

Disciplina Arcani

Discipline of the Secret

"The Synod of Antioch condemned the Arians for admitting catechumens and even pagans to a discussion of "the mysteries". The phrase itself was not coined until the seventeenth century; but the discipline was one of the earliest in the Christian community - a mandatory concealment of the more mysterious rites and doctrines of the Church."

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Father Theodore M. Hesburgh President,
University of Notre Dame

HISTORY of the CHRISTIAN CHURCH [1]

by

PHILIP SCHAFF

Christianus sum.
Christiani nihil a me alienum puto

VOLUME II

ANTE-NICENE CHRISTIAINITY

a.d. 100-325.

[1] Schaff, Philip, History of the Christian Church, (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.) 1997. This material has been carefully compared, corrected, and emended (according to the 1910 edition of Charles Scribner's Sons) by The Electronic Bible Society, Dallas, TX, 1998.

See also the edition of the Didache, Prolegg. p. 32 ff.; Rothe, "De disciplina arcani origine," 1841. S: 67. Division of Divine Service. The Disciplina Arcani.

Richard Rothe: De Disciplinae Arcani, quae dicitur, in Ecclesia Christ. Origine. Heidelb. 1841; and his art. on the subject in the first ed. Of Herzog (vol. I. 469-477).

C. A. Gerh. Von Zezschwitz: System der christl. kirchlichen Katechetik. Leipz. 1863, vol. I. p. 154-227. See also his art. in the second ed. of Herzog, I. 637-645 (abridged in Schaff's "Rel. Enc.").

G. Nath. Bonwetsch (of Dorpat): Wesen, Entstehung und Fortgang der Arkandisciplin, in Kahnis' "Zeitschrift fuer Hist. Theol." 1873, pp. 203 sqq.

J. P. Lundy: Monumental Christianity. N. York, 1876, p. 62-86.

Comp. also A. W. Haddan in Smith & Cheetham, I. 564-566; Wandinger, in Wetzer & Welte, new ed. vol. I. (1882), 1234-1238. Older dissertations on the

subject by Schelstrate (1678), Meier (1679), Tenzell (1863), Scholliner (1756), Lienhardt (1829), Toklot (1836), Frommann (1833), Siegel (1836, I. 506 sqq.).

The public service was divided from the middle of the second century down to the close of the fifth, into the worship of the catechumens, and the worship of the faithful. The former consisted of scripture reading, preaching, prayer, and song, and was open to the unbaptized and persons under penance. The latter consisted of the holy communion, with its liturgical appendages; none but the proper members of the church could attend it; and before it began, all catechumens and unbelievers left the assembly at the order of the deacon, and the doors were closed or guarded.

The earliest witness for this strict separation is Tertullian, who reproaches the heretics with allowing the baptized and the unbaptized to attend the same prayers, and casting the holy even before the heathens. He demands, that believers, catechumens, and heathens should occupy separate

places in public worship. The Alexandrian divines furnished a theoretical ground for this practice by their doctrine of a secret tradition for the esoteric. Besides the communion, the sacrament of baptism, with its accompanying confession, was likewise treated as a mystery for the initiated and withdrawn from the view of Jews and heathens.

We have here the beginnings of the Christian mystery-worship, or what has been called since 1679 "the Secret Discipline," (*Disciplina Arcani*), which is presented in its full development in the liturgies of the fourth century, but disappeared from the Latin church after the sixth century, with the dissolution of heathenism and the universal introduction of infant baptism.

The Secret Discipline had reference chiefly to the celebration of the sacraments of baptism and the eucharist, but included also the baptismal symbol, the Lord's Prayer, and the doctrine of the Trinity. Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Cyril of Jerusalem, and other fathers make a

distinction between lower or elementary (esoteric) and higher or deeper (esoteric) doctrines, and state that the latter are withheld from the uninitiated out of reverence and to avoid giving offence to the weak and the heathen. This mysterious reticence, however, does not justify the inference that the Secret Discipline included transubstantiation, purgatory, and other Roman dogmas which are not expressly taught in the writings of the fathers. The argument from silence is set aside by positive proof to the contrary. Modern Roman archaeologists have pressed the whole symbolism of the Catacombs into the service of the Secret Discipline, but without due regard to the age of those symbolical representations.

