On Spiritual Knowledge

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Esotericism in religion means 'hidden knowledge'. This knowledge is not supposed to be literally hidden somewhere, but to be of such a refined and insightful nature that ordinary intelligence simply cannot grasp it. Or, otherwise, is it just that this knowledge is only hidden because it serves to buffer and legitimate the power and prestige of a ruling class or elite?

Historical Christianity is not supposed to have levels of knowledge, like a sect, but to be eager to spread a universal message, within reach of everyone to understand if they want to. From the Christian point of view it might be thought that the notion of 'esoteric Christianity' is a Theosophical and New Age perversion of orthodoxy. However, Christianity has traditionally supported the notion of 'spiritual knowledge', a knowledge that is in some sense 'hidden'. It is the object of this presentation to clarify the Christian meaning of spiritual knowledge.

The Christian approach to spiritual knowledge is realistic: believing that there really *is* such a type of knowledge. In a nutshell, spiritual knowledge is knowledge that has been 'spiritualized' by the Holy Spirit. Every Christian believes in the actual existence of the Holy Spirit and that the Holy Spirit is God. It is part of the Creed. And it is the *real presence* of the Holy Spirit in the knower that ostensibly spiritualizes his or her knowledge. Starting with the *New Testament* then, we will now begin to examine the substance of Christian thinking on spiritual knowledge.

Jesus said, 'The Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure buried in a field, which a person finds and hides again, and out of joy goes and sells all that he has and buys that field' (Mt. 13:44). Jesus claimed to grant his followers, 'knowledge of the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven' (Mt.13: 11).

Elsewhere Jesus warned the disciples not to throw pearls before swine (Mt.7: 6). In other words, he forewarns them that what enlivens their own hearts is not for everyone. Ignorance will be deaf to wisdom.

And as innumerable commentators have pointed out, Pilate still wonders what truth is, *even when it is staring him in the face.*

There are two chief senses of spiritual knowledge known to Christianity and I shall focus on the second, but it is as well to be aware of the first, which is the foundation. The first sense of spiritual knowledge is what is called 'literal' and the second sense, 'mystical'.

Ordinary spiritual knowledge - the mainstream sense – refers to knowledge of the Baptised. This type of knowledge may be resumed as follows: it is more of a being-known (ie. to God, the *pleroma* of being within terms of which knowledge is partial); and the knowledge of the Baptised is knowledge of the true mysteries, as opposed to the false mysteries of the pagan mystery religions. St. Cyril of Jerusalem (c.315-387) authoritatively refers to this in the *Procatechesis*, and John Chrysostom, roughly contemporary (d.407), preached it from the pulpit at Constantinople from where the whole world (that is, the Emperor and Court) could hear. In addition to this, it is the true *gnosis* as opposed to the false *gnosis*. The idea of the pseudo-*gnosis* of the Gnostics was a claim of Clement of Alexandria (140-c.220). *Gnosis* for Clement meant 'that light which is kindled in the soul as a result of obedience to the commandments'.[1] In other words, obeying the moral prescriptions set down in the Decalogue will make a person wise, that is, able to discern good from evil, means from ends.

True gnosis is being *bonded* by the faith. Irenaeus of Lyon (c.130-c.208) and Basil the Great of Caesarea (c.329-379) argued this at length, particularly Basil, in his influential treatise, *On the Holy Spirit.* For Irenaeus, spiritual knowledge is communal and what engenders unity of persons. Ordinary spiritual knowledge is open to all who seek to make the Baptismal vows and be anointed. Mystical spiritual knowledge concerns, more directly, what the Baptised *know*. Yet what is this knowing which is more of a being-known?

Celsus (the Alexandrian philosopher – Alexandria being the intellectual centre of the ancient world of the time after Christ) quoted the *Seventh Letter of Plato* to show that knowledge of God (Most High, beyond all idols) depends upon five things: first, the name (*onoma*) of the thing; second, the definition (*logos*); third, the image (*eidelon*);

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1 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies,* III.5.44 in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1, Rpt. Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1978.

fourth, the science (*episteme*); and finally the object itself (ie. *that* which is named).

