

DEITY AND SPIRITUALITY

(Note to reader: This essay, perhaps more than the others, is an intellectual exploration. To some it may seem little more than a metaphysical exercise—a neo-scholastic digression that is more suited for the middle ages. Obviously, to start off, the discussion assumes the *existence* of something we refer to as “God” or “Deity.” Then the chapter continues on attempting to *describe* what God or Deity might actually be. Such an undertaking may seem at best impossible and at worst presumptuous. Attempting to define Deity *in the abstract* may also seem less relevant when it really comes down to God being a very personal

experience that gives many of our lives meaning and purpose. For the author personally, contemplating such attributes of Deity is a way of cultivating further awe and respect for God. So---enjoy this essay if you wish -- or feel free to ignore any parts of it that seem too abstract.)

Defining Deity

The names of Deity vary across the world's major religions, including Christianity (God), Judaism (Yahweh), Islam (Allah), Hinduism (Brahma), and Buddhism (the Buddha). So do each religion's conceptions. So how is it possible to approach a common, universal concept of deity?

A perfect definition is impossible. The inherent nature or *essence* of Deity is generally viewed as ineffable—beyond our comprehension. Most theologies agree that a complete definition of God is beyond description or conceptualization. However, there do appear to be certain common attributes traditionally ascribed to God throughout a majority of religions.

So, at best, the following very partial list can be said to *point in the direction* of what might be God's "inherent nature." They all have a long history among various human attempts to understand the source or ground of all being.

Infinite

This attribute boggles the mind because it cannot be fully conceived. Alternatively, we can say that God is *boundless and is not any finite thing*. So that rules out the entire cosmos, whether that cosmos consists of only physical, or both physical and so-called “subtle,” dimensions (see the two essays on the “Scope of the Universe.”) The entire cosmos is said to be the “creation” of God (except in pantheistic theologies where it is equated with God), but God itself remains beyond the creation, not only in space but in time as well. Our minds simply cannot get a handle around such a possibility. To sum up:

God is not a distinct thing or process, but beyond all things and processes.

Prior to time and space

God's existence *beyond* space and time is often mentioned in classic spiritual texts. In the Old Testament, the burning bush tells Moses:

“Before Abraham, I am” and “I am that I am.” In short, God's existence—the one attribute we can grasp without paradox—extends beyond “the beginning of time” and “the ends of space.”

Cosmologists used to say that time and space as we know it began with the Big Bang 13.7 billion years ago. Thus God must have existed prior to and outside of that. One current cosmological theory proposes that there may be up to an

infinite number of big bangs extending backward and forward in time and space. So, even more unfathomably, God's existence must precede *all possible* cosmic big bangs.

Omniscient

The attribute of omniscience, or all knowing, starts to move away from Deity being something beyond all time and space. Instead, God, if "all knowing," must be more akin to *mind* or *consciousness*. But the immediate question is mind of consciousness of *what*? Is God the mind or consciousness of the entire cosmos? Several philosophers, including Spinoza and Hegel, proposed that this might be so. Even the Greeks

spoke of a “logos” – a sort of animated intelligence –which gives order to all things.

As one thinks of Deity as the sum total of all consciousness—a sort of universal cosmic mind—it seems as though we might be getting somewhat closer to the true article, the nature of Deity. The problem, though, is that such a notion of God lacks the fundamental attribute of being truly infinite. If there is such a thing, the “Mind of the Cosmos” must have a beginning or end in time and space, at least if the cosmos itself does. Therefore, Deity as cosmic consciousness lacks the quality of being infinite.

This argument against equating God with the cosmos (both physical and subtle) was

reasonable until a few years ago. However a current commonly proposed view by cosmologists is that the cosmos (even just the physical one) may itself be without boundaries and therefore infinite. So if there is a “Mind of the Cosmos,” then it, too, must be infinite. An “infinite mind of the cosmos” seems to be getting a step closer to a crude conception of what might be considered to be Deity, *especially* if we include not just a mind of the physical cosmos but one that embraces all of the numerous subtle realms (the heavens and hells, planes, nirvana and so forth, proposed by the world’s religions).

