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**Christentum als mystische
Tatsache und die Mysterien des
Altertums. English**

Rudolf Steiner

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CHRISTIANITY AS
MYSTICAL FACT
AND
THE MYSTERIES OF ANTIQUITY

BY
DR. RUDOLF STEINER
AUTHOR OF "MYSTICS OF THE RENAISSANCE," "THE GATES
OF KNOWLEDGE," ETC.
THIRD EDITION, REVISED AND ENLARGED

EDITED BY H. COLLISON

THE AUTHORIZED ENGLISH TRANSLATION

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION ToC

Christianity as Mystical Fact was the title given by the author to this work, when, eight years ago, he gathered into it the substance of lectures delivered by him in 1902. The title indicated the special character of the book. In it the attempt was made, not merely to represent historically the mystical content of Christianity, but to describe the origin of Christianity from the standpoint of mystical contemplation. Underlying this intention was the thought that at the genesis of Christianity mystical facts were at work which can only be perceived by such contemplation.

It is only the book itself which can make clear that by "mystical" its author does not imply a conception which relies more on vague feelings than on "strictly scientific statements." It is true that "mysticism" is at present widely understood in the former [iv] sense, and hence it is declared by many to be a sphere of the human soul-life with which "true science" can have nothing to do. In this book the word "mysticism" is used in the sense of the representation of a spiritual fact, which can only be recognised in its true nature when the knowledge of it is derived from the sources of spiritual life itself. If the kind of knowledge drawn from such sources is rejected, the reader will not be in a position to judge of the contents of this book. Only one who allows that the same clearness may exist in mysticism as in a true representation of the facts of natural science, will be ready to admit that the content of Christianity as mysticism may also be mystically described. For it is not only a question of the contents of the book, but first and foremost of the methods of knowledge by means of which the statements in it are made.

Many there are in the present day who have a most violent dislike to such methods, which are regarded as conflicting with the ways of true science. And this is not only the case with those willing to admit other [v] interpretations of the world than their own, on the

ground of "genuine knowledge of natural science," but also with those who as believers wish to study the nature of Christianity.

The author of this book stands on the ground of a conception which sees that the achievements of natural science in our age must lead up into true mysticism. In fact, any other attitude as regards knowledge actually contradicts everything presented by the achievements of natural science. The facts of natural science itself indeed cannot be comprehended by means of those methods of knowledge which so many people would like to employ to the exclusion of others, under the illusion that they stand on the firm ground of natural science. It is only when we are prepared to admit that a full appreciation of our present admirable knowledge of nature is compatible with genuine mysticism, that we can take the contents of this book into consideration.

The author's intention is to show, by means of what is here called "mystical knowledge," how the source of Christianity prepared its [vi] own ground in the mysteries of pre-Christian times. In this pre-Christian mysticism we find the soil in which Christianity thrives, as a germ of quite independent nature. This point of view makes it possible to understand Christianity in its independent being, even though its evolution is traced from pre-Christian mysticism. If this point of view be overlooked, it is very possible to misunderstand that independent character, and to think that Christianity was merely a further development of what already existed in pre-Christian mysticism. Many people of the present day have fallen into this error, comparing the content of Christianity with pre-Christian conceptions, and then thinking that Christian ideas were only a continuation of the former. The following pages are intended to show that Christianity presupposes the earlier mysticism just as a seed must have its soil. It is intended to emphasise the peculiar character of the essence of Christianity, through the knowledge of its evolution, but not to extinguish it.

It is with deep satisfaction that the author is able to mention that this account of the [vii] nature of Christianity has found acceptance with a writer who has enriched the culture of our time in the highest sense of the word, by his important works on the spiritual life of humanity. Edouard Schuré, author of *Les Grands Initiés*, [1] is so far

in accord with the attitude of this book that he undertook to translate it into French, under the title, *Le mystère chrétien et les mystères antiques*. It may be mentioned by the way, and as a symptom of the existence at the present time of a longing to understand the nature of Christianity as presented in this work, that the first edition was translated into other European languages besides French.

The author has not found occasion to alter anything essential in the preparation of this second edition. On the other hand, what was written eight years ago has been enlarged, and the endeavour has been made to express many things more exactly and circumstantially than was then possible. Unfortunately [viii] the author was obliged, through stress of work, to let a long period elapse between the time when the first edition was exhausted, and the appearance of the second.

