

# WRITTEN IN OUR HEARTS

## The Practice of Spiritual Transformation

by

Theodore J. Nottingham

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### EXCERPT

#### THE INNER LIFE AND THE INSTITUTION

#### *The spiritual cargo of a sinking vessel*

##### THE MODERN SEARCH FOR MEANING

We now live in a time of smorgasborg spirituality, religion a la carte, where the lines of authority are blurred and barriers between traditions and cultures are crumbling. These are times of extraordinary possibilities in which humanity's loftiest and most powerful knowledge is being made available to anyone who yearns for it. But therein also lies the danger: one of confusion and lack of discernment. What is ultimate truth? What is the summit of human transformation? Religion is meant to awaken us to this life-long becoming. It is by definition nothing less than the blossoming of human beings into children of the universe living in the light of that sacred mystery which created all things.

Ritual, holy scripture, liturgical celebrations must lead us to this state of consciousness or they are dead ends. All spiritual leaders must reflect and transmit something of that light or they are charlatans and impostors. And what is the basic characteristic of this metaphorical light? Unconditional love. To know that we are loved is the secret which religion reveals. It has no other message and no other purpose. But what power that knowledge contains! It is indeed "saving" knowledge. Kierkegaard told us: *"If there is an equality among us in which we truly resemble each other, it is that not one of us truly thinks about being loved."*

It is this "faith," this knowing which gives birth to inner freedom, confident joy, indomitable hope, and radiant love for all other beings. This is what the man from Nazareth came to tell us and it is the very simplicity of his cosmic message that got him nailed to a cross. In the light of that pure, unadulterated and overwhelming

consciousness, all of the complexity, arrogance, and thirst for power found in human history down through the ages is revealed for the tragic and shameful emptiness that it is. Does the straightforward, no-nonsense core of religion mean that we can be rid of temples, fancy robes, musical instruments and all the props that go into creating a religious community? Perhaps, for all of that is only meant to assist the inner experience of awakening to a new consciousness of the divine Presence in our lives. If you can use it, if it works for you, then by all means take advantage of it. Sometimes a chapel or temple is the only place in our society where one can still find a silence enabling such an encounter. If, on the other hand, these sets and artifacts reek with negative associations, then walk away from them and find a quiet grove in the woods (if you still can).

The injustices of the world will never be changed until individuals have changed. And individuals will never change until religion as inner transformation has penetrated to the heart of their being and made them into new persons. Change happens one human being at a time. It is your transformation, my transformation, that will make a difference in this wondrous but troubled world of ours, as we become who we truly are beyond the mundane limitations of the narrow realities in which we function.

## THE ORIGINAL PURPOSE OF THE CHURCH

The word "church" is a translation combining several Greek words and a multitude of images and metaphors. It comes directly from a word meaning "those who belong to God." The New Testament writers used many descriptions to express the meaning of church: slaves of Christ, the people of God, the family of God, the bride of Christ, the body of Christ. In the Book of Acts, the term "brothers" is used thirty times to describe the fellowship we call church. Church is therefore a gathering of individuals who, called together by a stirring in their hearts, seek to awaken to the divine presence. The real building of the church is, in the words of Thomas Merton, "a union of hearts in love, sacrifice, self-transcendence." Merton writes in *Life and Holiness* that "the strength of this building depends on the extent to which the Holy Spirit gains possession of each person's heart, not on the extent to which our exterior conduct is organized and disciplined by an expedient system."

Church is simply people who have experienced through the teachings of Christ the truth of *Emmanuel* -- God among us -- and attempt to make it the center of their lives and live out its implications. In spite of the chaotic array of religious organizations claiming to be the "real thing," there are only two kinds of churches: the institutional church with its power structure, fund raising, and packaged curriculum; and the holy church which is manifested in the selfless love of individuals both within and outside the organization who have awakened to the reality of the living God. The churches that surround us today are buildings, operations, projects, bureaucracies. Whether it be the Pope, the elder, the domineering minister who has control over the community, or the families which contribute the most money, the organization is generally run along secular concepts of power and authority. Intolerance, petty rivalry, dogmatic tyranny, group pressure, harsh legalism -- the list is almost endless and stands as a tragic witness to the near spiritual bankruptcy of the institutional church.

