

Review: The Hidden Church of the Holy Graal

by

Walter Leslie Wilmshurst

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What was, and is, the Holy Graal? Not to waste space in considering fatuous imaginings concerning any material reliquary that may once have served at a certain sacred feast and was supposed subsequently to have been concealed at Glastonbury or elsewhere, be it remembered that there has obtained no extensive or important system of religious expression, whether ethnic or Christian, but has instinctively formulated the conception of a feeding-dish communicating supernatural food; a cauldron brimming with some celestial brew; a cornucopia, bowl, or horn of plenty, exuberant with luscious fruits; each the symbol of that mystical, invisible, but unailing cup or platter from which the inward life of man is, by all save those unconscious of an inward life, felt to be sustained. The Holy Graal is the gracious Christianized form of this catholic symbol. Besides the cup itself, it involves also the content of the cup; the Sangreal, or sacred vessel, as if language itself refused to dissociate the inward content from the outward vehicle, is also the Sang Real, the Royal Blood, or life-giving Spirit, imparted therefrom.

In its chief sacrament the official Christian Church perpetuates, after one manner or another, a rite or office whereby, it is taught, supernatural sustenance is communicated to the human soul. But if the doctrine affirmed in most schools of religious philosophy be correct—namely, that that which is below is in correspondence with that which is above, and that visible things are patterns of invisible, it follows that the terrestrial office is a shadow of a celestial one; that the Church militant upon earth is the reflection of a Church triumphant beyond this earth, and that the sacramental bread and wine of the former have their appropriate, exalted, and sublimated counterparts in the latter.

Suppose it, then, possible for human consciousness to transcend terrestrial shadow-shapes, however sacred; to soar beyond the sacramental symbols inevitable to the perishable plane of existence, and to participate in the imperishable reality which, out of normal ken, stands behind the symbol and renders that symbol both possible and valid! Well, so to do would be to gain access to an interior Church hidden from this world and to partake of the arch-natural Eucharist therein celebrated. In other words, it would be to achieve that quest of the Holy Graal, to which, as its goal and *summum bonum*, the knighthood of religio-romance literature was self-dedicated. That knighthood no wise abjured or neglected the instituted temporal rite of which we all know something. Rather did it strive to penetrate beyond the sacramental symbol and to find that symbol's legitimate and natural, or rather arch-natural, extension upon the spiritual plane. The symbol held good *pro tanto* [to that extent]; it was the conduit, the promise, and the substitution in time and space of a vital reality existent beyond those limitations; it was the base from which the questing knights operated and advanced. They dared not neglect the formal rite, but they ever realized that—"A substitute shines brightly as a king, until the king be by, and then his state empties itself, as doth an inland brook into the main of waters." [The Merchant of Venice]; and the objective of their quest was the transcending of symbol and substitute by attaining conscious cognition of the King of kings Himself.

Listen to the simple, stately prose of Malory describing Galahad's achievement of the Graal in Castle Corbenic:—

And therewithal beseemed them that there came a man and four angels from heaven, clothed in the likeness of a bishop, and had a cross in his hand; and the four angels bear him up in a chair, and set him down before the table of silver where the Sangreal was; and it seemed that he had in the midst of his forehead letters that said, "See ye here, Joseph, the first bishop of Christendom, the same which our Lord succoured in Sarras in the spiritual place." . . . And then the bishop made semblant as though he would have gone to the consecrating of the mass. And then he took a wafer, which was made in the likeness of bread; and at the lifting up there came a figure in the likeness of a child, and the visage was as red and as bright as any fire, and smote himself into that bread, so that they all saw the bread was formed of a fleshy man; and then he put it into the holy vessel again and then he did that belonging unto a priest to do at mass. . . . Then looked they and saw a man come out of the holy vessel, that had all the signs of the passion of Jesus Christ, bleeding all openly, and said, "My knights, and my servants, and my true children, which be come out of deadly life, I will now no longer hide me from you, but ye shall see now a part of my secret and of my hidings. Now hold and receive the high meat which ye have so much desired."

