

Toward Christian Renewal

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to introduce the reader to the types of esoteric Christianity that have developed out of the ancient mystery traditions of Greece, Egypt, and various other locales. Additionally, it seeks to demonstrate how incorporating these esoteric aspects into mainstream Christianity will produce a more informed participant of the Christian faith. By examining the rituals of the mystery traditions, principally those of death and rebirth, one can identify a connection between Christian practices and the ancient mysteries. In this article, the frayed ends of those traditions are found to reconstitute in the Christian religious system, particularly within its esoteric branches. The writings of Christian esotericists such as Richard Smoley, Antoine Faivre, Rudolf Steiner—and even the Universalist philosophy of Alain Badiou—are shown to reveal spiritual components absent from mainstream Christianity. Their work provides a roadmap to the true teachings espoused by Christ Jesus, i.e. that of self-apostleship or self-initiation.

Introduction

Christianity is an effectively organized system of beliefs, yet much of the religion—including its history, mythology, teachings, and symbolism—remains unknown to its practitioners. If we look to Paul of Tarsus, the goal of subscribing to the Christian beliefs is to become an apostle—to be utterly reborn into something new, a self-appointed harbinger of the “good news.” Alain Badiou, a French atheist and communist thinker, elucidates the process in a groundbreaking philosophical work *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, in which the author gets at the core of what it means to be Christian. On the other hand, it seems acceptable among members of the mainstream Christian community to consider themselves Christians without a true know-

ledge of the eventful impact of the Christ, nor what it means to become an apostle of the faith. Particularly eclipsed are the mystical origins of the religion, the history of transmissions from esoteric schools, which have poured themselves into the melting pot that is Christianity in its current form. These days simply stating “I am a Christian” seems to suffice. Nevertheless, there exists within the Christian religion a system of ideas, linking it to profoundly potent mysticism and esotericism. This system finds its roots in what is commonly known as the mystery traditions, and a proper understanding of their correspondences engenders a complete and utter renewal (what Paul referred to in Galatians 6:15 as becoming “a new creature”).

This is not meant to denigrate mainstream Christians, but rather to acknowledge the long tradition of mysticism in their very midst, as well as to draw attention to the works of Christian esotericists such as Richard Smoley, Antoine Faivre, and Rudolf Steiner. We would also draw attention to the Universalism of Alain Badiou, and additionally, the history of esoteric practices incorporated into Christianity and its various branches, including the neo-Gnostic churches, in the hope that members of the faith can take full advantage of them and enhance their spiritual life—ultimately becoming more informed Christians.

About the Author

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The article explores three subjects, which combine to form the complex picture of the esoteric structure of Christianity. Enhancing one's beliefs and aligning them in the proper way does not involve physical action, contrary to what some might believe. Mainstream Christians have been performing valid rituals and prayers for hundreds of years, so there is no need to devalue the solemnity of their devotion. The requirement, rather, is an acquisition of certain information not usually given to church members (knowledge about the ancient mysteries and esotericism), and a deeper understanding of the Christ-event (the crucifixion and resurrection), which would lead to conviction regarding the Christ-event itself, as well as the self-authorized apostleship espoused by Saint Paul in the New Testament. This practice of self-appointment may equate to the self-enlightenment and self-initiation systems popularized during the New Age Movement.

The Mystery Traditions

The intention here is to show the relationship between Christianity and esoteric methodology, for this relationship can shed light on the connection between Christian religion and ancient mystery traditions from ancient Egypt, Greece, and elsewhere. Once that connection is established, we can explore the idea that something might be missing from the exoteric practices of mainstream Christianity, and further propound what that something missing may be, as well as how to incorporate it into the mainstream traditions.

More than likely, mystery traditions have existed since prehistory. However, one of the earliest places scholars encounter them is in ancient Egypt. Mortuary cults initiated their members into a secret body of knowledge, enabling them to experience a symbolic death, actually to venerate death, before passing into the afterlife following their *real* death. The wisdom and supernatural powers these initiates gained from their premature death experiences were incorporated into every facet of Egyptian society and culture: funerary rites, burial rituals, hieroglyphs, tomb carvings, the mummification processes, the construction of pyramidal structures, and cartographic postmortem texts such as the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*. This

knowledge was transmitted to the Egyptian people by a highly organized priesthood under the direction of the pharaohs who were advanced initiates.