But even a consciousness as vast as this is still a fairly clear *conception*, and the original argument was that God, beyond being extant, remains *beyond all human conception*. So we're left to speculate that if there *is* a so-called "infinite mind/consciousness of all possible universes," then such a mind—if not the Ultimate Itself—must consist of subsidiaries and intermediaries of God, such as archangels, angels and spirit guides in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic traditions and devas and secondary deities like Shiva and Vishnu (among other entities) in Eastern religious traditions. It is *they* who do all the work of running the infinitude of physical and subtle universes, while God itself (in essence) remains beyond even this (as a kind of director?),

and inherently transcends even consciousness itself.

Long story short, God, being omniscient, knows virtually everything, and this “everything” happens to include a whole lot more than we mortals know or can even *conceive*.

Omnipotent

As it goes with omniscience, so it goes with omnipotence. To be omnipotent, God has to be infinitely powerful in every way we can conceive and then some. Deity qualifies as the “Source” of all order and organization throughout an infinitude of physical and nonphysical cosmoses. No doubt, though, such a “power” extends way beyond that— certainly

beyond what we could conceive or perhaps ever *possibly* conceive.

To say that God sourced and powered only the cosmos(es) we can conceive would certainly give Deity the short-shrift. Our physics (both quantum and macro) has many rules and laws that can't be changed. Newton's and Kepler's laws, for example, are immutable throughout the physical cosmos. But a truly omnipotent God would not be confined by any set of laws and should easily be able to change the laws (and corresponding physics) to any format chosen. Being totally omnipotent, why would God be confined to just our known physics?

Any possible physics (and corresponding phenomena to go with it) could be created.

Virtue

Beyond all of God's abstract attributes just described, many philosophers have also conceived God as an ultimate source of good, the ultimate standard to which all of our human ideals may be compared. There are many such ideals, but a few of the most important ones include:

- Altruism and empathy (compassion)
- Wisdom and understanding
- Ultimate beauty
- Perfect harmony and peace

How do these ideals arise—where do they come from? For Plato there were innate archetypes for them within the human soul (which he referred to as “forms”). It wasn’t that we learned them.

Instead we *recalled* them from our previous stint in heaven. For Kant, they were inborn “categories of understanding” that existed prior to the development of reason and language.

For scientist Richard Dawkins, on the other hand, standards of human morality are manmade and evolved over millennia as humans started living in groups and needed to develop rules and standards to get along with one another. The quest for wisdom and

understanding branched out from an earlier quest for survival.

Philosophers have argued for hundreds years whether these standards are innate or acquired. In my personal opinion, it would be desirable to believe they are innate, as it would then be possible to say that humans are inherently good by nature and only go astray through faulty learning and conditioning. The opposite is also true. When people behave in unloving or ignorant ways, or deliberately desecrate beauty, it would be desirable to believe that they do so as a result of faulty parental and/or cultural conditioning, not as a result of some innate human tendency toward evil. If humans have a

truly innate, unlearned tendency for evil, then they are certainly distinct from all other primates and animals on the planet.

Light

Another attribute often ascribed to God is Light. Not the physical light of an electric light bulb but the “Divine Light” that illuminates the heavens or the “inner light” that illumines our innermost being. In John 18:12 Jesus refers to himself as the “Light of the World.” In the transfiguration of Christ, he is said to have radiated light on a mountaintop. There are many Biblical references to this light in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Judaism , in the book of Daniel 2:22 , affirms that God “knoweth what

is in the darkness, and the Light dwelleth in Him.” In Islam, the Koran claims: “Allah is the Light of Heaven and Earth....Light upon Light, Allah guides unto His Light whom He will.” In Hinduism, it is said that God Almighty (Brahmin) resides within all humans as light. Buddhism speaks of the “clear light” of illumination and enlightenment.

So most religions attest to a connection between the Light inherent in God and the “inner light” within the soul of each individual. It is one of the most consistent connections between God and humanity attested to throughout the world.

So what is this Divine Light that is universally attributed to God as well as the human soul? A

number of characteristics distinguish it from physical light, as it does not belong to the physical, space-time order of things. Instead, it is said to be bright, luminous white light yet capable of being beheld without becoming blinding. Unlike the physical light of the sun, it emits no heat.

Apart from descriptions within religious literature, there are many reports of encountering such a light during near death experiences. The person with such an experience does not necessarily report encountering God directly; rather it is a “being of pure light” that is seen, typically an unconditionally bright light that does not hurt one’s eyes. Others who have

had near death experiences report a heaven that is resplendent with light. They report that they are naturally drawn to this light, sometimes through a dark tunnel.

