Chapter 1

The Royal Road of the Early Church

The inner tradition is a Christian equivalent of Zen or Raja Yoga, both of which contain extensive psychological teachings, but the technicalities of this Christian equivalent, known in the gospel as the Way, have never been known in the West. Now modern travel and scholarship have given us access to some of the most important of the forgotten psychological teachings of this Christian tradition, but it is almost too late. The very words have lost their meaning, so that new methods of research are now needed to discover the inner sense of these texts, the ambitious aim that forms the subject matter of this book. In its full form, the psychological method to which I refer represents what was known in the early church as the Royal Road. This name was once given to certain therapeutic psychological and psycho-spiritual techniques developed by Christians who followed Christ's narrow way. The Royal Road was a science based on the gospel teaching about the cure of the soul—by curing the nous, sometimes known as the eye of the soul. This leads to what was then known as the illumination of the nous, and so develops the hidden potential or talents of the individual, once described by Saint Paul as the Gifts of the Spirit.

The first part of this book gives us glimpses of this Royal Road, as it was described by the church's great masters of spirituality, from Clement of Alexandria in the second century, to Pierre Caussade in the eighteenth and, in our own time, to the enigmatic figure of Boris Mouravieff. Here we will discover that this ancient path is not simply a Christianized form of India's Rajah Yoga, and that the early Fathers of the church regarded the name Royal Road as a direct synonym for the Narrow Way of the gospel.
The similarities and differences between this way and Yoga are important. One is that this Christian Royal Way is entirely in keeping with Christian theology, at least on the level where it is justly said that, whatever their differences in doctrine, the churches are charismatically one. Its most fundamental technique is very different from Yoga, being based on the gospel idea that what is impossible to man is possible to God. More important today, although its practical work is entirely dependent on holding a traditional prescientific Christian worldview, yet it contains a detailed spiritual psychology as great and as precise as any belonging to the religions of the East. It is in truth an ancient science, and the great hesychast master Saint Gregory Palamas wrote about it that “truly this seems to me to be a craft above all crafts, and a science above all sciences, to lead a man, the wildest and most changeable creature.” This craft is said to introduce us to the kingdom of heaven, in the bliss of the uncreated light of God: in the Greek this is theoria. So, say the fathers, on this Way the vision of God becomes light, and not fire for us.

The chapters that follow this describe certain practical aspects of this Royal Road and show how certain ideas in Christian doctrine have been misunderstood, a misunderstanding that has had serious consequences for what was once a Christian civilization.

The Path of Heart

In certain monasteries that are dead to the world yet infinitely alive within, an old kind of Christianity is still understood. It does not speak to us of how to get what we want. It does not offer us heaven in return for taking out membership. It is entirely deaf to our everyday desires. So, against a background of television and consumer goods and easy living, what it offers seems meaningless to most of us, just as it seemed when Jesus offered it in Palestine almost two thousand years ago. But in stillness, in the shade of the Tree of Life, when we begin that inner dialogue with God that is our birthright, but which exists in its pure form only in the garden of the heart—in openness of eye and mind, there we will find the meanings and the joyfulness of those old texts, those doctrines that involve the heart, so that what they convey is not only thought, but felt. This reuniting of the thinking faculty to the heart might be described as the great secret of Inner Christianity, only it is not really a secret so much as something unnoticed because of our lack of understanding.

To read about these things and enjoy, to ponder them and understand, we have to declare a moratorium on analytical methods and avoid debate, even with ourselves. As Socrates once discovered, only when we
recognize that in a special sense ideas are not knowledge—and in what sense this is true—can we link the mind to the heart. It was just these motivations which led monasticism to emerge in the Christian world as a reaction to the establishment of the church. Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh once described this beginning of monasticism in a talk:

... the monastic movement began as a reaction of men and women of depth and spiritual intensity against the lukewarm... Christian society that had evolved as a result of the imperial edict giving a right of existence and later predominance to the Christian Church. These people left the city, left the countries of their origin to go to places where Christianity was not watered down, and where they could create communities full of ascetic endeavor, of ruthless determination, of radicalism that allowed them to make of the gospel nothing else than the total of their lives.

