

LEGACY OF CHRISTIANITY

The Origins of Christianity

Certain esoteric teachings suggest that the Christian religion existed before the birth of Jesus Christ. G.I. Gurdjieff, for instance, claimed that the origin of Christianity was in ancient Egypt. In talks with his students he offered a very different history of Christianity than the traditional view of scholars and clerics: "Many people think that the outward form of worship, the rites, the singing of canticles, and so on, were invented by the fathers of the church. Others think that the outward form has been taken partly from pagan religions and partly from the Hebrews. But all of this is untrue. The question of the origin of the Christian church is much more interesting than we think."

The Christian church, the Christian form of worship, was not invented by the fathers of the church. It was all taken in a ready-made form from Egypt, only not from the Egypt that we know but from one which we do not know. This Egypt was in the same place as the other but it existed much earlier. Only small bits of it survived in historical times, and these bits have been preserved in secret and so well that we do not even know where they have been preserved. It will seem strange to many people when I say that this prehistoric Egypt was Christian many thousands of years before the birth of Christ, that is to say, that its religion was composed of the same principles and ideas that constitute true Christianity. Special schools existed in this prehistoric Egypt which were called 'schools of repetition.' These schools were taken as a model for Christian churches – the form of worship in Christian churches almost entirely represents the course of repetition of the science dealing with the universe and man. Individual prayers, hymns, responses, all had their own meaning in this repetition as well as holidays and all religious symbols, though their meaning has been forgotten long ago. (1)

The ancient, perennial origin of the teachings of Jesus was confirmed by St. Augustine in one of his *Letters*: "That which is called the Christian religion existed among the ancients, and never did not exist from the beginning of the human race." The Franciscan scholar Roger Bacon also wrote of a perennial spiritual teaching in his *Philosophia Occulta*, which identified a number of predecessors of Jesus in the same universal tradition, including Abraham, Moses and Noah as well as Zoroaster, Hermes, Pythagoras and Socrates.

The Sufis, who describe Jesus as a 'Complete Man' and accept him as a 'Teacher of the Way,' consider him as a representative *par excellence* of an ancient and continuing wisdom tradition. Many sayings and stories attributed to Jesus appear in the writings of classical Sufi masters such as Attar, Rumi, Shabistari and El-Ghazali. Jesus is also honoured and esteemed in Islam:

The Qur'an makes it clear that, like Mohammed, he was both a prophet and a Messenger and taught people to surrender to God – the central concept and meaning of Islam. Jesus is described as 'an eminent one in this world and in the next'

and as 'One of those brought near to God.' In Chapter 57 comes the following affirmation:

We formerly sent Noah and Abraham, appointed them as prophets, and the Book to be in their posterity. In their footsteps we caused Jesus to follow, and We gave him the Gospel containing guidance and light.

Thus Jesus' mandate from on High is made clear to every Moslem. This, in turn, explains why so many sayings and parables by him, and stories about him, were so valued, and preserved. (2)

There are suggestions that the Chaldean Magi played an important role in the life of Jesus. The Magi originated in central Asia before the time of Zoroaster and spread throughout the Persian empire, eventually reaching Syria and Egypt. The members of the Magi brotherhood were devoted to serving the Divine and were considered Masters of Wisdom. According to the gospel of Matthew, they were experts in astrology and divination.

Esoteric tradition holds that the 'Three Wise Men' who visited Jesus after his birth bearing gifts were Magi. It is believed that they also bestowed *baraka* (blessing, grace) on the young Jesus to support his destined role as a Messenger of God. After the time of Christ the Magi continued to preserve and transmit his original teachings, which emphasized the necessity of a spiritual transformation (a 'rebirth' or 'resurrection') before one could enter the 'Kingdom of Heaven.' The Magi were also connected with the Essene Brotherhood.

Historical sources indicate that the Essene Brotherhood was founded 1200 years before the birth of Christ and flourished between 200 B.C. and 200 A.D. The Brotherhood was located in isolated communities near the Dead Sea and practised asceticism, held property in common and sought mystical communion with God:

The Essenes were not only influenced by Zoroastrianism and the Magi. They were also close to the Pythagoreans and knew the Pythagorean teaching about number and harmony which was incorporated into their liturgy. They were also in contact with the Buddhist missionaries whose teachings about the Noble Eightfold Path must have influenced the rule of the Community of the Covenant. It seems probable that the great Teacher of Righteousness [Jesus], whose title could equally be translated as Master of Wisdom, was responsible for combining the different traditions in a teaching and way of life that attracted the very finest spirits among the Jews. (3)

John G. Bennett believed that both John the Baptist and Jesus received their initial spiritual education with the Essene brotherhood. "Much of Jesus' teaching, and especially the Sermon on the Mount, is so close to the Essenes' own doctrines that it is reasonable to suppose that in his early manhood he went through the full training and initiation of the brotherhood." Gurdjieff claimed that the "Brotherhood of the Essenes" were able to preserve the original teachings of Jesus and subsequently transmit them to successive generations.