From these near death reports, it appears that Divine Light is not merely associated with God but is a property of “heaven” itself. Heaven is often described as if it is actually “made of light.” The light has an attractive aspect that draws souls toward it. This is no surprise, really. If the soul itself is imbued with the Light of God, it seems plausible to imagine it would seek out its own kind when confronted by Light in heavenly or subtle realms.

The Light of God has had, since antiquity, an association with both: 1) higher knowledge and wisdom and 2) moral perfection. The words “illumination,” “enlightenment,” and “revelation” point to the aspect of Divine Light thought of as higher knowledge or wisdom. By contrast, the opposite term “darkness” typically refers to ignorance, unenlightened action, and morally reparable or “evil” behavior. “Going over to the darkness” or “falling into the darkness” is associated with ignorant and/or morally deficient behavior, while “becoming enlightened” or “seeing the light” indicates moral reform and overcoming ignorance and misunderstanding.

In most afterlife theologies, it should come as no surprise that heavenly realms are full of light and hellish ones full of darkness. Such disembodied, subtle realms are seemingly not so different from physical life on earth. In mortal life we may stumble, lose our way, and “suffer in the darkness” or be redeemed, restored, and “come to see the light,” improving both our experience of life as well as our interactions with others. Darkness and Light are not absolute opposites: there is a spectrum of shades of darkness and light in both subtle realms and on earth. A minor lie is called a ‘white lie.’ Our illumination may not be perfect: “we see through a glass darkly (or dimly).”

It might be argued that Divine or heavenly light is the “queen” of celestial attributes, providing a matrix for other ideal virtues such as love, beauty and harmony. It is by Divine light— Divine Illumination—that we are able to perceive such virtues. Of course there is an argument to be made that love (in its unconditional form sometimes called “agape”), is the “king” of all attributes of God and the heavens.

There is the famous quote of Jesus: “So my faith, hope and love abide, but the greatest of these is love.” Whether the highest attributes of God (and human experience)—faith, hope, charity, beauty, love, harmony, etc. are hierarchically

arranged or equal seems unanswerable and ultimately moot.

In approaching the “foothills” of Divinity and heavenly virtue, perhaps we would find that perfect Light, Love, Harmony, and Beauty are all intertwined and are interchangeably a part of, for lack of a better word, the “Divine Substance.”

So that leaves the question: what is *that*? If there is a Divine Substance, what is it? Certainly not matter or energy of the physical universe. More likely some kind of infinite, all pervasive consciousness—the luminous, radiant, all-loving so-called “Mind of God.” Perhaps a better and more universally accepted word is simply

“Spirit of God,” referred to in the Bible as the “Holy Spirit.” Again, as mentioned above, we are not speaking of the inherent, unknowable *essence* of Deity itself (which transcends conception). The “Spirit of God” is an *attribute* of Deity that includes ideal qualities such as perfect love, beauty, and harmony. This Spirit reaches down from its heavenly height to each of our mortal souls.

It *inspires* us, quickening our mind to perceive beauty, to do the right and best thing morally, and even to create all manner of creative and artistic productions. As in the case of Divine Light, the Holy Spirit is a vital connecting link between heaven and earth, between the Source and its creation.

From attributes to types of theologies

Personal vs. Impersonal

The attributes of deity mentioned above describe God in largely impersonal terms, focusing on qualities considered by many theologies to be inherent or essential to God's nature. However, since the beginning of time, humanity has tended to personalize Deity, giving God personal names and worshipping a variety of divine "representatives" of God perceived to take human form, from Jesus to Buddha to Mohammad. Though it is a longstanding view that God is ultimately ineffable and unknowable, the notion of Deity as an abstract, impersonal Source or Ground of all

Being has been more popular among philosophers and theologians than among the populace at large. Much more will be said about this in the section of this essay: “The Human Relationship with God.”

Theistic vs. Nontheistic

Closely related to the distinction between a personal vs. impersonal God is that between theistic vs. nontheistic conceptions. Theistic religions usually give God (or the gods) a name, such as Allah, Yahweh, or even *Great Spirit*. In some sense God is then understood to be a Divine Being who is personal, present, and active in the governance of the universe.