Some on the other hand left their place of origin, whether it was the great cities of the empire or small villages, because danger had come upon them, physical danger or moral danger, danger of personal corruption or danger of physical destruction. These people left in a state of frailty, but a frailty which, aware of itself, was not prepared to be used by the surrounding world of people who had authority or power over them to destroy them as human beings, as Christians. Others left their places of origin because, surrounded not only by lukewarm Christians but also by a largely pagan society, they fell into despair at the emptiness of life. This is something which we find now in all the countries where atheism predominates; people who are confronted with despair and therefore move onwards and try to find either an interior situation, the kingdom of God within them, or an outer situation, be it prison, concentration camp, or monastery, where they can find another kind of safety—not the safety of the body, not the comfort of the mind and their emotions, but the safety of knowing that they are anchored in God, and that life has a meaning... and they went into the desert... into solitude, into the unknown... into a desert still unknown or still unexplored by others.\(^5\)

To this day, a gentle—and occasionally not so gentle—conflict between monasticism and the moralistic element in the church shows that the forces that led to monasticism as a reaction have not yet disappeared. In fact, they have grown stronger, and in this century of politics,
communication, and tourism, the inmost heart of monasticism may not survive this intensified pressure. P. D. Ouspensky, in his early lectures, wrote of this path: "We shall now speak about the conditions necessary for development because it must be remembered that although development is possible, it is at the same time very rare and requires a great number of external and internal conditions. The first is that a man must understand his position, his difficulties, and his possibilities, and must have either a very strong desire to get out of his present state or a very strong inclination for the new, for the unknown state which must come with the change."7

Even today, in the monasticism of the Eastern Church, much is conveyed in unwritten ways. I was once talking to a monk about where they had learned the traditional methods. He listed a few books in Greek. I asked if any of these described the complete tradition. "No," he replied. I asked again what book contained the basics of the tradition. "None," he replied. "Where do you obtain these basics?" I asked him, somewhat frustrated. "It's the tradition," he replied, and would say no more on the subject.

What is this tradition, and what does it tell those who follow it? Many things, but here is an example of great practical merit from Saint John Cassian, who came from the African deserts to found some of the earliest monasteries in Western Europe. He wrote that to remain on this Royal Road was possible only through persistent efforts to discriminate.8 He also wrote of many monks he knew who had lost the Way, asking: "What was it, then, that made them stray from the straight path? In my opinion it was simply that they did not possess the grace of discrimination; for it is this virtue that teaches a man to walk along the Royal Road, swerving neither to the right through immoderate self-control, nor to the left through indifference and laxity."9

Throughout the centuries, this path known as the Royal Way has been a common but barely recognized thread in Christianity. A typical example is how Clement of Alexandria linked this Royal Way to the classical narrow way of the gospel, writing: "And as, while there is one royal highway, there are many others, some leading to a precipice, some to a rushing river or to a deep sea, no one will shrink from traveling by reason of the diversity, but will make use of the safe, and royal, and frequented way." And he also wrote elsewhere: "Whence, 'Seek and ye shall find,' holding on by the truly Royal Road, and not deviating."10

When we look for it, we will discover that often the term Royal Way or Royal Road is not capitalized, nor treated as a proper noun by translators, suggesting that in a time of secrecy, some effort was made to put
this term in such a way that only those familiar with it would recognize its significance. But what, in essence, is this Royal Way? Certainly there is “one way,” but there are many “ways” of walking it. Gurdjieff talked about what he called the “sly man’s pill.” To find salvation, he tells us, the fakir, the man who works with physical exercises, spends sixteen hours a day on them; the monk, taking the way of the heart, spends twelve; the sly man, the man of understanding, simply takes a pill each day. The pill is one of a selection of methods—described in a later chapter—referred to as noetic ascesis.

Pray for Help

A major element in the esoteric tradition takes the form of teachings of different kinds. Oral teachings help to eliminate error, and at one time these were conveyed by those called to be teachers of whom Saint Paul spoke. Sometimes they are embedded in the liturgies of the early church. And because language is limited in what it can convey, there is a whole unwritten doctrine, much of which is not even spoken. The non-verbal teaching is more difficult to find and to understand, but when found, it greatly reduces the possibilities of error.

Similar methods are described in India in a parable in which a man with a thorn in his foot finds a second thorn with which to extract the first. Once successful in this, both thorns are thrown away. This parable can be understood on several levels, but is not normally presented with any indication that deeper levels of meaning exist, so it conveys only the idea that good ideas or doctrines remove bad ideas; this, although valuable for its breadth, does not have the depth of Macarius’s presentation (see p. 95) and the Christian interpretation he gives. And of course the whole point of this Christian method is that it uses two new thorns, the Word and the Spirit, to extract the single unwanted thorn. The second thorn, the action of the Spirit, is not to be thrown away; the whole aim is to make it permanent. If it stays with us, it keeps us free from involvement in externals.

