

Easter: The Mystery of Dying and Becoming

Lecture given by
Adriana Koulias
Theosophical Society
Sydney 6th April 2004

Easter The Mystery of Dying and Becoming

For two thousand years Christians have celebrated the Easter festival as a commemoration of the death of Christ Jesus and His subsequent resurrection.

On Easter Friday Christ Jesus experienced the death on the cross. He was placed in a grave and there he remained for three days. On Easter Sunday he was resurrected, he arose from the grave. Essentially we can say that the mystery of Easter involves firstly an earthly death, lying in a grave, and a subsequent resurrection.

Such a ritual, however had been enacted long before Easter in the pagan mysteries, among ancient peoples whose rituals resemble very strongly the Christian Easter Festival.

Let us look for instance at some ancient Festivals.

The Festival of Adonis was celebrated in the great Phoenician sanctuary of Astarte at Byblus to the shrill wailing notes of the flute, with weeping, lamentation, and beating of the breast. The God's likeness was immersed in the sea, lake or a pond etc during which the community experienced solemn silence. After three days the statue of the God was lifted up out of the water and there was great rejoicing for the God had come back to life!

In our own country there is a similar Festival celebrated by the Aborigines of South-east Australia. An old man dressed in stringy bark-fibre lies down in a grave. He is covered up lightly with sticks and earth and the grave is smoothed over. The buried man holds in his hand a small bush which seems to be growing from the ground, and other bushes are stuck in the ground round about. The novices are then brought to the edge of the grave and a song is sung. Gradually, as the song goes on, the bush held by the buried man begins to quiver. It moves more and more, and gradually the man rises up from the grave.

Such festivals were an external celebration of something that happened within the sacred Mysteries to all who aspired to Initiation. Initiation being the attainment of enlightenment or direct knowledge and experience of worlds beyond the physical senses.

The Initiation rituals of ancient times ran on similar lines. The candidate for initiation was led to a dark and gloomy chamber with black walls and no windows in which there contained a kind of coffin or a ceremonial table. Those who led the young aspirant to initiation, the hierophants or priests would sing dirges and laments as they led the student to his spiritual death. It was clear to the young student that he would undergo an experience of death in the coffin. He would be placed in a trance by the initiators and in a trance-like state he would remain for three days. During this time, he would achieve total clarity with regards to the death experience, acquired in the world beyond the senses - the sphere of the Sun. On the third day he would arise an initiate - one who has entered into the revelation of the spiritual world first hand and could now see the physical world from the standpoint of the spirit.

The Druids conducted these initiations at midnight in Cromlechs or caves. The symbolic death represented the death of Hu, the sun; and the resurrection symbolized its resurrection. The Egyptians called this initiation the Temple Sleep. Think for instance of the king's chamber in the great Pyramid of Giza. This could only have been an initiation chamber as no king was ever found entombed there. In this chamber the neophyte would travel in the boat of Isis and sail upon a river of souls to be carried away through the gates of Duat to Osiris the Sun God. It was a great intense inner transformation that was experienced by the candidate for initiation into the Mysteries. An actual experience of the dying of the soul and the reawakening within it of a higher (Sun) consciousness. The soul died, to rise again to a higher consciousness. We must above all hold fast to this, that the body did not die, but the soul died, in order to be awakened to something higher.

Similarly the God Mithras was said to have shut himself up in a cave from which he emerged once a year born anew. His followers were initiated in cave temples or subterranean grottoes. They were made to climb a ladder with seven rungs symbolising an increase in the level of spiritual consciousness.

The ascent of consciousness however could only be achieved by a few who could raise themselves morally and spiritually above their contemporaries. Those not deemed mature enough experienced these rituals in the form of festivals that symbolised what occurred in the mysteries. Rudolf Steiner tells us that what the postulants achieved in the life of soul in the ancient mysteries Christ Jesus had to achieve in the physical body. That is, what the candidate for Initiation in the ancient Mysteries had undergone in his soul, had to be undergone in the entire human nature by Christ Jesus – A God - upon Golgotha.

Why did Christ Jesus need to undergo this Initiation?

To understand this we have to understand the 'fall'. In biblical terms the fall designates a time when human beings began to distance themselves from the Gods. Through the influences of the forces of Opposition (Lucifer in the Garden of Eden) human beings descended to earth and in this descent entered upon a path that led further and further from the Gods – that is they lost their innocence and became ego bearing beings - independent. A consequence of this independence was the appearance of Death on the Earth - significantly the only event in human life to which even the highest of the Gods had no access.