Rudolf Steiner.

May, 1910.

FOOTNOTES:

[1] This book is to be had in an English translation, by F. Rothwell, under the title of *The Great Initiates, A Sketch of the Secret History of Religions*, by Edouard Schuré (Pub., Rider & Son, London).

CHRISTIANITY AS MYSTICAL FACT

Christianity as Mystical Fact

I ToC

POINTS OF VIEW

Natural Science has deeply influenced modern thought. It is becoming more and more impossible to speak of spiritual needs and the life of the soul, without taking into consideration the achievements and methods of this science. It must be admitted, however, that many people satisfy these needs, without letting themselves be troubled by its influence. But those who feel the beating of the pulse of the age must take this influence into consideration. With increasing swiftness do ideas derived from natural science take possession of our [2] brains, and, unwillingly though it may be, our hearts follow, often in dejection and dismay. It is not a question only of the number thus won over, but of the fact that there is a force within the method of natural science, which convinces the attentive observer that that method contains something which cannot be neglected, and is one by which any modern conception of the universe must be profoundly affected. Many of the outgrowths of this method compel a justifiable rejection. But such rejection is not sufficient in an age in which very many resort to this way of thinking, and are attracted to it as if by magic. The case is in no way altered because some people see that true science long ago passed, by its own initiative, beyond the shallow doctrines of force and matter taught by materialists. It would be better, apparently, to listen to those who boldly declare that the ideas of natural science will form the basis of a new religion. If these ideas also appear shallow and superficial to one who knows the deeper spiritual needs of humanity, he must nevertheless take note of them, for it is to them that attention is now turned, [3]

and there is reason to think they will claim more and more notice in the near future.

Another class of people have also to be taken into account, those whose hearts have lagged behind their heads. With their reason they cannot but accept the ideas of natural science. The burden of proof is too much for them. But those ideas cannot satisfy the religious needs of their souls,—the perspective offered is too dreary. Is the human soul to rise on the wings of enthusiasm to the heights of beauty, truth, and goodness, only for each individual to be swept away in the end like a bubble blown by the material brain? This is a feeling which oppresses many minds like a nightmare. But scientific concepts oppress them also, coming as they do come with the mighty force of authority. As long as they can, these people remain blind to the discord in their souls. Indeed they console themselves by saying that full clearness in these matters is denied to the human soul. They think in accordance with natural science so long as the experience of their senses and the logic of their intellect demand it, but they keep to the religious [4] sentiments in which they have been educated, and prefer to remain in darkness as to these matters,—a darkness which clouds their understanding. They have not the courage to battle through to the light.

There can be no doubt whatever that the habit of thought derived from natural science is the greatest force in modern intellectual life, and it must not be passed by heedlessly by any one concerned with the spiritual interests of humanity. But it is none the less true that the way in which it sets about satisfying spiritual needs is superficial and shallow. If this were the right way, the outlook would indeed be dreary. Would it not be depressing to be obliged to agree with those who say: "Thought is a form of force. We walk by means of the same force by which we think. Man is an organism which transforms various forms of force into thought-force, an organism the activity of which we maintain by what we call 'food,' and with which we produce what we call 'thought.' What a marvellous chemical process it is which could change a certain quantity of food into the divine tragedy of [5] Hamlet." This is quoted from a pamphlet of Robert G. Ingersoll, bearing the title, *Modern Twilight of the Gods*. It matters little if such thoughts find but scanty acceptance in the outside world. The point is that innumerable people find themselves

compelled by the system of natural science to take up with regard to world-processes an attitude in conformity with the above, even when they think they are not doing so.

It would certainly be a dreary outlook if natural science itself compelled us to accept the creed proclaimed by many of its modern prophets. Most dreary of all for one who has gained, from the content of natural science, the conviction that in its own sphere its mode of thought holds good and its methods are unassailable. For he is driven to make the admission that, however much people may dispute about individual questions, though volume after volume may be written, and thousands of observations accumulated about the struggle for existence and its insignificance, about the omnipotence or powerlessness of natural selection, natural science itself is moving in a direction which, [6] within certain limits, must find acceptance in an ever-increasing degree.

