

Great Esotericists of the Past

Anna Bonus Kingsford (1846-1888)

Anna, née Bonus, Kingsford grew up in a middle class English family. A sickly but precocious child, she wrote her first poem at age nine. At thirteen she wrote a 114-page history of Christianity, published four years later. When she turned twenty-one she married her cousin Algernon Godfrey Kingsford, an Anglican clergyman who took a position in the county of Shropshire. They had one child, a daughter Eadith.

Anna's father died the year of her marriage, and his estate provided her an income of £700 a year, a considerable sum for the time. From the funds she bought *The Lady's Own Paper* in 1872 and became its editor. The work brought her into contact with prominent women of the day and stimulated her feminist instincts. An article on vivisection sparked her interest and led to a lifelong campaign for animal rights.

To enhance credibility in her anti-vivisection campaign, Anna Kingsford resolved to acquire a medical degree. Since women were not admitted to British medical schools at the time, she enrolled at the Faculté de Médecine in Paris. After six years of study she graduated in 1880. Her thesis, *L'Alimentation Végétale de l'Homme*, promoted the benefits of vegetarianism. It was published in English as *The Perfect Way in Diet*. Dr. Kingsford established a medical practice, only the second female physician to do so in Great Britain.

Kingsford converted to Roman Catholicism in 1872, but her Christianity was anything but conventional. She had mystical experiences, including what she believed to be visitations by Mary Magdalene. In later years she would sometimes be referred to by her confirmation name of Mary. In 1873 Anna came in contact with English novelist Edward Maitland, and—apparently with her husband's consent—the two developed a lifelong platonic relationship. Maitland, twenty-two years older, became her constant companion, serving as chaperone in

Paris and accompanying Kingsford on her many lecturing tours. When she began to experience trance-like states and lucid dreams in 1875, Maitland transcribed and helped interpret her impressions. His name appears as co-author on her two major books.

Armed with her growing esoteric knowledge, Anna Kingsford drew appreciative audiences to her lectures. A series of lectures given in 1881 was published the following year as *The Perfect Way, or the Finding of Christ* (not to be confused with her medical thesis). This, her most important work shared her vision of a new Christianity, unburdened by what she considered the superstition and materialism of the institutional church. Scripture, as Anna interpreted it, was mainly symbolic in nature; for example, she considered the creation story in *Genesis* to be a parable. *Clothed with the Sun*, another collection of lectures, together with some transcripts of her dreams, was published posthumously.

Early in 1883 Anna Kingsford was appointed president of the British Theosophical Society, which she promptly renamed the London Lodge of the Theosophical Society. Ever at her side, Maitland served as vice-president. Anna agreed to the appointment because she approved of the Society's charter, whose idealistic goals included: "To form a nucleus of the universal brotherhood of humanity without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste or color; to encourage the study of comparative religion, philosophy and science; and to investigate the unexplained laws of nature and the powers latent in man."

Kingsford had misgivings about the Theosophical Society from the start, however. Despite the nonsectarian ideals of its charter, she perceived a strong anti-Christian bias among the Society's leaders in India. Helena Blavatsky announced her embrace of Buddhism, and co-founder Henry Alcott became a prominent ex-

ponent of the Buddhist revival movement in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). Meanwhile the mahatmas were serving as the Society's main sources of esoteric teachings. Alfred Sinnett, author of *Esoteric Buddhism*, returned to London in the summer of 1883 and began to compete with Kingsford and Maitland for the hearts and minds of the London membership.

Kingsford concluded that the Society's leaders were committed to eastern religions, to the deliberate exclusion of Christianity. She also regarded the mahatmas—later identified as including the Masters Morya, Kuthumi, and Djwhal Khul—as inferior to her own sources. Anna and Maitland resigned their positions in December 1884. By that time they had formed a new organization, the Hermetic Society. One of its stated goals was to study "Christian mysticism," and it was advertised as having "no Mahatmas, no miracles." The Hermetic Society was short-lived, but it served as a model for the influential Hermetic Society of the Golden Dawn, co-founded by William Westcott, McGregor Mathers, and William Woodman in 1888.

