
THE TRADITION

by

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In every religion there are always two aspects, the seen and the hidden. The manifest is observed in buildings, ministers, rituals and scriptures. These perform the task of influencing the world at large by bringing a sense of a higher Power, a Moral code and good customs into what for the mass of people is a tooth-and-claw existence. Of course there are times when the ministry becomes influenced by the ways of the world, and its authority is corrupted, turning it into the oppressor of the soul as well as the body. But such phenomena are subject to the laws of cosmic justice, and the evil destroys itself. Every religion has had such periods, and they indicate the last phase of decay before a new impulse enlivens the tradition again.

The new impulse always originates from the hidden aspect of the religion. Often centred on one man or a group, the light that once illuminated the Teaching returns to meet the needs of a generation that can no longer accept its parents' understanding of the tradition. This process must occur continuously in order to preserve the life of a religion. When it does not, the inner meaning soon fades into mere form, which then turns into dead custom that imprisons the ignorant and drives the intelligent away. The

irony and providence of such a situation is that the rebels often seek and find the original principles of their faith far away from the conventional and conservative establishment of their own religion. Indeed, often while examining the source of another tradition they recognize the same precepts and objectives, and sometimes in terms strangely more familiar than the watered-down or silted-up versions they were instructed in as children. This is because at source all traditions meet.

This source is the hidden aspect of a tradition that periodically manifests when those responsible for the spiritual life of mankind reformulate the Teaching for the current generation. This restatement of the nature of Man and his relationship to the World and God takes many forms but it is never changed in essence. The Teaching is complete and perfect, although it wears many garments.

The hidden aspect of religion is to preserve the tradition, but not by rigid code. Thus, while the Teaching is written down, or designed into festival, art or story, its real life can only be imparted orally, that is in the subtle relationship between elder and younger. In this way there is no distortion as the language of

the past becomes blurred with time. Each generation is taught in its own tongue, so that while terms may change the precise meaning in a current idiom does not. This is why many scriptures of long ago are unintelligible; we sense the profound truth of them but we cannot fully comprehend the language of symbols, because they were written for the children of that time.

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Every religion has its scriptures, and they are the grounding of that tradition in relation to the World at large. None of the major faiths could exist without them.

The Inner Tradition is a continuous line. Kabbalah, it is said, goes back to the angels who were instructed by God.

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All formulations of a tradition are initiated, grow, fulfil their purpose, decay and die. Often, however, many who are on the periphery of such a movement do not recognize that the light has been removed, that the heart has gone from the formulation and that all that is left is a set of redundant rules. The unperceptive often mimic the master, even don his role, and teach without depth and without realization of the precepts. They perform by rote because they have never experienced the Teaching. Nor can they, without a major change in their being. History reveals many such spiritual bodies that have died and become the precise reverse of what their

rounders conceived them to be. Schools originally designed to help people to free themselves spiritually can become psychological prisons. Such a training situation is dangerous for the seeker in pursuit of truth or mystical experience. To have as a master a man who is simply aping his own teacher or, worse, living out a long-dead myth is useless. In such a case help can come to a genuine aspirant, but not through the authority of a formal dynasty. Contact with the hidden tradition can be direct and unmistakable. This is the untraceable line of connection that scholars never find. It is the truly oral tradition. The result may be spectacular, like Ezekiel's vision by the river Cheber, but it is more likely to be an apparently well-arranged happening, a psychological change of attitude or an encounter that will alter the course of a whole life. All that is required for such an event is a total commitment to spiritual growth. With this prerequisite, Grace and Providence can set up the conditions for an inner and outer change. Such turning-points are very rare; but then people who are prepared to risk all for a pearl of great price are not common. In time, and always just at the right moment, a teacher or maggid arrives. Then there will be, no doubt, others who will pick up the Tradition, be it by instruction or illumination. Perhaps you are the person; someone who reads these words in a faded book by a long-dead Kabbalist whose archaic phrases make some sense in a modern world far into my future. In Kabbalah time does not matter: only Eternity and beyond is our concern.

*(Extracted from Chapter 1 of **The Way of Kabbalah** and reprinted by permission of Gateway Books, who are publishing a new edition*