If Deity is both a “Being” and considered *infinite*, then God’s beingness cannot be understood in any ordinary sense of the word “being.”

Perhaps the most important implication of naming God is that it allows for the possibility of a personal relationship through worship, prayer, offerings, faith, and so on. Historically, all regions have included a theistic god or gods, allowing for a personal relationship. This can be dated back to prehistoric times of offerings and sacrifice to various gods.

On the other hand, impersonal notions of god described under the previous heading, are usually *nontheistic*. Deity remains an abstraction that does not seemingly have attributes of a

“being.” Abstract terms typically used to describe these impersonal conceptions are “the Absolute,” “the Infinite,” “Spirit,” “Source,” and the “Ground of Being.” Such terms have been popular among philosophers and metaphysical schools throughout history. Modern “new age” groups often use the words “Source” or “Spirit” to refer to God. Interestingly, they still encourage a personal relationship with a Deity so described through spiritual practices such as prayer and meditation. Many people these days take a position of religious universalism and want to avoid identification with any specific religion, so they avoid names of God (generally associated with religions) and prefer abstractions. However, they do not act as

though such a Deity is strictly impersonal. Ultimately, sharp distinctions between personal/impersonal and theistic/nontheistic tend to fall apart. Humans who are spiritually oriented invariably personalize whatever they choose to think of as Deity. What use would a totally impersonal, nontheistic abstraction be to humans in those times when we seek help, support, guidance, or comfort from a Higher Power? To sum up, Deity most often contains both an impersonal and a personal aspect. In it's "highest," inherent essence, it may be impersonal and beyond conception. For purposes of human spirituality, it also has a personal aspect with which/whom we may

interact. (See the section below on “The Human Relationship with God”).

Monotheistic vs. Polytheistic

Ancient peoples such as the Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, and Celts worshipped a pantheon of deities. There were gods of love, war, the sea, earth, the underworld, knowledge, the bounty of nature, and on and on. Some peoples even attributed deities to every local mountain, hill, and sacred place. “Sub- deity” beings (for lack of a better word) such as elves, fairies, rock spirits, and tree spirits abounded throughout many traditions. In addition to Jesus and Mary, Catholics have worshipped archangels, angels, and saints (each

of which having a special calendar day reserved for their remembrance), though these are typically seen as subsidiary to Jesus Christ.

Hindus traditionally have as well as continue to worship Shiva, Vishnu, Krishna, Radha, Ganesh, and a host of other deities.

All of these polytheistic perspectives conceive of the Divine as a plurality. It was in the second millennium BC that certain peoples began first to give precedence to a single deity over all the others. The Egyptians, even prior to the famous pharaoh Akhenaten, gave precedence to the god Aten, the sun god, over all of the other gods in the Egyptian pantheon. (Aten derived from the even older Ra, the sun god worshipped in Egypt

during the third millennium BC.) The belief that one god has precedence among a group of gods is referred to as *monolatry*, in contrast to the belief in only one, singular god, *monotheism*.

Early examples of monotheism are the Judaic worship of Yahweh and the Zoroastrian belief in Ahura Mazda. Whereas Judaism continues to this day to be monotheistic, the Christian doctrine of the *Trinity* posits a complex “three-in-one” monotheism, with God consisting of three distinct persons or *hypostases*: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Other variations of monotheism include *pantheism*, the belief that Deity is equivalent to the physical cosmos, and *panentheism*, the belief that Deity embraces *both*

the known cosmos as well as unknown
transcendental dimensions beyond.

Immanent vs. Transcendent

This polarity basically refers to the presence of Deity either *within* the known universe or transcendently beyond it. The belief that God is *both* in and beyond the universe simultaneously is described as *panentheism*. The very first religions predating even polytheism viewed Deity as entirely immanent and were *animistic*. Animism embraces the belief that there is a spiritual force in every rock, tree, mountain, lake and river (and much more). Deity is a multiplicity of spirits (often named) that inspire every physical thing, and yet it is also One Spirit

behind all of these distinctions. This approximates the Native American concept of the “Great Spirit.” A spiritual community in Scotland, known as Findhorn, revived this type of animism back in the late 1960s, claiming to actually communicate with the spirits of individual plants, as well as archetypal spirits that oversee entire plant or animal species, what they called *devas*.

