

# **Esoteric Christianity**

by Annie Besant

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## FOREWORD

The object of this book is to suggest certain lines of thought as to the deep truths underlying Christianity, truths generally overlooked, and only too often denied. The generous wish to share with all what is precious, to spread broadcast priceless truths, to shut out none from the illumination of true knowledge, has resulted in a zeal without discretion that has vulgarized Christianity, and has presented its teachings in a form that often repels the heart and alienates the intellect. The command to “preach the Gospel to every creature” [S. Mark, xvi, 15] - though admittedly of doubtful authenticity - has been interpreted as forbidding the teaching of the Gnosis to a few, and has apparently erased the less popular saying of the same Great Teacher: “Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine”. [S. Matt., vii,6]

This spurious sentimentality – which refuses to recognize the obvious inequalities of intelligence and morality, and thereby reduces the teaching of the highly developed to the level attainable by the least evolved, sacrificing the higher to the lower in a way that injures both – had no place in the virile common sense of the early Christians. S. Clement of Alexandria says quite bluntly, after alluding to the Mysteries: “Even now I fear, as it is said, ‘to cast the pearls before swine, lest they tread them underfoot, and turn and rend us’. For it is difficult to exhibit the really pure and transparent words respecting the true Light to swinish and untrained hearers”. [Clarke’s Ante-Nicene Christian Library, Vol. IV. Clement of Alexandria. *Stromata*, bk. I, ch. xii. ]

If true knowledge, the Gnosis, is again to form a part of Christian teachings, it can only be under the old restrictions, and the idea of leveling down to the capacities of the least developed must be definitely surrendered. Only by teaching above the grasp of the little evolved can the way be opened up for a restoration of arcane knowledge, and the study of the Lesser Mysteries must precede that of the Greater. The Greater will never be published through the printing-press; they can only be given by Teacher to pupil, “from mouth to ear”. But the Lesser Mysteries the partial unveiling of deep truths, can even now be restored, and such a volume as the present is intended to outline these, and to show the *nature* of the teachings which have to be mastered. “Where only hints are given, quiet meditation on the truths hinted at will cause their outlines to become visible, and the clearer light obtained by

continued meditation will gradually show them more fully. For meditation quiets the lower mind, ever engaged in thinking about external objects, and when the lower mind is tranquil then only can it be illuminated by the Spirit. Knowledge of spiritual truths must be thus obtained, from within and not from without, from the divine Spirit whose temple we are [I. Cor., iii., 16. ] and not from an external Teacher. These things are “spiritually discerned” by that divine indwelling Spirit, that “mind of Christ”, whereof speaks the great Apostle [*Ibid.*, ii., 14, 16.] and that inner light is shed upon the lower mind.

This is the way of the Divine Wisdom, the true THEOSOPHY. It is not, as some think, a diluted version of Hinduism, or Buddhism, or Taoism, or of any special religion. It is Esoteric Christianity as truly as it is Esoteric Buddhism, and belongs equally to all religions, exclusively to none. This is the source of the suggestions made in this little volume, for the helping of those who seek the Light – that “true Light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world”, [S. John, 1,9] though most have not yet opened their eyes to it. It does not bring the Light. It only says:

“Behold the Light!” For thus have we heard. It appeals only to the few who hunger for more than the exoteric teachings give them. For those who are fully satisfied with the exoteric teachings, it is not intended; for why should bread be forced on those who are not hungry ? For those who hunger, may it prove bread, and not a stone.

Annie Besant

## Esoteric Christianity

*In proceeding to the contemplation of the mysteries of knowledge, we shall adhere to the celebrated and venerable rule of tradition, commencing from the origin of the universe, setting forth those points of physical contemplation which are necessary to be premised, and removing whatever can be an obstacle on the way; so that the ear may be prepared for the reception of the tradition of the Gnosis, the ground being cleared of weeds and fitted for the planting of the vineyard; for there is a conflict before the conflict, and mysteries before the mysteries.-*

S.Clement of Alexandria.

*Let the specimen suffice to those who have ears. For it is not required to unfold the mystery, but only to indicate what is sufficient.- S. Clement of Alexandria.*

*He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.- S. Matthew.*



## **CHAPTER 1 THE HIDDEN SIDE OF RELIGIONS**

MANY, perhaps most, who see the title of this book will at once traverse it, and will deny that there is anything valuable which can be rightly described as "Esoteric Christianity". There is a wide-spread, and withal a popular, idea that there is no such thing as an occult teaching in connection with Christianity, and that "The Mysteries", whether Lesser or Greater, were a purely Pagan institution. The very name of "The Mysteries of Jesus", so familiar in the ears of the Christians of the first centuries, would come with a shock of surprise on those of their modern successors, and, if spoken as denoting a special and definite institution in the Early Church, would cause a smile of incredulity. It has actually been made a matter of boast that Christianity has no secrets, that whatever it has to say it says to all, and whatever it has to teach it teaches to all. Its truths are supposed to be so simple, that "a way-faring man, though a fool, may not err therein", and the "simple Gospel" has become a stock phrase.

