

# Esoteric Perspectives on the Eucharist

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## Summary

This article discusses the Christian sacrament of the Eucharist from the standpoint of pre-Christian antecedents, archetypal significance, analogies with medieval and Renaissance alchemy, and the writings of modern esoteric teachers. One conclusion is that the Eucharist belongs to a large class of ancient rituals, all of which envisioned the receipt of divine energy through the sacrificial offering and/or consumption of grain and vine products. Another is that the transformation of the eucharistic elements—and the associated transformation of recipients' consciousness—can be viewed on many levels: literal, symbolic, and metaphysical. The most important conclusion may be that the Eucharist offers opportunities for profound mystical insight, spiritual nourishment, service—and even cooperation with the deva evolution.

## Background

The sacrament of the *Eucharist* (Greek: Ευχαριστία, “Thanksgiving”), also referred to as Holy Communion, or the Lord’s Supper, has played a conspicuous role in Christian worship for two millennia. Opinions differ concerning its importance and differ even more as to its meaning. For some Christians the Eucharist simply commemorates an event in Jesus’ ministry. For others, through a miraculous transmutation of the elements, the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ, and the sacrament forms “the sacrifice of the new covenant.” This article will not try to resolve such divergence of belief. Rather, its purpose is to explore the mythological, archetypal and esoteric dimensions of the Eucharist in the hope of stimulating new insights, understanding and study.

Eucharistic prototypes are found in Judaic, pagan, and other ancient cultures as well as in

medieval and Renaissance alchemy. Meanwhile, some modern esoteric writers have discussed the Eucharist, commenting on the transformation in the lives of participants as well as upon the transubstantiation of elements. The attention paid to the topic by esotericists and the insights they have shared vary substantially, possibly reflecting religious convictions. Be that as it may, study of the Eucharist from an esoteric perspective helps bridge the sometimes-wide gulf between the ageless wisdom and conventional theology, and esoteric teachings can complement traditional religious teachings in significant ways.

## The Christian Eucharist

The Christian Eucharist has always been viewed as a commemoration of the Last Supper at which, we are told, Jesus shared bread and wine with his disciples. After the resurrection, Christ “took bread, and blessed it, and brake, and gave to [the apostles],” adding that thereafter he would be known to his followers “in breaking of bread.”<sup>1</sup> The Eucharist became a major component of early Christian ritual, reinforcing collective identity—or “communion”—as well as expressing devotion and trust in Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup>

The Last Supper resembled the Jewish *Seder* (Hebrew: סדר), or Passover meal.<sup>3</sup> Also, Judaic images were incorporated into the earliest known eucharistic liturgy, believed to date from the mid-first century:

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## About the Author

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We thank thee, our Father, for the holy vine of David Thy servant, which You madest known to us through Jesus Thy Servant; to Thee be the glory for ever... Even as this broken bread was scattered over the hills, and was gathered together and became one, so let Thy Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into Thy kingdom; for Thine is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ for ever.<sup>4</sup>

Christians came to believe in the “real presence” in the Eucharist—that in some way they received the body and blood of Christ. But that belief probably evolved only after Christianity moved beyond Palestine and distanced itself from its Judaic roots. Jews would have viewed the drinking of blood, even in symbolic terms, as abhorrent.<sup>5</sup> Paul was addressing a Hellenic audience when he warned that anyone who participated unworthily “eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body.”<sup>6</sup> The Christian Eucharist, as eventually understood, owed more to pagan than to Judaic precedent.

The gospels are thought to have been written during the last three decades of the first century. Many of the sayings attributed to Jesus may have been composed at that time, including the famous “words of consecration” on which belief in the real presence depended:

[A]s they did eat, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and brake it, and gave to them, and said, Take, eat: this is my body. And he took the cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them: and they all drank of it. And he said unto them, This is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, relevant symbolism was projected back onto Jesus’ ministry. Reportedly he had said: “I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger;”<sup>8</sup> he described himself as “the true vine;”<sup>9</sup> and his first miracle was to change water into wine.<sup>10</sup> The *Epistle to the Hebrews*, conventionally dated to around 95 CE, described the Eucharist as the “sacrifice of the new covenant,”<sup>11</sup> linking—but also contrasting—the Eucharist with Jewish ritual sacrifice<sup>12</sup> which had ended with destruction of the temple in Jerusalem.

The notion that a god might inhabit sacred elements was familiar to the prevailing pagan mindset. Moreover, Christ’s incarnation convinced the early Christians that the Divine could take physical form. Writing in the 160s CE, Justin Martyr—who like many others died in the Roman amphitheater—asserted that the bread and wine “which is blessed by the prayer of His word, and from which our blood and flesh by transmutation are nourished, is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh.”<sup>13</sup> Likewise, Ambrose, fourth-century bishop of Milan, spoke of the Eucharist as the “Flesh of Christ,” adding that the “food which you receive, that living Bread which came down from heaven, furnishes the substance of eternal life; and whosoever shall eat of this Bread shall never die, and it is the Body of Christ.”<sup>14</sup>

By the fourth century, the Eucharistic ritual had evolved from a communal meal into the distinctive religious service of the Mass. Basil of Caesarea, a contemporary of Ambrose, proposed a liturgy which is still used in Eastern Orthodox churches, and his near-contemporary John Chrysostom proposed an alternative form. The Latin rite of the Mass evolved on similar lines, and by the eighth century it included most of the components known today.

