after many of them were written, much larger numbers of the works of the early Fathers of the church, until now inaccessible to the ordinary reader, are at last becoming available to us in English translation.

But why are these texts significant, and to whom are they significant? Their significance is that they give an unequivocal answer to an important question. They do not merely say, but clearly demonstrate, that a different quality was possessed by early Christianity. Because of this, they are significant to all Christians who have ever raised the question of Christian imperfection, have ever wondered whether Christianity was always flawed as it is now, who have ever asked the catch question: Why must Christian action so often differ from Christian intention?

These ancient texts are significant to every Christian who ever asked questions such as: How can I be more Christian? How can I free myself from my own bad habits? How can I learn to live the commandment; to feel growing in my own heart the qualities described in the Sermon on the Mount? How can I turn the other cheek? How can I love my enemies?

The early Fathers of the church continually asked questions like these; they gave their whole lives to them in a way we can hardly believe today, and in so doing, they began to find answers that help us when we face the same questions today. It is the discoveries of those ancient men and women, answers that helped to shape our civilization, that have been forgotten and effectively missing from the English-speaking world for so long and that are now again available. What all this means is that, now becoming available to the ordinary layperson for the first time is perhaps the greatest religious psychology in the world, much of it more than fifteen hundred years old but unsurpassed even today. For example, the texts of the Greek *Philokalia*, of which three of the five volumes are now available in English, are already proving valuable source material to professional psychologists. The studies of the Russian monastic teachings about what they name provocation, <sup>24</sup> an idea derived from the earlier Greek Fathers and described in recent books on the Russian Church, also have considerable significance in

this field. Many other examples could be found. But this is hardly enough!

To help yourself be yourself for Christianity this means to realize, not to distort human nature you need to know what those words mean. But if ordinary mechanical skills are learned only by apprenticeship, how much more is this true for the skills of healing the soul?

We have rediscovered the instruction books, but we still need to know their meaning.

In the past century and a half, certain individuals, particularly in the Russian Church, have studied these texts, and some of them have written about them in terms easier for the modern reader to understand: these include Saint Theophan the Recluse and Boris Mouravieff. There has also been Fedotov, who introduced the second volume of his work *The Russian Religious Mind* with the words: "My intention is to describe the subjective side of religion, as opposed to its objective side; that is, opposed to the complex of organized dogmas, sacraments, rites, liturgy, Canon Law, and so on. I am interested in man, religious man, and his attitude towards God, the world, and his fellow men; his attitude is not only emotional, but also rational and volitional, the attitude of the whole man." 25

### *Eastern Monastic Practice*

In the Introduction I spoke of how so much time has passed since the early Fathers of the church wrote that the special meanings of the words have long been forgotten. There is an exception to that fact, and it makes it possible that the West might discover those lost meanings. The exception is that a large part of the inner tradition was preserved in unwritten but practical forms in Orthodox and Coptic monasteries and hermitages, particularly on Mount Athos and in other monasteries throughout the Orthodox world. This explains the wide knowledge of ancient Greek among the monks. Yet even this source is not perfect, as its history shows that it has periodically lost its inner meaning. Indeed several times it has had to be renewed over the centuries. Such a renewal is occurring now. These monasteries appear also to have been a major source of the highly practical teachings of Gurdjieff<sup>26</sup> and Ouspensky, although the linguistic problem of loss of meaning explains why such a small number were unable to convey to those limited to Western language all the key elements of the teaching as a method. The Orthodox Church, as it comes into the West, is facing the same difficulty.

Since the meaning of a text is found by linking the words to experience, the meanings of many of these ancient texts are stored but stored *wordlessly* - in the memories of those who *practice* the monastic life, and particularly in that monasticism which uses the texts of the early Fathers as its guide. As mentioned earlier, the primary textbooks of Greek and Russian monasticism include the *Philokalia* and the *Gerontikon*. Some of the stories in the *Gerontikon* are probably true, others are clearly parables, whether or not they have foundation in fact.

But the important thing about this is that monastic texts relate to actual practice, and it is found that the effort to transmit to someone an actual practice eliminates many of the misunderstandings that occur in purely verbal communication. This means that today, after two thousand years of Christianity, the meanings of the Gospels and of all these later texts are more accurately preserved not simply in words but in the practices of the monastics, in the "life of the heart" lived in these monasteries a life that can never be fully explained or intellectualized. These monks and nuns have generally been guided in their practice by those who have gone before, generation after generation, and such guidance means, more than anything else, a process of correcting mistakes. So those whose practices follow those of generations that have gone before them provide a unique resource by which the practical meaning of certain ideas can be checked. Even today, it is sometimes possible for the devout pilgrim to enter into these practices to the point of acquiring understanding, by processes that require much time. But that is another story, perhaps to be told later.

## *Monastic Rules*

Some of these ideas survive in written form, too, in the great monastic *rules* of the Western Christian world, in the Rule of Saint Benedict, in the teachings of Saint Francis of Assisi, in the spiritual exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola in their original form, not the later form shortened soon after his death. Many have survived or reemerged in Russia, from the fifteenth century on, in the teachings of Saint Nilus of Sora and others who created specific teachings for the needs of a particular time and place, as in the correspondence of Saint Theophan the Recluse or the instruction given by Saint John of Kronstadt.

It is sometimes difficult to distinguish between this classification and the next, but the distinction is generally valid. More to the point, although in written form they are not the equal of the unwritten teaching of a monastery, monastic rules are a compendium of practical instruction.

## *Church Liturgies*

In certain parts of the Christian liturgy, and in the many other services of the Christian year, certain of the Fathers enshrined great truths in words, in images, statues, frescoes or icons and others choreographed these truths into what we call the “ritualized” action of priest and deacon when the liturgy is properly performed. They were even built into the very architecture of some of the great churches. 27 Not all of these “objective” truths are disguised: many great truths are plainly stated in the words of the older liturgies, to be ignored by the modern worshiper who, too often of course, doubts them, perhaps because of the scientific prejudice that “this is not real knowledge,” or more often as a result of inattention. 28

That “other Christianity,” then, is still alive. The esoteric tradition is not a different form of Christianity, but an early strand in the tapestry of the Universal Church a strand whose importance has long been forgotten, so that today it needs to be “lifted up,” to draw an analogy from the weaver’s craft, until it can once again be seen, be understood, and so be fitted back into its proper place in the fabric of the church. This is the thread of common experience that once stitched together the many churches into the One Church from which they sprang.

Once we learn to value it, much of this knowledge will be revealed. It can be obtained simply for the price of going to church and listening carefully, or by careful reading but this is so only as long as we remember to ask ourselves: What does that actually mean?

But when we value something we learn, we come to understand it differently.

## *Great Spiritual Texts*

Certain of these ideas survive sometimes in the great spiritual texts of the past few centuries: in *The Imitation of Christ* and in other books by those associated with the Society of the Common Lot in the “Low Countries” of Europe; in the English *Cloud of Unknowing*; in the teachings and poems of Saint John of the Cross; in Pierre Caussade’s *Abandonment to Divine Providence*. Occasionally one can trace in these texts mentions of teachings that go back to the first centuries of the church. But in all these great texts, which are for many Western Christians their sole source of knowledge of this tradition, surprisingly little has survived of the vast resources of knowledge available to the early Church, resources that are now slowly being rediscovered and made available to those who can see their value.

Among these great texts are some that are certainly in line with the inner tradition known by the early Fathers, such as the teachings of Saint Theophan the Recluse, who from the depth of his spirituality and the richness of his scholarship was able to put the same ideas in the Russian of the nineteenth century, language which at least contains modern concepts lacking to the authors of the early centuries. Sources of this kind are still few and far between in the English language, so that I have had to contribute to their publication, as well as drawing the attention of those who are interested to the value of their content.

### *Alchemical and Mystery Teachings*

Some of the ideas spread across Europe in disguised form in medieval times, particularly after the occupation of Greece by the Turks, and mixed with other streams to form European esotericism of the time. The Christian esoteric tradition also appears to have gone underground at certain times, but here it has in general been mixed with material from other sources, so that it is more often than not confusing to all but the best trained scholars, and we will not go into further detail about it at this time except to say that in alchemy were preserved certain items of Christian and pre-Christian psychological knowledge dealing with subjects so long ignored that today they would be regarded by the modern churches with considerable suspicion.



## Chapter 2

### The Burning Bush

There are two important differences about Christianity seen from the esoteric view, and these are exactly the reasons why the inner tradition can offer new hope in a troubled world. The first is the view that saints are not born holy, they are made holy. The second is that the process that produces holiness involves and has always involved a kind of psychological science which provides help for just those questions that neither modern psychology nor modern, moralistic religion know how to resolve. And the inner tradition is a science in just the sense that it depends on experiential confirmation, that is, on its own kind of experimental method. It says that specifically in the idea of *synergy*,<sup>1</sup> which means that although it is impossible without Christ's redemption, salvation also depends on our own inner efforts. In this view, the saints, the holiest Christians of all time, serve as examples of the basic principle that we are redeemed by Our Lord, but that this redemption becomes effective only through the efforts of the individual concerned. In other words, I cannot slander my neighbor, rob my employer, deny Christ, ignore God's requirements for me and still claim to be saved by Christ's great sacrifice; by behaving in this way I make a mockery of Christianity itself, and it is directly because of this great gap between Christian claims and Christian performance that this great faith has fallen into disrepute in the modern world.

How is it, then, that a God who loved His creature created us imperfect? The traditional answer is found in the Book of Genesis; it is

that man has *fallen*. Early tradition speaks about this; in the Canon of Saint Andrew of Crete (see p. 43) we are told about an inner, psychological fall as a result of an inner, psychological temptation. We will perhaps come to discover that this was itself, in the long term, not so much a tragedy as a stage in our growth to racial maturity.

This is no empty claim. The path of esotericism is marked by experiences, by glimpses of the different reality from which we once fell; glimpses that create certainty or at least restore hope as we pass through our uncertainties. They armor us against the greatest problem of modern religious thought, the tacit but entrenched rationalist definition of all inner experiences, including these visions which sometimes transform people's lives, as "subjective and therefore meaningless," a definition that resulted from the fundamental scientific redefinition of the term *truth*. This self-imposed blindness has led to the existence of questions which from this viewpoint appear to be unanswerable. Often these questions arise directly from the inner experience of individuals and are of crucial importance to those individuals, but today they are treated as trivial not only by science, but even by many religious authorities. Yet these questions are unanswerable only because there has been a general turn away from inner experience, just as happened in the tenth century, when Saint Symeon the New Theologian (A.D. 949-1022) made great efforts to demonstrate the experiential element in Christian spirituality. Abbot of a Turkish Christian monastery, he was sent into exile for his pains, at the request of his own monks.

Yet although we generally see inner reality as illusion and the outer illusion as reality, inner experience is still with us, although often entirely forgotten. Indeed, although esoteric Christianity is seen in terms of inner experience, the experience of the esoteric path is not all inner for one specific reason, that at a certain point the boundaries between inner and outer dissolve in a new reality, a kingdom of which Jesus says, in the Gospel According to Thomas: "The kingdom is within you, and it is outside you."

Such teachings can only be understood if read in context, and the text given above hints, to those who know how to read it, that initially this kingdom, which is inside and outside us, can only be discovered within us, that is, through Self-knowledge. This is a basic tenet of inner knowledge, that we must first discover certain things within us, but once discovered within, they can also be recognized in other people. At a later stage the same applies to all the phenomena of the outside world. As I hope to show in this chapter, the mystical experiences at the peak of inner experience are often the point at which the inner breaks through into the outer, the subjective into the true objective.

## A Hermit Speaks

One reason for the vagueness of modern Christianity about these points is the lack of examples. The scarcity of holiness in modern times has troubled me for a long time. It was already a persistent question when, on an early visit to Mount Athos in 1983, I spoke to a truly spiritual hermit, a *pneumaticos* in the terms they use there, and was given a “message to the West” a message I was expressly told to pass on the English-speaking world.

Put baldly, as it was given, this message has until now proved almost impossible to pass on, because as a message it only makes sense when we have the “meat” of it. So this book is the attempt to give the real meaning of that message and to expand on it as far as I am able, knowing that others will have to complete the task. The message is brief and simple, until one begins to ponder its implications.

“You English,” said the hermit sitting in his simple cell, “have served man very well with your intellect, giving him many things he needs, the solutions of many problems that have made life easier for everyone.”

He paused, to let the young Greek Australian serving as interpreter render his words to me, then continued, and as he did so I looked around the room. Benches made of simple planks lined two sides, an iron bedstead was on a third, and an iron stove on the fourth. The interpreter began again: “Now you should do another work: to understand and to tell the world of the inner truth, the truth of the heart as well.” The conversation continued for some time, but everything else that was said was overshadowed by the enormity of the message, the impossibility of ever fulfilling this charge.

Why is it so difficult to convey this message? The problem is that, to a greater degree even than was true of biblical man, and despite our belief in “progress,” modern man is fallen man. We are psychologically fallen, that is, we are no longer in full possession of our faculties. The text known as the Canon of Saint Andrew of Crete, one of the most important of the early documents still in use today in the services of the Orthodox Church, provides an unexpected glimpse of what is unequivocally an inner, psychological interpretation of the Fall of Adam.

My mind's Eve took the place of the bodily Eve  
for methè passionate thought that was in my flesh.  
Showing me the sweets  
and gorging me ever on the poisonous food.  
Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me.

Worthily from Eden of old, Adam was exiled,  
When he failed to keep, O Saviour,  
Thy one commandment.  
What shall I suffer, who am always rejecting  
Thy lifegiving teachings.  
Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me. 3

The inner, psychological view that is revealed in this text was understood by men of the early centuries. But this kind of thinking has long been forgotten. Because of this, the hermit's message, as I understand it, is not so simple: before we can do what he has asked us to do, we must begin to remedy this *inner blindness*.

This is the task that the hermit has set us, disguised as a simple need to think about something different. The precision of this message is such that it clearly defines esoteric Christianity. This is exactly how esotericism understands the Fall of man: as a corruption of man's inner potential and of his basic goodness that depends on the full use of his faculties. The Fall describes a partial loss of faculties that echoes the insight of physician Hughlings Jackson, in the last century, who said that in any form of intoxication by drugs, by drink (and of course by one's own emotions) the higher faculties are lost first.

Each of these verses ends with the repetitive refrain of the Canon, the *Kyrie eleison*, "Lord have mercy," that sounds repeatedly in Orthodox services and is echoed time and again in all the texts of Christian esotericism. In this, esoteric Christianity differs from what most people in the West know of other esoteric teachings. In the Christian esoteric tradition, salvation from our state depends primarily on the mercy of God. For man unaided, says the tradition, salvation is impossible, although according to the same tradition, individual effort does play a most important part in this salvation, and this need to make individual effort is one of the major distinctions between inner Christianity and its purely outer forms.

## Trial by Fire

"By Thy light we shall see light," says the Orthodox liturgy. If inner religion comes from inner experience,<sup>4</sup> then religion in our times has almost forgotten this key. The inner sense has been lost, or to be more exact, despite the fact that many people have glimpses of an inner life and of its great richness, these glimpses have not been understood, so they have not been put to use.

This loss of the inner sense has gone on a very long time. Yet to return to my experiences on Mount Athos, which so well illuminate this question, on one of my early visits there I glimpsed one of the less visible parts of the early tradition of the church, when I had a number of interesting and revealing conversations with my friend Father A. All of these talks touched on the question of what happens if the higher faculties are restored in full, even if briefly. One talk of particular importance was in the otherwise empty reception room of the monastery *archontariki* or guesthouse where, sitting on the cushioned seat running along the windows overhanging the blue-gray sea that Xerxes had once sailed his fleets over, he showed me an icon of the Virgin and child. Around the Virgin on this icon, he explained, the prophets 5 were shown, each so as to illustrate one aspect of their story in a way that helped to explain the “inner” meaning of the birth of Christ. There was Jacob with his ladder, Moses with the burning bush.

Something about this burning bush analogy fell into place. A strange experience was lit up for me, a brief awakening that happened to me on a Christmas Eve many years before a divine gift received at night, after I had tried to spend the whole day dedicated to Christ. As I drifted off to sleep a blow hit me in the solar plexus, energy rushed up my spine and out of the crown of my head. Immediately the world was different, on fire, the interior of objects around me suddenly visible in ceaseless motion. It was then that I first understood Moses’ vision on Mount Sinai. Now, more than a decade later, in an ancient monastery three thousand miles further east, this icon enabled me to fit that experience into its biblical context. The link it established between the Old Testament image of the burning bush and the birth of Christ helped to explain this past experience. From this I began to understand how the forces existing in our unpurified minds our fears and wishes, delusions and compulsions prevent the birth of Christ within our consciousness. Without the purity of heart that is one of the elements of the wedding garment referred to in the Gospels, without being free from these compulsions, we are not invited to the wedding. The other gospel reference, in its inner sense, has to do with when the “Bridegroom” comes: “I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire” (Matthew 3:11). And one symbolic name for the Jewish inner tradition was derived from the chariot of fire that took the prophets to heaven. Come now, Lord, for Your servant awaits You.

But when this experience first happened to me, I was not ready for this coming: something in me, something that was present in me at least partly because of my lack of preparation for this event, became very fearful

at what was occurring. The fear caused inner tensions, and with those tensions, the experience, the state of consciousness, came to an end.

Years later, seeing that icon in the guesthouse over the windblown Aegean, I began to formulate questions about this event, and this, of course, caused us to move on to the discussion of experiences. Stillness, the emotional stillness of *hesychia* the word used by Fathers such as St. Gregory Palamas for the emotional stillness found in prayer seems a very important factor in all the more significant experiences. But something else was also necessary, an abundance of energy of a certain kind that comes from such experiences: dynamis, Palamas' term for energy, then defined by change, almost exactly as it is in Newtonian physics, dynamis in potential, *dynamis* as change, dynamis come to rest again.

The fear of the unfamiliar that ended that experience is a commonplace on the inner path. Much esoteric work takes the form of a struggle against that fear. Our reaction to such an experience illuminates the fact that to enter a different form of life we ourselves must become different. We inhabit a fallen world, and we are trapped there because we ourselves are fallen. But who within us is it that is afraid to step out into the sunlight? We can learn to understand that this is not I. This is one route to *humility*.

But this understanding must include a remembrance that to say that we are fallen is also to say that our proper place in life is higher. This relates directly to the following gospel passage on the importance of humility:

But when thou art bidden, go and sit down in the lowest room; that when he that bade thee cometh, he may say unto thee, Friend, go up higher: then shalt thou have worship in the presence of them that sit at meat with thee.

For whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted (Luke 14:1011).

Why did I suggest that what ended that experience was fear? Observation shows that something in us fears any glimpse of higher realities, even the faintest, which would be much less powerful than the one I am describing. Is this not the same thing that fears the uncertainties of the night, that fears anything we cannot control; the fear that drives men to become ever richer, to try to dominate others, to hide from the world, to pretend, to lie?

When we attempt to serve God, and attempt this realistically, realizing that to do so will bring to an end our partial or even purely imaginary control over what happens to us, then something in us resists mightily. I continually meet this problem in myself. The unpredictable, the uncontrollable, anything that I do not understand, all of this threatens the

pretense of control that I present to the world, and all of this is to be avoided, if necessary violently. Observation of the inconsistencies in our nature, of the differences between our avowed aims and the moment-to-moment purposes for which we strive, shows us that something that has developed in us over the years has developed a life and a sense of identity all its own, and fears to lose this "life." Perhaps it sees the loss of its control over events as tantamount to loss of this identity: of this I am not sure, but I am very sure of the fear.

## Symeon the New Theologian on Inner Experience

We have fallen from our proper state. Experiences of that state are now sometimes described as mystical. There are many kinds of mystical experience, and not all of them have the character of fire. In the Gospel of Saint John we read: "And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not" (John 1:5). This famous passage has an inner as well as an outer meaning. It refers to the fact that in our normal state we cannot remember or understand the events that occur in higher states. 6 Saint Symeon the New Theologian wrote: "At the summit of the spiritual ascent, I saw a light, and in the light another, clearer light, and again in the midst of this light there shone a splendour as of the sun. From the sun there beamed forth a ray which filled all things, but whose nature remained incomprehensible."<sup>7</sup>

On another occasion he describes as if it happened to somebody else his first major experience of what is known as the *uncreated light*, an experience that supposedly happened when he was twenty years old:

One day, as he stood and recited, "God have mercy upon me, a sinner,"<sup>8</sup> uttering it with his mind rather than with his mouth, suddenly a flood of divine radiance appeared from above and filled all the room. As this happened the young man lost all awareness of his surroundings and forgot that he was in a house or that he was under a roof. He saw nothing but light all around him and did not know whether he was standing on the ground. He was not afraid of falling; he was not concerned with the world, nor did anything pertaining to men and corporeal beings enter into his mind. Instead, he was wholly in the presence of immaterial light and seemed himself to have turned into light. Oblivious of all the world he was filled with tears and with ineffable joy and gladness. His mind then ascended to heaven and beheld yet another light, which was clearer than that which was close at hand.<sup>9</sup>

This light, and what precedes it, the “cleansing fire” of the Spirit, were not new with Symeon; they have had a long biblical history: “And now men see not the bright light which is in the clouds: but the wind passeth, and cleanseth them” (Job 37:21). This is the light that shines in the Darkness (John 1). It is the light of Christ, the joyful light at the heart of the universe, and it shines unseen, uncomprehended, in our own in-most heart. This is the Second Coming, its joyful advent the alchemical wedding itself. Saint Symeon also wrote: “The nous immersed in Your light becomes so bright that in the end it is light itself, in the likeness of Your glory. The nous of the man to whom this has been granted is called Your own: he is then deemed worthy to possess Your nous, and he is made one with You, never to be parted.” 10

This is the final stage in what is known as the illumination of the nous. It is told that eventually if only rarely this state may become permanent, a possibility that makes a great deal of sense of reports by pupils of Boris Mouravieff that he continually advised them to “work for permanence.”