It is necessary, therefore, to prove clearly that in the Early Church, at least, Christianity was no whit behind other great religions in possessing a hidden side, and that it guarded, as a priceless treasure, the secrets revealed only to a select few in its Mysteries. But ere doing this it will be well to consider the whole question of this hidden side of religions, and to see why such a side must exist if a religion is to be strong and stable; for thus its existence in Christianity will appear as a foregone conclusion, and the references to it in the writings of the Christian Fathers will appear simple and natural instead of surprising and unintelligible. As a historical fact, the existence of this esotericism is demonstrable; but it may also be shown that intellectually it is a necessity.

The first question we have to answer is: What is the object of religions? They are given to the world by men wiser than the masses of the people on whom they are bestowed, and are intended to quicken human evolution. In order to do this effectively they must reach individuals and influence them. Now all men are not at the same level of evolution, but evolution might be figured as a rising gradient, with men stationed on it at every point. The most highly evolved are far above the least evolved, both in intelligence and character; the capacity alike to understand and to act varies at every stage. It is, therefore, useless to give to all the same

religious teaching; that which would help the intellectual man would be entirely unintelligible to the stupid, while that which would throw the saint into ecstasy would leave the criminal untouched. If, on the other hand, the teaching be suitable to help the unintelligent, it is intolerably crude and jejune to the philosopher, while that which redeems the criminal is utterly useless to the saint. Yet all the types need religion, so that each may reach upward to a life higher than that which he is leading, and no type or grade should be sacrificed to any other. Religion must be as graduated as evolution, else it fails in its object.

Next comes the question: In what way do religions seek to quicken human evolution? Religions seek to evolve the moral and intellectual natures, and to aid the spiritual nature to unfold itself. Regarding man as a complex being, they seek to meet him at every point of his constitution, and therefore to bring messages suitable for each, teachings adequate to the most diverse human needs. Teachings must therefore be adapted to each mind and heart to which they are addressed. If a religion does not reach and master the intelligence, if it does not purify and inspire the emotions, it has failed in its object, so far as the person addressed is concerned.

Not only does it thus direct itself to the intelligence and the emotions, but it seeks, as said, to stimulate the unfoldment of the spiritual nature. It answers to that inner impulse which exists in humanity, and which is ever pushing the race onwards. For deeply within the heart of all — often overlaid by transitory conditions, often submerged under pressing interests and anxieties — there exists a continual seeking after God. “As the hart panteth after the water-brooks, so panteth” [Psalms, xlii,1] humanity after God. The search is sometimes checked for a space, and the yearning seems to disappear. Phases recur in civilization and in thought, wherein this cry of the human Spirit for the divine — seeking its source as water seeks its level, to borrow a simile from Giordano Bruno — this yearning of the human Spirit for that which is akin to it in the universe, of the part for the whole, seems to be stilled, to have vanished; none the less does that yearning re-appear, and once more the same cry rings out from the Spirit. Trampled on for a time, apparently destroyed, though the tendency may be, it rises again and again with inextinguishable persistence, it repeats itself again and again, no matter how often it is silenced; and it thus proves itself to be an inherent tendency in human nature, an ineradicable constituent thereof. Those who declare triumphantly, “Lo! it is

dead!" find it facing them again with undiminished vitality. Those who build without allowing for it find their well-constructed edifices destroyed as by an earthquake. Those who hold it to be out-grown find the wildest superstitions succeed its denial. So much is it an integral part of humanity, that man *will* have some answer to his questionings; rather an answer that is false, than none. If he cannot find religious truth, he will take religious error rather than no religion, and will accept the crudest and most incongruous ideals rather than admit that the ideal is non-existent.

Religion, then, meets this craving, and taking hold of the constituent in human nature that gives rise to it, trains it, strengthens it, purifies it and guides it towards its proper ending — the union of the human Spirit with the divine, so "that God may be all in all". [ I Cor., xv,28]

The next question which meets us in our enquiry is: What is the source of religions ? To this question two answers have been given in modern times — that of the comparative Mythologists and that of the Comparative Religionists. Both base their answers on a common basis of admitted facts. Research has indisputably proved that the religions of the world are markedly similar in their main teachings, in their possession of Founders who display superhuman powers and extraordinary moral elevation, in their ethical precepts, in their use of means to come into touch with invisible worlds, and in the symbols by which they express their leading beliefs. This similarity, amounting in many cases to identity, proves — according to both the above schools — a common origin.