### Development of Eucharistic Doctrine

Belief in the real presence, understood at least in a mystical sense, may have been widespread by the fourth century; but the formulation of definitive eucharistic doctrine took much longer. In the ninth century, the French Benedictine theologian Radbertus Paschasius proposed that the elements are physically transformed into the body and blood of Christ.<sup>15</sup> His opponents argued, as Protestant reformers would many centuries later, that the elements themselves were not transformed, but the body and blood were received by virtue of the recipient’s faith. In any event, Radbertus was ahead of his time. The Aristotelian revival, which offered the categories of *substance* and *accidents* that could be invoked to justify the proposition, still lay in the future. As a result, doctrinal debate continued. Finally, in 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council formally defined the doctrine of transubstantiation:

There is one Universal Church of the faithful... [i]n which there is the same priest and sacrifice, Jesus Christ, whose body and blood are truly contained in the sacrament of the altar under the forms of bread and wine; the bread being changed by divine power into the body, and the wine into the blood.<sup>16</sup>

Transubstantiation (*transsubstantiatio*, “change”) means that the “substance” of the eucharistic elements is changed, though the “accidents”—or appearance of the elements—remain the same. The Lateran Council affirmed that the Eucharist is a ritual sacrifice because of the separate consecration of the bread and wine. Christ’s sacramental body and blood are separated, as they were when he died on the cross. The Lateran decree remains the official belief of the Roman church.<sup>17</sup>

The eastern churches ignored the ninth-century controversy and had split from the Latin church by the time of the Lateran Council. The doctrine of transubstantiation was not accepted in Eastern Orthodox Christianity until the “latinization” movement of the 17th century, when Aristotelian philosophy finally made inroads into Orthodox thought. Even then, there was no firm commitment to the doctrine, and current teachings affirm the real presence, while allowing considerable freedom to speculate on the mechanism by which it is accomplished.

Transubstantiation became a primary target of the Protestant reformers. Although Martin Luther retained a belief in the real presence,<sup>18</sup> he despised Aristotelian philosophy and was loathe to accept a doctrine that stemmed from it. Moreover, he argued, transubstantiation went beyond what could be defended by scripture. Luther and others also complained that, by defining the Eucharist in physical terms, the Roman church had removed the sense of mystery on which true devotion rested.<sup>19</sup> Bishop Richard Hooker, 16th-century apologist for the Church of England, rejected the need for a rigorous definition:

What these elements are in themselves it skilleth not, it is enough that to me which take them they are the body and blood of Christ... [W]hy should any cognition possess the mind of a faithful communicant but this, “O my God thou art true, O my Soul thou art happy!”<sup>20</sup>

Finally, the Lutheran and Anglican churches rejected any notion that the Eucharist was a sacrifice,<sup>21</sup> though they continued to refer to their clergy as “priests.”

In the Reformed (Calvinist) churches, and the later Evangelical movements, belief in the real presence was dropped altogether, and the Eucharist became little more than a symbolic or commemorative ritual. “Priest” was deliberately changed to “minister” to emphasize new perceptions of the clerical role.

Changes in attitude to the Eucharist were accompanied by major changes in the liturgy, in vestments and regalia, and even in church architecture. Simplified services that stressed preaching and devotion replaced the elaborate rites of the pre-Reformation Mass. Decorated stone altars, traditionally associated with sacrifice, gave way to plain Communion tables. Pulpits became the most conspicuous feature in churches, often located in the center of the chancel where altars once stood.

Over the last 150 years, certain groups have moved closer to Roman and Orthodox tradition in their understanding of, and attitude to, the Eucharist. Anglo-Catholics, Neo-Lutherans, Evangelical Catholics, and Liberal Catholics once again celebrate the Mass with elaborate ceremony. However, they do not necessarily accept the rigid formula of transubstantiation.<sup>22</sup> Bishop John Cosin, a prominent member of the Tractarian Movement that produced Anglo-Catholicism, insisted:

[T]his eating of Christ’s body is spiritual, and that by it the souls of the faithful, and not their stomachs, are fed...; for this none can deny, but they who being strangers to the Spirit and the divine virtue, can savour only carnal things.<sup>23</sup>

## Judaic and Pagan Eucharistic Archetypes

In support of eucharistic doctrine, Christian Apologists often cite the biblical story of Melchizedek, king of Salem and “priest of the most high God.”<sup>24</sup> Melchizedek “brought forth bread and wine,” in what retroactively was considered a prophecy of the sacrament instituted by Christ. Less often cited is the passage in *Proverbs* in which Wisdom invited the townspeople to her love-feast: “Come, eat of my bread, and drink of the wine which I have mingled.”<sup>25</sup> The main meal of the Jewish Sabbath, or *Shabbat*, still involves the blessing of a glass of wine. And at the annual *Seder*, or Passover festival meal, the *matzah*, or unleavened bread is broken and a piece given to everyone present.

Eucharistic precedents extend beyond Judaic tradition. Initiates in the Eleusinian mysteries offered sheaths of grain and drank from a chalice of barley-water and mint, commemorating the refreshment requested by the corn goddess Demeter while searching for her daughter Persephone.<sup>26</sup>

Worshippers recalled that Persephone was eventually released from Hades, but only to spend eight months of the year in the land of the living. She returned from the underworld each spring, whereupon the land waved “with long ears of corn, and its rich furrows... loaded with grain upon the ground, while others would already be bound in sheaves.”<sup>27</sup>

Offerings of the fruits of the earth were not always held in high regard. *Genesis* records that Cain offered God the “fruit of the ground,” while Abel offered “the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof.”<sup>28</sup> Cain’s sacrifice was rejected, whereupon Cain slew his brother in anger. The story can be interpreted in many ways, but certainly we can detect tension between traditions of vegetation-related sacrifice—a category that would include the offering of products like

bread and wine—and traditions of blood sacrifice.

