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The Rhythm of the Christian Year

Renewing the Religious
Cycle of Festivals

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St John's Tide in the Year's Rhythm

The summer solstice was always a celebration of the sun and light. The view of the Christian St John's Day festival is likewise aimed at sun and light, but is dependent on penetrating through the senses' shine and arriving at the essential element that speaks to us through sun and light. It is, after all, celebrated when the ecstasy of the longest day and the shortest night are over. Our celebration of St John's Tide is like an *echo* of the solstice as the outer culmination of the year. There is a deep wisdom in this. At one time, June 24, St John's Day, coincided with the summer solstice, but then it moved away from the solstice as a result of the Christian calendar. Today, June 24 therefore occurs three days *after* the summer solstice. People can observe the St John festival in greater composure and freedom once summer's culmination point has passed. In the future, the 'first Sunday after St John's Day,' this will acquire a resonance similar to spring's 'first Sunday following the full moon in spring.' For even as the full moon in spring is the culmination of what the moon bestows on earth, so the summer solstice is the greatest intensification of what earth can unfold in relation to the sun's light and warmth. The culmination points in nature must be awaited; only afterwards can we celebrate the Christian festivals, Easter in spring and St John's Day in summer.

The inner situation of the St John festival is illustrated in a humorous way in Richard Wagner's *Meistersinger* (III.i). It had been a turbulent night, things had been topsy-turvy. It was the

night before St John's Day. People were thrashing each other without knowing who the other was. A colourful throng rushes across the stage. And now, when St John's Day dawns in golden stillness, Hans Sachs is sitting in his shoe shop. He is a human reflection of John the Baptist whose name he bears (for Hans comes from Johannes). Once again, he reflects why people are always fighting. Last night had been rather wild, all the fun notwithstanding, quite like on the evening before a wedding.

Man, woman, apprentice and child
assault each other as if mindless and blind:
and if madness allows it,
it will now rain blows.

He cannot get the sound of the rhythm in which people beat on each other out of his ear; the thrashing continues in the music. But now the clamour has passed and he arrives at the most sympathetic solution of the riddle: the nature of midsummer is at fault.

A glow worm missed its little mate;
It then caused all the damage.
The lilac did it — St John's night!
But then came St John's Day!

Oh yes, summer's night! When the lilac blooms — this refers to elder-berries — and when the glow worms flit about, there is magic in the air. When the days are the longest and the nights shortest, fires are lit on hilltops and everybody dances and leaps. People leave all orderliness at home and surrender to the splendid cosmic disorder inherent in summer's ecstasy. But subsequently the gentle fruitful glory of St John's Day must arise.

To discover the *Christian summer* is a task that we will be able to solve only with time. But when the longest day and the exuberant, short night arrives, we are not yet in summer, just at summer's beginning. Summer only comes after midsummer-night's

madness, it unfolds *after* the summer solstice. The miraculous abundance of summer only develops during the descending half of the year. This awareness has disappeared to a large extent, in no small measure due to religious customs and institutions.

The year is a remarkable totality of rhythms. The cosmic background becomes manifest not in numbers that stand still but in rhythms, in the upward and downward surging of a wave. That is the secret of time: it does not move along a straight line, but moves in oscillations, it dances. If humans were not so immobile and boring but would move along with pulsing time, they would know better what being human means. Man is stuck, but time nevertheless pulses. And should not the innermost element in our life, religious striving, also pulsate? If Christendom tries to evolve into the future, it must move along in a living way with the year's rhythm. We must know what it signifies when the festivals fall in the various seasons of the year. At most for the Christmas festival and in ^{the} case of Easter, a diminishing feeling for the time of the year has still been retained. We have to learn anew how intimately the thought of Christmas is related to the earth-rhythm's winter-position and the thought of Easter to ^{the} spring-position of the earth-rhythm. But above all we need to regain a feeling for the whole year; the empty space that is called the festival-devoid half of the year must be filled out.