Origen (185-254), the greatest Christian scholar of antiquity, argued in his work *Contra Celsus* (a work which survives) that Celsus was being too rationalistic. Origen thought that too much rationalism compelled Celsus to see spiritual knowledge purely extrinsically, as if it were an object. Spiritual knowledge, said Origen, following Clement, is not a *thing*, and knowing *about* spiritual knowledge was different to possessing it. On the other hand Origen preserved Plato's categories. Origen said these five *categoria* were actually aspects of Christ.

Before I explain this, it should be noted that Origen's paradigm shift on Celsus' understanding of Plato marked an important move away from a rationalistic knowledge about something to a personal knowledge of some one - of God. Gregory of Nyssa (c.330-395) would say 'for the Lord did not say it is blessed to know about God, but to know God'.[1] Already then, we can say: *spiritual knowledge is personal knowledge.*

Origen transformed Celsus' purely analytical schema by referring them to Christ. Now, *onoma* meant the Name of Jesus, before whom every knee shall bow; *logos* referred to He who, before Abraham was, said 'I AM'; *eidolon* (image) referred to the wounds of Christ or imitation (*mimesis*) of Him (in the sense of *sharing* in his universal quality of existence, not merely *copying* his behaviour); *episteme* (science) meant the transfiguration of the self and, finally, that which is named - the object category - was the cosmic Christ, Christ Alpha and Omega.

Origen referred in particular to two terms that encapsulate the meaning of spiritual knowledge for posterity. These are contemplation (*thea, theoria*), and spiritual understanding (*noiein* or *chorien*).

We derive our modern word 'theory' from *theoria*, but the Greek word is more akin to the Latin, *contemplatio*, with its silent overtones and monastic modulations. The word *noien* is not just the intellect, its usual translation, but refers specifically to a perceptive faculty that can 'see' and 'know' God. It is a faculty of 'higher' intelligence that is not normally available to us. To function in this

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1 Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Beatitudes,* Ch. 6 in *On the Beatitudes*, tr. Hilda Graef, Newman Press, New York, 1954.

sphere one must make oneself worthy, which entails special preparation and conditions. The other word, *chorien* means to contain or comprehend (God); again, the need to be able or worthy. Or, 'to be capable of.' For instance, *choretikos theou*, means 'be capable of God'.

The word *gnosis*, in the meantime, had come to mean *hubris* or sophistry – pretentious so-called knowledge, the knowledge of the sects competing with Christianity for souls. Spiritual knowledge (*theoria, contemplatio*) referred to a sure sign of the Spirit (that is, God). In the second place we can say then, that spiritual knowledge *is the presence of the Holy Spirit.*

Having reached this conclusion we need to ask, what *presences* the Spirit? Origen answered for the whole Tradition, Eastern and Western: the answer, he thought, lies with the five spiritual senses or faculties. If we can appreciate the spiritual senses the meaning of the 'spiritual understanding' (*noien*) will be clarified. The spiritual senses correspond to our physical senses; they also correspond to five aspects of the Spirit's intelligibility; they mean that spiritual knowledge is not other than physical knowledge – but that spiritual knowledge cannot be reduced to physical knowledge. Finally, they mean that the body is essentially a spiritual entity.

Spiritual life therefore, means developing the acuity of these senses – their sharpness. This requires a special set of *exercises*. And here is where *ascesis* (asceticism) fits into spiritual knowledge. *Ascesis* means exercise. These exercises are what will make us 'worthy' and prepare us for *noesis*. The noetic faculty is understood as the integration of the five spiritual senses.

Hear what the great Father Diadochus of Photike (in North Greece in the fifth century) wrote 'One Hundred Chapters on Spiritual Knowledge', published in the first volume of the *Philokalia*, a collection of texts written by spiritual masters between the fourth and fifteenth centuries, compiled by St Nikodimus of the Holy Mountain and St Makarius of Corinth and published in Greek in 1782.

