

# Collective Initiatic Work & Spiritual Presence<sup>\*</sup>

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THERE ARE initiatic forms in which, by their very constitution, collective work holds as it were a preponderant place; we do not of course mean that this could ever substitute for each member's personal and purely interior work, or that this latter could in any way be dispensed with, but it at least constitutes an essential element in such a case, whereas its role can be limited or even wholly lacking elsewhere. This is particularly true of initiations found in the West today, and no doubt it is generally the same to a greater or lesser degree in all craft initiations wherever these are found, for collective work appears to be something inherent to their very nature. This is related for example to the fact, to which we alluded in a recent study on Masonry,<sup>1</sup> of a "communication" that can only be effected through the cooperation of three persons, none of whom alone possesses the power necessary for this result; and in the same order of ideas we can also cite the condition that a certain minimum number of participants, seven, for example, be present in order to ensure a valid initiation, whereas there are other initiations, frequently met with in India, where the transmission is effected simply from master to disciple, without the cooperation of anyone else. It goes without saying that such a difference in modalities must entail equally different consequences throughout all the later initiatic work; and among these consequences we are especially interested in examining more closely those relating to the role of the *guru* or of what takes his place.

In the case of initiatic transmission effected by a single person, the latter thereby assumes the function of *guru* toward the initiate; and it matters little whether his qualifications in this regard be more or less complete, or whether, as often happens, he is only capable of leading his disciple to a certain determined stage, for the principle is always the same: the *guru* is present from the beginning and there can be no doubt as to his identity. The collective situation, on the

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<sup>\*</sup>This text was originally published as chapter 23 of the posthumous collection *Initiation et réalisation spirituelle* (1952). This translation is taken from the 2001 edition by Sophia Perennis, with thanks.

<sup>1</sup> See "Parole Perdue et Mots Substitués" in the December 1948 issue of *Études Traditionnelles* [included as "Lost Word & Substituted Words" in *Studies in Freemasonry and the Compagnonnage*].

contrary, is much less simple and less obvious, and one can legitimately ask where the *guru* really is; no doubt, when any “master” instructs an “apprentice” he takes the *guru*’s place in a certain sense and to a certain degree, but only in a very relative fashion, and even if the one who effects the initiatic transmission is properly speaking only an *upaguru*, all the others will also be so, and with all the more reason; besides, there is nothing here resembling the exclusive relationship of the disciple with a single *guru*, which is an indispensable condition for using this term in its true sense. In such initiations it does not in fact appear that there have ever been any spiritual masters properly speaking who have exercised their function in a continuous way; if there have been such, which is a possibility we cannot exclude,<sup>2</sup> this has been an exception, and their presence has not been a constant and necessary element in the special constitution of the initiatic forms in question. However, there must in spite of everything be something that takes their place, which is why one must ask who or what has effectively filled this function in such cases.

One might be tempted to answer this question by saying that here it is the collectivity itself, composed of the initiatic organization as a whole, that plays the role of *guru*, an answer in fact suggested quite naturally by the remark we made at the beginning about the preponderant importance then accorded to the collective work; but without saying that this is entirely false, it is at least wholly inadequate. Moreover, it is necessary to make very clear that when we speak in this respect of a collectivity we do not mean merely a gathering of individuals considered in their corporeal modality alone, as could be the case of any profane group; what we have particularly in mind is the collective “psychic entity”, to which some have given the very inappropriate name “*egregore*”. Let us recall what we have already said in this connection:<sup>3</sup> the “collective” as such will never transcend the individual domain since in the final analysis it is only a resultant of the component individualities, nor, consequently, will it go beyond the psychic order; now all that is only psychic can have no effective and direct relationship with initiation since this latter consists essentially in the transmission of a spiritual influence meant to produce effects of a similar spiritual order, thus transcendent with respect to the individuality, whence one obviously must conclude that whatever is able to render effective the initially virtual action of this influence, must itself necessarily have a supra-individual and thus, if one may put it so, a supra-collective character. Moreover, it is evident

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<sup>2</sup> There must necessarily have been such masters, at least at the origin of every distinct initiatic form, for only they could have been qualified to effect the “adaptation” required to establish it.

