

The Grail and the Development of Conscience: St Paul and Parsifal

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Introduction by Guy Cornish

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The volume contains nine lectures – two from 1954 and seven from 1962 (though they are placed in reverse order in the book). All nine lectures were given in Newton Dee, part of the original Camphill complex (for people with special needs) on Deeside, to the west of Aberdeen, Scotland. There is an excellent introduction by Guy Cornish, a 32-page appendix containing lecture notes and diary entries, and ten high-quality colour plates of some of Raphael's key paintings.

Although I always find Karl König's work interesting and thought-provoking, I initially approached this review with less enthusiasm than it deserves. I was preoccupied with the dangerous political, economic and military 'games' being played out on the world scene, especially here in Europe, and was inclined to view this new volume of König's lectures as a possible instance of what one might call "esoteric archaeology" – something for people to read in their comfortable armchairs and add to their collection of "worthy" literature, but which did not require them to take action; something that engaged their 'consciousness' but not their 'conscience' – a theme Karl König addresses specifically in the sixth and seventh lectures.

But it turned out that these lectures reveal Karl König – like Steiner – as very much concerned to relate esoteric knowledge to contemporary life and practical action in the world (exemplified, of course, in his founding of the Camphill Community). He refers to what is perhaps the core message of Rudolf Steiner's *Philosophy of Freedom* (sometimes titled *Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*) – the three steps in "moral development" that have to be taken for each single step in 'spiritual development', where 'moral development' means positive practical action in the world.

Two quotes from Karl König – the first an indirect quote, from notes taken by Anke Weihs (no definite date is given, the indication merely states "in the early days of Camphill", so presumably during WWII) – clearly reveal König's understanding that 'consciousness', i.e. awareness both of spiritual reality and of what is going on in the world, must be transformed into 'active conscience' – the sense of one's personal responsibility to do something to make that world a better place. Though spoken more than half a century ago, these words are remarkably apposite to our time:

"There is a knighthood of the 20th century whose members do not ride through the darkness of physical forests as of old, but through forests of darkened minds [my emphasis]. They are armed with a spiritual armour, and an inner sun makes them radiant. Out of them shines healing – healing that flows from a knowing of the image of man as a spiritual being. They must create inner order, inner justice, peace and conviction in the darkness of our time". (Even more relevant in this 21st century, the hallmarks of which are organised global disorder, the absence of and even contempt for justice, virtually permanent war, and a widespread apathy and lack of conviction.)

"Will Europe be able to discover her present task? The last two thousand years culminating in the 20th century have seen continuous attempts to build up Europe. From a spiritual point of view, all the streams of development flow together and raise the great question: will Europe understand its task? What is the task? The task is that European people learn to understand the path to the Holy Grail. For this Europe was created. Only if the different nations of Europe are able to understand this will the possibility come to grow out of the present dilemma". (1962)

In 1962, Europe was of course both geographically and politically divided into western (US-dominated) and eastern (Soviet Union-dominated) "spheres of influence". 1962 was the year of the "Cuban missile crisis". The following year John F. Kennedy was assassinated. Fifty-four years on Europe is experiencing echoes of that in what is being described as the "New Cold War" between the West and Russia, with false accusations of Russian aggression, and the NATO militarisation of eastern Europe. The EU is riven by centrifugal forces, especially after the UK "Brexit" and there are few, if any, signs of any awareness of a specifically European "mission" or "task" in the world. Had König been alive today, would he have despaired? I think not. He might have pointed to the relative failure of Rudolf Steiner's great "three-folding" initiative after WWI, for which insufficient numbers of people were ready.

What happens to important initiatives like this? It seems that they may 'go underground', sink below the surface phenomena, to reappear at a more propitious time. Elements of the Threefold Social Order can be found in today's world, for example in the calls for a "universal basic income" as a means of moving away from what many see as the 'wage slavery' of modern liberal capitalism. The 'spiritual' dimension – the "path to the Holy Grail" – seems to be absent, but we should perhaps recall that in the 'German' i.e. Wolfram von

Eschenbach's version of the Parsifal story, on which Karl König places great emphasis in these lectures, Parsifal misses his first chance of reaching the Grail out of a lack of awareness (more precisely a lack of conscience = moral action) in failing to ask why the Grail King was suffering. He is given a second chance when confronted with the suffering of Sigune. Could today's "second chance" be the confrontation with the sufferings of the refugees and the victims of war everywhere - including on the eastern border of Europe in the Ukraine?

But what is this Holy Grail? While many would dismiss it as a fantasy, the name is very popular in contemporary English in the sense of 'the ultimate goal' – predominantly of science – with no sense of its mystical origin: "Scientists still hunting Holy Grail of energy production" (*The Guardian*); "Holy grail of preventing breast cancer is in sight, say scientists" (*The Telegraph*); or "Consciousness: the Holy Grail of science".