## Saint Maximos on the Fall

These experiences tell us things we did not know about ourselves. Coming from the gospel tradition, the inner, psychological interpretation of the Fall is basically “good news” in a literal sense. It is news confirmed by these experiences of man’s inherent goodness and the possibility of regaining it.

How did the early Fathers of the church interpret this story of the Fall of man told in Genesis? Normally they write of it not as a historical event but as a “psychological event,” and then, generally, as an event applying to each individual. In this drama, each one of us is Adam, and each one of us possesses the possibility of ceasing to make the mistake that Adam made. Saint Maximos the Confessor, for example, is quoted in the Greek *Philokalia* as writing about it. He says first that the two trees represent two different ways of viewing the world:

The tree of life, when understood as symbolizing wisdom, likewise differs greatly from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, in that the latter neither symbolizes wisdom nor is said to do so. Wisdom is characterized by intellect and intelligence [nous], the state which is opposite to wisdom by lack of intelligence and by sensation.

Since man came into being composed of noetic soul and sentient body, one interpretation could be that the tree of life

is the soul's intellect, which is the seat of wisdom. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil would then be the body's power of sensation, which is clearly the seat of mindless impulses. Man received the Lord's commandment not to involve himself actively and experientially with these impulses; but he did not keep that commandment. 11

Maximos then speaks further of this relation of the two trees to our experience of life, suggesting that in some way we *choose* to experience through one or other of these processes.

Both trees in scripture symbolize the intellect and the senses.<sup>12</sup> Thus the intellect has the power to discriminate between the spiritual and the sensible, between the eternal and the transitory. Or rather, as the soul's discriminatory power, the intellect persuades the soul to cleave to the first and to transcend the second. The senses have the power to discriminate between pleasure and pain in the body. Or rather, as a power existing in a body endowed with soul and sense perception, they persuade the body to embrace pleasure and reject pain.<sup>13</sup>

Next he fits all this together as a complete explanation of the key points of the creation story in Genesis, and links this with a particular conception of obedience to the divine commandment, and from this he builds a detailed conception of good and bad in human behavior all of this founded on simple but exact psychology. In practice, confirmation of this psychological doctrine is difficult to obtain through self-observation, but with serious efforts of investigation the truth and practical usefulness of it can be found. Here, in simple terms, is one statement of the Christian answer to the questions asked on page 13, which add up to the single question: How can I become truly Christian? In this book we will from time to time meet other ways of conveying the same truths.

This is typical of the psychology of the early Fathers, making it entirely amazing that this knowledge has been so thoroughly ignored. And here is what Maximos said next:

If a man exercises only sensory discrimination between pain and pleasure in the body, thus transgressing the divine commandment, he eats from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, that is to say, he succumbs to the mindless impulses that pertain to the senses; for he possesses only the body's power of discrimination, which makes him embrace pleasure as something good and avoid pain as something evil. But if he exercises only that noetic discrimination which distinguishes between the eternal and the transitory, and so keeps the divine

commandment, he eats from the tree of life, that is to say, from the wisdom that appertains to his intellect; for he exercises only the power of discrimination associated with the soul, which makes him cleave to the glory of what is eternal as something good, and avoid the corruption of the transitory as something evil. 14

There are, then, different levels of judgment. True goodness and true evil are something more than what appear to the fallen mind to be good and evil on the basis of sensory perception alone. This whole idea will be developed in a later chapter on discrimination, where we will find another early Father, Saint John Cassian, giving still more details about this ability, known as the power of discrimination of spirits.

Saint Maximos too had more to say, clearly defining the choice that faces us between the Spirit of God and the "spirit" of the sensory world: "Goodness as far as the intellect is concerned is a dispassionate predilection for the spirit; evil is an impassioned attachment to the senses. Goodness as far as the senses are concerned is the impassioned activity of the body under the stimulus of pleasure; evil is the state destitute of such activity."15

The Fall is also the reason why it is so difficult to convey the hermit's message, for it is a message containing a great deal of sense. A medieval book, a *History of the Tree of Life*, expresses elements of the esoteric teaching, telling how the wood of the cross on which Christ was crucified was taken from the dead trunk of the Tree of Life.

The fact is that today we have a fallen view of what constitutes knowledge. This view is different from that held by the early church, and it is actually a narrower view, as well as a more external view, as we will discover later in this book. And this narrow view limits what we consider to be knowledge and at the same time, according to the Fathers, traps our thinking into a narrow part of the nous, the "true intellect" which is so much greater than the discursive mind, so that either we totally ignore the spiritual, or narrow that too down to what "makes sense" a revealing phrase, for the other characteristic of this limited idea of knowledge is that, as it is today, it is bound to the world revealed by the senses. Once understood and accepted, this difficult proposition suddenly seems easy. We wonder why we had so much difficulty with it. But in fact it can only be seen as a kind of fall a further fall of already fallen man, a step further in the Fall of Adam, and, to overcome it, the original Fall must also be understood. Once the soul has fallen, it is difficult for it to return to that different world where is found the Tree of Life. A long search is required: this is normally an individual matter but, from time to time, a whole

nation, even a whole civilization, has to perform that search in order to restore the inner paths that have been lost to it. We live in such a time, but caught up in our personal concerns, even our personal spiritual concerns, nobody perceives the need of the time.

## Our Nature is Fundamentally Good, but Has Been Distorted

Russia's Saint Theophan the Recluse wrote in the last century that man is good by nature, but his natural goodness has been overlaid by something artificial that must be in some way changed before his natural goodness is apparent. Among other things, this distorting overlay of artificiality limits what we can take in (or contain), and makes us slow to understand.

There is a clue in this: whenever we act unconsciously, our nature is invaded, the vacuum left by our lack of consciousness is filled by "borrowed" activity, is controlled from outside us. In simple form we can see this in the effects of indecision, in which events or the actions of others force us into incorrect decisions. This borrowed activity then keeps us "asleep." But, by combining memories of certain experiences with the habit of certain actions that arise from our inner nature, we can build within us a different kind of structure that, instead of obscuring consciousness, will awake the sleeping consciousness within. This was known by the early church as the illumination of the nous. It is hinted that this possibility, and what can happen in the enlightened nous, are what mankind was created for.

Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober.

For they that sleep sleep in the night; and they that be drunken are drunken in the night.

But let us, who are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for an helmet, the hope of salvation (1 Thessalonians 5:68).

Saint Theophan, "that mighty man of prayer," as he was once called, learned about these possibilities of man from a *starets* 16 or "elder" near Kiev, and found the key concept of the innate goodness of man expressed more clearly in his researches into ancient Syriac Christian sources. Researches he made in the middle of the last century, during a seven-year sojourn in the Middle East on a mission to Jerusalem for the Russian Church. It was there that he discovered this idea, by then forgotten in the

West and even in the Orthodox East, that man is naturally good, but is now in an unnatural state. He discovered this in texts that went back to the days when the Syriac Church played a major part in the formation of early Christianity. The evil in man, he said, summarizing this discovery, arises outside him but, like a weed or tare 17 has taken root in him: so that ancient accident makes us vulnerable to accident today. As Saint Theophan puts it, then, man's nature is good. The evil arises, "by accident" in a quite technical sense, from outside him, but once it has taken root in him, it attracts his nous, his awareness, to further accidental forces.

Saint Isaac the Syrian, another great master of the esoteric church, who was one of the early sources rediscovered for the Russian Church by Theophan, had put this slightly differently, with the idea that sickness comes after health: "Sickness is posterior to health, and it is impossible that one and the same nature be both good and evil. Therefore of necessity, one must precede the other; and the one that is prior is also the natural, because anything which is accidental is not said to belong to a nature, but to intrude from without. And change follows upon every accident and intrusion. Nature, however, does not change or alter itself."18

From the psychological viewpoint, it is more important still that according to the gospel, these "weeds" the term refers of course to the unnatural element in us were sowed "while man slept." They occurred during that lowering of consciousness, that *Fall of man*, which caused Gurdjieff to teach that ordinary man is asleep, an idea that was developed by Ouspensky, who defined the normal state of consciousness of modern man as *waking sleep*.19 Properly understood, this idea of waking sleep can help create the possibility of waking up again. The way it should be understood is that we are asleep to our full potential, and that during this partial sleep, accident, or chance, sows certain destructive tendencies in us which help to keep us asleep.

A more recent Christian psychiatrist and teacher, Karlfried von Durkheim, in his studies of an element called *hara*, a key factor in Japanese culture, in both its worldly and spiritual aspects, discovered this same need to overcome some unnatural element in us. He wrote about this that: "Hara, it is true, is part of man's original endowment, but, for that very reason, poses a task for him for it is the task of man to become what he is. Man can fulfill his task of becoming a complete human being only if he overcomes again and again that within him which obstructs the way to this true becoming, and also if, at the same time, he apprehends and allows to grow within him that basic power which is always striving to carry him on to his fully human state."20

In esoteric Christianity, this knowledge is generally transmitted in unwritten form, but, because of the previous lack of a written expression

for some part of this important concept, Durkheim's formulation adds meaning to the Orthodox interpretation of the biblical idea that we are made in the image and likeness of God. This links with the key idea that Christ Himself was the first and pure image of the Father. Origen, for example, calls Christ the Wisdom of God and describes this Wisdom as like a clean mirror that perfectly reflects the Father. This doctrine has widespread practical significance, the basic elements of which are developed by Origen in his *de Principiis*, which tells us how the Creator, being invisible to the eye, is manifested in the original and pure *image* or icon, Christ, who, as the Son, *knows* the Father: "no man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him" (Matthew 11:27).

So, in His words and actions, outwardly, as they are described in the events of the gospel, or inwardly as they occur as the image within us, as described by Palamas as the *energies* of God, 21 in either manner, Christ shows us the Father, whom we cannot otherwise see, and in this way we can know the Father.

George Capsanis, the hegoumen or abbot of the monastery of Osiou Grigoriou on Mount Athos, teaches today in the same tradition of the early Fathers. In what turns out to be an effective summary of the whole process of *theosis* or deification, he makes a series of points which, for convenience, we will separate out one by one:

Man is made in the image of God, but in fallen man, "infected by sin,"<sup>22</sup> this image is obscured.

As a result, the inmost man, made "according to the image," is incapable of fulfilling itself by becoming a likeness of God or becoming Godlike.

Christ, as an unchanged, uncorrupted icon of God, restores the image fallen in Adam to reveal the original beauty within us, at the same time teaching us and guiding us towards our divine archetype.

Transfigured, Christ restored the radiance of a creation made dark by the Fall.

Thus, when we become "conformed to the image of Christ" (Romans 8: 29), we regain our own inmost nature.

He quotes the Orthodox *Vespers of the Transfiguration*, which says: "Transfigured, Thou hast made the nature which was darkened in Adam become radiant again, O Christ, transforming it into the glory and brilliance of the Godhead."

This summarizes the inner tradition of Christianity as followed by the Eastern Church. In the monastic form of this inner tradition, men even today seek by ascetic practices to redirect or transform their nature

psychologically, so that the “latent divine image” appears in them, a process that is superficially akin to the development and “fixing” of a photographic image. Until it is fixed, or made permanent; we get a situation that has been familiar in monasticism for centuries, and is equally familiar with those who “work on themselves” in other ways, in which everyone falls every day and falls many times each day and, to start with, many times each hour: “The monk falls and gets up again, falls and gets up again.” 23

But in this intermediate state, it is not our nature but our state that changes. In the Greek *Philokalia*, this is said in the following way: “The moon as it waxes and wanes illustrates the condition of man. Sometimes he does what is right: sometimes he sins and then through repentance [metanoia] returns to a holy life. The nous<sup>24</sup> of one who sins is not destroyed (as some of you think), just as the physical size of the moon does not diminish, but only its light.”<sup>25</sup>

To understand this process requires a different way of looking at life and at ourselves; different, that is, from our modern, supposedly scientific, view of the world. To carry it out requires a different kind of effort from those efforts normal to our modern way of life.

The remainder of this book attempts to describe these differences, which together form that process known in the Eastern Church as *theosis*: deification.

## Modern Man’s Inability to Remember Inner Experience

A modern way of looking at the Fall is that of C. G. Jung, who described how the loss of contact with the inner life today has had very widespread effects on our outer life.<sup>26</sup> It also acts like a self-fulfilling prophecy, creating situations and attitudes which prevent the investigations that would recover this kind of knowledge and the natural human capabilities that give rise to it. In simple terms, it seems that our lack of persistence on the esoteric path, like our apparent lack of knowledge of the inner world, comes from the inability to *register* and remember inner experience. This is a direct result of what is known as the Fall, taken in its traditional psychological meaning.

This becomes an explanation of how we have become almost inextricably caught in external life, so that we have neither time nor attention for anything inward.

In this situation it is not our awareness of the inner life - the inner spirit - that is lost first. What goes first is our ability to *register* it and so remember it. But this leads to an external view of the inner teachings, and turns the morality of the inner tradition into the kind of external, legalistic

code for which the Pharisees were famous. 27 But this loss of the inner sense has been developing for a very long time, and now our inner lives are not simply unnoticed or regarded as “subjective and thus unreal,” but they have become largely unseen.

Saint Symeon today is regarded as one of the source theologians of the Orthodox Church. It sometimes seems as if few really understand what he was trying to convey<sup>28</sup> in this particular section of his writings, but those who have experienced this light will begin to understand.

## A Theory of Knowledge is a Barrier to Faith

The theory of knowledge expressed by these early Fathers is “explained” nonintellectually in a traditional icon of Saint Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist (shown overleaf). It expresses the idea that intellectual knowledge is more limited than that of the heart, and is often (but not necessarily) limited to the sensory idea partially expressed by Socrates’ discovery that he did not *know*: which means that ordinary, discursive intellect does not know God, nor can it ever know anything for certain.<sup>29</sup>

Considerably later, in the life of Saint Nilus of Sora (1433-1508), the same respect for a discriminatory form of intellect the *nous*, in Greek terms surfaced again in the Russian Church. Unlike many of his predecessors, he advised care in evaluating so-called spiritual writings: not all were equally valid. He wrote of the care taken in his own approach to such texts: “Most of all, I scrutinize the divine writings, first, the precepts of the Lord and their commentaries, and the traditions of the Apostles, also the doctrines of the Holy Fathers, and meditate on them. And what agrees with my reason I copy for myself and edify myself with it and hereon do I put my life and my breath.”<sup>30</sup>

Nilus, says Fedotov after this quotation, used human reason as an instrument for exploring the scriptures. Like Paisios Velitchkovsky three centuries later, he was faced with mistranslated and corrupted texts and had to make great efforts to find the correct meaning, a process in which the early Fathers’ respect for philosophical skills must have proved very helpful. “The concord between scripture and reason,” writes Fedotov, still about Nilus, “is for him a necessary condition for behaviour.” He quotes further: “When I have something to do I first examine the divine scriptures, and if I do not find what agrees with my reason in beginning the matter, I delay until I find it.”<sup>31</sup>

People believe that reasoning and the whole question of knowledge are unimportant on the spiritual path. This is true in one sense, the sense developed by early Fathers such as Gregory Palamas, who



Figure 2.1  
Icon of Saint Elizabeth

argued that intellect is only a path to ideas about God, not to the formation of an experiential relationship with God. Thus Saint Maximos wrote: "When you intend to know God do not seek the reasons about his being, for the human mind and that of any other being below God cannot discover this." 32

But the idea of this specific limit of reason, of reason's inability to know God, must be understood exactly, as to turn it into a generalization and to say that reason cannot help to prepare us for such knowledge can, for people whose minds have formed in certain ways that are common today, be an effective and sometimes permanent obstacle to spiritual growth.

Contrary to what most people expect, it is experience - experience that results from the action of the Word - that transforms the mind and prepares it for the coming of its Lord. But simply to have experience is not enough; we must retain it, and for this, a good memory is also not enough. Before we can perceive and then *register* sufficient inner experience, so that it is retained and accessible in our memory, two things are necessary: first, relevant inner experiences must become more common and of longer duration in our lives, and second, we must value and accept these experiences as real and meaningful sources of knowledge.

In a monastic context, obedience to a *rule* and to an *elder* produces the experience necessary without the need to pass through a stage of theory or scholarship. For those without the support of rule and elder, additional knowledge, for instance of methods of extending our experience, is also necessary. Again there are problems here. Nothing we learn can directly show us God, and indeed knowledge of God is different from all other knowledge and cannot be reached intellectually, in the ordinary sense of intellect, but when this fact is understood, many people assume that to be given new knowledge of man is equally useless. This false attitude, based on a misunderstanding of a real truth, often becomes so entrenched that even commonsense perceptions of one's own nature are shut out by it.

Even for the monk, to retain and properly value the inner experience of his life - to accept and actually to value certain kinds of suffering,<sup>33</sup> for example - it is necessary that he change his whole concept of knowledge, and this, in effect, - means that his whole worldview must change. Even more is this true of the layperson who works alone under the pressures of everyday life. For such people, other types of knowledge are equally important. Their conception of knowledge must become and that in a significant sense wider and more all-embracing than is normal in our times.

The problem is that before we can understand this theory of knowledge, we have to learn to perceive and register inner experience, and as we are we can do this only imperfectly.

More important still, experience gained casually is of little use: even if it is not incomplete, it is gained too slowly for our needs. Only the experience gained in putting things into practice reveals the knowledge we need and opens the doors of the recognition that makes knowledge usable. Before we can understand, we have to do, and so, as Saint Paul said, “renew our intelligence.”

One of the things that emerges from this method, which I call “exegesis by practice,” is that practical experience provides different data from that revealed by pure analysis unaided by praxis. One of several problems in normal exegetic methods is that information is formulated differently depending on how it is to be used, and there is little reason to imagine that this was not always so. In studying information provided by others, therefore, it is necessary to study it under the conditions in which it was intended to be understood. Since, in studying this tradition, we are studying knowledge intended to be conveyed through the medium of practice, to study it merely theoretically is to misunderstand. The intention has determined the form of the knowledge.

Among other things, this explains the method used in this book to study the doctrines of the Gospels and the early Fathers.

## Gregory of Nyssa’s View

I learned more about the burning bush image when I discovered a book by one of the ancient Fathers that is little read, but fairly readily available: Gregory of Nyssa’s *Life of Moses*. When he speaks about the experience of higher knowledge, he uses the analogy of the burning bush. He writes:

It is upon us who continue in this quiet and peaceful course of life that the truth will shine, illuminating the eyes of our soul with its own rays. This truth, which was then manifested by the ineffable and mysterious illumination which came to Moses, is God.

And if the flame by which the soul of the prophet was illuminated was kindled from a thorny bush, even this fact will not be useless for our inquiry. For if truth is God and truth is light the Gospel testifies by these sublime and divine names to the God who made himself visible to us in the flesh such guidance of virtue leads us to know that light which has reached down even to human nature. Lest one think that the

radiance did not come from a material substance, this light did not shine from some luminary among the stars but came from an earthly bush and surpassed the heavenly luminaries in brilliance.

The light teaches us what we must do to stand within the rays of the true light: Sandaled feet cannot ascend that height where the light of truth is seen, but the dead and earthly covering of skins, which was placed around our nature at the beginning when we were found naked because of disobedience to the divine will, must be removed from the feet of the soul. When we do this, the knowledge of the truth will result and manifest itself. The full knowledge of being comes about by purifying our opinion concerning nonbeing.

In my view the definition of truth is this: not to have a mistaken apprehension of Being. Falsehood is a kind of impression which arises in the understanding about nonbeing: as though what does not exist does, in fact, exist. But truth is the sure apprehension of real Being. So, whoever applies himself in quietness to higher philosophical matters over a long period of time will barely apprehend what true Being is, and what nonbeing is, that is, what is existence only in appearance, with no self-subsisting nature.

It seems to me that at the time the great Moses was instructed in the theophany he came to know that none of those things which are apprehended by sense perception and contemplated by the understanding really subsists, but that the transcendent essence and cause of the universe, on which everything depends, alone subsists. 34



## Chapter 3

### The Rediscovery of Spirit

On the individual scale, the task of overcoming the massive inertia of a fallen civilization seems impossible. Yet around thirty years ago, studies that began in the Himalayas in the 1930s led to the introduction to the West of what is now known as transcendental meditation, a phrase that translates the Sanskrit word *dhyana*. The new practice was entirely different from anything previously known in the West as meditation. The effects of this have been quite remarkable. From this practice, as long ago as the early sixties, many people obtained valuable inner experiences. Some of them experienced the inner light, the light that shines in the darkness, the light of what is called in Sanskrit *sat-chit-ananda*: being-bliss-consciousness, the *uncreated light*. In time these stimuli have helped reawaken dormant possibilities within our own Christian civilization; for example, the experiences obtained in meditation have reawakened interest in Christian methods of inner prayer, in the Jesus Prayer or *prayer of the heart*, and in the centering prayer introduced by Father Thomas Keating. At the same time, within the Christian world, another important influence has survived to the present day. Reading about Mount Athos, I was struck by the comment by a previous visitor that “several monks now living are known to have had the experience of the uncreated light.” Abbot George of Grigoriou expressed the priorities of such people when he said to me once that “the principle export of Athos is the Jesus Prayer.” The inner experience that results from this kind of prayer has awakened many to inner Christianity, “for the salvation of the world,”<sup>1</sup> as the Eastern Church puts it. This is the exact Christian equivalent of the Indian *dhyana*

meditation, although technically different in certain important ways. Practiced assiduously, both methods have many identical efforts, whose influence on the Christian faith is now substantial. People who have gained new understanding of their nature from using these methods are returning to the fold of a church they now understand more deeply. So large are the numbers now involved, that life in the West is beginning to take a new direction: new ways of thought are emerging, which are as yet immature, but which might be expected to lead in time to the development in our civilization of means to manage inner experience better, now that in this way Westerners are rediscovering their spiritual nature, previously hidden ever deeper by the Fall and its consequences. Ouspensky said, fifty years ago, that when talking of these things one should not speak of God. Already, virtually unnoticed, this civilization has become so different that today we can speak openly of things that not so long ago had to be spoken of in whispers. In a civilization that had for so long forgotten that man is spirit, spirit is now being remembered again. Because of this, to reveal these truths now may actually bring results. It may be that this is an evolutionary change in direction, a true *metanoia* of humanity turning toward the spiritual dimension of life.