Jesus of Nazareth

Esoteric tradition holds that Jesus' mission on earth was not necessarily to found a new religion or reform existing religious structures. Rather, he was a representative of an ancient tradition of inner transformation based on the developmental principle of self-knowledge and understanding. "What has been termed 'Christianity' was originally and essentially a mystical school of teacher and pupils – master and disciples – whose purpose was not the inculcation of belief, but an education in experience." From this perspective Jesus is seen as the founder of a mystical school for the transmission of inner teachings of human development for those with the requisite desire and receptivity to benefit from them. In the words of Jesus himself: "He that has ears to hear – let him hear."

Jesus, far from being an isolated phenomenon, was in fact a representative of an ancient and still ongoing tradition of wisdom whose object is to produce a different kind of human being, not merely more ethical, but more conscious. We are 'asleep.' We have to 'wake up.' We have, it seems, a deeper, fuller, truer power of intelligence, intuitive in nature, direct in perception, slumbering within us. We are more than we know. It is the role of Jesus and people like him, to enable us to 'know ourselves' – an ancient admonition. A look at the newly-found *Gospel of Thomas*, where the master's exhortation 'Know thyself' is writ as large as it is above the portals of the Oracle at Delphi, certainly bears this interpretation out. (4)

The goal of all authentic spiritual teachings is the perfecting of the human soul to produce the 'Complete Human Being.' "When Jesus said: 'Be ye perfect as your Father in Heaven is perfect' (Matthew 5:48), he was exhorting his disciples to realize their potential completeness as human beings, their full development, and become as perfectly human, as God was perfectly God."

Man has dormant perceptions of which he is not aware, hidden faculties waiting to be developed. The light of his possible higher consciousness lies hidden under his 'bushel' – as the Nazarene master expressed it. In his relative unconsciousness lies his incompleteness. To be complete means to be conscious, completely conscious. It also means to be re-attached inwardly to the Source of Being and of Wisdom, God, from whom we have been separated. We can then become true participants in the universe, the real and spiritual universe – to which we ultimately belong. (5)

The teaching mission of Jesus was predicated on the possibility of consciously developing access to higher levels of consciousness, allegorically represented as the 'Kingdom of Heaven.' It is recorded that Jesus taught his disciples that "the Kingdom of Heaven is within you and whosoever knoweth himself shall find it. And having found it, ye shall know yourselves that ye

are the sons and heirs of the Father, the Almighty, and shall know yourselves that ye are in God and God is in you.”

It is clear from the Gospels that the whole aim and object of Jesus' teaching was to enter 'the kingdom of heaven.' This was the term he used for the higher state of being and consciousness, that 'life more abundant,' for which we have the potential, and which is the possession of the completed human being. But as we are now, we are incomplete, hence our deep unease and sense of unfulfilment. This will continue until we do what we were ultimately created for – enter the kingdom. Though this is our birthright it is not an automatic inheritance, not a 'natural' endowment. It has to be striven for, under guidance. Such guidance comes from a teacher, like Jesus, who directs the effort of the student, making it 'right effort.' Such help is both subtle and sophisticated. And obviously indispensable. It is not enough to want to 'overcome the world' which Jesus says we must do to enter 'the kingdom.' We must also know *how* to overcome the world, and recognize it when we see it. This requires education. For 'the world' is a technical term for 'everything that weighs down the soul.' (6)

Bennett identified *sacred love* as the central core and heart of Jesus' teaching: "I believe that the mission of Jesus was no less than an attempt to bring mankind to the next stage of human evolution, when love will be an inherent property of the human essence as creativity has been for the past thirty-five to forty thousand years."

When Jesus had been baptized by John, he accepted the task entrusted to him by his Father, which was to transmit to those able to receive it the direct action of Divine Love. This is the highest Cosmic Impulse that can enter the Creation. Beyond it is the Unfathomable Source, of which nothing can be said or even imagined. When man is united with Love, he is God, but Divine Love can enter only into a soul that is utterly empty of itself and liberated from all taint of egoism. (7)

The New Testament provides almost all our knowledge of how Jesus transmitted his teachings to his followers. The stories, sermons, parables and sayings of Jesus were recorded by four of his most spiritually developed disciples and form the four Gospels of the New Testament. Bennett distinguishes them on the basis of their esoteric content and emphasis:

The four gospels were compiled by four different schools of wisdom, each entrusted with a different task. Saint Mark's gospel recounts the story of the event as it appeared to the uninitiated disciple. It could be recognized and confirmed by eyewitnesses or those who had had contact with them, such as their children and grandchildren. Saint Luke's gospel was written to connect Christianity with the Great Mother tradition through the Virgin Mary. St. John's gospel is an interpretation based on the Gnostic tradition. It expresses the true significance of the event in symbols, and, of course, it emphasizes more than any other the need for full mutual acceptance and love between the disciples. St. Matthew's is preemi-

nently the gospel of the Masters of Wisdom. It is a *legominism* – knowledge that is intended for posterity and put into a work of art in such a way that its meaning can be deciphered only by initiates – carefully constructed according to the pattern that connects the three worlds. (8)

P.D. Ouspensky argued that the New Testament is an esoteric introduction to 'hidden knowledge' or 'secret wisdom.' "In each of the four Gospels there are many things thought out and based on great knowledge and deep understanding of the human soul. They were written consciously for a definite purpose by men who knew more than they wrote. The Gospels tell us in a direct and exact way of the existence of esoteric thought, and they are in themselves one of the chief literary evidences of the existence of this thought."