The transcendent view of the Divine, on the other hand, is reflected in the Buddhist notion that the ultimate transcends everything that exists and everything that we can conceive that exists. Nirvana, or the Great Formless Reality, lies beyond all manifest creation, and even

beyond the potential or archetypal forms of what might exist. Christianity leans toward a transcendent view of God, maintaining that God is totally beyond the natural and human order of things. However it allows for the immanence of God in believing that the Holy Spirit is able to enter into human awareness and inspire us.

The four dualities just described cannot, *ultimately*, truly exist. We humans find it difficult to conceive of our world except in dualities. However, on the level at which the Divine exists, there are no dualities—the Divine itself is *One beyond all duality*.

A useful metaphor in this context is the notion of a *holographic universe*. The notion was first

proposed by English physicist David Bohm (Bohm, 1980). According to Bohm, all of the separate things we perceive in the physical world constitute what he refers to as the “explicate order.” However, these various things are all enfolded into one another in a way that renders them “all one.” The level on which this happens is beyond our perception and construction of a three- dimensional universe. Bohm refers to this level as the “implicate order.” He presents his ideas not as philosophical speculations but as constructs that help to explain the phenomena of modern quantum physics. Though not fully substantiated, there is actually some empirical evidence to support Bohm’s view that the

universe is organized holographically. A popular explanation of Bohm's ideas, making them available to the public, can be found in Michael Talbot's book, *The Holographic Universe* (Talbot, 1991).

If it is true that everything that exists is organized like a hologram, the implications are quite remarkable. One of the most fundamental aspects of a holographic image is that every part contains information about the whole. If the entire universe is organized "holographically," then each separate person, animal and thing implicitly contains the whole cosmos. We're all enfolded through the implicate order back into

one. In a sense, we are all emanations or permutations of one singular reality.

It follows that distinctions between polytheistic and monotheistic, or immanent and transcendent, ultimately cannot hold up at the very deepest level. Such dualities are humanly constructed distinctions. In a holographic universe they ultimately do not exist. The “many” really are not distinct from the “One” because each of the many is simply yet another emanation of the Whole. Spirit, in the final count, is both immanent and transcendent since, ultimately, the distinction does not exist.

The Human Relationship with God

How is a relationship with God possible? With whom or what do we enter into such a relationship? It was emphasized previously that Deity, *in its essence*, is totally beyond conception. When God is referred to as “the Absolute,” “the Infinite,” “the Source,” or “the Ground of Being,” it seems we are speaking of Deity as something impersonal or transpersonal, something beyond what we can relate to or even comprehend. If God is inherently ineffable and beyond conception, how can we have any kind of relationship? What is the point of praying to God, if we can’t conceive of what we are praying to?

In fact, it turns out that the idea of deity being beyond all conception is a relatively late historical invention (and abstraction) of medieval theology. From the beginning of human history, dating to very ancient times, deity has always been *personalized*. The earliest humans made sacrifices and offerings to deities and hoped for favor in return. Not long afterward, deities were given personal names such as Yahweh (a transliteration of an earlier acronym) in Judaism and Ahura Mazda in Zoroastrianism. The oldest names of all predated monotheism and referred to specific gods, such as Enki and Marduk in ancient Sumeria (Sumer).

By far the most common and widespread way of personalizing Deity is the belief in a Divine representative of God in human form. The major religions of the world are centered around such individuals. Christ in Christianity is exalted to the divine status of “Son of God” and considered to be the direct incarnation of God the Father. Krishna in Hinduism, said to have actually lived around 3200 BC, is considered a god with numerous divine attributes that distinguish him from mere mortals. Guatama Siddhartha—the Buddha—who lived around 400 BC, is no less a divine being, said to have witnessed all of his thousands of incarnations and ascended to Nirvana (heaven).

On the other hand, the central figures of Islam and the Bahai faith, respectively Mohammad and Bahauulla, are not direct incarnations of God but rather great prophets who were divinely inspired.

The same is true for Abraham and Moses in Judaism. However it's interesting that, out of all religions, Judaism does on occasion ascribe human characteristics to God. In the *Torah*, God speaks with his prophets and exhibits emotions such as anger, grief or happiness. In Taoism, Lao Tzu, the great philosopher author of the *Tao Tai Ching*, is often revered as a deity.

So, in brief, each major religion centers itself around a divine representative of God who took

human form — either as a direct incarnation or as a great prophet. Such intermediaries enable Deity to have a more concrete and recognizable form for a majority of people in the world.

