

TRANSFORMATIONS OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE: THE APPROACH OF RUDOLF STEINER

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Rudolf Steiner: the Spiritual investigations

The first point to clarify, at the beginning of this paper on the subject of religious experience, to save any subsequent confusion, is that Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) did not put himself forward as the teacher of any new religion or sect. His 'Anthroposophy' which forms the basis, e.g. of the Waldorf Education for which he is increasingly well-known, is not, in the strict sense a religious teaching, although it aims to affirm the cognitive value and even, as one might say, evolutionary significance of humanity's religious experience. He began his life's work as an academic philosopher, with a thesis on Fichte, a connection with Nietzsche, and a fundamental book on the relationship between issues of freedom and issues of knowledge.

Like the emerging school of Phenomenologists, whose mentor Franz Brentano he had heard lecturing when he was a student in Vienna, he was moving out of the idea of philosophy as an attempt to define the necessary foundations of all knowledge and toward a fresh look at the way the world shows itself to us. Turning away from nineteenth-century objectivism, his was an attempt rather to explore the human perspective as such – hence that difficult and, in English at least, rather awkward term Anthroposophy (Gk. 'wisdom of man'). In some respects, moreover, his ideas reach right forward here to what are now called 'anthropic ideas' in modern science. The world we encounter, many scientists now tend to acknowledge, cannot be thought of as just happening to be there before our eyes, nor is it just a random part of the world that we encounter. For what we know first of all about it is that the world (or our bit of it) is such that it has produced us, with our living senses and the consciousness with which to become aware of it. We are therefore in a quite concrete and specific way ourselves a key to the nature of that world. Steiner had already used this kind of thinking to break the charmed circle into which Kant's influence had trapped the theory of knowledge. We can only know what our organisation enables us to perceive – quite true. But it does not follow that we cannot know anything about the world as it really is, as if our organisation were not a part of that reality and a product of evolution and adaptation to it! Nor are we only able, as Kant had thought, to speculate about something more 'behind' e.g. a colour as it appears to our eyes. A reality outside our own consciousness there obviously is; but the reality behind the appearance is not to be sought, for Steiner, in some mysterious 'beyond' that we can only metaphysically infer, but in the concrete process whereby the eye originated through the effect upon the living organism of light. There is more to a colour perception than a passive appearance-in-consciousness, but it is in our evolutionary history that the active nature which produces the colour impression reveals itself for what it is, not in a speculative, transcendental domain. And thus the human observer is ultimately the sensitive apparatus we need as scientists to allow the phenomena to speak. We are ourselves the 'hieroglyph of the universe'.

He found that Goethe's many-sided genius had intuitively grasped much of this, simply as a deep-seated attitude, in his unorthodox but ever more widely respected studies in biology and colour-theory:

Goethe considered the human sensory organs to be the consummate physical apparatus ... 'The greatest misfortune of modern physics' consisted, for him, in the fact that experimentation had been separated, as it were, from man ... Newton and his followers meant to observe the processes of light and colour as they would go on if there were no eye present. But their attribution to such an external sphere has, in the context of Goethe's world-conception, no justification whatever. Steiner, *The Riddles of Philosophy* (New York 1973, pp.195-6).

The full impact of such ideas, now seen to be increasingly pertinent to modern science, remains far from clear, and Steiner's philosophy may well help us to see where they ultimately lead. I have tried to develop that perspective in my own *Rudolf Steiner's Philosophy and the Crisis of Contemporary Thought* (Edinburgh 2004).

My object here is to show their bearing on Steiner's treatment of religious experience, which he treats in a similarly 'anthroposophical' and indeed evolutionary way. It will be clear, perhaps, from what I have said about his philosophy that he did not think that human existence or experience could be explained in any sort of reductive or materialistic way, but that the world in its many aspects is encountered as a human reality that can only be encompassed through the fullest reach of all our faculties. (One might mention in passing here his profound valuation of art.) Moreover, in an evolutionary sense, any such definition can only be one stage along the way, as our humanity is above all our capacity for growing, maturing, deepening and enriching our experience through reflection and knowledge. This is the active nature which Steiner acknowledges as the spirit in humanity. Everything had to be tested, one might say, against the fullness of that human range or potential, against the demands of the spirit in us that is our creative connection with the world. Knowledge was never, for him, a having something imposed on us from outside. By understanding our own living connection with the world, we could and as human beings must have an 'inside' knowledge of it if, and only if, we are ready to meet it in this existential manner, testing our ability to grow spiritually and uncover deeper layers of our own being as we widen our experience of the world. He is a penetrating diagnostician of the way that the opposite approach to meaning and knowledge, which tries to make it independent of any human observer, not only leads to questionable philosophical assumptions but, much more seriously, leaves our modern culture drained and spiritually hollowed out, dehumanised.

Religion too has been affected by the conditions and underlying assumptions of modern thought, but for Steiner it always goes back in origin to the inner active spirit that can be discovered at the point of our living connection with the world as it makes and transforms us. Religion has become for many a system of dogmatic ideas, and ideas that no longer make sense since they have lost the human meaning they originally possessed. Just as his 'anthroposophical' approach suggested that the human observer was not a limitation but a key to the scientific truth we seek, so restoring the human dimension would not reduce the spiritual and religious to the all-too-human, but give us the fullest clue to the manifold possibilities of its meaning that have been lost. Steiner tackled head-on some of the central, irreducible features such as the Virgin Birth, and the resurrection, which have proved so intractable to modern theologians. Instead of trying to marginalise them, or sweep them under the carpet, he tried to find the way inside their meaning and allow them to challenge the meanings we have crystallised into modern prejudices and dogmas. It was his realisation that we can find the inner reality of these ideas by the spiritual-scientific or anthroposophical approach, rather than treating them as strange and impossible

descriptions of external events, which brought him to write his major work *Christianity as Mystical Fact*. He did not deny that Christianity came into being out of certain historical events, an actual life and a death on the cross. But how the origin of that life could be a 'virgin birth', and how that death could become the experience of the Risen One were matters that are accessible only when we see that they express, in earlier form, the same kind of existential testing of our humanity and contact with the creating, transforming spirit to which he was trying to give scientific, conceptual form for modernity.

Rudolf Steiner thus wrote his *Christianity as Mystical Fact* out of a powerful spiritual experience, which as he says brought him to 'stand before the Mystery of Golgotha in a solemn festival of knowledge' (Steiner, *The Course of my Life* (New York 1977) p.319). On the basis of that experience and his subsequent path of inner development, Steiner sought to bring out the meaning of Christianity for the modern world, and especially for the modern individual whose religious convictions lack authenticity unless they are reached through his own search, and whose values must be tested in the complexities of contemporary life. He faced perhaps more fully than any other modern thinker, the challenge of applying the consequences of that experience in every domain of life and thought. By being based on his anthroposophical method, then, his spiritual teaching was not founded on a 'conversion-experience', nor on a claim to some private revelation – many seers, spiritual leaders or mystics have claimed such, and one may respect the sincerity of their religious feelings and relationship to Christ. But Steiner offers something beyond the mystic's self-certainty. He offers something that can be put to the test as knowledge, provided only that we will test it with our whole being. Therefore this is something that is relevant above all in an age like ours, when we are having to question and re-examine the foundations of our religious traditions to discover what Christianity really meant to its first adherents, relevant, that is, to the search for the understanding of what works in Christianity to change, to transform people and to bring people together in creative ways.

In his re-examination of Christian origins, for example, Steiner reached back beyond that whole mediaeval consolidation of Christianity into a body of dogma and collective belief, to the early phases when

individual souls sought by very different paths to find the way from the ancient views to the Christian ones ... During the first centuries of Christianity the search for the divine path was a much more personal matter than it afterwards became (Steiner, *Christianity as Mystical Fact* (New York 1997) pp.147-8).

