

## FOREWORD

*Rudolf Steiner and the Nature of Esotericism*

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*From an address held on the occasion of the opening of the second Goetheanum, Michaelmas 1928. Carl Unger was one of the first members of all the sections of Rudolf Steiner's Esoteric School and from 1908 until his death he was a part of the leadership of the Anthroposophical Society.*

The essence of esotericism can be described in a few words. I would like to describe some points of view concerning the place of esotericism in the present age.

Rudolf Steiner often said that esotericism always existed in the various ages of history but that something different was always characterized as esotericism. However, at all times esotericism included an attitude of soul that lay outside the usual capacities for knowledge and abilities in life. It was a character of soul that had first to be achieved, that the human being had to strive for, had to grow toward.

I would like to draw our attention to the transition from the third cultural epoch to the fourth and from there to the fifth epoch. The impulse of the third epoch appears again in our time; hence, there is good reason for us to be concerned with it.

We know from Rudolf Steiner's book, *An Outline of Esoteric Science*, that the cosmic processes of development belonging to an earlier age become the path of initiation for a following age.

In this sense, we can regard the ancient Indian Mysteries as a repetition of Saturn development in the Polarian age; we can regard the Persian path of Initiation as reflecting the ancient Sun development in its repetition during the hyperborean age. Then we stand in the third post-Atlantean epoch, the Egypto-Chaldean epoch, which also contains the history of the Hebrew peoples. The essence of old Moon penetrates there into human souls as it was transformed through the Lemurian age. In ancient Lemuria the human being still lived magically

connected to the elements of the earth. To a large extent humans could influence the powers of nature and coerce them. We find this magical power from ancient times alive in the third post Atlantean epoch working in its mystery centers. The esotericism that held sway in those centers of initiation we must characterize as thoroughly magical. What had remained preserved there from that age as culture could only be shaped and controlled under the influence of a magical esotericism. Only a few specially selected were allowed entrance, a special few who had been trained by means of severe and difficult trials. Often already selected as young children, they had to be prepared for many years by training their spiritual and soul forces, even down into the organic level of interweaving formative forces in their bodies, so they could experience the mystical death. For this to happen the unconditional subjection of the pupil to the teacher was necessary. The teacher, using spiritual forces, separated the higher members from the pupil's physical body and then reunited them again. Initiation was achievable only through the magical actions of the hierophant. The ancient peoples were led through magical powers and powerful suggestive words and thus led to cultural progress.

The mystery centers were protected from the intrusion of unauthorized persons through magical means. Those entering without permission or who had not proven themselves were destroyed by the experience. We find hints of this protection of holy places even into the Old Testament: no one was allowed to enter the holy of holies except the high priest; everyone not initiated who approached it died. Of course, I realize that there are materialistic explanations for all of this even involving the details. However, such explanations simply show that those who give such explanations or believe them understand nothing of the matter.

The age of the Greeks followed, in which the memory of Atlantis was especially alive. This age had a "secret esotericism." This esotericism no longer reached all the way down into the physical-bodily nature. Instead mediated by soul experiences, it became effective in wakeful human consciousness. It enkindled enthusiasm, the forces of enthusiasm, the "being filled with God" and through art developed forces in human life that created spirit.

To the extent that the Mysteries lost the power to protect themselves through magic, oaths and threats were instituted to keep esotericism secret. Those who betrayed the Mysteries were persecuted and condemned to death.

In the present age we still have remnants of secret esotericism in the various secret societies. In forms and rituals, which they attempt to keep secret, they cultivate the remnants of ancient times. Here too betrayal is punished.

Today, however, we are dealing with entirely different times and spiritual impulses. We are beyond the epoch of magical effectiveness and secretive esotericism because the Mysteries have been brought to the public light. The Mystery of Golgotha brought the turning point when Christ broke through the barriers of ancient tradition. With his death and resurrection the mystery wisdom of all ages was “fulfilled” and indeed, “in front of all the people.” This was recognized by the knowledgeable people of that time; hence, he was accused of betrayal of the Mysteries. Concerning Christ we read in the New Testament: “Because he had done signs before the people,” they sought “to find some cause to hold against him.”