The origin of the Secret Discipline has been traced by some to the apostolic age, on the ground of the distinction made between "milk for babes" and "strong meat" for those "of full age," and between speaking to "carnal" and to "spiritual" hearers. But this distinction has no reference to public worship, and Justin Martyr, in his first Apology, addressed to a heathen

emperor, describes the celebration of baptism and the eucharist without the least reserve. Others derive the institution from the sacerdotal and hierarchical spirit which appeared in the latter part of the second century, and which no doubt favored and strengthened it; still others, from the Greek and Roman mystery worship, which would best explain many expressions and formulas, together with all sorts of unscriptural pedantries connected with these mysteries. Yet the first motive must be sought rather in an opposition to heathenism; to wit, in the feeling of the necessity of guarding the sacred transactions of Christianity, the embodiment of its deepest truths, against profanation in the midst of a hostile world, according to Matt. 7:6; especially when after Hadrian, perhaps even from the time of Nero, those transactions came to be so shamefully misunderstood and slandered. To this must be added a proper regard for modesty and decency in the administration of adult baptism by immersion. Finally--and this is the chief cause--the institution of the order of catechumens led to a distinction of half-Christians and

full-Christians, exoteric and esoteric, and this distinction gradually became established in the liturgy. The secret discipline was therefore a temporary, educational and liturgical expedient of the ante-Nicene age. The catechumenate and the division of the acts of worship grew together and declined together. With the disappearance of adult catechumens, or with the general use of infant baptism and the union of church and state, disappeared also the secret discipline in the sixth century: "cessante causa cessat effectus."

The Eastern church, however, has retained in her liturgies to this day the ancient form for the dismissal of catechumens, the special prayers for them, the designation of the sacraments as "mysteries," and the partial celebration of the mass behind the veil; though she also has for centuries had no catechumens in the old sense of the word, that is, adult heathen or Jewish disciples preparing for baptism, except in rare cases of exception, or on missionary ground.

New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge,

Vol. I: Aachen-Basilians; Schaff,
Philip (1819-1893)

Arcani Disciplina ("Instruction in the Sacred Secret," i.e, initiation into the mystery): A term first applied by Dallaeus and G. T. Meier to the practice of maintaining a studied reticence (*fides silentii*) concerning the form and character of introduction into the Church, as if this were something analogous to initiation into the mysteries of the heathen world. The practice is especially observed in the fourth and fifth centuries. Baptism and the Lord's Supper, with the baptismal formula and the Lord's Prayer, in so far as these had an essential part in the introduction, were made the center of the supposed mysteries. In accordance with this idea, after the sermon, to which all could listen, at the beginning of the so called *missa fidelium*, the deacon warned all uninitiated away from the divine service with the words: "Let no one of the catechumens, let no one of the hearers, let no one of the unbelievers, let no one of the heterodox, be present" Apostolic Constitutions viii. 12).

The arcani disciplina became the subject of confessional polemics through the attempt of the Jesuit Emanuel von Schelestrate to prove that it was instituted by Jesus and followed by the apostles; and that for this reason the Roman doctrine of the sacraments [especially transubstantiation], the veneration of images and saints, and other teachings of the Roman Catholic Church do not appear in the early Church. In reply Tentzel proved conclusively that until toward the year 200 the Church knew of no mysteries to be kept secret. Nevertheless, Roman Catholic scholars with few exceptions (e.g., Batiffol) have endeavored to defend Schelstrate's position. Justin's detailed exposition of the act of baptism and the celebration of the eucharist, however (Apol., i. 61, 66, 67), is decisive. The exclusion of the unbaptized was an inner necessity (cf Didache, ix. 5) and does not imply a mysterious character of the cult; the secrecy also concerned not the dogma directly, but the symbols and performance.