Making the transition from ancient Egypt to ancient Greece we again find the practice of mystery religions in the Pythagoreans, Orphic cults, and the Dionysian and Eleusinian mystery schools. It was common practice among these groups to experience a premature death in which the candidate was given glimpses of the spirit world or the gods themselves, the end result being that of self-identification with the divine. Greeks initiated themselves into secret societies and therein acquired the wisdom of the cosmos.

The secret Pythagorean Society was formed in Greece around 400 BCE, and it was based on the belief that everything in the world could be represented as a relationship between the natural numbers. Plato said in his *Republic* that, above all else, Pythagoras was most famous for leaving behind him a way of life. The members of his school regarded him as a divine figure, sent by the gods to benefit humankind.¹

Those who were initiated into his school made solemn vows both to Pythagoras and to each other, and together they learned about reincarnation and the relationship between man and the cosmos. It is said that Pythagoras invented the musical octave, and that his followers referred to him as "the harmonic deity," halfway between the gods and man.²

The Orphic, Dionysian, and Eleusinian mysteries make up the more pastoral form of the Greek initiation rites, though no less secretive, and by no means less emphatic on the requirement that the candidate give up his or her old way of life. All of these initiation ceremonies offered rewards in the afterlife, as well as an enhanced version of their remaining existence on Earth. Orphism centered on the pivotal figure of Orpheus and the story of his journey to the underworld. Moreover, "Orphics affirmed the divine origin of the soul, but it was through initiation into the Orphic Mysteries and through the process of transmigration that the soul could be liberated from its Titanic in-

heritance [sinful portion] and could achieve eternal blessedness. Orphism stressed a strict standard of ethical and moral conduct. Initiates purified themselves and adopted ascetic practices (e.g., abstinence from eating animal flesh) for the purpose of purging evil and cultivating the Dionysian side [divine portion] of the human character.”³

The Dionysian and Eleusinian initiation involved a focus on a journey to the underworld, or the darker side of the soul, and the subsequent return to the divine portion, so that the candidate was thenceforward unafraid of death, and could unfailingly recall the event of initiation to revitalize that firm belief.⁴ In succeeding years, the Mithraic mysteries were practiced in the Roman Empire from about the 1st to the 4th centuries CE, and they involved the candidate partaking in a vast meal modeled after the Christian “Last Supper,” following a ceremony in which a bull was slaughtered. “Those who ate and drank of this Mithraic meal thus revitalized themselves with the elements representing the divine body and blood of the slaughtered bull.”⁵

Plato’s academy was even a type of lodge,⁶ with the inscription “Let None But Geometers Enter Here” etched above the entrance.⁷ Following Plato was his pupil Aristotle, who created the Lyceum based on Plato’s model, and although both of these schools “did not require an oath, dietary rule or secret initiation to be admitted,”⁸ they functioned under the lodge paradigm, with an aim to “educate disciples, philosophers who in the future would occupy positions of authority in the state and be guided by true philosophy.”⁹ As a result of this training, members obtained illuminating knowledge or *gnosis*. In this case: knowledge of the spirit world and the immortality of the soul. Initiates of the mystery traditions no

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longer feared death, for they possessed a firm and definite knowing that life force did not end, but was merely transformed.

In addition to Egypt and Greece, other mystery traditions have flourished, such as the so-called Gnostics, the Jewish Kabbalists, and the Manicheans of Persia. The ritual death initiations in the mystery tradition may possibly find the faintest echo in “born-again” conversion experiences of evangelical Christians. Christianity and the mystery traditions share a promise of immortality of soul following these death experiences. The linking with the Christ is meant to establish a firm bond with the divine, as the Christ is the Son of the Father, and after being reborn the faithful practitioner is now proposed to *live within*

the Christ. This intimate link is unique to Christianity, in contrast to other belief systems, but may well have its roots in the mysteries.

