



Ancient Wisdom for Today Canon Peter Spink

Contained in the New Testament, encapsulated in one statement, are all the elements of what is commonly called in many mystical traditions the "Ancient Wisdom". The words are those of the Apostle Paul who, addressing himself to the Christians at Corinth, writes as follows: "I speak God's hidden wisdom, His secret purpose, formed from the very beginning to bring us to our full glory".

Let us look at the nature of this wisdom, see what in essence it is and at the characteristics of an age in which we live; we may then catch a vision of its relevance for this age. We note first of all that the wisdom of which St Paul speaks is communicated "to those who are ripe for it" (a lovely phrase for which we are indebted to the translators of the New English Bible). The clear implication here is that ripeness or a particular maturity on the part of the recipient is essential for the realisation of this wisdom. Indeed without such ripeness this wisdom is incomprehensible for in its absence such wisdom dissolves in to nothing more than factual information. So let us be clear at the outset that the wisdom which is here described constitutes something very much greater than a body of knowledge.

Secondly, this wisdom is declared to be 'ageless' for it does not belong to any one passing age. It is divorced from the thought forms of any one culture, code of ethics or morality. It is not limited to a particular period of history or any one stage in the evolution of man. It is timeless – eternal. It spans all the ages and is relevant to every period of history. Its function is to inform history and invest it with meaning, and give hope to society. This leads us to a third of its characteristics: It constitutes the substance of the Divine Plan for humanity, a plan hidden from man's natural sense perceptions.

Here then in brief, in the context of – indeed at the very heart of the Christian religion we have enshrined a great signpost to the essential elements of Ageless Wisdom, known to the great Mystery Schools, found in the secret tradition of all ancient civilisations often submerged within the context of formal religion and consciously carried forward by the Mystics in every generation.

A TIME OF CHANGE

In order to relate this to the needs of our day we need first of all to take a broad perspective of the age in which we live. To be more precise one

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should say 'ages' for on any count we are living at the meeting point of many worlds today; in a twilight era; in the passing away of the old and the coming to birth of the new. In this time of transition we are witnessing the disappearance of the frameworks of society as it has been known for centuries; the breaking down of hierarchical structures; the disintegration of former concepts of morality with the accompanying lawlessness and licence, the dissolution of old political and social patterns and fundamental changes in education. No aspect of society remains unchanged.

'The pessimists supported by Townbee's assessment of what is happening see all the signs of the end of a civilisation, preceding perhaps total catastrophe. The Marxists see the crumbling of the great capitalist systems preceding the birth of true social justice and communism. The religious apocalyptics and fundamentalists see the approaching end of the world, whilst many see the signs of the Perusia or the second coming of Christ. All these attempts to explain what is happening contain elements of possibility and truth. What is abundantly clear and beyond dispute is that we are in the midst of a great crisis point in the history of the human race and from this situation goes up the cry "Where lies the reality and the road to sanity?"'

But parallel to this shaking of the foundations, the great disruption of society, there is another element of change which, if we are to gain a balanced perspective must be taken in to account.

THE NEW CONSCIOUSNESS

Since the late nineteenth century in the Western World, there has been growing within the consciousness of a steadily increasing number of people an awareness of the dawning of some great interior change: a change within man, an eruption of new life within human consciousness. Mystics, scientists, philosophers, poets and artists sharing in this consciousness have struggled – some consciously, others intuitively, to express and interpret it and to relate it to the great external upheavals of our day. A variety of theories have been put forth. These range from that of an evolutionary leap to changes in the life of the planet resulting from the beginning of a new astrological cycle. Within the context of this eruption from within men and women have arisen: prophets and seers, individuals of great intellectual and spiritual stature and from a great diversity of backgrounds, whose writings and interpretations have powerfully shaped the soul and directed the thinking of Western man. Not all have done so consciously; their contribution has nonetheless been significant. Among the scientists and philosophers Huxley, Palanyi, Bergson and Shaw, to name but a few have played their part, whilst men such as Ouspensky, and Teilhard de Chardin have consciously linked the disciplines of philosophy and science with mystical understanding in order to produce a rationale cognisant of spiritual values. Jung, Maslo and Assagioli have contributed to an understanding of the nature of man in Western psychology where consciousness has shifted from centering in a self that is to be denied and repressed to a 'higher self' wherein lies a potential for tremendous good.

