

Synopsis

MANY PATHS, ONE MOUNTAIN: Awakening to Your Personal Spiritual

Journey was conceived in a series of contemplative states I experienced while basking in the sun in Oakland, California and (believe it or not) Seattle, Washington, in the 1990's. The book is a meditation on the personal nature of spirituality, the inspiration one gains by affirming spirituality in one's life, and the philosophical outlook it can afford. The carefully reasoned prose narrative is counter-balanced by a series of emotionally charged poems tracing the arc of my experience with faith, trauma, grief, loss and ultimately acceptance of the death of my former life partner.

The opening chapter, Acknowledging Spirituality, begins with the premise that spirituality is independent from religiosity and that it is absolutely valid for each person to acknowledge and affirm his or her personal metaphysics, including his own understanding of God – who or what God is and whether or not God exists.

The case for a personal form of spirituality has been heavily criticized by many religious groups since the earliest days of the Christian Church, which successfully suppressed the Gnostic movement and other splinter groups. In the last two decades, many religious leaders have argued that it is decadent, self-serving or superficial; that it is a trendy outlook put forth by “New Age” groupies and that it is symptomatic of the secularization of our society, which they view with alarm. For example, in his recent book, **GOOD GOD: FAITH FOR THE REST OF US**, Rabbi Daniel E. Weiner declares that an individual who pursues his own spiritual development apart from a congregation does nothing to support his fellows or a wider society because he is “a community of one.” To this, I counter that however valuable a spiritual community such as a

congregation is, its value grows from its members' social and faithful commitment to it, not necessarily from a fundamental consensus of jointly held inner beliefs. Each member constructs his or her own inner truth, while simultaneously serving his community.

After presenting the case for the individual spiritual seeker, I examine how each of us constructs his or her own spiritual outlook from a highly individualized pattern of ideas received sometimes rigorously and sometimes randomly from the three pillars of human knowledge--religion, science and philosophy--and from some combination of reliance on faith and reason. For some of us the lens with which we view the world is primarily religious or reliant on faith; for others it is primarily scientific or dependent on reason. For still others, such as myself, it is based on a personal philosophical synthesis of the other two disciplines and on a belief in faith and reason as natural checks and balances on each other. For me, faith unrestrained by reason and reason uninspired by faith each lead to a stunted, warped or even harmful outlook on the world, yet combined and synthesized they can nurture and release the bird of spirit.

From this springboard, I launch a series of chapters outlining a spiritual world view grounded in philosophy:

- Describing God (Chapter 2) examines the nature of God, our relationship to Him as creatures in Creation and how our in-grained cultural habit of anthropomorphizing God as a paternalistic father figure is often detrimental to personal spiritual growth. While He is elusive and beyond definition in words, I frame my conviction that what we call "God" is much closer to the divine animus that we perceive in a field of wildflowers, as so vividly described by Alice Walker in *A COLOR PURPLE*.

- Beginning with the proposition that the reciprocal concepts “life” and “death” cannot be understood without express reference of the one to the other, Explaining Death and Birth (Chapter 3) considers the role of death in bringing meaning to life; what we can learn from near-death experiences; the contrasting emphasis between the Christian concept of salvation and the Buddhist idea of enlightenment; and the significance of the theory of reincarnation for the spiritual seeker.
- Speculating on the Human Condition (Chapter 4) analyzes the limits of human knowledge, the adverse role of the ego in the human psyche, and the illusion of separateness. Theories of human evolution and progress are considered and the chapter concludes with the question of whether universal physical laws do or do not set bounds on the potential effectiveness of human action.
- Grappling with what is perhaps the knottiest problem in both philosophy and theology, Wrestling with the Problem of Good and Evil (Chapter 5) presents a philosophical analysis of these dueling energies or polar opposites within the context of the religious doctrine of free will.

MANY PATHS concludes with Developing a Sense of Purpose (Chapter 6), which examines how each of us must move on from generating our personal metaphysical outlook to affirming our own highly unique sense of purpose in life--a life-mission that springs from a deeper inner source than our outer social roles as spouses, parents, professionals and citizens.

MANY PATHS, ONE MOUNTAIN

Awakening to Your Personal Spiritual Journey

By Brooks R. Kolb

Chapter 1, Acknowledging Spirituality

Poem: Capilano Canyon (On Faith)

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Capilano Canyon (On Faith)
July 12, 1994*

The wooden planks
Of the suspension bridge
Swayed beneath my feat;
The rocky creek
Through the mountain gorge
Tumbled far below.

Like a tiny boat
On the high seas,
My entire world
Reeled and spun.
I reached out
To grab the rail
That might help steady
My uncertain feet.

Awkwardly I pivoted,
Seeking to turn back
Toward the safety
From which I had come.

“I see that terror has struck,”
The matron laughed
As all at once
She navigated
Stolidly toward me.
“Come on, I’ll take you
Across with me.”

She grabbed my arm
As if I were a babe
And marched me
Directly on
Across the gorge.
I clasped her hand
And looked neither left
Nor right,
Nor above nor below.

The other side
Announced itself
With tall firs
Anchored firmly
In the solid rock.
“Meet me here
When you want
To come back,”
She said reassuringly.

But after I visited
The quiet wood
With the hidden pond,
I returned by myself
Across the swaying bridge.

I fixed my gaze
Straight ahead,
Looking neither left
Nor right
Nor above nor below,
And soon I found myself
Safely moored
Upon that airy shore.