This legacy of degeneration has come to a climax as our society becomes more and more secular and as seekers of spiritual transformation look for other avenues of development. The consciousness of God is very hard to find in Christian worship. Boredom, habit, popular custom, mechanical repetition predominate in what is supposed to be a religious experience. Serious seekers can no longer sit through mediocre sermons that impart nothing and absurd rituals which pass for the celebration of the intimate presence of the Holy. The church at both the local and national level is in danger of accepting a living death and calling it abundant life. Fundamentalism, that strange throwback to a frontier mentality cut off from all of the illumined teachers of the past, has experienced a surge in numbers, a massive return of young people, and rather arrogantly points to this factor as a sign of holding the keys of truth. This phenomenon is a sad commentary on the desperate need for spiritual food in our time. A place with easy answers is better than a place that doesn't even know the questions.

Emotional stimulation, though far removed from genuine spiritual experience, is better than dreary boredom and mere social interaction posing as Christian *agape* (conscious love). The gathered assembly of the faithful ought to be a place where the deeper self awakens and is allowed to arise from beneath the pretenses, masks, defense mechanisms, and ignorance of our superficial selves. For this transformation to occur, the teachings of Christ must penetrate the heart and fill it with a taste of the divine love. However, the local church seems to have lost sight of that precious map that assists us in becoming our true selves. The treasury of Christian spiritual writings seems to have been forgotten or rejected, reducing preachers to administrators and social activists while leaving the person in the pew in a state of starvation.

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTIANITY

How could one of the most radical teachings on inner transformation be turned into the foolishness that goes on in most churches on Sunday mornings? The historical reasons began as far back as 312 A.D. when the emperor Constantine won a crucial battle and decided that his victory was due to the fact that he had experimented with putting crosses on his soldiers' shields. From then on, Christianity became a state religion, as opposed to a secret underground movement that brought certain death to its adherents if they were found out. Now membership could guarantee tax write-offs. Centuries later, the bishop of Rome decided to carve out western Europe for himself and branded it with a legalistic form of religion that has dominated our societies ever since. What was lost in the process was the eastern form of Christianity coming out of Palestine, Syria and Egypt. This teaching is truer to the original meaning of the Aramaic expressions spoken by the Christ to Mideastern people. It is more focused on the development of the inner life and has been preserved in the traditions of eastern orthodoxy. In the Philokalia, a compilation of the teachings Fathers of the desert from the third and fourth centuries, there is a gnosis on the watch of the heart and the uses of attention that is as potent a form of human transformation as can be found anywhere.

## ORTHODOXY AND GNOSTICISM

One of the clues to the early Christian struggle is found in the conflict between orthodoxy and gnosticism. We know the latter primarily through the polemical writings of their enemies. Vast and complex mythologies that seem to have little value to us are generally associated with gnosticism. However, C.G. Jung's insights into the archetypal imagery expressed in these myths has provided some important insight to gnostic thought. But it is more significant to focus on the recognition of the central issues in that struggle because they did shape what was to become official Christianity. For the first several hundred years of the budding religion, gnostic and orthodox Christians battled for dominance of a worldview that came to be known as Christianity. The gnostics and their insistence on the primacy of individual experience lost the power struggle and orthodoxy, with its requirements of obedience to hierarchies and adherence to creeds, took hold of the western soul for the following two millennia. Monasticism was tolerated in the organization as a safety valve for those who were driven to the solitary life, but it too was brought under the rule of the group mind represented by the bishop.

For over five decades, Dr. Charles Ashanin studied and taught these matters on several continents. He is professor of Early Church History Emeritus and a practicing Orthodox who is particularly sensitive to the spirit of Christianity. His rich insights into this struggle are valuable to all seekers of meaning as they exemplify the process by which the teachings are turned into something other than what they were meant to be, sometimes even into their opposite. He suggests that Christianity did not begin as a hierarchical entity, forcing individuals into a group structure. He states that original Christianity was "charismatic" and that although it had a sense of leadership, it was in the context of community rather than over community. This "charismatic understanding" includes equality within the group. Its leadership was not based on power but on the charisma of those who were advanced either in experience or in knowledge.

That situation changed when Christianity became hierarchical. Dr. Ashanin believes that very early on, when the Roman empire became aware of this group of people and declared war on them, there evolved a struggle between two societies: the Roman, pagan society with its own religion and this new religion claiming a different kind of theology. These two worlds were at war. As time went on, hierarchical Christianity adapted the Roman military and bureaucratic structures. A fundamental change occurred when things of the spirit become obedience to the bishop. Dr. Ashanin points out, however, that these bishops who later became bureaucrats, were called in the early Church "guardian angels," and "pastors." The hierarchical system was not meant to be authoritarian but was to organize a mutual net of support in what was nothing less than a war situation.