The Esoteric

The difference between exoteric and esoteric is best illuminated when the latter is explicitly defined, as was accomplished by Richard Smoley in his book *Inner Christianity*:

Knowledge that liberates consciousness is often described as *esoteric*. The word “esoteric” ... comes from the Greek *esotero*, which means “further in.” You have to go “further in” yourself to understand what this knowledge is about.¹⁰

For initiates of the mystery traditions, a proper understanding of this body of esoteric knowledge was gained by undergoing the premature deaths and the subsequent rebirthing in the divine—the same concept practiced and promulgated by Christ Jesus and incorporated into Christianity. This fact has been lost on many mainstream Christians, who feel the act of proclaiming the born-again quality suffices,

ignoring the longstanding tradition of the mystery schools, which demands a true and utter self-renewal, so that the proper link with divinity can be established.

However, for reasons which history has made clear, the esoteric forms of Christianity have been secretly and lovingly nurtured in many underground streams. In recent times, it has been nurtured by Rudolf Steiner and his Anthroposophy, Anna Kingsford, Annie Besant, Arthur E. Waite, and Geoffrey Hodson. The qualities needed for any tradition to be considered *esoteric* are six fold, as put forth by Antoine Faivre, French esotericist and scholar, and also one of the first Religious Studies professors to discuss esotericism in an academic arena. Faivre's six essential components for a practice to be called esoteric are listed below:

- 1) Correspondences
- 2) Living Nature
- 3) Imaginations and Mediations
- 4) Experience of Transmutation
- 5) The Praxis of Concordance
- 6) Transmission

These components and their relevance are summarized as follows.¹¹ By *Correspondences*, Faivre refers to the correlation between realms of the spirit (or Heaven) and all the material parts of the universe. This relates to the creative powers of the Word, or *Logos* (Greek for *word*), and the first passages of the Gospel of St. John. In the case of Anthroposophy, Steiner takes the Word in the first passages of St. John and reverts to the Greek, taking the following passage “the word (*Logos*) was with God, and the word (*Logos*) was a God” to mean that the structuring power inherent in the *Logos* is indeed the functionality of the Christ—His purpose is structuring our thoughts in the manner of clear thinking—*Ordo ab Chao*, or “Order Out of Chaos”—so that we might approach the spirit world correctly during this time, and not be diverted by fantasy.¹²

By *Living Nature*, Faivre suggests that spirit exists in all matter, organic and inorganic. In other words, that everything is alive and spir-

itual. We find this prevalent in the Christian concept of Creationism, which posits that the world was created by God and that evidence of His hand is discernible everywhere. Referring to John 1:3, “All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made.” Nature is therefore, like a vibrating cosmic string, which manifests the creative powers of the Word, or the *Logos*, in everything. Referring to Steiner again, the hierarchical system of angels in his Christian philosophy work downward through the One, or God, through various spirits of form, astrality, and etheric forces, until reaching the physical world where everything that is “made” becomes an expression of the divine.¹³

Imaginations and Mediations refer to the use of images and symbols (imaginative works), such as the Christian iconography, and how these images mediate events on the physical plane from spiritual realms. We need only consider the power of the symbol of the crucifixion to find this component in Christianity. Arthur E. Waite implemented the Rose Cross symbol, the cross with a blooming rose at the center, for his esoteric Christian order *The Fellowship of the Rosy Cross*, and he also incorporated other Christian symbolism into the Rider-Waite Tarot deck, which he co-created with Pamela Colman Smith.

The *Experience of Transmutation* is Faivre's term for the transformation of a thing from its lower state into a higher one (i.e. from a sinner to a saint), usually by means of the death processes. The Christ most explicitly embodies this in the resurrection on the third day, a state Christians should endeavor to emulate, and which, according to Rudolf Steiner, is the fore-running condition that all human beings will eventually achieve by developing their spiritual constitution and receiving the Resurrection Body, i.e. immortality. Transmutation is also the end result of alchemy, in which a base metallic substance (such as lead) is elevated to the state of gold. Christians endeavoring to live like the Christ are thought, in esoteric circles, to pursue a similar state of spiritual elevation.

