

## Student Papers

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### Service: an Essential Factor in Spiritual Growth

Miguel Malagreca

The word *service* evokes different ideas in each of us. The word itself is somehow elusive, as each person understands service in relation to personal circumstances, and in relation to their development or progress on the path of discipleship. It follows that any definition we may give of the word *service* is quite personal, and influenced by our background, views and values. There is, however, a fundamental link between esoteric training and service that all disciples intuitively understand and pledge not to break. Therefore, we may say that discipleship training and service correlate, as two sides of one and the same phenomenon. We cannot serve efficiently without adequate training, and we cannot get training without putting the Teaching into service. If we further explore these two areas—service and discipleship training—we may also say that training is to service what the Soul is to the personality: training is the occult side or the vitalizing energy behind service, and service is the externalization of such energy, put into practice as we move along the path.

By suggesting that service and training go together as two sides of one phenomenon, I am in no way suggesting that there is a deep dichotomy between one and the other. Rather I am trying to explore service and training as a deep unity or a continuum. Sometimes we penetrate deeper into the training extreme of this continuum, and sometimes we penetrate deeper into the significance and importance of delivering or serving. Yet no matter what extreme we are drawn into with more depth each time, we are reminded to keep engaged in both aspects all the time. There are important reasons for this.

The most important reason is that when one starts treading the path and undergoes esoteric training, some important subjective and objective changes happen. The training I am thinking of here has little to do with formal esoteric study at a formal school—though this might be for many of us a way of finding support while treading the path. There are many servers today who may not be aware that they belong to a large family or even to a subjective ashram as this training process may happen—for some time—at the pure level of the Soul with no conscious awareness. It is first the Soul that receives instruction and is prepared to serve humanity at the feet of a Master, and it is also at the level of the Soul where we are initiated and where we must face some challenges. Initiation is something that seems to happen at a purely spiritual sphere with, in some cases, no obligatory participation of the brain or the physical mechanism—although the whole of our being is nevertheless involved and hence it experiences the consequences, whether we know it or not.

When we start treading the path of discipleship there is an increasing flow of energies circulating throughout our system; the bodies are charged and new ideas enter into our consciousness. Service to humanity is the safest and most constructive way to root and channel those energies, so that they find a way to express Light, Love and Power in order to reestablish the Plan of God on Earth. It follows that whenever we start a path of training in discipleship, serving others and serving God is

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#### About the Author

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a safeguard against energy overload. Just as we need to engage in physical activity to release stress from our physical body, serving may help release energy that accumulates as a result of entering into contact with higher energies.

Hence service can be seen as a purifying act that preserves our mental, psychic and spiritual strength. This is just one reason—a “protective reason”—why the Teachings demand service. There is, however, another essential reason that is more profound and significant. The path of discipleship is a path of progressive unification and synthesis with higher units. On the path we learn that we are not isolated Souls, but one Soul with the Super Soul. Just as we are not the lower physical, emotional and mental bodies that we usually identify with, we are also not separated Souls traveling back home. The traveling is done always in company, and salvation is group salvation. The Law of Reincarnation teaches that groups of lives come together to existence because we are linked together for some reason or because we need to learn together some important lesson. Service is the resulting and logical effect of this realization—that nothing on this plane of existence is separate. For this reason, there is no point in working toward *our own* enlightenment, sanctity or development. We should strive continuously for group development and evolution, as each of our brothers and sisters, each of the Souls on this planet are one. Service means understanding this truth and acting in consequence. Individual evolution is always co-dependant to Planetary evolution and vice versa.

The next reason why the Teaching emphasizes service is because service is of essence to initiation. Initiation is not given as a gift from above; rather, it is taken from below. By this I simply mean that initiation is the result of one’s own efforts to forget oneself completely and work for the benefit of the Plan—that is, for the evolution of humanity as a totality. In a way, initiation may happen once we forget about the importance of initiation. It is a consequence not a cause. It is a natural result, not a preliminary. It is no prerogative or privilege.

Just as an orchid bud blooms when the right soil and light is provided, our inner core expands and opens through adequate service. Initiation means that we are blooming and opening up our hearts.

Along these lines, the Tibetan Master suggests that service is “the urge” of the awakened Soul once the heart is open. In this light, service is “the spontaneous outflow of a loving heart and an intelligent mind.” What is this urge or spontaneous outflow that the Soul feels and synthesizes? It comes, I believe, from a deep realization of the transitory character of all forms and the eternal unity of all existence. It is an urge to express meaning, to grow and to share the gifts of the Spirit; it is an urge to give form a sense of direction, and to move in that direction—one that will take us to the Home of the Father. We serve when we follow the directives of our Soul and our heart, not our separatist mind.

The above are therefore three main reasons why service is commanded and necessary: purification, synthesis and constant work or striving toward higher values. In addition, it would be useful to consider how we serve: we can serve exoterically or we can serve esoterically.