In his book, *Christianity as Mystical Fact*, and in many lectures he portrays precisely this difference between the deed of Christ and all previous initiations. The mystery of Golgotha should come to all the world; it is a cosmic event that liberates the Mysteries. Since the mystery of Golgotha we must regard esotericism as free and open; that is what is essential. Rudolf Steiner connected with this fact and led us, during the second phase of his work in the Anthroposophical Society, deeper into the mystery of Golgotha using the gospels. By imparting to us the results of his spiritual scientific research concerning the cosmic deed of Christ Jesus, Steiner opened for us a new understanding for the biblical accounts; genuine reverence grew in the soul anew from such insight into the religious documents. When placed in such a context the individual word of the Bible reacquired its holy, world-encompassing truth; the individual words could be experienced in its esoteric power.

Rudolf Steiner wanted to provide the people who had come together in the Anthroposophical Society with an esotericism appropriate to the

spiritual situation of the fifth post Atlantean cultural epoch. He wanted to show them the way to a Christian esoteric development by acquiring, out of an understanding of ancient occult traditions, modern forms of researching the supersensible appropriate to the consciousness soul.

I would like to support this with words that he himself used. Rudolf Steiner once said: People do not realize that in every one of my lectures, even in the public lectures, there is a wealth of esotericism. The lectures must only be taken up in the right way. He said this after it was no longer possible in the war years to cultivate esotericism in the ways customary until then, and members were approaching him with the request that he again take up this esotericism. In this way Rudolf Steiner wanted to characterize what he wanted people to understand as “esoteric” in the present time. Another time he said: I will point you to an esoteric book which, although it is in everyone’s plain sight, nevertheless is not understood as such by anyone, namely Fichte’s *Science of Knowledge*. In the same sense Rudolf Steiner characterized every table of logarithms as esoteric, i.e., in order to understand it we must first acquire the necessary scientific prerequisites, we must muster the good will to achieve the necessary preliminary knowledge. For all of us, everything depends on our taking such words seriously enough.

But how did Rudolf Steiner cultivate esotericism in our Society?

Those who accompanied Rudolf Steiner on his path from the turn of the century experienced the following: Rudolf Steiner frequently sought a basis for certain presentations. He would report something from his spiritual research to a very small group of people, sometimes only three, two or even only one person as a kind of test. He was making an experiment so to speak to find out to what extent present day consciousness could “bear” to hear these things. It was always some new results of his research that he put before a few people. One could ask about those results and they could be explained. After a while one could hear him presenting the same question to a larger circle, e.g., to a circle of people that formed an esoteric group. Following this Rudolf Steiner then presented the matter to all the members of the Anthroposophical Society. Then if one waited a while, he began to speak about the same subject in public lectures.

You see how the esoteric contents, i.e., the spiritual that is still inaccessible to ordinary consciousness, had to be planted into present day consciousness step by step. The ground had to be plowed step by step so that the seeds could be sown. But these things were destined for all human beings from the beginning. Rudolf Steiner broke through the wall that had encircled the spiritual life of the new age until the end of Kali Yuga [1899]. Today still there are initiates representing various points of view, some progressive and some conservative. Rudolf Steiner, however, wanted to give humanity everything, for which it proved itself ready to receive. Just as Christ Jesus went through the mystery of Golgotha for all human beings so too here, no one was to be excluded.

However, we must also bear in mind that the spiritual world has its laws and does not allow anyone to approach it who lacks the will to prepare. The enormous effort required of the individual assures that no one not allowed will approach these things. The conditions themselves and the state of an individual's consciousness prevent any impermissible entry. The Mysteries protect themselves; today no other means is necessary, neither magic nor secrets.

Rudolf Steiner placed the protection of the Mysteries in the methodology of the paths to esotericism. These paths are such that in the preparation, in what Steiner called the "study" of Anthroposophy, the awakening power to true self knowledge of the human being lies. The call: "Oh man, know thyself!" that comes to us from the Mysteries penetrates into the soul of the one who is seriously striving for the spiritual knowledge of anthroposophy. The ordinary experience of self is transformed in the soul through this striving and a new sense of human responsibility awakens: a responsibility to the spirit. When the spirit self awakens the soul feels its home to be among spiritual beings, in whose sight the soul acquires a new moral attitude. "Ancient knowledge" required the protection of magic or secrecy for protection. Today spiritual knowledge is grounded in true self knowledge of the human being and the sense of responsibility that blossoms forth from this self knowledge. That is the reason why Rudolf Steiner placed everything before the general public at the Christmas Conference 1924. He wanted to found a new mystery stream whose impulse could lead directly to the Christ event; open esotericism is the only kind possible

today. As magical esotericism worked and formed all the way into the *physical* and esotericism kept secret awakened the *soul* to new powers of experience through art, so now open esotericism turns to the *spirit* of the human being.