Thus far Protestants are agreed, but not concerning the nature and origin of the disciplina. Casaubon assigned its

beginnings to the influence of the heathen mysteries and a borrowing of their forms for purposes of instruction, and scholars immediately following him accepted his views. Frommann sought out the root in an imitation of the Jewish practice with regard to proselytes. Rothe called attention to the connection with the catechumate of the early Church, and Credner to a relation with the twofold division of the cult resulting from the dogmatic-mystic conception of the Lord's Supper. T. Harnack recognized in the discipline a systematic transformation of the divine service into a form of mystery - a phenomenon which has a parallel in the fact that the Roman Catholic Church to-day finds the secret of its power in the mystic-theurgic act of its priests (cf. Bonwetsch). Zezachwitz maintained, more in accord with the views of Rothe, that the cult acquired an exclusive character and *fides silentii* arose in the Church from prudential motives because of persecution; when persecution ceased, the sermon sufficed for the needs of the catechumens (*audientes*) and full knowledge of the higher Christian secrets, as well as

participation in the vital part of the service, was reserved for the final grade of maturity (attained only by the competentes); references to these matters naturally ceased. It may confidently be asserted, however, that the arcani disciplina was not founded in the external condition of the Church or in pedagogic considerations, but was real, though unconscious, assimilation to the ruling ideas of the mysteries. The notion that communion with God was possible only by assimilation to God in a future state of incorruption through the medium of sacred acts, led as naturally to the formation of a hierarchy, differing from the laity and bringing divine essence into it by sacred acts, as to transformation of the divine service into a celebration of mysteries which were supposed to include the divine in symbols and symbolic acts. Anrich is correct, therefore, in designating the disciplina as an analogy within the Church of the system of efficacious initiations among the Gnostics and the natural outcome of the theology of a Clement and an Origen, influenced by the Greek mysteries (against this view, however, cf. Batiffol).

Zahn (p. 326) has demonstrated that the beginning of the *arcani disciplina* can not be traced earlier than the third century. When Irenaeus (*On Heresy*, III. Iv. 102) demands that the baptismal confession be transmitted orally it is only to the end that, being written in the memory, it may become an inner possession. Tertullian (*Apol.*; vii.; *Ad nat.*, i. 7) speaks of a *fides silentii* with reference to the Christian mysteries, but from the standpoint of an opponent. Hippolytus (*Ad Dan.*, 1. 16, 18) speaks of baptism without pointing out the duty of silence. Phrases like "the initiated know" in Origen do not establish the existence of the *disciplina*, since it can not be proven that Origen represented general usage. In *Contra Celsum*, iii. 59-61, he has no cultic acts in view; when he remarks (*Levit. Hom.*, 9, 10; ix. 364, ed Lommateach), "He who is imbued with the mysteries knows the flesh and the blood of the Word of God," he is thinking of the mysteries of the *gnosis* (Anrich, 129, n. 2). His reference to the anxiety lest some of the consecrated bread should be dropped (*Exod. Hom.*, xiii. 3; ix. 156) is a warning against the

inattentive hearing of the Word; and his reference (Lev. Homl, xiii. 3; ix. 403) to ecclesiastica mysteria proves nothing. Methodius does not apply Matt. Vii. 6 to sacred acts (Photius, Bibl., cod. 235), nor are such acts "the orgies of our mysteries, the mystic rites of those who are initiated" (Sympos., vi. 6).

In the fourth and fifth centuries the arcani disciplina was in its bloom; the frequent occurrence in the sermon of "the initiated know," "the initiated," is characteristic, and the transference of the phraseology of the mysteries into the Church is evident. "To initiate (Gk. Myseisthai) and "to instruct" (katecheisthai) become interchangeable terms. Baptism is called "the seal of the mystic perfection" and "a mystic purification (katharmos) and lustration (katharsion)"; the Lord's Supper is "the mystery"; its elements are "symbols." "To be initiated" (mystagogeisthai) signifies to be competent to partake of the sacraments, and to betray the mysteries is expressed by the corresponding exorcheisthai.