This turnabout already exists, but the words for it, the statements that explain it and make it articulate are as yet lacking. When Spirit speaks to those who will listen, reminding them that their own inmost self is spirit, one result is the beginning of a restoration of the esoteric tradition. Another is a developing dialogue between the churches. Both are signs of a single living force acting within our human world. This growing awareness of spirit as Self is beginning to penetrate into the heart of our civilization. But the experience of *dhyana* or even the experience of the uncreated light is not the full Christian transformation. For this to occur, there must have been an actual shift within the individual of the center of awareness a redirection of the *nous* from thought, imagination, and physical sensations to the heart.

In Western forms of the Christian esoteric tradition, we can as yet find few authors who touch on this important aspect with sufficient precision, so far have we lost our way. For some decades we have been forced to draw on the great Eastern thinkers to grasp this special way of understanding spirit as Self: an understanding of the fact that our real nature can be experienced as that of a spirit inhabiting, interpenetrating, and manifesting as a body, not merely as a physical body. And once this knowledge has been assimilated by a sufficient number of people, new forms of understanding will give new life to these ancient experiences.

What this all means is that a rekindling of religious experience which is a form of direct knowledge is actually occurring now not for hundreds but for millions of individuals who are now learning for themselves that they are spiritual beings. This knowledge, born of experience, contains in it the answers to many of our questions. It is the reason for this book, and for the studies that have led up to its writing. It is quite literally an immediate answer to the question of how we are again to open the doors of our Christian faith to consideration of those significant human experiences which at present are generally ignored; those rejected not only by science, but by the churches under the influence of science, and by many Christians. So, in answer to the question as to how we Christians are to recover confidence in our own religious experiences, we can only say that the task is in hand, that, through an unprecedented and generally unacknowledged cooperation of world faiths, the Christian world is rediscovering the realities of religious experience.

## The Christian Overcomes the Fall

Recently a priest from Mount Athos echoed the hermit's instruction to me all those years ago, saying: "Mount Athos can help return to Europe an awareness of what its own, unique contribution among the great organizations of the world must be, that is, to comprehend the meaning of the human person and the idea of a personalist society." 2

This would be to begin the restoration of that which was lost in the Fall. There is no more doubt that we are inwardly fallen, but the true Christian, the perfected Christian in the sense understood by the masters of the early church, is someone who has inwardly risen again from that Fall, and not only from the Fall that happened once, when our present "captivity," our *exile* from our own inner nature, began. The fully developed Christian,<sup>3</sup> who is Christian in being as well as in intention, has also risen from the Fall as a psychological event, a personal resurrection from a personal, psychological fall that happens every day, whenever we wake from sleep yet remain partially asleep. If once we begin to wake from that captivity, then each time we fall back into captivity it is the same *Fall of Adam*.

As certain of the early Fathers put it, in this inner sense, resurrection is the awakening of a new state which can only mean a new state of consciousness and the General Resurrection is the overdue awakening of humanity as a whole to a new and less corrupt psychological state. Indeed, on the evidence available it is not too fanciful to suppose that each civilization is an experiment, an attempt at that general awakening, and that

each civilization that fails to attain this eventually dies. In evolutionary terms, in human beings, nature is still experimenting, and even now, at this time, and even in this book, the current experiment which we know as Western civilization continues, but we must recognize that right now the experiment, and with it the whole of the world we know, is, as Teilhard de Chardin, or more recently Boris Mouravieff, might have put it, at a crucial point.

How do these different threads relate? There is a question that arises when we try to define this civilization. Is it a Christian civilization in which, as Mouravieff points out, "The Gospel is now known through all the world"? Should we speak only of Western civilization, and if so, what is the significance of the fact that we no longer think of our civilization as Christian? For is it not true that our present civilization did indeed spring from the marriage of minds from the Greek and Semitic civilizations, a union that took shape in the early church? And if this is true, is it not strange that we feel apologetic today when called to profess our Christian roots?

### *The Life of Moses*

With the rediscovery of spirit, a rediscovery of the spiritual dimensions of scripture is becoming a reality. A clue to this is found in the work of Gregory of Nyssa. Writing in his *Life of Moses* about his way of interpreting the events in the Book of Exodus, he once commented on the way historical passages of scripture should be read, and how we can draw a proper parallel between inner and outer realities in such an account. He wrote:

If while trying to parallel completely the historical account to the sequence of such intellectual contemplation, someone should somehow discover something in the account which does not coincide with our understanding, he should not reject the whole enterprise. He should always keep in mind our discussion's goal, to which we are looking while we relate these details. We have already said in our prologue that the lives of honoured men would be set forth as a pattern of virtue for those who come after them.

Those who emulate their lives, however, cannot experience the identical literal events. For how could one again find the people multiplying during their sojourn in Egypt? And how again find the tyrant who enslaves the people and bears

hostility to male offspring and allows the feminine and weaker to grow in numbers? And how again find all the other things which Scripture includes? Because therefore it has been shown to be impossible to imitate the marvels of these blessed men in these exact events, one might substitute a moral teaching for the literal sequence in those things which admit of such an approach. In this way those who have been striving toward virtue may find aid in living the virtuous life.

If the events require dropping from the literal account anything written which is foreign to the sequence of elevated understanding, we pass over this on the grounds that it is useless and unprofitable to our purpose, so as not to interrupt the guidance to virtue at such a point. 4

This passage is quite clear in suggesting that the events of an exceptional man's life reflect the inner processes that made him exceptional, and so can be used to illustrate those inner processes in order to help others imitate him. The same principle was implied in a conversation with a remarkable hermit on Mount Athos who suggested that I should study the lives of individuals of great achievements of this kind.

In this way of using the text, Gregory seems to say, the reader must ignore some things as being merely historical events of no inner significance or, on the other hand, such events, perhaps reported elsewhere, may have been left out of a specific account as unnecessary to the inner purpose.

## Philosophy in the Early Church

For a long time two meanings of subjectivity have been confused. The scientific world has correctly warned us against taking subjective opinion for evidence, but many people have taken this as a restriction against subjective *experience* as evidence, an entirely different thing. It has been widely assumed from this that nothing we experience within ourselves is knowledge, although in our hearts we know that inner experience tells us some things of which we need then have no doubts. Our heads have been trained to accept these statements as blindly as the medieval world accepted the statements of a then bigoted church. Like those churchmen, but on the other side of the debate, when we are faced with a consensus of our peers and the massed weight of the educated, even if we do feel doubts of these modern dogmas, we rarely take these doubts into account, such is the power of education. But it is these silenced doubts that give us one glimpse of the kind of theory

of knowledge that might have developed if the inner tradition had remained unhidden.

Underlying this is a clear distinction between two fundamental kinds of knowledge, a distinction that will run like a central thread throughout this book. Implied in this distinction between different kinds of knowledge is the idea that there is a higher kind of knowledge which, until it is complete, lacks its full power. When it reaches a certain stage of *completeness*, it stabilizes a change that gives us the strength to change our lives.

In modern terms, such as those used by Gurdjieff and Ouspensky, these would be regarded as *exoteric* and *esoteric*. Between these two they placed a third category, *mesoteric*, but according to Greek Orthodox author Constantin Carnos, the original terminology used only the two terms. He wrote:

Greek Church writers appropriated the word "philosophy," already in the early centuries, for denoting Christianity. In order to clarify and justify this appropriation, they drew a distinction between two kinds of philosophy: "External (exoterike, exothyraten) philosophy," and "internal (esoterike, eso) philosophy." The latter they also called "the true philosophy," "heavenly philosophy," "spiritual philosophy," "divine philosophy," "philosophy according to Christ," "sacred philosophy," "philosophy from Above," and "wisdom from Above."

The first kind of philosophy, external philosophy, comprises for them ancient Greek philosophy and the pagan philosophy of early Christian centuries. The second kind, "internal philosophy," is identical with the Christian religion. This term is used to denote Orthodox Christian teaching in its totality; lived Christian teaching in general; some interior practice, particularly inner attention and inner stillness and the monastic life. 5

In fact, both the twofold and threefold divisions are valid in practice. The twofold division distinguishes between two kinds of knowledge described by Saint Paul. Both exoteric and esoteric philosophy in this early sense used the ordinary faculties of the human mind to their best, but the two forms differ greatly in the meaning they give to their teachings, in the way their statements are confirmed or verified, and in certain aspects of the training necessary to produce a competent philosopher. Finally, they differ in their overall outcome: exoteric philosophy generates *ideas*, esoteric philosophy brings ideas into being and changes *being*; the result at its best is *sanctification*, so that the philosopher himself is the product and demonstration of his philosophy.

Exoteric philosophy is thus part of the Knowledge of the World, to use Saint Paul's terminology. A product of individual human minds, it is by nature fragmentary, and the consensus it forms is subject to continual change. Because exoteric philosophy obtains its verification empirically, by Kantian intuition, it is subject to the limitations of that form of thinking; each meaning is circular and resting on some previous idea, a situation that leads to fragmentation so that philosophy, psychology, theology, and the physical sciences form separate disciplines.

Esoteric philosophy in this twofold sense is *gnosis*: it is Knowledge from God, although in those terms it also incorporates the fruits of human experience of how to live in alignment with that knowledge. A gift to the human mind from the Spirit, it is by nature unitive and hence coherent, and the consensus it forms is not subject to fundamental change, but evolves with time while remaining internally consistent. It is this fact, this coherence, this constancy, this unity of truth that reflects the truth of unity, which is the origin of the idea of the Perennial Philosophy. Esoteric philosophy is experiential in a mystical sense, not an everyday sense; it obtains its verification by direct intuition of the Spirit. This is how it presents a picture that is consistent and self-referential, so that its meaning is obtained in the act of verification, not by comparison. Within it, philosophy, psychology, theology, and the physical sciences at one time formed a single discipline, their divisions dissolved in a divine simplicity.

The modern threefold terminology - exoteric, mesoteric, esoteric - distinguishes between different stages in the student's progress from one of these two kinds of knowledge to the other. In other words, it refers to his growth in understanding of the esoteric so that the threefold terminology as used in this century is experientially correct.

Clement of Alexandria, Saint Basil the Great, and many others made this distinction between exoteric and esoteric because they believed that, to overcome problems of knowledge that existed in the Hellenic and Jewish worlds even in the earliest days of the church, philosophy had a practical use in the Christian life. Clement of Alexandria wrote nearly two thousand years ago that pre-Christian philosophers were often inspired by God, but that one had to be careful what one took from them. Not all that the early philosophers had written was inspired. Even after selective reading, what he called "pagan" philosophy was not to be taken in or put to use in a haphazard way. According to men such as Clement and Origen, the study of *external* philosophy was to be employed mainly as a preliminary training for the mind before this was transcended. True philosophy they saw as one with theology, and with the practice known as *ascesis*: it was the entry into a different kind of thinking and behavior, which led not to

worldly success but to spiritual salvation. Yet the early Christian Fathers found uses for both the inner and external knowledge, reflected respectively in esoteric and exoteric philosophy. We need external knowledge even to obtain the necessities of life. But all true Christian philosophy is esoteric, in the sense that its aims and its worldview are rooted in inner experience, and in the actions dictated by that inner experience.

Clement said, for example: “But if the Hellenic philosophy comprehends not the whole extent of the truth, and besides is destitute of strength to perform the commandments of the Lord, yet it prepares the way for the truly royal teaching; training in some way or other, and moulding the character, and fitting him who believes in Providence for the reception of the truth.”<sup>7</sup> This quotation contains important practical information. It distinguishes clearly the difference seen by many of the early Fathers in the effects of two teachings, and this view is confirmed in practical experience:

1. The Greek philosophical teachings are incomplete in the sense that they leave their student “destitute of strength to perform the commandments of the Lord.”
2. The Christian inner teaching, if comprehended in full, is complete in the sense that once it has been fully assimilated or digested, it gives the student the strength to perform those commandments .

The student’s ability to fulfill the commandments or rules of the path therefore forms a test either of a teaching or of a student’s assimilation of that teaching. This is an important factor in esotericism. In terms of modern esotericism, it is this that distinguishes the rare real “schools” from their imitations. It often manifests as humility.

Gospel terms sometimes used for this kind of knowledge were *gnosis* and *epignosis*. We shall discuss later the distinction between this *Christian gnosis* and the teachings of the sects now known as the Gnostics; suffice it for the moment to say that the difference is the same as between the two forms of teaching described immediately above.

Gregory of Nyssa, his thinking descended from Clement and influenced by Saint Basil, distinguished these two kinds of knowledge with philosophical precision. Lacking the vocabulary of modern thought, he nevertheless managed to make himself clear by saying that one kind of knowledge was known by *measure*, and the other was associated with *virtue*. Gregory was one of the Cappadocian Fathers who did much to shape the Eastern Church, but whose works repeatedly touch on material more often restricted to the oral tradition. He managed to show clearly how a proper theory of knowledge expands upon our definition of knowledge and so finds a place for both kinds of knowledge, that which we

meet in life and *gnosis*, when he wrote: “The perfection of everything which can be measured by the senses is marked off by certain definite boundaries. The person who looks at a cubit or at the number ten knows that its perfection consists in the fact that it has both a beginning and an end. But in the case of virtue we have learned from the Apostle that its one limit of perfection is the fact that it has no limit.” 8

The same idea of the *immeasurable*, here expressed in terms of the nature of the gift of the Spirit to Christ, is found in the Gospel of Saint John:

And what he hath seen and heard, that he testifieth; and no man receiveth his testimony.

He that hath received his testimony hath set to his seal that God is true.

For he whom God hath sent speaketh the words of God; for God giveth not the spirit by measure unto him (John 3:3234).

## Saint Isaac’s Prayer for Gnosis

The Fathers say that our *nous*, the nonverbal intelligence which perceives direct experience and symbols as equally “real,” will be free to function properly and objectively only when it is released from wrong thoughts and feelings. Today this means that it must be liberated from the narrow intellectualism of the Western world, and this can occur fully only when this *nous* is “informed” with gnosis, with noetic knowledge, equated, by Saint Paul and by the Fathers (including Clement, who quoted this passage by Paul in his *Stromata* or esoteric text), with knowledge given by God: “Which things also we speak, not in the words which man’s wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual” (1 Corinthians 2:13).

The problem is that this kind of knowledge is not acceptable to the mind that still has not discovered the limits of its capabilities, that continues to believe that scientific theory is able to plumb the depths of reality. Saint Isaac the Syrian had a prayer that makes it clear that he understood that, because unaided or externally aided reason is unable to be sure of the divine, all true knowledge of God comes from God.

O Lord, make me worthy to know you and love you,  
not in the knowledge arising from mental exercise  
and the dispersion of the mind,  
but make me worthy of that knowledge  
whereby the mind, in beholding you,

glorifies your nature in this vision  
which steals from the mind the awareness of the world.

One of the practical implications of this is that the final stages of prayer are taught more by God than by man.

## Two Very Different Kinds of Knowledge

In Saint Isaac's prayer, written in the seventh century, we will perhaps recognize the way it looks at the idea of the knowledge of God, linking this to inner instead of external experience, and to knowledge, revealed to us instead of deduced by us, that we are reading of the Tree of Life, instead of the Tree of Knowledge. In this different kind of knowledge, there are certain basics that will have been found in the ideas we have already been considering specifically:

This idea of two levels of knowledge: the worldly, based on observation and deduction, and the spiritual or esoteric, which is *gnosis*.

The idea that everyday knowledge obscures higher knowledge. This was put succinctly by the Spanish Saint John of the Cross, who wrote: "We can only attain to God by stilling the faculties of understanding."

There is also a third fact about this: the idea that true *gnosis*, an awareness of spirit, steals from the mind our awareness of the world

According to one scholar, Morton Smith, Clement appears to have viewed the form of knowledge known as *gnosis* as an external form of knowledge, knowledge in the sense used by Karl Popper to define what he described as objective knowledge. Smith says: "Both Clement and this letter 9 conceive the gift of *gnosis* as a process of instruction in the elements of the Christian tradition, including the Lord's teaching instruction given only to chosen candidates, and leading eventually to deification."<sup>10</sup>

However, for the written form of knowledge truly to possess the properties and have the effects defined above, it needs to be assimilated and linked to experience. As I understand it, there are in fact two forms of *gnosis*, related as are a human and his or her shadow: *true gnosis* is a truly spiritual form of knowledge that transforms those who experience it; the transmitted *gnosis* is an expression of that true *gnosis*, the divine word, *Logos ton Theon*, through the medium of the human *word*, through human communication, a representation of *gnosis* that draws the recipient toward the experience of the *true gnosis*.

This latter idea, this approach of considering the divine qualities, exists in the inner tradition of other faiths, and can be practiced by those whose weak faith prevents them considering the divine as unmanifest, when they can instead consider the important principles of life: love, truth, beauty, mercy, goodness, forbearance and even principles that also seem to exist in the “inanimate” world, like infinity, eternity, perfection and they can contemplate God by contemplating these qualities taken to their furthest possibilities.

## The Inner World as a Window onto the Invisible World

This clear description of the difference in quality between inner knowledge and external knowledge gives us another glimpse of the kind of theory of knowledge that might have existed today if intellectual growth had not been so closely tied to sensory knowledge. By clearly distinguishing these kinds of knowledge, but at the same time accepting the validity of both, it seems clear that we would have become able to apply each where it is appropriate. In such a situation, we could have combined the progress of technology with individual and social self-knowledge, and this would have given us the ability to regulate that progress.

In fact, a scientific way has been developed of saying virtually the same thing: this is physicist David Bohm’s criticism of the assumption that any scientific theory can be complete. His philosophically important criticism has been summarized thus: “Bohm criticized this assumption by pointing out that nature may be infinite.”<sup>11</sup> This is *exactly* the same as saying, as did Gregory of Nyssa, that the limit of perfection has no limit. The summary continued: “Because it would not be possible for any theory to completely explain something that is infinite, Bohm suggested that open scientific enquiry might be better served if researchers refrained from making the assumption [of the completeness of an explanation].”<sup>12</sup> This is the same as saying that only measured or measurable dimensions can have measurable aggregates and hence only these can have definite limits. To make the parallel between Bohm’s and Saint Gregory’s ideas complete, we have to realize that Bohm is using the term *nature* to describe the totality described by Gregory’s term *virtue*, and that this term is virtually equivalent to Plato’s *One*.

Bohm continued to develop his ideas, so that Talbot could add on the next page that: “Classical science had always viewed the state of a system as a whole as merely the result of the interaction of its parts. However, the quantum potential stood this view on its ear and indicated that the behaviour of the parts was actually organized by the whole. This

not only took Niels Bohr's suggestion that subatomic particles are not independent 'things,' but are part of an indivisible system one step further, but even suggested that wholeness was in some ways the more primary reality." 13

Bohm's view of *nature*, seen in this light, if not derived from Plato's concept of the *One*, as it may be, is clearly approaching it very closely. This means that it also approaches the Christian view of reality, although it does not reach it. Certainly this view breaks the bounds of the physical or materialist view of life and shows with precision the direction in which a rapprochement between scientific and Christian worldviews is possible, a conclusion confirmed by the statement by 1973 Nobel physics laureate Brian Josephson, quoted in Talbot's summary, "Bohm's implicate order may someday even lead to the inclusion of God or Mind within the framework of science."14

This view is already adequate to define the philosophical boundaries of the physical sciences in Christian terms although not at the same time setting boundaries for the higher Christian knowledge.<sup>15</sup> It also develops Whitehead's work on *assumptions*, opening the door to an understanding of scientific method as based on the challenging of assumptions, and, most important, it provides a tool by which the modern individual can comprehend the limits of intellect and of the "unholy alliance" of intellect and perception that have distorted the worldview of our civilization and "blinded the eyes of faith." To overcome this is a powerful act toward freeing oneself from the thrall of the fallen reasoning faculty, and one of the reasons why Clement of Alexandria could ask: "How will you love your neighbour if you do not philosophize?"

This question exactly defines the concept of philosophy as it was in the early days of the church. At first sight it looks quite different from the classical Greek philosophy that preceded the Christian era, but in fact Clement, a philosopher trained in Athens before he became Christian, said that it was a proper development and fulfillment of the same intention and inspiration which had already existed in the teachings of Socrates and Plato.