According to Ouspensky, the Gospels constitute an esoteric document which can only be fully appreciated and understood by the initiated. "The four Gospels are written for the few, for the very few, for the people of esoteric schools. However intelligent and educated in the ordinary sense a man may be, he will not understand the Gospels without *special* indications and with-out *special* esoteric knowledge."

The New Testament is a very strange book. It is written for those who already have a certain degree of understanding, for those who possess a key. It is a great mistake to think that the New Testament is a simple book, and that it is intelligible to the simple and humble. It is impossible to read it simply just as it is impossible to read simply a book of mathematics, full of formulae, special expressions, open and hidden references to mathematical literature, allusions to different theories known only to the 'initiated,' and so on. At the same time there are in the New Testament a number of passages which can be understood emotionally, that is, which can produce a certain emotional impression, different for different people, or even for the same man at different moments of his life. But it is certainly wrong to think that these emotional impressions exhaust the whole content of the Gospels. Every phrase, every word, contains hidden ideas, and it is only when one begins to bring these hidden ideas to light, that the power of this book and its influence on people, which has lasted for two thousand years, becomes clear. (9)

Our contemporary understanding of Jesus and his way of teaching through stories, parables and sayings was greatly enhanced by the discovery of the previously unknown document *The Gospel of Thomas* (10) discovered in 1945 near Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt. Many of the sayings and parables of the text are concerned with man and his Origin and possible return to it:

Here we have a collection of oral teachings of Jesus, sayings and parables, both known and unknown, together with interesting variants of familiar ones. It is very probable that these 'sayings' of Thomas were likely the 'oracles' of Matthew and other early Christian teaching texts that have been lost. The Gospel of Thomas is simply and wholly concerned with the presentation of teaching statements by Jesus, introduced every time with the words 'Jesus said.' There is no narrative. There is

no mention of his birth, the external incidents of his life, the miracles, nor of his 'death.' There are no 'apocalyptic' statements nor any mention of a 'second coming.' The gospel is in no way concerned with events in time. It is concerned solely with entry into eternity or eternal life. 'Whoever finds the meaning of these words will not taste death.' Eternal is of course a qualitative concept. It refers to intensity rather than extensity, being rather than surviving, consciousness rather than continuity. Eternal life is thus synonymous with the kingdom of heaven. (11)

One of the most important teaching methods employed by Jesus was the parable, a form that could be transmitted through the ages with minimal distortion. "Sayings and parables are the underlying common core of the Gospels. This was the original prime material around which the Gospel writers composed their various texts:

If the objective of the School of Jesus was entry into the Kingdom of Heaven, then the parables can be regarded as 'keys' to the Kingdom, but keys that could only be 'turned' in the totality of the teaching. Many of the parables do, of course, refer to the kingdom quite explicitly, beginning for example with 'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed' or 'The kingdom is like leaven.' These are not 'comparisons,' but immediate and active symbolic agents of transformation which in some mysterious way emit an impulse which carries you *towards* the kingdom. The parable is thus a symbolic organism spiritually imbued with something of the texture of the kingdom itself. It is a living ladder, let down from above, drawing us up. The parable of the mustard seed *is* the mustard seed. It makes us grow through its intrinsic power of growth. And in the parable of the leaven (hidden in the dough) is that very leaven. Thomas Merton grasped something of this action when he said: "The true symbol does not merely point to something else. It contains in itself a 'something' which awakens our consciousness to an awareness of the inner meaning of life and of reality itself." (12)

The stories and parables in the New (and Old) Testament have different levels of meaning, from the literal to the higher esoteric interpretation. In *The New Man*, Maurice Nicoll describes the way in which these teaching forms convey both an outer and inner meaning to the listener or reader:

All sacred writings contain an outer and an inner meaning. Behind the literal words lies another range of meaning, another form of knowledge. There are many stories in the Old Testament which convey another knowledge, a meaning quite different from the literal sense of the words. The story of the Ark, the story of the tower of Babel, the story of Jacob and Esau and the mess of pottage, and many others, contain an inner *psychological* meaning far removed from their literal level of meaning. And in the Gospels the *parable* is used in a similar way. Many parables are used in the Gospels. As they stand, taken in the literal meaning of the words, they refer apparently to vineyards, to householders, to stewards, to spendthrift sons, to oil, to water and wine, to seeds and sowers and soil, and many other things. This

is their literal level of meaning. The language of parables is difficult to understand just as is, in general, the language of all sacred writings . . . The idea behind all sacred writing is to convey a higher meaning than the literal words contain, the truth of which must be seen by Man *internally*. This higher, concealed, inner, or esoteric, meaning, cast in the words and sense-images of ordinary usage can only be grasped by the understanding. (13)

During his life many miracles were attributed to Jesus, especially apparent healing miracles. Although the inner developmental function of these miraculous events are of greater import than their outer manifestation and effect on observers, the multi-dimensional impact truly defines its comprehensive nature. "Though the real operation of a teaching miracle is at a deeper level, it is likely that the element of wonder or astonishment involved is also there to play a role in the total event."