It is a one-sidedness that Christian festivals exist in the main merely during the ascending part of the year. At Christmas, the sun begins to ascend again. At Easter time this continues and at Whitsun-tide it still goes on. But for the time when the sun descends during the year, from St John's Tide, summer's beginning, through Michaelmas, autumn's beginning, until Christmas, corresponding Christian contents for the year do not exist. Is it therefore surprising that humanity only likes to acknowledge all that moves upwards but is afraid of what moves downward? But we cannot swing along in the cosmic

rhythm if we experience fear of the descent, for example, fear of ageing. The whole of human life today has therefore become arhythmical, uniform, lacking in rhythm. How is it with the wondrous rhythm of day and night? Is it still truly experienced as a rhythm? In fact, we merely value daytime, for then we are active. We simply put up with night. But if we do not live in the rhythm of day and night and love both parts, the ascending and the descending one, we will soon no longer receive benefit and blessings from sleep. Night will leave us empty. It will refuse us its secrets and gifts. Then life merely consists of lengths of daytime with gaps in between that are nothing.

Human life likewise represents a rhythm corresponding to the year's course. The middle of life corresponds to the summer solstice. Life today has become deprived of rhythms, without pulsating vitality. This can be clearly discerned by the fact that only in rare cases will people truly continue to develop past mid-life. The ultimate reason for this is that human beings are reluctant to give up the remainders of their youth. They have forgotten that ageing can have great value, namely, when the descending branch begins after mid-life. We go along with it, particularly so long as ageing can still be touched up. Still, we cannot change it. But truly to affirm this part of the wave that does not rise but falls, yet which frees up the inner side of existence that earlier was frequently covered up by the blossoming interior, truly to say 'Yes' to ageing is something that we have yet to learn anew. We never arrive at maturity and fulfilment of our innermost being without this affirmation.

How is it with the most minute rhythm that we constantly activate inasmuch as we breathe in and out? In a world where the meaning for rhythm in all things large and small is extinguished, does breathing not have to become shallow? Do people even breathe at all today? Of course, we cannot avoid breathing altogether, it still moves a little. What a wondrous help inhaling and exhaling could be for remaining alive within!

Goethe knew how to express this splendidly in the verses of *West-östlicher Divan*:

A twofold benefit comes from breathing:
Inhaling air and letting it go.
The first oppresses, the latter refreshes,
Thus life is blended wondrously.
So, thank God when He presses you,
And thank Him when He lets you go.

The whole of life is dominated by rhythm that blends life remarkably. Inhaling presses; exhaling refreshes. The whole of life contains times when we are pressed into ourselves, but there are likewise times when we can once again trust ourselves confidently to life's surges. And what happens to us if this alteration does not take place? In comparison to that, the wife of Lot who turned into a column of salt was still a moving figure. The annual rhythm of spring, summer, fall, and winter could above all be the great school within religious life where man would learn to overcome rigidity and all that lacks rhythm, and once more acquire rhythm, the true element of life. The mighty inhaling and exhaling of the earth are the year's seasons. Earth as the great maternal living being breathes out from Christmas until St John's Tide; then breathes in again from St John's until Christmas. In exhaling, we have the Easter festival, the festival of Whitsun, all the way to the summer solstice; in inhaling, the coming-into-its-own, the entering-into one's own inner being that begins at St John's. St John's Day celebrates the start of inhaling; then, at Michaelmas, follows the great station of the intensified coming-into-one's-own. The earth inhales all the way to Christmas: we are completely within ourselves, even as earth is completely within herself.