The invisible world, then, was visible before the Fall, either figuratively or actually. Yet for us today it is in an ordinary sense invisible, although it can be glimpsed in part within us, "through a glass darkly," as Saint Paul put it.<sup>16</sup> With the Fall, the inner reality became for us a hidden or secret inner world.

The nature of human perception is such that, as we are, we can see only the surfaces of things. We cannot see inside things, with rare exceptions such as water, and of course the flames of a fire. We can "see" inside people only as much as they are able to put into words. But when we still

the surface noise and activity within us, we can see within ourselves. Then it is that we discover the truth of the often quoted words from Saint Isaac the Syrian, one of the great texts of the esoteric tradition, which says: "Enter eagerly into your inner treasure-house and you will see the treasure-house of heaven: for the two are the same, and one and the same entry reveals them both. The ladder leading to the Kingdom is within you, hidden in your soul. Plunge into yourself, washing yourself from sin, and you will see the rungs of the ladder by which you can ascend." 17

In my experience, when we see in this way, then anything and everything can be seen in this way, as *fire*, even a humble thornbush. Christ promised just this: to bring *fire* in that cryptic saying: "I am come to send fire upon the earth, and what will I if it be already kindled" (Luke 12:49).

But many people have experiences they cannot interpret, just as I could not originally interpret this that I suppose must be called a mystical experience, a view of the world as if transformed into fire. Even Saint Gregory's explanation is not easy for us to understand today, so, in modern terms, what is the meaning of this moment of fire?

I think the answer to this is almost naively simple. To see a flame is to see *inside* matter while it is in a particularly active state. I think such experiences show that modern physics is accurate enough in its picture of matter to indicate that inside, beneath the surface our senses cannot penetrate, everything is like that, particles in ceaseless motion. I think the vision I experienced, as have so many before me, was simply that: seeing beneath the surface of life outside myself, when we ordinarily see beneath the surface only very incompletely, and only inside our minds.

But the greater lesson, the valuable self-knowledge I gained from this, perhaps, was the fear that I found in the moment of the fire. This fear arises naturally when we face the great unknowns of life, simply from our unfinished nature: what we are, what we know of ourselves, is so limited that we cannot face the fullness of our nature nor the fullness of the world around us. There is in this fear a doubt of our ability to cope, and sometimes a fear that we will lose the things that are precious to us, but which we know, somewhere inside us, are not really so important. Did Saint Paul know this same fear when he wrote: "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:31)?

The senses, then, show a false or, to be more accurate, a purely external and thus incomplete reality. Reality is found within, but when we do begin to find it within, we discover, as the *Gospel According to Thomas* says: "The Kingdom is within you, *and* it is outside."

Esotericism, then, is about the inner world: that inner world which, when discovered, is also found to be outside us, that once was reality to

our ancestors; the reality from which we have fallen and to which we seek a return: the reality of Being.

This too is the world of true prayer. It was about this inner world, dark for most of us most of the time, that the gospel teaching says: "Go into your closet and close yourself in, and your Father Who sees in secret will reward you openly" (Matthew 6:6). In this verse, the link between inner or esoteric experience, experience of the hidden, and the Christian doctrine of inner or noetic prayer, is established irrevocably.

So even in the story of the Fall itself, there is an outer and an inner interpretation. In the inner interpretation, both the garden and the earth outside the garden were part of what we now know through glimpses as the *inner world*. More than this, the description of the inner world that it gives us is part of a classical view of the inner world of the heart. In this classical view, the garden of the heart is a seedbed that can bring into being all kinds of plants.

With the loss of man's higher faculties comes a further change described in the story of the Fall. The world, now become simply an outer world, begins to produce "plants," which seem at first beautiful but which, as they become full grown, are found to have thorns and impenetrable tangles: to become briars of suffering.

What does the New Testament have to say about this? Unfortunately, the answer to this question depends on which version - which translation - you are reading. Some translations reveal a great deal more of the inner teaching than others. For example, one recent translation renders a passage in Romans in agreement with what has been written on the last few pages. This was written about the Jews by that once vehement Jew Paul; but it could as easily be written today about many people in all faiths. This version claims to be the most straightforward translation of the original Greek - and therefore closest to the version used by the early Fathers of the church. It says:

There is not one innocent, not even one,  
No one who understands,  
No one seeking God.  
All declined into uselessness together  
With no one practicing kindness,  
Not a single one. 18

When we go to the King James Version, the language, at least today, is not quite so specific. It loses its bite, but it still says a great deal.

There is none righteous, no, not one;  
There is none that understandeth;

There is none that seeketh after God.  
They are all gone out of the way,  
They are together become unprofitable;  
There is none that doeth good, no, not one  
(Romans 3:10-12).

Other versions have even less authority.

## The Role of Knowledge in Spirituality

The part played by knowledge in spiritual development is never based purely on discursive intellect, so that it can only exist, in the container of a life that is in some sense religious, when it is founded on that clear perception that leads to spiritual adulthood, but is easily interrupted not only by adolescent fantasy, but by theory and overuse of language. The myth of the tower of Babel refers to this. Knowledge became fragmented after the Fall; it becomes fragmented today as long as we continue to feed from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Such knowledge is fragmented by the way we take it in: we regard single views or simple descriptions of some thing or object taken from one point of view or based on a single idea as being complete. Such knowledge has few connections with other objects, treating a single idea too narrowly and without its proper existential or contextual connections. A fragmentation that results when this kind of knowledge is *incomplete* but people yet consider that the knowledge they have of something presents a “complete” picture. This means that people who genuinely know part of something tend to see that part as being the whole, and draw misleading conclusions as a result.

With esoteric knowledge, because of this danger it is particularly important that we establish a view, of ourselves, and of the world, that is “complete” not in the finest detail which is of course impossible but in form and structure. Only esoteric doctrine that is “complete” in this way is effective in leading to inner change that is complete and unifying. This is one of the reasons why, in Clement’s *Stromata*, a reverse process of reuniting fragmentary knowledge is suggested: he claimed that it is possible to *discover* Christ by reconstructing the fragments of the truth, including genuine truths from sources other than the gospel; for God, he said, can reveal truth even to pagans, and this too will help us to discover for ourselves the *whole Word*, the living presence of Christ. This whole idea is difficult to understand as a reality, and becomes comprehensible not with study alone, but only as a result of struggling with our own illusions. “So, then, the barbarian and Hellenic philosophy has torn off a fragment

of eternal truth not from the mythology of Dionysius, but from the theology of the ever-living Word. And He who brings again together the separate fragments, and makes them one, will without peril, be assured, contemplate the perfect Word, the truth.” 20

But how does one reunite the separated fragments? By *theoria*, the equivalent in the Greek Church of contemplation in Western Christianity: by studying the same thing from many angles, in its relationship to many other objects, so that all its *connections* are known, as well as the thing itself. It is then that “The truth shall set you free.”

With our knowledge reunified and linked to true *gnosis*, and this *gnosis* acquired in full experience, we are free indeed.

And what must be reunified in this way? There is a phrase that recurs throughout the Bible, Old Testament and New; it is *Logos ton Theon*, the Word of God. To search through the Bible and read each occurrence of this phrase in its context gives a clear sense of something unique: some special communication first found in the prophets, later in the Apostles, and par excellence in Christ, who became directly identified with that Logos - with that form of communication, with the force that carried it, and with the power it possessed, under certain circumstances, to act within those who heard it. A power that it still possesses. “For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12).

Discernment is the product of a particular kind of knowledge, referred to earlier as *logos*, when that knowledge has been properly understood and remembered. This special kind of knowledge was once called *logos* because it was carried by the *word of God*, small *w*, and represented by Christ as the Word, large *W*.

This phrase, “the word of God,” occurs many times in Old and New Testaments and always with the same significance. The knowledge it conveyed is also known in some Gospels and sometimes in Saint Paul as *gnosis*. This special knowledge has the power to create this special kind of discrimination.

Having the right knowledge, we become able to make the right choice. “For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe” (1 Thessalonians 2:13). It is rather like taking a wisdom pill, although the medicine involves learning things about oneself that are often highly unpleasant in the learning.

This *gnosis* lights the way by which the animal or exterior man can become a spiritual or interior man, and the temporal can become eternal.

This is the meaning of one kind of discrimination, known as the *discernment of Spirits* (Greek *diakrisis*), discussed in more detail in chapter 13. The *Philokalia* says about this: “the power of discrimination, scrutinizing all the thoughts and actions of a man, distinguishes and sets aside everything that is base and not pleasing to God, and keeps him free from delusion.” 21

## Saint Maximos on Contemplation

When you think of contemplation as pure reason, when you imagine, as you sometimes will for many years yet, that you can think about God, and perhaps even understand Him, with pure reason, remember that the Fathers did not believe this, and take up next in your studies the following passage from Saint Maximos the Confessor, who gave a good idea of what the early Fathers thought about it when he wrote: “When you intend to know God do not seek the reasons about His being, for the human mind and that of any other being below God cannot discover this. Rather, consider as you can the things about Him, for example, His eternity, immensity, infinity, His goodness, wisdom, and power which creates, governs, and judges creatures. For that person among others is a good theologian if he searches out the principles of these things, however much or little.”22

The proper meaning of *theoria* survives today in the West in part of the extended meaning of the concept of “infused contemplation.” In the Eastern Church this aspect is often ignored, and the practical elements implied in this term are brought as they very well may be, as the concepts overlap - into descriptions of *prayer of the heart*.

*Gnosis*, gained in this way, is regarded as the only way that we can be united in love to higher worlds and eventually to the Lord. Evagrius said of this: “The food of the soul is said to be contemplative knowledge,<sup>23</sup> since it alone can unite us with the holy powers. This holds true since union between incorporeal beings follows quite naturally from their sharing the same deep attitudes.”<sup>24</sup> Here we have taken the Greek word, sometimes rendered *bodiless*, in the sense better indicated here by the context as incorporeal, taking this to refer to those who are not ruled by the body. Most translations seem to suggest that it refers to those who are physically without a body, but we can see from the last sentence of the verse that Evagrius believed that when false emotional attitudes were removed, natural attitudes emerged and that those natural attitudes were common to all “incorporeal” beings; that is, that these natural attitudes ruled all beings except those ruled by “corporeal” forces coming from outside them.

Before you claim for yourself that you are already free, that, at least, you already know the *Way* to God, that you already walk these paths and

experience these realities, have a care, and carefully ponder the words of the Book of Job, where it says:

Have the gates of death been opened unto thee? or has thou seen the doors of the shadow of death?

Hast thou perceived the breadth of the earth? declare if thou knowest it all.

Where is the way where light dwelleth? and as for darkness, where is the place thereof,

That thou shouldest take it to the bound thereof, and that thou shouldest know the paths to the house thereof? (Job 38:1720).

## Chapter 4

### The Wise and Foolish Virgins

The question of energy has been important to Christianity at least since the end of the twelfth century, when Saint Gregory Palamas, faced with the growth of what has since become known as rationalism, left his monastic life on Mount Athos to become a bishop in Thessalonika, where he entered the debate then raging with the philosopher Barlaam the Calabrian. In answer to Barlaam's claims that God was to be known by the intellect, Palamas made the point that God could not be known by thought, nor by observation, but that He could be known in the stillness of *hesychia*: by the presence of His energies within the still heart of the knower a presence which could be known by "abstracting" the awareness from all the activities and images that normally fill the inner world and take all our attention, so that we become aware of activities that could be recognized as of divine origin by the fact that they had no earthly origin; that they did not act under our direct control or in response to anything directly perceivable. He wrote: "Such a union of the divinized with the light that comes from on high takes place by virtue of a cessation of all intellectual activity.' It is not the product of a cause or a relationship, for these are dependent upon the activity of the intellect, but it comes to be as a result of a process leading to total abstraction, without itself being that abstraction." 1

When he was sure he had made the point, Saint Gregory resigned his bishopric and returned to the monastic life and to his fellow hesychasts.

Translations of the Bible actually seem to confuse *energy* with *virtue*, so important is this question, and so closely are the ideas connected on the esoteric path. The same confusion occurs in translations of the early

Fathers, if confusion it is. In fact, one of the great discoveries of this investigation has been the realization that virtue is the result of possessing specific energies.

One of the great problems of modern spirituality is that spiritual experience today is generally infrequent and unpredictable. This is in fact a question of energies, and these energies are a matter of what might be called “spiritual metabolism.” Man, viewed merely as a body, metabolizes food (mixed in water) and air, and these are the fuels and combustive atmosphere that provide the energy, or in early Greek terms the *dynamis*, the force of movement, that gives movement and life to the body.

But Christian doctrine says that man is a *spirit*. Spirit too acts “on energy received,” but normally the energy it receives is too little to sustain what we know as genuine spirituality. Without the necessary energies, the nous remains dark, the “eye of the soul” remains blind. The result is that after glimpses of the truth that they are spirit, individuals are thrust into the struggle to obtain sufficient energy to reopen the door that once opened so briefly. This is the beginning of the “unseen warfare.” To succeed in this struggle we need special knowledge, knowledge that is only now reaching us and is as yet not generally accessible in our modern civilization, although it exists in the gospel and ways of understanding it exist in the esoteric tradition. Together, these tell us that the activity of our spiritual metabolism can be enhanced or augmented in certain ways. Certain keys to this process are encapsulated in the gospel parable of the wise and foolish virgins.

## The Quest for Energies

Spiritual growth and practice require and develop certain subtle energies which tend to be in short supply in our normal ways of life. The importance of these higher energies is actually emphasized in the gospel, but in translation the connection is not obvious. One reference, which links with the idea of energies or actions in the Palamas sense, uses the idea of a supersubstantial bread (see chapter 11 for details). Another familiar passage says: “But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). This is not about our normal food but about a change in our food, an improved metabolism producing new energies. When this becomes stable, it leads to visible changes in us that are evidence of other less obvious results of our *metanoia*. Evagrius made one meaning of this doctrine clearer when he wrote: “Just as bread is

nourishment for the body and virtue for the soul, so is noetic prayer nourishment for the nous.” 2

This doctrine clearly links with a diagram that shows the three main levels of the human organism which must be changed in order to achieve a total and permanent transformation (see figure 4.1). Each requires appropriate energy. Recently, in the terminology introduced by Gurdjieff to fit in with modern thought, the foods for the psyche and the nous have been described as *energies*. Saint Gregory Palamas said that we cannot know God’s essence, but we can know Him by His energies.

Nous	Noetic energy
Psyche	Psychic energy
Body	Physical energy of sugar metabolism

Figure 4.1

### Basic division of energies.

In the quotation from Evagrius, the word translated *virtue* actually is the Greek word *dynamis*. In the Gospels, too, this word is also sometimes translated *virtue*. To understand what this means, how the same word can be translated as “activity,” as “energy,” or as “virtue,” we can start from the experience many of you will have had from attending church services, or even from certain spiritual meetings. You may have realized that *some* of these events give you a strange kind of energy. People sometimes look different - sometimes *younger* - when they leave such events from how they looked when they came in through the door. This difference is the direct result of different energies a different balance of energies within us. Certainly, these energies are little understood today, but although nothing is ever said about them, we experience their effects on us, and if we are honest we must sense that they are important, especially for those with true spiritual aims.

These energies connect directly with the following verse from the prayer of the Syrian Saint Joseph the Visionary, which spoke of what the tradition calls the “Glorification of the body.” This said:

May my body be sanctified by You,  
May my soul shine out for You,  
May my body be purified by You,  
of every image and form here on earth,  
and may my thoughts be cleansed by You

and my limbs be sanctified by You;  
and my understanding shine out,  
and may my mind be illumined by You. 3

This change is a normal result of bringing our spiritual energies to the highest pitch.

## The Wedding Garment

Macarius the Great wrote at length about this question of change in our substance and our energies, again linking virtue to energy (*dynamis*), but also linking it to this glorification of the body:

How, therefore, ought each of us to believe and strive and to be dedicated to live a full virtuous life? With much hope and endurance we should now desire the privilege of reviving that heavenly power and the glory of the Holy Spirit interiorly in the soul so that then, when our bodies will have been dissolved, we may receive what shall clothe and vivify us. It says: "If so be that being clothed we shall not be found naked" (2 Corinthians 5:3), and "He shall bring to life our mortal bodies by the Spirit that dwells in us" (Romans 8:11).

For blessed Moses provided us with a certain type through the glory of the spirit which covered his countenance upon which no one could look with steadfast gaze. This type anticipates how in the resurrection of the just the bodies of the saints will be glorified with a glory which even now the souls of the saintly and faithful people are deemed worthy to possess within, in the indwelling of the inner man. It is written: "For we all with open face [that is to say, in the inward man], reflecting as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory" (2 Corinthians 3:18).<sup>4</sup>

The Fathers intimated that we could experience the life to come in the future, but that we could also experience that same life to come at any moment in our lives within ourselves. This is also clearly linked with the idea that the human is the image of God, but in such a way that it also connects to the modern idea of transparency, for a clear mirror is, in effect, transparent; in *apatheia* the nous does not distort the image it reflects. What is then reflected? Macarius, a little later than the paragraphs above, added the passage quoted earlier in this book: "the blessed Moses shows us what glory true Christians will receive in the resurrection: namely, the

glory of light and the spiritual delights of the Spirit which even now they are deemed worthy to possess interiorly.” 5

We will not now be surprised to learn that the gospel story of the wise and foolish virgins is a parable about higher energies.

And when the king came in to see the guests, he saw there a man which had not on a wedding garment:

And he saith unto him, Friend, how camest thou in hither not having a wedding garment? And he was speechless.

Then said the king to the servants, Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

For many are called, but few are chosen (Matthew 22:11-14).

We should also bear in mind that it is immediately after Christ taught this, according to the gospel, that “Then went the Pharisees, and took counsel how they might entangle Him in his talk” (Matthew 22:15). Divided minds cause human conflict once again! But on the other hand, Evagrius wrote: “For the true wedding garment is the dispassion [*apatheia*] of the deiform soul which has renounced worldly desires.”6

In the gospels, this combination of the “polished glass” of *apatheia* with the glorification that follows it is almost certainly one of the meanings of the “wedding” and its wonderful garment (Matthew 22:11). In such texts, the idea of an internal form of the glorification that can exist while we are still alive in this world defines the term *Christian* as a level to be achieved. This is of course part of the whole concept that also includes the idea of the bridegroom, and of the wedding feast to which came the wise and foolish virgins of the parable.

It is from passages like this that key Christian concepts are given an inner meaning, and that inner meaning is clearly linked to the possibility of experience in this life. This image is an important part of the esoteric tradition, and demonstrates one of the ways in which such stories convey far more than merely intellectual information. But to understand what they convey, they must be studied with care and attention, and linked to personal experience.

In the gospel imagery, the wedding garment represents the *nous* in its completed or *purified* and *awakened* form, the illuminated nous: the alchemical mirror prepared to reflect the truth. Recent commentaries, particularly of Theophan, opposing the Westernizing thought introduced into Russia by Peter the Great, are valuable for our attempts to understand

this question, but we must realize that where these ideas have been presented out of their Christian context, there are certain dangers; in particular when out of context, and particularly when in written form, they seem to tell us to do something. 7 In the best hands, the practices of Christian asceticism are not seen quite like this: *synergy* is necessary. Synergy may include effort, but it also requires grace. Self-centered effort is not enough.

To reach full illumination of the nous is one of those things that is “impossible to man, but possible with God’s help.” Yet in the church, God’s help is invited and intensified by certain efforts made to assist “Him who needs no assistance but values our intention.”

Something else we must understand of what is implied in this image of the bridegroom: the *awakening* implied is, like a wedding, a change in our way of life; in this case it actually implies a change of being, a discontinuous change. It is fundamental that one cannot be in two states of being at the same time, so that to be in a *Christian condition*, one must have passed beyond the ordinary state of being (or nonbeing) of fallen man. In the Jewish text of the *Zohar*, which has of course common roots to the Christian inner tradition, it is said that the path of knowledge has ten steps but the path of the heart has only one. What this means in practice is that change of being happens instantaneously, just as in the Zen doctrine of sudden illumination. One moment one is in one state of being, the next moment in another. There is no graduated scale.

Change of being is instantaneous, but sometimes there is a gradual change in the degree of access we have to the higher state of being. To start with, we normally experience very occasional and very brief moments of real being. When one of these lasts long enough for us to notice it, we often think, after one or a few such moments, that we have been “born again.” But if this is so, then at one moment we were born, but the next moment we became again “unborn.”

In the Greek, in the gospel sentence that is normally understood to read, “save a man be born again,” the Greek word is *anōthen*, which means “from above,” and is linked with concepts of the descent of the Son and the Holy Spirit “from above,” with baptismal regeneration “from above,” and with the descent of divine gifts from above. The sentence therefore should read: “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3).

Truly to be born “from above” is something much greater. In essence, the esoteric tradition seems to suggest that such awakenings not only vary in how often they happen, in how long they last, and in their intensity but the range of this variation is very great. Tradition suggests that eventually such moments should change from rare and exciting events

to something so common that it becomes the “mainspring” of our lives, a *true rebirth*.

But a permanent change of this kind is rare in modern times.

The necessity, in fact, is to regard such moments, taken singly, not as being born again, but as a beginning of repentance, a moment in which we have a brief and partial glimpse of what might be possible; this becomes the motivating factor for *metanoia*. Just as to believe that we already know something will prevent our seeking to learn, so to believe that because of a moment’s glimpse of something we are already reborn prevents our seeking to improve ourselves, and so effectively cuts us off from putting into practice the esoteric teachings of the early church.