On the other hand, some cultures made efforts to resolve the tension by combining the two types of sacrifice. For example, the seven-day feast of Tabernacles (Hebrew: *Sukkot*, סוכות) originally involved animal sacrifice,<sup>29</sup> but by the late biblical period it had evolved into a harvest festival. Similarly, the *Toda* (תודה), a rite of thanksgiving offered by someone who had narrowly escaped death or been delivered from enemies, included both animal sacrifice and the breaking of bread.<sup>30</sup> What we know of the ancient Greek festival of Dionysus, or Bacchus, also suggests a combination of offer-

ings. Dionysian rituals were marked by offerings of bread and wine—and, from what we know, consumption of the latter on a substantial scale. They also involved animal sacrifice. In his influential book *The Golden Bough*, James Frazer describes various Dionysian rituals, including an ancient Cretan practice in

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which men tore a live bull to pieces with their teeth and ate it.<sup>31</sup>

In societies that practiced either or both types of sacrifice, a common belief was that eating the consecrated elements amounted to “eating the god” they represented. Of the Cretan sacrificial rites, Frazer comments: “[W]e cannot doubt that in rending and devouring a live bull at his festival, the worshippers of Dionysus believed themselves to be killing the god, eating his flesh, and drinking his blood.”<sup>32</sup>

In Mithraic mythology, Mithras, “the Invincible” god-man, slew a bull after a long struggle. Statuary and relief sculpture depicted wheat and grapes, the ingredients of bread and wine, emerging from the bull’s body and blood. According to legend, Mithras and his disciples celebrated his victory over the bull at a “last supper” before he ascended to heaven in a fiery chariot. In commemoration, initiates in the Mithraic mysteries participated in a communal meal which included bread and wine.<sup>33</sup> Mithraism and Christianity developed concurrently, early in the Common Era, and arguments arose as to which influenced the other.<sup>34</sup> Most likely, both were modeled on common antecedents. Comparable rituals have been documented, from countries stretching from pre-Christian Mexico to India, in which consecrated bread was consumed in sacramental meals. In some cases loaves of bread were baked in human form to represent the god.<sup>35</sup>

The practice of “eating the god” instilled hope that participants might absorb some of the god’s characteristics: long life, fertility, courage, wisdom, or whatever quality was valued in the particular society. It also reinforced communal solidarity and loyalty to a tribal god. Drinking the god’s blood—or its sacramental equivalent—reinforced the sense that his (or in some cases her) blood flowed uniquely through the particular tribe. The Dionysian and similar wine festivals may have reflected such a belief, and Jesus’ remark about being “the vine” could be interpreted likewise. Wine and blood can have broad, overlapping meanings in a sacramental context.

Fertility of families, herds, and the land was critical to societies’ survival, and sacrifices to ensure good harvests survived to comparatively modern times. The rituals often involved the symbolic slaying of a corn deity in animal or human, form. Frazer remarks: “[O]ur European peasants have furnished unmistakable examples of the sacramental eating of animals as representatives of the corn-spirit. But further... the new corn is itself eaten sacramentally; that is, as the body of the corn-spirit.”<sup>36</sup>

The Christian Eucharist may never have been considered a fertility ritual, but in its evolution it embraced many of the characteristics of ancient, and in a few instances more modern, practices involving the offering of consecrated corn and vine products. Whether or not passages in scripture and elsewhere were prophetic, it seems clear that the Eucharist drew upon archetypes whose meaning and significance were recognized in the remote past. Among those archetypes was the sacrifice of a god-man. The Eucharist preserves a strong reference to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

## The Eucharist and Alchemy

During the high Middle Ages and Renaissance, correspondences were noted between the transubstantiation of eucharistic bread and wine and the alchemical transmutation of base metals into gold. Central to the alchemical process was production of the “philosopher’s stone,” which offered curative and rejuvenative powers in addition to serving as a catalyst in the transmutation of metals.

Among the roughly 100,000 surviving alchemical texts, considerable variations can be found in the sequence of steps considered necessary to produce the philosopher’s stone. But a common theme was the *conjunctio* of a pair of opposites, such as the lower and higher natures, mankind and the Divine, a king and queen, bride and bridegroom, sun and moon, or fire and water. The *conjunctio* was often portrayed as the consummation of a mystic marriage.<sup>37</sup> Significantly, a passage in the Gnostic *Gospel of Philip* tells us: “The Lord

[did] everything in a mystery... a eucharist and a redemption and a bridal chamber.”<sup>38</sup> The outcome of the *conjunctio* was not always the birth of a child; in some cases it was the emergence of an androgyne symbolizing the synthesis and mutual transformation of the polarities.

The philosopher’s stone was often compared with Christ—in that case the offspring of a mystic marriage between the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary.<sup>39</sup> In the alchemical text *Aurora Consurgens*, often attributed to the 13th-century theologian Thomas Aquinas,<sup>40</sup> the author boldly suggested that the *conjunctio* involved himself and *Sapientia*, or Wisdom, who had organized the love-feast in *Proverbs*.<sup>41</sup> Later in the same work, he took a more cautious position, acknowledging that it more likely involved heavenly partners united in Christ and that he, the alchemist, was just a guest at the feast. Nevertheless the author continued to view the Eucharist as an alchemical work, commenting: “When thou hast water from earth, air from water, fire from air, earth from fire, then shalt thou fully and perfectly process (our) art.”<sup>42</sup>

One of the most audacious attempts to relate the Eucharist to alchemy was made by the early 16th-century Nicholas Melchior of Hermannstadt. Melchior’s instructions for the alchemical process were formatted to resemble the Latin Mass. In place of the usual *Kyrie Eleison*... (“Lord have mercy on us...”), for example, we find: *Kyrie, Ignis Divine*... (“Lord, divine fire, help our hearts, that we may be able, to your praise, to expand the sacrament of the art, have mercy”).<sup>43</sup> Although no explicit reference was made to the consecration, psychologist Carl Jung judged the work to be in bad taste.<sup>44</sup>

According to the doctrine of transubstantiation, the substance of the eucharistic elements is transformed while the accidents remain unchanged. But alchemy sought to transmute both substance and accidents. Indeed, skeptics would have ridiculed any claim that only the “substance” of the lead was transmuted into gold. Nonetheless, if alchemy commanded less faith than the Eucharist did, rare successes were all the more impressive.<sup>45</sup>

Today, most esotericists contend that, if transmutation—substance and accidents—occurred at all, it was just the outward sign—a side-effect, as it were—of the transformation of the alchemist’s consciousness. The following comment is typical:

For the alchemist, it must be remembered that power over matter and energy is only a secondary reality. The real aim of the alchemist’s activities... is the transformation of the alchemist himself, his accession to a higher state of consciousness. The material results are only a pledge of the final result, which is spiritual... the transmutation of man himself... his fusion with the divine energy, the fixed center from which all material energies emanate.<sup>46</sup>