But in the Christian tradition, there is also a quite different way of looking at this question. At a certain point on the journey—as described in the parable of the prodigal son, where his father comes out to meet the returning prodigal—God will take us by the hand, as it were, and begin to show us the correct meaning of the teaching. In the West, this is called “infused contemplation”: “It is He [Christ] who truly shows how we are to know ourselves. It is He who reveals the Father of the universe to whom He wills, and as far as human nature can comprehend. ‘For no man knoweth the Son but the Father, nor the Father but the Son, and he to whom the Son shall reveal Him.’” 11

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When we talk about the Royal Way, then, we are talking about an oral tradition based on a psychology of prayer; not prayer used simply as an exercise for the mind, but practiced for transcending the mind through a true synergy, the core of which is a request for the help of an all-powerful God to change in ourselves what we cannot change by our own unaided efforts. Properly practiced, this expands into a two-way flow expressed in the classic formula in which “it is not I who prays, but Christ who prays in me.”

This is well understood in the Eastern Church, where the interpretation and expression of the written teachings have always been shaped by an unwritten tradition coming down through the centuries. Although it is commonly believed that there is a divergence between these methods in Eastern and Western churches, this divergence is more in terminology and contemporary practice than in basic principles. At least one of those who refers to the Royal Road is Roman Catholic in background, although I have not often seen it named in this way outside the Eastern Church. The teachings of Saint John of the Cross, of the Western authors in the tradition of Saint Denys, Thomas à Kempis and Jan van Ruysbroek, and the anonymous author of the Cloud of Unknowing, among others, basing their teachings on those of Dionysius the Areopagite, also clearly belong to this type of prayer teaching.

Over the many centuries of its currency, different authors have associated the Royal Way specifically with different aspects of practical esotericism, and in Pierre Caussade’s marvelous book Abandonment to Divine Providence, it is abundantly clear that he understood this same Way, by name, where he writes: “O love eternal, adorable, ever fruitful, and ever marvelous! May the divine operations of my God be my book, my doctrine, my science. In it are my thoughts, my words, my actions and my sufferings. Not by consulting your former works shall I become what You would have me to be, but by receiving You in everything. By that ancient road, the only Royal Road [emphasis added], the road of our fathers, shall I be enlightened, and shall speak as they spoke. It is thus that I would imitate them all, quote them all, copy them all.”

Others in this century have uncovered evidence of this Way: in 1973 a Harvard scholar named Morton Smith summarized certain ideas he said had been described by Clement of Alexandria, both in his Stromata and in a letter which Smith attributed to Clement partly on the basis of the extremely close coincidence of such elements. He tells us that this second-century author claimed that, for prepared students, Christianity should:

- develop or improve certain psychological qualities of human individuals;
- include “development to perfection of gnosis,” which term is
used specifically by Clement and reported by Morton Smith: lead to what the Eastern Church calls theosis or deification. This result of gnosis can be obtained in this life.

And finally, he added that this gnosis is “a result of instruction in three stages.” In all of this, Smith seems to have quite accurately defined the practical aims of esoteric teaching. It is worth noting that he also says in this book that “Progress in this ‘gnosis’ or inner knowledge is then said to be a condition for admission into the ‘greater mysteries.’”

The General Resurrection

Here we come back to the question of the Fall of Adam. In their inner meaning, the Fall and the Resurrection of the dead relate to consciousness. Genesis tells how Adam fell as a result of eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This makes it clear that knowledge played a part in the Fall of man. The idea of the Fall is exactly like the idea of the Resurrection in one way. To external religion it has only one meaning: the Fall happened once, the “General Resurrection” will come on one particular day in the future. But if this is so, then it is a purely external event. Yet certain of the early Fathers of the church, giving an esoteric view of Christianity, have made it clear that, to them, the Resurrection exists in three ways: it does exist outside us, in the past as a single event, and in the future as a universal event, but it also exists now, in any moment, always accessible, always possible if rarely actual within us. The same is true of the Fall, which happens to us time after time. One of the Fathers in the Philokalia wrote of the life to come that:

In saying this (that we must seek to enter the Kingdom while we are still alive), we are not forgetting the blessings of the life to come or limiting the universal reward to the present life. We are simply affirming that it is necessary in the first place to have the grace of the Holy Spirit energizing the heart and so, in proportion to this energizing, to enter into the kingdom of heaven. The Lord made this clear in saying: “The kingdom of heaven is within you” [Luke 17:21]. The Apostle too said the same: “Faith is the substance of things hoped for” [Hebrews 11:1]. “Run, that you may reach your goal” [1 Corinthians 9:26]. “Examine yourselves whether you are in the faith. ... Do you not know... that Jesus Christ is in you unless you are worthless [2 Corinthians 13:5].”