This diversity of earliest Christianity is increasingly recognised, in the teeth of conservative resistance, by the most advanced modern studies, whether it be Helmut Koester reconstructing the growth of the Gospel traditions or P. Bradshaw the origins of Christian ritual. The conservatives are alarmed, of course, at the idea that there may not have been a single starting-point, either in practice or in 'orthodox' belief defined from the very beginning. Many ordinary Christians are alarmed, too, and the growing tendency toward fundamentalism, with no questions asked, is perhaps an index of their sense of insecurity: learned efforts to pry into the sources of belief have opened the Church, it seems, to ever graver uncertainties as the twenty-first century unfolds. The questions, however, do not go away, and the vicious circle appears harder than ever to escape. Rudolf Steiner, on the other hand, suggested an approach that would stop us ever getting into it in the first place. For by admitting the diversity, and even acknowledging it as an essential aspect of the formative stages of Christianity that can become excitingly relevant in our own individualistic age, Steiner actually finds a deeper key to the universality of the Christian experience. He looks,

not for a single doctrine that had to be accepted by everyone, but for the inner process which brought people from a variety of backgrounds to a recognition of the Christ as the answer to their search, cutting through the barriers which most divided ancient societies – male and female, Jew and Greek, educated classes and the ordinary folk.

Ultimately Steiner's evolutionary account of Christianity and its role in the history of human consciousness aims to do justice both to the wide appeal and the inner depths; but his starting-point is the inner process, like that of his own awakening to the 'Mystery of Golgotha'. It was not a conversion, leading to the acceptance of new beliefs, but rather an initiation – revealing stages of spiritual development that lead to a specific illumination experience. Steiner's first and in many ways still most definitive book on Christianity was written in the recognition of exactly such inner processes of development behind the images and events of the Gospels, especially but by no means uniquely the Gospel of John, and the Christian mystery of mysteries, the Book of Revelation. These and the other writings of the New Testament are full of 'signs': actions, manifestations (such as a heavenly voice), healings, etc. which identify Jesus as the divinely ordained and prophesied Messiah (in Greek, Christ), and the Son of God. The Church has tended to emphasise their character as 'miracles'. It tried to dissuade people from asking how they came about and stressed their overwhelming, superhuman and even arbitrary character since they apparently broke all rules by bringing back the dead and altering the nature of substance. The only appropriate response, it has seemed to many pious Christians, is awed acceptance. Yet by calling them signs, Steiner pointed out long in advance of modern theologians, the Gospels themselves imply a totally different viewpoint, and suggest that they are actually a key to interpretation, to the 'significance' of the event. They challenge us not just to accept, but to identify the meaning of what is taking place. And Steiner recognised in many of them the exact images of the experiences of initiation. The seemingly miraculous stories of death and resurrection, of a world made new by the power of the spirit or inwardly transformed, of a transfiguring light, or a divine voice pronouncing God's pleasure in his newly-begotten 'Son': these were all familiar on the inner path of initiation, of spiritual awakening, and showed that the writers of the Gospels must themselves have understood the inner events to which they allude. Steiner would have been delighted when the rediscovered *Gospel of Thomas*, which preserved an early stage in the development of the Gospel tradition, affirms that 'he who finds the interpretation of these words will not taste of death', i.e. he will be one who has found his own eternal, undying self.

Rudolf Steiner's approach is thus to start at the other end from the empirical researches of familiar scholarship. But he did not therefore rush to the conclusion that the historical events described in the Gospels never happened. That would have been to fall into a mirror-image fallacy to the 'advanced' modern theologians' view, that wherever something in the Gospel texts recalls a mythological story, or an Old Testament scene, it is an excrescence on the unembroidered simplicity of the original tale. In some ways, at least, scholarship has remained very faithful to the Church's notion that the Gospel events must just be accepted – they simply happened. Anything else must be ruthlessly stripped away. Hence was born the Protestant theologians' project of 'demythologising' the New Testament, so as to get back to the unsullied truth, which has dominated all conventional approaches outside traditionalist circles for most of the twentieth century. The disciples of Rudolf Bultmann pushed the method to its logical extreme. In one sense, their fascinating researches run parallel to Steiner's: they became adept at recognising the way the evangelists and their contemporaries thought, their mental pictures, their 'mythological' ideas, their religious assumptions. But in exposing the legendary and culturally constructed nature of the life of

Jesus they eventually fell victim to their own methodology. The pure facts behind the myth were now in danger of disappearing altogether. It is apparent to many, both within and outside the Church today, that the critical investigation of the Bible and the attempt to find religious certainty founded on such external means has in reality opened the door to ever-increasing uncertainty and scepticism, and the Bible itself is in danger of becoming a fallen idol. Here again Rudolf Steiner offers something that comes to meet the insights of twentieth-century Christian thought, but from a subtly different perspective. It is not simply that he insists upon inner certainty as opposed to outer: he has raised the question of their relationship in a much more constructive, creative way.

In the first place, he refuses to make the simplistic assumption that events just happen, and that the interpretation is added to them afterwards: as a philosopher he knew that all knowledge is interpretation. Hence, for example, he was able to recognise that the Gospel of John, whilst embodying a profound spiritual vision which long made it suspect to scholarship and which was supposed to be late in comparison to the other Gospels, was in fact from an eye-witness in the circle of Jesus' closest following (cf. my further discussion in Welburn, *The Beginnings of Christianity* (Edinburgh (1991) pp.245ff). He was far ahead of historical investigation, with its sometimes misleading assumptions; scholarly research has only slowly come round to his insights here. The evidence was all there, but the presuppositions of the scholars and the misleading tradition of the Church prevented it from being fully appreciated. Steiner, on the other hand, recognised both the nature of the underlying ideas in the Gospel as an expression of spiritual experience, and the way that these illumined, as with a searchlight, the events which the Beloved Disciple who wrote it had witnessed – indeed, in which he had taken a significant part. Moreover, when sensational discoveries like the 'Dead Sea Scrolls' brought to the study of Christian origins the sort of historical evidence that sceptical analysis of the Gospel texts had signally failed to expose, it was revealed that those closest to Jesus and to Christian origins were indeed steeped in highly developed, esoteric and initiatory ideas. The Essenes, who wrote the 'Scrolls' and assembled them in their library at Qumran, turned out to be very unlike the representatives of Judaism as an Old Testament religion, and equally unlike the Pharisees whose successors shaped the Judaism that was to survive the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans (in 70A.D.) and descend to the present day. The Essenes had complex rites of initiation, a cosmic vision based on the struggle of Light and Darkness that was quite unlike the prophetic, historical theology of the Old Testament, and their own esoteric literature based on the teachings of the great figure who founded or reformed their movement, the righteous Teacher as he was called. Hence when Jesus was seen and interpreted by those closest to him, it would have been against a background of ideas concerning spiritual renewal, inner illumination, etc. The Essene rites included baptism, which led to the experience of God's Holy Spirit; is it accidental that Christian baptism too spoke of imparting the Spirit? Or did the earliest Christians go through rites comparable in effect to those of the Essene *illuminati*? Even before the 'Dead Sea Scrolls' were rediscovered, Steiner had pointed to the inner connection between earliest Christianity and the esoteric teachings of the Essenes, confident that his clairvoyant methods of research would in due course find confirmation.

'Historical research,' he once asserted, 'will one day vindicate completely the evidence drawn from purely spiritual sources which forms the basis of my *Christianity as Mystical Fact*.' (Steiner, *Building Stones for an Understanding of the Mystery of Golgotha* (London 1972) p.19).

And so it has: indeed the vindication goes further, and still affords perspectives and guidance among the piecemeal explorations now going on. Steiner's perception of the inner connecting links and deeper dimension of their meaning allows many pieces of the jigsaw-puzzle to fall significantly into place.