The alchemical process has often been called “the Great Work,” and esoteric teachers continue to use that phrase to refer to the expansion of consciousness, particularly in the context of the major initiations.<sup>47</sup>

## The Eucharist in Modern Esoteric Teachings

### The Eucharist as Magic

Esotericists in the western tradition often speak of the sacraments as magic rituals. Golden Dawn<sup>48</sup> initiate Dion Fortune comments: “[T]he Mass of the Church and the ceremonies of the Freemasons are... representative types of magic, whatever their exponents may like to say to the contrary. The Mass is a perfect example of a ritual of evocation.”<sup>49</sup> Francis King and Stephen Skinner offer a similar opinion:

Both the priest and the magician... pass on the force of the invocation. The priest invokes a god to gain power in order to affect a transformation, and “earths” the force in a Sacrament which becomes (in Christianity) the blood and flesh of God. This then is passed on to the congregation who thereby receive the virtue of the invocation... The magician does exactly the same thing...<sup>50</sup>

The authors add that the power invoked by the magician can be applied for purposes of prophecy, benediction or healing.<sup>51</sup> Recalling

pre-Christian antecedents, they envision a range of eucharistic forms whose elements suit the deities to be invoked: “[F]or Bacchus wine would be appropriate, for Ceres [the Roman equivalent of Demeter] a corn wafer, for Persephone a pomegranate, and possibly for Nuit [the Egyptian goddess of the night sky] the milk of the stars.”<sup>52</sup> Whether many people perform such rituals, however, is unclear.

The Kabbalistic Tree of Life was often used as a system of reference in Golden Dawn teachings. Dion Fortune relates Ceres and corn to the sefirah Malkuth, and Dionysus and wine to Tifareth.<sup>53</sup> Bearing in mind that the alchemists associated Malkuth with lead and Tiphareth to gold, we find in such references yet another association between the Eucharist and alchemy.

Israel Regardie, another Golden Dawn initiate, offers a single form of eucharistic ritual: “Eucharist of the Four Elements” of air, fire, earth and water. Bread and wine represent the elements of earth and water, while air is represented by the perfume of a flower, and fire by a lamp flame. Moreover, the bread is augmented by salt, a common earth-symbol in western occultism.<sup>54</sup> After invoking “Archangels, Angels, Kings, Rulers and elementals,” the officiant invites them to participate: “I invite you to inhale with me the perfume of this rose... To feel with me the warmth of the lamp... To eat with me this Bread and Salt... And finally to drink with me this Wine.”<sup>55</sup> Interestingly, Regardie’s words of consecration associate the bread and wine with the body and blood of Osiris rather than Christ:

For Osiris On-Nophris, who is found perfect before the Gods, hath said: These are the elements of my Body... [T]he Cup of Wine is the pouring out of the Blood of my Heart, Sacrificed unto Regeneration, unto the Newer Life; And the Bread and Salt are as the foundations of my Body, which I destroy in order that they may be renewed.<sup>56</sup>

Notwithstanding, the notion of sacrifice comes through, as it does in the Christian Eucharist.

King and Skinner’s use of the term “invocation” is important; and, correctly understood, it could help alleviate institutional Christianity’s

reluctance to acknowledge associations between the sacraments and magic. Prior to the Renaissance, ecclesiastical authorities did not regard all magic as evil. Rather, they distinguished between different types of magic, approving of “good magic” and disapproving of its bad counterpart.<sup>57</sup> Subsequently, attitudes hardened for a number of reasons, not least the unsavory reputation of many would-be magi and the motives underlying their work. However, some magicians are motivated by the worthiest of ideals and serve as channels for higher power. Esotericists view the mastery of magic for selfless purposes as essential to progress on the initiatory path.<sup>58</sup> Nobody would expect the churches to hand over responsibility for their sacraments—particularly the Eucharist—to occultists in the Golden Dawn tradition or anywhere else. But much would be gained by acknowledgement that the Eucharist belongs to a larger class of phenomena that includes both magical and religious ritual.

### **The Eucharist and Theosophy**

Under the leadership of founders Helena Blavatsky and Henry Olcott, the Theosophical Society was not infrequently accused of anti-Christian bias. However, attitudes changed among later generations of leaders, and certain Theosophists sought to combine traditional Christian beliefs and practices with esoteric teachings. Criticism of the Society by Christians on account of its initial bias gave way to criticism by some esotericists that it had become “too Christian.”

Prominent Theosophists became deeply interested in sacramental ritual. Like occultists in the Golden Dawn, they viewed the sacraments as magical rituals; but they couched their descriptions in terms much more acceptable to conventional Christians. For example, Annie Besant describes the act of consecration in very traditional terms: “As the priest in the Roman Catholic Mass spreads out his hand over the unconsecrated wafer and makes over it the Sign of Power... the sign of the Cross... he pronounces the Word of Power: ‘This is my body.’”<sup>59</sup> She adds: “the great power of the Christ pours down upon His assembled worshippers through the consecrated symbol in the

sacrament, which is the means of the spiritual grace.”<sup>60</sup>

Fellow Theosophist Charles Leadbeater became presiding bishop in the Liberal Catholic Church, which resembles Anglo-Catholicism in its forms of worship.<sup>61</sup> His influential work *The Science of the Sacraments* discusses the Eucharist and the Mass in considerable detail. For example he describes the preparation of the elements for consecration:

The bread and wine, first employed as symbols of the offerings of the people, and then as channels of our sacrifice, are now to fill yet another and far higher rôle, and to act as outward manifestations or vehicles of the power and life of Christ Himself. So the Priest first breaks the link which he made, and then demagnetizes the elements, sweeping them clean from any earthy taint that may have mingled, while leaving in them all the purely spiritual part of our offering to be laid later on at the feet of the Christ our glorious King.<sup>62</sup>

Leadbeater’s comments on *demagnetization* of the elements contrast with discussions elsewhere in the occult literature where *magnetization* of materials and tools by the hierophant is claimed to be necessary.<sup>63</sup> Clearly he regarded the consecration as a process drawing upon higher power rather than on the priest’s own will.