Diadochus says that the spiritual senses converge in what he calls 'the remembrance of God' (*mneme theou*). Then, in the remembrance of God, we will intensify our spirit until the point when we will *become aware* of our own *noesis*. A special devoted monastic life-style is the prerequisite for this knowing through remembrance of God:

> He who dwells continually within his own heart is detached from the attractions of this world, for he lives in the Spirit and cannot know the desires of the flesh [...] We must confine the mind within these very narrow limits, devoting ourselves solely to the remembrance of God [...] When we have blocked all the mind's outlets by means of the remembrance of God, the intellect requires of us imperatively some task which will satisfy its need for activity. For the complete fulfillment of its purpose we should give it nothing but the prayer 'Lord Jesus'. 'No-one,' it is written, 'can say "Lord Jesus" except in the Holy Spirit' (1. Cor.12:3). Let the intellect continually concentrate on these words within its inner shrine with such intensity that it is not turned aside to any mental images. *Those who meditate unceasingly upon this glorious and holy name in the depths of their heart can sometimes see the light of their own intellect.*[1]

This is the source of the idea of *speculative* theology. The *nous* becomes a mirror (Latin *speculum*) and by the light of its reflections of the Beyond, one carries out one's thinking.

From this traditional ascetic point of view spiritual life, as a journey through *this life*, means a progress from unlikeness (to that image of holiness which is Christ, to which the Holy Spirit calls) to likeness. Spiritual life, the outcome of spiritual knowledge, leads to more and more Christ-likeness (or godliness, the word customarily used in English); from likeness to kinship, to Sonship: traditionally, filiation meant glorification or deification (*theosis*).

Deification (*theosis*) is a key notion presupposed by the Church Fathers' understanding of spiritual knowledge. *Theosis* is our essential possibility. 'For what meaning would there be for Creation if man should not know God?' asked Athanasius of Alexandria (295-273) in his absolutely formative youthful treatise, *On the Incarnation.*[2] *Theosis* entails spiritual knowledge to some degree, perhaps as a sign of the way

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1 Diadochus, 'One Hundred Chapters on Spiritual Knowledge', Chs. 57-59 in *The Philokalia*, Vol. 1, G.E.H. Palmer, P. Sherrard, and K. Ware (eds), Faber, London, 1979.

2 Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, trans. A Religious of C.S.M.V., SVS Press, Crestwood, NY, 1993, Ch. 1.

we are on, the way being of course Christ. Such spiritual knowledge is not rational knowledge – as Celsus and the philosophers supposed – not discursive knowledge, but *theologia*: communion as knowledge: 'I know, because I commune-with ...' *Theology* in fact never used to mean 'discourse about God', as it tends to today, it meant 'divine illumination' right up until the late Medieval period in the West, and has never meant anything else in the East. Hence, the Universal Church, for more than a thousand years, believed prayer was *educative*, because it *qualified* theologians. Origen's most famous student Evagrius of Pontus wrote in a famous maxim: 'If you are a theologian you will pray truly. And if you pray truly you are a theologian'.[1] Prayer and theology co-inhere. To grow in one is to grow in the other.

Prayer being something you *do*, points out something else about spiritual knowledge: it is based on practice (*paxis, praktikos*). While *praxis* referred to any work of salvation, *praktikos* came to refer in particular to monastic practice, or ascetic exercise. Essentially they refer to morality, moral practice, not according to the letter, but in the real spirit of the Law, which is love.

Mystical and ascetic styles of life co-inhere and only *together* involve spiritual knowledge. To know God, one must *be* both a mystic and an ascetic. And being is ranked: some are holier than others. Proof of holiness is service and humility. Who knows least knows most (echoing Paul in 1.Cor.1).