This is one reason why the Fathers taught the doctrine of asceticism, which says that to achieve these things we need to make great effort for who will make such efforts when they think they have no need for them? “If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them” (John 13:17): This is so because all the other elements of the wedding garment depend on energies that are only made available, are only stable or permanent, in the degree to which we have achieved *apatheia* and so closed the doors through which those energies are normally wasted.

Here we have one definition of the difference that puzzles so many Christians and leads to so many false distinctions, that between the *called* and the *chosen*. Clement of Alexandria in his *Stromata* makes the relationship of this to *apatheia* even more clear: “For those who are the seed of Abraham, and besides servants of God, are ‘the called’; and the sons of Jacob are the elect - those who have tripped up the energy of wickedness.” 8

The chosen have developed *apatheia*. The energy they have saved by this change shines out in them.

## Shining Faces

These higher energies and their effect on human beings have been known for millennia. Homer in his *Argonauts* speaks of how the crew of the *Argos* attended the Eleusian mysteries during their voyage. They returned to the ship with shining faces; after a few weeks, says Homer, the shine faded, but “they remained changed men.” The *Zohar*<sup>9</sup> speaks of a rabbi who went into a tent in the desert: in it he met the “masters of the Aggadah,” and they all had shining faces.

But what does all of this mean to us? As with earlier traditions, the unwritten stream of the Christian esoteric tradition touches on such manifestations, but the shine comes rarely and fades quickly. To transmit it to

others is relatively easy, yet it is only made permanent after many years of effort. Energy transformation mechanisms within people can begin to work more efficiently as a result of induction from others in whom they function better. But, after those involved go their different ways, old habits of their minds reassert themselves; the new energies, the new feelings, are replaced by the familiar. The old appearance returns to the face, the old posture to the body.

It has been said that it is sometimes easy to bring people to stillness, but the difficulty is to go beyond this: to acquire this power in oneself and so take a step toward making this state permanent.

Here is what the gospel says about this:

Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom.

And five of them were wise, and five were foolish.

They that were foolish took their lamps, and took no oil with them,

But the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps.

While the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept.

And at midnight there was a cry made, Behold, the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him.

Then all those virgins arose, and trimmed their lamps.

And the foolish said unto the wise, Give us of your oil; for our lamps are gone out.

But the wise answered, saying, Not so; lest there be not enough for us and you; but go ye rather to them that sell, and buy for yourselves.

And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came; and they that were ready went in with him to the marriage; and the door was shut.

Afterward came also the other virgins, saying, Lord, Lord, open to us.

But he answered and said, Verily I say unto you, I know you not.

Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour when the Son of man cometh (Matthew 25:113).

Macarius the Great also explained this parable precisely in terms of a psychology of energy, which I shall try to describe briefly 10 in the form of a commentary. First of all, he defines the aims of the study and outlines its form thus: "Take for example the five prudent and vigilant virgins. They

enthusiastically had taken in the supernatural vessels of their heart the oil of the supernatural grace of the Spirit a thing not conformable to 11 their nature. For this reason they were able to enter together with the Bridegroom into the heavenly bridal chamber.”<sup>12</sup>

Clearly the “oil of supernatural grace” defines a specific energy in the sense that Saint Dionysius the Areopagite and Saint Gregory Palamas speak of it.<sup>13</sup> It is more exactly defined by saying that this is not normal to their nature the translator uses the term *conformable*, which is probably a more accurate translation, but less appropriate to the context so that this “oil,” this fuel, clearly was obtained from outside them, and from outside their ordinary life experience.

Why is this oil so important? Macarius makes the answer to this clear: translated in terms consistent to the Western model of causality, this “oil,” which he later defines as “oil of gladness,” was the “reason” why these virgins were able to enter the heavenly bridal chamber with the Bridegroom. This fits modern experience in the life of prayer, which confirms, time and again, that without this energy, experiences of the Spirit are fleeting and distant: the experience of something touches us from that “other world” but we cannot follow back to its “home.”

Next, Macarius defines in more detail why the five foolish virgins were unable to follow the Bridegroom into his home. It is because they had not obtained this oil of gladness, but instead had “fallen asleep.” And then he defines what he means by this term *sleep*. “The other foolish ones, however, content with their own nature, did not watch nor did they betake themselves to receive ‘the oil of gladness’ (Psalm 45:7) in their vessels. But still in the flesh, they fell into a deep sleep through negligence, inattentiveness, laziness, and ignorance, or even through considering themselves justified. Because of this they were excluded from the bridal chamber of the kingdom because they were unable to please the heavenly Bridegroom.”

Extending the analogy of bride and groom, to read into the word *please* an analogy to the worldly concept that an *attraction* should exist between bride and groom, we learn that when the oil of gladness acts as an attraction between bride and groom, then the bride can enter the home of the Bridegroom, the kingdom of God. But why then does such a bride not possess this oil of gladness? Macarius has more to say. It is because: “Bound by ties of the world and by earthly love, they did not offer all their love and devotion to the heavenly Spouse, nor did they carry the oil with them.”<sup>14</sup>

So two things are needed before we enter the spiritual world or “home of the spirit”: the oil of gladness and the redirection of love. Macarius then attempts to describe such individuals more fully, and in so doing

defines the condition that must be met before such *sanctification*: “But the souls who seek the sanctification of the Spirit, which is a thing that lies beyond the power of nature, 15 are completely bound with their whole love to the Lord. There they walk; there they pray; there they focus their thoughts, ignoring all other things.” 16

Clearly, one need described here is to be *wholehearted*. Sanctification involves the heart as a whole, and cannot be “halfhearted.”

For this reason they are considered worthy to receive the oil of divine grace and without any failure they succeed in passing to life, for they have been accepted by and found greatly pleasing to the spiritual Bridegroom.

But other souls, who remain on the level of their own nature, crawl along the ground with their earthly thoughts. They think only in a human way. Their mind lives only on the earthly level. And still they are convinced in their own thoughts that they look to the Bridegroom and that they are adorned with the perfections of a carnal justification. But in reality they have not been born of the Spirit from above (John 3:3) and have not accepted<sup>17</sup> the oil of gladness.<sup>18</sup>

To make this state permanent, our whole psychological nature must change. It must change in the right way, and it must change at every level. More than this, the parable of the lamp can be extended in a modern image and unlike some other parables it can be updated in this way without becoming untrue.

The classical lamp of the time of Christ was something like the Aladdin lamp of the fairy tales: a shallow teapot with a wick emerging from the spout. Typically, a modern oil lamp has the wick centrally above the oil reservoir, and the flame is sheltered from the wind by a glass chimney. This then becomes the perfect parable for the two main aspects of the esoteric path: the oil represents the energies that must already exist in us before new energies can be developed from them; the flame it feeds represents the production of the new and visible energies, which can occur only when another flame is touched to it to kindle it. The chimney protects the flame from the wind, so that it remains alight and burns steadily. But the chimney must also be kept clean, so that the light passes through it without being partially or wholly darkened.

A final note about this: in churches and in a few study groups that maintain a living inner connection with the tradition, people obtain clearly observable inner energies when they come together. Most of them quickly dissipate the new energies in gossip or excitement. A few maintain the

disciplines of the Way and retain the energy. Much of this book is about ways of achieving this.

“Ask, and it shall be given you.”

What does it mean to be wholehearted? The gospel teaching raises very different and seemingly unrelated questions. For example, it has told us to:

Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you:

For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened (Matthew 7:78).

When we come to this question, all that we have already said, almost all commentary on the teachings of Christ, suddenly seems almost meaningless. The gospel also asks: “Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone?” (Matthew 7:9).

How then can we understand the teaching that we need but to ask in the same context with the idea that we need to *repent*? that we need to turn around in ourselves before coming into real contact with God?

If all we have to do is to ask, what more could we need? Yet it is a fundamental principle of esotericism that the tradition is a coherent whole. A valuable test is that when we understand 19 the ideas of the esoteric tradition correctly, then the apparent disagreements between concepts will disappear. It is our misunderstandings that conflict, not our understandings, hence the idea, I think, expressed by P. D. Ouspensky that “you cannot understand and disagree.”

An understanding that allows us to accept both these doctrines, the idea that we must repent and the idea that we have only to ask, is not far away from us as a possibility. The complexities of our nature complicate the whole thing, but basically the problem, as with all the key elements of esotericism, is not of what to do, but of what we are.

When the gospel tells us to ask and it will be given, too many people believe that this negates other instructions of Jesus. They imagine it means we need not repent nor seek the kingdom, that we can ignore the exacting requirements of Paul, and that the complex methods and instructions of the desert hermits that followed in later centuries were mere embroideries based on misunderstanding. This is not true. There is a good reason for everything in the tradition. Asking for help may be the perfect shortcut, but if this is possible for everyone, it is easy only for the just, only for the

truly righteous, those who have no sense of guilt about themselves when faced with the divine, nor any reason to feel guilty. Who is able to ask with a whole heart? Only the one who is “right with God.”

The righteous one, the one who is in true relation to God, needs no repentance; the corollary of this is that repentance produces righteousness, as we find in the following passage: “I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance” (Luke 15:7).

## Christianity as a State of Being

When Macarius the Great described the difference in “being” between the “foolish virgins,” which he regarded as a description of normal manmodern man and the “wise virgins,” he referred the latter term to those that elsewhere he described as “true Christians”: those who had regained their divine birthright. He said of them: “they are greater and better than those of the world, because their intellect and thinking of the soul is permeated by the peace of Christ and the love of the Spirit, as the Lord had in mind when he said: ‘They had passed from death to life’” (John 5:24). He then describes the normal Christian, someone who is Christian in intention but not in *being*. One who thinks he is a Christian, but *who does not act or perceive as a Christian* does and this is a description that most of us, if we are honest, will recognize as applying to ourselves. This is the Christian who forgets to ask the Lord, who is unable to look the universe “straight in the eye” as he asks, who turns away in his guilt. (And if you begin to observe yourself more clearly, you will *recognize* the feeling of this turning away unless you turn away from the observation.)

It is, therefore, not in outward shape or form that the distinguishing characteristic of Christians consists. Many Christians believe that the difference does lie in some external sign. They are in mind and thought similar to those of the world. They undergo the same disturbing restlessness and instability of thoughts, lack of faith, confusion, agitation, and fear as all other people do. They really do differ somewhat in some external form and way of acting in a limited area, but in heart and mind they are shackled by earthly bonds. They do not have the divine rest and heavenly peace of the Spirit in their hearts because they never begged it of God nor did they ever believe that He would deign to grant these to them. 20

## The Startsi

But there is a different kind of Christian in the world of the Eastern Church, and among them some with a different consciousness.

In the monastic republic of Athos, for example, something of the quality of those early monks who shaped the church is reflected by today's monks, and especially by the rare "elder members" of the Eastern churches, the true *startsi* or *gerontes*. These elders are the "professors" of this other kind of knowledge, the researchers in this other science, whose results are shared more in present help than in written description, more in description than explanation.

These elders were the *startsi* of the Russian Church, their unique work in the church the practice of *starchestvo*, described here by émigré Russian and Oxford theologian Nicholas Zernov.

*Starchestvo* was the practice of laymen appealing for spiritual counsel to certain monks known for their piety and wisdom, called *Startzi*. The center of the movement was at Optina Pustyn, a monastery near Tula in Central Russia. The tradition of *Starchestvo* was started there by Father Leonid (d. 1841), a disciple of the famous monk Paissy Velitchkovsky, who introduced it into Russian Church life at the end of the eighteenth Century. The full glory of that way of holiness was, however, revealed by a monk of another monastery, Saint Seraphim of Sarov (1750-1833), one of the greatest saints of the Russian church. 21

Those who practice this science have little or no equivalent in the Western world, nor in Roman and Protestant churches, for the *startsi* often has no outward status whatsoever, no rank, and instead may be totally wrapped in his humility. Yet he is the true theologian, and even those immediately around him would hesitate to claim such a high calling for themselves.

"Theology is such a high thing," said one of my friends on Athos recently, "that most of us here hesitate to call ourselves theologians." The *startsi* it is who has what our modern Western world lacks, while the Western world hoards what the *startsi* has rejected as trivial.

The truth of the heart, the truth of the *startsi*, is not divisible as our truths are, idea from action, theory from practice: you cannot approach the knowledge learned by the *startsi* without approaching the values held by the *startsi*. You cannot take the knowledge of the *startsi* without taking the values of the *startsi*. You cannot justify such sweeping statements to modern man, yet even today you cannot know what the *startsi* knows without becoming the *startsi*. It is all beyond reason.

And when the *starets*, the elder, asks, then it is just as it was when the gospel said:

Jesus answered and said unto them, Verily I say unto you, If ye have faith, and doubt not, ye shall not only do this which is done to the fig tree, but also if ye shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea; it shall be done.

And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive (Matthew 21:21-22).

The problem is that, lacking purity of heart, we do not ask sincerely, or we forget to ask often enough, or we evade the issue from the sense of guilt that comes from our awareness of the gap between what we are and what we might be between fallen man and our natural qualities, the qualities normal to the invisible, divine world to which we should belong.

If we can learn to accept ourselves, to face our imperfections consciously, without turning aside, then we can learn to ask consciously. When we ask “unconsciously,” there is a question to ask. That question is: Who is it that asks?

With faith, the answer to this question changes: “If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you” (Matthew 17:20).

## The Prayer of Joseph the Visionary

Although the idea of the Royal Way has been attached to a number of different things, including the prayer of the heart that is so important to the Eastern Church, all these things are esoteric in the special sense that not only do they refer to inner processes, but they describe the action of unobservable and autonomous forces in our lives in a very special way that is clearly expressed in the Syriac prayer of Joseph the Visionary (part of which we quoted earlier), which talks about prayerful ways of changing the quality of the memory or “hidden mind,” roughly equivalent to what we now call the *unconscious*. In the form given by Joseph this is an esoteric doctrine in the sense that it refers to *processes within the person praying* that cannot be observed externally, and it clearly describes the need to obtain help for this from a higher level. It is a good prayer for those who have reached a stage of dryness in their struggle with attention and with the overactive mind.

Cleanse my hidden mind  
With the hyssop of Your grace,  
for I draw near to the Holy of Holies  
of your Mysteries.

Wash from me all understanding  
that belongs to the flesh,  
and may an understanding  
which belongs to your Spirit  
be mingled within my soul.

Cause to reside in me  
a faith that perceives Your Mysteries,  
so that I may perceive Your sacrifice  
as You are, and not as I am.

Create eyes in me,  
that I may see with Your eyes,  
for I cannot see with my own eyes.

May every bodily image  
be wiped away from my mind's eye,  
and may You alone  
be recognized before the eye of my mind. 22

## The Control of the Senses

On my first visit to Mount Athos, in 1982, I noticed that certain of the monks, particularly in public places away from their monasteries - on the boat, the jetty, in the little town of Karyes, the capital of their monastic republic - seemed not to look at one directly, not in a shifty sort of way, but because they were contained within themselves, their eyes not seeking contact nor their minds ranging round the world outside them.

Later, when I was talking to Father D. of the Monastery of Simono-Petra about the Jesus Prayer, he suggested to me that I should turn my eyes down and away from the world when I was able. The two things were part of the same discipline.

The *rishis* of Raja Yoga in India teach that the mind should be treated like a young bride, and kept isolated from corrupting impressions from the outside world. This principle can be applied to Christian asceticism.

But there is more to it than this. Turning the eyes down both reminds us and assists us to control and minimize our reactions to the

events outside us. These reactions consume in mental and physical energy, in physical tensions and suchlike, the energies that should be transformed through prayer into higher energies. Our difficulty is that our minds as they are can be easily provoked into reacting to events outside us. But what reacts is inside us. Our reactions to events cause disturbance within us. The prevention of this disturbance is important in spiritual life, and observation shows that it can in fact be controlled in more than one way, although for various reasons certain individuals, and individuals in certain situations or at certain stages in their lives, may find one form of regulation easier or more possible than another.

The Blessed Callistus had more to say about this, using the image of *living water*. On the physical scale, water is the medium of life, and *living water* was the image that Jesus Himself had used to describe a certain “renewable inner resource” of energy which, he taught in John 4:14-18, was available to those who learn to seek a more than purely physical medium of life.

If we do not bar our bodily senses, the fountain of water which the Lord promised to the woman of Samaria will not gush forth in us. This woman, seeking physical water, found the water of life flowing within her. As the earth by nature contains water which it pours forth as soon as the outlet is opened, so the earth of the heart by nature contains this spiritual water which gushes forth as soon as this becomes possible, like the light which our forefather Adam lost through transgression.

As physical water flows continually from its source, so the living water, gushing forth from the soul as soon as it is opened, never ceases to flow. Flowing in the soul of the holy man Ignatius, it urged him to say: “There is in me no matter-loving fire, but water acts and speaks in me.” 23

## The Five Virgins as the Senses

What then are these five virgins? Macarius defines them exactly and so clarifies the whole passage, writing of the virgins as the “five rational senses of the soul.” The foolish virgins are the senses acting alone, when they are *irrational*, depending on their own nature. In that state, before we become aware of what is being perceived through those organs, other more subjective elements enter the process. The wise virgins perceive in simplicity, without subjective bias the process described by Boris Mouravieff in his *Gnosis* as *constatation* - perception without prejudgment.

“The five rational senses of the soul, if they have received grace from above and the sanctification of the Spirit, truly are the prudent virgins. They have received from above the wisdom of grace. But if they continue depending solely on their own nature, they class themselves with the foolish virgins and show themselves to be children of this world. They have not put off the spirit of the world, even though, in their false thinking by some exterior word, opinion, or form, they believe themselves to be brides of the Bridegroom.”<sup>24</sup> Here he shows clearly that he is speaking about the way in which we sense the world, and how this depends on whether we still remain *self-centered*,<sup>25</sup> subjective, still driven by our own impulses and reactions to the world and attentive to the same external things, or whether we have transcended this state and become “dependent” on the Lord “whose service is perfect freedom,” which means, in effect, whether we are *God-centered*, which is to say, attentive to the Lord.

Then Macarius describes in more detail this state of dependence, this centering on God, and how different this is from our normal involvement in the life of the world.

Just as the souls who have completely given themselves to the Lord have their thoughts there, their prayers directed there, walk there, and are bound there by the desire of the love of God, so, on the contrary, the souls who have given themselves to the love of the world and wish to live completely on this earth walk there, have their thoughts there, and it is there where their minds live (Luke 12:34). For this reason they are unable to turn themselves over to the kind, prudential guidance of the Spirit. Something that is foreign to our basic nature, I mean heavenly grace, necessarily means being joined and drawn into our nature in order that we can enter the heavenly bridal chamber of the kingdom and obtain eternal salvation.

We have received into ourselves something that is foreign to our nature,<sup>26</sup> namely the corruption of our passions through the disobedience of the first man, which has strongly taken over in us, as though it were a certain part of our nature by custom and long habit.<sup>27</sup>

This must be expelled again by that which is also foreign to our nature, namely the heavenly gift of the Spirit, and so the original purity must be restored. And unless we will now receive the heavenly love of the Spirit through ardent petition and asking by faith and prayer and turning away from the

world, and unless our nature will be joined to love, which is the Lord, and we are sanctified from the corrupting power of evil by means of that love of the Spirit, and unless we will persevere to the end unshaken, walking with diligence according to all of his commands, we will be unable to obtain the heavenly kingdom. 28

We will note that Macarius's ideas about this contain several crucial concepts which will be developed later in the book.

1. In the first of the paragraphs above we learn that those who believe themselves to be "brides of the Bridegroom," to be united to Christ, before they have put aside their dependence on their own abilities, are simply deluding themselves. And from the next paragraph we learn that those whose minds and thoughts live in the world and are wholly concerned with the world are unable to turn themselves over to the "prudential guidance of the spirit."

2. On the other hand, those who correctly believe themselves to be united to Christ are united by the quite different direction taken by their own inner nature. Their thinking has completely changed, become more consistent and filled with higher thought: "souls who have completely given themselves to the Lord have their thoughts there, their prayers directed there, walk there, and are bound there by the desire of the love of God."

3. With this we have distinguished two different kinds of human: not born different, but in very different states that effectively make them different beings.

4. We learn that our habits are not natural to us, but have been learned from outside us, yet have come to seem so much a part of us that they now act as if they were part of our original nature.

5. We learn that these may be removed again through the active love of the Holy Spirit.

## Koinonia as Communion

What is it like when there is enough oil for one's lamp? I got some kind of a glimpse of this on one of my visits to Mount Athos, where I had a unique experience of true emotion that began when Father A. took me to one of the tiny chapels in the main block of the monastery.

When we entered the chapel I saw around me several familiar faces, almost the same small group of monks as those who had invited me to join the few of them in a small liturgy to Saint Christopher in the gardener's

cottage chapel at the end of my second visit to their monastery. I was aware of a great sense of love, of belonging, expressed by the Greek word *koinonia*, a sense that I had never experienced to the same degree in England, even among those with whom I have worked, studied, or served for years.

The celebrant, Father M., had also officiated at that earlier service. The old Father S., another friend, sat quietly at the back of the chapel, his head bowed much of the time in prayer. In the gloom, the few small candles shone on the icons and the simple furnishings. The service began and ended in stillness.

Early in the liturgy this sense of love and mystery overcame me, drove out my thoughts of self, and cleansing tears followed, what the early Fathers called “fire and tears.” I began then to understand the theological significance of *koinonia*. In modern Greek theology it is said to represent the love that unites the Trinity and whose expression between members of the church expresses the loving nature of the Trinity in a true, emotional union within the church: a kingdom of love on earth.