Using his clairvoyant abilities Leadbeater describes the participation of angels of various orders in the Mass. Most important are the “Angel of the Eucharist” and “Angel of the Presence.”<sup>64</sup> With the collaboration of the celebrant and congregation, the Angel of the Eucharist builds a thoughtform encompassing the sanctuary, creating a “sacred space” in which the consecration of the elements can take place.<sup>65</sup> The Angel of the Presence reportedly facilitates the consecration itself. We recall that archangels and other entities were invoked in Israel Regardie’s ritual described earlier.

According to Leadbeater’s description the priest consciously—or more likely unconsciously—creates a “tube” connecting the physical elements with the intuitional plane.

When the words of consecration are uttered, “the Angel of the Presence appears, and the life of that higher world flows in, providing conditions under which can take place the wonderful changes of the Consecration.”<sup>66</sup>

Theosophist Geoffrey Hodson, some 30 years Leadbeater’s junior, was at least as clairvoyantly gifted. And, like his forebear, he was also ordained in the Liberal Catholic Church. Hodson shares his own experiences while celebrating the Mass:

This morning the Lord’s Holy Presence was wonderfully revealed. I knew that it was in very truth the “Lord Maitreya Buddha”... He appears to my limited consciousness as a golden, glorious, shining Presence of unimaginable beauty, love, spirituality, and transcendent refinement, as if there were naught lower than *Buddhi* and limitless extensions above. He is all-embracing. Of the reality of the Holy Eucharist and of the Consecration and Transubstantiation there can be no doubt. It is a glorious truth.<sup>67</sup>

Clearly he shared Leadbeater’s strong belief in transubstantiation. Elsewhere he comments:

I saw the Christ Presence in the Host flashed out as in golden darts or rays of Himself in each one of the people and became linked thereto, awakening, arousing the Christ consciousness and power. Like sought like as if by magnetic law as the prayer was uttered.<sup>68</sup>

Hodson regarded the Eucharist as having more than just planetary significance:

At the Holy Eucharist, [I] realized and saw correspondence between the microcosm and the Macrocosm. The Rite is solar and cosmic, with the Lord Maitreya as Mediator. A “funnel” opens out from the personality into Causal consciousness to the verge of *Buddhi*, revealing the Solar Logos and Planetary Regents as a unit, a vast sphere containing all. [I had] momentary flashes of experience of unity with the Solar Logos, to Whom the Gloria is addressed and, through Him, with Himself as the Planetary Regents.<sup>69</sup>

A later writer in the Liberal Catholic Church echoes the sentiments of both Leadbeater and Hodson: “The Holy Eucharist literally exists



on the intersection between the Earth and the Heavens. As a column of fire and light it connects the forces of the earth and those of the sun as a channel for richly imbued spiritual energy.”<sup>70</sup> The “column of fire” may correspond to Leadbeater’s “tube.”

### The Eucharist as Allegory

While the Theosophists became deeply interested in eucharistic ceremony and the Mass, other esoteric teachers who also traced their lineage to Blavatsky took a less conventional approach to the entire subject.

Rudolf Steiner wrote *Christianity as Mystical Fact*<sup>71</sup> as well as commentaries on the four canonical gospels. But his interest in ritual was focused largely on Masonic-style ceremony.<sup>72</sup> It was only late in life that he devoted attention to the Christian liturgy, when he collaborated with Lutheran theologian Friedrich Rittelmeyer to form the Christian Community movement.<sup>73</sup> With respect to the Eucharist Steiner did remark:

[T]hose who are able to grasp the true meaning of [the] words of Christ create for themselves thought-images that attract the body and blood of Christ into the bread and the wine, and they unite with the Christ Spirit. In this way our symbol of the Lord’s Supper becomes a reality.<sup>74</sup>

More generally he interpreted the Eucharist allegorically, in the light of the “Mystery of Golgotha” through which the Earth became the body of Christ. Steiner’s Christ points to the earth and said “When you behold the cornfield and then eat the bread that nourishes you... [y]ou are eating My body. And when you drink of the plant sap... it is the blood of the earth—My blood.”<sup>75</sup>

Alice Bailey also distanced herself from traditional religious beliefs and preferred to view the Eucharist in allegorical terms:

It was this sense of unity with God and His fellowmen which led [Christ] to institute the Last Supper, to originate that communion service, the symbolism of which has been so disastrously lost in theological practice. The keynote of that communion service was fellowship. “It is only thus that Jesus creates

fellowship among us. It is not as a symbol that he does it ... in so far as we with one another and with him are of one will, to place the Kingdom of God above all, and to serve in behalf of this faith and hope, so far is there fellowship between him and us and the men of all generations who lived and live in the same thought.”<sup>76</sup>

Not everyone would agree that the symbolism of the Last Supper and communion service have been “disastrously lost.” Nevertheless, Bailey foresaw this allegorical Eucharist coming into its own in the Age of Aquarius:

[T]he sign in which the universality of the water of life will become a factor in human consciousness; then we shall indeed all sit down eventually to the communion of bread and wine. [Christ] referred indirectly to the same idea when He spoke of Himself as the “water of life,” assuaging the thirst of humanity.<sup>77</sup>

Bailey’s reluctance to consider the Eucharist sacramentally may have reflected her Evangelical religious background. By contrast, Annie Besant, Charles Leadbeater, and Geoffrey Hodson, who attached great importance to sacramental ritual, came from the Anglican tradition at a time when increasing attention was being focused on recovering essential components of pre-Reformation ceremony.<sup>78</sup> Rudolf Steiner was raised a Catholic and “came... to know the ritual of the Church” while serving as an altar-boy.<sup>79</sup> But he reported finding little religious feeling and piety in the churches of his youth.

## Reflections

The purpose of sacramental ritual is to create dynamic forms into which energy can flow from higher planes. The forms comprising the Eucharist include the sacred elements of bread and wine, the words of consecration, associated gestures like elevation of the host and chalice, and participants’ consumption of the elements. Believers in the real presence contend that the Eucharist has a quality that sets it apart from other types of religious ritual. In any event, like any ritual, repeated enactment results in a cumulative investment of en-

ergy, and participation in the Eucharist by millions of believers over a period of two millennia—even longer if we include pre-Christian antecedents—has produced a sacrament of great power.