It seems a far cry from these high mysteries to the body ecclesiastic we know; to its record of heresies and schisms; its conflicts concerning Transubstantiation and the Real Presence. But to recognize this fact is essential to the point to which I am leading up. Centuries ago Galahad achieved the quest, but, it is recorded, "since then was there never no man so hardy for to say that he had seen the Sangreal." It, and what it connotes, owing to human imperfection, was withdrawn into concealment. The inner Church passed out of men's thought and consciousness, leaving the terrestrial Church desolate and in widowhood, practising maimed and impoverished rites; a cloud, as it were, resting upon the sanctuary. Yet, the legends run, there was given large promise of the restoration of the Graal; and of the remanifesting upon a larger scale than aforetime of all that was removed into hiddenness. And through the long years of inhibition and withdrawal the hidden Church has continued its work in silence but in real activity, whereof abundant tokens exist for those who have an eye for them. Finding no response in its external counterpart it has made its voice heard unmistakably elsewhere, not in its old-time tones, but in varying and feigned terms, if haply some few, hearing, might discern or be brought to the understanding of the withdrawn mysteries; terms of subterfuge and allegory; terms of Alchemy, of Kabalism, of Rosicrucianism, of Masonry, of Templarism, of sundry secret schools; yet terms proclaiming, beneath whatsoever veils, always the same message, urging ever the same doctrine; the doctrine, that of the possibility of human regeneration; the message, that in due time the King will return to that Kingdom within us which we affirm in every Paternoster to be His.

So much may be premised by way of introduction to what is perhaps the most important and effective treatise upon Christian mysticism as yet published. Hitherto the Graal legends and romances have been the province, well nigh exclusively, of students of folklore and mediaeval letters, who have found in them only such worth as their special equipment enabled them to perceive. Even for them, when all has been said, there has remained over (as in the faint recognition of the idea of a Graal Church existing concurrently with, but interiorly to, the official Church of the day) a certain surplusage of refractory material, irresolvable, because out of affinity with that which canons of folklore and scholarship are adapted to treat. But it is just this excess which, as Mr. Waite points out, belongs to, and is explicable only by, the mystic. And it is this which gives students of the varieties of mystical religious expression the clue to the facts, that the Graal literature is one of concealed intention; that it is the ashes, as it were, of a great

fire; the records of a great religious experience; the reminiscences of a school of initiation into those mysteries the existence of which in Christian times has been, and still is, as veritable a fact as the old-time mysteries of Egypt, of Chaldea, and of Greece. "It is only in its mystic sense that the Graal literature can repay study," Mr. Waite asserts. His book, accordingly is addressed exclusively to, and is intelligible only by, readers of mystical tendencies. From the standpoint of mysticism alone, therefore, it is best to speak of it here, though, to the credit of its author's own abundant erudition, it must be recorded that, to justify his conclusions, he has skilfully collated and co-ordinated that literature, and at one stride has both met official scholarship upon its own ground and altogether surpassed its achievements by virtue of having applied to the subject his own special gifts and appropriate equipment.

Quite probably the customary reproach will be urged at him that the mystic has read into his subject more than was ever there or intended to be there. One might as ineptly complain at Ruskin for deducing ethics from the dust of the earth; or at Wordsworth for seeing more in a primrose than did Peter Bell. The most commercially minded may recall that even upon the material plane fortunes have been made by discerning eyes that have seen the potential value of waste products or that have detected diamonds or gold nuggets where others saw but clay-mire or river-gravel. Is the exercise of the like faculty to be denied the religious mystic who, recognizing the marks and signs-manual of fellow-mystics who have trodden the path that leads from natural to supernatural life before him, is able out of his own knowledge to interpret them, and out of his own experience to vouch for their veracity? The objection referred to notwithstanding, henceforth all consideration of the Graal literature, whether of that known or of that yet untraced, is destined to be subjected to the criterion of Mr. Waite's interpretation; and, to dismiss the merely academic aspect of the subject, it may be asserted confidently that future scholarship will confirm rather than discredit the deductions he has reached. If the large and often conflicting Graal literature be, as Mr. Waite suggests, a progress from chaos towards order; a series, that is, of graduated efforts on the part of an old-world age to express, in terms of chivalry, the perennial problem, and to disclose the perpetual secret, of individual reintegration into that primal sanity humanity enjoyed before the Fall into matter—efforts culminating in the record of the attainment of the Graal by Galahad, the perfected spiritual aspirant—so, after a like manner, the extensive but inconclusive modern interrogation of that literature may be said to culminate here in this exhaustive and convincing volume by the most appropriately equipped of literary knights.