For aeons human beings remembered the Gods in their rituals which portrayed man's descent into matter (the fall) and the subsequent death to the world and resurrection in spirit, however as humanity descended further and consciousness became less able to see into the worlds of spirit the ancient mysteries' powerful influence had to diminish and it became difficult even for high priests to access the worlds of spirit. Finally only the slightest memory of this experience remained and the rituals began to lose their meaning. We see the druidic rites and other rites such as those of the Mexican Aztecs becoming more and more bloody as the symbolic soul death was not understood and so a physical death was thought to be needed.

Rudolf Steiner tells us that the gods themselves began to lose contact with human beings and began to 'forget' them. The danger arose that the human race might fall

altogether from the spiritual world and this threatened the evolution of the world, which had been willed by the higher Gods. This danger became the greatest during the Greco Roman times when the human being was developing the powers of the intellect. This was the lowest ebb of spiritual experience of life after death for humanity and as a result we have come to know the Greek saying ‘ better to be a beggar on earth than a king in the realm of shades’ for the spiritual world had become something dark and impenetrable, the realm of Evil. To the Gods themselves death was a mystery which they could not penetrate not having ever acquired a physical body and so they could not help humanity.

In ancient times the mysteries that could still access some understanding of this human ordeal, taught this:

The Gods perceived that death would take hold of the human soul, that is, through a materialistic outlook, an outlook that sees only the world of matter. More and more people would enter into the spiritual worlds after death in a way that was the equivalent of blindness there. This meant that at the moment of death there would not merely be a death of the body, but also a death of the soul. This was the great ‘Dread of the Gods’. It was decided, in the Sun realm of the Gods that a Sun God would have to descend to Earth into a mortal body, so that as a God He might suffer death and make the knowledge of death accessible to the divine wisdom of the worlds of Spirit. At the same time this God would now make it possible for human beings to once again rise up out of the world of matter and make their way back towards the spirit through the impulse of this mystery. In earlier times man could only find the way to the spirit by the descent of a *divine* being such as Krishna for instance. But through the Mystery of Golgotha man was endowed with the faculty *to draw from his own innermost being* the forces that could raise and lead him upwards into the spiritual worlds.

For this reason, what a number of select people had undergone on earth as an initiatory ritual conducted in the privacy of a temple or cave was now to be experienced and undergone in the public eye so that all could experience it. A death and resurrection not merely of the soul, as in the case of a human being, but the death and resurrection that was experienced as far as the physical body in the case of Christ-Jesus.

The intimate rites of the mystery sanctuaries now stood forth as an external historical event. We can easily see the discomfort of the priests, when they learned of the raising of Lazarus/John after three days by Christ-Jesus. A man was conducting a secret ritual before the eyes of the laity! Little did they know that by putting that Man to death they would be enacting the greatest of all rituals in the eyes of not only the living but also the dead, including the Gods. Christ Jesus was taken to mount Golgotha or the place of the skull and there He was crucified.

We can see here the wisdom in this name for it since the skull is representative of human thinking and responsible for cutting man off from the spirit and the words ring

out for all of humanity 'My God My God wherefore has thou deserted me!' Why have you forgotten me?

It was the case that now, all people, and the Gods, not merely initiates could take part in this raising towards the spiritual in the 'remembering'.

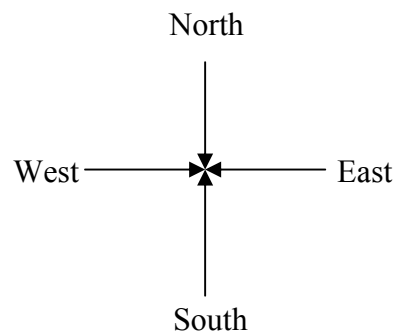
When the corpse was taken down and placed inside the cave Christ Jesus underwent the old initiation but this time right down into the physical body. When the boulder was rolled back he appeared in the midst of the life of the garden - the risen Christ had vanquished death and to his followers he said, 'I give you life and life more abundantly.'

What is this life that Christ gives more abundantly?