The hierarchy was not supposed to kill the charismatic spirit but to safeguard it. Gnosticism was a radical critique of what Christianity was becoming. But it was also an attempt to create Christianity in its own image. It emphasized the spiritual, the egalitarian and real transformation as opposed to the popular version that became a socially accepted institution. The gnostics criticized the leadership of the Church in a

way that is still applicable in our day: *"Some who do not understand mysteries speak of things which they do not understand but they will boast that the mystery of the truth belongs to them alone."* The gnostics were people who were conscious of the divine and who saw only bureaucrats in power requiring external deeds to fit the membership of an organization.

Dr. Ashanin suggests that within the Church itself, there were very sincere orthodox people who realized that the Church was bureaucratized. Without denying the theology, doctrines, or symbols of that Church, they went out to live their Christianity separate from the "political" Church. They did not want to live in a regime where bishops were magistrates. The whole movement of monasticism came as a corrective. The criticism of the gnostics had a positive impact on a segment of the Church which disassociated itself politically but remained spiritually within it as a guardian of the spiritual dimension. Yet it remains possible that the Church left out key insights into the message of Christ by choosing specific gospels over others during the political struggle over the books officially chosen to make up the Bible. Other gnostics insights that were lost in this process include the intriguing role of Mary Magdalene.

The gnostics claimed her rather than Peter as the primary apostle and thereby included that whole feminine dimension that has been missing from Christianity for centuries. Gnostic Christians insisted that baptism did not make a Christian and in the *Gospel of Philip* it is written that "many people go down into the water and come up without having received anything and claim to be Christians." In the legalistic Church, the act itself makes something valid. But Dr. Ashanin points out that the gnostic criticism of external ritual is very unfair criticism. It is true that in our time, many churches seem to adhere to the unfortunate motto: "you all come, so long as you pray, pay, and obey." But in the early Church, a long process was required for becoming a Christian. Christianity was once an initiation into a mystery, into an inward truth rather than into some external fact.

The Church had its own gnostic initiation which generated an inner understanding of the Christian mysteries. Dr. Ashanin concludes that without the Church which gnostics opposed, there would not have been gnosticism as we know it. Without gnosticism, the theological outlook of the Church would not have been the same. Gnosticism forced the Church to intellectualize Christian imagination at the expense of its spiritual side in order to define its truth against so-called heresies. Yet becoming a true "*pneumatikoi*" (spiritual ones) remains the vocation of every Christian.

## CHRISTIANITY IN OUR TIME

The mystics of the fourteenth century, the dawning of Renaissance, and the upheavals of the Reformation certainly struggled against the more grotesque distortions imposed on the Churches, such as the sale of indulgences. But by the time we reach the American frontier of the nineteenth century, we find a new misinterpretation unexpectedly born out of these attempts at purification. Biblical literalism was made possible because the "baby was thrown out with the bath water." By dropping all the wisdom developed through the centuries, from Clement of Alexandria in the second

century to Meister Eckhart in the fifteenth, the preachers traveling through the new territories began to turn the Scriptures into a one dimensional caricature, thereby overlooking the clear injunction that "the letter kills, but the spirit gives life." Gone was the allegorical method of Origen and Augustine,

gone was the poetic intuitive understanding of a John of the Cross or an Ephrem the Syrian. Suddenly, a new phenomenon was on the religious scene: bibliolatry. The book, stripped of its bottomless spiritual depths informed by Hebrew mysticism and a consciousness of the universal Logos, now defined life and became a weapon of separation rather than a roadmap to unity. This misuse of sacred writings was countered with the "historical critical method" which still reigns in seminaries to this day. Here the findings of archeology along with the application of rational and secular forms of literary criticism are the foundation for the exegesis of Biblical texts. Though identifying the context in which a teaching was given is certainly superior to a dull acceptance of every dot and tiddle as the divine expression, we are still left with the same gaping black hole. What is the inner meaning of the teachings that has the power to transform human beings? The inability to answer this question is the source of the modern churches' irrelevance to the spiritual journey.