**This poem was written on July 12, 1994, while my mother, Jacqueline Kolb was having heart surgery, and it is dedicated to her. It is based on an incident that occurred in mid-September, 1993, while we visited the Capilano Canyon suspension bridge on the occasion of my fortieth birthday, two weeks before the death of James Draper.*

Chapter 1, Acknowledging Spirituality

1: Recognizing the Spiritual Dimension

We often surmise that there are two dimensions threading through life concurrently--the physical reality we perceive directly and a spiritual dimension. We may be only dimly aware of a spiritual aspect to our world or what we might call “the spiritual plane,” but it can be viewed metaphorically as a thread, or perhaps a cord, which is wholly interwoven with our physical “coil” like two strands of DNA wrapped tightly around each other. I would go further and propose that life exists only because of these two interwoven strands. One mirrors the other. When we pass on to “a better life” in the “spirit world,” perhaps we are able to look back and “see” this world from which we came, just as now in going about our everyday duties in this life, we may occasionally become sharply aware of the spiritual dimension.

It happened to me in 1996, for example, when I was cleaning my old apartment after moving to a new house. All of a sudden a small refrigerator magnet seemingly flew off the freezer door, landing in front of me as I knelt, scouring the floor. It was a little block with the letter “J” stamped on it. “J” was for James, my life partner, who died in 1993. The little block had always occupied a spot on the freezer door next to a “B” block

representing me. When the “J” magnet jumped to the floor, it was clear to me that James didn’t want me to leave my old home without taking him with me on my new journey.

This little story illustrates not so much that the spirit world can be proven as that it is something felt intensely within. There is no way that I can demonstrate scientifically that the “J” block jumped off the freezer door rather than simply falling because I had snagged it. It is more important that I know this in my heart - for in the spiritual dimension, knowing and feeling may well be one in the same; perhaps they are not distinct categories of reason and emotion as we characterize them on the physical plane.

Unfortunately, in our world, if we equate feeling with knowledge we can get into deep trouble. For instance, if one acts on passionate belief alone, equating one’s strong feeling with sound reasoning, one can potentially cause great harm for others as well as for oneself. Here in our physical world we almost always need to weigh feeling and knowledge (faith and reason) carefully. In the more elevated realm of spirit, this distinction is not necessary, for no knowledge could be used to harm people.

When we perceive the world of spirit in our hearts, it is when we “know” and “feel” something simultaneously. But a third condition must also pertain: we must know and feel a truth in an atmosphere of love and joy, not in one of vengefulness and hatred, no matter how convinced we are of our rightness or righteousness in our feelings of anger. Awareness of the world of spirit is at times incited by strong emotions, such as those that

bubble up during a church service with rousing Gospel music, but more often it arises quietly or spontaneously. Either way, this awareness is a sureness in which knowledge and feeling are linked in a wellspring of love and joy.

What we call the human soul is the heart and the mind working in concert with each other. When the heart and mind are in harmony, the soul is at peace. When the soul is at peace, its wisdom is deeper than the wisdom of the heart or the mind acting alone without benefit of the other's guidance. The heart leads us toward religion; the mind toward philosophy. The wisdom of the soul, on the other hand, achieves a purity that combines and transcends elements of both religion and philosophy.

2: Developing A Spiritual Perspective

Spirit is the energy that drives the soul. What we mean by "spirituality" is an awareness of the linkages and the inter-relationships between our physical world and the "other-worldly" planes or dimensions beyond the physical, coupled with an attitude of compassion, reverence and love toward God, the universe, the Earth and all of its creatures. Belief in the existence of consciousness apart from the physical brain is almost a pre-requisite for spirituality and the spiritual life. That is, a conviction that consciousness can and does exist independently of the physical body and brain is the clearest basis for spiritual understanding.

Many people in our complex, highly organized and technologically driven modern societies are in the process of developing a spiritual perspective on life, without subscribing wholeheartedly to any one religion. Those who believe in God as well as those who are aware of their spiritual nature without believing in God are both followers of this path, which is one of many paths up the mountain.

There are many outlooks on life. There is an atheist position: God does not exist. There is an agnostic position: God may or may not exist, but he cannot be known. There is a religious position: God exists and He is the God of (my) religion. One further outlook remains which has not so far been explored extensively or articulated overtly, except as it is implied in secular literature and “New Age” writings. This is a spiritual position: God exists and God is a universal, inner principle shared by all religions and spiritual traditions.

Religious authorities often object that people who describe themselves as being “spiritual” without subscribing to any one religion have no moral guidance; they are at risk of falling into immoral behavior because they do not subscribe to a moral code provided by the religion. These leaders seem to pose the question, how can there be morality in the absence of God? To this challenge, spiritual people can respond that the question is not how can there be morality in the absence of God; the real question is, why can't there be God in the absence of organized religion? Why do people assume that if one is not an active participant in an organized religion, one must be a

non-believer and an immoral one at that?

To assume that in order to uncover ultimate truths, a person must take a stand and choose one of only two possible outlooks – atheism or the creeds of a specific religion such as Christianity or Islam – is absurd, given the probability that the universe is populated by billions of life forms on billions of planets and galaxies. All of these “peoples” or life forms must surely have conceived or recognized the existence of God, but that they will have formulated an exactly identical, parallel Christianity or Islam is highly unlikely. Since the God of these hypothetical peoples is perforce the same God that we recognize, God can be conceived as the divine common thread throughout the universe; individual religions cannot. Historically, our monotheist God emerged from all the tribal “gods.” In the same fashion, we need now to look upon God as being the God of all the peoples and life forms of the entire universe.

We human beings are made in equal parts of two natures – an animal nature and a divine nature. Bringing us the strong emotions of anger, fear and pain, our animal nature has bequeathed to us the fight-or-flight response in the face of every challenge. This animal nature, with its impetus toward hoarding and violence, is entirely responsible for our suffering. The greatest question facing humanity is whether or not we are capable of relieving our suffering by evolving toward the substantial part of ourselves that is already divine.

3: Religion and Spirituality

I have often heard people say, “I am a spiritual person,” only to find out what they really mean by this is that they are religious or follow the guidelines of a religion. To be religious generally has a clearer meaning than to be spiritual, for it implies adherence to a complete credo laid down by the religious tradition as the accepted truth. When a believer strays from part of the creed of his or her religion, such as when a Catholic does not actually believe in the virgin birth or even in the celibacy of priests, then it is debatable to what extent that person can truly be called religious.

