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# What Was Hidden

*Looking Deeper Into Christianity*

## *an interview with* **Richard Smoley**

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**I**n my childhood, I expected that church was the place where I would learn about the deep mysteries of existence and have some truly eye-opening, otherworldly experiences. After all, church certainly looked more mystical than my home, my school, or the shopping mall. But the older I got, the more boring and stultified church came to seem. By the time I quit going, in my early teens, I was convinced that religion was little more than hypocrisy and lingering superstition. Still, I always held on to a kind of wistful feeling that there must have been something wonderful hidden away in the recesses of my childhood church — some inner secrets that I had never discovered and that no one in charge had bothered to show me.

Richard Smoley has made a study of the inner secrets of Western religions for most of his adult life. He's written two books, *Hidden Wisdom* (Penguin Putnam) — which surveys Western esoteric traditions in general — and his latest, *Inner Christianity* (Shambhala), which focuses on the lesser-known myths, symbols, and metaphors of the West's predominant religious tradition. He also edited the late, lamented *Gnosis* magazine, a journal of religious inquiry.

A graduate of Harvard and Oxford in classics and philosophy, Smoley says that his conscious spiritual work began in graduate school in England, when he first delved into the Jewish mystical system known as the Kabbalah. "Its intricate delineation of levels of the visible and invisible universe spoke to my intellect," he recalls. "Its profound understanding of the Bible touched the part of me that was brought up a Christian." But once he returned to the United States from England, Smoley had a difficult time finding Kabbalah teachers willing to work with a non-Jew. He took this as a sign that he needed to move on to a different phase of his spiritual education, and in 1981 he encountered the contemporary and controversial discipline of "mind training" known as A Course in Miracles. At the time, he says, "I was heavily imbalanced toward severity: toward form, intellect, judgment. The Course, which teaches that all judgment is to be relinquished to the Holy Spirit, provided the perfect counterpoint."

As he studied the Course over the next several years, Smoley became aware of another imbalance in his life, namely his "enormous resistance to working with my body." Some forays into bodywork led to a Tibetan movement practice known as kum nye, which helped him overcome his habit of "holding back from physical experience, shirking it as an abused animal avoids its tormentor." Kum nye, in turn, led Smoley into Tibetan Buddhist study and practice. Just as he was ready to commit to a lifelong study of those teachings, he turned toward the Western esoteric tradition.

Smoley writes, "When I was negotiating these various twists and turns on my path, it seemed simply that the right teaching and the right teachers appeared as needed. My role was merely to remain open to what presented itself and to work as hard and as sincerely as I could — and to leave when I felt finished."

I met Smoley not long after he became editor of *Gnosis* — I once proposed a humor column for the magazine entitled "Gnostrums," but, alas, he didn't go for it — and over the years we've enjoyed periodic kaffeeklatsches in which the conversations have ranged from the struggle to keep our heads above water as freelance writers to the finer points of metaphysics. He once told me about reading portions of the Bible in ancient Greek and Hebrew and stopping to exclaim to himself, "My God! Does it really say that?" Though Smoley is much more of a scholar than I am, I've always appreciated his down-to-earth sensibilities as much as his intellectual acumen. When I need some practical pointers on how to hang on in the everyday world without becoming too much of it, I go to him. In the following conversation, we discuss the central points of his book *Inner Christianity*. He can be contacted at [smoley@innerchristianity.com](mailto:smoley@innerchristianity.com).

**Miller:** What's the difference between inner Christianity and conventional, "outer" Christianity?

**Smoley:** All religions have both an inner and an outer aspect, and this reflects the dual function that religion performs in our lives. First, there's religion in its familiar form: the institutions and codes that are meant to guide our actions and to regulate social conduct. There is nothing wrong with this aspect; it's necessary and vital. But there is another aspect as well, which has to do with inner transformation. We are not all we could be, the inner tradition teaches. Our consciousness and being can be considerably more integrated and perfected than they are. This striving toward perfection is the role of the inner traditions.

I often speak of "esoteric Christianity." The word *esoteric* is usually used to describe something that is "far out," but the word comes from the Greek *esotero*, which literally means "further in." You have to go further into yourself to understand what these teachings are all about. I use the terms "inner Christianity" and "esoteric Christianity" interchangeably.