In his *Conference* with John Cassian and Germanus, Abba Nestoros indicates the importance to spiritual knowledge of spiritual practice. Cassian (350-435) was a contemporary of Augustine of Hippo. He had taken the vow of the *xeniteia* (to remain a stranger and pilgrim on this earth) as a young man. He and Germanus spent about fifteen years in the Egyptian wilderness and in later life Cassian wrote the *Conferences*, records of his interviews with the holy Fathers he met. Cassian later became a legate for John Chrysostom to Rome, where he met Pope Leo the Great and was ordained. Later again, in the south of France he founded monastic houses for men and women and wrote the Rule for them. Cassian is revered in both Eastern and Western Churches. His *Conferences* were read from, aloud, every evening in Benedictine

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1 Evagrius, 'Chapters on Prayer', 60 in J. Bamberger (trans.) *Praktikos and Chapters on Prayer*, Spenser, 1972..

houses for over a thousand years and Benedictines here in Australia still read Cassian in Refectory today. Cassian was the favourite reading of Thomas Aquinas on those days of solitude and writing when the Angelic Doctor felt his spirit flagging.

Abba Nestoros tells Cassian it is not so much being a monk which brings with it spiritual knowledge – not so much *what* you do – but the way you do it. If some good is being done beautifully it does not matter particularly what that particular good is. 'It is valuable and proper that each one should strive with zeal and diligence to achieve perfection in whatever work he has undertaken'.[1] Cassian tells Abba Nestoros that he has chosen reading as his spiritual occupation and Abba Nestoros gives him a few helpful tips on good reading that in fact define what the West will later understand as *lectio divina* (spiritual reading). But the basic rule for any *praktikos* is quite simply this: 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God' (Mt.5:8). 'It is impossible for the unclean of heart to acquire the gift of spiritual knowledge'.[2]

> Anyone wishing to master contemplation must, with all zeal and energy, acquire first the practical side. This practical mode can be reached independently of contemplation. But in no way can contemplation be arrived at without the practical. There are two arranged and separate stages by which human lowliness can reach up to the sublime. With these in the order I have indicated, the human can attain the heights.[3]

'A complete purity of heart is the foundation of all divine knowledge', says John Climacus (sixth century), the one time Abbot of St Katherine's monastery in Sinai desert.[4]

Germanus queries this. He says he knows Jews, heretics and sinful Catholics who have a perfect knowledge of Scripture and Tradition, while he has met many holy people who have impressed him by their

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1 Cassian, *Conferences*, tr. Colm Lubheid, Paulist Press, New York, 1985, XIV. 5.

2 *Ibid.* XIV. 10.

3 *Ibid.* XIV. 2.

4 John Climacus, tr. M. Heppel, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, London, 1959, Step XXX.

sanctity but who have nothing whatever to say for themselves, and apparently no learning at all. What does *this* say for purity of heart as spiritual knowledge? Nestoros calmly distinguishes for Germanus (and for us the reader) between simulated, seeming knowledge – book knowledge – and the experience of the heart which books and Scripture quotations are mere reflections of, but which reticence does not stifle.

> Spiritual knowledge must have a solid lasting strength in you. It is not something to be enjoyed occasionally, as happens with those who do not work for it, who only know of it from what others tell them or whose acquaintance with it is, so to speak, like that of some fragrance in the air. It is something to be hidden, perceived, and felt in one's innards.[1]

But for this *strength*, repeated listening or reading, long rumination or meditation, and slow digestion of what has been imbibed is absolutely necessary. Spiritual knowledge takes time.

Spiritual knowledge is a form of health and experience according to Cassian. But 'experience' does not mean what we would think. Experience, as part of the order of spiritual knowledge, is not a 'gained' or 'accumulated' experience. It is the experience of ridding, of shedding oneself, or emptying oneself. This experience is not just fruitful for the Spirit, it is regarded *as itself a fruit* of the Spirit. As such, spiritual knowledge is a virtue.

As the proverb says, 'Wisdom [the Presence of God] comes to rest in the good heart' (Pv.14: 33). Finally, to sum up, spiritual knowledge is: something you are, not merely something you know; not a content – not a 'thing' you know – but a light (of discernment/insight *diorasis*); native to ordinary activity in everyday life; a being-virtuous: free from emotional and intellectual baggage, therefore able to love; and an embodied (incarnate) knowledge rather than merely cerebral knowledge; and *what* is embodied is the Holy Spirit rather than an item of information.

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1 Cassian, *op. cit.*, XIV. 13.