To be spiritual, on the other hand, is a subtler claim. The person who calls himself spiritual without adhering to any particular religion or while adhering only partly to an established religion, is certainly asserting an individual relationship with God which is not dependent on any official creed. This individual relationship with God is not so much claimed as felt. The advantage of the non-religious spiritual person in our society is that he or she is free to socialize with the followers of all religions and with atheists and agnostics without holding that any of them are blasphemous, pagans, infidels or inherently evil persons because of their beliefs. This conviction of a personal relationship with God, together with tolerance for the many belief systems in our world, is exactly what our complex modern society needs in order to achieve the over-riding human goal of peace.

The problem with religions for modern man is that they are inherently susceptible to manipulation for particular human political agendas. For example, at this moment in American political history, it is difficult to say, “I am a Christian” without implying a highly specific political philosophy including conservatism on social issues, such as opposition to homosexuality, abortion and even to a broad program of government welfare. If someone says “I am a Muslim,” the person receiving this information may wonder if the Muslim is or is not sympathetic to terrorists. In both cases, the implied political beliefs have little if anything to do with the core teachings of the religions in question. Unfortunately, religions often tend to be dominated by political figures who use their considerable personal influence to slant the basic principles of the religion in one direction or another, to the advantage of their own political philosophy.

4: Religion, Philosophy and Science

Most of us wander through our daily lives fortified by a personal world view composed, illogically and in unequal parts, of snippets of religious, philosophical and scientific understanding. Moreover, unless one is a born-again Christian or devout Catholic, Jew or Muslim, at most times we are only dimly aware of the competing claims each discipline holds on our minds, and we haven’t a clue how we have assembled them to form our world view of the moment. The often haphazard balance of understanding that we form between these three very different approaches to knowledge varies considerably for each

of us, and it is almost inevitable that we each develop a unique coping mechanism when weighing their divergent claims on our outlook. Some of us approach life with a clearly religious bias; others with a scientific one. People of a philosophical bent devote a lot of time to juggling the claims of the other two disciplines on their decision-making processes.

However we approach these realms of knowledge in our daily lives, perhaps swinging at will from a scientific perspective at work to a religious one at home with our families, our views of the world are colored by our educations, our ethnic backgrounds and by what might aptly be called our cultural conditioning. This makes it doubly tough to approach philosophical and spiritual questions from an unbiased perspective. The smattering of inputs each one of us receives from religion, philosophy and science is undoubtedly a normal and even perhaps a laudable aspect of the human condition. The great quest for each of us, though, becomes how we reconfigure the fragments of understanding we receive from all three disciplines into a workable, rewarding, and hopefully well-reasoned world view.

We have three tools for interpreting the world: science, religion and philosophy. Philosophy is the bridge between the other two, combining as it does reason, which is the precondition for science, with a contemplative outlook, which is one of the key features of religion. Philosophy also exists in reaction to the other two disciplines, because while it refuses to restrict its boundaries to what is knowable through a rigorous series of

scientific experiments, it also regards a complete embrace of religious faith with skepticism. Philosophy exists in a delicate balance between religion and science; it is like a beam atop the twin pillars of the other two disciplines. Like a social science, it is neither a true science nor a religion, yet it employs the tools of both – the reason of scientists and the intuitive insights of religion and mythology.

Philosophy and religion exist in response to two contrasting human needs. Both address questions about the nature of the universe and man's place in it--a basic human need to know--but each addresses this basic need in a very different way. Like science, philosophy responds to the impulse of curiosity and attempts to frame the questions of life and the universe in terms of knowledge, if not actually to answer them. Religion generally eschews curiosity, which it seems to regard as a lower or less relevant human impulse. Instead, religion responds to the need for meaning, order and purpose in life. To put it another way, philosophy poses questions in order to satisfy curiosity and goes on to try to answer them. Religion offers an answer, God, and suggests that not all questions about God can be answered because they are beyond the limited power of human understanding.

Curiosity is like a thirst which philosophy tries to slake. Religion bypasses curiosity and holds up faith as the ultimate answer for human questioning. The principal tool philosophy and science employ in their related quests to find answers is reason, both

inductive or empirical and deductive or logical. Religion claims that reason, while useful, is subsumed within the greater power of faith to provide answers or “the” answer.

The Relative Merits of Philosophy and Religion

Which approach to the question of man’s place in the universe is more effective or useful? Religion, by describing God either as prime mover or as the source from which all creation issued and to which it must return, asks man to “submit” – as Islam would put it – to the higher divine Reality which is beyond the reach of human reason. Philosophy does not ask man to submit to any truths beyond his own powers of reason, but neither does it promise that there are any ultimately knowable answers, whether in God or not in God. Thus the question of which system is more effective is moot, since we are not comparing apples to apples. There are many philosophers who are also believers either in an individual God they cannot prove or in an established religion, just as there are many religious followers who have a strong interest in philosophy. For these people, faith and reason are both important, if not equally so.

I have often asked myself, which is the better way to view the world – through the lens of philosophy or through the lens of religion? At times it seems that religion is the superior vehicle because by the leap of faith required to become a believer, the adherent automatically confesses the limitations of his own reason and submits his will to the greater will of God. At other times, however, philosophy seems to be the better vehicle

of understanding, because it does not fall into the complicated dogma of religions, does not pit “my” religion against “your” religion as the only true one and does not suppose that man’s reason is so inferior as to be without foundation as the primary basis for understanding the world.