But on the nature of this common origin the two schools are at issue. The Comparative Mythologists contend that the common origin is the common ignorance, and that the loftiest religious doctrines are simply refined expressions of the crude and barbarous guesses of savages, of primitive men, regarding themselves and their surroundings. Animism, fetishism, nature--worship, sun-worship — these are the constituents of the primeval mud out of which has grown the splendid lily of religion. A Krishna, a Buddha, a Laotze, a Jesus, are the highly civilized but lineal descendants of the whirling medicine--man of the savage. God is a composite photograph of the innumerable Gods who are the personifications of the forces of nature. And so forth. It is all summed up in the phrase: Religions are branches from a common trunk — human ignorance.

The Comparative Religionists consider, on the other hand, that all

religions originate from the teachings of Divine Men, who give out to the different nations of the world, from time to time, such parts of the fundamental verities of religion as the people are capable of receiving, teaching ever the same morality, inculcating the use of similar means, employing the same significant symbols. The savage religions — animism and the rest — are degenerations, the results of decadence, distorted and dwarfed descendants of true religious beliefs. Sun-worship and pure forms of nature-worship were, in their day, noble religions, highly allegorical but full of profound truth and knowledge. The great Teachers — it is alleged by Hindus, Buddhists, and by some Comparative Religionists, such as Theosophists — form an enduring Brotherhood of men who have risen beyond humanity, who appear at certain periods to enlighten the world, and who are the spiritual guardians of the human race. This view may be summed up in the phrase: “Religions are branches from a common trunk — Divine Wisdom”.

This Divine Wisdom is spoken of as the Wisdom, the Gnosis, the Theosophia, and some, in different ages of the world, have so desired to emphasize their belief in this unity of religions, that they have preferred the eclectic name of Theosophist to any narrower designation.

The relative value of the contentions of these two opposed schools must be judged by the cogency of the evidence put forth by each. The appearance of a degenerate form of a noble idea may closely resemble that of a refined product of a coarse idea, and the only method of deciding between degeneration and evolution would be the examination, if possible, of intermediate and remote ancestors. The evidence brought forward by believers in the Wisdom is of this kind. They allege: that the Founders of religions, judged by the records of their teachings, were far above the level of average humanity that the Scriptures of religions contain moral precepts, sublime ideals, poetical aspirations, profound philosophical statements, which are not even approached in beauty and elevation by later writings in the same religions — that is, that the old is higher than the new, instead of the new; being higher than the old; that no case can be shown of the refining and improving process alleged to be the source of current religions, whereas many cases of degeneracy from pure teachings can be adduced; that even among savages, if their religions be carefully studied, many traces of lofty ideas can be found, ideas which are obviously above the productive capacity of the savages themselves.

This last idea has been worked out by Mr. Andrew Lang, who —

judging by his book on *The Making of Religion* – should be classed as a Comparative Religionist rather than as a Comparative Mythologist. He points to the existence of a common tradition, which, he alleges, cannot have been evolved by the savages for themselves, being men whose ordinary beliefs are of the crudest kind and whose minds are little developed. He shows, under crude beliefs and degraded views, lofty traditions of a sublime character, touching the nature of the Divine Being and His relations with men. The deities who are worshipped are, for the most part, the veriest devils, but behind, beyond all these, there is a dim but glorious overarching Presence, seldom or never named, but whispered of as source of all, as power and love and goodness, too tender to awaken terror, too good to require supplication. Such ideas manifestly cannot have been conceived by the savages among whom they are found, and they remain as eloquent witnesses of the revelations made by some great Teacher – dim tradition of whom is generally also discoverable – who was a Son of the Wisdom, and imparted some of its teachings in a long bye-gone age.

The reason, and, indeed, the justification, of the view taken by the Comparative Mythologists is patent. They found in every direction low forms of religious belief, existing among savage tribes. These were seen to accompany general lack of civilization. Regarding civilized men as evolving from uncivilized, what more natural than to regard civilized religion as evolving from uncivilized? It is the first obvious idea. Only later and deeper study can show that the savages of to-day are not our ancestral types, but are the degenerated offsprings of great civilized stocks of the past, and that man in his infancy was not left to grow up untrained, but was nursed and educated by his elders, from whom he received his first guidance alike in religion and civilization. This view is being substantiated by such facts as those dwelt on by Lang, and will presently raise the question, “Who were these elders, of whom traditions are everywhere found?”