The animal-rights campaign was Anna Kingsford's passion. She was appalled by the experiments conducted in Paris and London on animals without anesthetic. When the campaign failed to stop the practices, she turned in desperation to other means. Her diary records that she cursed the offending physicians. Drs. Paul Bert and Claude Bernard died, and Louis Pasteur became seriously ill. Whether the deaths actually resulted from the curses remains an open question.

In any event Anna's own, already frail, health took a turn for the worse, and she died of pneumonia at age forty-one. Shortly before her death she wrote in her diary: "I had hoped to have been one of the pioneers of the new awakening of the world. . . . Is it, perhaps, all

premature? Have we thought the time nearer than it really is? Must I go, and sleep, and come again before the hour sounds?" Westcott, who along with Mathers had lectured in Kingsford's Hermetic Society, eulogized her as "indeed illuminated by the Sun of Light." Maitland devoted the next several years to writing the two-volume *Life of Anna Kingsford* (1896).

Kingsford's achievements, in a mere two decades of adult life, were enormous. In addition to her pioneering work in medical practice and her tireless work for animal rights, she set the course of western esotericism for decades to come. Trance work is often criticized, but Kingsford clearly understood the difference between the passive trance of the spiritualist mediums and active

trance, in which the will is retained and information is received in full consciousness.

Kingsford read widely, and her work reflects Platonic, Neoplatonic, Gnostic and Kabbalistic influence. She quoted Emanuel Swedenborg and Eliphas Lévi and seems to have been familiar with the writings of Jakob Böhme. Reportedly, she studied Buddhism and Hinduism, and from them she may have acquired her firm belief in reincarnation.

The latter half of the 19th century saw the emergence of occult studies from the secretive lodges and private salons of Europe into open discussion. The Hermetic revival was underway in France, and the Rosicrucian revival in Britain. No doubt Anna Kingsford had contacts with the flourishing occult salons in Paris. The Martinist movement, associated with Frenchman Louis Claude de Saint-Martin, expressed a form of Christian Kabbalism. She probably learned from, as well as contributed to, the programs of the Theosophical Society's London Lodge. Because of her brief involvement, however, she may have had little contact with the Society's work in India and elsewhere. Blavatsky moved from New York City to

Adyar in 1879, two years after *Isis Unveiled* appeared. *The Secret Doctrine* was published the year Anna died.

No one teacher stands out to whom Kingsford seems indebted. She affirmed that her esoteric work represented a “recovery and.... a discovery...independent of any prior knowledge.” Maitland added: “our knowledges [sic] were derived directly from celestial sources, the hierarchy of the Church Invisible in the holy heavens.” Some of her esoteric knowledge may have come from examination of the akashic records, a method later used extensively by Rudolf Steiner and others. Most of it probably came from entities whom writers in the western tradition called “Elder Brothers,” “Inner Chiefs,” or “Secret Chiefs.” The information she received has to be regarded as among the first that the Planetary Hierarchy revealed to humanity in the modern age.

Some of Anna Kingsford’s esoteric teachings now seem dated, but much is of continued relevance. Her descriptions of the soul and the guardian (solar) angel are remarkably close to what Alice Bailey provided fifty years later. Her feminist theology anticipated work a century later. Her description of the denizens of the astral plane remains unequaled.

Kingsford’s influence can be seen in the work of Mathers; Rudolf Steiner, founder of Anthroposophy; Max Heindel, founder of the Rosicrucian Fellowship; Dion Fortune, founder of the Fraternity of the Inner Light; and Annie Besant, who succeeded Olcott as president of the Theosophical Society in 1907. *The Perfect*

Way’s influence on Besant’s *Essay on the Atonement* and *Esoteric Christianity* is striking.