Teaching masters like Jesus perform the trans-dimensional actions called 'miracles' to communicate an inner developmental impact to the deepest self of a pupil or other witnesses which will vary according to the receiver's state. As such, miracles are in fact parabolic actions. Their purpose is transformative. From this point of view the turning of water into wine by Jesus at Cana (John 2: 1-10) is a miracle *about* miracles, telling us something of the essential nature of *all* of his miracles: they are all about changing 'water' into 'wine' – the alchemical transformation, the refinement of consciousness, wine being a symbol for spiritual essence. Thus 'walking on water' is only superficially a demonstration of overcoming the laws of nature. Its primary significance is undoubtedly as a teaching action, an inner communication from master to pupils regarding their need to walk on their own waters, and capacity to still their own inner storms. One can be sure, too, that in some way the 'feeding of the five thousand' (Matthew 15: 32-39) represents not merely the miraculous distribution of ordinary food to the disciples and others present that day in the 'wilderness,' but also the parallel transmission of spiritual sustenance. There is always more to the miracle than meets the eye. (14)

Esoteric Christianity

Every religion contains both an exoteric and an esoteric component. The outer or exoteric element tells the practitioner *what* to do in terms of practices and behaviours, while the inner or esoteric teaching shows *how* to carry out the admonitions of the religion. Gurdjieff made this distinction between the two levels very clear in talks with his students: "A Christian is not a man who calls himself a Christian or whom others call a Christian. A Christian is one who lives in accordance with Christ's precepts. Christ says: 'Love your enemies,' but how can we love our enemies when we cannot even love our friends."

Religion is doing; a man does not merely *think* his religion or feel it, he *lives* his religion as much as he is able, otherwise it is not religion, but fantasy or philosophy. Whether he likes it or not he shows his attitude toward religion by his actions and he can show his attitude *only by his actions*. Therefore if his actions are opposed to those which are demanded by a given religion he cannot assert that he belongs to that religion. The vast majority of people who call themselves Christians have no right whatever to do so, because they not only fail to carry out the demands of their religion but they do not even think that these demands ought to be carried out. No one has a right to call himself a Christian who does not carry out Christ's precepts. In order to be a Christian it is necessary not only to desire, but *to be able*, to be one. (15)

In the first three centuries following the death of Jesus, his teachings spread throughout the Middle East to Europe and as far as India and China. Early Christianity flourished as the esoteric element was nourished by those who perceived and realized the inner transformative nature of what Jesus taught his disciples. However, over time, distortions and misinterpretations of the original teaching gradually emerged and the external religious form of Christianity began to follow the inevitable laws of birth, development and decline that mark the stages of any earthly organization.

Ouspensky and others have argued that the organized Christian church did not faithfully represent the original esoteric teachings of Jesus: "The New Testament and Christian teachings cannot be taken as one whole. It must be remembered that later cults deviate very sharply from the fundamental teachings of Christ himself, *which in the first place was never a cult.*"

A critical turning point in the history of Christianity occurred in Rome in 325 A.D. when the Emperor Constantine convened the Council of Nicaea in which both state and church were represented. Unfortunately, the result of this gathering was a hardening of dogma, resistance to change and the exclusion of esoteric ideas and practices. "The deviation of Christianity from the rest of human religion was the result of a deliberate choice – the decision to regard the events of the life and death of Christ as unique, not as part of a continuous process. It must clearly be remembered that the versions of Christianity most generally available are those which have prevailed, being most successful, not necessarily the most accurate, historically or otherwise."

One of the consequences of this fossilization was that the early Church Fathers disregarded the importance of special techniques and exercises to develop consciousness. Also ignored was one of the essential cosmological principles of esoteric Christianity: the universe consists of a spectrum of Being reflecting a continuum of matter and spirit. Even the validity of the Gospels has been challenged. The text may have been corrupted, in transcription in the early centuries and later in translation, so that the original authentic text has not been preserved. Ouspensky questions the generally-held belief that they were entirely composed by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John: "It is very probable that the Gospels appeared as the result of the joint work of many

persons, who perhaps collected manuscripts, which circulated among followers of the apostles and contained records of the miraculous events which had occurred in Judea.”