Philosophy approaches the world through a lens of skepticism; religion through a lens of belief. Philosophy frees the mind from the autocracy of religious dogma while religion frees the soul from the potential godlessness or rational materialism of a philosophical world view. To this extent, man needs both tools to understand the world and he needs them simultaneously. Concern about the competition between philosophy and religion for our minds thus shifts from the question of which discipline has more value to the question of how both disciplines can interact to our best purpose. When the two points of view are strongly at odds, such as during the Reformation, great harm results to the human spirit. Religious authorities are shown to be capable of burning scientifically minded philosophers at the stake, whether actually or metaphorically, while the philosopher-scientist appears to threaten or undermine an entire culture’s system of beliefs simply by pursuing his interests and his work.

Is it possible, then, for these two disciplines to exist in harmony with each other?

Perhaps each could make concessions to the other, without betraying the essential principles of their two very different world views. For example, philosophers could admit that their constructions of the universe can potentially be deeply unsatisfying to

the human spirit when they veer radically in the direction of rational materialism. They could further admit that the purpose of a religion – any religion – is to assuage the deeply emotional, spiritual needs of human beings and that, as such, religions have the right to spread their word. At the same time, clerics could admit that it is impossible to be objective toward the world in a scientific sense when one’s viewpoint is wholly devoted to following a specific faith. How is it possible to generate new, fresh thoughts about the nature of the universe when one has voluntarily placed one’s entire cognition in service of the guiding principles laid in place by a religion’s holy scripture, whether it be the Old Testament, the New Testament, or the Koran?

Religion rewards those who think alike; philosophy rewards those who think independently. Religion’s reward is that it confers a state of grace or at least solace and social status upon its adherents; philosophy’s reward is that it opens the minds of its students, albeit often or mostly at the expense of solace.

Philosophy commands a large, uncharted and fertile territory between the poles of religion and science. Spirituality is a form of philosophy that tilts toward the religious pole without always completely embracing it. Usually it implies an underlying belief in the existence of God, which no philosopher or scientist has succeeded in proving. Nevertheless, there are undoubtedly atheists and agnostics who would describe themselves as leading spiritual lives. The existential philosophers who, like Albert Camus, did not subscribe to Christianity can be described as spiritual.

Unlike the revelations of divine truth promised by religion and consensus around the best working hypothesis offered by science, philosophy's answers to the fundamental questions are speculative by nature. This is their drawback, that their truth or falsehood remains unproven, but it is also their strength because philosophy allows thought to jump ahead of the conventions posed by science and the conformist views imposed by religion. Science and religion are direct responses to deep human needs to know with certainty and to belong, respectively. Philosophy is for people who are satisfied with neither.

Faith and Reason

A greater puzzle implied by a comparison of the relative advantages and disadvantages of the religious view and the philosophical one is the question, how powerful is human reason? Should we, with hubris and optimism, take the position that no mystery is beyond the power of reason to unlock? If philosophy does not take this position, it at least implies that such a view is tenable or worthy of consideration. On the other hand, should we conclude with humility that human reason is limited – that our brains are, in effect, wired to understand only so much, and no more about the universe? If we do take this position, we are suggesting that faith, to the extent that it is true or legitimate, must be stronger than reason. Once we have accepted this premise, that faith is real and that it is stronger than reason, then our religious traditions teach us that we are opening our minds to faith: that faith can flood in, light up our minds, and propel us to a greater

understanding through revelation or enlightenment. Faith is a state in which the human being opens his soul widely enough that he is prepared either to receive revelation directly from God or to accept without rational objection the truth of divine revelation as it has been recorded in Scripture. It is as if we are asked to believe that faith, and faith alone, can transform the clumsy circuitry of our brains into a receptive organ which God's truth can enter.

Religion stipulates that we must begin with belief: we are asked to begin our world view with belief in faith, just as we are asked to believe in God. As we are not offered proof of God, so we are not offered proof of faith. For the person who believes fundamentally in the power of human reason, however, such as a committed scientist or philosopher, one could say that faith is a tool that can be applied to reason: that we specifically need to have faith in reason itself in order to achieve the next breakthrough in human understanding.

These circular constructs probably can only be resolved on the level of individual human understanding. Each individual must ask himself, which is his greatest need: to satisfy his curiosity through reason or to take refuge in faith? Somewhere in a creative synthesis of faith and reason can be found the motivator of all effective and moral human action. Action on faith alone can at times be barbaric, such as when "God" tells a believer in a vision to kill the infidel; action on reason alone can lack compassion or courage, such as when an un-believer flees, leaving a badly wounded soldier on a battlefield. Either way,

human action without motivation by an enlightened combination of faith and reason can lead to negative outcomes, destructiveness and tragedy. In The Power of Now, Eckhart Tolle calls this unenlightened action “insanity.”

In my daily outlook, I constantly find myself oscillating between a restraint posed by my limited powers of reason and an enthusiasm granted by my gift of faith. The most significant question is, does philosophy’s claim that human reason may be equal to the task of understanding the universe hold any sway against religion’s argument for the superiority of faith, revelation and enlightenment? We may never know what boundaries, if any, apply to man’s capacity for reason. However, if we regard reason as a divine gift conferred on us, to a greater degree than on any of Earth’s other creatures, perhaps we begin to close the gap between faith and reason. Faith supported by reason may lead us to a sharper, more complete notion of God, and reason supported by faith may lead us to deeper philosophical and scientific insights into the nature of the universe. Originally, I wrote these words with the conviction that human reason was up to the task of opening and resolving the great mysteries of life and the universe, yet reading Eckhart Tolle has led me to a new understanding that our capacity simply to be, that is to be fully present, transcends both reason and faith, revealing greater truths than either one.