As noted, the opposites always seem to touch somewhere. Exoteric service will be a reflection of esoteric or inner growth. Exoterically, one manifests the higher values in everyday life, in whatever field one is called to devote one’s life to. For example, as a teacher, one tries to help students find inspiration to study and to grow as human beings. Or one may teach the importance of becoming a good student, because in reality we are all students in the great classroom of Heaven. Or one may just teach that nobody is infallible; so if a teacher makes a mistake, then it should be recognized and corrected so that the students can see that the road to mastery is difficult, but that honesty is important. No matter what we do, we should try to do it as perfectly as possible, in the attempt of becoming a transmitter of the values we believe in, which will be reflected in our living. We do this at home, with our neighbors, at the office and in any kind of field.

Esoterically, we serve by praying, meditating and focalizing all of our energy into world problems, so that when we recite the Great Invocation, for instance, we are invoking the guidance of the Lord, and this brings an adequate response. We try to forget about our

personal business and we do not try to achieve enlightenment or special powers, rather we simply think about what are great causes to live for and how we can reflect something of the Plan on this planet.

## Book Reviews

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***Frances Yates and the Hermetic Tradition*, by Marjorie G. Jones.** Ibis Press, 2008. Paperback, 263 pages. US\$24.95.

The typical scholar of the last 100 years earns higher degrees under recognized teachers, enters the supportive world of academia, and in due course publishes articles and books that have the stamp of approval of the prevailing mindset of his or her discipline. In each generation, however, a few lone individuals manage to rise to the heights of their fields, achieving international reputations outside that comfortable establishment, or even in spite of it.

One of those individuals was Frances Yates (1899–1981), famed historian of the Renaissance period. Marjorie Jones' biography tells the story of a remarkable Englishwoman who lived and thought "outside the box" of conventional academic scholarship. Reviewing one of her books, Oxford historian Hugh Trevor-Roper observed:

Frances Yates has a gift that transcends [those of all other living English historians]. It is the power not only to answer old questions but to discover new, not merely to fill in details, but to reveal a new dimension which alters the whole context in which those details must be seen. She does this by a technique which is very easy to state but very difficult to acquire: by re-creating the mind of the past. [p. 149]

*Frances Yates and the Hermetic Tradition* tells the touching story of a woman who grew up in

the stifling atmosphere of an early 20th-century middle-class family. The daughter of a domineering mother, Yates was, except for brief periods in her young life, home-schooled:

In the early 20th century—before World War I—it was socially acceptable to school a female child at home. In the face of intense family pressures, Frances' near contemporaries Dorothy Sayers (1893–1957) and Vera Brittain (1893–1970) struggled mightily to attend university... There can be little doubt that, if she had been born male, Frances would not have been permitted by her father to be educated at home. [p. xxi]

She lived with her parents until they died—and stayed in the family home until her own death. When, in her twenties, she earned baccalaureate and master's degrees from the University of London, it was as a commuting student. She never held a university appointment.

Yates' career might have never gotten off the ground at all had it not been for an invitation to work at the newly founded Warburg Institute. The Institute was established in London in the 1930s by émigrés from Nazi Germany. There her multidisciplinary approach to learning—she sought to integrate studies of language, history, and the arts—was valued and nurtured. Even then, she was shunned by academia and treated with suspicion by academic publishers. In 1934, Cambridge University Press agreed to publish her first book, *John Florio, the Life of an Italian in Shakespeare's England*, only if she paid £100 toward the costs. To put that

sum into perspective, the annual income of many English men—if they were fortunate enough to find work during the Depression—was under £40 a year; women earned even less.

Yates's most influential books appeared much later, the result of long study and reflection in which she distanced herself from contemporary historical opinion. Particularly relevant were *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (1964), *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (1972), and *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* (1979). A theme that became a hallmark of her work was the notion that the Hermetic tradition, which began in Europe in the early 15th century when Marsilio Ficino translated the *Corpus Hermeticus*, pervaded the Renaissance mindset well into the 17th century. Bruno, who was burned at the stake in 1600; Isaac Newton; and many others conventionally regarded as pioneers of the Scientific Revolution were in fact still steeped in the Renaissance mindset that drew no distinction between magic and science.

One of Frances Yates' hallmarks was to explore not only the actual course of history but also the course it *might* have taken—or probably would have taken except for the chance fall of the historical dice. That approach is one of the reasons her writing is so fascinating. But it was not well-received by academic historians:

Frequently, Yates was criticized for writing about history that never happened. Fittingly, her last essay—... published the year she died—explored a possible meeting between Dee [English mathematician and occultist John Dee] and Bruno, or at least a relationship between the two *magi* and their missions. “Why,” she wondered, “did Dee leave England immediately after Bruno's arrival? The possibility cannot be ruled out—though there is no evidence for it—that Dee might have been avoiding Bruno.” Then, in a way, in one simple sentence, she identified the underlying theme of her entire body of works: “The burning of Bruno was a symbol of the reaction against the daring, spiritual adventures of the Renaissance.” [p. 223]

Frances Yates lectured throughout Europe and the United States well into her seventies. She received many honorary degrees and in 1977 was awarded the title of Dame Commander of the British Empire, the equivalent of a knighthood.