The formal structure of the early Christian church, which was established long after the death of Jesus and his disciples, only partially reflected the inner teachings of the Master:

He and his disciples did not of course call the teaching ‘Christianity’ – a term which first appeared many years later – but referred to it as ‘the way’ to express simultaneously the concept of a journey to be travelled or path to be followed, and a method by which something is to be done. It was not until A.D. 45, when Paul and Barnabas were on a mission to Antioch, that the term ‘Christian’ was first coined . . . It is unlikely that the term was ever accepted by the inner group of disciples, under James’s leadership, at Jerusalem. This was the centre. Here were the authentic representatives, the true continuers of the teaching. Compared to them, the original twelve, Paul was a newcomer at the periphery, and not a disciple in the real sense. With regard to the term ‘Christianity’ it is nowhere to be found in New Testament literature . . . It tends to imply a completed and static body of doctrine, while the concept ‘way’ expresses a dynamic current of activity *in a certain direction*. Which is why the original school of Jesus used this term to describe the special developmental education they were engaged upon. It was a way within the Way, the Ancient Path to Wisdom. For wisdom can only be an organic aspect of inner growth. Otherwise it cannot be ‘contained’ – as Jesus explains (John 16:12): ‘I have yet many things to say unto you but ye cannot contain them now.’ A new ‘receiving organ’ has to be developed. Which is why ‘No man putteth new wine into old bottles.’ (Mark 2:22). (16)

As the Christian church became more rigid and institutionalized, it emphasized dogma and authority at the expense of a living teacher-student relationship as exemplified by the teaching role employed by Jesus with his disciples. The implications of this inflexible attitude were truly profound: “This, in turn, meant that the development of the personality and capacity of the teacher would have to be only within the narrow confines of doctrine. It would not be possible for a teacher to arise who might not accept the administrative and confessional doctrines which the organization monopolized. Such men, and women, would be heretics and there have indeed been many such in the Christian Church.”

But the institutionalization of belief and practice, the interposition between man and the divine of a mechanism which administers, effectively if not in pretension the good which is to come and lays down the forms of behaviour, these things can be seen to have little connection with the simple faith and daily study of the disciples who studied under Jesus. Modern students have been forced to the conclusion that the whole apparatus of the Church (whether Christian or other) is a replacement of the institution of discipleship. Christianity, as we know it in action today, follows more the pattern of stylized religion, and the active transformation of mankind, starting with the individual and mediated by an enlightened figure, is

now to be seen by us only in glimpses in the Gospels and again in the traditional Teaching Ways which are anathema to the Church. The cause of this split between us and the rest of humanity, of course, can easily be traced to the decisions taken to unify and to monolithise the community of Believers into a Church which alone monopolized the sacraments and which alone claimed to have infallibility. (17)

One of the principal lines of transmission of early esoteric Christianity was the school of the *Gnostics*. The chief centres of the Gnostic brotherhoods between the first and fourth centuries A.D. were located in Egypt. They preserved the inner teachings of Jesus in their original form as they revealed the deepest mysteries of the spiritual world. In the second century A.D. one of the most important Gnostic teachers, Clement of Alexandria, taught that there were three stages of spiritual transformation: *katharsis* (purification), *telete* (initiation) and *epopteia* (direct vision). He referred to the ultimate state of direct spiritual perception and knowledge as *gnosis* and indicated that it could only be accessed through a process of initiation into the "mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven."

The teachings of the Gnostics spread beyond Egypt to neighbouring regions while continuing to embody the spirit of Jesus' message of inner transformation and union with God:

During the early centuries of the Christian era, a rich and strange profusion of Gnostic societies or schools mysteriously manifested and iridescently irrupted throughout the Near and Middle East. Those which have been called Christian Gnostics, claimed to possess a secret connection with the original teachings of Jesus and regarded themselves as the inheritors of an esoteric Christian tradition unknown by, and incomprehensible to, the orthodox . . . The Gnostics sought 'Gnosis,' which means 'knowledge.' This was not knowledge in the usual sense, but transcendental or mystical knowledge available only through spiritual illumination arrived at as a result of special effort and education. One would then become a 'Knower,' possessed of a permanent state of knowing, a higher level of perception, and thus be able to fully and consciously participate in the life of the Universe. This was the Gnostic quest. (18)

The Gnostics taught that in order to reach the goal of *gnosis* or personal mystical experience, certain aspects of the aspirant's mind must be developed and refined in order to liberate the full spiritual potential hidden in the depths of human consciousness. "The Gnostic claims that within every man and woman there is an unfulfilled urge which cannot be given proper expression in the normal way because there is no social means by which it can be fulfilled."

Gnostic practices centered around discipleship, purification of the lower self or ego and the attainment of divine illumination. The Gnostics also believed that "after death man will rejoin that from which he has been severed, and will be unified with those whom he loves."

The Gnostics did not confine their studies, or their teachings, to any one religion, but borrowed illustrations from all that were accessible to them. The main teach-

ing states that there is a supreme being or power which is invisible and has no perceptible form. This power is the one which can be contacted by mankind, and it is through it that man can control himself and work out his destiny. The various religious teachers throughout the ages, putting their creeds in many different ways, were in contact with this power, and their religions all contain a more or less hidden kernel of initiation. This is the secret which the Knowers can communicate to their disciples. But the secret can be acquired only through exercising the mind and body, until the terrestrial man is so refined as to be able to become a vehicle for the use of this power. Eventually the initiate becomes identified with the power, and in the end he attains his true destiny as a purified personality. (19)

In their psychological teachings the Gnostics preserved fundamental transformational ideas such as 'humanity is asleep,' 'know thyself,' 'human completion and perfection' and 'returning to the Source.' They also taught that "the great Universe, visible and invisible, was created by a Supreme Being who is Alone, Ineffable, Beyond, Above, and yet mysteriously Within, all His Creation."