The Theosophical Society, the Golden Dawn, and French Hermeticism dominate published histories of esoterism of the period. Sadly, and unfairly, Anna Kingsford is all but ignored; few people today even know her name. Now that reprints are becoming available, her books can be read more widely. Kingsford needs to be recognized as the pivotal figure she was in the development of esoteric philosophy in the 19th century.

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Contributed by John F. Nash

The Awakening

William Meader

Introduction

Humanity is on the verge of unprecedented crisis and change. In every country there is a rising tide of fear as we witness our economic and social institutions seemingly fail. To many people, the world predicament feels hauntingly ominous and even insurmountable. Yet, it must be realized that this is not a crisis that foretells the end. Instead, it is the antechamber to a new beginning. For the first time in history, the *Soul of Humanity* is awakening.

The awakening of the Soul of Humanity can initially be recognized in many ways. For example, due to the advent of the internet and global communications, we are able to witness the many rich and diverse expressions of human culture at every corner of the globe. This has been a great gift. Through it, our commonality is more easily seen. It has helped us recognize that, while cultural differences can be wide and varied, fundamental human needs and desires are essentially the same. We all yearn for happiness, peace and the opportunity to grow, and we want to see our children experience joy and prosperity as well. This is true regardless of differing cultural or socio-economic backgrounds. Realizing this is important. In this way, we begin to see ourselves within others—which is the first step in the recognition of humanity's essential oneness.

Oneness as Essence

An acceptance of humanity's oneness is the first step in trying to navigate through the global crises we currently face. Of course, the idea that we are one is not something new. It has been a tenet advocated by world religions for uncounted centuries. Usually our oneness is rooted in the commonality of being human, yet this is only the first phase in its recognition. We must understand that we are not just one in kind, but more importantly, we are one in es-

sence. Beyond (and behind) the sameness of our human experience there is an inner dimension where we are fused as one soul—the Soul of Humanity. This collective soul can be understood as a transcendent unified consciousness overshadowing the entire human family. And it is this that is awakening from its long historic slumber.

Humanity's soul is awakening, and is learning to see itself through the numerous garments of its external expression. These garments manifest as cultural and racial differences, religious variations, and socio-political distinctions throughout the world. Each is an aspect of the Soul of Humanity as it incarnates itself in (and as) the human condition. In this regard, it is oneness manifesting through diversity—the one becoming the many. Looked at esoterically, it means that humanity, as a single being, is learning how to recognize the many parts of itself. Herein is found an essential clue to recognizing humanity's collective soul. It is through an appreciation of human diversity that inner unity can be sensed. Contrary to conventional thought, our oneness is not recognized through ethnic or cultural similarities, but instead via the richness of our differences.

The Duality of Social Systems

To sense the Soul of Humanity requires that we examine the nature of the many social systems used by a culture and civilization. Though we typically consider government, the

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arts and science (to name just a few) as institutions designed to facilitate various societal functions, they are actually much more than this. Social systems must be understood as living beings. They are living categories of human thought evolving over the vastness of time. Each provides humanity with an essential ingredient in support of its evolution. And, just as a human being has a higher and lower nature, a soul and personality, so too do the social systems used by every civilization and culture throughout the world.

An understanding of the livingness of social systems is essential when considering the many crises facing humanity today. Indeed, the difficulties we now face stem largely from the inadequacies of many of our social institutions. While this is true, we often cast the net of blame too broadly, not realizing that social systems are dual in nature. We overlook the fact that they are living entities in their own right, and that they have both a soul and personality. At times of crisis, we tend to only see the worst of our institutions and their failures, forgetting that it is only the lower nature (personality) of an institution that is the culprit.

World Crisis and the Burning Ground

From a certain perspective, world crisis represents the out-pictured state of humanity's consciousness. For the first time in history, the Soul of Humanity is deliberately seeking expression through our collective personality, *en masse*. This can be recognized by the fact that, around the world, more and more people are beginning to sense the need to live by a higher set of values. It is an awakening to a spiritual dimension deep within—a loftier potential. These values are the promise of the future, and are being planted into the minds of people by this greater soul.