**Miller:** You've suggested that the outer Christian seeks salvation after life, while the inner Christian seeks "gnosis" in this life. What is gnosis exactly, and does it forestall the need for salvation?

**Smoley:** Salvation, as it's conventionally understood, is a promise of God's help now and at the hour of our death, which is a crucial point in the journey of the spirit. Salvation is free for the asking. You don't have to do anything but accept it. If it takes and bears fruit, you will become a kinder, more decent individual. That is a natural consequence, not a result of obeying a list of dos and don'ts.

Gnosis is direct knowledge or insight into the nature of things. Like enlightenment in Buddhism or Hinduism, it is *not* freely given. It is very difficult to achieve — or, rather, we all have glimpses of it, but they are generally so brief and evanescent that we don't notice them. If we are blessed by grace or carry out certain meditative practices, gnosis becomes more pervasive in our being. If it reaches a certain critical mass, our whole being is transformed. This is what the esoteric Christian tradition speaks of as the "resurrection body" or "spiritual body." Saint Paul says, "It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body."

Reaching this level is called *theosis* or "deification." As one Church father put it, "God became man so that man could become God." At this level, you are beyond all relativities; you become pure light. And then salvation is a concern that is left far behind. But I must stress that I'm speaking theoretically, because I have never met anyone who seemed to have reached that level — in any tradition.

**Miller:** Years ago I heard Robert Bly criticize the popularity of Zen in the West, arguing that it tends to take Westerners up, up, and away from what's going on in their own consciousness, when what they need to do is turn inward and learn to transform their "dark matter" through self-confrontation. Do you agree?

**Smoley:** I've always found it funny that Zen, this rigorous, austere sect, has become associated with a laid-back, slacker

attitude, as in "He's really Zen about it." You see books like *The Zen of Cat Grooming* or *The Zen of Portfolio Management*. I'm not a Zen practitioner and have no direct experience with it, but my impression is that it is quite different from the way its critics — and some of its popularizers — portray it. From what I know, Zen sitting actually involves a stark confrontation with this "dark matter." So Bly's criticism of Zen doesn't seem accurate to me.

There is a subtle issue here that's often overlooked. Bly's right that there is a spiritual trap in becoming disassociated from your "dark matter"; you cut yourself off from your own experience, and you become floaty and fatuous. This is one of the great pitfalls of the New Age. The dark matter doesn't go away, of course: people often just grow dishonest about their hostilities and become passive-aggressive. This is a total dead end, in my opinion.

But there is another trap too, and it goes in the opposite direction: you go so much into the dark matter that you get lost in it, and there seems to be no way out. I think dwelling on your own problems and neuroses is highly overrated. You are not going to free yourself that way, either.

The inner Christian path, as I understand it, involves walking a fine line between the two extremes. You face all your inner issues rigorously and impartially; you want to see everything there is inside the teeming ocean of the psyche. But — and this is an important *but* — you are not identified with it. At the back of your mind there must always be an awareness that you are not your "passions" (to use the traditional Christian term), that there is something in you that is awake and alive and, incidentally, immortal. This is the true "I," the pure consciousness, the "light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world." It sees everything in you impartially and objectively — but also with profound compassion.

**Miller:** Perhaps the dead end of dwelling on one's problems explains the relatively low success rate of traditional psychoanalysis. Jung broke with Freud in part because Jung sensed the need for a spiritual dimension to psychological healing, even if he seemed to stop short of a full-fledged spiritual path. How important is Jung to inner Christianity?

**Smoley:** Jung was terribly important to the modern revival of the esoteric tradition. Before he came along, the religious impulse in humanity had been all but explained away. Sir James George Frazer had written *The Golden Bough*, in which he claimed that the death and resurrection of Christ, like other death-and-resurrection legends, was nothing more than a myth of seasonal vegetative renewal. (This view, by the way, was known even in antiquity. Plutarch, writing in the first century, scoffed at the "dull crowd" who believed this sort of thing.) And Freud said that religious experience was a dim longing to go back to infancy and its "oceanic consciousness," where a person is not aware of where he or she ends and the outside world begins.