Experience is closely linked with consciousness. The Resurrection is also a raising of consciousness, and the inner meaning of the Fall of man
is a description of a universal fall in our state of consciousness. (But this idea of consciousness is an idea that is easily misunderstood.) It is possible to experience these inner meanings in our own lives; resurrection in fire is an uncommon experience, but to fall again into inner darkness is common enough. Here is the Christian view of the transformation of consciousness, hidden in mythological language.

This view is confirmed by the way Macarius the Great, whose works are of the highest importance to monastics of the Eastern Church, describes how, in the tradition, Moses is used as an example of a resurrection in life:

In a double way, therefore, the blessed Moses shows us what glory true Christians will receive in the resurrection: namely, the glory of light and the spiritual delights of the Spirit which even now they are deemed worthy to possess interiorly. Because of this, these gifts of the Spirit will then redound also in their bodies. The saints even now possess this glory in their souls, as said above, but it will then cover and clothe their naked bodies. It will sweep them up into heaven and we will at last come to rest, body and soul, with the Lord forever.

When God created Adam, he did not furnish him with material wings as birds have, but he prepared for him the wings of the holy Spirit. The same he plans on giving him at the resurrection, to lift him and direct him wherever the Spirit wishes. These wings the saints already now are deemed worthy to possess to fly up mentally to the realm of heavenly thoughts.

For Christians live in another world, eat from another table, are clothed differently, prefer different enjoyment, different dialogue, and a different mentality. . . . Therefore, also in the resurrection their bodies will be worthy to receive those eternal blessings of the Holy Spirit. They will be permeated with that glory which their souls in this life have already experienced.17

Unchanging Truth

The idea of unchanging truth, encapsulated in the concept of the Perennial Philosophy, has at least three different but related meanings. One reflects the insights of Plato that the truth of the spirit refers to that which is eternal and timeless and hence unchanging. This concept has
gained a special meaning in the Christian Church, whose God—according to the Bible but more clearly in the words of the early Fathers—is eternal and unchanging yet loving and in a special sense personal. The second meaning is that those facts about human life that have to do with the approach of that life to the eternal also tend to show very little change over the centuries. Our spiritual potential changes little, if at all, reflecting the unchanging center of the inner world, while our everyday, worldly nature changes through the years and reflects the changeability of the outside world.

The third meaning is that the true teaching, the esoteric tradition, changes very little—and does so, when it changes, organically. Unlike modern scientific thought, esoteric truths are never replaced by new paradigms. The occasional new discoveries that do occur in esotericism are added to those that have gone before.

Those alive today whose experience confirms the conclusions of the inner or esoteric teaching will accept that, as Huxley suggested in the title to his Perennial Philosophy, truth does not change, and that the original form of the inner teaching in the early days of the Church was little different from that which appears to be necessary today. The small changes that are needed are due almost entirely to changes in educational and other factors, perhaps evolutionary, that modify human character in different historical epochs.

At the risk of appearing Platonic, one can say that the goal of the spiritual life in the Eastern Church, theosis or deification, is the establishment of a living relationship with the unchanging. But it is necessary to understand this in a way that is both experiential and Christian: not to attempt to define or limit the Lord by this term, nor to demand to see Him “face to face,” but simply to “locate” Him, to describe the “direction” in which one can relate to Him—a direction more dependent on human limitations than on any illusory possibility of restricting or “placing” the divine in some human scheme. And the New Testament tells us: “If ye fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself, ye do well” (James 2:8).

Loss of Ancient Knowledge

How did it happen that this psychological knowledge, which was a mature science in the Christian world long before the development of our modern physical sciences, became lost?

Often the inner changes of history have the simplest causes. In this case, for example, with the decline of the Roman Empire, book learning
became the almost exclusive concern of the clergy. This had the effect of an unplanned but effective censorship. To this was added mistranslation and careless copying, and there is frequent evidence as well of deliberate distortion. By the late medieval era these causes had led to an almost total loss of the psychological knowledge of the previous era. The fact of the matter is that most of these teachings never reached the West in usable form. The Christianity of the Fathers has never been tried in the Western world. In summary:

1. What is now known as Gnosticism—different from the Christian concept gnosis—survived only as a few short-lived sects with conflicting teachings.

2. Much pre-Christian Greek thought was lost by accident or by monastic censorship, although other elements were preserved to the present day in the writings of the early Fathers and those who have followed in their spiritual footsteps.