By *The Praxis of Concordance*, Faivre refers to the common denominator found in all religions; that all religions spring from the same

source. In Freemasonry, specific rituals are performed as to forge a common chain of union within all religions, and even theosophist Annie Besant, who authored *Esoteric Christianity, or The Lesser Mysteries* helped to develop a Co-Freemasonry in order to accentuate this spiritual commonality. Sadly, this may be the area where mainstream Christianity is most lacking, as other forms of religions are often thought of as spiritual enemies, to be avoided rather than studied and compassionately accepted.

Finally, Faivre's *Transmission* refers to the practice of spiritual knowledge being promulgated by means of a teacher, which in Christianity relates to the importance of church and clergy, while in esoteric circles transmission is accomplished, as mentioned, by way of graded initiations, such as is practiced in Freemasonry. Intimate imparting of specific information ensures the information will have the desired *esoteric* effect, rather than a superficial, exoteric one. Christ did the same thing and is the proper example by which to follow, as is recounted in *Matthew 13:10-11*: "And the disciples came, and said unto him, Why speakest thou unto them in parables? He answered and said unto them, Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given."

In summary, incorporating Faivre's six essential components into Christian practice can help to foster the turning of one's attention "further in" to that esoteric place, which is our personal link to the divine, and which, following the born-again experience, is meant to be properly nurtured and developed. Exoteric forms of Christianity place their focus on the afterlife, on immortality in Heaven, but when we look at this ideological belief esoterically a greater understanding emerges. The faithful assert that they gain admission into the afterlife by repenting for their sins. However, that is an exoteric interpretation. The word repentance comes from Greek *metanoia*, which more literally means something like a "change of mind or direction"—in this case, directing "further in."

In his book on inner Christianity, Smoley explains the significance of *metanoia* in the following passage:

In ordinary life, attention is directed outward, toward the world of sensations, thoughts, and feelings. With a certain shift in attention, the mind is directed within, toward the center of being, beyond all thoughts and representations, where God meets the individual self ... changes are likely to develop organically out of an increase in consciousness. As you see and understand more of the inner worlds, love, kindness, and compassion become more spontaneous and natural.¹⁴

The Subjective and Saint Paul

A crucial component needed for Christianity to be esoterically effective is an emphasis on the subjective experience of the divine, which must occur on the very deepest psychological level. For all the mystery traditions of Egypt and Greece, this was the purpose of the premature death ritual: to create a living and subjective experience within the initiate, to which he might refer back on occasion and reflect. Reverence toward the subjective was thought to enhance the "I" or the inner part of a person, helping to strengthen and develop it. In esoteric Christianity, this is the motivation of Christ's mission on Earth. We may even posit that the voice Moses heard in the burning bush alluded to this mission: I AM THAT I AM—which actually points to this emphasis on the subjective, or inner form, as the true practice of Christianity.

Paul of Tarsus, originally named Saul of Tarsus prior to his mystical experience, had a literally blinding vision of Christ on the road to Damascus. He underwent the classic death and born-again experience, leading to a direct communication with the divine, establishing his own subjective link to God. Paul, a staunch adherent of Jewish Law, had been heading to Damascus in order to confront the Christian cults practicing there; but after his vision, instead of returning to Jerusalem or continuing on to Damascus, he retreated into Arabia for

three years. Not much is known of Paul during this time, but it can be supposed that he was developing and nurturing his inner connection with Christ. When he does return to Jerusalem, he proclaims himself a “new creature,” a person wholly reborn in Christ, who no longer accords obedience to Jewish Law, but has found his liberation from all spiritual authority in the sole fact that Christ has been brought back from the dead. Paul held so fast to this belief, adhering to its proclamation even in public and placing all importance on the Christ-event, that it eventually became, for him, the only possible means of salvation.

In his provocative book on Saint Paul, French philosopher Alain Badiou delineates the course of Paul’s intellectual development, from ardent Pharisee and follower of Jewish Law, to becoming the passionate proclaimer of Christ’s resurrection. As Badiou rightly points out, following Paul’s subjective experience of the divine, the burgeoning apostle was utterly reborn, a “new creature,” liberated from material bonds of the flesh by clinging to the subjective truth that Christ had been raised; in other words, by having unshakable faith.