The god of most religious organizations is not the "cosmic Christ" but the rational mind. The leadership, still predominantly male and over fifty, stands squarely before the gates of the kingdom of heaven like the Pharisees of old. They are the ones of whom Christ said: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you shut the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in." (Matthew 23:13) Their justification for avoiding the true demands of Christ ("you must be reborn"), is found in nice catch-phrases like "peace and justice." We would all agree that the world needs plenty of that, but the person without inner peace is not going to spread peace in the outer world! It is much easier to decry the Third World debt and to lobby in the halls of Congress than it is to overcome one's negativity, self-indulgence and egotism. For generations, the church as we know it has only reinforced our culture and often blatantly stood for the opposite of its teaching. Merely the small detail of a flag in the sanctuary invalidates the church's claim to be the house of God. Nationalism does not mix with a consciousness of the universal love that unites all things.

## **THE POTENTIAL OF THE CHRISTIAN WAY**

Why is it that persons who have journeyed through esoteric and New Age teachings or who left the Church altogether sometimes find themselves returning to this anachronism in what is essentially a post-Christian society? The fact is that we have no choice but to deal with Christianity in some way. Most of us born and bred in western culture carry in our subconscious the values of the Judeo-Christian tradition. We have been molded by these ideas, as has our society and our history. We cannot stamp them out any more than we can choose not to be born from the parents life has given us. A number of the great spiritual teachers of our day have commented on this, including G. I. Gurdjieff and Karlfried Graf Durckheim, suggesting that our essence is formed by our cultural

heritage and it is in this context that we can best develop the inner life. In other words, there may be much to learn from Hindu and Buddhist insights, but westerners may find that their "native soil" is best suited for the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth.

For instance, we will tend to naturally resonate to the idea that every person can be an incarnation, or at least an instrument, of the divine, whereas the concept of becoming one with the great Void is not as likely to have the meaning it holds for a child who has grown up in the shadow of the Buddha in meditation. It is also true that the institutional religion has been unable to destroy the treasure buried within its dogmas. Perhaps its purpose through history has been to unknowingly carry this spiritual wealth hidden beneath its wretched robes of patriarchy, bureaucracy, greed and ignorance so that genuine seekers of truth might have access to these living waters.

One clue that points to the presence of life beneath the rubble of nonsense and distortion making up the contemporary church is found in the list of rather extraordinary individuals who have understood the nature of this treasure in spite of everything. Consider this roster in our century alone: Albert Schweitzer, Nicolas Berdayer, Evelyn Underhill, Thomas Merton, C.S. Lewis, Mother Teresa, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Malcolm Muggeridge. There are many others, of course, famous and unknown who have witnessed to the incredible transformation available through the teaching preserved in the church. These are people whose inner life caught fire and metamorphosized them into radiant children of the divine Spirit. Their impact on the world around them is undeniable and the gnosis glowing within their being is as wondrous as any esoteric mystery. Each of these people discovered that the dogmas so poorly preached from the pulpits are carriers of experiential wisdom. They have developed "ears to hear and eyes to see" in spite of all the obstacles, particularly that of the church itself.

The exoteric form of this teaching, which knows nothing of its esoteric content, will continue to attract persons satisfied with simple ritual and friendly Sunday morning behavior. Yet the Church will also continue to attract people yearning for deeper meaning and new becoming. If they do not abandon the effort in despair or disgust, they will be the ones to call the church to its authentic task. They will rediscover the revelations of Christ and the way that leads to a comingling with the divine. They will be the ones to find the genuine spiritual leaders, the few enlightened pastors who have not been destroyed by seminaries, and together they will create a new community aligned with the legacy of the early Christianity. There are such places on this planet. I have found one in eastern France, and I am privileged to count among my friends a number of individuals who have made it through the trackless waste of external religion to the well of spiritual transformation.

Every generation has produced such persons and they pass on the torch in the dark night of human ignorance. This is why those who seek spiritual awakening cannot entirely disregard the Church in spite of itself. It is a vessel that carries a sacred cargo, one that is known to give life to those who find it. And the most astonishing thing of all is that this secret cargo often draws the seeker to itself long before he or she has any

idea that it exists. The paradox, then, remains virtually unresolvable: Does the Church as we find it in our time foster the inner life? No. Does the Church hold the keys to a new consciousness? Yes. In the last few years, signs of hope have appeared concerning the Church's role in the future. The influx into ministry of women and of persons who have journeyed through the holistic mindset of the new age promises to impact the spiritual dimensions of the Church's teachings. Also, the recovery of eastern Christianity in the west is providing us with a theology steeped in insights that are both highly pragmatic and profoundly mystical, although they are not any more generally accessible in mainstream Orthodoxy than they are in Protestant or Catholic churches.

