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It comes from Greek roots meaning "further in," and its ancestor, the adjective esoterikos, was first used in antiquity to refer to the writings of philosophers that were meant for their students rather than for the public at large. Practically all the surviving works of Aristotle are "esoteric" in this sense, consisting chiefly of his lecture notes that were edited by his students after his death. Exoteric, by contrast, means "further out"—that which was publicly available. For the mystery religions of classical antiquity, the exoteric aspect was the myth itself—in the case of the mysteries of Eleusis, for example, of Demeter rescuing Persephone from Hades. This myth was publicly known, but its inner meaning was revealed only to initiates. As a result, today this esoteric meaning is a matter of speculation: devotees of these cults were sworn to secrecy, and generally speaking, they kept their oaths. (One possible exception is the tragedian Aeschylus, who was once prosecuted for revealing too much of the mysteries in his plays.) Nevertheless, it's easy to see how the mysteries of Eleusis resemble the death and resurrection myths that are so prominent in ancient Mediterranean religion. They also bear a strong similarity to esoteric teachings that we know today, in which the lower self must symbolically die in order for the higher self to be born. Even this extremely brief sketch reveals a crucial difference between the two levels. The exoteric level was a story given out to everyone; most people believed it naively. But when someone suspected that there was more to this myth than met the eye, he or she was taken aside and initiated into its real meaning. It very likely had to do with the fact that human life does not end with death, as we gather from Cicero, the Roman statesman and philosopher, who wrote in *De Legibus*: "These mysteries have brought us out of a rustic and crude existence to a genuinely human life. The rites are called 'initiations,' and indeed they have initiated us into the true principles of life, giving us reason not only to live happily but to die with better hope" (2.36). When proto-catholic Christianity, one of many strains of Christianity that existed in the first two centuries and ancestor of the present-day Catholic and Orthodox churches came onto the scene, it spread rapidly. After allying with the secular power of the Roman Empire in the fourth century, it eventually edged out and suppressed its competitors, in part, because its model, that of the mystery religions, was already familiar. Its only real difference—and its major selling point—was its claim that the death and resurrection of Jesus was not a myth but an actual event that had taken place in the recent past. What, then, were the esoteric teachings of ancient Christianity? If you were to ask most conventional theologians today, they would answer that what was the esoteric meaning in antiquity, is for us today, the exoteric meaning: that Christ came down from heaven, died for our sins, was raised from the dead, and so on. However, the problem with this answer is that these teachings were never esoteric; they were common knowledge even in antiquity. Annie Besant quotes third-century Father Origen who addresses this issue in *Contra Celsum*, a refutation of Celsus, a pagan critic of Christianity: Moreover, since he [Celsus] frequently calls the Christian doctrine a secret system [of belief], we must confute him on this point also, since almost the entire world is better acquainted with what Christians preach than with the favorite opinions of philosophers. For who is ignorant of the statement that Jesus was born of a virgin, and that He was crucified, and that His resurrection is an article of faith among many, and that a general judgment is announced to come, in which the wicked are to be punished according to their deserts, and the righteous to be truly rewarded? And yet the Mystery of the resurrection, not being understood, is made a subject of ridicule among unbelievers. In these circumstances, to speak of the Christian doctrine as a secret system, is altogether absurd. But that there should be certain doctrines, which are [revealed] after the exoteric ones have been taught, is not a peculiarity of Christianity alone. (44) Origen is saying that the claim that Christ rose from the dead is not the esoteric meaning—not "the Mystery of the resurrection." What is it, then? To explore this question fully is beyond the scope of this article. I have discussed it in my book *Inner Christianity*, and in *Theosophical literature*, Annie Besant's *Esoteric Christianity* gives the best account. But in short, we can say there is a correlation of the mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ with the "death" of the lower self (the day-to-day persona with which we usually identify) which is reborn as the true Self, sometimes called the spirit or the "true I." As such, the resurrection of Christ becomes not merely a matter of blind belief or historical research but one of profound inner transformation. This fact indicates why esotericism is so difficult to approach. An overwhelming majority of people are not particularly interested in it and instead want comparatively little from spirituality: some sense of community, a