As Badiou explains:

Faith publicly acknowledges that the subjective apparatus commanded by the law is not the only possible one. But it becomes apparent that faith, confessing the resurrection of one man, merely declares a *possibility* for everyone. That a new assemblage of life and death is possible is borne out by resurrection, and this is what must be declared ... Faith says: We *can* escape powerlessness and rediscover that from which the law separated us. Faith prescribes a new possibility, one that, although real in Christ, is not, as yet, in effect for everyone.¹⁵

Thus, Paul’s belief was that everybody, in effect, was dead and living in sin, so long as they held to a blind observance of the law. The only possibility of liberation, of *real life*, was the subjective experience of Christ’s resurrection, which, for Paul, was freedom from materiality and rebirth in spirituality. That this possibility was available to *all* people, regardless of herit-

age, class or creed, meant that to become an adherent of the Christian faith was to become an apostle. But what does becoming an apostle involve? Certainly, it does not connote becoming a prophet in an Old Testament sense of the word where an individual awaits signs and symbols from a supernatural or divine being. Neither is it the same as becoming a wise man in the Greek sense of mastering the logical application of reason. In order to become an apostle, as Badiou says,

... it is not necessary to have been a companion of Christ, a witness to the [Christ] event. Paul, who claims his legitimacy from only himself, and who, according to his own expression, has been “called to be an apostle,” explicitly challenges the pretension of those who, in the name of what they were and saw, believe themselves to be guarantors of truth. He calls them “those who are most esteemed,” and seems, for his own part, not to share this esteem. He also adds, “What they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality” (Gal. 2:6). An apostle is neither a material witness, nor a memory.¹⁶

So what, then, is it? It is the living proclamation of Christ risen from the dead, a subjective truth that is available to all people, that lives in the proclaimers’ souls, and grants freedom from flesh and everlasting life in spirit. Badiou, a communist and atheist, offers an intriguing angle, in that he reveals how Paul likens the Christ-event to a communistic *coup d’état*, an overthrowing of the old rule and a founding of a new system—a self-governing system, in this case—in which *event* as a historical fact speaks for itself. Such an event is similar to marking and celebrating a day of independence or the establishment of a socialist regime in a newly liberated country, in which the *event* from then on serves as the *continuing renewal* of the free condition. For the Pauline Christians, the Christ-event had happened; Christ was resurrected; therefore, those who kept faith *in that event* could also be resurrected. There was no proving or disproving, no arguing or rebutting—only a subjective proclamation of the event—which itself granted all the validating authority needed.

Thus, “When Christ dies, we, mankind, shall cease to be separated from God, since by filiating Himself with the sending of his Son, He enters into the most intimate proximity to our thinking composition.”¹⁷ In other words, proclaiming Christ dead on the cross and resurrected is all the authority needed, all the saving grace required, all the work necessary, for the deed is done and the historical event is held, subjectively, as true. So therefore, liberation in spirit is accessible to every person, as long as they reach out and claim it, necessitating the famous statement by Paul in Galatians 2:20: “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.”

As we can see, Paul was truly a different person after his experience on the road to Damascus, and he was able to draw on this subjective visionary experience for the rest of his life. Indeed, his vision guided the content of his thinking from then on. This account of Paul harkens back to the mystery school traditions, whose rites were intended to give the candidate a direct experience of God, and thus obliterate any and all fears about death. Clearly, this is the driving force behind the beliefs in Christianity, along with Christ’s command that we all love one another. Sadly, the vision-granting emphasis on the subjective, the rebirthing rite’s culmination, is missing from mainstream Christianity, as those who experience oneness with God and mystical visions are often shunned or castigated. Such instances of suppression may have their purpose. However, a proper understanding of these experiences may be lost to outer forms of the religion, which could explain why “unsound” or “crazy” mystical events have not been properly managed.