But are the demands made by natural science really such as they are described by some of its representatives? That they are not so is proved by the method employed by these representatives themselves. The method they use in their own sphere is not such as is often described, and claimed for other spheres of thought. Would Darwin and Ernst Haeckel ever have made their great discoveries about the evolution of life if, instead of observing life and the structure of living beings, they had shut themselves up in a laboratory and there made chemical experiments with tissue cut out of an organism? Would Lyell have been able to describe the development of the crust of the earth if, instead of examining strata and their contents, he had scrutinised the chemical qualities of innumerable rocks? Let us really follow in the footsteps of these investigators who tower like giants in the domain of modern science. We shall then apply to the higher regions of spiritual life the methods they have used in the study of nature. We [7] shall not then believe we have understood the nature of the "divine" tragedy of Hamlet by saying that a wonderful chemical process transformed a certain quantity of food into that tragedy. We shall believe it as little as an investigator of nature could seriously believe that he has understood the mission of heat in the evolution of the earth, when he has studied the action of heat on sulphur in a retort. Neither does he attempt to understand the construction of the human brain by ex-

aming the effect of liquid potash on a fragment of it, but rather by inquiring how the brain has, in the course of evolution, been developed out of the organs of lower organisms.

It is therefore quite true that one who is investigating the nature of spirit can do nothing better than learn from natural science. He need only do as science does, but he must not allow himself to be misled by what individual representatives of natural science would dictate to him. He must investigate in the spiritual as they do in the physical domain, but he need not adopt the opinions they entertain about the spiritual [8] world, confused as they are by their exclusive contemplation of physical phenomena.

We shall only be acting in the spirit of natural science if we study the spiritual development of man as impartially as the naturalist observes the sense-world. We shall then certainly be led, in the domain of spiritual life, to a kind of contemplation which differs from that of the naturalist as geology differs from pure physics and biology from chemistry. We shall be led up to higher methods, which cannot, it is true, be those of natural science, though quite conformable with the spirit of it. Such methods alone are able to bring us to the heart of spiritual developments, such as that of Christianity, or other worlds of religious conceptions. Any one applying these methods may arouse the opposition of many who believe they are thinking scientifically, but he will know himself, for all that, to be in full accord with a genuinely scientific method of thought.

An investigator of this kind must also go beyond a merely historical examination of the documents relating to spiritual life. This is necessary just on account of the attitude [9] he has acquired from his study of natural history. When a chemical law is explained, it is of small use to describe the retorts, dishes, and pincers which have led to the discovery of the law. And it is just as useless, when explaining the origin of Christianity, to ascertain the historical sources drawn upon by the Evangelist St. Luke, or those from which the "hidden revelation" of St. John is compiled. History can in this case be only the outer court to research proper. It is not by tracing the historical origin of documents that we shall discover anything about the dominant ideas in the writings of Moses or in the traditions of the Greek mystics. These documents are only the outer expression

for the ideas. Nor does the naturalist who is investigating the nature of man trouble about the origin of the word "man," or the way in which it has developed in a language. He keeps to the thing, not to the word in which it finds expression. And in studying spiritual life we must likewise abide by the spirit and not by outer documents.

[10]

II ToC

THE MYSTERIES AND THEIR WISDOM

A kind of mysterious veil hangs over the manner in which spiritual needs were satisfied during the older civilisations by those who sought a deeper religious life and fuller knowledge than the popular religions offered. If we inquire how these needs were satisfied, we find ourselves led into the dim twilight of the mysteries, and the individual seeking them disappears for a time from our observation. We see how it is that the popular religions cannot give him what his heart desires. He acknowledges the existence of the gods, but knows that the ordinary ideas about them do not solve the great problems of existence. He seeks a wisdom which is jealously guarded by a community of priest-sages. His aspiring soul seeks a refuge in this community. If he is found by the sages [11] to be sufficiently prepared, he is led up by them, step by step, to higher knowledge, in places hidden from the eyes of outward observers. What then happens to him is concealed from the uninitiated. He seems for a time to be entirely removed from earthly life and to be transported into a hidden world.

When he reappears in the light of day a different, quite transformed person is before us. We see a man who cannot find words sublime enough to express the momentous experience through which he has passed. Not merely metaphorically but in a most real sense does he seem to have gone through the gate of death and to have awakened to a new and higher life. He is, moreover, quite certain that no one who has not had a similar experience can understand his words.