<sup>3</sup> See chapter 6, “Spiritual Influences and ‘Egregores’”.

that it is not as an individual human being that the *guru* properly speaking exercises his function, but insofar as he represents something supra-individual, of which, in respect of this function, his individuality is in reality only a support; thus in order for the two cases to be comparable, it is necessary that what is here assimilable to the *guru*'s not be the collectivity itself but the transcendent principle for which it serves as support and which alone confers on it a true initiatic character. What is involved therefore can be called in the strictest sense of the word a spiritual "presence", acting in and by the collective work itself; and it is the nature of this "presence" that we must now explain somewhat more completely, though without claiming to treat the question in all its aspects.

In the Hebrew Kabbalah it is said that when the sages converse about the divine mysteries, the *Shekinah* is present among them; thus, even in an initiatic form where the collective work does not in general seem to be an essential element, a spiritual "presence" is no less clearly averred when such a work takes place, and it can be said that this "presence" manifests itself at the intersection as it were of the "lines of force" running between those participating in it, as if its "descent" were directly invoked by the resulting collective produced at this determinate point, which furnishes it with the appropriate support. We will not dwell further on this perhaps somewhat overly "technical" aspect of the question, adding only that here it is a matter of the work of initiates who have already reached an advanced degree of spiritual development, in contrast to that of organizations where the collective work constitutes the usual and normal modality from the very beginning; but of course this difference changes nothing as to the principle itself of the spiritual "presence".

What we have just said should be compared to this saying of Christ: "When two or three are come together in my name, I am in their midst"; and this comparison is particularly striking when one knows the close connection between the Messiah and the *Shekinah*.<sup>4</sup> It is true that according to the current interpretation, this passage simply refers to prayer; but as legitimate as this

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<sup>4</sup> It is sometimes claimed that there existed a variant of this text in which "three" are spoken of, rather than "two or three", and some wish to interpret these three as the body, soul, and spirit; it would thus be a matter of concentrating and unifying all the elements of the being in the interior work necessary for the "descent" of the spiritual influence at the center of the being to be operated. This interpretation is certainly plausible, and independent of the question of exactly which text is the more correct, it expresses in itself an incontestable truth, although without in any way excluding the truth related to the collective work; however, if the number three really was specified, one would have to admit that it then represents a minimum number required for the effectiveness of this work, as in fact it is in certain initiatic forms.

application may be in the exoteric order, there is no reason to limit oneself to it exclusively and not also to envisage another, deeper meaning, which by this very fact will be true *a fortiori*; or at least there is no other reason for this except the limitation of the exoteric point of view itself, for those who cannot or will not go beyond it. We must also draw particular attention to the expression “in my name”, which moreover is so often encountered in the Gospel, for at present it seems to be understood only in a greatly diminished sense, if in fact it does not pass unnoticed; almost no one any longer understands all that it really implies traditionally, both as to doctrine and ritual. We have already said a little about this last question on various occasions and will perhaps return to it again, but at the moment we only wish to point out the consequence that from our point of view is very important: in all strictness, the work of an initiatic organization must always be accomplished “in the name” of the spiritual principle from which it proceeds and which it is destined as it were to manifest in some way in our world.<sup>5</sup> This principle can be more or less “specialized” in conformity with the modalities proper to each initiatic organization; but, being of a purely spiritual nature as obviously required by the very goal of all initiatic organizations, it is in the final analysis always the expression of a divine aspect, and it is a direct emanation from this aspect that properly constitutes the inspiring and guiding “presence” of the collective initiatic work, in order that this latter might produce effective results according to the measure of the capacities of each of those taking part in it.



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<sup>5</sup> Any ritual formula which does not correspond to what we have been describing, when substituted for this, can only represent a diminishment of it due to a misunderstanding or to a more or less complete ignorance of what the “name” truly is, implying in consequence certain degeneration of the initiatic organization, since this substitution shows that the latter is no longer fully conscious of the real nature of the relationship uniting it to its spiritual principle.