The exception to this rule seems to be metaphysical movements or schools like Theosophy and Christian Science, who present elaborate systems of esoteric philosophy without worship of an immortalized human being. In these traditions there are primary teachers but no prophets to worship.

Theosophy has origins dating back to the 1500s, such as are found in the work of Jacob Boehme, long before the writings of its best known teacher in the 19th century, Helena Blavatsky.

Christian science, on the other hand, dates back to seminal author and founder Mary Baker Eddy. Rosicrucianism, founded in the 14th century by a mystical order that was not explicitly Christian, still maintains a Christian symbol, the rosy cross. Freemasonry does not look to any mortal representative of God but declares belief in a Supreme Being (candidates for Freemasonry are asked to expand or explain what this might be). Finally, Kriya Yoga, a popular system of teachings with certain resemblances to Hinduism, was brought to public awareness by a lineage of gurus (teachers), the most famous of which was Yogananda, who lived in the first half of the twentieth century. He was viewed as having attained a very high degree of spiritual

awareness, referred to as “realization,” but was not, strictly speaking, considered a prophet.

List of Experiences Defining the Human-Divine Relationship

The relationship between God and mortals includes many aspects. Direct experiential communication is often spoken of as “revelation.” Such communication may be perceived to come directly from God, from an immortalized being such as Jesus, or from a presumed angel or spirit guide. Frequently, though, there is no perception about the specific origins of the experience. It’s identified as revelation because there is a distinct feeling that it did not originate from one’s own

consciousness. Revelation can take many forms, some of which include:

Guidance

This can be an inner, intuitive sense of rightness about a particular decision to make or which has been made. It might also be an inner prompting to do or say something that is perceived to come from beyond one's own consciousness.

Inspiration

This is often described as an inner enthusiasm or uplift that leads to creative activity (music, writing, art, etc.) It can also be a state of awe and wonderment in response to perceived beauty, which is said to "inspire" us.

Support and Comfort

This might involve a sudden feeling of peace or calm in the face of challenge and uncertainty. It might also be a sense of companionship—that one is not alone—coming from a source perceived to be beyond oneself.

Sense of Oneness

An experience of all persons and/or all things in the world being deeply interconnected and thus part of a common unity.

Vision

A perception, not strictly visual, but in one's inner awareness, of a divine being, message, or even a heavenly scene. Usually the person having the vision is fully awake. Similar experiences can occur during the hypnagogic state (while falling asleep) or in dreams, but these are not considered to be visions, which occur during full wakefulness.

Special Occurrences of Divine Origin

Miracles

A miracle is understood to be a special event of Divine origin that interrupts the laws of nature. Classic examples come from the life of Christ, including healing of blindness and illness and physical occurrences such as raising Lazarus

from the dead and walking on water. However miracles frequently can occur without intervention of a prophet or saint. Many accounts of healing from illness that defy medical understanding have been documented. A common miracle reported is being saved from death (for example, drowning) by an unknown person who suddenly appeared out of nowhere.

Synchronicities

A synchronicity is the experience of two or more events that are not causally related, and unlikely to co-occur by chance, which are experienced occurring together in a meaningful way. The word “synchronicity” was coined by Carl Jung in his original book on the subject in 1952 (Jung,

1952). An example of a synchronicity would be thinking about leaving your boyfriend or girlfriend while driving, and then the song, "It's Too Late," by Carole King, comes on the radio. Another example would be this: at the very moment you've decided to call a friend, they call you just before you dial their number. Jung and many other people believe that such "meaningful coincidences" are not mere coincidences. The concept of synchronicity has been criticized, though, in both psychology and cognitive science as a form of confirmation bias. Confirmation bias is a tendency to interpret information in a way that confirms one's preconceptions and biases while ignoring any contradictory information.

Direct Interaction with Deity: Prayer and Meditation

Prayer

Prayer is a way of actively communicating with Deity, often in the form of a request. We may ask for a particular quality such as strength, peace or clarity. Other times we might ask Deity to be present with us in a particular situation. At other times we may simply *relinquish* a problem to Spirit, “giving it up to God,” so to speak.