Parallel to the opening up of the worlds of the unconscious by Freud and Jung came the unfolding and interpretation of Theosophy and Anthroposophy by Annie Besant and Rudolf Steiner, and although their contribution to human self knowledge is still generally unacceptable both to religion and to science in the West, their influence on the interpretation of the twentieth century has been considerable. Prominent to those who have sought to give an interpretation of man's unfolding past, present and future is George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff. His teachings in the sphere of spiritual disciplines find a rapidly growing response especially amongst the young. These are but some of those who have emerged prominently amongst the forerunners of interpreters of the new consciousness.

NEW CENTRES

In the late 1950's and 1960's this new consciousness which had hitherto been the experience of individuals began to express itself in group situations and in Britain we saw the formation of what have been called the 'New Age' Centres. These centres differ widely in form and structure, each having its own particular ethos and emphasis. What they have in common is a search for true understanding of what is now happening and to establish growth points for the new society. Through the practice of spiritual disciplines, commonly called techniques of transformation, they have endeavoured to develop an inner resonance with the current changes. It has been characteristic of the centres that at their best the awareness they have cultivated has related to the current changes, embracing concern for simplicity of life style, social responsibility and cooperation with the evolving life of the planet.

As a result of the group consciousness fostered by these centres powerful psychic energies have been released and it must be said that this has not always led to positive results. The coming together of sensitive individuals-sensitive that is on the psychic and emotional level, has frequently resulted in the proliferation of psychic perceptions which, divorced from wisdom have led to illusion and delusion. All too often there has been an accompanying aura of romanticism and an inability, through the absence of valid spiritual disciplines and true discernment, to harness the energies in unselfish ways. The combination of new ideas powerfully coupled with psychic energies has produced New Age 'thought forms' all too often divorced from the business of living. Parallel to this has been the great release of psychic energies within the churches, generated by charismatic renewal. Much that is positive has resulted from this awakening to new dimensions. Nevertheless the lack of gnosis has frequently resulted in such renewal turning in upon itself, leading to individuals and groups in the grip of capricious emotions.

DIVIDING OF THE WAYS

We are now moving towards the end of this first stage of New Age realisation with its exciting discovery of new dimensions and potentials. The harsh realities, which in many New Age circles have until now been happily referred to in terms of apocalyptic generalities, are beginning painfully to emerge as economic, social, and political pressures which are being felt by the Centres themselves. Many are searching for a clear sense

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of direction. The propagation of ideas in the context of a powerful emotional release is seen by an increasing number to be insufficient of itself to meet the demands of living in the present. We may now discern something of the dividing of the ways. On the one hand are those who would be drawn irresistibly in the direction of glamour and continuing excitement. This will lead to a cul-de-sac of escapism from the harsh realities of life as they confront us. On the other hand, for those who are prepared to pay the price, there will what be what Jesus called the finding of the true self. And here is a paradox, for this is a self larger than the individual. It is this new "Self" consciousness, which will give birth to a true group consciousness symbolised and pre-figured by the Centres. It is in this context that we must examine the relevance of the Ancient Wisdom. But lest we be tempted at this point to think of 'them' and 'us' we do well to remind ourselves that the dichotomy I have just described exists within us all, for we are all prone to gravitate towards glamour and delusion, and the division exists within every individual.

THE WISDOM OF ALL AGES

Let us return now and look a little more closely at this wisdom as we have briefly defined it to see how the wisdom of all the ages can inform the present spiritual crisis and the upheavals through which society is passing. At a recent conference on the subject of Christian initiation some members of the audience expressed a certain amount of disappointment at the failure of the Speaker to unfold some exotic new rite which would instantaneously effect enlightenment. Oddly enough, the two thousand year old Christian rite of baptism and the laying on of hands received scant consideration in this context. It is probably that these ancient rites of initiation were thought to have been so devalued in the course of the last two thousand years to have little or no significance in this day and age.

The mystery schools to which we have referred had their rites of initiation, as have all the great religions. All these were right for their time and informed in varying degrees the ages to which they belonged. It is of the essence of ripeness in the age into which mankind is now moving, not that he should subject himself to initiations effected from without and symbolised by external rites, but to a new awakening within himself. In other words as John Robinson indicated in his book *Honest to God*, in terms of a new potential man has come of age and must begin now to take full responsibility for, and control of, his evolution and destiny.

TRANSITION

To understand this is a fundamental requirement if we are to perceive the signs of the time and grasp the present opportunity. And this is not easy. For those nurtured within the great religious institutions, which for two thousand years have shaped our history as a nation and provided paternalistic direction within clearly defined doctrinal and ethical structures, a transition in to the very substance of those realities which hitherto have been safely enshrined in doctrine and dogma, can be not only difficult, but traumatic.