What survived was understood only by a few. Psychology in those days was regarded as a form of philosophy, and this was so thoroughly lost in medieval times that one of the great scholars of this century, Etienne Gilson, speaking particularly of the Greek form of philosophical thought, wrote that: “there is no philosophy between the end of the 3rd century after Christ . . . and the middle of the 13th century, with the appearance of the Summa Contra Gentiles.”¹⁹ (It was just then that the inner tradition went underground.) Thus:

3. From the time of Clement, the outer church had become increasingly closed to the inner tradition.

4. From the time of the establishment of the church under Constantine, what survived of the inner tradition had mostly gone into seclusion, so that practice of the Christian inner tradition was almost entirely limited to a few monastic locations, most of them in the eastern marches of Christendom, and the tradition became virtually invisible to most individuals.

The division between Eastern and Western churches became wider, until the inner tradition of the Royal Way barely survived except in the monasticism of the Eastern Church. There it survives today in certain special places and was restored by certain specific individuals. Saint Nilus of Sora, in thirteenth-century Russia, commented on monks of the time by quoting the earlier Philotheus of Sinai on the lack of experience of certain monks (quoted in chapter 9).²⁰

This could have been said today, particularly because the Western Church, in which the inner tradition has had less influence on the preva-
lent culture, took a different form. In the thirteenth century, it faced an
influx of Arab translations from, and commentaries on, the works of
Aristotle, and in this form Greek philosophy reentered the mainstream of
Western thought in a different way. This faced the Western church with
the need once again to resolve problems with conflicting ideas. Because,
this time, the inner tradition was distant or hidden from sight, the solution
was different.

It was at this point that the debate between the hesychast Gregory
Palamas and the Italian philosopher Barlaam, who proclaimed that intel-
lect was the means for knowing God,\textsuperscript{21} was resolved schismatically in a
literal sense, by forming or reinforcing the rift between Eastern and West-
ern churches. To this day, theologians of the Eastern Church believe that
Palamas carried the day, while the Western churches believe that Barlaam
proved the primacy of intellect as a basis for faith.

Thus the schism between the two churches was at root a schism
between head and heart.

On Mount Athos today, considerably more than a thousand monks follow
the Royal Way of the heart as practicing hesychasts. Before the First World
War, there were many more. In earlier times, most monks joined in their
teens. Now some come in their fifties and sixties, when the process known
as “cutting off the will” (described later, chapter 10)—the basic form of
obedience for the monk of the Royal Way—has become impossible for
them: the way the mind of Western man normally develops with age
makes it impossible. Today the modern world is beginning to reach out to
those distant monks, as a flood of tourists and pilgrims disrupts monastic
life and even creates traffic problems on the tracks of the Holy Mountain.
At certain times of the year, large groups of young Greek men visit the
mountain with the encouragement of their families, but often with little
real interest in what they find there. For monks, as for lay people, for all
people in the world, the question now is: How can the Way be found
when it is impossible to isolate oneself for so many hours each day?
Conditions change and, in the past, ways of seeking God have changed
with them. Saint Nilus of Sora in his monastic rule wrote:

In the past it was not only the holy fathers living as hermits
in the solitude of the desert who kept themselves under spiri-
tual restraints and attained grace and purity of soul: this
discipline was likewise maintained by monks leading a com-
munity life, and even by those who had not removed from the
world but lived in large cities, such as Symeon the New Theo-
logian and his staret, Symeon the Studite, of the great Studion
monastery in so vast and populous a city as Constantinople, whose spiritual gifts shone like stars.

Blessed Hesychius of Jerusalem says: “Just as it is impossible to preserve life without eating and drinking, so it is impossible to achieve anything spiritual without that guarding of the mind which is called ‘sobering,’ even for those who force themselves to avoid sin for fear of the pain of hell.”

The technique of this exquisite, light-giving action, according to Symeon the New Theologian, is communicated to many souls through instruction; but there are some who are enabled by ardent faith to receive it directly from God.23

In the modern world, how many of us—even monks today, when many Western monks and nuns are forced to take jobs—can give sixteen hours a day to the quest? Yet the ordinary monk in community needs little special knowledge. He just does what he is told. But he must do it for long hours, and the abbot, the confessor, the elder who leads the monk, does need knowledge.

The Sources of My Investigation

Much of the knowledge of this Way belongs to a time when theology and psychology, philosophy and science, were all one discipline. This ancient unity of knowledge was one of the reasons why the modern individual cannot easily come to grips with older forms of the subject: we simply don’t approach it in the same way. With the specialization of modern thought have come differences in the classification and expression of knowledge. These form rifts deeper than those caused by the need to translate from different languages, so that we can only bridge them through appropriate experience, and not in merely conceptual ways.