Still pursuing our enquiry, we come next to the question: To what people were religions given? And here we come at once to the difficulty with which every Founder of a religion must deal, that already spoken of as bearing on the primary object of religion itself, the quickening of human evolution, with its corollary that all grades of evolving humanity must be considered by Him. Men are at every stage of evolution, from the most barbarous to the most developed; men are found of lofty intelligence, but also of the most unevolved mentality; in one place there is a

highly developed and complex civilization, in another a crude and simple polity. Even within any given civilization we find the most varied types — the most ignorant and the most educated, the most thoughtful and the most careless, the most spiritual and the most brutal; yet each one of these types must be reached, and each must be helped in the place where he is. If evolution be true, this difficulty is inevitable, and must be faced and overcome by the divine Teacher, else will His work be a failure. If man is evolving as all around him is evolving, these differences of development, these varied grades of intelligence, must be a characteristic of humanity everywhere, and must be provided for in each of the religions of the world.

We are thus brought face to face with the position that we cannot have one and the same religious teaching even for a single nation, still less for a single civilization, or for the whole world. If there be but one teaching, a large number of those to whom it is addressed will entirely escape its influence. If it be made suitable for those whose intelligence is limited, whose morality is elementary, whose perceptions are obtuse, so that it may help and train them, and thus enable them to evolve, it will be a religion utterly unsuitable for those men, living in the same nation, forming part of the same civilization, who have keen and delicate moral perceptions, bright and subtle intelligence, and evolving spirituality. But if, on the other hand, this latter class is to be helped, if intelligence is to be given a philosophy that it can regard as admirable, if delicate moral perceptions are to be still further refined, if the dawning spiritual nature is to be enabled to develop into the perfect day, then the religion will be so spiritual, so intellectual, and so moral, that when it is preached to the former class it will not touch their minds or their hearts, it will be to them a string of meaningless phrases, incapable of arousing their latent intelligence, or of giving them any motive for conduct which will help them to grow into a purer morality.

Looking, then, at these facts concerning religion, considering its object, its means, its origin, the nature and varying needs of the people to whom it is addressed, recognizing the evolution of spiritual, intellectual, and moral faculties in man, and the need of each man for such training as is suitable for the stage of evolution at which he has arrived, we are led to the absolute necessity of a varied and graduated religious teaching, such as will meet these different needs and help each man in his own place.

There is yet another reason why esoteric teaching is desirable with respect to a certain class of truths. It is eminently the fact in regard to this

class that "knowledge is power". The public promulgation of a philosophy profoundly intellectual, sufficient to train an already highly developed intellect, and to draw the allegiance of a lofty mind, cannot injure any. It can be preached without hesitation, for it does not attract the ignorant, who turn away from it as dry, stiff, and uninteresting. But there are teachings which deal with the constitution of nature, explain recondite laws, and throw light on hidden processes, the knowledge of which gives control over natural energies, and enables its possessor to direct these energies to certain ends, as a chemist deals with the production of chemical compounds. Such knowledge may be very useful to highly developed men, and may much increase their power of serving the race. But if this knowledge were published to the world, it might and would be misused, just as the knowledge of subtle poisons was misused in the Middle Ages by the Borgias and by others. It would pass into the hands of people of strong intellect, but of unregulated desires, men moved by separative instincts, seeking the gain of their separate selves and careless of the common good. They would be attracted by the idea of gaining powers which would raise them above the general level, and place ordinary humanity at their mercy, and would rush to acquire the knowledge which exalts its possessors to a superhuman rank. They would, by its possession, become yet more selfish and confirmed in their separateness, their pride would be nourished and their sense of aloofness intensified, and thus they would inevitably be driven along the road which leads to diabolism, the Left Hand Path whose goal is isolation and not union. And they would not only themselves suffer in their inner nature, but they would also become a menace to Society, already suffering sufficiently at the hands of men whose intellect is more evolved than their conscience. Hence arises the necessity of withholding certain teachings from those who, morally, are as yet unfitted to receive them; and this necessity presses on every Teacher who is able to impart such knowledge. He desires to give it to those who will use the powers it confers for the general good, for quickening human evolution; but he equally desires to be no party to giving it to those who would use it for their own aggrandizement at the cost of others.

Nor is this a matter of theory only, according to the Occult Records, which give the details of the events alluded to in Genesis vi. *et seq.* This knowledge was, in those ancient times and on the continent of Atlantis, given without any rigid conditions as to the moral elevation, purity, and unselfishness of the candidates. Those who were intellectually qualified