The deeper dimension, which is the insight that Steiner constantly provides into the spiritual potential and wider human implication of doctrines or ideas, is the most remarkable feature of all his work. We see it, for example, in his treatment of the ancient mythologies. Where most theologians have regarded the signs of Christianity's borrowing from myths of pagan imagery as regrettable vestiges, elements of its time that need to be shaken off or simply ignored, Steiner senses the need for a profounder effort of understanding. We have to look up the stories of gods, heroes and nymphs in reference books, or recall them from allusions in literature. But they were still (as R. Lane Fox has recently pointed out once more) palpably living presences in ancient culture far into Christian times, affecting people on many levels from the routine of daily offerings at their shrines to visions in time of crisis, healings etc. or even vivid relationship with a deity in one's dreams. The gods and myths were a part of the consciousness of ancient humanity. If the early Christians showed Christ in the garb and with the attributes of Orpheus, therefore, in the paintings of the catacombs, we shall scarcely comprehend what He means to them unless we learn what power was focussed in these images. And Steiner takes us further than anyone else, I think, into an understanding of their power. Associations with the myths extended into virtually every aspect of life. Though we tend to view them as relating to far off, primordial times, for the people of the ancient world the mythical events established the patterns that continued to run through everything: in the seasons Persephone was still carried off to the Underworld for half of every year, even though the ordinary people could only tell the story and plant the seeds – an act that seemed to have a mysterious relationship to the events of the tale. Their sprouting furthermore seemed to be nature's own way of telling the story of the goddess' return to the upper regions and reunion with her mother, the fertile Earth (Demeter) after her sojourn in darkness. The myth was not so much about nature, as a human way of taking part in nature's life, of which practical agricultural knowledge was an offshoot, an echo of the divine deeds in the tale. But as to the origins of that knowledge, and the mythic tale – the ordinary people had no idea. Myths seem to be timeless, to be told as if they had always been told so long as seeds have sprouted, if not before!

It was only in the Mysteries that the initiates had a direct relationship to the source of the ideas. And in the Mysteries the human relationship to the world of divine images was intensified to a degree that can only be described as dramatic. Texts hint that the process was like dying, followed by rebirth on some higher plane: a spiritual transformation after ordeals and inner crisis, opening a way to the sources not only of new life but of the divine knowledge otherwise only passively received in the myths. The initiates themselves stood on the level of the gods. Steiner's investigations focused on the all-important relationship between the Mystery-experience, the secret knowledge behind the myths, and the Christian analogies in the accounts of the 'divine man', Jesus. (In *Christianity as Mystical Fact* Steiner refers repeatedly to the presentation of Jesus as a Hellenistic *theios aner*: but he stresses also how much the notion of man transfigured into divine greatness had to be metamorphosed, even reversed to arrive at the suffering Son of Man.)

When the initiates underwent the shock of psychic dissolution and renewal, they did indeed leave a part of themselves behind as 'dead'. And told in the context of the powerful ordeals of the Mystery-cult, the story of Orpheus and his descent into the Underworld would take on an immediacy, a directness springing from the initiates' own first-hand knowledge. They too had come through an encounter with death; they had performed the Orphic feat. Or when in the Mysteries of Demeter at Eleusis they were 'adopted' as sons of Persephone, and were told about the birth of her 'divine child' – they would recognise that they too had been touched by the power of a god who sprang to life within them. This deeper dimension, of divine actuality, could not be communicated. What could be communicated was the myth.

But the knowledge of the reality could be shared among those who had been through the Mystery-rites, and they could always tell one who 'knew', as they did. Paul uses what we now know to be language of the Mysteries when he says that 'at present we see as in a mirror, obscurely – but then, face to face!' (I Cor. 13,12). Elsewhere, Paul describes what happens in Christian baptism, relating it to the central events of Christ's crucifixion:

We were therefore buried with him through baptism
into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from
the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may
live in a new life. (Rom. 6,4)

It has actually been widely recognised that Paul here makes of Christianity a Mystery-rite, whose inner significance is known to those who share through their baptism an initiatory experience. In fact, Paul has often been decried for importing into 'pure' and 'simple' Christianity alien ideas from the culture of his Hellenistic upbringing. That, incidentally, was *not* Rudolf Steiner's view – though it may be part of the reason why he chose not to focus on Paul in his book on Christianity, but on the evidence that the processes he identified went back to the origins, to the Founder and his milieu.

The real worry behind the shying away from myth by conventional Christian thinkers is the threat to the uniqueness of Christianity. Every culture has its myths. If Christianity can be related to the mythical images of other cults, it yields up its claim to be the sole channel of salvation, and becomes one myth among many – or so fear the traditionalists. But for Steiner the claim that Christianity was unrelated to anything else, to its time or to broader religious experience, was a ludicrous and unrealistic mode of defence, which the erosion of Christianity has revealed in all its inadequacy. Moreover, it betokened, in his view, a lack of genuine confidence in the Christian message, a sneaking fear that despite their rhetoric the professors of faith were not too sure there was anything so unique to defend. For him, on the contrary, every religion represented particular insights into the spiritual foundations of life, particular ways of adapting to their demands, particular expressions of the inexhaustible wealth of religious knowledge. If Christianity echoed images from myth and Mystery, that might help us profoundly in our need to find the source of its power to change people's lives; but at the same time, the fact that it connected them in a special way with the life of an individual, His teaching, suffering and eventual death, constituted an extraordinary new claim. What was formerly myth had become a fact. The meaning of the universe had become a man living and dying in Judaea. And Christianity did indeed change the meaning of the world through that very claim.

It can be argued that Steiner's concept of Christianity as a mystical fact faces the modern issues more honestly than the prevalent 'demythologising' which has robbed Christianity of its cosmic dimension. The cosmic dimension is myth – but myth has its reality in the inner transformation which Steiner claims is at the heart of our ability to interpret the world and to find our humanity. Moreover, it is just there that his anthropic or anthroposophical ideas revealed the possibility of reintegrating such knowledge with an awareness of our place in the world. But even apart from that, he is uniquely in a position to bring together those who grasp the deep spiritual significance of Christianity and those who are striving to understand the problematic origins of its texts and cardinal ideas in the melting-pot of the ancient Near East. His recognition of initiation-meanings in the Christian story led to a perception of its historical setting which, we have mentioned, is confirmed by the 'Dead Sea Scrolls' and Essene esotericism. Steiner's realisation that Christianity points to the sources of myth conversely led him to formulate his answer to the profound loss of meaning experienced in the twentieth century: the 'rejuvenating powers' of myth, Steiner considered, are the only

adequate reply to contemporary needs, and Christianity might offer its aid! The mythic dimension has become a crucial concern that can no longer be dodged now that the Gnostic Gospels (the other main body of evidence from early Christian times) have revealed extensive links with the world of the Mysteries, with pagan mythologies and the cosmic vision of Zoroastrianism. Steiner's exploration of the inner connection between the great world-religions, such as he develops in the lecture-cycles on the Gospels given in the decades following *Christianity as Mystical Fact*, is an invaluable help in simultaneously grasping the continuities and new factors in the spiritual evolution of humanity that was taking place. He enables us to place ourselves inwardly into that evolution – which is still going on, and indeed whose most important consequences may yet be to come. (The main courses on the Gospels are: *The Gospel of St. John* (New York 1973); *The Gospel of St. Mark* (London 1978); *The Gospel of St. Matthew* (London 1965); *The Gospel of St. Luke* (London 1975).)

By bringing together the meaning of the great religions and the developing consciousness of humanity, and connecting both with the processes of our inner growth today, Steiner arrived at the science of religious experience, some of whose results I have tried to present in their contemporary relevance in a new book (Welburn-Steiner, *The Mystery Origins of Christianity*). Where most historians of religion study doctrines, practices or other products of religious evolution, Steiner examines the inner dynamic which shaped them and by so doing imparted a special, unique quality to a whole culture. Every religion has been, not just a body of beliefs, but a power that has changed people in specific ways, enabling them to give value to particular aspects of life and experience. The religions have thus worked together with, though they are not reducible to, the stages of human culture: indeed they often challenge the culture's assumptions and demand far-reaching change, and work against a culture's tendency to overvalue its own achievements. Christianity is the religion that works with individuality. This can be seen on many levels, e.g. in the high degree of individual commitment required of the believer, the personal relationship to the figure of Christ. It has certainly facilitated the individualistic civilisation that in secular form has emerged from it. Yet its central metaphor is not of self-development but of offering and sacrifice; it shows the way the individual ego finds its meaning by giving itself to what is greater than itself, the message of love. Steiner is able to explain that character of Christianity, whilst opening the way to comparisons with other religious experience. In no sense does he arbitrarily give it a special position.