In this, the very types of knowledge are often named differently. Monastics in the Eastern Church today speak of anthropology, but to them this is a unitary form of knowledge, fundamentally different in structure from modern knowledge, and containing what were clearly psychological and theological statements. For example, there was a way of seeing theology that was essential to that early Christian psychological understanding. Rooted in the Bible, these teachings used the terminology of their time—including a psychological terminology which they had in common with the Greek and Roman philosophers of the Stoic school, a fact confirmed by a number of investigators.
Many differences make those ancient teachings hard to understand today: different terminology, the differences in the questions they asked then, the differences in texts over time and due to errors in copying and translation, and the shift of meaning that occurs when such ideas are not put into practice. Because of this, little of this early knowledge is understood today, and what is still understood has been so totally absorbed into modern thought—and so distorted and fragmented by attempting to "correct" it to fit the scientific views of our time—that we do not recognize its origins. Yet much of this ancient knowledge has survived in different forms. Some of them remain within the mainstream of the churches, often the Eastern. Some survive in the records of specific developments in the history of the church, and for historical reasons which will become clear, some have gone fully underground, so that when they emerged it was without the form and often without the approval of the church. Nevertheless, if one is willing to break free of the boundaries of specialization, there are a number of sources from which this ancient knowledge can be recovered, and not always in fragmentary form.

The Bible
plus the Apocrypha,
including the Dead Sea Scrolls
The Writings of
the Fathers of the Church
Eastern Monastic Practice
Church Liturgies
Special Teachings
Great Spiritual Texts
Alchemical and Mystery Teachings

Figure 1.1 Sources in which the forgotten teachings can be found today.
The Teachings of the Bible

It was said in the New Testament that Christianity will be complete when the gospel is preached throughout the world (Matthew 24:13–14). The Bible has now been readily available throughout the world for some decades, yet in another way the time is not yet come. We have described why the inner tradition which, in the first years of the Christian era, produced a different kind of person, has not yet reached the part of the world in which we live today. That form of Christianity has not been tried and failed, but has never yet been tried. In the first centuries of the church, at the time when Christianity produced its greatest results, men and women such as the Martyr Polycarp were able to withstand torture and fire and continue singing or praising God throughout. The modern individual finds this example unbelievable. Reports in texts such as the second-century *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius are convincing in their detail. The fact is that the Christianity of that time was tried, and it succeeded. But a second fact is that the form of Christianity that produced those results never reached us. It was the inner meaning of the gospel that worked those changes in people’s hearts.

One effect of this situation is that if we admit that the Bible does have inner teachings—a conclusion that is inescapable if we are honest with ourselves—then, because the early inner interpretations have been forgotten, we often describe them as obscure, because narrow or purely invented modern interpretations have more and more become “common coinage.” In general, meanings that could previously be discovered with a little effort can now be discovered in the Bible only after we have found clues in the early Fathers.

The Apocrypha

It has been suggested that the discovery of the so-called Dead Sea Scrolls, and particularly of the Gospel of Thomas, at this time of need is little short of a miracle. Indeed, there is little doubt of the value of some of the texts, particularly the *Gospel According to Thomas*, in filling in some of the gaps that remain in the record of early Christian teaching, nor of the fact that that gospel seems to be particularly comprehensible to the intellectual man of the modern era. Certain texts of the classical Apocrypha also repay investigation, but do not play any direct part in this particular study.
The Fathers of the Church

Immediately following the era of persecution, when many devout Christians moved away from the centers of civilization into the deserts and hard places, a great inner tradition grew up in the church concerning ways of achieving the inner states that form part of Christian possibility. That was the Christianity of the early Fathers. It was a small movement, which probably reached and was understood by a very small population.

To study the Fathers can provide us with a key that makes the Bible more accessible to us, and so invests it with greater meaning. The meanings assigned in this book to biblical texts are examples of this, and have been generated in the studies on which this book is based. The problem has been the enormous delay. At the time when they were written, these texts never reached the rest of the world at large, although they survived in three forms: in a great collection of texts of astonishing clarity and depth; in a feeble undercurrent that spread through Europe as a sometimes “secret” inner tradition; and in monastic form which preserved the experience better than either of the other two forms.

The fate of the written knowledge is one story. For far more than a thousand years after it was written down, printing did not exist. For an even longer time, modern book distribution and other forms of communications did not exist. Until now, the texts of this tradition have remained little known in and wholly unassimilated by the West. Much of that knowledge was preserved in writing only in the Alexandrian and Syrian churches. Some but not all of this reached the Greeks through Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and the saints known as the Cappadocian Fathers. More written knowledge from these Middle Eastern sources reached Russia about a century ago. Some reached the West from Russia and Greece in the first twenty years of this century, normally in obscure scholarly translations laden with Greek and Latin that made them wholly inaccessible to the majority of men and women.

But this—which forms a true discipline in the widest sense of the term—has never in two thousand years been generally available in complete form. The unwritten teachings have been even more inaccessible.