The eucharistic formula cleverly solved the age-old tension symbolized by the biblical story of Cain and Abel. Notions of the transmutation of bread and wine into divine flesh and blood combined contrasting patterns of sacrificial ritual—the offering of the fruits of the harvest and offering of prized selections from the flock or herd. Also preserved were ancient notions of “eating the god.” Christian theology linked the descent of divine force into the eucharistic elements with the descent of the Son of God into physical incarnation.

In considering the Eucharist today, we are forced to confront doctrinal formulations that emerged in the Middle Ages as well as ritual formulas dating back to antiquity. The difficulties may be no more or no less than what we face when confronting the claims of medieval and Renaissance science. Does the priest really change the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ? Did alchemists really transmuted lead into gold? The two questions may never be answered to everyone’s satisfaction; nor should we be overly concerned to try. Simplistic answers reduce issues spanning multiple planes of reality to the level of mundane chemistry. In particular, to insist that the bread and wine are changed into the physical body and blood of the Jesus born in Bethlehem is not only problematic, it may be distasteful to modern consciousness. More importantly it con-

fuses human nature—however exalted—with the Second Aspect of Deity embodied by the Christ who overshadowed the Master Jesus.

The issue of transubstantiation may be peripheral to a true understanding of the Eucharist, but esoteric teachings still provide worthwhile insights into doctrinal arguments based on the Aristotelian categories of “substance” and “accidents.” Recognition that physical matter is just the lowest manifestation of multi-level substance persuaded Charles Leadbeater and Geoffrey Hodson that the eucharistic elements could be transformed on higher planes, even

though the dense physical appearances remain unchanged. The divine force may penetrate the elements as far as the etheric plane, low enough to influence the life of the cells in participants’ physical bodies and certainly low enough to influence the subtle bodies. To put this in perspective, we recall that Sanat Kumara incarnated to the etheric level in ancient Lemuria,<sup>80</sup> and the consciousness of the Christ may have penetrated Jesus’ body to the etheric level.

Leadbeater also proposed that the Eucharist can be regarded as a sacrifice because the Christ de-

scends into the physical elements in a recapitulation of what must have been his painful descent into incarnation two millennia ago.<sup>81</sup> The physical world may not be evil, as the Gnostics contended, but it is an unpleasant place for spiritual beings to visit. Leadbeater may have distanced himself from the Fourth Lateran Council’s assertion that sacrifice is implied by separate consecration of the bread and wine. But in invoking parallels with

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Christ's incarnation, he followed a doctrinal tradition extending back to the second century.

Ultimately, what happens to the eucharistic elements pales in importance compared with recipients' individual and collective experience. Just as the true purpose of alchemy may have been transformation of the alchemist, the true purpose of the Eucharist is the elevation in consciousness of the priest, the congregation, and the larger group—however that group may be defined. Rudolf Steiner spoke thus of the initiate's encounter with the god in the ancient mysteries:

A divine Being approaches you? It is either everything or nothing... What the divine Being is in itself is a matter which does not affect you; the important point for you is whether it leaves you as it found you or makes another man of you. [T]his depends entirely on yourself.<sup>82</sup>

Who would argue that the same is not true of the communicant?

Not every Christian esotericist should feel obliged to study, still less participate in, the Eucharist. The Path of Ceremony<sup>83</sup> is just one of several spiritual options, equally valid and commendable. Furthermore, belief plays a major role in the Eucharist's perceived relevance. For those drawn to sacramental ritual, and those who believe in the real presence—as defined by the doctrine of transubstantiation or as a mystery that transcends narrow definition—rich potential opens up for establishing new relationships with the Master of Masters and the Second Aspect of Deity. Celebration of the Mass and receipt of the sacrament can both symbolize and facilitate the awakening of the inner Christ. They can also be important service activities, helping to anchor Love-Wisdom in the world and in humanity.<sup>84</sup> Moreover, if clairvoyants are right about the participation of powerful angelic beings in the Mass, the Eucharist offers a way to explore fruitful cooperation with the deva evolution.<sup>85</sup>

For “non-believers,” the Eucharist can still provide a powerful symbol of the Christ's presence in the world. Alice Bailey predicts that, even in its allegorical sense, it will bring people together in a “true communion”:

The future will see right relationships, true communion, a sharing of all things (wine, the blood, the life and bread, economic satisfaction) and goodwill; we have also a picture of the future of humanity when all nations are united in complete understanding and the diversity of languages—symbolic of differing traditions, cultures, civilisations and points of view—will provide no barrier to right human relations. At the centre of each of these pictures is to be found the Christ.<sup>86</sup>

As we work to make that vision a reality, may we all seek the sacramental Christ and respond according to our beliefs and the paths we have chosen.

<sup>1</sup> *Luke* 24:30-34. (All biblical references in this article are taken from the King James Version.)

<sup>2</sup> *Acts* 2:42-46.

<sup>3</sup> However elements of the *Seder*, like the use of bitter herbs or the cup of wine for Elijah, were not recorded in the gospel accounts of the Last Supper. Nor did they pass into eucharistic liturgy.

<sup>4</sup> *Didache*, ch. 9. (Transl: A. Roberts & J. Donaldson.) Early Christian Writings. Note that the wine was offered before the bread.

<sup>5</sup> James D. Tabor. *The Jesus Dynasty*. Simon & Schuster, 2006, pp. 203-205.

<sup>6</sup> *I Corinthians* 11:29.

<sup>7</sup> *Mark* 14:22-24. *Mark's* description of the Last Supper probably provided the source for *Matthew* 26:20-30; *Luke* 22:14-38; and *John* 13:4ff.

<sup>8</sup> *John* 6:35.

<sup>9</sup> *John* 15:1, 5.

<sup>10</sup> *John* 2:3.

<sup>11</sup> *Hebrews* 10:1-22. This epistle's author is unknown.