There is only one spiritual science, and we apply it as an instrument for proclaiming the truth and for bringing to light the treasures of the spiritual life of mankind. It is the same spiritual science that we apply in order to explain now the *Bhagavad Gita* and now the Gospel of Luke. The greatness of spiritual science consists in the fact that it is able to penetrate into every treasure given to humanity in the realm of spiritual life. We should have a false conception of it if we were to close our ears to any of the religious proclamations made to humanity. (Steiner, *Gospel of St. Luke* p.202).

The patterns of spiritual experience studied in this spiritual-scientific way must be seen, then, in relation to the emergence of the fundamental moral and spiritual qualities expressed in human civilisation. Christianity could not have come about until mankind had gone far in the evolution of a moral self, capable of individual autonomy and responsibility; yet it far transcends that particular stage, and brings it into connection with primordial and perhaps universal forms of spiritual truth. The evolutionary model must not make us think that one religion 'supersedes' another in Rudolf Steiner's scheme of things, and that the older forms then become redundant or have 'served their purpose': that would be a travesty of evolution, as though we supposed animal life ought to supersede vegetation rather than enriching the ecology and bringing it to a higher level of overall balance and complexity. In

previous times, for example, individuality was not a general feature of life, but was asserted only in situations of danger by a 'hero'. The resources of the individual self or ego were touched only when there was a threat, or when at certain ritual moments society was reminded of the perilousness, the intrinsic uncertainty of life. At other times people felt held in the security of the group – so much so that they were scarcely able to express their sense of separate existence in the modern sense at all. Once a year in ancient Babylon, to take a concrete instance, a religious festival reminded society of the forces of instability, seen as chaos and destruction. The king played the role of champion of order, a hero who became godlike in his ability to stand against the fearful monsters of the abyss. In fact, in esoteric rites the king became one with the creator-god, Marduk, and effectively saved his people by the fact that he re-established their world. He rescued them from the anxieties of the critical moment, and life continued for another year. The kind of rising-to-the-challenge which they experienced in the person of their king, of course, every one of us nowadays has to do individually and day by day. We can no longer look to someone to be our collective 'ego' and map out our life by defining it for the cycle to come. We have evolved beyond the stage where the ego shines out in acts of outstanding, heroic assertion on behalf of the whole people. And yet that does not mean that the myth and rites of the Babylonian festival, embodied in their grandiose poem *Enuma Elish* (the 'Epic of Creation'), is no longer relevant to us – quite the reverse. Modern life affords ample evidence of the suppressed panic and the monsters of anxiety, etc. which are the shadow-side of our individualism, our reliance on self. And the myth still enables us to confront the demons, making us realise that our achievement of selfhood still depends on overcoming those same fears. Rudolf Steiner pointed out that we live through the experiences of the myth every time we wake up, dispelling the confusion and anxieties of our dreams and grasping the ordered reality of our day. To do so in the way the myth dramatically makes possible, moreover, is still to raise the question of the greater potential of our waking self – a question that forms the starting-point of a higher, esoteric awareness.

The truths expressed in the myths are not superseded, then, but their context changes. Steiner saw clearly how the myths return in ever varying guise, nowhere more strikingly than in the Christian case. Instead of protesting against this fact, he saw in it an essential feature of evolution: ever and again, a new step forward simultaneously involves a reaching-back to the beginnings, to the mythic source. Contrary to the assumption of many modern religious thinkers, recognising the myth in Christianity does not mean that we are forced to the view that there is no religious development, but only endlessly varied repetition. Revisiting the levels of experience on which all civilisation and human consciousness rests is an essential part of religious discovery, and it is the special function of the Mysteries to do so in a particularly intensive way, interacting with the needs of changing historical developments in society and the human psyche. Christianity seized upon the possibilities of the time, seeing there a new historical fulfilment of the myths and becoming a turning-point in spiritual evolution. The processes of inner growth and renewal took on the meaning of divine actuality for those who lived through them – as they still can for those who seek out that actuality through the inner events of initiation. Christianity also 'democratised' the direct relationship to divine actuality by connecting it with a public, historical event. Even if not in the dramatic way of the ancient Mysteries, large numbers of people were able to intensify their inner life through the feelings, above all, which the story of Jesus evoked. History did not, after all, mean the end of the Mysteries but a new era: The Christ-impulse, as Steiner called it, was a power working on in us from the historical event, which a modern esoteric Christianity is able to become more deeply aware of, and of which we can work to become an ally.

Rudolf Steiner's lectures range brilliantly and widely over history and spirituality, human and cosmic. Here I have brought together those which focus on the line of development most relevant to Christian origins, but for a fuller appreciation of the perspective his spiritual-scientific approach is able to delineate, one would have to pursue the themes still further through his work. However, the scope of the present enquiry was rather clearly defined by his first major book. He himself never fully drew his results together in later life, in part no doubt because of the extraordinary pressure of work in manifold spheres; but to do so is to bring into focus the marvellous coherence and underlying aims of his research. But he would certainly think the project unsatisfactory unless his results could be brought together, somehow, with all the considerable new information about the Mysteries, about the Essenes, about the cosmic dimension of Christianity in the Gnostic writings and their place in the earliest stages of the tradition. In this paper there can be no more than an attempt to sketch such a complex encounter of spiritual insight and historical vista, experience and knowledge, esotericism old and new, in order to show the profound and continuing relevance of Rudolf Steiner to the rediscovery of Christian origins and reinterpretation of our civilisation that must result, and to reveal him as still one of our foremost, most adventurous pioneers in understanding the deeper dimensions of religious experience.

A book of collected materials from Steiner's whole range of books of lectures is a project I have long been working on. A first part will attempt to portray the sweep of Steiner's presentation from the ancient Mysteries to the evidence of their presence in the shaping of the Christian mystery of Easter; a second part will focus more closely on the background of the Gospels and their 'esoteric' truth. In connection with Rudolf Steiner, in another book I have presented initiation texts and modern discoveries from Essenes, Gnostics and others to illustrate the evolution that leads up to the Christian transformation of the Mysteries (Welburn, *Gnosis. The Mysteries and Christianity* (Edinburgh)). It is all we can do here, however, to consider in more general terms the scope of those discoveries and the nature of Rudolf Steiner's account of their significance.

The Mysteries

In the New Year rites of ancient Babylon the king moved between the worlds of waking and of the dream – the haunted abyss whose images threatened or disturbed the life of his subjects. The abyss (our word is actually just a later form of their term for it, *apsu*) could be imaged as a dark, chaotic sea, and the 'Epic of Creation' described the king-god mastering its raging power. Such images were a source of strength and reassurance over thousands of years, and it is hard not to think that people in the Near East recalled them when they heard of Christ walking on the water and calming the storm with a word of power (Mark 6,45-56), or when he spoke of the 'sign of Jonah': of entering the sea-monster's belly yet returning to the living world victorious just as Marduk does once again in *Enuma Elish*.

In the secret rites themselves, however, the king identified himself with the god in a dimension beyond dream. For the god did not only have to conquer the darkness of sleep but also that of sleep's darker companion, death. Before he could win his victory, Marduk first had to be defeated and confined in the hollow interior of the world-mountain, had in short to die. And other gods were also said to die and rise again: notably the vegetation-divinity Tammuz, addressed as '*adon*, Lord, by his worshippers and hence known to the Greeks as Adonis. In his cult especially, the pattern of violent death, whether by drowning in turbid waters, or wounded by a monster or wild beast, followed by exultant return to life, established a foundation that influenced many of the Mysteries in the Mediterranean world in the centuries before Christ.