The written teachings of the early Fathers exist in two main forms: in the writings of the Fathers themselves, and in those of their successors, more recent teachers or authors in the same tradition, including a very few members of the Western churches who have obviously followed in the same line of work, and including monks and nuns and occasionally other clergy of the Eastern Church right down to the present time. Figure 1.2 shows the relation of a few key figures in this tradition. Now, by modern
Figure 1.2  Diagram of the history of the tradition. Names shown in italics are quoted or discussed in this book.
ways of publishing translation and explanation, this unique knowledge—some nearly two thousand years old—is becoming more readily accessible in its original form, but its assimilation to Western thought is only just beginning. Some texts that are only just being translated into English were available in French in the 1930s or the 1950s. But in the English-speaking world this is still an unknown teaching.

In view of the difficulties in reaching this knowledge today, what seems to be only an accident of history may be a greater miracle still. In this second half of the twentieth century, more than seventeen hundred years after many of them were written, much larger numbers of the works of the early Fathers of the church, until now inaccessible to the ordinary reader, are at last becoming available to us in English translation.

But why are these texts significant, and to whom are they significant? Their significance is that they give an unequivocal answer to an important question. They do not merely say, but clearly demonstrate, that a different quality was possessed by early Christianity. Because of this, they are significant to all Christians who have ever raised the question of Christian perfection, have ever wondered whether Christianity was always flawed as it is now, who have ever asked the catch question: Why must Christian action so often differ from Christian intention?

These ancient texts are significant to every Christian who ever asked questions such as: How can I be more Christian? How can I free myself from my own bad habits? How can I learn to live the commandment; to feel growing in my own heart the qualities described in the Sermon on the Mount? How can I turn the other cheek? How can I love my enemies?

The early Fathers of the church continually asked questions like these; they gave their whole lives to them in a way we can hardly believe today, and in so doing, they began to find answers—answers that help us when we face the same questions today. It is the discoveries of those ancient men and women, answers that helped to shape our civilization, that have been forgotten and effectively missing from the English-speaking world for so long—and that are now again available. What all this means is that, now becoming available to the ordinary layperson for the first time is perhaps the greatest religious psychology in the world, much of it more than fifteen hundred years old but unsurpassed even today. For example, the texts of the Greek Philokalia, of which three of the five volumes are now available in English, are already proving valuable source material to professional psychologists. The studies of the Russian monastic teachings about what they name provocation, an idea derived from the earlier Greek Fathers and described in recent books on the Russian Church, also have considerable significance in
this field. Many other examples could be found. But this is hardly enough!

To help yourself be yourSelf—for Christianity this means to realize, not to distort human nature—you need to know what those words mean. But if ordinary mechanical skills are learned only by apprenticeship, how much more is this true for the skills of healing the soul?

We have rediscovered the instruction books, but we still need to know their meaning.

In the past century and a half, certain individuals, particularly in the Russian Church, have studied these texts, and some of them have written about them in terms easier for the modern reader to understand: these include Saint Theophan the Recluse and Boris Mouraviev. There has also been Fedotov, who introduced the second volume of his work *The Russian Religious Mind* with the words: "My intention is to describe the subjective side of religion, as opposed to its objective side; that is, opposed to the complex of organized dogmas, sacraments, rites, liturgy, Canon Law, and so on. I am interested in man, religious man, and his attitude towards God, the world, and his fellow men; his attitude is not only emotional, but also rational and volitional, the attitude of the whole man."25

Eastern Monastic Practice

In the Introduction I spoke of how so much time has passed since the early Fathers of the church wrote that the special meanings of the words have long been forgotten. There is an exception to that fact, and it makes it possible that the West might discover those lost meanings. The exception is that a large part of the inner tradition was preserved in unwritten but practical forms in Orthodox and Coptic monasteries and hermitages, particularly on Mount Athos and in other monasteries throughout the Orthodox world. This explains the wide knowledge of ancient Greek among the monks. Yet even this source is not perfect, as its history shows that it has periodically lost its inner meaning. Indeed several times it has had to be renewed over the centuries. Such a renewal is occurring now. These monasteries appear also to have been a major source of the highly practical teachings of Gurdjieff26 and Ouspensky, although the linguistic problem of loss of meaning explains why such a small number were unable to convey to those limited to Western language all the key elements of the teaching as a method. The Orthodox Church, as it comes into the West, is facing the same difficulty.
Since the meaning of a text is found by linking the words to experience, the meanings of many of these ancient texts are stored—but stored wordlessly—in the memories of those who practice the monastic life, and particularly in that monasticism which uses the texts of the early Fathers as its guide. As mentioned earlier, the primary textbooks of Greek and Russian monasticism include the Philokalia and the Gerontikon. Some of the stories in the Gerontikon are probably true, others are clearly parables, whether or not they have foundation in fact.