In the fifth of the 1962 lectures, Karl König refers to an early lecture cycle by Steiner, *The East in the Light of the West*, given in 1909, in which Steiner had retold one of the Grail legends, in which a precious stone that is said to have fallen out of Lucifer's crown was formed into a cup and it was into this cup that Christ's blood was received, underneath the Cross on Golgotha. In Steiner's words: "Out of the stone which fell from Lucifer's crown was made the Holy Grail. This precious stone is in a certain respect nothing else... than the full power of the Ego". Certainly a concept that challenges our thinking and takes us away from the idea of the Grail as the 'physical something' Grail-hunters have sought in places like Rosslyn Chapel, near Edinburgh, Scotland.

König points to the significance of the fact that the three best-known versions of the Grail story appeared in Europe within a very short space of time – some 40 or 50 years only. These are the versions by Robert de Boron, Chrétien de Troyes, and Wolfram von Eschenbach. In the fourth lecture, König links these three to England, France and Germany respectively, even though the first two authors were both French. Boron's most famous works are: *Joseph of Arimathea: A Romance of the Grail*, and *Merlin*. It is through Joseph of Arimathea, who was believed to have guarded the vessel (from the Last Supper) into which some of Christ's blood flowed on Good Friday, that the connection to England is made. There are legends that describe Joseph visiting Cornwall, perhaps even bringing Jesus with him (William Blake's "And did those feet in ancient time walk upon England's pastures green?"). And Merlin, of course, is intimately connected with the legends of Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table.

König writes: "What is it that Robert de Boron described? The Grail is a cup containing the whole memory of mankind... the spiritual past, the spirit-recollection, of all that once took place. And this journeyed in a hidden way from the East, where the old temple had been destroyed, to be planted into the developing European continent".

Chrétien de Troyes, by contrast, focuses on Parsifal "and the Grail remains entirely in the background... we follow Parsifal through different trials, but Parsifal never reaches the Grail. Where did Chrétien get his story from? He claims to have received it from his superior, Philip of Flanders", of whom Chrétien wrote that "he asked no-one except his own free and pious heart, which advised him to do good. [...] This is conscience. Here we suddenly have something new beginning to dawn. We can say that Parsifal, in the way he is described by Chrétien de Troyes, bears human conscience."

Then there is Wolfram von Eschenbach, who says that his story came from Kyot, who found an old manuscript in Seville containing the wisdom of Kyot's teacher, Flegetanis – who, according to Wolfram, lived at the time of King Solomon. König suggests that this Flegetanis is none other than Hiram, the architect of the two pillars of Jachin and Boaz in Solomon's Temple, and that Hiram represented all that has been called the *Urweltweisheit* - the primeval wisdom:

"Robert de Boron points to England; Chrétien de Troyes is himself a Frenchman; Wolfram is German. The three parts of the emerging destiny of Europe begin to form, permeated by this entirely new Christian impulse, by these new images of the Grail and Parsifal. This enabled the *Urweltweisheit* [Primal wisdom] to reappear in a new form to prepare for what Europe was to become. In this way we can try to pave a way for an understanding of how history has unfolded, and how we have to look back in order to understand our destiny in the twentieth century".

And in this century? Do England, France and Germany still hold the key to our European destiny? Or, given that there is little spirituality in evidence in modern Europe, has the stream gone underground again – to emerge further east, perhaps? It is curious to find the present head of the country which, following Marx, declared religion to be "the opiate of the people", speaking openly of God and protecting religious observance, but Steiner did, of course, indicate that Russia would be the vehicle for the next stage, in the far future, of the development of human consciousness. My old Professor of German at Manchester University, Idris Parry, gave a series of wonderfully imaginative talks on radio. In one of these, which I particularly like, he wove together another trio: Kafka, Rilke and Rumpelstiltskin. He reminds me of the way Karl König makes equally interesting connections – in these lectures between St. Paul, Parsifal and our own time: a span

of some two millennia. His 'revisionist' interpretation of the famous Raphael painting The School of Athens – based on Steiner's indications (for example in a 1912 lecture given in Cologne on May 6th of that year, two paragraphs of which were quoted in English by König, though the whole lecture seems not to have been translated into English) – would no doubt offend most art historians, for whom the two central figures in the painting represent Aristotle and Plato. König assures us that they are in fact St. Paul and Dionysius the Areopagite, who was converted by Paul to Christianity (see Acts 17:34). For König, as with Steiner, St. Paul is intimately connected with the evolution of the human Ego (the essential self, the true kernel of the human being) and the birth of conscience and thus with Parsifal.

As I hope my review makes clear, I have found this new collection of the works of Karl König stimulating and rewarding. I can therefore recommend them unequivocally.

*[This Review was by Paul Carline,
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