The cosmological teachings of the Gnostics envisioned Creation as a process of the descent of spirit into matter with the possibility of return to the spiritual light (the 'Great Work'). "From the high world of Light the soul was lowered. Down, down, down through Aeon after Aeon it descended, until at last it reached this planet or plane, this vale of Forgetting, where it forgot, or only dimly remembered, its high Origin, the Light Kingdom from which it had been exiled."

From on high, this Most Mysterious Being creates in a downward flow of emanation an ever-descending succession of worlds or levels of being, each emerging from the one above and within it, in a cascading gradient of consciousness and life, from the finest of the fine to the most material at the lowest end of the spectrum. The world closest to the Creator was called by the Gnostics the 'Light Kingdom' or 'Kingdom of Light,' wherein dwelt beings of the very highest subtlety of consciousness. Below this realm was a descending sequence of 'Aeons' or planes of being and intelligence in the downward Chain of worlds. Humanity occupied a world or level four stages above the lowest, and just below 'The Lower Firmament.' This was, however, not the true and 'rightful' domain of the human soul or 'pneuma,' which in some way had fallen from a very much higher realm into a world where it did not really belong. Man was thus a 'stranger' here. His origin was elsewhere, and to it he must return. (20)

Eventually, and perhaps inevitably, the Gnostics came in conflict with the orthodox religious authorities. Over time, the Christian church had ceased to be the religion of Divine Love ("Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy mind and with all thy strength and thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.") and became prey to the twin evils of power and persecution. "The Gnostic societies undoubtedly constituted a very serious challenge to the authority that the orthodox Church assumed, and a major threat to its identity and self-image." The Gnostics then became a target of their wrath:

The Gnostics were ardent lovers of Jesus and had no doubt of his Divine Mission. It is not easy to see why they should have been so relentlessly combated and finally suppressed by the orthodox church unless they possessed secrets that might have undermined the doctrines about the nature of Christ and the Deity that were the pretext for the power-seeking adventures of the bishops who surrounded the Roman emperors from Constantine to Justinian. This suspicion is strengthened by the zeal with which the sacred books of the Gnostics were sought out and destroyed. (21)

Another strain of mystical Christianity developed in Ireland in the fifth century A.D. through the work of St. Patrick, a Christian missionary and bishop:

The Irish reacted to the impulse of Christianity as no other nation did. They revered religion but they loved life. They also respected learning. They already possessed a wisdom tradition from their own Eastern ancestry and it had been carefully preserved in their initiate system. Their *allamhs*, or bards, were also healers, whose methods and training are astonishingly paralleled by Sufic methods in use at the present time. When the Irish accepted Christianity they did so on their own terms; which was to deny any conflict between the love of learning and the love of God. By the 6th century, Irish learning was famous and scholars were being drawn to Ireland from the fringes of Europe . . . The Irish Church preserved pagan literature because it valued knowledge. It read pagan poetry side by side with the Christian Gospels. When it copied the Gospels, its monks were inspired by more than devotion and skill or even love of the message they were transcribing. In the Book of Kells, from a monastery in Ireland, and in the Lindisfarne Gospels, from a monastery off the North-umbrian coast, there seems to be illumination at more than manuscript level. The works suggest inner illumination – both light and joy. (22)

It is apparent that Celtic Christianity derived much of its vision and potency from its spiritual inheritance from the ancient Druids. They also preserved the legends and poetry of early European traditions. This gave them an ability to bridge cultures and share knowledge with other nations: "The Celtic Church acted as a magnet to minds that sensed something defective in the official presentation of Christianity and the magnet caused a two-way flux from Europe to Ireland and from Ireland back to Europe."

Many of the early schools of esoteric Christianity were generally able to function openly until the beginning of the Dark Ages, when they were forced to change their outer expression to self-sufficient monastic orders to escape from the chaos and disorder of the times and safeguard their knowledge. Five hundred years later Medieval Christianity emerged, centered in France at the Abbey Church of Cluny:

The Abbey was founded in 910 by twelve monks from Monte Cassino and from this peaceful retreat in strife-torn France an extraordinary influence spread. Within a century the Cluniacs had gained control of a thousand square miles of surrounding country and were establishing the rule of law and order where there had been

little or none for five centuries. By 1095 a great new building in a strange and wholly unfamiliar style was ready to be consecrated – the Abbey Church of Cluny. In it was encapsulated all the Gothic cathedrals to come. In each of these there was a suggestion of a whole unseen cosmology; each an encyclopedia in stone, containing, for those who could read, so tradition has it, a summary of the Plan and Purpose of evolution. Conceived in an ecclesiastical body, the Medieval Christian culture was nevertheless designed for a new and different kind of expression. Although it was conceived by conscious men who were deeply committed to a religious expression of the Great Work, the Medieval Christian culture depended for its execution on exponents who were not churchmen at all, but craftsmen. (23)