This was what happened to those who were initiated into the Mysteries, into that secret wisdom withheld from the people and which threw light on the greatest questions. This "secret" religion of the elect existed side by side with the popular religion. Its origin vanishes, as far as history is concerned, into the obscurity in which the origin of nations [12] is lost. We find this secret religion everywhere amongst the ancients as far as we know anything concerning them; and we hear their sages speak of the Mysteries with the greatest reverence. What was it that was concealed in them? And what did they unveil to the initiate?

The enigma becomes still more puzzling when we discover that the ancients looked upon the Mysteries as something dangerous. The way leading to the secrets of existence passed through a world of terrors, and woe to him who tried to gain them unworthily. There was no greater crime than the "betrayal" of secrets to the uninitiated. The "traitor" was punished with death and the confiscation of his property. We know that the poet Æschylus was accused of having reproduced on the stage something from the Mysteries. He was only able to escape death by fleeing to the altar of Dionysos and by legally proving that he had never been initiated.

What the ancients say about these secrets is significant, but at the same time ambiguous. The initiate is convinced that it would [13] be a sin to tell what he knows and also that it would be sinful for the uninitiated to listen. Plutarch speaks of the terror of those about to be initiated, and compares their state of mind to preparation for death. A special mode of life had to precede initiation, tending to give the spirit the mastery over the senses. Fasting, solitude, mortifications, and certain exercises for the soul were the means employed. The things to which man clings in ordinary life were to lose

all their value for him. The whole trend of his life of sensation and feeling was to be changed.

There can be no doubt as to the meaning of such exercises and tests. The wisdom which was to be offered to the candidate for initiation could only produce the right effect upon his soul if he had previously purified the lower life of his sensibility. He was introduced to the life of the spirit. He was to behold a higher world, but he could not enter into relations with that world without previous exercises and tests. The relations thus gained were the condition of initiation.

In order to obtain a correct idea on this matter, it is necessary to gain experience of [14] the intimate facts of the growth of knowledge. We must feel that there are two widely divergent attitudes towards that which the highest knowledge gives. The world surrounding us is to us at first the real one. We feel, hear, and see what goes on in it, and because we thus perceive things with our senses, we call them real. And we reflect about events, in order to get an insight into their connections. On the other hand, what wells up in our soul is at first not real to us in the same sense. It is "merely" thoughts and ideas. At the most we see in them only images of reality. They themselves have no reality, for we cannot touch, see, or hear them.

There is another way of being connected with things. A person who clings to the kind of reality described above will hardly understand it, but it comes to certain people at some moment in their lives. To them the whole connection with the world is completely reversed. They then call the images which well up in the spiritual life of their souls actually real, and they assign only a lower kind of reality to what the senses hear, touch, [15] feel, and see. They know that they cannot prove what they say, that they can only relate their new experiences, and that when relating them to others they are in the position of a man who can see and who imparts his visual impressions to one born blind. They venture to impart their inner experiences, trusting that there are others round them whose spiritual eyes, though as yet closed, may be opened by the power of what they hear. For they have faith in humanity and want to give it spiritual sight. They can only lay before it the fruits which their spirit

has gathered. Whether another sees them, depends on his spiritual eyes being opened or not.

There is something in man which at first prevents him from seeing with the eyes of the spirit. He is not there for that purpose. He is what his senses are, and his intellect is only the interpreter and judge of them. The senses would ill fulfil their mission if they did not insist upon the truth and infallibility of their evidence. An eye must, from its own point of view, uphold the absolute reality of its perceptions. The eye is right as far as it goes, [16] and is not deprived of its due by the eye of the spirit. The latter only allows us to see the things of sense in a higher light. Nothing seen by the eye of sense is denied, but a new brightness, hitherto unseen, radiates from what is seen. And then we know that what we first saw was only a lower reality. We see that still, but it is immersed in something higher, which is spirit. It is now a question of whether we realise and feel what we see. One who lives only in the sensations and feelings of the senses will look upon impressions of higher things as a Fata Morgana, or mere play of fancy. His feelings are entirely directed towards the things of sense. He grasps emptiness when he tries to lay hold of spirit forms. They withdraw from him when he gropes after them. They are just "mere" thoughts. He thinks them, but does not live in them. They are images, less real to him than fleeting dreams. They rise up like bubbles while he is standing in his reality; they disappear before the massive, solidly built reality of which his senses tell him.