The crises we face are caused by the shadowy aspects of our collective personality arising in defiance. The difficulties now playing out on the world stage are therefore predictable. Fundamentally, it is a developmental pattern woven into the evolution of human consciousness itself. Darkness naturally emerges before the dawning hour.

Paradoxically as this awakening begins, many dark aspects of consciousness, hidden within our collective personality, tend to resist the soul's downward gaze. This accounts for the rise of such things as spiritual intolerance found within various world religions, the shameful motives that drive many business tycoons and the unscrupulous practices of assorted governments around the world. These are symptoms of radical change. They are the shadowy aspects of our collective consciousness rising in defiance of the Soul of Humanity, as that soul seeks to infuse a higher set of values into us. When society's higher consciousness is inwardly recognized, we

immediately become aware of various attitudinal and psychological traits that seem to prevent it from fuller expression. Stated metaphorically, when the door to the soul is discovered, the devil is found standing in front of it.

During the last several years, we have seen the worst of human nature becoming more visible to us. We have witnessed unparalleled corruption within our economic and business structures; we have seen dark and primitive behaviors violently express themselves through fundamentalist theology; and we have observed blatant genocide in Africa and elsewhere. At first glance, it is easy to conclude that humanity is on a path to self-destruction. Yet this is not so. We are not witnessing the end of civilization. Instead, humanity has entered a crisis period that foretells of a promising future. Again, it is the devil poised in front of the door of opportunity.

Collectively we have entered what has been called the *burning ground* phase of our evolutionary journey. This is a period of painful adjustments. Yet, at the same time it is ushering humanity into a more enlightened era. You may ask, what is arousing humanity to traverse this fiery burning ground? It is the Soul of Humanity seeking expression through the na-

tions of the world and the social institutions that we utilize. Indeed, we are awakening to our collective soul. The crises we face are caused by the shadowy aspects of our collective personality arising in defiance. The difficulties now playing out on the world stage are therefore predictable. Fundamentally, it is a developmental pattern woven into the evolution of human consciousness itself. Darkness naturally emerges before the dawning hour. Wise optimism is therefore well founded.

Oneness Earned Through Crisis

As human consciousness evolves, we are beginning to understand that the means to navigate through world crisis requires that humanity's essential oneness be recognized and lived. This we can certainly do, but it doesn't come without a price. It must be earned. Proclaiming that humanity is one is not the same as living it. The key to understanding this moment in history is to realize that the human kingdom evolves through crisis, not by trying to avoid it. It is through the resolution and harmonization of our differences that our oneness will truly be sensed and lived. Crisis is therefore a prelude to all expansions of consciousness. Indeed, evolution demands that this be so.

The larger question to be asked is what can we do to support the Soul of Humanity as it seeks to externalize itself? There are a few suggestions that can be offered. First, be an advocate of pluralistic ideas. Initiatives based on multiculturalism, ecumenicalism, and egalitarian ideas are specifically oriented toward bringing divergent perspectives together. Each seeks to create an amalgamation, and therefore supports humanity's oneness through an honoring of diversity. Realistically speaking, because of the complex nature of modern civilization, it is only through diversity that we have any hope of uniting as one.

Secondly, begin to see nations and social systems as dual, each having a higher and lower

nature, a soul and personality. This is an essential step in order to discern the soulful qualities arising from people and circumstances versus those that are impelled by the personality. Life takes on new meaning when you can see this duality expressing through world events. It is a process that involves looking beyond the outer form (personality) in order to sense the golden thread of truth (soul) that it conceals. This is made easier when we remember that no person, institution, or nation has found the Truth, but each has found a piece of it. Herein is a philosophic truism of enormous import.

Finally, move away from the tendency to see things as right or wrong, good or evil. When we are able to perceive the duality of people and events, we begin to see that nothing in the world is purely good or purely evil. Instead we start to realize that everything is a mixture of both. The question to be asked is not what is right versus what is wrong? Instead we should be asking ourselves, what is the proportion of light and dark playing out within a particular person, nation or circumstance? From such a perspective, wiser decisions can then be made.