Smoley highlights a passage illuminating the emphasis on the subjective in *Inner Christianity*. The quote comes from Thomas Merton, the celebrated twentieth-century Trappist monk:

...the superficial, external self which we commonly identify with ... is not our real self. It is our “individuality” and our “empirical self” but it is not truly the hidden

and mysterious person in whom we subsist before the eyes of God. The “I” that works in the world, thinks about itself, observes its own reactions and talks about itself is not the true “I” ... It is at best the vesture, the mask, the disguise of that mysterious and unknown “self” whom most of us never discover until we are dead.¹⁸ [Here we see that the author is aware of the contemplative tradition.]

Conclusion

In the West, and much of the rest of the world, Christianity remains a driving societal force. Yet we can see from this elucidation that much of its inherent power and emphasis on the subjective experience, or inner world, has been polluted, lost, or forgotten—particularly among mainstream Christians. The true origins of the faith have been misplaced, misinterpreted, and misrepresented. However, in some esoteric circles the inner form of Christianity is on the rise, a positive symbol that true Christian practice is approaching more people. The various Rosicrucians and Martinists, to say nothing of the Gnostic traditions and contemplative branches of Christianity (such as monastic orders), as well as the Pentecostals’ emphasis on a direct personal experience of God through baptism with the Holy Spirit—are all proof that esoteric Christianity is starting to free itself from the mist-shrouded underground. Indeed, as with Rudolf Steiner’s Anthroposophy and Waldorf schools, esoteric Christian ideas are reaching more people, even in younger age groups. What is more, popular neo-Gnostic churches such as the Gnostic Church of L.V.X. in New York City, the *Ecclesia Gnostica* in Los Angeles, and the Liberal Catholic Church, center their practices and ritual services on the sacraments, which are viewed by their members as being successors of the ancient mysteries. By recalling initiation rituals and philosophical beliefs taken from the mystery traditions of ancient Egypt and Greece, these new forms of worship introduce people to the ideas of esoteric Christianity, and hopefully their popularity will continue to increase, so mainstream

Christians can eventually find their way to these ideas.

In the end what is required is the proper understanding of Biblical stories, Christian iconography, particularly the words of the Christ and their esoteric meaning, and an emphasis on the subjective experience of the resurrection. Only by cultivating such an inner mood, such a definite *knowing* of the divine, can we fully understand the Christian religious experience as it was intended to be experienced—i.e. esoterically.

¹ John Dillon and Jackson Hershbell, *Iamblichus, On the Pythagorean Way of Life* (Toronto, CA: Scholars Press, 1991), 14.

² David V. Barrett, *A Brief History of Secret Societies* (New York, NY: Carroll & Graf, 2007), 9.

³ *The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia*, 6th edition, Columbia University Press, 2012. Also see <http://www.infoplease.com/encyclopedia/society/orphic-mysteries.html>. Last accessed June 31, 2013.

⁴ “Eleusinian Mysteries,” . http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eleusinian_Mysteries. Last accessed July 9, 2013.

⁵ Marvin W. Meyer, *The Ancient Mysteries* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1987), 8.

⁶ Florian Ebeling, *The Secret History of Hermes Trismegistus: Hermeticism from Ancient to Modern Times* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), 129.

⁷ Victor J. Katz, *A History of Mathematics: An Introduction* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1993), 67.

⁸ “The Academy Versus The Lyceum”-*The Thin Tweed Line*. <http://www.humanstudy.org/history/2012-03-pauley-b.html>. Last accessed July 9, 2013.

⁹ “Plato’s Academy.” <http://ptta.pl/pef/haslaen/a/academyplato.pdf>. Last accessed July 9, 2013.

¹⁰ Richard Smoley, *Inner Christianity: A Guide to the Esoteric Tradition* (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 2002), 2.

¹¹ Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1994), 10-14.

¹² This is a general summation of Steiner’s complex esoteric Christian philosophy. Anyone interested in pursuing his ideas further is directed toward Steiner’s *Christianity as Mystical Fact* and *The Christian Mystery*.

¹³ See *The Spiritual Hierarchies and the Physical World; Reality and Illusion* by Rudolf Steiner, Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1996.

¹⁴ Smoley, *Inner Christianity*, 5.

¹⁵ Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 88.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁸ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York, NY: New Directions, 1962), 7.