Yates' story is of particular interest to readers of this journal because she managed, by the end of her long professional career, to make the Hermetic tradition of the Renaissance a legitimate field of historical inquiry. But it is inspiring to students of esoteric philosophy for the very reason that their fields do not yet have their own cozy academic establishments. We are all outsiders, struggling to gain recognition for our work in the face of continuing skepticism and even scorn from academia.

Marjorie Jones approaches her subject with insight and great sensitivity, juxtaposing Yates' towering intellect with her insecurities and periods of dark introspection. *Frances Yates and the Hermetic Tradition* is a “must read,” not only for students of the western esoteric tradition and the history of ideas, also for anyone who is moved by the story of an outstanding scholar who rises to the top of her field in the face of challenges that would deter those of us with less determination to succeed. This reviewer enthusiastically recommends the book to our readers. You will not be disappointed.

Editorial staff

***Christianity: the One, the Many*, by John F. Nash.** Xlibris, 2007. Two volumes, 762 pages total. Hardcover US\$59.98, paperback US\$39.98 (the set).

It may sound like a chore to review a two-volume book on Christianity, but set that thought aside! As I became engaged with this material I found myself delighted. The material is easy to read, exciting with stories and legends interwoven, and broad in that no one perspective is defended. Dr. John Nash has created a most pleasurable study. I particularly think how exciting an adult Sunday School

class could be as it bounded through these rich remembrances and explored the vision offered in conclusion. To dance through these two volumes is certainly possible; they are inspiring.

*Christianity: the One, the Many* takes one on a delightful tour through the history of Christianity with spice and good food along the way. The book's subtitle is: *What Christianity Might Have Been—and Could Still Become*. Volume I leads us through the earlier years of a church planted by the disciples as it sprouts into the mustard tree it was meant to be. Volume II leads us to self-examination and a realization that we are a part of Christianity's glory as well as its dubious past. We are led to acknowledge that as Christians, we are called to make our personal contributions to the as-of-yet unwritten future. Hard questions wait to be answered, and as we traverse this material, we find the inspiration needed to carry us forward.

Since I have special interests—as we all do—I relished the respectful mention of the Gnostics. I appreciated seeing their contribution to Christianity acknowledged and was sympathetic when they chose to go their own way. I could not help but to think of the dear price many paid for doing so. They and others, unknown to most of us, suffered greatly for the pursuit of the *Holy*, called by whatever name. At last we of the Christ are acknowledging this.

I was delighted with the treatment of the divine feminine: Mother Mary in Volume I and Sophia, in Volume II. The author's references to Sophia are rich, truly bringing both her history and her modern influence to our attention. As one of "Hers," I delight in his rich references helping to make the divine feminine more understandable. It is important for Christians to know *She has always been here*, although not always appreciated.

Nash's work is sensitive to all women throughout history as it is written at this more open period of time. He includes the plight of women as the regard for women deteriorated throughout the known world. He records the contributions women have made that went unrecognized. Thus we are provided a sense of

pride that women, known and unknown, have always served in our tradition, whether it was politically correct or behind the scenes.

A rich and original segment of Nash's effort is defining *The Seven Paths of Christianity*. The Paths, which can be of assistance to all who are seeking and/or serving the Christ, are: Devotion, Ceremony, Knowledge, Service, Healing, Activism and Renunciation. Esotericists will immediately see a relationship to the seven rays of Spiritual Science, or Kabbalists to Martin Buber's "ten rungs on the ladder." However one might approach these ideas, having such definitions makes it easier to see the path one has traveled or even how a path may be unfolding as one proceeds. We are reminded of the many intimate means by which we can choose to be one with the Christ.

Throughout these chapters, we find glimpses of known persons, but with a more friendly face, a legend or a story to help us get a feeling for the weavers of the faith. We emerge from these volumes realizing the wonder of the two-thousand year history Christianity has had: its high points and its low. We are inspired by the richness of the saintly and sickened by the scandals of certain kings and popes. We are brought face to face with humanity in all its expressions, a living caravan of Christians trying to find the Christ, the Light of the World.

No review of this material would be complete without mention of the richness of the references included at the conclusion of each chapter. This book is an encyclopedia of ideas, explored briefly and written in an easy-to-read style while providing plenty of documentation to satisfy the scholar who might desire to dig deeper. Ministers and teachers have need for such a tool, one that they can recommend to others without overburdening them with materials that are difficult to read and laborious to endure. Dr. John Nash is to be saluted for producing two volumes that are both interesting and readable.

I am rereading the two volumes, this time not to review them but to linger with the wisdom they contain. I desire to take the time needed to absorb the grace these volumes have to offer. While I rebel against "Churchianity," I

love Esoteric Christianity. I realize I am a more knowledgeable individual for having experienced the findings provided in these volumes. While rereading the book, I shall savor the pages as I ponder and derive an even deeper level of inner satisfaction.

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