There is an eastern legend, which describes this in a beautiful and profound way. The legend runs as follows: The great Teacher of the East, Shakyamuni, the Buddha, had a great pupil, *Kashiapa* who grasped fully the teachings of the Buddha. He was one of those most deeply initiated into these teachings, one of the most significant followers of the Buddha. The legend tells that when Kashiapa came to the point of death and on account of his mature wisdom was ready to pass into Nirvana, he made his way to a steep mountain and hid himself in a cave. After his death his body did not decay but remained intact. Only the Initiates know of this secret and of the hidden place where the incorruptible body of the great Initiate rests. But the Buddha foretold that one day in the future his great successor, the Maitreya Buddha, the new great Teacher and Leader of mankind, would come, and reaching the supreme height of existence to be attained during earthly life, would seek out the cave of Kashiapa and touch with his right hand the incorruptible body of the Enlightened One. Whereupon a miraculous fire would stream down from heaven and in this fire the incorruptible body of Kashiapa, the Enlightened One, would be lifted from earthly into spiritual existence. Rudolf Steiner helps us to understand this legend by explaining that the fire relates to the blood and the blood is connected to the breath so that when man purifies his breathing (Atman) he reaches a certain stage of initiation. However although Kashiapa was able to spiritualise his breath by way of a supreme enlightenment making his body incorruptible he could not yet find complete redemption. The incorruptible body had to wait in the secret cave until it could be drawn forth by the Maitreya Buddha. Rudolf Steiner tells us that the 'I' or ego finds expression in the physical body in the blood and must become spiritualised in order that it might become the vessel for the 'I' of Christ wherein it can shine forth as a fire quickened in the blood. In the fire in our blood lives the same God Who had announced Himself in the lightning on Mount Sinai and in the burning bush to Moses and Who then, in the Mystery of Palestine, incarnated in a human body in order that His power might permeate the blood where the human fire has its seat.

The Templars and Cathars understood the Pauline secret; that through the Christ impulse working in man 'Not I but the Christ in me,' the human being can once again overcome the physical world and enter into communion with the worlds of Spirit, the worlds of the Gods. The purity that was necessary for such an initiation was symbolised by the Catharsis of the Cathar perfecti and by the red cross on the white habit of the Order of Knights Templar. The red blood is the blood permeated by Christ and the white stands for purity of the soul. It was the task of the Templar Order

to imbue the ancient mystery rituals from the four corners of the world with the impulse of Christ to make way for another momentous event which the Templars guarded with their lives.



This momentous event occurred when, for the last time the old Temple sleep ritual was conducted in an inner sanctuary in 1254. This was the initiation of the young man who would become known as Christian Rosencreutz in the fourteenth century as the leader of the Rosicrucians. This individuality of Christian Rosencreutz, having had as his most significant past incarnation as John the Beloved, had to undergo this ancient initiation in order that he might transform it for the rest of mankind. For he experienced it, not as it had been experienced of old through the help of priests, but as an independent human being. This he achieved as an archetype for all humanity.

Four Cathar brothers took him from Montsegur to a Cistercian monastery situated on land owned by the Knights Templar in the Pyrenees. There he underwent an initiation that would allow him to take the Impulse of the Christ into his very ego in this new way before all other human beings, opening up the possibility for all of humanity through a conscious initiation. From that time on no individual human being had to experience the Temple death in order to enter into the world of spirits, but could now in full consciousness and independent of priest or hierophant or Guru, enter these worlds through his own spiritual striving and experience his own resurrection of the soul.

For this to happen a man must purify himself and this spiritualisation of the human being this purification is symbolised by the Rose Cross. The black cross is symbolic of all things material, the physical lower nature and death. The roses are symbolic of the red blood that is purified of all its selfishness and can then be a suitable vehicle for the Christ 'I' or impulse. The blood that brings new life, that opens the way to the spirit, the redemption of death. In future times, due to the immense sacrifices made by Christian Rosencreutz in this regard, humanity will have the possibility of not only resurrecting the spirit but also the body, which will become as pure as the rose.

We see here another connection with the Festival of Adonis as the red rose was said to have received its colour from the blood of his lover Aphrodite, who is said to have trod on a bush of white roses when hastening to her wounded lover. The sacred blood dried on the rose and stained it red forever.

It is interesting to note that the Adonis (here we can see a resemblance to the Jewish Adonai) festival in very ancient times was always conducted in autumn. In the raising of the statue out of the water, rightly instructed believers saw an image of the human

soul as it exists a few days after death – the image of the risen god of beauty and youth. Adonis is immersed in the earthly representative of the cosmic ether and is raised up out of it in the same way that the human soul is raised from the waters of the cosmic ether three days after it has passed through the portals of death. However having sunk down so low into matter, human beings were unable to experience the resurrection of a God in autumn when the earth was dying away when everywhere the reminders of death were before them. They lacked the strength needed to see the resurrection of the spirit when surrounded by physical death. As time drew on the Syrian cult of Adonis was changed to spring or in some instances replaced by spring festivals of fertility. The word Easter in fact comes from Eostre the great mother Goddess of the Anglo Saxon people. Her name was derived from the ancient word for spring Eastre. And it was from the faint memory of Easter's connection to the Goddess of Ephesus, Artemis, patron of all that bears fruit - fertility and its association with the moon, that in the middle ages the setting of a date for Easter became connected with the Lunar cycle. The Council of Nicaea issued the Easter Rule some three hundred years after the crucifixion, from that time on Easter would be celebrated on the first Sunday that occurs after the first full moon on or after the spring equinox in the northern hemisphere. In 664 at the Synod of Whitby the Celtic Church was made to change their Sun mystery festival of Easter that followed the Sun cycle for the Moon mystery festival of the Catholic Church.