The Clunic Church also expanded the paths of holy pilgrimage joining Rome to Canterbury to Compostela as an 'instrument' to broaden the minds of the pilgrims, shape their experience and nourish their spirit. At its peak of influence the Church spanned Europe from Portugal to Poland. The Church of Cluny was the prototype for the great Gothic cathedrals that followed, and around 1125 A.D. the various esoteric schools associated with the cathedrals were formally consolidated. Each school was a specialized centre of esoteric learning: Rheims for music, Mont St. Michel for astronomy and Chartres for multiple integrated studies. One significant effect of the cathedral schools was their profound influence on the surrounding culture:

About the effects of these schools which at the beginning of the 12th century designed the Gothic Cathedrals and remodelled medieval society and custom from top to bottom, we have perhaps most material of all. Everywhere we see their influence; in architecture, music, art, in the ritual of the church, in the spread of political peace, in the right organization of castes and guilds, even in a popular wisdom of legends and proverbs. Upon the stability so created Europe continued to exist into living memory. Hardly any other esoteric current in history created such profound and lasting effect. (24)

Almost nothing is known of those who designed and constructed the Gothic cathedrals. The architects and craftsmen were virtually all anonymous. What is certain is that these individuals possessed esoteric knowledge of a very high order: "Certain of the Gothic cathedrals are complete models of the universe. The cathedrals, directly or indirectly, were designed by men who belonged to schools for the achievement of higher states of consciousness."

Many who have carefully studied the Gothic cathedrals, including Ouspensky and his student Rodney Collin, believe that their primary purpose was to preserve and transmit "the ideas of *true Christianity*, that is of true religion or true knowledge." The designs of the cathedrals were very complex and symbolically encoded ideas and knowledge from many disparate fields of study, including human physiology and evolution, mathematics and astronomy:

It is known that there existed *Schools of Builders*. Of course they had to exist, for every master worked and ordinarily lived with his pupils. In this way painters worked, in this way sculptors worked. In this way, naturally, architects worked. But behind

these individual schools stood other institutions of very complex origin. And these were not merely architectural schools or schools of masons. The building of cathedrals was part of a colossal and cleverly devised plan which permitted the existence of entirely free philosophical and psychological schools in the rude, absurd, cruel, superstitious, bigoted and scholastic Middle Ages . . . There was then found or, to speak more accurately, *created*, for this knowledge a new and convenient refuge. Knowledge left the monasteries and passed into Schools of Builders, and Schools of Masons. The style later called "Gothic," of which the characteristic feature was the pointed arch, was accepted as the distinctive sign of the schools. The schools within presented a complex organization and were divided into different degrees; this means that in every "school of masons" where all the sciences necessary for architects were taught there were inner schools in which the true meaning of religious allegories and symbols was explained and in which was studied "esoteric philosophy" or the *science of the relations between God, man and the universe*. (25)

A number of remarkable individuals possessing deep mystical insight also emerged during this period in Europe. Each was destined to have a significant effect on the spiritual aspirations of humanity that has lasted to this day.

St. Francis of Assisi (1182 - 1226) is one of the most revered religious figures of history. He celebrated poverty and lived a simple, unpretentious lifestyle. Francis believed that nature was the mirror of God and he was known as the patron saint of animals. He even preached to birds, talked to wolves and had an uncanny effect on all living creatures. According to one story, when travelling with some companions, he came upon a grove of trees filled with birds. Stopping, he told his companions "to wait while I preach to my sisters, the birds." The birds surrounded him, mesmerized by the power of his voice and not one of them flew away.

In the early 13th century in Italy St. Francis founded the Franciscan Order of monks, which was based on a more universal understanding of the teachings of Christ. Idries Shah has identified numerous correspondences between this Order and traditional Sufi beliefs and practices:

The atmosphere and setting of the Franciscan Order is closer to a dervish organization than anything else. Apart from the tales about St. Francis which are held in common with Sufi teachers, all kinds of points coincide. The special methodology of what Francis calls "holy prayer" indicates an affinity with the dervish "remembering," quite apart from the whirling. The dress of the Order, with its hooded cloak and wide sleeves, is that of the dervishes of Morocco and Spain. Like the Sufi teacher Attar, Francis exchanged his garb with a mendicant. He saw a seraph with six wings, an allegory used by Sufis to convey the formula of the *bismillah*. And he threw away spiked crosses which were worn for purposes of self-mortification by many of his monks . . . Francis refused to become a priest. Like the Sufis, he enrolled into his teaching laymen, and again like the Sufis but unlike the Church, he sought to spread the movement among all people, in some form of affiliation. This was "the first re-

appearance in the Church, since its full hierarchical establishment, of the democratic element – the Christian people, as distinguished from the simple sheep to be fed, and souls to be ruled.” The striking thing about the rules laid down by Francis was that, like the Sufis and unlike the ordinary Christians, his followers were not to think first of their own salvation. This principle is stressed again and again among the Sufis, who consider regard for personal salvation to be an expression of vanity. (26)

Thomas Aquinas (1225 - 1274) was an Italian Dominican friar and priest who was honoured as a saint by the Catholic Church. During his lifetime he was a very influential philosopher and scholar who significantly impacted Western thought in the fields of ethics and metaphysics. Aquinas was considered an expert of natural reason and speculative philosophy and his commentaries on Aristotle’s works are highly regarded. “He blended Greek philosophy and Christian doctrine by suggesting that rational thinking and the study of nature, like revelation, were valid ways to understand truths pertaining to God. According to Thomas, God reveals Himself through nature, so to study nature is to study God.” His major contribution to medieval Christianity was to reinstate reason as a legitimate component of religious faith.