guideline for ethics, and hope for the afterlife. Esotericism provides none of these things in a ready-made fashion. The esoteric path, especially at first, is likely to create a sense of differentiation between the initiate and the world at large. If it imparts a sense of ethics higher than the common variety, it also reveals that much of what usually passes for morality is merely custom and convention. And if it provides hope, or even knowledge, of an afterlife, it raises profound questions about the nature of the Self that survives the body's demise. The religious authorities are also frequently ambivalent, if not hostile, to esoteric awakening. An individual with his or her own direct contact with spiritual realities is less likely to need the priests. Furthermore, a religion is directed by genuine initiates for only a comparatively short time. As a religion grows in secular power, it attracts those who are interested in power, and these individuals are generally those who are least aware or capable of spiritual development. In Christianity, we can see this trend as early as the first and second centuries AD—the time of the arising of the proto-catholic church. As a result of this process, the religion that was originally meant to serve as an outer court to esoteric truths became the chief impediment to it. Christ spoke of this danger when he said: "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer yet them that are entering to go in" (Matt. 23:13). Ironically, the authorities who invoke the name of Jesus most often are the ones who most often violate this precept. All this leads to the question of the proper relationship between esotericism and exotericism in Christianity today. Some insist that there can be no esotericism without exotericism. The best-known advocates of this view are the Traditionalist school, exemplified by the twentieth-century Swiss philosopher Frithjof Schuon. In *Transcendent Unity of Religions*, Schuon argued that esotericism and exotericism were inextricably linked and that one could not exist without the other. Schuon also had an apparently limitless faith in the capacity of the great world religions for self-renewal: Nothing is more misleading than to pretend, as is so glibly done in our day, that the religions have compromised themselves hopelessly in the course of the centuries or that they are now played out. If one knows what a religion really consists of, one also knows that the religions cannot compromise themselves and they are independent of human doings. . . . The fact that a man may exploit a religion in order to bolster up national or private interests in no wise affects religion as such . . . as for an exhausting of the religions, one might speak of this in if all men had by now become saints or Buddhas. In that case only could it be admitted that the religions were exhausted, at least as regards their forms. I am not so sure. To accept Schuon's claim, one would have to believe that today's world religions express the truths of spiritual realities as well as they can be expressed on planet Earth. I can see very little evidence to support such a view. Instead, the history of religion shows a progression or evolution in expressing the spiritual impulses of humanity. For example, until about 2000 years ago, animal sacrifice was a universal part of religious observance. Today it is despised as the relic of an earlier and more barbarous era. Animal sacrifice fell into obsolescence, in fact, with the coming of the great world religions, all of which were founded between 700 BC and 700 AD. Even the faiths that existed before this point—such as Judaism and Hinduism—were transformed into radically new versions that earlier practitioners might or might not even have recognized. The Vedic horse sacrifice and the immolation of lambs and bullocks at the Temple in Jerusalem were replaced by deeper, more sophisticated approaches to the divine. Thus, it would seem, the world religions express a particular phase of human development. Astrologers call this epoch the Age of Pisces, and it may be no coincidence that they also associate Pisces with religion. Today, there is a widespread belief that we are entering or have entered the Age of Aquarius (as there is no consensus about exactly when one Age ends and the other begins). As the Age of Pisces passes, will the age of religion pass as well? There is no reason to believe that the world religions as they are today represent the supreme or ultimate form of this exoteric faith, and there is much to suggest that they do not. In the coming centuries it seems likely that these religions will be transformed, yet again, into versions of themselves that will be practically unrecognizable to the present era. Where, then, does this leave Christianity? Which of its teachings express eternal truths, and which merely reflect the limited perspective of the Age of Pisces? Again, this is an enormous question, but we can at least glimpse an answer in some of the facts we have examined in this essay. In the Age of Aries (the predecessor to the Age of Pisces), God was supplanted through the blood sacrifice of animals, as we see in the Old Testament. The Age of Pisces replaced this on an exoteric level with the doctrine of the vicarious atonement, whereby Christ came down from heaven and