It is otherwise with one whose perceptions and feelings with regard to reality have [17] changed. For him that reality has lost its absolute stability and value. His senses and feelings need not become numbed, but they begin to be doubtful of their absolute authority. They leave room for something else. The world of the spirit begins to animate the space left.

At this point a possibility comes in which may prove terrible. A man may lose his sensations and feelings of outer reality without finding any new reality opening up before him. He then feels himself as if suspended in the void. He feels as if he were dead. The old values have disappeared and no new ones have arisen in their place. The world and man no longer exist for him. This, however, is

by no means a mere possibility. It happens at some time or other to every one who is seeking for higher knowledge. He comes to a point at which the spirit represents all life to him as death. He is then no longer in the world, but under it,—in the nether world. He is passing through Hades. Well for him if he sink not! Happy if a new world open up before him! Either he dwindles away or he appears to himself transfigured. In the [18] latter case he beholds a new sun and a new earth. The whole world has been born again for him out of spiritual fire.

It is thus that the initiates describe the effect of the Mysteries upon them. Menippus relates that he journeyed to Babylon in order to be taken to Hades and to be brought back again by the successors of Zarathustra. He says that he swam across the great water on his wanderings, and that he passed through fire and ice. We hear that the Mystics were terrified by a flashing sword, and that blood flowed. We understand this when we know from experience the point of transition from lower to higher knowledge. We then feel as if all solid matter and things of sense had dissolved into water, and as if the ground were cut away from under our feet. Everything is dead which we felt before to be alive. The spirit has passed through the life of the senses, as a sword pierces a warm body; we have seen the blood of sense-nature flow. But a new life has appeared. We have risen from the nether-world. The orator Aristides relates this: "I thought I touched the god and felt him draw near, and I was then between [19] waking and sleeping. My spirit was so light that no one who is not initiated can speak of or understand it." This new existence is not subject to the laws of lower life. Growth and decay no longer affect it. One may say much about the Eternal, but words of one who has not been through Hades are "mere sound and smoke." The initiates have a new conception of life and death. Now for the first time do they feel they have the right to speak about immortality. They know that one who speaks of it without having been initiated talks of something which he does not understand. The uninitiated attribute immortality only to something which is subject to the laws of growth and decay. The Mystics, however, did not merely desire to gain the conviction that the kernel of life is eternal. According to the view of the Mysteries, such a conviction would be quite valueless, for this view holds that the Eternal is not

present as a living reality in the uninitiated. If such an one spoke of the Eternal, he would be speaking of something non-existent. It is rather the Eternal itself that the Mystics are [20] seeking. They have first to awaken the Eternal within them, then they can speak of it. Hence the hard saying of Plato is quite real to them, that the uninitiated sinks into the mire, and that only one who has passed through the mystical life enters eternity. It is only in this sense that the words in the fragment of Sophocles can be understood: "Thrice-blessed are the initiated who come to the realm of the shades. They alone have life there. For others there is only misery and hardship."

Is one therefore not describing dangers when speaking of the Mysteries? Is it not robbing a man of happiness and of the best part of his life to take him to the portals of the nether-world? Terrible is the responsibility incurred by such an act. And yet ought we to refuse that responsibility? These were the questions which the initiate had to put to himself. He was of opinion that his knowledge bore the same relation to the soul of the people as light does to darkness. But innocent happiness dwells in that darkness, and the Mystics were of opinion that that happiness should not be sacrilegiously interfered with. [21] For what would have happened in the first place if the Mystic had betrayed his secret? He would have uttered words and only words. The feelings and emotions which would have evoked the spirit from the words would have been absent. To do this preparation, exercises, tests, and a complete change in the life of sense were necessary. Without this the hearer would have been hurled into emptiness and nothingness. He would have been deprived of what constituted his happiness, without receiving anything in exchange. One may also say that one could take nothing away from him, for mere words would change nothing in his life of feeling. He would only have been able to feel and experience reality through his senses. Nothing but a terrible misgiving, fatal to life, would be given him. This could only be construed as a crime.

The wisdom of the Mysteries is like a hothouse plant, which must be cultivated and fostered in seclusion. Any one bringing it into the atmosphere of everyday ideas brings it into air in which it cannot flourish. It withers away to nothing before the caustic verdict of modern science and logic. Let us [22] therefore divest ourselves for