5: A Spiritual Smorgasbord

Despite the objections of religious authorities, there is much to commend a pick-and-choose approach to spirituality. For one thing, it is an expression of the current phase of our cultural evolution as a whole. We live in metropolitan cities where every cuisine of the world is proffered on virtually every street corner. We seemingly have our choice of ten or twelve schools of Asian self-defense disciplines and four or five strands of Yoga. We attend ethnic festivals from every continent and fashion is influenced in turn by the native dress of any number of world cultures. Why not extend this concept to spiritual seeking? The obvious objection is that we sacrifice depth of understanding when we embrace only a part of one religious tradition and a slice of another. On the other hand, it could be argued that each religion has something of intense value to offer spiritual seekers, together with a lot of dogma and unwanted or leftover cultural baggage from generations past.

Christianity, for example, offers the illuminating concept of God becoming man in the person of Jesus Christ. At the same time, it preaches what is construed by some as an over-emphasis on the primacy of sin. Did Jesus in his lifetime really mean for generations of future followers to be hopelessly confused about whether God the Father is fundamentally merciful, forgiving our sins at the behest of Christ, or fundamentally judgmental, offering forgiveness only to a few deeply repentant souls? The followers of

Christianity receive a mixed message that they should place complete faith in God's mercy while at the same time being taught that they should fear his judgment or even his wrath, and the tuning of these two messages resembles the base and treble dials on a stereo receiver, with one knob turned up or down depending on the denomination to which the believer belongs. This conception of God as a Good Cop/Bad Cop figure wrapped into one has caused enormous anguish to millions of people for centuries. To the committed believer, these two aspects of God are not mutually exclusive but they certainly have led scores of Christians, including Catholic priests, to question their faith at the deepest level.

Hinduism, to name another tradition, has arguably offered us the most sublime and subtle metaphysics of any religion and its emphasis on participating in the "bliss-consciousness" of God through meditation is truly inspiring. At the same time, the Hindu religion as practiced in India participated directly in the most restrictive caste system of any advanced civilization and its perplexing mythology is more complex than any other. At center monotheistic, Hinduism nevertheless appears to present the uninitiated with a rogue's gallery of gods, demi-gods and god-like figures.

Buddhism, building on Hinduism, has given us an extraordinarily insightful view into the relationship between the life state and the state of non-physical being in death. Tibetan Buddhism describes these states with stunning clarity as repeating and succeeding "bardos" within the eternal wheel of existence. Buddhism also refines for us the Hindu

theory of reincarnation and the doctrine of karma, with its suggestion that all human actions lead to myriad results in an ongoing relationship of cause and effect. The subtle concept of karma resonates strongly with many modern seekers who are put off by the more stark, black and white doctrine of sinfulness pitted against goodness which is advanced by Western religions, even though karma is expressed in the Bible by the phrase ‘what ye sow, so shall ye reap.’ At the same time, Buddhism is perceived in the West as being largely a monastic practice which is so other-worldly as to seem irrelevant in a robust, capitalist economic system such as ours. The popular lay versions of Buddhism have helped to fill this breach between our capitalist, activist society and the other-worldliness of the Tibetan form of the religion, although it may reduce or corrupt these transcendent and devotional teachings by popularizing them.

There is much to recommend Confucianism, with its pragmatic emphasis on family, duty and the social order. Oddly, one might expect it to be embraced by our political candidates since it plays so directly into their policies, “messages,” and theories of the social contract. At the same time, on a spiritual level, it is ultimately unsatisfying since it completely leaves out the mystic aspects of the Divine which are universally recognized by the other religions. Taoism offers many valuable teachings and its theories of opposite yet integrated energy flows, the yin and the yang, are timeless. But Taoism has few followers, at least in the West, and to most of us it remains obscure, more a compelling philosophy than a popular religion.

Islam can be viewed as a parallel religion to Judaism and Christianity. Like these others, it is monotheistic, bases its teachings on divine revelation (to the prophet, Mohammed) and places a strong emphasis on sin and redemption, the battle of good and evil and the need for the soul to submit to the will of Allah. Of the three great Western religions, it is perhaps the most literal with respect to the divine commandments that must be followed, which has led to the brutal application of “Sharia” (Islamic Law) by its most fundamentalist adherents.

The three great Western religions are morality-based systems which exhort mankind to direct action in the cause of righteousness. Judaism places a great emphasis on ethical behavior among its adherents; Christians and Muslims are enlisted as members of a “salvation army” or of a “jihad.” On the other hand, the Eastern triad of Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism appear to base their emphasis on a theory of being, rather than of doing, or at any rate on a subtle moral evolution of the soul toward enlightenment rather than on the sudden conversion experienced by many followers of Islam and Christianity.

While all religions emphasize that life is sacred, Western religions have in an odd way trivialized life both by underscoring the universality of sin and more importantly by drawing lines in the turf between a small “in” group (the faithful, who will or can be saved) and a larger “out” group (the heathens, pagans or infidels, who most certainly will not be saved.) This “us versus them” dichotomy of belongers opposed to outsiders has arguably done at least as much to harm the human psyche as to help it, not to mention the

damage it has wreaked on entire societies and on history as a whole by stirring up passionate enmities which otherwise would have been restricted to simpler economic and ethnic conflicts. As a result of each religion's claims to the status of being the 'one true religion,' we are faced with a crisis in which it appears as if few people in the world are advocating strongly or convincingly for what is the only really defensible moral position: that all lives are equally sacred, no matter what religion or belief system they subscribe to.

Given all these varying systems, what is the modern seeker who has not been brought up in any one religion or who has rejected the tradition of his upbringing, to do? Why should he or she not borrow from, learn from and absorb the teachings of all these religions while rejecting some of their rituals, strictures or questionable doctrines? This selective approach, based as it is on belief in a personal relationship with God which has antecedents in both the Protestant Reformation and the ancient Gnostic Christian movement, must certainly have value if it is entered with sincerity, reverence and deep conviction in the importance of spiritual growth. In other words, the modern seeker is actually attempting to transcend the boundaries of the established religions. Arguably, this is precisely what some of the mystic or elite groups of these religions have always done, such as the Jesuits and the Sufis, among others. Despite the objections of some religious authorities, perhaps this approach of encouraging individuals to select from the smorgasbord of philosophical and religious teaching available to us is most appropriate to

our spiritual growth as individuals and most effective in facilitating our evolution into a world-wide, globalized human civilization.