One of his teachers was the alchemist Albertus Magnus, who taught that alchemical transmutation was a disguised reference to the process of spiritual transformation. He also experienced visions and was even said by some to have the ability to levitate. There are suggestions that he was connected in some way with esoteric schools of inner development:

One of Thomas’s aims was to correlate all known learning of his day. Reason and faith, he claimed, were both concerned with the same object. The former starts with sense-data and attains to a knowledge of the existence, goodness and will of God. The latter rests on revelation. Each requires to take into account the knowledge arrived at by the other . . . Both Albertus and Thomas Aquinas knew, because of their contact with a genuine esoteric source, that “known” truth and theological dogma need not, by any means, coincide. They were probably engaged in trying to reintroduce the original developmental force of Christianity, while gently diluting the organizational accretions which had all but smothered it. They tried, as a beginning, to show that rationalism and intuitive insights could be harmonised with theology. (27)

Meister Eckhart (1260 - 1328) was born in Germany and at an early age joined the Dominicans where he studied scripture and practised religious rites. He had a number of personal mystical experiences which shaped his spiritual life and gave him his own voice to expound the truths of Christianity through the lens of mystical understanding. His sermons were venerated and many were recorded for posterity: “When I preach I usually speak of detachment and say that a man should be empty of self and all things, and secondly that he should be reconstituted in the simple good that God is, so that finally he may attain the purity of the divine nature.” His most famous single quote is: “The Eye with which I see God is the same Eye with which God sees me.”

His teachings were rediscovered in the 19th century and strongly influenced Schopenhauer and the Theosophical Society. They have also been compared to Buddhism, especially Zen, and Advaita Vedanta. Eckhart propounded and exemplified a timeless spirituality of nondualism and religious inclusivity:

It was in his doctrines of God that he went beyond the tolerance of his time and perhaps beyond the capacity of ours. What he knew of himself, and through himself of all people in all times, and therefore what he discovered about God – this was the gift he wished to give and did give most richly. Certainly he lifted Christianity above any parochial conception and revealed its inner relation to the great, universal spiritual movements which have found expression in many forms. He lived on that high level, on the same highlands of the spirit that were disclosed in the Upanishads and Sufi classics. To go where Eckhart went is to come close to Lao Tzu and Buddha, and certainly to Jesus Christ. (28)

In the Late Middle Ages a new cultural revolution, the Renaissance, emerged in Europe. Initially centered in Florence, Italy, it quickly spread throughout Europe. A number of major accomplishments were associated with the Renaissance:

- Invention of the printing press with movable type
- Birth of the scientific method based on observation and experimentation
- Maturation of the sciences of botany, anatomy and medicine
- Advent of humanism reflecting the principles of reasoning and empirical evidence
- New advances in architectural design and construction
- Development of realism and perspective in painting
- Emergence of the “Renaissance Man” personified by polymaths such as Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo

The Renaissance also heralded a new transformational impulse. It was less overtly religious and philosophical in its expression of universal spiritual truths and more artistic and intellectual:

It was the milieu of an intelligentsia. Cosimo de Medici becomes the central magnet to which all that is new is attracted. He founds the first public library in Europe. The best of the past is salvaged from Constantinople. Florence becomes the epicentre of Europe. Everything seems to be in a process of remaking around a “court” of sensitive intellectuals. We see Donatello, Ghiberti, Botticelli, Mirandola and Alberti, each supremely qualified in his own sphere and a strange breed of hyper-specialists like Michelangelo and da Vinci, who are supremely qualified not in any one branch of human capacity but in nearly all. The glimpse is of the *uomo universal*, the *Weltmensch*. Pythagoras and Thales are re-echoed on a new turn of the spiral. And how far, this time, the waves spread. Out of Florence come Queens, Cambridge, Magdalen, Oxford, Glasgow University, the voyages of Columbus, the conquest of Mexico, modern astronomy, the English Renaissance, the Encyclopaed-

dias and finally, universal education. The modern world was born into Florence about 1450; its signature printing, painting and education. (29)

Rodney Collin has summarized the sequence of esoterically influenced European civilizations and their major contributions to the evolution of human experience and possibilities. (30):

<u>Civilization</u>	<u>Transmission of Ideas</u>	<u>Monument</u>
Greek	Drama, music	Temple, theatre
Roman	Code of laws	Roads, aqueducts
Primitive Christian	Preaching	The New Testament
Monastic Christian	Illuminated manuscripts	Monastery, abbey
Medieval Christian	Ritual, sculpture	Cathedral, church
Renaissance	Printed books, painting	University, school

Each civilization built upon the foundation and bestowal of its predecessors and then gave expression to its own unique spiritual signature. In turn, they prepared the soil for the future germination and infusion of esoteric ideas and practices in a form suitable for the needs of a particular 'time, place and people.'

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