But it is not only the religious who have a problem here. The experience may be no less easy for those whose thought patterns and attitudes have

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been shaped within those societies dedicated to the preservation of Ancient Wisdom which though hidden have been so active since the nineteenth century. The great changes to which I have referred already have not only made a profound impact upon traditional religious institutions; they have also caught unawares some of those very societies which have played a significant part in preparing the way for the new consciousness. For some of these organisations concerned with the esoteric traditions are still trying to operate as secret and special societies with a language now out-dated which only a few can understand.

It is a law of spiritual evolution enunciated so clearly by Jesus, that to find life one must lose it and that resurrection follows upon death. The old organisations existed in secret. That which was hidden for ages upon ages is now bursting forth within the consciousness of society itself. Secrecy is neither possible nor necessary. As a result, what is happening not infrequently makes unnecessary the work of those very societies which helped to bring the new consciousness to birth, with a paternalism and authoritarianism now unacceptable to many.

THE DYNAMIC

The second ingredient of this wisdom may be termed its agelessness for it is not to be seen as a body of static truth which can be transmitted in the form of a kind of esoteric catechism, parallel to the traditional preparation for admission into religion. Rather it is to do with the dynamic, the dynamic which operates within man himself. The expression of this dynamic may be seen and frequently is, within a variety of frameworks of belief and structures of faith. But these frameworks must not be confused with the dynamic itself nor regarded as necessary at all times for the transmission of this wisdom.

For the age in which we live, the dynamic, or true spirit of man, must be allowed to find its own level of operation. It must be permitted to energise that aspect of the human psyche which is to unfold and flower within this generation.

INTUITIVE KNOWLEDGE

J.G. Bennett in his massive work *The Dramatic Universe* describes the new consciousness in terms of the next age of man: when intellectualism will gradually give way to the unfolding of intuitive faculties with all that implies in terms of revolution within science, the arts, religion education etc. Basic to all this is an awakening to direct knowledge, the knowledge of the heart, and it is here without doubt that the dynamic is operating today. To ally oneself with this dynamic is to perceive that no static frameworks, whether ancient or modern, can today exclusively express the ancient wisdom. No language, whether exoteric or esoteric, can contain and adequately contain the dynamic, and no novelties of doctrine or dogma have relevance in an age where a higher and non-dogmatic form of consciousness is beginning to emerge.

DIVINE PLAN FOR HUMANITY

The third characteristic of the ancient wisdom is the divine plan for all humanity. And here we must admit at once to two possible ways of

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proceeding, either from the outside or the inside. By 'outside' I mean the adoption of a particular interpretation of history which invests it with meaning and purpose in philosophical and theological terms. Of these there are plenty to choose from. To proceed from the inside is quite different, for this means to establish a perspective which, while mindful of the outside views, allies itself with the movement from within. This I suggest, was the way taken within certain limits by Teilhard de Chardin and with less self imposed restrictions by Rudolf Steiner. The former allowed his inner perceptions to proceed no further than appeared to him to be consistent with the theological or 'outside' perspectives of his church. Steiner had no such problems to contend with. Nevertheless the self imposed restrictions of Teilhard prevented crystallisation of the dynamic which he touched and released into further static form, whereas Rudolf Steiner's apparent freedom to speculate gave birth to an alternative system which may be seen as repeating the process of encapsulating its own dynamic. Both men pointed the way forward, not simply for individuals but for society as a whole. They indicated and uncovered a dynamic within the whole created order, and evolution of consciousness, a movement of convergence towards the consummation of history. They both saw man as the apex of this movement and his conscious cooperation with it as essential to fulfilment. They saw this as the divine plan for mankind.

It is the plan and purpose with which 21st century man must cooperate if he is to grasp the opportunities of the present moment, opportunities which are unique in the long history of this evolution on this planet. We stand at perhaps the greatest crisis point in history, faced with the possibilities of either a descent into chaos created by our own follies, or a leap forward into a spiritual maturity which can match the demands of the present age. Listen again to St Paul who was capable of long perceptions and of taking the inner view of history: 'For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the Sons of God'

And to make this breakthrough – the shattering of the bonds which bind us to our personality selves, and prevent us from entering into what he describes as our 'glorious heritage' we now need to pay heed to that ancient wisdom which is neither the prerogative of systems of belief nor the product of accumulated knowledge but which belongs to those who have learned to see with the inner eye- the eye of direct perception from the heart.