All of the world's great religions have made major and enduring contributions to human civilization. Why would any intelligent person, drawn to all of them, choose to follow only one of them? The obvious answer is that without committing to a single system or discipline, the individual could be thrashing about, never learning to experience the deeper meanings and truths any one tradition has to offer. Once this point has been granted, however, I would urge this attitude on an individual seeker: go ahead and join a single religion but do so with full knowledge and acceptance that if you had selected one of the other religions, your experience would be equally valid, valuable and profound.

6: Separation of Church and State

In America today, society can be viewed as torn between two competing belief systems – a religious system and a secular one. The secular view, born in the Enlightenment and codified in the American Constitution and the Bill of Rights, emphasizes the rule of law, the rights of the individual, and even more significantly the right to freedom of religion. Meanwhile, the Christian world view declares the pre-eminent place of Jesus Christ, claiming that Christ's moral teachings should be at the center of human life. The struggle between these two world views permeates American politics, ethics and social life even when the secularists appear to enjoy a clear majority.

More specifically, this political and social struggle can be described as being between those who believe that the rule of law, grounded in the Constitution, is the highest authority in the land and those who believe that secular law is at all times subordinate to God's authority, as expressed in the Holy Scripture and then filtered through the myriad splinter denominations which are like bandwidths of the Christian spectrum, not to mention the Jewish and Islamic bandwidths.

People who may be described as "religionists" do not mind circumventing constitutional law when it serves the greater purpose of supporting what they believe to be God's higher law. As a secularist who believes in the right of the individual to pursue his own personal spiritual quest outside the strictures of organized religion, I submit that the great advantage of the U.S. Constitution is that it is accepted by all the citizens. There is only one Constitution for all of us, albeit one that is constantly being interpreted and re-interpreted by constitutional lawyers and judges. The Bible, on the other hand, is not accepted by all the citizens as a supreme document of government. The Old Testament is jointly adopted by two religious traditions, the Jewish and the Christian, and is recognized as well by the Muslims. The New Testament is accepted only by one, although Muslims view Jesus as a minor prophet. The many Christian denominations do not agree on basic matters of Biblical interpretation. The other religions represented in the American population, including Muslims and Buddhists among many others, do not accept either testament as being the highest expression of authority. The advantage of the

secular tradition, then, is that it is more accepting of and indeed protecting of the various religious traditions espoused by the citizenry than those religions are accepting of the secular order. The religions can be subsumed and protected by the secular order, but the secular is everywhere threatened by ceding too much power to the religions.

Anyone who believes deeply in God would most likely agree with the Christians that morality begins in God and that the law of human institutions is a blunt instrument that strives merely to emulate God's higher authority. To activist fundamentalist Christians, however, this instrument is so blunt as to be untenable in many instances. In these instances, conservative Christian partisans may at times believe that it is Christ's injunction to actively disobey the law in order to uphold "Christian" values. Civil disobedience, recently often conducted on religious grounds, is a profound tradition in our society, so perhaps it should not be surprising that, for example, anti-abortion activists feel impelled to invoke a higher authority - God - as justification for their active opposition to the laws permitting abortion, by any means which they find morally acceptable.

Yet it is because the population of the United States is not composed entirely of any one denomination or even of Christians in general that the Constitutionally protected concept of the separation of Church and State has endured. The principle of religious freedom was, after all, a founding principle of American society. When this principle began in colonial American society, there was an underlying cultural assumption that religious

freedom pertained specifically to variations within Christian belief; that is, variations between Anglicans and Puritans. Perhaps for this reason, our contemporary principle of the separation of Church and State is more vague, fluid, or at any rate less rigorous than that of modern European nations such as France which, after the French Revolution, erected a stronger wall between religion and government than we have in the United States. After all, the French Revolution completely overthrew the Catholic Church for a few years, effectively replacing it with a brand new Citizens' religion which was specifically invented for the occasion.

Since our American version of the separation of Church and State originally assumed that most if not all citizens were Christians of one sort or another, phrases such as "In God we Trust" and "I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help me God" have been thoroughly woven into our social fabric. Such a social construct did not originally anticipate the presence of atheists and members of other religions such as Jews and Muslims, among others, within the American polity. Increasingly, the rule of law has taken on the role of protecting the religious freedom of these latter groups from a Christian majority that may deride them as non-believers or even regard them as heretics or pagans. Ironically, then, government (and particularly the Supreme Court) has come to be an agent for enforcing what was originally a Christian principle, "love thy neighbor," insofar as the Court protects the rights of these neighbors, such as the right not to pray to a Christian god in a public school.

The conflict between conservative or militant Christians and secularists in the last decade is fascinating because from the conservative Christian perspective, it is the latest chapter in a centuries-old debate between those who rally together as orthodox ‘true believers’ and those who were traditionally labeled as heretics. No one calls a member of the pro-choice movement a heretic or accuses him or her of blasphemy outright, but this is what is implied in the more radical actions of the pro-life movement. State institutions such as the courts act to regulate this clash in views between secularists and religious conservatives – a clash which threatens at all times to become violent because it is so fundamentally about an essential world view and about the nature and sources of morality itself. Are these sources divine or human in nature, or both?

Naturally, this fundamental debate between secularists and religionists stands in even starker contrast when we examine societies dominated by other religions, particularly Muslim societies. Which of these two competing visions represents the true America? This is often at the center of political and social debate today, and is even reflected in election results.