What is the source of this pattern? In some form a similar structure seems to underlie religious thinking not only in ancient Mesopotamia but also in Egypt, Greece, even Iran and Vedic India. What is its foundation in the spiritual life? Rudolf Steiner pointed insistently to the origination of the religious ideas behind these diverse cultures in Central Asia. From there the spiritual currents that inspired the early civilisations went out, which then developed in notably different ways. (Here we need only deal with the spread of religious teachings, though Steiner has in addition important perspectives on the related migration of peoples.) In their primal form these 'northern' Mysteries, he says, are centred upon 'ecstatic' states, conditions of consciousness in which one is liberated from the body and goes out of oneself in trance. Gradually, as they spread southward, e.g. into Egypt, they interacted with kinds of spirituality that were more inward-looking, based on penetration into one's own inner being. We can in fact still see the remnants of this ancient ecstatic religion in the shamanism of Central Asia today. Though shamans have generally had rather a bad press from enlightened historians of religion, there is actually widespread agreement that shamanism goes back to an archaic high religion. And it is among shamans, the adepts in ecstatic spirituality, that we find the pattern of death and rebirth, which they experience in dreams and visions, often of a dramatic and violent nature involving dismemberment, being cooked in the pot and re-emerging as a new being, descending into hell and, ultimately, ascending into heaven. They live the myth that we find in so many different forms and applied to so many gods. And in the wide-ranging work of Mircea Eliade, in particular, we may find detailed confirmation of Steiner's claim concerning the basis of an evolution from shamanic-ecstatic experience in practices as diverse as sacrificial rites, 'divine' kingship and the individual initiations of the Mystery-cults. Vedic doctrines, Pharaohs and the Greek heroes alike bear signs of their origins – though also of the richly developed cultures to which they belonged (Eliade, *History of Religious Ideas* (Vol. 1 (London 1979), pp.16ff for 'shamanic ideas' already across a wide area in the Paleolithic; Vol.2 (London 1982). In earlier studies Eliade vacillated between the possibility that ecstatic patterns generated fundamental cultural and religious forms, and the alternative, namely that ecstasy internalises existing social realities. Here he seems to come down definitely on the former side.)

The trance-states induced by ecstatic techniques touch levels of mind deeper than dream. Indeed the similarity between the shamanic accounts and the death- or near-death experiences now so well documented among modern patients shows that they did in truth cross the threshold. They possessed the knowledge of immortality, and of a light beyond the light of this world. Their knowledge was a source of religion, but also of a spiritual cosmology; it was a way of keeping in touch with one's divine origins that could be re-enacted in a symbolic rite; it was a source of order to the whole of society by revealing the transcendent goal of human life. Modern research also tends to confirm Steiner's view that from the primitive Mysteries came not only the content of religious beliefs but the very foundations of the cultures of Antiquity. The dissolution of the personality in the ecstatic state and its rebirth or transformation formed the basis of the tribal 'secret societies', who shaped individuals for the roles needed by society. It may seem a paradox that the mental dissociation, the plasticity of the ecstatic condition should be a source of social complexity: but we should remember that it is precisely the continued fluidity, the unformedness, of humanity that so distinguishes us from the animals, which are locked into behaviour patterns determined by their environment. We too have a tendency to fall into fixity, but we are human because of our power to transform. It is repeatedly asserted in the sources that it was the Mysteries which raised humans above the animal state and formed them for civilisation. The starting-point for initiation in the Mysteries, says Steiner, 'was that the neophyte must genuinely regard himself as not human': only through initiation will one

become a human being (Steiner, *The Easter Festival in Relation to the Mysteries* (London 1968) p.34). That humanising role was the one Steiner foresaw for the modern Mysteries too. In our own time the forces of fixity, of external conformation, are infinitely stronger through the pressures of twenty-first century life. All the more need, not less, for us to seek ways of touching the deeper levels in ourselves, and also for finding ways of identifying humanly with the role which society demands of us – or, all too often, the confusingly different and contradictory roles!

A contemporary 'human wisdom' or Anthroposophy, however, must obviously be very different from tribal knowledge. Initiation will not now take the collective form of dramatic secret rites: but it will nevertheless have an affinity with the archaic sources. Also to be taken into account are the historical developments that lie in-between. We have mentioned that already the 'southern' Mysteries contained a different emphasis, blending with the divinising transformation a centring-in-oneself. Gradually civilisations arose in which this centring on the individual came to displace the archaic, tribal structures. In Greece, the Olympian sky-gods rose to prominence, presiding over the civic activities of the state which honoured them in public festivals and in artistic celebrations that cut loose from their tie with the Mysteries; in Rome there followed the beginning of secular society based on human 'rights'. In Israel tribal religion developed slowly into personal responsibility and 'personal-prophetic' spirituality. The prophet's vision was no longer the result of Mystery-processes but of individual ripeness, his special sense of 'election' and personal hearing of the 'word of God'.

The Mysteries did not disappear, but took on complex new roles. In Greece, the public religion was embodied in the calendar of festivals and in the epics of Homer (the 'Bible of the Greeks'), with their marvellously poetic, larger-than-life tales of the gods and heroes; but in the background the link with the Mysteries was retained and even renewed. The spiritual cosmology and knowledge of seership evolved into 'mysteriosophy', the 'wisdom of the Mysteries' that in its Orphic form inspired Pythagoras and Plato. Indeed, in the absence of direct evidence from the classical Mysteries, Rudolf Steiner achieved another brilliant feat in recognising the traces of its influence in pre-Socratic philosophy. The link is amply confirmed by discoveries such as the Orphic gold plates, and the invaluable Derveni papyrus which preserves a secret Mystery text designed to be burned with a deceased initiate. In addition, we are now able to apply Steiner's approach directly to the evidence of the Mysteries themselves. Meanwhile on another level, the Mysteries of Eleusis near Athens continued to celebrate their rites of rebirth, and to offer the secret of immortality to those found worthy of admittance, eventually to all free men. Greek culture should thus be seen in relation both to emerging public life and democracy, but also to a deepening and philosophising of the Mysteries, which indeed from the beginning were crucial to the emergence of philosophy itself (see further Welburn-Steiner, *The Mysteries. Rudolf Steiner's Writings on Spiritual Initiation* (Edinburgh 1997)).

Above all, Rudolf Steiner was free from the misleading assumption so often made, that the Mysteries represent just another religion alongside the official ones. In many studies we still read of 'the Mystery religions'. But as Walter Burkert has recently reminded us, and as Steiner clearly grasped, they are nothing of the sort. Steiner correctly relates them to the sphere of knowledge: they changed people's relationship to the gods of traditional belief, but did not furnish an alternative to it. He points out that the Mysteries revealed the deeper meaning, and even the sources of the well-known belief in the gods. They were 'cults' (which in those days existed in manifold forms, and there was nothing sinister, as there is now in

our age of religious monopolies, in having a special cult that one belonged to). (See W. Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (London 1987).) The philosopher Steiner was fascinated by this model for an advanced philosophical, indeed sceptical mentality that yet was not in collision with religious belief but helped to affirm it.