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What actually is rhythm? Whether we take the year's rhythm in the great scheme of things, the rhythm of day and night in the small scheme of things, or on a still smaller scale human breathing or our pulse beat, in rhythm the etheric world is revealed. The physical, material world, visible to our senses, does not stand still, but swings and lives in rhythms. This is a manifestation of the etheric world, the first sphere, closest to us, of the supersensory realm. Where rhythm works, we are in touch with the streaming forces of life and formation. If, as is often the case today, we no longer have an understanding of the intimate connection between religious life and the rhythmic element, we cut off the religious element from that of life and suffer an inner atrophy and loss of energy. In this lies the tragedy of the development in the last few centuries, that humans ultimately wanted only to acknowledge physical-material existence as being real. But that reality is static and rigid; it bears death within. The life forces that flow, weave, and swing through the world are invisible to ordinary human eyes. But wherever there is rhythm, the sphere of life forces becomes manifest. And particularly in religious life, this sphere should once again play a powerful role.

There is a tendency today, originating in America, to preserve the physical form. When somebody dies, for instance, they are embalmed and, with make-up and styled hair, are placed in a chair. The deceased appears at first sight like a living person. One does not wish to see death and conjures forth a spectral illusion of life. But this is merely a symptom for the tendency that emerges out of materialism to want to cling to life and maintain its physical condition. But by tearing life out of its rhythm, one surrenders it even more to death's power out of one's fear of death. Only where death is affirmed as a rhythmic counter-movement to life, living elements have full access to man's existence, and human life acquires its true meaning.

The etheric world manifests in rhythm. We can even go far-

ther and see the sun circling in the heavens as the source of all rhythmic aspects in our cosmic system, because it is the source of all life. Modern astronomy calls the sun a 'yellow dwarf,' because, viewing fixed stars as huge cosmic bodies, astronomers believe they have discovered that many among them are significantly larger than the sun. Indiscriminately, the concepts of modern scientific research are applied to the sun. Even though science relies on nothing but hypotheses, it is said that the sun is 'a complex of nuclear fission.' One is not aware that by saying this one describes the sun as the seat of death, the throne of the spirit of death, Ahriman. In reality, if we do not merely consider the physical aspect, the sun is the source and seat of life. Only one who thinks and feels this way can begin to have an idea that the sun and Christ were once closely connected, and that a change occurred in this connection when Christ came to earth in order to become man. With this, a sense can be gained for the fact that along with the incarnation of Christ as man the rhythmic life on earth has received a mysterious new content which henceforth swings along.

The sun on earth, how do we experience it? Now, this is not meant in the physical sense but in the life-bearing, life-giving sense. The sun is actually the primal phenomenon of rhythm. This is why it rises and goes down. This is why it magically conjures forth the rosy dawn and sunset glow of evening along with day and night. Where is the best location to find the true nature of the sun, at the equator, or in temperate latitudes? If the sun's nature is viewed purely in terms of amounts of light and heat, it would be best to go to the hot desert regions in order to encounter the sun's true nature. But there the sun is fierce like a beast of prey. Life cannot thrive there; only desert remains where the sun can be so totally effective in the physical sense. It is in temperate zones where the blessing of the sun can be best experienced. For the sun can only be comprehended through the rhythmical nature, the etheric nature within itself.

At the equator there is a complete cessation of seasons — the summer solstice reigns there all year long with constantly equally-long days and nights, something we only experience at spring and autumn equinoxes. Nights and days remain the same there. There are no variations. Due to the heat of the physical sun, rhythm ceases. By contrast, at the earth's poles, the extreme of the seasons holds sway. For half a year the sun is in the sky without it turning dark; for the other half, it is night without the sun rising.

In the rhythm of temperate latitudes in the middle, it is possible to experience the true nature of the sun: namely the complete rhythm and balance.