Apart from the fray of the cultural war between religionists and secularists which has defined so many of the leading political issues of our generation, such as the “right-to-life” movement supported by many of the religionists and the “right-to-die” movement espoused by some of the secularists, enters a brand new tradition - that of many people

who find themselves on a spiritual quest but do not wish to fall in line with any particular religious doctrine. The people of this new tradition expect to find the right to their beliefs protected by the Constitution and the secular order, whereas they may be challenged by or even encounter hostility from the religionists. Their philosophical or spiritual points of view are particularly dependent on protection by the principles of religious tolerance and freedom that are the cornerstones of our society.

At the dawn of the twenty-first century in America, there is a large group of people who are ready to embrace a new concept of spirituality – one which is not tied directly to any one religion but which recognizes all religions as many paths up the same mountain. All of the organized religions can be seen as the foundations or pillars of a world-wide higher spiritual consciousness transcending the sectarianism, denominational squabbles and dogma which are the least attractive aspect of the world religions. A concept of spirituality unfettered by organized religion can be a powerful foundation for a twenty-first century era of peace, religious tolerance and spiritual growth.

Part 7: East and West

Just as human beings need both philosophy and religion to be intellectually and emotionally whole, so do we need to synthesize the principles of Eastern and Western philosophies and religions. Why should an individual need to make a clear choice between these two very different outlooks? Western religion teaches us that human

dominion over nature and intervention in history are essential to improve the world. We cannot improve it without intervening in it and God wishes us, even asks us, to intervene. Meanwhile, Eastern religions tell us that the world is as it is; perhaps it cannot be altered. Human interventions for the purpose of progress could simply be an illusion, “maya.”

It would seem that these two world views are so diametrically opposed as to be incompatible. But why should it be so? After all, both approaches leave us lacking in one way or another. If one subscribes to the Eastern world view, at least as it has often been interpreted in the West, it is easy to fall into a sort of fatalism in which one believes that nothing can be done to improve the world. A person’s focus should be on enduring; on resigning oneself to suffering until one can conquer the illusion of one’s separateness from others. One is best advised to rise above suffering by meditation and by controlling the mind and body such that the painful and even the pleasurable sensations one feels cease to penetrate one’s soul.

On the other hand, if one subscribes to the Western view that we can – and must – improve the world through our free will, it is very easy to become hyper-active, anxiety-ridden and convinced of one’s failure to influence the course of events. Heart disease, neurosis and angst are the usual symptoms. We end up exploding and metaphorically firing on our fellow human beings like snipers on the roof of an office building. Moreover, all the evidence suggests that our interventions degrade the world as much or more than they improve it.

In the context of Eastern religions, faith is a subtle state of readiness in which the soul prepares itself to receive enlightenment, a concept which is fundamentally different from revelation. “Revelation” tends to connote a sudden verbal command from God received inwardly that is almost always of a moral nature, whereas “enlightenment” suggests a state in which the soul is dramatically lifted to a higher plane of understanding, in which ultimate truth is imparted in a completely non-verbal way.

Nothing could be clearer than that the health of human beings, both as individuals and as a society, would be vastly improved if we could simply reconcile these two systems, the Eastern and the Western. Why not continue to follow the Western tradition in attempting to eradicate poverty while simultaneously adopting the Eastern tradition by meditating, in an attempt to relieve societal stress? We live in a time when world cultures are all coming together in the big cities and coalescing, synthesizing into something else, something new, something we call “globalization.” The reconciliation of Eastern and Western outlooks may well be our chance to achieve real social progress (a Western concept) while at the same time achieving inner peace (an Eastern preoccupation.)

8: Moving Toward a Post-Christian Society

Today’s American political battles between a secular and a religious world view contrast with those of the Protestant Reformation inasmuch as they are not concerned with how a

Christian God reveals himself to the people; rather they focus on whether we as a society live in an established Protestant order or in a post-Christian world.

What I mean by a post-Christian society is one in which Christians and adherents of other religions are joined by people who take part in an undefined spiritual movement whose aim is to resolve and synthesize principles of Western and Eastern religions alike, combining them with elements of existential thought, “New Age” preoccupations and input from paranormal phenomena such as past-life regressions and near-death-experiences. The fact is that our culture is international and multicultural. The modern city offers restaurants serving the cuisines of Brazil to Burma and also houses of worship ranging from Buddhist temples and Zen monasteries to Islamic mosques, Assembly of God churches and Orthodox synagogues, not to mention the many cults and sub-cults of Eastern and Western religions. Faced with this pot-pourri of religious choice, is it so surprising that the average urbanite may profess at the same time a belief in Christianity, astrology and the predictive wisdom of tarot cards?

What truly may be occurring is the rise of a new post-Christian society – a society which generally accepts many elements of Christianity while abandoning others. A willingness to select spiritual ideas from many sources, while sometimes superficial, is nevertheless what most characterizes our society and our time. Living as we do in a multi-cultural world and one strongly influenced both by religion and by science, it is not possible for us to turn back to the era of Protestant or Catholic domination.

Spirituality is a growing conviction of one's own ability independently to learn more about the ultimate truths without recourse to the imposition of religious authority. In dialectic terms, one might say that the thesis is Judeo-Christian religion; the antithesis, science; and the synthesis or new order is an emerging spirituality which borrows freely from both Eastern religions and Western philosophy as well as from science and Christianity.

The key to this new order is to circumvent our societal tendency merely to pick the most convenient, comfortable or faddish ideas at the expense of a deeper, more searching knowledge. What elements of Christianity would such an emerging society be best advised to embrace, and what parts could it be excused to forget? Certainly, the moral teachings of Jesus should be accepted; whatever reason is there to reject them? In particular, the golden rule should remain a fundamental guiding principal for any actions one takes in this life. On the other hand, the doctrines of Judgment Day and damnation seem simplistic and even barbaric compared with the Hindu and Buddhist notions of a great "wheel of life," the cycle of birth and rebirth. The Eastern concept that one works out one's karma in a near endless process of birth, death and re-birth resonates more with life as it is experienced than the belief that each human life is final and is only followed by eternal damnation or salvation. Moreover, some of the Early Christian sects endorsed reincarnation.