Furthermore, those who are on the spiritual journey need to look beyond the cobwebs of old associations that hang over the teachings of Christ. Rejecting the external trappings of a religion that seems like a rotted fruit about to fall from the tree of civilization does not imply rejecting the experience to which it originally called us: the transmutation of human consciousness through the breakthrough of divine light. The great visionary mystics of Christianity, many of whom were persecuted by their "mother" the Church, offer powerful testimony to the worthiness of the teaching. Whether or not the vessel that carries this cargo is doomed to crash upon the rocks of its own failures is of little concern. The real issue is: can a new community of enlightened persons, radiant humility and intimacy with the divine which is the true mark of a Christian arise out of the ashes?

### **THE VESSEL'S SACRED CARGO**

What then is this cargo so well concealed from both its gatekeepers and those who "hunger and thirst after righteousness?" This cargo has surfaced at different times in history. The teachings have been clothed in the expression of different cultures but their results are essentially the same: the creation of individuals who have so transcended their egos that they have become transparent to the unconditional love sustaining the universe. Religion here reveals its true purpose. It reconnects us with our origin, lifting us out of the mundane illusions in which we drown daily, rendering us conscious of the invisible but dynamic presence of something completely "other" and yet incredibly familiar. Christ spoke of becoming as little children in order to enter the consciousness he named "the kingdom of heaven." This is a universal truth echoed in the teaching of Socrates: wonder. Religion is meant to realign our awareness of the sacred nature of reality. It heals us from the numbing apathy we so often feel toward the little things of life. Religion centers us not on ourselves but on this mystery called "God" that actively seeks to bring us face to face with its Presence. It offers methods of transformation that have been tested by time and by some of the great souls of humanity.

These are priceless teachings that are available to all who yearn to become who they truly are and to penetrate into the ultimate secrets of existence. The Church is the repository of potent inner disciplines that structure the inner spiritual combat and lead to ineffable discoveries. These stages of new becoming are referenced in the Scriptures with terms like "cleansing the cup," "new wine," and the famous "metanoia" so poorly translated as "repent" but which suggests rather a metamorphosis of the mind.

Detailed systems of inner development can be found in the Church, from the methods on discernment of the fourth century Church father Evagrius to Ignatius of Loyola on active meditation and Orthodoxy's spiritual giant Symeon the New Theologian on encountering the divine light. Highly charged words like recollection, contemplation, centering, vigilance, surrender, remembrance run parallel to the more familiar Christian ideas such as forgiveness, love, and humility that are found in Scripture.

This latter idea, so central to this path of enlightenment, has perhaps been the most misrepresented concept of all. Humility is the radical absence of vanity and self-interest; it is the recognition of our true condition. It does not refer to resignation or to the "meek and mild" image of Christ that so disgusted William Blake. The young rabbi from the rugged hillsides of Galilee was anything but such a person. And he certainly did not intend to have his message turned into a "let's be good boys and girls" sermon typical of so many middle class churches. On the contrary, he warned us that his teaching is as sharp and divisive as a sword, that it would in fact cause a great deal of trouble to those who took it seriously. The teachings contained in the vaults and libraries of the Church offer insights into every nuance of inner transformation. This understanding comes out of the furnace of experience and is grounded in the flesh and blood of the lovers of God who have gone before us.

Here is the true legacy of the Church and the purpose of the religious community. Out of the wealth of its inheritance and the inspiration of dedicated and enlightened leaders, the Church could be the doorway to extraordinary possibilities for the individual and for our society. Religion could once again claim its role as transforming experience rather than remaining the caretaker of rigid and irrelevant dogma. The latest Gallup poles tell us that over ninety-five percent of Americans believe in God or a universal spirit, but only forty percent are part of a church community. Imagine what would happen in the local sanctuary if that other sixty percent showed up looking to be nourished by the "living bread."

That is how the reformation started, with lay movements simply creating their own communities since the clergy was unable to provide them with what they truly needed. These groups shared in common a burning need for transformation. Out of their gathering together came some of the greatest masterpieces of spiritual literature, such as *The Imitation of Christ*, *The Theologia Germanica* and *The Spiritual Combat*. From this grass roots hunger for new becoming was born the Reformation. Those fires have since burned out and the wells of living waters they uncovered have dried up. History has come full circle. It is time for a new reformation and this implies a return to religion's first love: encounter with the sacred.