But the important thing about this is that monastic texts relate to actual practice, and it is found that the effort to transmit to someone an actual practice eliminates many of the misunderstandings that occur in purely verbal communication. This means that today, after two thousand years of Christianity, the meanings of the Gospels and of all these later texts are more accurately preserved not simply in words but in the practices of the monastics, in the “life of the heart” lived in these monasteries—a life that can never be fully explained or intellectualized. These monks and nuns have generally been guided in their practice by those who have gone before, generation after generation, and such guidance means, more than anything else, a process of correcting mistakes. So those whose practices follow those of generations that have gone before them provide a unique resource by which the practical meaning of certain ideas can be checked. Even today, it is sometimes possible for the devout pilgrim to enter into these practices to the point of acquiring understanding, by processes that require much time. But that is another story, perhaps to be told later.

Monastic Rules

Some of these ideas survive in written form, too, in the great monastic rules of the Western Christian world, in the Rule of Saint Benedict, in the teachings of Saint Francis of Assisi, in the spiritual exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola—in their original form, not the later form shortened soon after his death. Many have survived or reemerged in Russia, from the fifteenth century on, in the teachings of Saint Nilus of Sora and others who created specific teachings for the needs of a particular time and place, as in the correspondence of Saint Theophan the Recluse or the instruction given by Saint John of Kronstadt.

It is sometimes difficult to distinguish between this classification and the next, but the distinction is generally valid. More to the point, although in written form they are not the equal of the unwritten teaching of a monastery, monastic rules are a compendium of practical instruction.
Church Liturgies

In certain parts of the Christian liturgy, and in the many other services of the Christian year, certain of the Fathers enshrined great truths in words, in images—statues, frescoes or icons—and others choreographed these truths into what we call the "ritualized" action of priest and deacon when the liturgy is properly performed. They were even built into the very architecture of some of the great churches. Not all of these "objective" truths are disguised: many great truths are plainly stated in the words of the older liturgies, to be ignored by the modern worshiper who, too often of course, doubts them, perhaps because of the scientific pre-judgment that "this is not real knowledge," or more often as a result of inattention.

That "other Christianity," then, is still alive. The esoteric tradition is not a different form of Christianity, but an early strand in the tapestry of the Universal Church—a strand whose importance has long been forgotten, so that today it needs to be "lifted up," to draw an analogy from the weaver's craft, until it can once again be seen, be understood, and so be fitted back into its proper place in the fabric of the church. This is the thread of common experience that once stitched together the many churches into the One Church from which they sprang.

Once we learn to value it, much of this knowledge will be revealed. It can be obtained simply for the price of going to church and listening carefully, or by careful reading—but this is so only as long as we remember to ask ourselves: What does that actually mean?

But when we value something we learn, we come to understand it differently.

Great Spiritual Texts

Certain of these ideas survive sometimes in the great spiritual texts of the past few centuries: in The Imitation of Christ and in other books by those associated with the Society of the Common Lot in the "Low Countries" of Europe; in the English Cloud of Unknowing; in the teachings and poems of Saint John of the Cross; in Pierre Caussade's Abandonment to Divine Providence. Occasionally one can trace in these texts mentions of teachings that go back to the first centuries of the church. But in all these great texts, which are for many Western Christians their sole source of knowledge of this tradition, surprisingly little has survived of the vast resources of knowledge available to the early Church, resources that are now slowly being rediscovered and made available to those who can see their value.
Among these great texts are some that are certainly in line with the inner tradition known by the early Fathers, such as the teachings of Saint Theophan the Recluse, who from the depth of his spirituality and the richness of his scholarship was able to put the same ideas in the Russian of the nineteenth century, language which at least contains modern concepts lacking to the authors of the early centuries. Sources of this kind are still few and far between in the English language, so that I have had to contribute to their publication, as well as drawing the attention of those who are interested to the value of their content.

Alchemical and Mystery Teachings

Some of the ideas spread across Europe in disguised form in medieval times, particularly after the occupation of Greece by the Turks, and mixed with other streams to form European esotericism of the time. The Christian esoteric tradition also appears to have gone underground at certain times, but here it has in general been mixed with material from other sources, so that it is more often than not confusing to all but the best trained scholars, and we will not go into further detail about it at this time except to say that in alchemy were preserved certain items of Christian and pre-Christian psychological knowledge dealing with subjects so long ignored that today they would be regarded by the modern churches with considerable suspicion.