It is characteristic of the disciplina that the immediate object of the mystery was not the dogma and sacramental gift, but the elements and the ritual performance. In Theodoret's dialogue *Inconfusus* (iv. 125, ed. Schultze), the orthodox shrinks from openly naming bread and cup lest "some one uninitiated be present," and vaguely calls the body and blood of the Lord a gift. The desire was, of course, to withhold even from the eyes of the initiated the act and the "mystic symbols"; hence the exclusion of the unbaptized from the missa fidelium and the watch at the door by the ossuaries. Baptism and the Lord's Supper were the real object of the disciplina. To keep people in actual ignorance was, of course, impossible, but the silence observed produced the impression of a mystery. The Lord's Prayer at the Supper held the same position as the confession in baptism; the character of secret objects was given to both (cf. Sozomen, *Hist. eccl.*, i. 20; Ambrose, *De Cain et Abel*, I. ix. 37). The opposite to the confession of the neophyte was the renunciation, which was also kept secret. Everything which proceeded and followed baptism

necessarily partook of the secrecy. The eucharist as the climax of the mystagogy is the mystery par excellence. Dogmas were mysteries (Basil, *De spir. Sanc.*, xxvii. 66) only in so far as the Church generally claimed to possess wonderful mysteries, especially the dogma of the Trinity on account of its relation to the baptismal symbol; but no secrecy of the dogma was intended. With the disappearance of the catechuminate the *arcani disciplina* ceased, although in the Greek liturgy the formula for dismissing the catechumens remained; but the cult of the Greek Church now actually assumed the character of the mystico-allegorical drama, a mystery of the heathen kind, though of a higher type. N. Bonwetsch.

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A history of the Christian Church.
Fourth Edition Williston Walker, and
Richard A. Norris, David W. Lotz,
Robert T. Handy

Since publication of the first edition in 1918, A History of the Christian Church by Williston Walker has enjoyed outstanding success and recognition as a classic in the field. Written by an eminent theologian, it combines in its

narrative a rare blend of clarity, unity, and balance. In light of significant advances in scholarship in recent years, extensive revisions have been made to this fourth edition.

Chapter 13 Worship and Piety
pg. 187-189.

The Fourth and Fifth Centuries saw a significant flowering of Christian worship and, with it, of Christian art. Set free to figure as public institutions and to own and dispose of property, the churches expanded and elaborated their use of times, spaces, and ceremonies.

This is apparent first of all in the development and articulation of the calendar of worship. The temporal rhythm of Christian life continued to revolve around the week, with its regular celebration of Sunday, [Sunday worship was instituted by James the Just the brother of Jesus. James the Just is the first Bishop of the Christian Church and the head of the Apostles, the Disciples and those who came to accept Jesus as the Anointed, during that time. The beginning Christian Church was given permission to hold services in the Temple at

Jerusalem by the Council of the Chief Priests, Pharisees and Sadducees upon the advice given by Gamaliel in Acts chapter 5. These Eucharist celebrations first took place there on the Sunday following the Saturday services of the Jews. [Notation inserted by Editor.] and around the annual cycle, whose focus was the celebration of the Christian Passover during the fifty-day period from Easter to Pentecost. It was this latter celebration which received the earliest celebration, as we learn from the accounts given by the pilgrim Egeria of the celebration of Easter at Jerusalem toward the end of the fourth century. From her testimony, it appears that the marking of Holy Week as a commemoration of the events leading up to the resurrection of Jesus had been established there for some time. Palm Sunday, Maudy Thursday, and Good Friday as the day of the Cross were all observed with special ceremonies, and from Jerusalem these observances spread gradually, during and after the fifth century, to churches in other sectors of the Roman world. It was also during the fourth century that, following the chronology of Acts 1:3, the custom arose of marking a special feast on the

fortieth day after Easter, to celebrate the Ascension of Christ. Much earlier was the growth of the season of Lent, which is mentioned in Canon 5 of the Council of Nicea. Whatever its ultimate origins (concerning which there is still dispute among scholars), Lent in its developed form served two purposes. It was a period of fasting in preparation for Easter (eventually fixed at forty days to commemorate Jesus' fasting in the Wilderness), and it marked the time during which catechumens were instructed and made ready for baptism.