<sup>12</sup> God's command to the Jews to perform “continual” sacrifice appeared in *Exodus* 29:38-43 and *Numbers* 28:1-6.

<sup>13</sup> Justin Martyr. *First Apology*, §LXVI. (Transl: A. Roberts & J. Donaldson.) Early Christian Writings.

<sup>14</sup> Ambrose. *On the Mysteries*, ch. 8, 47. (Transl: T. Thomson.)

<sup>15</sup> Radbertus Paschasius. *De Corpore et Sanguine Domini* (“On the Body and Blood of the Lord”), 831-844 CE.

<sup>16</sup> Fourth Lateran Council, Canon 1. 1215. H. J. Schroeder (ed.). *Disciplinary Decrees of the*

- General Councils*. B. Herder, 1937, pp. 236-296.
- <sup>17</sup> Even then, debate continued within the Roman church. In the late 13th-century John Duns Scotus offered the alternative doctrine of *consubstantiation*, in which the bread and wine and the body and blood of Christ were jointly present. Further eucharistic doctrines were proposed in the 20th century. See: John F. Nash. *Christianity: the One, the Many*. Xlibris, 2007, vol. II, p. 246.
- <sup>18</sup> In a meeting in 1529, Luther and Ulrich Zwingli failed to resolve their differences over the Eucharist. Luther adhered to belief in the real presence, while Zwingli rejected it. In turn, John Calvin was strongly influenced by the Zwinglian position.
- <sup>19</sup> The closest Luther would go toward offering a eucharistic doctrine was to argue that a “sacramental union” existed between the bread and wine and the body and blood of Christ. In a famous quotation he insisted that Christ was “in, with, and under” the elements.
- <sup>20</sup> Quoted in: J.R.H. Moorman. *A History of the Church in England*, 3/e. Moorhouse, 1963/1980, p. 216.
- <sup>21</sup> For example, to clarify the Anglican position, the second Book of Common Prayer published in 1552 omitted all reference to the “sacrifice” of the Mass, and procedures for ordaining priests no longer contained any reference to their sacrificial office.
- <sup>22</sup> For a discussion of these traditionalist movements see: Nash, *Christianity: the One, the Many*, vol. II, pp. 260-262.
- <sup>23</sup> John Cosin. “The History of Popish Transubstantiation.” Tract 27. John H. Newman (ed.) *Tracts of the Times*, 1834, ch. 1. Project Canterbury, <http://anglicanhistory.org/tracts>. Emphasis removed.
- <sup>24</sup> *Genesis* 14:18.
- <sup>25</sup> *Proverbs* 9:5. *Chokmah* (Hebrew: חכמה) and *Sophia* (Greek Σοφία) both meant Wisdom, which in late-biblical Judaism took on the character of a feminine aspect of God.
- <sup>26</sup> See the discussion by James G. Frazer. *The Golden Bough*. Macmillan, 1960, pp. 456-462..
- <sup>27</sup> Homer. *Hymn to Demeter*, line 434ff. (Transl: H. Evelyn-White.)
- <sup>28</sup> *Genesis* 4:3-4.
- <sup>29</sup> *Leviticus* 23:33ff. *Sukkoth* is celebrated on the fifth day after Yom Kippur.
- <sup>30</sup> Associations between the Toda and the Eucharist, noted by H. Gese, are discussed in: Joseph Ratzinger, *Feast of Faith*. (Transl: G. Harrison.) Ignatius Press, 1981, pp. 51-60.
- <sup>31</sup> James G. Frazer. *The Golden Bough*. Macmillan, 1960, p. 453.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*.
- <sup>33</sup> Manfred Clauss. *The Roman Cult of Mithras*. (Transl: R. Gordon). Routledge, 200, pp. 108ff.
- <sup>34</sup> For example, see the attack on Mithraic rites by: Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, §LXVI.
- <sup>35</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, pp. 566-569.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 556.
- <sup>37</sup> The term “chemical wedding” was also common. For example, one of the Rosicrucian Manifestos was *The Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosencreutz*, published in 1616.
- <sup>38</sup> *Gospel of Philip*, 67:27-30. (Transl: W. Isenberg,) *The Nag Hammadi Library*, 3/e, HarperCollins, 1990, p. 150. Parenthesis in original.
- <sup>39</sup> Carl Jung. *Psychology and Alchemy*, 2/e. (Transl: R. Hull.) Princeton Univ. Press, 1968, pp. 345ff.
- <sup>40</sup> A number of works indicate that Aquinas was familiar with contemporary works on alchemy. Most likely he was first introduced to the subject by his teacher Albertus Magnus who dabbled in occultism.
- <sup>41</sup> Thomas Aquinas (attributed to). *Aurora Consurgens*, fifth parable. Marie-Louise von Franz (ed.). (Transl: R. Hull & A. Glover.) Inner City Books, 2000, p. 101-102. See also the commentary by Marie-Louise von Franz, p. 319.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, sixth parable, pp. 129-131, and von Franz’ commentary, pp. 358-361. Note that the Latin *Sapientia* is the direct equivalent of the Hebrew *Chokmah* and the Greek *Sophia*.
- <sup>43</sup> Melchior of Hermannstadt. *Processus sub forma missae*, c.1525. (Transl: R. Hull.)
- <sup>44</sup> Jung. *Psychology and Alchemy*, pp. 397, 406.
- <sup>45</sup> Individuals reported to have achieved the transmutation of metals include: Raymond Lully (1233–1313), Nicholas Flamel (1330–1418), Basil Valentine (c. 1413), Alexander Seton (d. 1604), Eirenaeus Philalethes (b. 1612), Lascaris (c. 1700), Seheld (early 18th century), the Count of Sainte-Germain (1710–1784?), Jean Julien Fulcanelli (1877–1932), and R. A. Schwaller de Lubicz (1887–1961). Scientists who, while not alchemists themselves, reportedly observed the successful transmutation of metals include: Jakob Zwinger (16th century), Wolfgang Dienheim (late 16th century), Jean-Baptiste van Helmont (b. 1577) and Johann Friedrich Schweitzer (b. 1625). The latter two were both skeptics until they were given portions of the philosopher’s stone and them-