Concluding Remarks

Humanity has entered a major crisis period on the road to enlightenment. We are confronted by enormous challenges that have staggering implications for all people and nations throughout the world. Yet it is not a time for fear and despair. Rather, it is a period of testing and adjustment needed in order that we may move forward into a more enlightened existence. The Soul of Humanity seeks greater expression in the outer world, and is forcing our lower tendencies to the surface so that they may be seen and transformed. As such, we are walking across the burning ground toward a door beyond which is found a dawning age of opportunity and promise. Yet, to walk through that door requires that we do so arm-in-arm. At times of global transformation, peril and opportunity always emerge as companions.

Book Review

The Mark, by Maurice Nicoll, 1954, reprint; London, England: Shamballa Publications, Inc., 1985.

Written as a sequel to *The New Man*, this book by Maurice Nicoll presents an accessible and perceptive interpretation of the teachings of Jesus Christ as found in the Gospels and parables. Dr. Nicoll, a noted psychologist, student of Carl Jung, Gurdjieff and Ouspensky, and a leading Fourth Way teacher, brings a psychospiritual approach to the Gospels that is down-to-earth yet exceedingly memorable. Like all authentic spiritual works, Nicoll contends that the teachings of Christ, some of which are quite complex and paradoxical, contain both an exoteric and esoteric meaning. Behind the literal, sense-based interpretation there lays a wider, deeper range of significances that can only be grasped by a shift in perspective away from the “mind of the flesh,” as the apostle Paul termed it, to higher psychological understanding. The Gospel narratives were not a historical report, nor are they concerned with moral precepts, rules or religion. They are an ordered set of esoteric teachings based on the self-evolution of the individual into a “new man.”

The book begins by showing that the Gospels and parables draw a clear distinction between the physical and spiritual man, the human being guided by the lower level of the senses, as exemplified by the feet, and one guided by a higher psychological or esoteric understanding, i.e., the heart and head. To illustrate this point Nicoll draws upon a number of biblical verses, such as the passage in Exodus 3:5 where an angel appears before the burning bush and says to Moses: “Draw not hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet,” or in Mathew 10:10 where Christ tells his disciples to go out and preach the Gospels without shoes on their feet. Nicoll goes on to explain that just as we must remove our shoes before entering a sacred place, so too must we move beyond our habitual, sense-given views, opinions and attitudes to comprehend higher levels of truth. The well-known passage in John

13:5-10 where Christ washes the feet of his disciples, further typifies the purification and transformation of thought, feeling and desire that is necessary for entry into the sphere of knowledge above the world of the senses.

The concept of transformation is seen as one of the dominant ideas of Christ’s teachings. In the Gospels, humans are regarded as “an experiment in self-evolution”—a seed sown into the earth whose latent power and potential can be brought to fruition. This idea is expressed in the parable of the Sower and the Seed (Mathew 13: 18, 19). The method involved is “self-creation”—prompted by contact and receptivity with the “word,” or a teaching such as the one given by Christ and by one’s own thoughts, insights and intuitions. Such a method is, in Nicoll’s words, the highest form of “Organic Chemistry:” a self-chosen alchemical process brought about by the search for truth combined with application of the will toward that which is good.

These ideas are also conveyed in the Gospels’ numerous exhortations about the need for a *metanoia* or change in thinking (from the Greek μετάνοια: *meta*, a transference of meaning and *noia* from the Greek *nous* or mind), which as Nicoll points out, is almost always completely mistranslated as repentance. (Unless ye repent, ye shall likewise perish, Luke 13: 2-5). It is not a moralistic repentance or a feeling of remorse that is called for, but the need to eliminate wrong thinking based on sense perceptions, personal attitudes and judgments about what is right or wrong. However, this paradigm shift, which reconciles the opposites and penetrates to the deeper meaning behind the world of appearances, is not possible if the physical, tangible world of everyday life is seen as all that exists. Therefore, the Gospels speak again and again about the possibility of turning around, of discovering a higher Good, an inner Kingdom or subjective Self as well as the greater Whole which lies beyond the subtle realms.