These elaborations of the yearly cycle determined by Easter and Pentecost went hand in hand with the appearance of a new annual cycle of celebration associated with the Incarnation and focused on the feasts of Christmas (December 25th) and Epiphany (January 6th). Each of these dates was also associated with pagan celebrations of the winter solstice. In Rome, December 25th had, since the time of the emperor Aurelian, been marked as the birthday of the Unconquered Sun; and in the East, January 6th had long had associations with the birth of the god Dionysus. Influenced by these

circumstances, and by the need to lend Christian meaning to established popular feasts, the churches adapted these days to celebration of the birth and manifestation in history of the divine Logos, the Sun of Righteousness. The earlier of the two feasts to become established was that of the Epiphany, which originated in Alexandria and from an early date commemorated not only the birth of Jesus but also his baptism and the miracle of KNH, in which, as we are told by the Fourth Gospel, he "manifested His glory." ii. 11. The Christmas celebration, on the other hand, originated in Rome early in the fourth century. By the middle of the fifth century, both feasts were known and kept in almost all sectors of the church. It was in the West that Epiphany acquired its association with the visit and adoration of the Magi.

These developments in the Christian year grew up in roughly the same era during which the initiatory rites of the church underwent their greatest elaboration. These rites included not only the act of baptism itself and the numerous ceremonies connected with it (which differed somewhat in character and order from place to place), but

also the associated actions by which persons were first admitted to the catechumenate and then enrolled as actual candidates for baptism. The development of these distinct stages in the initiatory process owed a great deal to the fact that in the fourth century—as contrasted, it seems, with the late second and the third—adult baptism had become the norm. Whether out of respect for the need of mature commitment in full members of the church, or out of a desire to postpone wholehearted dedication to the demands of the Christian way, large numbers of Christians lived a substantial part of their lives as catechumen or “hearers”—some, indeed, delaying baptism until they were near death. Such persons were understood to belong to the Christian movement, almost as a class of “fellow travelers”; but at the Sunday assemblies of the church, they were dismissed after the liturgy of the Word, having not yet been qualified through baptism for participation in the mystery of the Eucharist.

With this prolongation of the initiatory process, there developed, in the fourth and fifth centuries, a strict observance of the disciplina

arcani ("discipline of secrecy"), according to which not merely non-Christians but also catechumens were kept in ignorance of the central symbols of Christian life and faith: the ceremonies of baptism and the eucharist and their meaning, as well as the creed and the Lord's Prayer. This practice in part reflects the assimilation of the central Christian rites and their interpretations to the awe-inspiring secret mysteries of the pagan cults. Catechumens were kept aware that they lived in the shadow of a holy reality, which they could approach only with reverence and complete commitment.

When catechumen had determined upon baptism, they presented themselves for enrollment as candidates, normally at the beginning of the season of Lent (in some places in the fourth century baptisms were performed at the Epiphany as well as at Easter). If accepted as candidates, they underwent a preliminary exorcism and spent the forty days before Easter being instructed in the meaning of the faith. During this time, they were given their church's creed to memorize and heard its meaning expounded. At the vigil

conducted during the hours of darkness before Easter, the candidates came to baptism itself. They renounced Satan and his works. They were stripped of their clothes and brought naked into the waters of rebirth. There they were washed as (in the West) they confessed their faith in the triune God, or the bishop (as in Antioch) pronounced over each of them the formula "N is baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Often, but not invariably, there was a pre- or post baptismal anointing by the bishop, which was specially associated with the gift of the Holy Spirit. When these ceremonies were completed, the candidate was re-clothed, this time in white, and brought to the congregation to participate in the Easter Eucharist. The candidate had now entered upon the fullness of Christian life.