The existence of such a higher level of 'knowledge' within the religion of Judaism seemed to the scholars of religious history in Steiner's day infinitely less likely, if not downright impossible. Any split between the level of understanding of the few and the normal beliefs of ordinary Jews seemed alien to the Old Testament spirit – and so it was. Yet Steiner insisted that in the period of Christian beginnings there were Mysteries in Judaism. He pointed to the Essenes, and discoursed largely on their importance to the understanding of early Christianity, at a time when many scholars thought that the Essenes mentioned in ancient sources were either a confusion, a concoction or so extremely obscure as to be practically irrelevant. It is only with the discovery of the 'Dead Sea Scrolls' that the spiritual riches of the Essenes have been restored to us, showing that in the last centuries B.C. the Old Testament religion had also been transformed by renewed contact with the Mysteries. The Essenes at Qumran formed a Mystery-community with rites of initiation, an esoteric literature and methods of illuminated interpretation of the Bible. Their Mystery-link appears to come via contact with Iran, and the cosmic teachings on Light and Darkness that go back to the archaic seer and ecstatic (many would say shaman) Zarathustra. Here again Steiner was far in advance of the thought of his day, and arrived at results through his spiritual investigations which are only now coming to be seen in their fuller context. And despite the resistance from many in the orthodox establishment of scholarship, his assertions concerning their importance to early Christianity have increasingly had to be recognised as true.

Still more challenging aspects of Steiner's presentation have further been thrust into prominence by the Gnostic writings discovered almost at the same time as the 'Dead Sea Scrolls'. Many of these suggest Eastern, Egyptian or Mesopotamian ideas as well as the esotericism of the Jews. It is hard to imagine anything which could more spectacularly have broken the old mould, and confirmed Steiner's picture of Christian origins as a response to an evolution of religious consciousness in the whole ancient world. His presentation of the way that a new meaning emerged from the transformation of the Mysteries around the events in Palestine enables us to read the significance of this world-wide meeting and sometimes clash of ideas as a central moment in the spiritual evolution of human consciousness, and a new relationship of humanity to the divine.

The Problem of Primitive Consciousness

By asking us to recognise the significance of archaic myths, and to recognise the mythical element in Christianity, Rudolf Steiner breaks a taboo of the twentieth century. A good deal that is central to modern scientific culture is predicated upon some version of the idea of progress. And if our present-day knowledge is sharper, broader in conception and closer to the truth, it follows that the knowledge of ancient humanity was confused, patchy and superstitious. Christian theologians have demythologised in order to remain aboard the band-waggon of scientific advancement, to be 'modern'. The only alternative seemed to be relegation to the primitive. (Some have actually found that acceptable: they argue that despite progress, people need to keep in touch with their 'primitive' nature or to placate it. But Steiner wanted nothing to do with a 'primitivism' of this sort.)

Anthropologists studying primitive and ancient cultures have also tended to come down on one side or the other when trying to explain the workings of the mind. Either primitive humanity is excused for its strange ideas by the claim that it thought as we do – only not so well; or, it is treated as something strangely different from us, wrapped in an irrational haze that had to be dispelled by the emergence of rationality. Tylor and Frazer assumed that the ancients thought just like nineteenth-century scientists and tried to explain the world, but made crude hypotheses about spirits, gods etc. which we can no longer take seriously. Levy-Bruhl tried to describe a ‘primitive mentality’ that was irreducibly different from our own, for which the distinction between self and world does not exist and all is subjective. Yet Levy-Bruhl found it hard to explain how ‘primitives’ coped so well with the practical difficulties of their lives on the basis of so unrealistic an approach; while those on the other side soon had to acknowledge that looking back in order to find bits of our own mentality in the thought-processes of the ancients led to a powerful distorting-effect. It was all very well to find an instance of apparent logic and exclaim that this was right, while everything else might be regarded as confused and superstitious. But this did nothing to clarify how early people saw the world in their own terms, another apparent impasse in modern thought, which Steiner was able to point a way around.

Rudolf Steiner was in fact remarkable for the manner in which he freed himself from the distorted kind of history just described, the ‘Whig view of history’ as it is sometimes known from its use by a long-running political faction in English culture that wanted to present itself as the leading edge of gradual ‘progress’. Rather than following their line of picking out the bits of ancient thought that look right to us, however, Steiner made consistent efforts to get inside the consciousness of the ancients, to see as they saw, making neither of the assumptions, whether of sameness or difference. What he found was rather, a changing consciousness.

Humanity, according to Rudolf Steiner, has been in a changing relationship with the world – and with itself, and with God. That corresponds to his understanding of transformation as the basic human characteristic. Human beings have not had a fixed nature, but find out who they are by growing, learning and developing. Nor in knowledge terms are they merely mirrors. The particular stage of development of humanity is reflected in a language, a body of ideas, a consciousness of the world around. Each stage is valid, reflecting a particular way of looking at things (*Weltanschauung*). Steiner asks us to expand our own awareness by feeling our way into other ways of seeing, instead of assuming that everything ‘leads up to’ our own ideas and attitudes. Steiner was aware that his own spiritual science was itself a formulation of ideas for our own time that would give way to other ways of seeing in the future. This is the price of real understanding of other cultures and forms of consciousness: the realisation that we are not the goal, the end-design, but ourselves only a stage on the way. As a philosopher, Steiner had argued that this does not entail mere relativism or nihilistic loss of any real ‘truth’. But it does mean taking evolution seriously, and it does mean a willingness to rise to the challenge of human freedom, not only to do what one will, but to realise that in what people do they are shaping what they will be! Steiner’s anthropocentrism means precisely not that everything leads up to and converges finally on ourselves, but rather that we are, so to speak, the open-ended moment of possibility – that we should accept, indeed we should seize hold of our freedom to create the future freely, responsibly and with a genuine understanding of the value of others and other ways of seeing.

Steiner inserts our own mental outlook, then, into the stream of changing consciousness – a feat that is at once challenging but, if we do not panic, also liberating. And in regard to understanding myths and ancient thought, it means that we should think of them neither as

like our own nor as irremediably different but as a stage in the development of consciousness linked in a continuum with ours. To get over the sense of difference, we need a way of penetrating beneath the superficial otherness, the alien quality of myth. And this Steiner does with his concept of structure:

The Mystery-interpretation points to a psychological power in man. It is not a power of which we are normally aware; nevertheless it is active within us, generating the myth. And the myth has the same structure as the truth of the Mysteries ... [Myths] are the expression of a creative spirit, of the unconscious activity of the soul. The soul's creative work is determined by specific laws: it must be active in a particular way if it is to create something with a meaning beyond itself. On the mythological level it works with images. But the way these images are structured follows psychological laws. Hence one could add that when the soul develops beyond the mythological stage of consciousness to deeper forms of truth, these nevertheless bear the imprint of the same power which generated the myths. (Welburn-Steiner, *The Mysteries* p.28)

One aspect of ancient consciousness that disturbs us, for example, is the way that material qualities and idea-qualities often seem to be confused with one another. Thus in respect of the Adonis-Mysteries Steiner notes that the descriptions of the myth and cult mix up what to us are symbol and reality, signifier and signified. They 'were apt to confound,' he says, 'the actual image with what the image was supposed to represent' (cf. *The Mysteries*, pp.62ff). It is plainly not a momentary confusion, but a sustained way of thinking. Levy-Bruhl's emphasis on the otherness of primitive thought is at its most plausible in dealing with such phenomena, which he regarded as coherent expressions of a *participation mystique*, or oneness of mind with the object in an irrational fusion. Steiner acknowledges that we are in the presence of a consciousness different from our own, one in which the division of the world into subjective and objective, things-out-there and the onlooking mind, has hardly begun; yet he realises also that we can find a relationship to it. It represents what he calls the Sentient Soul stage, exemplified above all in the Egyptian and Mesopotamian cultures: in their art and modes of representation, for instance, space is not merely external as a container of objective forms, but at the same time a space of mental images, occupied by names or symbols alongside objects, not expressing otherness but a kind of two-dimensional immediacy. Children today still go through a stage comparable to this. Indeed the analogy of children's thinking, with its systematic lack of recognition of specific adult categories until a certain developmental stage has been reached, is the best way of entering into our connection with 'primitive' thought. Yet in modern infancy such a form of consciousness is only vestigial, soon transformed by further development as the child grows up; whereas in ancient Egypt an entire *Weltanschauung* was elaborated out of this kind of consciousness (see a summary version of Steiner's evolutionary conception in R. McDermott (ed.), *The Essential Steiner* (New York 1984) pp.212-226). Steiner observes that it must therefore be treated as a coherent whole, not as a mere anticipation of later 'knowledge'. Forms and signs derive their meaning from the structure of the whole, not in isolation. The adaptation of the Mysteries to create new forms of religious expression is not a mere rearrangement of parts, but a growth from the centre, transforming and adapting itself. The structural centre is discovered, moreover, by going to the point of most intense experience of the symbols: in the Mystery experience as such. Steiner's emphasis on structure links him to the structuralists' breakthrough in the interpretation of myths, enabling the stories to be related to the fundamental social and spiritual structures of the societies which narrate them. But whereas the influential anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss thought in terms of the 'polymorphic' nature of the mind – its ability, in other words, simply to structure the world in different ways – Steiner takes the bolder step of relating the emergence of social structures and mentalities to the pioneering activity of the Mysteries. Those who live the spiritual structures of their society as inner reality are able to touch the source of the creative process, and to embody them accordingly in the varying mentalities.