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If we allow the Christian St John's festival to convey its wisdom to us, we understand that it is the festival of the sun, but of the sun that from this time on begins to descend. It is the festival of light, but of that light which now gradually becomes dimmer. We know that as the summer's sun descends it bestows on us the most wonderful fruits. The rising sun allows growth; the descending sun causes ripening. And it possesses this magical power of ripening in late summer and early autumn. Then it bestows the finest fruits. Nature herself teaches us to love the slow descent, the downward swing of rhythm. Humans themselves must actively fill their life principally *after* mid-life. What stands in their way here, as has been indicated earlier, is that life today has been separated from the mystery of rhythm. Most people, having apparently reached their goals in society by the age of twenty-eight or thirty, come to an inner standstill. Basically, what follows then is the continuing recurrence of the same thing. Even in the cases of significant outward successes, there are no longer any true developments and breakthroughs to something new. Yet this should be the very time for new be-

ginnings, just as the descending sun allows the best fruits to ripen after the middle of the year.

Christianity has to become cosmic once again. When we say that Christ has united with the earth, this may be hard to comprehend for many people, since they only think of the physical earth. But earth possesses an ether or life body; she has her rhythmic entity. The rhythms in the life of our earth, particularly in the year's course, reveal her etheric elements. Christ has moved into the rhythmic-etheric element of our planet; he can be encountered in his life forces. But these swing to and fro. They exhale from Christmas until St John's Tide; they inhale from St John's Tide until Christmas. In this breathing, this swell, we are allowed to seek Christ. And particularly after the summer solstice, when earth inhales, and finally culminating at Christmas, a particularly intimate relationship of humanity to Christ opens up. Along with the mighty in-breathing, Christ makes his entry into the depths of earth-existence. It is this growing approach that is referred to by John the Baptist, who stands at the summit of the year when he says: 'He must increase.' Year after year, an increasing closeness to Christ can be experienced just at the time when the year descends from its height.

Now, John the Baptist could not say: 'I must decrease,' if he did not have something to give. The word of waning alone is proof for the fact that John was one of the very great ones. Only one who has, can give. And one who gives, grows. ~~Now~~ one might think: he has given something away, hence he has become less. Certainly, something in John does decrease. But precisely because of that, something else grows in him; we could even say, *another being*. This is connected with the fact that from one year to the next we become more familiar with a mystery. When we say the name of John during the St John's festival, our soul's eye seeks him as an altogether great being — after all, he is called an Angel or messenger of God (Mark 1:2) in the Gospels — we can find him on the level of the Angels. And as the Angel of the Lord

he teaches us how to offer up sacrifice, teaches us to pray. In the life of ritual we have a training in which we can learn the art of deepening our experience of rhythm in a new way. The ritual leads us through the rhythmic recurrences into a higher sphere of life. In this school, the of the Angels, the exemplary one who prays and offers up sacrifice, teaches us how, on our part, to say: 'I must decrease, he must increase.' He is the patron, the guardian angel of the ritual, rhythmical, religious experience that sways in the rhythm of the offering.

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Thus we properly enter into summer in the time when the sun drawss closer. At this very time, spurred on by John the Baptist, we can raise ourselves to the level of the Angels. At Whitsun we found the courage for the ascent to the true human condition, for the flame of the higher self had touched us. We experienced that the human being is allowed to strive for the heights. Now the path is open to strive for that inner height that has as its background the descent of the outer world. Inasmuch as we join the ranks of John, we touch upon the angelic stage. And when the rhythm of the year descends further and autumn begins, we can even raise ourselves to the level of the Archangels. We take the step from the St John's festival to the festival of Michaelmas. During the descending part of the year, man may grow, not physically, but with his inner being, because Christ can grow in him. In the two festivals, St John's Tide of summer, and Michaelmas in autumn, we find the true Christian content for that half of the year which at first sight does not have Christian festivals. And if we continue to grow, it continues from man, Angel and Archangel to Christ himself at Christmas. John — Michael — Christ, this is the ascent during the descending half of the year.

Alternate translation of Goethe verse (p. 65) —

In breathing grace may two-fold be,
We breathe the air in, we let it free;
The inbreath binds, the out unwinds,
Thus with marvels life entwines.
So thanks to God when we are pressed,
And thank Him when He gives us rest.