Participants in a post-Christian society can elect to embrace the core teachings of Christ while moving beyond the theological constructs which the church hierarchy gradually imposed over several centuries. In another era, such an approach to life would be considered heretical, but in our time it is a response to the influence of globalization and to the era of modern communications which is linking all the peoples of the world together. As a society, we would be well advised to march forward into a humanistic future not fundamentally as Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, Jews and atheists but more pointedly as spiritual beings ready to embrace our entire human cultural heritage in the aggregate. Doing so, we may question the dogma of our great religions without rejecting their deepest teachings. All religions seem to concur that in return for his love, what God expects from us is devotion, and devotion can equally well be expressed within the allegorical framework of any of the world's major religions, including animism.

9: The New Individual Spirituality

As we move into the new millenium, many people find themselves in need of a form of spirituality released from the dogma of the traditional religions. The thirst for this sort of spirituality is at least as old as the Christian religion itself, in that its precedents go back to the Gnostic faith in the very first centuries of Christianity. Generated from the word "Gnosis," meaning "knowledge," the Gnostics believed strongly in the power of the individual to "know" God inwardly, or at least to know that part of Truth that God allowed him or her to know, without recourse to the spiritual authorities of the church

hierarchy. This meant that each individual Gnostic was able to define his or her own truth, no matter how far it strayed from a common social consensus of belief.

While the Gnostic movement was squelched by the emerging power of the official Church, the need for personal spiritual fulfillment did not die. Reborn again centuries later with Martin Luther, this basic human desire took the form of a systematic reorganization of religious institutional structures, but arguably it never delivered on the promise of a direct, personal relationship with God. Today in our turbulent civilization, where great clashes occur on a daily basis between each of the major Western religions, this quest for a personal spirituality is especially intense. It is rooted in each individual's need to follow his or her own spiritual path apart from unwanted interference or censorship from religious authorities. Such an individual quest, based as it is upon Eastern concepts of the search for knowledge of self, inserts a fundamental Eastern philosophical principle into the Western religious tradition according to which most of us live our daily lives. As a society, we depend so much on a synthesis of ideas generated from different traditions of knowledge - a synthesis of religion with science and a synthesis of Eastern philosophies with the Western concepts of progress and divine Providence. This is the challenge and excitement of our time--the promise that each individual human being can inwardly synthesize these different threads into a fabric that makes the most sense to him or her as a blueprint for living his or her life.

There is a place in our world for people who wish to pursue God in their own way, inwardly perhaps, or at least without recourse to the programmed religions. This is not to say that these religions are wrong or evil but simply that each individual has a God-given right to choose the direction of his own spiritual growth, whether within traditional religious structures or outside of them. While many people are ready to accept this individual approach to spirituality, others condemn it on the basis that it is simply a “feel-good” outgrowth of the “New Age” movement. According to this critique, those who endorse an individual spiritual path, free as they are to pick and choose among an entire spectrum of Eastern and Western religious beliefs, are simply too lazy or misguided to adhere faithfully to any one tradition. Rather than buckling down and submitting to God’s will, they are simply choosing what appeals to them and rejecting what does not, like picking through a rack of designer clothes at the mall. Perhaps with good reason, religious authorities object that, in effect, the part is meaningless without the whole. To take two examples, how can a seeker embrace God’s mercy without fearing his judgment? How can a curious person experience his past-life regression under hypnosis without subscribing to the concept of karma?

Perhaps the greatest fear that opponents of New Age spirituality harbor is that individual seekers will see fit to consider themselves superior to the ten commandments. Just as a common criminal may consider himself above man’s law, these seekers may consider themselves above the law of God. To this objection, I would counter that the ten

commandments are a humanistic contract as well as a God-given covenant. It is not hard for a rational human being to agree to the restrictions of the commandments, whether for secular, humanistic reasons or for religious ones. In other words, the commandments probably seem as reasonable to the atheist and to the Buddhist as they do to the devoted believer in Christianity, Islam or Judaism. One could easily conclude that if an individual actively rejects the force of the ten commandments by deliberately murdering or stealing, then he is quite possibly mentally disturbed. Far from being an individual seeker who craves freedom from religious authority, he may be simply a renegade or a criminal.

Of course, whether all of the ten commandments are equally binding is an open question, particularly since the commandment against adultery is so widely broken by people who are more likely to be viewed as “all too human” rather than as criminals, at least in the eyes of man. This question - whether breaking one of the commandments is acceptable based upon the individual circumstances of a particular case - is one that is likely to be debated passionately between the religious traditionalists and those who believe in following an individual spiritual path.

Every human being has the right to follow his or her own spiritual path, and to follow it in the direction that opens up to him or her. There are many paths; only one mountain, as the Hindu and Buddhist traditions show us. While I will drop the use of the terms “him or her” in the words that follow, it is important to note that spiritual freedom is equally accessible to men and women. There is no place in spirituality for sexism; there are no

male clergy making sure that women are kept in their place. Fundamentally, though, this is not a new spirituality, since there is nothing new about individual spiritual quests.

What is new in the West is the concept that it is acceptable to follow such a quest without being an adherent to a named religion. When someone asks me if I am a spiritual person, I say yes, and I am continually disappointed by the second question that invariably follows: “what church do you go to?” It is unfortunate that people associate spirituality so strongly with religion that they cannot conceive of a person describing himself as spiritual without being an adherent to a named religion.

Being or Mind is the mountain; the paths to it and up it are the various religions and philosophies which each of us chooses to adopt or turn away from. In their purest, least corrupted form, these paths are emanations of the mountain itself. The chapters that follow represent my attempt to piece together the shards of religious, philosophical and scientific understanding that have molded my own personal metaphysics. They are reflections, or at least speculations, about the nature of God and man, good and evil, life and death.