The Sentient Soul stage of development gave way in Greek civilisation to the Intellectual Soul. Plato makes his innovative distinction between percept and concept. The difference between thoughts and things is only one way in which the new consciousness is expressed. However: we see it equally in the way that space becomes three-dimensional, no longer a dimension of images presented to the mind but a world 'out there', of artistic forms defined by a new grasp of spatial laws. But the Mysteries are not left behind because the old forms of consciousness have evolved into new ones. Those who can touch the structuring source are able to express the mythical truths anew, in a manner relating them to the more 'philosophical' attitude. There is no question of an irrational 'primitive mentality' giving way to the sudden light of reason. The rational world we know emerged out of the spiritual-material oneness of the mythical picture-consciousness. Owen Barfield has brilliantly developed Steiner's ideas to trace the history of meaning itself – and to place our own privileged meanings in the process of spiritual evolution, see above all Barfield. *Saving the Appearances* (New York n.d.).

When Steiner asked us to comprehend the myth in Christianity, uniquely related to the individual and history, he was therefore not pointing to primitive debris of an older form of consciousness, but to the sources of meaning. He himself was convinced that these could be described in modern, spiritual-scientific terms, and stated that the task of spiritual science was exactly to find forms for expressing what was previously conveyed in myth. Certainly we need to be able to appreciate the great myths of the world. Contrary to the notion of Joseph Campbell, however, it may not be quite so simple that we might just choose a selection of myths to believe in. Or at least that is only half the truth. Finding the myth that is relevant to our precise place in the evolution of consciousness and the world is in reality something that requires the profoundest insight, traditionally ascribed only to a great prophet or seer, the inspiring genius of an age or a civilisation. Rudolf Steiner himself has pointed to a number of myths whose meaning is not exhausted by the past but whose unfolding lies in our own present or immediate future: notably, the so-called 'second coming' or *parousia* – in the sphere of universal consciousness; the Archangel Michael overcoming the Dragon – in the individual-spiritual sphere; the quest of the Grail – a picture of the Christian rediscovery of the Mystery-sphere, and so in a sense applicable even to Steiner's own work directly, cf. his *Mysteries of the East and Christianity* (London 1972). In a way it is true that nowadays every individual has increasingly to take part in the search for the myth that will interpret our world anew: finding the way to the myth that can play this role, and renew the Mysteries for each successive age, actually is for Steiner 'the quest of the Grail'. Anthroposophy in one aspect is indeed the very way that we can find the myths we need to express the consciousness of modern times, and is uniquely valuable, I would even say, for being able to give us the key to such myths. Steiner was clear that in order to do so we have to get behind the outer forms of myth in the several ages and civilisations of the world to the spiritual source that was experienced directly in the Mysteries. Only then will we be able to fashion the myths that are the expression of our own time and its knowledge, or those of the future.

The rediscovery of the Mystery-origins of Christianity was the necessary preliminary to the still larger issue of the future of Christianity. And Steiner saw that the future form of Christianity could come about neither by 'demythologising' it, nor by any sort of fundamentalist retreat from the conditions of modern life. It could only come out of a renewal of the Mysteries, in whatever form they would have to take for the modern age.

The Future of Christianity

Steiner's concept of the evolution of consciousness helps us to understand, then, that ancient humanity had its own perspectives on reality, from which we may still be able to learn without endangering our modernity. Human knowledge has not progressed by sweeping away irrational nonsense, but has evolved out of older ways of engaging with the world as human consciousness itself changed and evolved. The process is still continuing. The Intellectual Soul stage has been succeeded, in Steiner's terminology, by the Consciousness Soul with its still greater sense of detachment, even alienation from the world and the rest of humanity. Science is especially the form of knowledge suited to the stage of the Consciousness Soul, and its triumph marks not the supposed seeing of things-as-they-are but the unfolding potential of humanity extending to the new domain and realising its freedom to interpret the world, to intervene in and indeed to change it. If Christianity is the spiritual stream that gives meaning to individuals in their striving, its role in accompanying the individual into new fields of knowledge and life seemed to Steiner to be still just beginning rather than coming to an end – and certainly to be far from exhausted. Goethe already had a vision of this in the 'Christian' ending to his restless *Faust* drama, which portrayed the way ahead still leading 'upward and on'.

In other Romantic thinkers and artists, Christian ideas had come together with advanced social, scientific and individualistic goals, often with a markedly esoteric content. Steiner's work suggests that the antagonism between science and religion that has dominated so much of life since Darwin may have distracted attention from the larger possibilities inherent in a synthesis toward which they were already feeling their way. His thought has been termed a 'Romanticism come of age'. Transecting the official dividing lines that have since been imposed, his ideas often have the effect of bringing out the full meaning of elements in our culture whose potency and intrinsic value are hard to ignore. By giving away so much to science, religion has made it difficult for many people to cope with the demands of living and acting in a scientific world-order, where what we do affects far-away peoples and the balance of the earth itself. For Steiner, the Christian analogy of the Incarnation provides a model for the life of an individual intervening decisively in the history of the world in a redemptive and creative way, balancing spiritual and material demands – a model that can be lived by anyone on a greater or smaller scale. And if that seems to some to be simply 'mixing up' Christianity with all sorts of alien (social, philosophical, ecological etc.) ideas, it needs to be pointed out that Christianity has been a determining force in civilisation by mixing itself up constantly with new ideas. The notion that it has preserved some pure teaching from the outset is a bankrupt as well as stultifying one.

Christianity conquered the world by transforming itself into a powerful, intellectual movement that made sense of changing times through an Augustine or an Origen, becoming almost unrecognisable to its former self by acquiring elaborate Neoplatonic doctrines of the Trinity, the Incarnation, and so on. In the Middle Ages, it transformed itself into a socio-spiritual movement based on feudal loyalties and subordination. Later it met the challenge of Arab scientific knowledge by swallowing Aristotle whole and refashioning him as a great Christian philosopher in the person of Thomas Aquinas, thus retaining the intellectual leading edge right through to the Renaissance, and even to Newton and beyond. The original moment of conscious awakening to the power of Christianity which started the transformation of ancient civilisation had to be absorbed also in this much fuller, evolutionary way. Otherwise it might have been just a local, temporary phenomenon – the highest flowering of ancient culture, as I suppose some historians might see it today. But from Steiner's perspective it has now more potential than ever. For now we are in a strange way back at the point where Christianity has to be grasped consciously and actively by

individuals, or it cannot continue. In his *Building Stones for an Understanding of the Mystery of Golgotha*, Rudolf Steiner brilliantly drew attention to the parallel situation. And he found that in the modern world we have the potential to realise the Christian impulse in a throughgoing way, where the early Church had to allow much to work on unconsciously. The parallels are often noted. So much of the modern, post-Romantic world is already intimated in the Hellenistic culture which early Christianity engaged and transformed. The germ of the Romantic Faust-figure is already unfolded in the myth or legend of Simon the Magus, the Gnostic Gospels confirm that originally knowledge as well as faith played a crucial part. The *Gospel of Philip* tells us that 'the existence of the world depends upon man' (Saying 60). Orthodoxy later found this evaluation of humanity's place too shockingly self-important; but the ecological crises of our own day show that vanity is the last thing which should prevent us from realising the grave import of this truth, which we can now accept with a sense of due modesty and responsibility. Was Romanticism pirating Christianity for its own narrow individualistic purposes – or was it not rather, responding imaginatively to the full potential of Christianity, which we can now start to document in historical truth? A Blake or Shelley may have been drawn to the heretical fringes – but then these have come to be seen as essential parts of the Christian story. It seems rather that Romanticism was a chance for Christianity to evolve to a new stage, but too few in the religious sphere were ready to rise to the challenge.