- selves succeeded in transforming base metals into gold. See for example: Kenneth R. Johnson. *The Fulcanelli Phenomenon*. Neville Spearman, 1980, p. 25. Also: Jacques Sadoul. *Alchemists and Gold*. Neville Spearman, 1970, pp. 59-187.
- <sup>46</sup> Louis Pauwels & Jacques Bergier. *The Morning of the Magicians*. Avon, 1960, p. 118.
- <sup>47</sup> See for example: Alice A. Bailey. *A Treatise on White Magic*. Lucis, 1934, p. 543. Of the 56 references to the “great work” in Bailey’s writings, that is the only instance in which she capitalizes the term.
- <sup>48</sup> The Hermetic Society of the Golden Dawn was founded in 1975 by three Freemasons: William Woodman, William Westcott, and Samuel “MacGregor” Mathers. Mathers soon became the sole leader.
- <sup>49</sup> Dion Fortune, *The Training and Work of an Initiate*. Aquarian Press, 1930, p. 78.
- <sup>50</sup> Francis King & Stephen Skinner. *Techniques of High Magic*. Destiny Books, 1976, p. 159.
- <sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 159-160.
- <sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.
- <sup>53</sup> Dion Fortune. *The Mystical Qabalah*. Weiser, 1935/2000, p. 90.
- <sup>54</sup> Incorporation of the four elements may suggest a link with alchemical symbolism.
- <sup>55</sup> Israel Regardie. *Ceremonial Magic*. Aquarian Press, 1980, p. 48.
- <sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.
- <sup>57</sup> John F. Nash. “The Power and Timelessness of Ritual.” *Esoteric Quarterly*, Fall 2007, pp. 35-53.
- <sup>58</sup> See for example: Bailey. *A Treatise on White Magic*.
- <sup>59</sup> Annie W. Besant. “Theosophy: the Root of All Religions.” Thirty-Seventh Annual Convention of the Theosophical Society, Adyar, India, December 27-30, 1913. *Theosophy and the Theosophical Society*. Theosophical Publishing House, p. 64.
- <sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.
- <sup>61</sup> The Liberal Catholic Church was founded in 1916 by James Ingall Wedgewood, a former Anglican ministerial student who was influenced both by Anglo-Catholicism and by Theosophy. Subsequently the LCC served as the “religious wing” of the Theosophical Society.
- <sup>62</sup> Charles W. Leadbeater. *The Science of the Sacraments*. Theosophical Publishing House, 1920, p. 159.
- <sup>63</sup> See for example: David Conway. *Ritual Magic: an Occult Primer*. Dutton, 1972, pp. 171ff.
- <sup>64</sup> The relationship between the two angels is not always clear, and they may actually be one and the same. Leadbeater also mentions “the Directing Angel,” and again it is unclear whether it is a distinct entity. Interestingly, Leadbeater comments that the souls of deceased human beings often attend Mass.
- <sup>65</sup> Leadbeater, *The Science of the Sacraments*, especially pp. 23, 119. In the text the thought-form is described as resembling the basilica of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. But the book’s frontispiece shows a tall spire instead of a dome.
- <sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179.
- <sup>67</sup> Sandra Hodson (ed.). *Light of the Sanctuary*. Theosophical Publishers, 1988, p. 104.
- <sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.
- <sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.
- <sup>70</sup> Frits Evelein. “Cosmic Energy and the Rainbow Bridge through the Chakras.” *The Liberal Catholic*, September 1999.
- <sup>71</sup> The German edition was published in 1902. The first English translation, edited by H. Collison, appeared in 1914.
- <sup>72</sup> Rudolf Steiner. *Freemasonry and Ritual Work*. Steiner Books, 1904-1924/2007. Late in life, Steiner assisted with the newly formed Christian Community movement.
- <sup>73</sup> In Christian Communities, the Eucharist is termed the “Act of Consecration of Man.” Although its liturgy refers to “transubstantiation,” there is no clear belief that the elements are transformed.
- <sup>74</sup> Quoted in: Heller Wiesberger. Introduction to the German edition of “*Freemasonry and Ritual Work*.” (Transl: J. Wood.) Steiner Books, 2007, p. 21.
- <sup>75</sup> Rudolf Steiner. *The Gospel of St. John*. (Transl: M. Monges.) Anthroposophic Press, 1908/1940, pp. 113-114.
- <sup>76</sup> Alice A. Bailey. *From Bethlehem to Calvary*. Lucis, 1937, p. 213.
- <sup>77</sup> Alice A. Bailey. *Esoteric Astrology*. Lucis, 1951, p. 566.
- <sup>78</sup> Anglo-Catholicism and the Liberal Catholic Church were both products of that focus. In Besant’s case we must note that she broke with religious tradition at an early age to become a rationalist. Only later in life did she recover a religious orientation.
- <sup>79</sup> Rudolf Steiner. “Autobiographical Sketch.” *The Essential Steiner*, HarperCollins, 1984, pp. 13-22.
- <sup>80</sup> Alice A. Bailey. *Initiation, Human and Solar*. Lucis, 1922, p. 28.

- <sup>81</sup> Leadbeater, *The Science of the Sacraments*, especially pp. 198-199.
- <sup>82</sup> Rudolf Steiner. *Christianity as Mystical Fact*. (Transl: C. Davy & A. Bittleston.) Rudolf Steiner Press, 1914, p. 24.
- <sup>83</sup> Nash, *Christianity: the One, the Many*, especially vol. II, pp. 315-320.
- <sup>84</sup> Geoffrey Hodson. *The Inner Side of Church Worship*. Theosophical Publishing House, 1930, ch. VI.
- <sup>85</sup> The Liberal Catholic Church International asserts: "We teach that we are assisted from the beginning of the Eucharist by the Angel of the Mass, and later by all of the various Orders of Angels." See:  
<http://www.liberalcatholic.org/teachings.html>. Accessed April 10, 2008.
- <sup>86</sup> Alice A. Bailey. *The Destiny of the Nations*. Lucis 1949, pp. 151-152.