

# THE WAY OF THE SEVENFOLD SECRET

Who are you?

Ted Schroder, January 17, 2010

Lilias Trotter (1856-1928) was proclaimed by art critic John Ruskin as being potentially one of the best artists of the nineteenth century. However, instead of devoting herself solely to the life of an artist, she dedicated herself to reaching the Muslims of Algeria with the Gospel. At the end of her life, she wrote, *The Way of the Sevenfold Secret*, in order to reach the Sufi mystics of the desert regions of North Africa. The Sufis attempted to seek union with God through a succession of seven spiritual states which could only be attained by long and hard wrestling, and even after that there was no guarantee that they would reach the gate of heaven. She presented an alternative path which began with joy and peace, and was not dependent on earthly effort, fasting, or abandonment to the counsels of a director. She took the seven sayings of Jesus about himself contained in the seven "I Am's" of John's Gospel and explored how each offered the secret for which the Sufis longed: satisfaction, illumination, access, leadership, eternal life, progress and ultimate flourishing.

What the Sufis long for is what all seekers after grace and truth long for. Over the next eight weeks I will look at each of these sayings of Jesus, and Lilias Trotter's commentary on the secrets of divine truth and spiritual power.

One of the most important questions of life is that of personal identity and significance. Who am I? Who are you? How do you define yourself? In terms of your family: as wife/husband, mother/father, sister/brother, daughter/son? In terms of your race, ethnicity, nationality? In terms of your work? Or in terms of your origin and destiny? When your obituary is written, what will it say? It usually begins with our birth and early life, because how we were formed and raised made a big impact upon us. What do you remember about your beginnings?

My first recollection is the end of World War II. I was born in 1941, and remember collecting cards from my breakfast cereal boxes. They weren't cards of baseball players, or other sports heroes, but cards of the allied leaders: Presidents Roosevelt and Truman, Prime Minister Winston Churchill, Generals de Gaulle, Eisenhower, Montgomery, MacArthur, and Marshall Zhukov. My earliest vivid memory is VJ Day, and the Victory parade in which my older sister was dressed up as Britannia, with helmet, spear and shield. It was much later that I discovered that there was life before I was born. I started to read history books, and learned about the history of my race and culture, King Arthur and the knights of the round table, Robin Hood, and the such. History opened my eyes to other civilizations in Egypt and China. So much of who we are is learned through knowledge of our ancestors, and the history of the world. My origins, how I was raised, tells you a lot about who I am.

How would you answer to the question: 'Who are you?' It depends on who is asking you, and for what reason. I recently had to fill in a medical history for my physician. He asked all sorts of intrusive questions: past or current medical conditions, past hospitalizations, current medications, social history, occupation, hobbies, and family history. Are you planning to become pregnant? What is your chief complaint? What was the health of your father and mother? Age and cause of their deaths?

The teachers of the law and the Pharisees asked this question of Jesus. "Who are you?" (John 8:25) "Are you greater than our father Abraham? He died, and so did the

prophets. Who do you think you are?” Jesus answered, “Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.”

“You are not yet fifty years old,” they said to him, “and you have seen Abraham!”

“I tell you the truth,” Jesus answered, “before Abraham was born, I am!” (John 8:53-58)

What an incredible response! Abraham lived 1,800 years before Jesus. He claimed to have lived before Abraham. In fact he uses the name of God to describe who he is, and how long he has lived. This name was first revealed to Moses.

Remember the story of Moses and the burning bush. God called Moses to lead the Israelites out of their slavery on Egypt to the Promised Land. Moses felt himself unworthy and inadequate for such a mission. He was assured of God’s presence and power. Then Moses asked: “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ then what shall I tell them?”

“God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you.’ God also said to Moses, ‘Say to the Israelites, ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers – the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob – has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation.” (Exodus 3:13-15)

In this revelation God identified himself in terms of his essential being, the One who was always present, and capable of becoming and acting in accordance with his will. He is the Almighty, the Everlasting One, who is from before the beginning, the Lord of History and Eternity, the Author and Source of Life, who calls us into being and into a covenant relationship with him.

So when Jesus said that, “before Abraham was, I am,” he was taking upon himself the identity of God. He was saying that his origins were before the beginning of the creation. What set Jesus apart was his claim that he existed before Abraham – in fact John says that he existed at the beginning of time (John 1:1)

In the recently renovated Hayden Planetarium in New York City, there is a walkway in which each inch represents the passage of 3.6 million years. After traveling the length of a football field – a journey of thirteen billion years – the visitor arrives at the point where human history begins, and the span of that history is the width of a single human hair. In the cosmos the earth is nothing but a mite of stardust. In relation to the Creator, we are minute. Such knowledge inspires humility before God – the great I Am.

Jesus is revealing to us that he is not simply another prophet, but he is one with the Father. “This means: *where I am, there is God, there God lives, speaks, calls, asks, acts, decides, loves, chooses, forgives, rejects, hardens, suffers, dies.* Nothing bolder can be said, or imagined.” (E. Stauffer, *Jesus and His Story*, pp.142-159) “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever.” (Hebrews 13:8)

If there is no God, or no Jesus, we are even less significant than we ever imagined. But we believe that God is real, that God comes near to us in Jesus, to assure us that we are indeed significant and valuable. Our origins are in him, for he gives us life. Our destiny is in him, for he gives us eternal life in Jesus. This Jesus, who was in the beginning, comes to reveal to us the way of the sevenfold secret. He is able to offer all that we long for: satisfaction, illumination, access, leadership, eternal life, progress and ultimate flourishing. All we have to do is to receive him into our lives as Savior and Lord.

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