One of the more notable allegories exploring this theme is the “Parable of the Prodigal Son,” also

known as the “Parable of the Lost Son” (Luke 15: 11-32). Nicoll’s interpretation of this story goes well beyond the literal interpretation of the profligate son who, after wasting his early inheritance “repents” of his “sins” and returns home where he is welcomed by his merciful father and begrimed by his more responsible older brother. The real meaning according to Nicoll, lies in the fact that parables are transforming devices that “bridge between two levels of meaning; the literal and the psychological. The psychological meaning transcends the words and images used, which have their own lesser meaning.” Thus the lost younger son does not merely repent of his “sins,” which in the original Greek (*ἀμάρτια: harmatia*) means “missing the mark.” Rather, he begins to *come unto himself*; he escapes from the power of the external world and undergoes a *metanoia*, a transformation of thinking and a reversal of direction in life. The lost son returns or goes back to Life.

This vertical shift in perspective sets the stage for Christ’s supreme teaching on re-birth, which Nicoll says, is not the same as the idea of cyclic return and incarnation. Although Nicoll certainly accepts these age old concepts and thinks that the notion of eternal recurrence in John 3: 2-10 was probably intentional, he does not want us to confuse these ideas with Christ’s teachings about dying to oneself in order to be born again. In answer to how one comes to be born anew, the Gospels proclaim that the individual must die to the “flesh” before he is born of the “spirit.” The “flesh” spoken of here is usually thought to refer to bodily and earthly pleasures and to the idea of setting one’s self against them. From an esoteric or psychospiritual viewpoint, such an interpretation, as Nicoll states, is absurd, for no spiritual heights can possibly be reached from ascetic and external disciplines alone. To follow Christ’s teaching of re-birth means to die in the right way to the little self. But this requires that one must discover one’s self in the Self and know that this is the object of the search.

A key aspect of the process involves the quest for truth, since there can be no re-birth unless the individual begins to grasp what is, in Nicoll’s words, “essential, real and good.” The

word “truth” (*αλήθεια*), which is used countless times in the Gospels, is always connected to Christ teachings, which come from an inner and higher order of truth, and not from any ordinary contact or knowledge of the outer, physical world. The person who begins to realize the truth about him or herself and who is receptive to Christ’s teaching (or any other authentic spiritual teaching) begins to awaken from the hypnosis and limited “logic of the senses.” Such a one is healed and becomes wholly one’s self. And it is this idea that lay behind the many miracles that are attributed to the Jesus Christ, such as his healing of the blind and the deaf as well as his raising of the dead (Mark 7:31-37 and John 11: 1-45).

For Nicoll, the greater object of the Gospels and all esoteric teachings, is to connect a person to God’s Will, or as one reads in the *Lord’s Prayer*, to have God’s “will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Mathew 6: 9-13). He describes this as beginning with the marriage of understanding and will. The union of the two, however, from Nicoll’s point of view, can only come about when one sees the *good* of truth and lives it through one’s own efforts or volition. “Truth then is no longer simply truth but becomes full of meaning.” It serves as the basis for every thought, word and action and the means by which the individual will and God’s will are brought to fruition in “a new heaven and a new earth.”

Although *The Mark* focuses almost exclusively on the New Testament, the book is not about Christianity per se. Its inspired interpretations, which eclipse the idolatrous dead-letter worship of the Bible, show that these teachings are both esoteric and universal in character. Indeed, the teachings of Christ are exposed as a set of ordered instructions on how human beings overpowered by the outer world and unconsciously driven by the senses, can awaken, seek freedom and complete themselves. *The Mark* illuminates the hopeful message of the Gospels in a way that transcends and expands traditional religious boundaries. It is a book that will engage every spiritual seeker.

Donna M. Brown

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