Now, it was become real for me. It was hard to believe that only days before I had been playing my accustomed role in business meetings at which the whole thing would have been regarded as nonsense. It was not “sense,” perhaps, in any literal way, but it was effective. After the service, I had a great sense of what I can only call “cleanness,” of simplicity, and of sensitivity to things of which I am in my everyday life normally unaware. More even than on my previous visits I began to understand what was really possible for a human being, and began, just began, to rediscover the incentive to make that inner effort for myself. From the midst of those senseless tears had come equally “senseless” stillness.

In this strange moment I had become emptied of myself for a while, something very necessary for me. This, more clearly than ever before, and after six visits to the Holy Mountain, was exactly what I had been looking for.

This, the strange and practical significance of *koinonia*, explains why, in the Gospels and often reiterated by the Fathers, there is this need to be reconciled to one’s brother, and why the whole idea of preceding communion with a reconciliation is so important to Orthodox thought even today. This idea is not only ethically valid, but is also important to real religious growth. The strength to pray comes from liturgy and love. The strength of the liturgical communion, as was later clearly demonstrated to me on Mount Athos, depends on one’s unity with all those communicating. Clearly, an environment of love is an environment of prayer. A Syrian Father created a long prayer that included the following passages

At this moment  
when the wine is changed  
and becomes Your blood,  
may my thoughts be inebriated  
with the commixture of Your love.

And a little later in the same prayer:

stir up within me at this time, Lord,  
the sense of wonder at Your cross,  
fill me with fervour of faith at this moment,  
so that my thoughts may be inflamed  
with the fire of Your love,  
and may my eyes become for You  
rivulets of water to wash all my limbs.  
May Your hidden love  
be infused into my thoughts  
so that my hidden thoughts may flow for you  
with tears and groans.

And again:

May I receive You  
not in the stomach that belongs to the body's limbs,  
but into the womb of my mind,  
so that You may be conceived there,  
as in the womb of the virgin. 29

How can I describe my first communion on Mount Athos? I first began to draw conclusions some hours later that day. I was sitting beside the big pine tree overlooking the jetty, trying to sort out the many and fast-changing impressions of my visit. I would alternate between periods of questioning and periods repeating the Jesus Prayer. The stillness of the water reflected the stillness within. Somewhere across the little cove a muleteer shouted at his charges as they began their journey into the forested center of Athos. Birds sang. The novices practiced their chanting in the music school that occupied the top floor of the nearby old building, outside the monastery walls, a rickety-balconied building built against the cliff, and which also housed the carpenter's shop. Bees shopped lackadaisically at the broom on the cliff below me. A fishing boat moved slowly across the horizon. Behind all these sounds lay the stillness of Athos an inward stillness. Within that stillness emerged a presence I can never describe. I was not then even sure how to put a name to the presence. I am still not sure.

Abbot Vasileios has words for the indescribable, for the event if not for that which gave it life:

Thus the statement “For Thou art God ineffable, incomprehensible, invisible, inconceivable “ rises before us like a very mountain, steep and hard to approach, from which the uncreated breeze descends and swells the lungs of man, bringing life to his innermost parts with the joy of freedom, of something unqualified, dangerous and wholly alive. How often we want to make God conceivable, expressible, visible, perceptible to worldly senses. How much we want to worship idols. The divine liturgy, however, does not allow us to do anything of the sort. It destroys our idols of God and raises up before us His saving Image, the Word “who is the image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15), the archetype of our true, hidden and Godmade being. 30

In words, nothing had changed. Yet at heart, something had changed.

Something had touched me, and had left a memory of its passing a “memory without image,” which closed the eyes of the mind, gently upset all my preconceptions, destroyed all my idols, and took my idea of Christ and Christianity beyond the modern ideas that “He must have been a great teacher,” and that Christianity is a great teaching, to something greater still. “God,” said Evagrius of Pontus, “cannot be grasped by the mind. If He could be grasped, He would not be God.”<sup>31</sup> Truly, I had “fallen through the hole” once again, had discovered the “reality” behind or beyond the “reality” I had discovered before.

In the Garden of *Panaghia*,<sup>32</sup> a seed began to grow.



## Chapter 5

### Gnosis is Not Gnosticism

There was once a Christian conception of gnosis that was very different from what has recently become known as Gnosticism. Certain Greek words, rendered today in Anglicized form by the single word *gnosis*, occur both in the New Testament - in the Gospel of Saint Mark and in certain of Saint Paul's letters and they are also found in the writings of many of the Fathers of the church, of whom Clement of Alexandria was most open, writing about the qualities of certain Christians who had become Gnostics, although simply in the Christian sense that they possessed certain inner knowledge. In the Christian psychology we are studying, the word *gnosis* and its derivatives are highly technical terms used with great precision, and this idea of gnosis was borrowed, not originated, by the Gnostic sects. For this and other reasons, we are forced to say that the Christian form of gnosis is not in any sense Gnosticism, and that there is good reason for believing that it was not possessed by the Gnostic sects. The term refers to a specific form of inner knowledge - the roots of the word *gnosis* refer to knowledge by or through the *nous* - special knowledge that was sometimes given its special name in the effort to distinguish it from other, more common forms of knowledge.

But we have also learned that the inner knowledge of what was then one Church, not divided as it is now, was available, as Clement says, only to those who had been properly prepared. It was effectively and possibly intentionally hidden or hermetized around the time of Clement's banishment from Alexandria, some seventeen centuries ago. Certain forms of it then continued to be passed on through monasticism, where it could be

relatively protected from church politics. The whole problem of evidence for inner truth is encapsulated in the continuing difficulties of proving that this Christian gnosis adheres closely to the original, inner form of Christ's teaching, and is therefore not simply another heretical sect claiming to be Christian. There is no "demonstrable" proof; the only convincing verification takes the form of experiences sometimes known as mystical, so is accessible only to those who are sensitized to this kind of experience. Inner truths thus depend for their survival on *confirmation* by the genuine spiritual experience of individuals, an experiential as opposed to a merely legalistic form of confirmation.

## An Experiential Gnosis

In chapter 3 we described how today, after a long period in which spiritual experience was uncommon, or at least when few people were willing to speak about it and it occurred largely dissociated from earlier sources of knowledge about it, increasing numbers of individuals are now again beginning to become aware of their inner, spiritual nature. With new insight into the difference between inner and outer knowledge many people, rebuffed or confused when they seek inner knowledge from their churches, have turned to seek it elsewhere. Vast numbers have sought in the Eastern traditions whose inner knowledge has for a time been more accessible than that of our own tradition. A smaller but substantial number have been attracted to exciting doctrines that appear to be the inner knowledge, doctrines that were first offered in the early Christian centuries by the sects that today have become known as the Gnostics. However, one basic fact about this situation which is not so generally known is that there is a key difference between Christian doctrine and that of all of the so-called Gnostic sects. Each of these sects has a different answer to what C. S. Lewis called *The Problem of Pain*, and none of these widely varied and often fantastic answers agrees with the Christian answer, which is so hard to understand but which, in spite of this, when it is finally understood, has always been the same throughout two thousand years of Christian history. Thus, there appears to be one specific character to almost all Christian answers to this question, while the many and varied answers given to this same question in the teachings of the Gnostics all appear to the eye of self-knowledge to take the form of intellectual speculation, sometimes not falling very far short of modern science fiction, describing strange battles between strange beings with even more outlandish names.

Strangely enough, this Christian answer survives to comparatively recent times in Shakespeare's plays, where it is skillfully hermetized, so

that it appears as cryptic statements, such as that in the passage from *As You Like It* that begins:

Sweet are the uses of adversity;  
Which like a toad, ugly and venomous,  
Wears yet a gracious jewel in his head:  
And this our life, exempt from public haunt, 2  
Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,  
Sermons in stones, and good in everything (Act 2, scene 1).

Christ taught that spiritual influences are known “by their fruits,” and in these terms another difference between Christian and Gnostic teachings is shown by the characteristic moral laxity reported of certain Gnostic sects by early Christians, as in Clement’s comments on the sect known as the Marcionites, whom he specifically referred to as “libertine Gnostics.” It will be seen at least that there was a wide difference between such sects and the Christians of the time, with their emphasis on continence and even virginity as a spiritual method, while Clement himself described his “Gnostic” in terms that make it very clear he was far from being “libertine,” writing that: “The Gnostic prays throughout his whole life, endeavouring by prayer to have fellowship with God. And, briefly, having reached to this, he leaves behind him all that is of no service, as having now received the perfection of the man that acts by love. But the distribution of the hours into a threefold division, honoured with as many prayers, those are acquainted with who know the blessed triad of the holy abodes.”<sup>3</sup>

It would be possible to support this statement in a detailed study, but not in the space of this book. In the meantime we will try to define in this chapter the Christian concept of gnosis as a particular form of inner knowledge, while certain other parts of the book will give enough idea of the Christian answer to pain and suffering to allow comparison with the often outlandish and infinitely varied solutions to this same found in the teachings of the Gnostic sects.

## Different Worldviews

For the modern individual, all this is very difficult. Most of the time, all we know as heart is changeable, appearing as excitements and sudden desires. Occasionally we may glimpse depths and richness that are mostly lacking from our lives, yet when we do, we have no “science of the heart” to help us get to know this other kind of emotion, for has not the heart been labeled subjective and hence, by implication, “unscientific”? More than that, our very way of thought is based on circular definitions<sup>4</sup>

that are convincing precisely because they are inescapable, so that they give no reason for listening to the heart. And how, without trusting in God, without confidence in a *hidden benevolence* in the universe, can we follow the teachings of Our Lord?

How, without waking the inmost heart to the divine reality, can we find the courage to “take no thought for the morrow”? To the eye attuned to an inner tradition, the circularity of contemporary reasoning, with its assumption of an identity between analyzed perception and knowledge, often seems to be closed against all ideas of the validity of nonsensory knowledge. Like a wagon train defended against Apaches, it guards us from the intuitions that reach us from a reality that is neither directly perceptible nor explainable in terms of the circular definitions of our time. Faith alone will break this circle: “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1).

Because of its importance, this quotation occurs again later in this book in a quotation from St. Mark the Ascetic. On page xiv and elsewhere I described how the proper relationship of faith to knowledge has been generally misunderstood. To begin to understand what this means that faith can become knowledge and knowledge become love we must realize that this statement was never intended to speak of what can be seen, weighed, measured. Nor does it even hint toward something that can be *inferred* from sensory perception.

It is for this reason, because the data of the heart cannot be verified deterministically, predictably, on demand, that the modern individual ignores it. We, our minds, our thoughts, are permeated with a determinism that is actually only apparent, only a form of self-delusion. Because of this captivity of the intellect, we are unable to understand religious things. This incomprehension is, in part at least, because we have not accepted or even tried to understand the true religious view, the forgotten Christian “theory of continuous creation,” in which God was Creator and is Creator still. Modern thought has made the world appear entirely constant instead of almost constant. It has worked this sleight of hand simply by this attitude of determinism, by describing repeating patterns as actual *laws*, which, by definition, are then binding in such a way that they effectively forbid the existence of any ultimate authority, any “supreme power” who can overrule his own laws. A small change in reasoning, but it takes away all hope. In this lies the difference between the deist views of thinkers such as Thomas Paine and the true Christian worldview. For the deist of the eighteenth century, God formed the universe and then left it to run by itself, like a clock once wound. Such a view leaves no place for the mystery of continuous creation, for the hidden authority of God, a power that makes the world we understand

and at the same time goes beyond understanding: the authority that explains the gospel saying “With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26).

## False Gnosis

Because it is so often used simply to describe ancient texts, whatever their source, we need to be extremely clear about the traditional meaning of this word *gnosis*. Saint Irenaeus of Lyons (died 202), was a dedicated opponent of the Gnostic sects, writing his most famous book against them: *Against Heresies: False Gnosis Unmasked and Refuted*. This title, if read with care, seems to imply that there also existed a “true gnosis,” although on its own it cannot be taken as proof.

The essential difference between the Christian gnosis and that of the Gnostics is in the quality of the knowledge itself. In Christian esotericism, the true *faith* taught by the gospel and the Fathers forms the basis, the seed of a special kind of *inner knowledge*; it describes an inner reality, known first in words, but finally at the level of experience, as the Word, which cannot be entirely put into spoken words, and all of which, when put into words, is liable to be misunderstood. It also includes a psychological teaching which relates to ways to obtain the meaning of the teaching and put it into practice. The reality expressed by these teachings is at core *unchanging* and thus undifferentiated in the Platonic sense. The theological disagreements that have accumulated over two millennia are caused by misunderstandings of language, by the Babel of tongues.

Often it is possible to see that two sides in a disagreement of doctrine are both motivated by the desire to preserve the same inner truth. 5 It is to avoid such misunderstandings that esotericism took the form of an “unwritten tradition,” and it was almost certainly to avoid the political disagreements that go with these misunderstandings even today that it has also sometimes been kept secret, at least since the time of Clement’s exile from Alexandria as a result of such misunderstandings.

It may already have become clear that the reason for this lack of written form, and often for actual secrecy, is itself quite straightforward and does not normally stem from a desire to preserve an advantage or a sense of superiority over those who are excluded from the secret. Rather, it arises from a concern for the recipients. An honest analysis of the normal methods by which humans obtain knowledge will reveal that there is in fact an essential problem in obtaining knowledge of the unchanging (it is essential to our grasp of these ideas that we understand that what does not change cannot be registered by the mind in the way we register things

that change), yet we have already briefly referred to *diakrisis* between the spirit or influence of the changing world and that of the undifferentiated divine reality a subject dealt with in detail in chapter 13. In this situation, the difficulty of obtaining such knowledge on the one hand, and the difference between the two types of influence, lies both the question and its answer. This of course was the question around which developed the famous debate between Barlaam and Saint Gregory Palamas (p. 79). As mentioned earlier, the esoteric tradition says, in effect, that knowledge of the eternal can be obtained, but not by the normal human methods. God can be known as a different influence, a different spirit, in the sense used by Cassian: the *Spirit of God*.

This is the same as saying that to know God requires a different kind of knowledge. Almost all recent esoteric writers of substance have conveyed this idea by quoting the passage from Saint Paul that warns the student of manmade and hence changeable ideas: "Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ" (Colossians 2:8). In esotericism, this kind of knowledge is linked with the special knowledge called gnosis - which we described earlier as *noetic knowledge*, known by the nous - a knowledge that is entirely in keeping with the teaching of the Gospels, and is thus, as already suggested, essentially different from the teachings of the sects called the Gnostics.

The problem with this *Christian gnosis*, which is a kind of knowledge, not a select group of people, is that in this form, people misunderstand it: the average reader seems to imagine, when thinking of a form of knowledge called gnosis, that although this may consist of certain special ideas, those ideas will have the same form as what we ordinarily call knowledge - knowledge that can be fully expressed in words. We imagine that it can be understood and retained in memory in full - *in the form of words* and understood in relation to everyday experience. But this Christian gnosis, this *knowledge of the nous*, is something different from this. It can neither be fully expressed in words, nor can ordinary experience reveal its full depth, but, given to those who possess an inward stillness, it gives them access to certain kinds of nonsensory experience, and gives such experiences meaning.

What then is the *nous*? This is experienced as that single organ of consciousness which contains all our knowledge in itself, not verbal or diagrammatic knowledge, but direct knowledge, entirely different from the descriptions and definitions that with most people pass for knowledge. 6 This distinction is essentially of the unwritten tradition, as it is one of those things that really cannot be adequately conveyed in writing without the aid of inspiration or spiritual intuition.

As used in the Bible, the idea of gnosis appears to describe the special kind of knowledge behind the Gospels and certain other great spiritual works, books in which the same passage at different times can reveal what seem to ordinary minds to be different meanings, all of them valid. In the Old Testament it also appears in the Hebrew term *daath*, which in the Cabala is the knowledge that connects man to what that philosophy calls the “higher sephiroth,” which appear to be identical with the *sat-chit-ananda* - the being-bliss-consciousness - of Indian thought. Eventually, true gnosis, the complete gnosis, has a specific quality: it seems as if, although gnosis as a type of knowledge is made up of different partial elements, when it becomes complete it becomes a unity, although not *The Unity*.

As mentioned already, the Greek word from which this word *gnosis* was obtained is certainly used in certain parts of the New Testament. The early Fathers whose works were recorded in books like the *Philokalia* also used the word *gnosis* to describe a particular form of knowledge. Although the idea of Gnosticism was derived from this word gnosis, it is clear that the early Christian use of the word has or had a simple and direct meaning far from the complexities of many of the sectarian Gnostic teachings. As a simple example, consider the direct way in which experiential knowledge liberates us from uncertainty. The essence of the Christian knowledge tradition was the familiar gospel idea that “the truth shall set you free,” but even this most wonderful doctrine has to be understood before we can really benefit from it, although at the same time: “Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear” (Hebrews 11:3).

To be freed by truth, we must learn that truth, or to be more precise, since the Christian Truth is, in a particular sense, a *person*, we must learn of that Truth, and the learning of this spiritual truth is more than simply learning the words for it. The truth can set us free only when it is *understood*. That itself is one of the truths that brings freedom.

## The Alexandrian Tradition

A modern rendering of extracts from the books of Clement of Alexandria translates *Gnostic as one who knows God*. This translation is correct, but it is not a full and complete translation, and does not include the full meaning of the word. The same translator comments:

In his Miscellanies, Clement attacked their claims by describing the lifestyle and prayer life of one who truly knows God (i.e., a true “Gnostic”). He argued that those who deny or twist

the scriptures are not really “Gnostics,” for they have not come to know God in truth. 7

Clement wrote:

And the gnosis itself is that which has descended by transmission to a few, having been imparted unwritten by the apostles. Hence, then, knowledge or wisdom ought to be exercised up to the eternal and unchangeable habit of contemplation.<sup>8</sup>

This confirms the existence of an unwritten Christian tradition, but why, in a time when literacy was expanding, should some of the knowledge be kept unwritten: what use is an unwritten or, to be more exact, partially written tradition? Saint Isaac the Syrian wrote about this in a way that gives clear indications as to how such incomplete texts may be put to practical use:

As to the method of that other prayer, and its continuance without compulsion, it seems to me that it is not becoming for us to treat such things in detail, by describing their nature in speech or writings, lest the reader, being unable to understand anything of it, should judge it to be something useless; or if he should be acquainted with these things, should despise him who is not able to see the order of the things. From the one censure, from the other mockery would be the consequence. But he who is desirous to know these things may combine works with thought, by the grace of our Lord. And what in practice happens in these states he may experience personally.<sup>9</sup>

I most strongly recommend that the serious reader ponder this question at length before reading further in this book.

This aspect of Christianity, the “stream” that concerned itself so much with inner knowledge, existed and is sometimes supposed to have been developed in Alexandria,<sup>10</sup> and, as suggested already, it seems to have been suppressed in the second century, at the time of Clement, so that it had to go underground along with the virtual disappearance of the methods of self-discipline with which it was associated. Yet really there is no secret about the continued existence of this unwritten tradition. But one will not be told things that one can as yet only distort, any more than a doctor will give you technical information which you will misunderstand because of lack of knowledge.

About thirty years ago evidence appeared, in fact, that strongly supports the idea that Clement himself was involved in a church that preserved

information which was not made generally available but was kept for an “inner circle” of accomplished students. A large fragment of a letter, believed to be by Clement, was discovered by Harvard scholar Morton Smith. A lengthy investigation appears to confirm that this remarkably preserved fragment (it survived copied onto the flyleaf of another old book) is genuine, and part of it is also so relevant that it is worth quoting here. This letter talks about the writing, by Saint Mark himself, of an expanded version of Saint Mark’s Gospel that was used in Clement’s church, and certain quotations from otherwise unknown “additions” confirm that they are not part of the generally available version of that Gospel. We will also note that the following text hints at Mark himself having spent time in Alexandria.

Mark, then, during Peter’s stay in Rome, he wrote [an account of] the Lord’s doings, not however, declaring all [of them], nor yet hinting at the secret [ones], but selecting those he thought most useful for increasing the faith of those being instructed. But when Peter died as a martyr, Mark came over to Alexandria, bringing both his own notes and those of Peter, from which he transferred to his former book the things suitable to whatever makes for progress toward knowledge (gnosis). [Thus] he composed a more spiritual Gospel for the use of those who were being perfected. Nevertheless, he yet did not divulge the things not to be uttered, nor did he write down the hierophantic teaching of the Lord, but to the stories already written he added yet others and, moreover, brought in certain ways of which he knew the interpretation would, as a mystagogue, lead his hearers into the innermost sanctuary of that truth hidden by seven [veils]. Thus, in sum, he prearranged matters, neither grudgingly nor incautiously, in my opinion, and, dying, he left his composition to the church in Alexandria, where it even yet is most carefully guarded, being read only to those who are being initiated into the great mysteries. 11

A little later, the same text refers to Christ’s giving teaching to an individual, a young man he had just miraculously raised from the dead.