suffered and died to serve as a perfect expiation for the sins of Adam and his offspring. Although we can see it as an advancement on literal blood sacrifice, today this view itself is no longer satisfactory. Why, after all, should God, having become irked at the human race because someone ate a piece of fruit six thousand years ago, feel the need to send a part of himself down to earth and have it tortured to death as a way of making it up to himself? Put this way, it sounds ridiculous, but this is nothing more than a capsule description of the doctrine of the vicarious atonement. The human race is ready for something different, something, we may hope, that is more advanced and more profound. An esoteric perspective offers such an advancement. The death of Christ to appease a peevish and self-important deity may no longer inspire us in a literal sense, but if we see it as a type of the sacrifice of the lower self to the higher dimensions within ourselves, it again becomes mysterious and sublime. Even so, I would not want to suggest that this perspective is itself absolute. Besant made this point obliquely in titling her book, which in full is called *Esoteric Christianity, or the Lesser Mysteries*. The "lesser mysteries" are those relating to individual human evolution; even these are merely a prelude to the "greater mysteries" of the cosmic sacrifice. All this said, where can this perspective fit into Christianity as we know it today? All but the comparatively liberal denominations would have an extraordinary amount of difficulty accepting this perspective theologically, and the liberal denominations may not care: more and more they appear to be preoccupied with social rather than spiritual matters. Not long ago I found myself in Northampton, Massachusetts, with a spare half-hour and decided to go into the Episcopal church downtown to meditate. Unfortunately, I had chosen the time when the vestry board was meeting, and they were having a very loud and vexed discussion about their church's position on gay clergy. I soon decided to meditate in the comfort and privacy of my car, instead. "That pretty much sums up the Episcopal church today," I thought as I walked out. "You can't meditate because they're making too much noise arguing about gay rights." These social issues are of pressing interest to many, no doubt, but they come close to displacing spiritual life as the central concern of American religion today. One way around these difficulties might be the forming of a church or denomination that is specifically orientated toward the esoteric perspective. The Liberal Catholic Church, founded by Theosophists in 1916, is perhaps the most visible attempt in this direction; there is also the Christian Community, founded by followers of Rudolf Steiner in 1922. Some independent congregations also foster an esoteric orientation. Current examples include Stephan Hoeller's *Ecclesia Gnostica in Hollywood*; the *Ecclesia Gnostica Mysteriorum* in Palo Alto, California; and Spirit United Church in Minneapolis. Nevertheless, denominationalism in itself has a propensity to be divisive, and one can easily ask whether what Christianity today needs is yet another denomination. I may not be the best person to deal with this question, as my own approach over the years has been highly eclectic and personalized, and I have preferred working in small, informal groups rather than through a church as such. Although this approach has, I believe, served me well, others may not find it suitable; and in any case the spiritual curriculum is highly individualized, as A Course in Miracles, that great monument of contemporary esoteric Christianity, reminds us. But this feature may itself be a characteristic of the coming age. My good friend Alice O. Howell, author of *The Dove in the Stone* and *The Heavens Declare*, occasionally shares her memories of her studies with M., an enigmatic Rosicrucian master in New York in the 1940s and '50s. The spirituality of the future, M. said, would be focused in small groups. "The problem is," he added with a chuckle, "you'll never know how many of you there are." M.'s point hits home on a number of different levels. In today's world, we live under what the French esotericist Rene Guenon called "the reign of quantity," where the value of everything is calculated by the ever-present consideration of how much and how many. Can the esotericism of the future appeal to the broad mass of humanity? Maybe, maybe not. But esotericism is principally about quality, not quantity, and the small groups of which M. spoke have always been the real catalysts for spiritual transformation. Christ alluded to this truth in his parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened" (Matt. 13:33). So it is likely to be both today and in the future. In any event, these issues are real and pressing, as our civilization seems to be wrestling with the role Christianity and religion as a whole are to play in the collective life of humanity. At this point, it is probably more important to ask questions and follow the threads of various possibilities rather than setting out party platforms or fashioning flags for people to follow. References Besant, Annie. *Esoteric Christianity*. Reprint. Wheaton, IL: Quest, 2006. 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