It was necessary that the Mystery of Golgotha occur at a time of spring when everywhere in the external world the earth is sprouting up and coming to life for humanity was not able to see life in death.

We are very fortunate in the southern hemisphere, because here we have the perfect opportunity to experience Easter as it should be experienced in the future. For in the future we will not be able to rely on nature to help us to reach a spiritual mood. We will have to rely on our own soul forces to achieve it.

Here in Australia when it is autumn we observe the dying earth all around us, we see the days growing shorter and the sun rising lower in the sky and we can feel in this dying, the sprouting of the spirit within our hearts and souls. For when the earth is dying and all things are still and quiet we can draw nearer to the spirit and experience it's becoming. This is one of the meanings given to the old Rosicrucian term to 'die and to become'.

The Gods sacrificed the Supreme Sun God – Christ - in order that he might descend into the earthly world into the physical body of Jesus of Nazareth during the course of three years in order to experience death. It was then that the sublime idea of humanity appeared before the Gods, the reflection of the divine in the image of a Man. And in the same way that man gazed at the statue of Adonis to see a reflection of Man in the spiritual worlds – the gods now gazed upon man to see the reflection of the divine. The word became flesh and manifested the ultimate aim of the Gods on earth for man, that he might overcome death through resurrection of the spirit. In future times the festival of Whitsuntide will come into its own. When man's spirit will be reborn in the universal thoughts of the Gods.

Ex Deo Nascimur In God we are born – from out of the Divine man is born.

In Christo Morimur In Christ we die – In Christ we die but

Per Spiritum Sanctum Reviviscimus - Through the Holy Spirit we are reborn

For what would have happened on the earth if Christ had not appeared? One world-saviour after another might have descended until finally they would have found on the earth below that human beings were entrenched in matter, immersed in substance, to the extent that the pure, divine-spiritual forces could no longer raise them from out of the corrupted, impure substance.

It was with grief and profound sorrow that the Eastern sages looked into this future in which they knew that the Maitreya Buddha would one day appear in order to renew the primal wisdom. They saw this future and understood that it was possible that there would be no disciple capable of retaining his wisdom.

“If the world continues along this course,” they said, “the Maitreya Buddha will preach to deaf ears; he will not be understood by men wholly engulfed in matter. Moreover, the materiality prevailing on the earth will cause the body of Kashiapa to wither away so that the Maitreya Buddha will not be able to bear his remains into the divine-spiritual heights.”

Those with the deepest understanding of Eastern wisdom looked with such sorrow into the future, wondering whether the earth would be capable of receiving the coming Maitreya Buddha with greater understanding and discernment.

The reality of what could have happened to humanity must permeate our wills and enter into the very fibre of our beings to fill us with reverence, wonder and awe at this sacred time of the year. It must make us grateful for the mystery of Golgotha. For it is at this time of the year that we can truly experience the light that shines within the darkness of the skull, or the life of spirit that is born within when all around us the physical world is dying. This is possible because when Jesus of Nazareth had reached the age of 30, the Christ was able to descend into his body. For the first and last time would a God live in a physical body. And His victory over death — when it is rightly understood — reveals to man what the manner of his own life must be if, for all ages of time: that he is to be conscious of the reality of the spiritual world. That is the true meaning of Easter — the union with Christ — A resurrection and redemption of humanity — a becoming.

Suggested Reading:

The Easter Festival – Evolution of the mysteries – Rudolf Steiner.

The Cycle of the Year as a Path of Initiation – Sergei O Prokofief.

Festivals and Their Meaning – Rudolf Steiner

See concerning the Initiation of Christian Rosencreutz – Temple of the Grail by Adriana Koulias.

Festivals Seasons and the Southern Sun K Kaltenbach, R Breipohl and D.

Wansbrough in particular the lecture given by David Wansbrough.

Pagan Regeneration a study of mystery initiations in the Graeco-Roman world - by Harold R. Willoughby:

Druidry and the Druids - www.tylwythteg.com/druid1.html