Mr. Waite has given us, however, not merely an exposition of the meaning and purpose of the Graal literature. His work is a guidebook to a variety of other mystical systems that since the outward Church became desolated have sprung up, have perpetuated in other forms a cognate doctrine, and have left behind them traces of their affiliation to that unmanifested centre which is none other than the Hidden Church of the Holy Graal. Casual inquirers into the perplexing literature of Alchemy have long desired some simple statement of what all that strange commixture of religion and chemistry really means. The equally monstrous unintelligibilities of Hermeticism and Kabbalism; the doubtful value, historical and otherwise, of semi-secret schools of symbolic doctrine such as Masonry—all systems apparently foreign to, and yet not subversive of, orthodox doctrine and official religious institutions—have long needed justifying, interpreting, and co-ordinating. Mr. Waite has supplied this need, and has furnished us with a common denominator to them all. He establishes beyond controversy the fact that they are all voices crying in the wilderness, in different tones, but expressive all of one truth, and testifying all to a common but concealed source of inspiration.

Is there now for the plain wayfaring man who is unable or unwilling to tread these devious paths of apparent heterodoxy any instructional method ready to hand whereby he may enter upon the heritage promised by them all? Can he, not being a knight-errant, behold the Graal to-day Can he, no alchemist, transmute base metals into gold; or, no builder of temples, discover a certain lost secret, by which he may rear one? Well, in each of these cases the goal is the same, and all the various methods of attainment are reducible to one; that one, as Mr. Waite succeeds in demonstrating, being involved in the true perception of the Catholic office of the Mass; an office which, in whatever other respects the Latin Church may have deflected from its purpose, it yet, by an unerring instinct, has perpetuated and preserved from desecration as a channel of supernatural grace and a criterion for universal guidance. It is perhaps a strange claim to be made by one outside that Church and to readers many of whom will be prejudiced against its communion. But Mr. Waite's claim is not used at all as an argument for enlistment in the Roman Church. He knows too well that the offices of grace are administered upon all hands and are not restricted to any one ecclesiastical penfold. As an expert, if the term be permitted, in mysticism and symbolism, he merely records and emphasizes, with equal sincerity and impartiality, the fact that, despite all withdrawals of the hallows, despite all spiritual blindness in official places, one eloquent witness to a supernal sacrament has always survived, and that all other symbolic and mystical systems find their simplest and readiest expression in the Roman Office of the Mass. As in a great cathedral are found lesser shrines devoted to special purposes, and chapels subsidiary to the main sanctuary, so Mr. Waite's thesis is designed to show that all mystical schools and systems outside the main current of historic orthodoxy have in reality been but accessory to it; specialized forms appropriate at certain eras and to certain minds; yet all over-spanned by one common, embracing roof, and all capable of finding their diversified methods of expression unified at one central high altar. The alchemic mystery, for example, as Mr. Waite proves, is put with almost naked simplicity in Eucharistic doctrine. To understand the Mass is to hold the key to all other mystical systems.

I have left small space for reference to Mr. Waite's most important and instructive pronouncement upon the nature of that Hidden Church, which, never slumbering nor sleeping, has through the centuries of inhibition, watched over all the external churches and schools. Something of this unmanifested communion of saints we have learned before from those enlightening letters of Eckhartshausen's in *The Cloud upon the Sanctuary*, and from other less well-known sources. Henceforth all such voices will find fuller and co-ordinated expression in Mr. Waite's earnest and impressive closing pages. He defines it variously as the integration of sanctified souls in the higher consciousness; the cohort of just men made perfect; the lower mind of the official Churches raised to a higher plane of self-realization and rendered conscious of the unmanifested life involved within itself. It is not an organized community in time and space, and yet life within physical limitations need be no disqualification for admission there into. It is briefly that hidden House into which, in the passage quoted above, the purified spirit of man, typified by Galahad, is described as entering and participating in the celebration of the supreme mysteries of being; that House into which, as the Graal romances tell, and as our experience attests, the hallows have for a season been withdrawn, leaving a widowed Church with but their substitution, though not without promise of their restoration.

Is Mr. Waite's book—as I have said, the most luminous and important work upon Christian mysticism yet given us—a presage that that restoration is impending? That is a question that will be answered affirmatively or negatively according to the measure of enlightenment and mystical consciousness of him to whom it is put. Assuredly no one will read this book without asking it of himself, and without wondering why, at the present juncture in human affairs, when the questing spirit for the things of final import is rife amongst us, so momentous an elucidation of matters that for so long have remained veiled and close-guarded should have taken place. And no understanding reader will close it without gratitude and without praying that it may fulfil its author's purpose of helping many upon the path of attainment of that of which his book treats.