Christianity need not fear to float free in history, to take new forms in response to the Romantic awakening of individual experience as, for example, Steiner argued, if it keeps its link with the inner authenticity of the Mystery-experience. Then we can always rediscover the whole of its meaning, out of our own human wholeness. Romanticism was ultimately a rediscovery of the Mystery-sphere, allowing interaction and growth of individual people, and reacting back both upon the sum of knowledge and the religious shared values of its time. Spirituality was once more actively rebalancing society, testing individual insights and giving individuals a role in changing themselves and the world. It is that inner testing which would make such a renewed Christianity different from just an intellectual movement, giving it the depth of the total human experience of the Spirit as its grounding. Modern initiation must be a deeply inward process, to be pursued by individual seekers, but also put forward to be the basis of common struggles (it is that which would prevent it from being just religious mysticism). A Mystery is a personal experience, but also a glimpse of spiritual communication, a flash of recognition. Steiner's new Mystery-forms are addressed to each person, as it were confidentially, yet they are explicitly designed to restore our human sense of balance in the cosmos of modern knowledge, and enable us to work together in the Spirit. They are Christian in the way they aspire to bring people together through a sense of common destiny and responsibility for the earth, thus placing the Mysteries at the cornerstone between science and religious belief, individual discovery and collective values, where today there is normally an antagonistic rivalry and disputed domain of uncertainty and overlapping ideas. Once again one might relate their position to the threefold schema of society which Steiner developed in his own later thought, based on the values of freedom, brotherhood, and equality:

FREEDOM
Individual Conviction

BROTHERHOOD
Mysteries, Testing,
Co-operation

EQUALITY
Universality, Rights,
Religions, Shared Values

In the context of myths, one might wonder about analogies with the well-known 'tripartite ideology', with its three functions of sovereignty, resources-wealth, priesthood, explored extensively by Georges Dumézil. Each of Steiner's three domains is independent in principle, but never separate in practice, cf. Steiner, *Towards Social Renewal* (London 1999). Not interfering with the search for knowledge or with religious communion, the Mysteries are therefore in a position to interpret the human meaning of science and to relate it to the shared values that sustain religious togetherness.

That goal of togetherness would then be carried by Christianity to its fullest, most universal unfolding. The early Church still felt the cosmic scope and universal destiny of the transformation humanity might undergo through Christ, and likewise the universal character of the *praeparatio evangelica*, which included all of human knowledge and history for a Eusebius or an Augustine. Subsequently, the Church narrowed the line of descent to the Old Testament prophecies alone and narrowed the participation in the destiny of God's people to those who accepted certain technically defined doctrines: both developments being directly related to the loss of the Mystery-element (though Catholic declarations of faith continued to make formal reference to the esoteric tradition until the time of the Council of Trent). The reason for ascribing prophetic understanding to the Old Testament tradition is clear: it was the one religious line that had already had an historical framework, seeing God's hand in events and new situations rather than in timeless myths. By losing the Mystery-connection, however, the Church also lost sight of the way that Christianity had promised to extend that 'saving history' to all of humanity. Instead of universalising the sense of destiny which had been shared by the people of Israel, Christianity became in effect a continuation of Judaism, a people set apart though with an added urge to conquer the world. (Perhaps the real inner distortion contained here is unconsciously reflected in the recurring fantasy of a Jewish world-conspiracy, actually a projection from Christianity.)

The renewal of the Mysteries would open up again that area of *gnosis*, of knowledge that leaps across boundaries of culture and religion. (Such an idea, of course, has nothing to do with the confused notion that Steiner is a 'Gnostic' in the old, heretical sense.) And Christianity would bring universality, not imposing its doctrines on the world but by bringing its dimension of universal history into the understanding of religious experience. But only through respectful meeting – and a sense of real need. Buddhists, for example, would not be asked to abandon their teachings but to extend their own self-knowledge, to understand their own history. Steiner mentions the changes that came to a head in Buddhism in the second century A.D., and the way they reflect the transformed conditions of spiritual life that are the starting-point of Christianity. Wherever spiritual understanding is brought into relation with the changing needs of the time, we have in reality the incarnation of the Logos, the encounter between striving individuals and the universal spirit in which Christ can become manifest. The best name for such encounters is love (in its modern sense a Christian creation) and in his beautiful lecture on *The Meaning of Love* Steiner showed how the Christ is present wherever loving understanding bridges the individual and the universal in that way (see Steiner, London 1972). Thus a new revelation, a 'second coming' of Christ will be the result of the further evolution of modern individualism – and this revelation through a new consciousness, he warned, is the only way that we can rightly expect a reappearance of Christ that is not a material fantasy or another attempt to repeat the past. He believed that we stand on the verge of that new revelation, and the renewal of the Mysteries in their modern role would be the preparation for that new Christ-awareness, just as so much of the ferment of 'new age' and spiritual-ecological movements is a 'sign of the times'. That consciousness will overstep conventional boundaries and beliefs, but if it is not to lose and squander itself in the wealth of spiritual potential it will need the discipline of the Mysteries and the science of spiritual evolution (or anthroposophy).

Steiner's lectures on the Gospels are already profound documents in the exploration of inner links between the religions of the kind that we will need. And perhaps I have said enough both to suggest the importance of rediscovering the Mystery-origins of Christianity, and to allay the theologians' fears that Steiner might therefore neglect the historical reality of Christian development. If I have spoken of the renewal that might take place as conditional, as what might or would happen, since it belongs to a future that we are only just able to glimpse, it should be added that he himself has demonstrated much of the potential in his own astonishingly creative life – and that he after all requires us to base ourselves on nothing that we have not authentically become, if only we will stop to comprehend its full implication. His work has already made so many fruitful beginnings that it would not be feasible to examine them here; certainly anthroposophy has shown the value of a boundary-crossing 'wisdom of man' in today's world, and the Anthroposophical Society has fostered many initiatives, cultural and scientific, that deserve to be better known; also, in the organisation called the Christian Community, somewhat prominent in Holland and Germany but with churches all over the world, we have a church-movement that has responded to the challenge of moving beyond dogma in order to foster the seeking individual and the 'free Christian' whose convictions are those of openness, not those of exclusion.

The new historical perspectives have made the foundations of Steiner's vision in the reality of the spiritual or Mystery events present at its beginnings startlingly clear, and this paper has been an attempt to bring together some elements in his work which present them in an overall pattern of human spiritual evolution. It is also assembled in the hope of fostering that new evolution of Christian understanding which he hoped and prophesied that it would bring.

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- b) works giving in-depth background, or accounts of recent discoveries, new perspectives, etc., in areas touched on in the above lecture and extracts.

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This booklet is based on Dr. Welburn's lecture to the Oxford/Cotswold group, Mansfield College, 22nd March 2003. It utilises material which was later to be included by way of introduction to a publication (Floris Books, Edinburgh) presenting Rudolf Steiner's ideas in connection with modern discoveries, entitled *The Esoteric Background of the Gospels*. We are grateful to the publishers for allowing its use here.