Jung, from his own experiences and from those of his patients, recognized that something else was going on. Religious symbols occur spontaneously in the human psyche, he believed, whether the person has been taught about them or not. From

this Jung concluded that there were “archetypes,” basic structures in the psyche, that give rise to these experiences. Some of the archetypes are the Self, the higher totality that lies at the center of each of us; the Spirit, usually appearing as a wise old man or woman; and the Shadow, the dark, hated, feared side, which often appears as the devil. In short, religious experience is hard-wired into us.

It’s also important to say what Jung did *not* do. He offered no opinion about whether these archetypes existed independently in a theological or philosophical sense. He did this for two reasons. In the first place, he wanted to stick to his role as a psychotherapist and not stray into the realm of theology (although he did at times). In the second place — and this is often overlooked — Jung was a Kantian. Kant taught that we can never perceive the world in its pure state, as it is; rather, we experience it only through the “categories,” like time and space and causality. Jung accepted this perspective. For him, the archetypes are instinctual ways in which we structure experience — including religious experience. He didn’t want to commit himself to whether they had any objective existence.

The esoteric traditions, on the other hand, do commit themselves. They say that there are a number of levels in the human structure. The physical is one, the psychological another. Above that is the level of the spirit, and beyond that still, a divine level in which we are integrated into the whole of the cosmos. Esoteric Christians would say that these higher realms have an objective existence and can be known and experienced, even though it’s the rare individual who does so. Some say these levels are more real than the one we experience in ordinary life.

**Miller:** A clear difference between East and West is that Christianity emphasizes the heart, the emotional life of the soul, and the “personal relationship” between humanity and divinity, whereas Buddhism sees the goal of spiritual work as emptiness or “no self” and doesn’t speak of a personal God to whom one can relate. Are these paths more similar than they appear, or are they ultimately irreconcilable?

**Smoley:** Curiously, when I had finished the first draft of *Inner Christianity*, I went off to a retreat for Dzogchen, the “Great Perfection” that is said to be the summit of Tibetan Buddhist teaching. Dzogchen, which is quite popular these days, is essentially about developing *rigpa*, or pure consciousness. I remember telling my editor at the time, “I’m going to see if *rigpa* is the same as what esoteric Christianity calls ‘the Son.’” And at the end of it all, I was inclined to believe it is.

The true “I” — the consciousness that looks out at the world through you, as through a window — has many names: in Christianity it is the Son, the Logos, the kingdom of heaven; Jung called it the Self; the Dzogchen teachings speak of *rigpa*; other Buddhists sometimes call it “mind”; for the Hindus it is Atman. This Self — which is emphatically *not* the lower self or the ego — is at the core of your being. You can never see it, because it is *that which sees*. Saint Francis of Assisi alluded to this when he said, “What you are looking for is what is looking.” And Christ in the Gospel of Thomas says, “You can never

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take hold of it, but you can never lose it.”

Paradoxically, this “I,” this most intimate and private part of ourselves, is held in common by all; it is the same in everyone. *A Course in Miracles* says, “God has only one Son,” and we collectively *are* the Son. Language itself begins to bend and break under this realization. How does our tidy system of grammar do justice to the fact that what is most deeply, intimately “me” is precisely what I most share with everyone else?

The Buddhists say it is just as accurate to speak of “no self” as of the Self. Buddhism also doesn’t subscribe to the notion of a theistic God. Esoteric Christianity would agree that God is not a person in the way you and I are persons. God is Absolute, beyond personhood or nonpersonhood. And yet, Christianity teaches, God is capable of relating to us as persons. That is part of the infinite mercy of the divine.

**Miller:** Why haven’t the inner Western paths caught on in the way that Zen has?

**Smoley:** Inner illumination has never been terribly popular. “Many are called, but few are chosen,” it says in the Gospels. What this means is that few choose to go beyond the most basic levels of the spiritual path. People fall in love, get married, have children, get jobs, and pay bills. There’s not much time for spiritual work in life. Most people are happy with this situation, or at least resigned to it. It’s the rare person who tries to look deeper. Although Zen has become popularized, I don’t think there are many people who pursue Zen to its deepest levels, either.

That said, there are historical reasons that the inner Western paths are not well-known or understood. They had to survive in an extremely hostile environment for hundreds of years. In medieval times, a mystic or a theologian who stepped outside the limits of conventional Catholic dogma would be condemned. And condemnation in those days was not just a matter of failing to get tenure: it meant poverty or even death. We can only admire the courage of the people who kept these traditions alive against all odds.

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