And they came into Bethany, and a certain woman, whose brother had died, was there. And coming, she prostrated herself before Jesus and says to him, “Son of David, have mercy on me.” But the disciples rebuked her. And Jesus, being angered, went off with her into the garden where the tomb was, and straightway a great cry was heard from the tomb. And going near Jesus rolled away the stone from the door of the

tomb. And straightway, going in where the youth was, he stretched forward his hand and raised him, seizing his hand. But the youth, looking upon him, loved him and began to beseech him that he might be with him. And going out of the tomb they came into the house of the youth, for he was rich. And after six days Jesus told him what to do and in the evening the youth comes to him, wearing a linen cloth over [his] naked 12 [body]. And he remained with him that night, for Jesus taught him the mystery of the kingdom of god. And thence, arising, he returned to the other side of the Jordan.<sup>13</sup>

Writings that appear to reveal some of the doctrines of this version of Saint Mark appear in Origen only a small percentage of whose writings survive to the present time, and those apparently extensively altered, also in the writings of Clement of Alexandria, the man often supposed to have been Origen's teacher<sup>14</sup> and certainly his predecessor as head of the Alexandrian school, and in other passages such as those now attributed to Evagrius, a pupil of Origen. In fact, this connection between these authors and the "knowledge tradition" seems to have been the common factor that has led to a general suspicion of these authors in Western and sometimes even in Eastern theology: what is ignored is of course not understood, and what is not understood is regarded as suspect.

Clement of Alexandria himself confirms the existence and special character of this Christian gnosis in texts such as the following: "This cannot be described as in other branches of study. But as the result of great intimacy with this subject, and living with it, a sudden light, like that kindled by a coruscating fire, arising in the soul, feeds itself."<sup>15</sup> The words are the representation of gnosis, and the experience, the intuition, the light is the *gnosis itself*. The *light of the nous* is itself gnosis, and sometimes the words that represent it may become the light itself. Yet even such knowledge may first be learned, or at least "learned of," from words, but it is understood, its meaning is known, only by direct if subtle intuition; so that the *true gnosis* is also that subtle, special intuition itself but those who know of it in modern times also warn us to beware of assuming that guesswork or the vague intimations once known as "feminine intuition" are gnosis. The intuition of Christian gnosis is closer to *revelation*<sup>16</sup> than to either the "Kantian intuition" which everyone possesses, or the everyday forms of "Jungian intuition" not surprisingly, considering Clement's Greek background, yet without departing from Christian experience or gospel teaching, where Christ says: "I am come to send fire on the earth; and what will I, if it be already kindled?" (Luke 12:49).

Clement's words powerfully and exactly echo Plato's statement in his seventh letter about unwritten knowledge. More important, as we have already shown, this kind of knowledge, this gnosis, is easily forgotten by many people even after they have experienced it, so that it is important in this context that the Greek word for truth in the Gospels is *alitheia* (truth). There is also an element of remembering, of course, where the Gospel of Saint John says: "We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness" (John 3:11). We must of course be honest and admit that this is not intellectual proof of the validity of the esoteric tradition: but it does conform to inner experience.

## Knowledge of God's Omnipotence

The source of all hope, of all possibilities that are beyond us unaided, is the hidden power of God as manifest in the incarnation of Christ. To know of this, to be convinced of it without possibility of that conviction being overturned, this is something that can entirely change our lives. This and the ability of the Lord to meet every need were the subject of one of the sermons of Macarius the Great, in this remarkable passage:

How could the infinite and ineffable ability "of the manifold wisdom of God" (Ephesians 3:10) create out of those things that did not exist bodies that are grosser and more subtle and more simple which subsist by His will? And how much more can He who is as He Himself wishes, through His ineffable compassion and incomprehensible goodness, not change and diminish and assimilate to Himself holy, worthy, and faithful souls by means of an assumed body? By such a body He, the invisible, is able to be seen by such souls, He, the untouchable one, may thus be felt according to the subtlety of the soul's nature. In this way also such souls may taste His sweetness and enjoy in actual experience the goodness of the light of inexpressible pleasure.

When God wishes, He becomes fire, burning up every coarse passion that has taken root in the soul. "For our God is a consuming fire" (Hebrews 12:29). When He wishes, He becomes an inexpressible and mysterious rest so that the soul may find rest in God's rest. When He wishes He becomes joy and peace, cherishing and protecting the soul.

If God also should wish to make Himself similar to one of His creatures for the exultation and happiness of his

intelligent creatures, as, for example, Jerusalem, the city, or the heavenly Mount Zion, He can do all things as He wishes, as it is said: “You come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem” (Hebrews 12:22). All things are easy and possible for Him who can transform himself into any form that He wishes for the benefit of those souls who are worthy of and faithful to Him. Should anyone only strive to be pleasing to him and be acceptable, He certainly will see the heavenly good things in actual experience. He will have an experience of the unspeakable delights and truly immense riches of God which “eye has not seen nor ear heard nor has it entered into the mind of man to conceive” (1 Corinthians 2:9).

The Spirit of the Lord also becomes the rest of worthy souls and their joy and delight and eternal life. For the Lord transforms Himself into bread and drink as it is written in the Gospel: “whoever eats of this bread will live forever” (John 6:58). In this ineffable way He recreates the soul and fills it with spiritual happiness. For He says: “I am the bread of life” (John 6:35). Similarly He transforms himself into the drink of a heavenly fountain as He says: “Whoever will drink of the water which I shall give him, it shall be in him a fountain of water ‘springing up to eternal life’” (John 4:14). And it is also said: “And we have all drunk of the same drink” (1 Corinthians 12:13, 10:4).

Thus He appeared to each of the holy fathers, exactly as He wished and as it seemed helpful to them. 17

Our God, the God of the Christians, is a living God. An understanding of the authority and autonomy of God, described for example in the gospel story of the centurion, is important for its implications in our own lives. As we come to understand the hidden power and *providence* of God in our lives, we begin to change our attitude and to understand more of what is possible. To understand the power of God is important, because it can free us from the feeling that we are able to and must be able to solve the problems of our own lives, when: “Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature?” (Matthew 6:27). But to understand this is problematical. As Saint Isaac the Syrian said, it is often only possible to perceive the providence of God when we possess no other support: when we have “no safety net” in our lives.

P. D. Ouspensky, the Russian philosopher who taught in England in the 1930s, told a story illustrating the way in which God might be

limited: A seminarian is supposed to have answered this question by saying that God “Cannot take the ace of trumps with the deuce.” The problem with this story is that although it contains a truth, or at least something that would be a problem for a God made in man’s image, when this idea is used as a blunt tool, it attacks true faith: it is rightly understood as showing how, by creating time, God can maintain the fabric of a universe without capricious change, but this can then be wrongly taken as showing that God is Himself absolutely subject to or determined by the laws discovered by science. Thus does modern education and the scientific view of life weaken the understanding of people of faith, reinforcing our belief in a mechanical determinism and so, in showing a world with no escape from a predetermined future, creating fear. Theirs is a dead world, a blind machine that ennobles or ruins good or bad equally, with a blind lack of discrimination. Practicing Christians of the “old school,” such as the monks on Athos, live instead in a living world, a world of miracles that are never predictable, never law conforming and so do not allow the dependence, either on God or on the law, which is the panacea, the placebo, the false confidence that protects “sleeping man” from being awoken by the abrasive facts of his life.

Saint Therese of Lisieux describes in her autobiography how a letter of her mother tells how, while still a small child, she was able to answer this theological problem: “Celine asked the other day how God could be there in a tiny Host like that, and Baby [the child who was to become Saint Therese] said: ‘There’s nothing surprising about it. God is Almighty.’ ‘Almighty, what does that mean?’ ‘It means he can do anything he wants to.’” 18

Breaking free of the view of the universe as a dead machine, seeing it as the creation of a God, of an omnipotent God, a God who is Lovewarm, caring, responsive, ultimately conscious (or beyond even consciousness as we know it, but certainly not less than that), although entirely inexplicable this is Christian life. Learning to live with and love that living universe, not of a God limited to law, but of laws subservient to a living God, this is awakening to Christianity as Christianity was once. But to ascribe to the living God of the Christian the determinism experienced or imagined by man is to make God in man’s image: to limit Him by law as we imagine ourselves to be limited, and thus to make Him powerless to help us, so that to conceive of a God limited by law is to eliminate the hope of divine help in our lives.

In a West without Christian spirituality, there is not even a Christianity that has been tried and failed, but only a Christianity that has not been tried.

## A World Without Gnosis

What is clearly true is that modern man lacks esoteric knowledge, and one of the reasons for this is the very great difficulty of learning enough about the unwritten tradition when it is so well hidden from us. The significance of this loss to us is twofold. It is important to the individual. It is equally important to society as a whole. It is important to the individual because of the proliferation of external concerns both in modern society and modern Christianity. Most people, including many clergy, have become almost willfully blind to certain human experiences including certain religious experiences and this because these experiences are classified according to our scientific worldview, our scientific mind-set, as *unreal* or *unscientific*. In effect, this means that, as it has been put, "Christianity has been the victim of a general cultural attack on the possibility of spirituality." 19 Today, spiritual experience is said to be "subjective," with the unfounded but generally accepted implication that what is subjective is unreal or illusory. What this means is that the Fall in consciousness has been followed by a second fall in our way of thinking, so that we are now influenced by fashionable ideas, of which the "unreality of the subjective" is one, an error in methods of thought that is a direct result of the limitations of the first Fall. As well as the initial limitation in our consciousness, therefore, we now have to correct a second limitation, the limitation created by *defined thought*, and that defined one-sidedly only from impressions obtained from the material world and confirmed by circular definition; so that there is now a belief almost universally accepted in our cultural milieu that anything not included in that circular definition is "unreal." 20 This leads to the conclusion that our experiences of the inner world, which are all that remains of the consciousness that preceded the Fall, are in fact delusions. The possibility of recovering that original consciousness depends on our increasing our awareness of this real world that is only supposedly a merely inner world, and this possibility is almost entirely blocked if we cling to any kind of *materialist* belief.

It is important to society because a world that ignores the inner life is a world without gnosis. To recover this gnosis is now extremely important to our civilization as a whole, for there is little doubt today that even by earlier standards, albeit of "fallen" man our Western civilization is now seriously out of balance; in fact, it has become increasingly obvious that although we are the most technically advanced civilization in recorded history, today's Westernized world is morally backward, if only in the specific sense that it is unable to cope with the human problems caused by its own technical achievements. This was confirmed early in 1992, when a joint report by the U.S. National Academy of Sciences and

the British Royal Society stated: "If current predictions of population growth prove accurate and patterns of human activity on the planet remain unchanged, science and technology may not be able to prevent either irreversible degradation of the environment or continued poverty for much of the world." 21

What is true but much more difficult to prove is that this imbalance is partially or wholly due to the imbalance in our knowledge. What is lacking today is self-control on a cultural scale: we cannot control ourselves, and as a result we cannot control the technology we use nor govern its social consequences. Prolonged reflection will show us that, just as control of the environment requires external or worldly knowledge, self-control, morality, and social stability require internal or esoteric knowledge. Another element of our present situation, then, is that humanity finds itself in an entirely new situation, requiring entirely new solutions. The problem with this is that nobody is any longer generating new solutions: there is no longer the deep knowledge that the early church called *gnosis* to act as a source for new solutions or at least a medium not just of new phrasings, but of entirely new meanings.

And as man thinks, so he is: this is true for the individual and for a whole civilization.

## The Question of Education

There is clear evidence<sup>22</sup> that the way the mind is formed when young predisposes it one way or another in its attitude toward religion and toward inner growth. The Hebrews appear to have been aware of this, and the Greeks, if not fully aware of this spiritual question, as well they may have been, were certainly aware of the social importance of education.

With their combined Hebrew and Greek heritage, for many centuries both Eastern and Western churches played a similar educational role in their societies; specifically, they helped to train behavior in certain ways and to introduce certain sensibilities and inculcate certain attitudes, some of which form the basis of modern morality and ethics. These attitudes and sensibilities were essential for those who wished to enter a life of prayer, but were also valuable for their effect on everyday life, in which they improved people's ability to live together in meaningful ways. Thus the religious life of the time placed its stamp on that society in a way similar to that in which certain branches of Greek monasticism today shape the behavior and attitudes of lay people who maintain contact with the monasteries. Seen objectively, this reveals the benefits possible to any society which shapes the minds of its members in this way.

Today, we live in a society in which one of the main problems is the number of people requiring treatment or hospitalization for what are called neuroses or mental illness. It is easy and probably correct to conclude that the almost epidemic growth of problems of this kind is directly traceable to the decline in what might be called “emotional education” in our society.

In our contemporary society, as the authority of the church has declined, the question of training the emotions has sometimes been taken over in part by schools originally formed by the church, among which the English so-called public schools, at least, were remarkably monastic in their character. As the form of education now becomes more and more career oriented, emotional education is more and more obviously left to the family, which often either neglects this role or is ignorant of how to perform it. The result in many cases is failure, often catastrophic.

It is certainly arguable in this case that to restore the emotional element of early educational methods would be highly beneficial both for individuals and for society as a whole.

## Paideia and Catechism

To understand the way the early Fathers thought about this question, and how they tilled the soil that brought forth such “fruit unto repentance,” such a crop of individuals of a spiritual power almost unimaginable in this time without saints, it is helpful to know that, even before their time, the Greece of Pericles, Plato, and Socrates possessed an established educational tradition. This was a program of character formation, and it seems to have been the idea of developing this further that inspired large parts of Plato’s *Republic*. Werner Jaeger, a leading Harvard theologian of the 1960s, wrote about Greek philosophers of the slightly later time when Christianity began, that:

They led their pupils to that spirituality which was the common link of all higher religion in late antiquity. They began to remember that it had been Plato who made the world of the soul visible for the first time to the inner eye of man, and they realized how radically that discovery had changed human life. On their way upward, Plato became the guide who turned their eyes from material and sensual reality to the immaterial world in which the nobler-minded of the human race were to make their home.

In this situation, Clement of Alexandria, the head of the Christian school of the Catechetes, and Origen became the founders of Christian philosophy. 23

To prepare people by making them more sensitive to subtleties that *include*<sup>24</sup> spiritual feelings and intuitions, general aesthetic education is often recommended, especially under modern conditions, when aesthetics are largely ignored in education.

Greek *paideia* (the word originally meant and still means “children” in Greek, but is classically used as a general term for education) - specifically the *paideia* of Athens at the time of Plato and Pericles - included aesthetic elements as well as physical culture and intellectual concerns. The Stoic philosophy, which was a major force in Greece and Italy at the time that Clement taught in Alexandria, could be regarded as a specific form or an adult extension to *paideia*, and it is notable that it taught self-control. So, at the time of Christ, Greek education included elements that contributed to the formation of emotional sensibility and self-control. Plato, for instance, advocated teaching certain specific poetic and musical forms. Byzantine Christian society many centuries later taught a series of rules for music that defined precisely the way in which some combinations of sounds had a beneficial effect on the hearer while others were harmful. Those rules can still be studied.

In the early centuries of the church the aim not only of the education of children but of the training of Christian adults possessed a strong emphasis on emotional education: the proper preparation of the heart. Traces of this emphasis survive throughout the Western world. For instance, a Greek taxi driver, faced with impatient passengers, will counsel *hypomonie*, patience, and the word he uses is the same as that used by the Fathers of the Greek Church fifteen hundred years ago, when those who sought God were counseled to practice *hypomonie*, to endure with patience.

Today the training of the heart has almost disappeared from our educational system and is left to individuals to resolve as best they can through therapy, counseling, self-knowledge, or the substitutes alcohol and drugs adopted when no help seems to be available. The Western world is “reaping the whirlwind” as a result. A therapeutic expression of religious thought that took inner factors into account would quickly reverse this trend.



## Chapter 6

### The Work of God

Some people believe that inner growth and “working on oneself” are something we do of ourselves. Nothing much comes of it all until we learn that despite the great efforts we must make, this view is not wholly true. Others believe that spiritual change happens in an instant, as if by magic. Both these views are based on a lack of self-knowledge, on inadequate information about what actually happens. The inner change that matters is a work of God in synergy with man. This is a process, and a process “takes time.”

The interpretation given earlier of John 3:3 as “born from above”<sup>1</sup> instead of the more usual phrasing of “born again” has a great significance for a proper understanding of the gospel message. Why is it important? This is partly because the idea of being born *from above* makes it clear that we do not “conceive ourselves,” partly because it shows that a process is involved. Also, the idea of being “born from above” is analogous to physical birth, and the inner tradition makes it clear that this describes a long process of conception, gestation, and finally birth.

Look at the question in another way: if such a birth were instantaneous, then monks would be working for many, many years to attain what can be achieved in a second or two. The truth is that the working of God in the transformation of man does what is impossible for man to do unaided. But in this process or working not only does our Lord require man’s cooperation, but, like all processes, it takes time. Saint Macarius the Great, a fourth-century associate of Gregory of Nyssa, once wrote: “Those who hear the word should give witness to the working of the Word in

their own souls. The word of God is not an idle word, but it has its own work upon the soul. For this reason it is called a work, so that the work may be found in those who hear it. May the Lord therefore grant the work of truth in the hearers so that the Word may be found fruitful in us” 2

Thus God works a transformation in man, often appearing to begin this process through knowledge the good news that we can change.

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh:

(For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds;)

Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ;

Do ye look on things after the outward appearance? If any man trust to himself that he is Christ's, let him of himself think this again, that, as he is Christ's, even so are we Christ's” (2 Corinthians 10:35 & 7).

## The Working of the Word

“Salvation belongeth unto the Lord, thy blessing is upon thy people.”<sup>3</sup> So says the Orthodox vigil service. This expresses the fact that as esoteric psychology works a transformation in someone who makes appropriate efforts, then, in service, man brings God's work inward and outward to his particular place in the world. So that God's work is done by man, and also on man, in alliance with man's work upon himself. How can this happen, we might ask? Macarius the Great gives us part of the picture but human language is incapable of giving it all!

His very grace writes in their hearts the laws of the Spirit. They should not put all their trusting hopes solely in the scriptures written in ink. For divine grace writes on the “tables of the heart” (2 Corinthians 3:3) the laws of the spirit and the heavenly mysteries. For the heart directs and governs all the other organs of the body. And when grace pastures the heart, it rules over all the members and the thoughts. For there, in the heart, the mind abides, as well as the thoughts of the soul and all its hopes. This is how grace penetrates through all parts of the body.<sup>4</sup>

The process is a living one, a process that can occur in any one of us. I first began to understand this from a conversation with one of the monks

of the monastery of Simono-Petra. “There are some places in this world,” he told me as we sat on the balcony overlooking the sea far below, “where eternity has touched the earth, where things of eternal significance have happened, and some sense of this remains today. Athos is one of these places. By coming here, some people are able to reestablish contact with the eternal element within themselves.” This memory of the living presence is both personal and communal, and is most important to the practice of religion in the Athonite sense: “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:20).

When they talk about the fact that in some places it is easier to reestablish contact with the eternal in us, however we understand it, it is on this eternal factor within us that the mind can rest and become still. Here, at the center of one’s being, one finds Christ. Here lies truth, and here open the doors of that love that cannot betray.

This “place” is perhaps the least known and least understood key to Christian psychology. It seems to reflect the gospel image of the “strait gate,” the eye of the needle, yet it also explains the parable of the talents. Understand this, and one understands so much else. Find this, and one finds how to put into practice so many ideas that otherwise remain mere theory. Carry out the instructions of the *geronte* or elder with sufficient care and persistence, and it is this “place” one comes to.

One becomes what one is, becomes for the first time not an imitation of someone else, but oneself one becomes whole, for a moment, or for the rest of one’s life by becoming wholehearted; becomes complete by refusing to compromise one’s best. One becomes whole by not compromising truth, becomes whole by not escaping from the sorrow of emptiness into continual distraction. Becomes whole by giving, not asking; by perceiving with care instead of jumping to conclusions; above all, one becomes whole by acting from the heart, by overcoming division in oneself, by acting from the real facts and not from one’s illusions: by making *superefforts*.

But who is it that makes these superefforts?

## Surrender into the Hands of God

Let me talk about my own experience again for a moment. I once faced a problem getting to Mount Athos. I had little time, since I must be off Athos again by the following Thursday, while the offices from which I had to obtain the documents needed to get into Athos would not open again to the public until 11 A.M. on Monday, and those offices were in bustling Thessalonika, still 140 kilometers from the Ouranopolis pierhead, from which the Athos ferry sails at 9:45 every morning.

Here was the real test of nearly thirty years of prayer and meditation. In spite of the uncertainties, it seemed important that I go. So I decided just that: to go anyway. If it was right that I should go to Athos, then something would resolve the difficulties, though I could not imagine what. I must leave myself in the hands of God, and by this must test my intention to place my well-being in God's hands. On my way, I met the abbot of the monastery to which I retreat, and he arranged for my brief visit, so that I traveled on to the mountain with him.

On our arrival he said to me that it was good that I had taken this course, had trusted in God and acted accordingly. From then on, his attitude toward me changed and he became willing to give more time to me.

It is now clear to me, from many similar events, that the monks recognize certain efforts and act to reinforce them. Here, then, superefforts are of many kinds, and are recognized not in terminology but in action.

This is important to understand: it is oneself, one's intentions, one's emotional condition, one's constancy which such situations test. They do not "test for truth," or discover for us whether God is real; they test us and our ability to live with the reality of a living God. Such a test is a question of attitude, of intention. If we are unwilling to see it as a test of ourselves, then it becomes, in intention at least, a challenge to God and, as the gospel puts it: "thou shalt not test the Lord thy God." (The word *tempt* in our English version translates the Greek *peirasmos*: the temptation that tries and tests us.)

True tests of our faith or lack of it exist, however, in all situations of uncertainty, and sometimes the test is to depend not on ourselves and our everyday methods of making sure, but, like Saint Paul as he sailed those coasts in much more difficult days, to do what we can but then leave the rest to God and His synergy to send what He will.

It is this, a true change of intent, a reversal in the direction of our will, that demonstrates true change of heart. I suspect also that this is not something that happens without effort, but something that happens only as long as we have in mind *mneme Theou*, remembrance of God.

Temptations test us at many stages on the journey to truth. Saint Maximus the Confessor wrote: "God searches the intention of everything that we do, [to discover] whether we do it for him or for any other motive." 5 A few paragraphs later he added: "The onslaughts or temptations are brought on sometimes to take away sins already committed, or those being committed in the present, or else to cut off those which could be committed. And this is apart from those which come upon one as a trial, as with Job." 6

The Book of Job acquires an importance on the esoteric path once we really become aware of these trials or tests, since it represents what is probably the most complete description of the whole process in existence.

## Doing the Will of God

More than to study the esoteric doctrine, to participate in any real way in the esoteric practice of Athos brings one face to face with a different world. In that world one discovers a more relaxed, more forgiving attitude to sin. A different attitude to life begins to surface within you in response, so that one begins to see this different world everywhere: around you; in the attitudes and actions of the monks; in the theology of their church; even in the behavior of nearby villagers. The big difference lies in the difference of the monk's attitude to things like authority and responsibility. Underlying this is a different way of understanding the concept of the "will of God," a difference which is perhaps crucial to the Orthodox view of life.

We tend to view the will of God legalistically, as something we should learn to obey as we learn to obey ordinary instructions from employers and others; that is, we regard it almost as a communication. The view on Athos is different, and links instead with the idea of the icon, with the idea of man made in God's image, the image made perfectly manifest by Christ. God's will according to this view is already existing within us.

This idea of Christ as the icon of the Father was long ago expressed in the following passage from the homilies of Saint Macarius the Great.

And how much more can he who is as he himself wishes and is what he wishes, through his ineffable compassion and incomprehensible goodness, not change and diminish and assimilate to himself holy, worthy, and faithful souls by means of an assumed body? By such a body he, the invisible, is able to be seen by such souls, He, the untouchable one, may thus be felt according to the subtlety of the soul's nature. In this way also such souls may taste his sweetness and enjoy in actual experience the goodness of the light of inexpressible pleasure. 7

This also links in some way with the gospel parable of the talents. God's will is within us, waiting to be discovered and expressed. It is not something to be learned or acquired. This inner image has to be "dug up." It must be "put to work," so that it becomes our real working idea of ourselves instead of the false view held by the Personality. It must not be left buried in our inmost hearts. Thus, to fulfill the will of God is not to go against one's real nature but to uncover one's real nature. "To be true to the Spirit" is to be true both to God and to oneself, something close to the Western idea of finding and expressing one's "real self." It is also closely related to the best meanings of our modern concept of *conscience*.

This is a big thing, and contains overtones of responsibility. Through my experiences on Athos I have come to see this as giving a wholly different view of virtue. This is a view based on observation, but on observation that is obtained only with difficulty. It is consistent with the idea, expanded elsewhere in this book, that if we are the icon, the image of God, this means that there is an innate goodness in the human being that, once uncovered, needs no outward enforcement. All we have to do is to become what we are: to be ourselves as God made us; to do what we see to be right according to our inherent sense of what is right and our best abilities. This view was clearly expressed by Theophan the Recluse (see p. 51). The full breadth of this idea that by being true to ourselves we are true to God, because we are then being true to something God-given within us, was made clearer to me in a conversation with the hermit Father J. on my sixth visit to Mount Athos. This visit to the hermit began one day when, after making the journey from Ouranopolis, outside Athos, to Karyes, the town at the center of the peninsula that is the capital of the monastic republic, and having obtained my *diamonitirion*, I walked, already tired, to the Grigoriou *konachi*.<sup>9</sup>

“*Kali spera*,”<sup>10</sup> said Father T. as he answered the bell of the *konachi* and invited me in, ushering me through the wide hall with its great log chest and its glass doors into the chapel. He led me into the little living room with its icons, its iron stove, its long window, its long wide benches and hard cushions, just as I remembered it.

“*Katse*.”<sup>11</sup> He invited me to sit. But Father V. soon appeared with a full plate of a delicious soup with artichokes from the *konachi*'s fertile garden. Then, among friends, we settled down to the serious business of trying to communicate. What did I need? Did I want to see Father J., the hermit in the forest, as they had heard I would? I think that was the gist of it. But the communication did not go well. Soon I was shown to a room to rest. I opened the windows as wide as I could for the air, and lay down gratefully for siesta. I was wakened two hours later by voices in the hall outside the guest room. As I emerged from my room I was introduced to a young man in a khaki sweatshirt: Andreas, a Canadian of Greek ancestry, who was staying with the monks at a nearby *kelli*.<sup>12</sup>

The coffee duly appeared, and we continued our conversation on the veranda with its magnificent view of the distant peak of Athos itself. Andreas briefly told me he was visiting the Holy Mountain for the second time, staying some two months in the summer before returning to Canada and college. He lived in the *kelli* with the monks, and while he was there, like a monk, he came under obedience to the *geronte* or elder monk who led that small community. Did I want to see Father J.? he asked. The best time would be the next morning. He would be happy to translate for me,

but would need the permission of the father of his *kelli* first. He would telephone later if the *geronte* agreed. We arranged a time in the morning when he would come, and which would hopefully allow me to return to Karyes in time for my bus. Later, a telephone call confirmed that the trip was on.

Next morning I woke around six, and quickly made my way to the chapel to join Father V., who was saying matins on his own. He had just finished when Andreas arrived and began talking high-speed Greek to him. There followed the embarrassment of piled food, of which I could eat little since my stomach had not yet adapted either to Athos times nor Athos cooking. Finally, somewhat later than intended, we left, Father V. showing us the unmarked trail that cut straight from the *konachi*, through the thickly overgrown forest, to the mule track where the path to Father J.'s cell branched off. The journey was very much shorter than if we had gone through Karyes.

When we got to his *kelli*, Father J. was under the veranda splitting logs. "Who is it?" he called in Greek. My interpreter told him it was the Englishman who had been to see him twice before. "Wait!" came the reply. We waited. The gentle blows of the axe splitting wood merged into the silence of the forest. Big logging machines grumbled far away in the background without spoiling the stillness. A quarter of an hour passed. "Should I try again?" asked my companion. "No," I said, "he knows we are here. He will come when he is ready."

Two or three minutes later the old man emerged from the bushes near the gate and passed us the key. We followed him up the path, round the cottage, to the clearing on the far side where under a tree were some half dozen logs upended beside a larger one that served as a table. The old man greeted us, filled mugs with crystal clear water, left the *loukoumi* open beside them in traditional Athos hospitality, and disappeared into his home, saying that we had arrived so early that he still had chores to finish.

Ten minutes later he joined us again, and we began to talk. Again, as had happened on a previous visit I had made without an interpreter, I learned more from his manner than simply by his words. In essence, I discovered that it would be better if I had come to him better prepared, after my visit to the monasteries and not before, when my mind was still full of the world I had so recently left. I still regret that I did not think clearly enough at this time to follow up what he said as well as I might. I also regretted very much that I had not learned to speak Greek; the limitations of translation cause real problems when dealing with things both subtle and spiritual. Nevertheless, it was a conversation of great value to me and, I suspect, to others living in the West.

“Jesus tells us,” I said at the beginning, “that we should not simply call on God but should do the will of God. If I wished to carry out this commandment, what should I be doing in my everyday life?” I think my young interpreter put it slightly differently, because the old man seemed slightly disappointed that this was all I was asking, and I remembered then that he had expected me to return at some future time and ask him one special question. That question was still unasked. However, he answered my current question very well, and in my eyes very much simplified the whole idea of doing the will of God.

It seems to me that Father J. does not talk theory. There is a quality in his advice that eliminates the distance and imprecision that normally come between us and important ideas. His words, as always, had seemed to directly link to experience.

He showed me quite precisely what was meant by the idea that we should be open to the best impulses that reach us, and dead to the temptations of our own weaknesses and of people’s attempts to force us into different directions in our ordinary lives. There seems to be an element of “conscience” in this: of “saying what we feel and doing what we say.” At the same time, it linked with the idea that to do the will of God we should “be ourselves,” should learn to express ourselves not in a modern sense, but to express that Self which God had made of us “in the beginning.”

To be true to our divine self-image, we need to be renewed in the way described by Saint Paul when he wrote: “be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, 13 that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God” (Romans 12:2).

## Gregory of Nyssa and the Chariot Parable

One of the threads in Jewish thought that clearly appear in inner Christianity is found in the *Merkabah* tradition, the tradition of the *chariot of fire* by which certain of the prophets were taken up to heaven: a tradition that gives the chariot analogy its full emotional meaning, previously not revealed to us. The same basic elements are also found further east, and this whole structure appears not only to contain certain of the basic concepts of Christian thought, but to help to provide a formal framework for these doctrines. This framework fits experience with a high degree of accuracy, and forms a useful basis for practical working in a Christian Fourth Way.

In fact, this is still the subject of investigation. Although I already have experiential evidence for what is said, at this point it is the practical application that is important, and as it concerns unwritten tradition, this

preliminary presentation cannot be fully documented but depends, in the traditional way, on the transmission of understanding.

For who does not know that the Egyptian army those horses, chariots and their drivers, archers, slingers, and the rest of the crowd in the enemies' line of battle are the various passions of the soul by which man is enslaved? For the undisciplined intellectual drives and the sensual impulses to pleasure, sorrow, and covetousness are indistinguishable from the aforementioned army. Criticism is a stone straight from the sling, and the spirited rejoinder is a quivering spearpoint. The passion for pleasures is to be seen in the horses who themselves with irresistible drive pull the chariot.

In the chariot there are three drivers whom the history calls "viziers." you will perceive these three, who are completely carried along by the chariot, as the tripartite division of the soul, meaning the rational, the appetitive, and the spirited. 14

In the story of the charioteer, the chariot of course represents the human body. When a single driver is described, this represents the Greek nous. The three viziers "who are completely carried along by the chariot" refers to what Gregory called "the tripartite division of the soul, meaning the rational, the appetitive, and the spirited," and this of course is the equivalent of the modern formulation of *three lower centers*. The horses represent the lower emotions, the reins the higher faculties of self-control that have to be formed or strengthened. The master or owner of the coach, the Lord himself, will not enter it until the driver is firmly in control. This is a particular state that is described in another work of Gregory of Nyssa, who wrote:

if reason [Greek *dianoia*], which is the distinctive property of our nature, should gain dominion over those traits which are added to us from outside (the word of Scripture has revealed this as if in a riddle, bidding mankind to rule over the irrational creatures<sup>15</sup>), none of these impulses would work in us for servitude to evil, but fear would produce obedience in us, anger, courage, cowardice, caution, and the desiring impulse [eros] would<sup>16</sup> mediate to us the divine and immortal pleasure.<sup>17</sup>

This will not happen until the synergetic action of the Spirit acts, like the turning of the river through the Augean Stables in the mythical labors of Hercules, to clean out all the debris of the past, deposited within us by the action of the outside world. In the meantime, we are trapped in our past actions so that the horses we should command are instead able to drag us

this way and that at whim, a process again described by Saint Gregory immediately after the previous passage:

But if reason should let go of the reins and like some charioteer entangled in the chariot 18 should be dragged behind it, wherever the irrational motion of the yoke-animals carries it, then the impulses are turned into passions, as indeed we can see also in irrational animals. For when reason does not control the impulse which naturally lies in them, the fierce animals are destroyed by anger because they fight among themselves. In these animals the energy of desire and pleasure is not occupied with anything higher, nor does any other of the faculties which appear in them lead in any way to a beneficial result. So also in us, if these faculties are not directed by reason towards what is right, but if instead the passions rule over the power of the mind, our humanity is changed from intelligence and godlikeness to irrationality and mindlessness. We are turned into beasts by the force of these passions.19

The process of cleaning out the past is described, again by Gregory of Nyssa, but going back to his *Life of Moses*, in paragraphs immediately following those quoted earlier from that work.

So all such things rush into the water with the Israelite who leads the way in the baleful passage. Then as the staff of faith leads on and the cloud provides light, the water gives life to those who find refuge in it but destroys their pursuers.

Moreover, the history teaches us by this what kind of people they should be who come through the water. For if the enemy came up out of the water with them they would continue in slavery even after the water since they would have brought up with them the tyrant, still alive, whom they did not drown in the deep.20

It is with the emotional flow that begins with water, with the tears of *compunction*, that this cleaning out begins to be effective. These tears, according to Theophan, are the smoke from the newly lit wood, still “wet” with *passions*. In time, the smoke becomes the flame of the spiritual fire in the heart.21

This process - which leads to *apatheia*, since the enemies described are the passions - is developed in progressively more detail as we go through the book. Experience will show you how if the dianoia/the discursive mind responds to provocation (see chapter 14), so that it becomes subordinate to the passions, we lose control of our minds, and also how the

alternative, described as gaining dominion over external forces, stabilizes this to form an element in that *magnetization* which provides us with a basis for inner prayer that brings something new to our lives.

Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me hath everlasting life.

I am that bread of life.

Your fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead.

This is the bread which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof, and not die.

I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world (John 6:47-51).

Then, the gospel tells us, the Jews around him misunderstood what he was saying, and took it *literally* and on a materialist level, asking a question that many of us have asked: "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" (John 6:52). Christ at first explains to the Jews what can happen but does so in a way that almost fits in with their literal view, but paradoxically creating even stronger conflict.

Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you.

Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day.

For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed.

He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him.

As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father: so he that eateth me, even he shall live by me.

This is that bread which came down from heaven: not as your fathers did eat manna, and are dead: he that eateth of this bread shall live for ever.

These things said he in the synagogue, as he taught in Capernaum (John 6:53-59).

But afterwards, alone with his disciples, he gives one of the great keys to Christian mystery, explaining the inner truth, the doctrine of His inner tradition, that what He calls His flesh is in fact Spirit, not the substance of the physical body: "It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth

nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life” (John 6:63).

## Work on Oneself

Outside monasticism, what we might call the path of repentance (*metanoia*) commonly begins with a search, the pursuit of answers to our deepest questions about the world and about ourselves. At a certain point, if we obtain good enough answers to our questions normally these would be gospel answers - something begins to act in us: whether it is the power of the Word expressed in the gospel, or the guidance of specific individuals, we will, if we are sincere, become less concerned with the world outside us, and more with questioning ourselves with looking into our inner world. It is at this point that the following quotation from Saint John - first quoted earlier - begins to apply: “If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them” (John 13:17).

Questioning ourselves leads to an awareness of the need for certain new knowledge, something that is perhaps the original concept behind the idea of the Good News or gospel. This is effective only to the degree that we understand it in its original meaning, or its multiplicity of meanings, instead of viewing it through the distorting glass of modern specialized thought.

This in turn can bring us into certain conditions of contact with others, *koinonia* in the Greek, a term which is more commonly used now for the communion service itself, but also means community. As our understanding deepens, the process then begins to follow a logical sequence, essentially Christian in character, yet in many ways similar to that known in the East as the method of cause and effect, or Karma Yoga. This process occurs unseen, although the results will be apparent.

And he said, So is the kingdom of God, as if a man should cast seed into the ground;

And should sleep, and rise night and day, and the seed should spring and grow up, he knoweth not how.

For the earth bringeth forth fruit of herself; first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear (Mark 4:2628).

Since the spirit is unpredictable, the efforts we make will not produce results that are clearly a result of that effort, yet, say the Fathers in many places, including the passage by Macarius the Great near the end of chapter 5, without effort, there is no grace, and without grace, no growth. Yet

if we persist in exposure to both these forces, then we will begin to recognize certain temporary changes in us; changes that occur when we are exposed to these forces but which run down between whiles. After a time, we become aware that the ideas and the teachings, however true they may be, are not making these needed changes permanent. The first outcome is usually a kind of addiction, in which we simply seek greater and greater exposure to the good influence that has begun to act on us.

In simple terms, a cult is something that imitates this spiritual process closely enough to have this initial addicting effect on some people, but which, because it does not convey the complete message, generates a form of reasoning which does not afterwards free them from their addiction and so cannot lead to genuine spiritual results. But with instruction that is sufficiently complete, with proper exposure to the gospel, we will quickly come to realize that it is up to us: that for those who know these things, “happy are ye if ye do them.” That is, we may realize that some effort by ourselves is necessary if we are to become changed as we wish to be changed. This necessary effort is what many people in esoteric work describe as *work on oneself*.

Work on oneself is the effort of repentance, it is work for *permanence* of our spiritual states.

## Modern Solutions

The monastic life is, or used to be, dedicated to this practice of purifying the heart by *metanoia*. Outside the special conditions of monasteries and hermitages, this particular form of *metanoia* may not always be possible. At different times in history, and for people in different situations in life, a different approach may be needed, so that nonmonastic *metanoia* differs from other forms of the religious life, in that not only is continual practice demanded of the student, but continual research is demanded of any community of such students and their leaders to adapt to changing needs as the circumstances of life change. This is less so of monasticism, but because of the time it demands - up to sixteen hours of daily prayer and liturgical life at the extremes - Boris Mouravieff said about this monastic way: “It is obvious that this method cannot operate in modern conditions of life and work. It would be useless and even stupid to attempt it for, if the searcher has the greatest will in the world, it cannot be applied the whole time, and, practiced for part of the time it can only lead to self-deception.” 22

In many people’s everyday lives, to give sufficient time to the monastic forms of this practice is difficult, if not impossible. Other answers,

other ways of working on oneself, are required. And today at least, and where they have received a modern education, even monks have been known to become too busy!

For these reasons, some mention of alternative methods by which laypeople can work on themselves under modern conditions will be made in the following chapters, but in practical terms this book is intended among other things to draw attention to the need for ongoing practical research in this field, as part of a program of restoration of the inner tradition to the full effectiveness it now lacks. As Livingstone said about the amount that must be done to rediscover darkest Africa, we must realize that to rediscover the Christian tradition much work has to be done.

But we must also realize something else, that a waking heart is a change of being.

Morton Smith, who was referred to earlier (pp. 1089) as describing quite accurately the qualities of the Christian gnosis, in his book *The Secret Gospel*, 23 an attempt to simplify the complex thesis of his original book, describes the great difficulties he experienced attempting to understand what it was that Jesus had taught secretly. His *atheistic conclusion* is that Jesus transmitted to others a kind of possession by some spirit, that this was a kind of psychological process, and that, after Jesus' death, it could be transmitted from person to person by what he actually calls at one point *infection*.

If the atheistic preconception is removed from Smith's conclusions, they are fundamentally correct, although incomplete in detail to the point of distortion. But the addition of the atheistic viewpoint compounds this distortion or perhaps caused it. It seems an easy evasion, if time-honored, to say that this idea can only be understood from a position of faith, but this happens to be the fact.

It is in fact possible to identify in meaningful modern terms the greatest element missing from this whole view, an element that differentiates the processes described from any clinically pathological event. Symptomatic of schizophrenia and certain other psychoses is the generally recognized effect they have of creating an *incoherence*<sup>24</sup> of speech, reason, and behavior. It is possible to say, with Smith, that the characteristic of Christian experience, and a test of the truth in inner Christianity, since we are speaking of inner experience, is *coherence*: the tradition forms a coherent or internally consistent whole. It is worth remembering here that the classical medical test of *awakening* from anaesthesia is one of *coherence*. This should be understood in the sense that people often speak incoherently when emerging from anaesthesia, and they are not considered to have become *conscious* until they speak coherently.

I am not qualified to define the Holy Spirit, but it is clear from my own experience, as well as from my researches, that the great difference between pathological possession and the union of the Christian with Christ is that the pathological leads away from the conscious into the fragmented, whereas any true spiritual union leads in the opposite direction - away from the fragmented toward unity of consciousness.

This also links with our reference, on page 44, to Hughlings-Jackson's definition of intoxication as a state in which the higher faculties are lost first. Fallen humanity is thus in a kind of intoxication from which we have yet to emerge as a race. The parable of the *tares* (Matthew 13:27-30) refers to a *psychological intoxication*, an intoxication of ideas or sensations, entered in a state of partial sleep. "While men slept," an enemy sowed weeds among someone's wheat, so that the weeds grew up amongst the grain. The farmer refused to pull out the weeds, being afraid to damage the wheat. He then said that it would be easier to separate them at harvest time. Psychologically, this speaks of a state, not of physical sleep, but of absence (an opposite of *presence of mind*): an inattentive or distracted state, in which we take in ideas and sensations *indiscriminately*. What we take in in this state then influences our future thoughts and behavior, and can even reduce our future awareness.

In the parable, the solution is not to try to remove these unwanted memories immediately but to wait for the harvest and then "bind them into bundles." "Harvest," in this sense, is the time when we see what happens when our various thoughts and memories emerge and shape the events of our life. Then we should classify the harmful thoughts and memories in "bundles," and so we will learn to burn them in the fire of *compunction*.

As long as our minds are dominated by these images indiscriminately taken in in the past, people will be able to say of us that: "these people have arrived at a certain concept of God, but not a conception truly worthy of Him and appropriate to His blessed nature. For their 'disordered heart was darkened by the machinations of the wicked demons who were instructing them.'" 25

Most people believe that there is a great gulf between Eastern and Western thought. This fallacy is due to the Victorian idea that Indian philosophy regarded the world as unreal. This was a naive and quite incorrect interpretation: the doctrine in question actually claimed that the view of the world held by those who lacked a properly formulated conceptual system was inaccurate, that is, incorrect or illusory. In Indian thought, illusion (*maya*) arises through ignorance (*avidya*). We can see the action of this principle in ordinary thought, where we will discover that *ignorance leads to opinion*: it is our nature to form theories and opinions





























































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