Meditation

Meditation is a practice of becoming quiet to the point where we get in touch with a deeper part of our inner being, one that is non-reactive, beyond conditioning, and ultimately in tune with our soul and soul connection with Spirit. The practice of meditation offers a way to learn to dis-identify with self-limiting thoughts and emotions so that we can *witness* rather than *react* to them. For thousands of years, meditation has been a way to “still the mind” and directly access “the kingdom of heaven” (Judeo-Christian) or nirvana (Buddhism).

Summary

The preceding list of experiences, occurrences and direct interactions defining the Human-Divine relationship is very brief, incomplete and only touches on some common examples typical of Western religious traditions. The subjects of prayer and meditation have each been explored in virtually hundreds of books, and a full discussion is beyond the scope of this essay. For more detailed discussion of prayer and meditation, see the author's books *Beyond Anxiety & Phobia* (chapter 7) and *Global Shift* (chapter 22) (Bourne, 2001, 2008).

In sum, notions about the human relationship to Deity are quite ancient and date back to the beginning of history, long before monotheism,

when humans propitiated (asked for favor) and made sacrifices to their gods.

Part II: Toward a Universal Spiritual Perspective

Aldous Huxley referred to the common spiritual core that underlies the world's religions as the "perennial philosophy." He defined it as "the metaphysic that recognizes a Divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something like, or even identical with, Divine Reality; and the ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being."

The perennial philosophy has developed over several thousand years and falls into *two distinct traditions* whose general principles overlap. The first tradition springs from Eastern and Western mystics and spiritual leaders, often supplemented with philosophical insight and reflection. The second tradition consists of secret societies, occult wisdom, or mystery schools only marginally connected with organized religion. Both traditions share a common paradigm that encompasses: 1) some kind of Godhead, 2) the notion of irreducible dimensions beyond the physical, 3) a belief in the interconnection of all things and 4) the idea that the ultimate purpose of life on Earth is spiritual evolution.

In the East, the perennial philosophy arose from the experience of the ancient yogis of India, was partially systematized in the *Upanishads*, and was later refined in *The Bhagavad Gita*, the *Yoga Sutras* of Pantanjali, and by Shankara in his *Crest Jewel of Wisdom*. It has come down to us in recent times through the writings of Sri Aurobindo in *The Life Divine*, Ramana Maharshi, and Lama Govinda in his *Foundations of Tibetan Buddhism*.

In the West, the perennial philosophy can be traced back to Plato's theory of forms in *The Republic*, Plotinus's *Enneads*, and Meister Eckhart's *Sermons*. It was elaborated philosophically in Spinoza's *Ethics* and Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Mind* and was carried

forward in the twentieth century by William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*, Huston Smith's *Forgotten Truth*, Aldous Huxley's *Perennial Philosophy*, and, more recently, the voluminous writings of Ken Wilber.

The second tradition, the so-called mystery or esoteric schools, dates back to Pythagoras and includes Gnosticism, Kabbalism, and the Essenes in ancient times. During the Renaissance, schools such as the Rosacrucians and Masons emerged. More recent examples in the nineteenth and twentieth century would include Emmanuel Swedenborg, spiritualism, theosophy, and the teachings of Alice Bailey.

The so-called “New Age” spirituality of the late twentieth century, which flourished in the 1980s and early 1990s, is in a kind of category by itself but has made its own contribution to the perennial philosophy through channeled teachings such as *A Course in Miracles* and the writings of *Lazarus, Emmanuel* (channeled by Pat Rodegast), *Orin* (channeled by Sanaya Roman), and *Conversations With God* (channeled by Neale Donald Walsch).

In the twenty-first century, and more broadly over the next few hundred years, it seems likely that some form of the perennial philosophy will gain a progressively wider following. Up until the past fifty years, a majority people identified

spiritually with a particular religion rather than a universal form of spirituality associated either with mystical philosophy or a particular esoteric school. While this is still largely true throughout the world, the New Age movement in America and Europe witnessed a large number of people departing from established religion and adopting spiritual perspectives and practices that frequently crossed the boundaries of Eastern and Western traditions. It is likely that this move from religion toward spirituality will continue to broaden during the present century. Over a longer time period, perhaps several centuries, one might predict a gradual evolution of mankind away from highly defined traditions

toward a more universal spirituality. It's probably unlikely, though, that religions will disappear altogether. Cultural and national differences will probably always lead to a variety of religious approaches. Yet the boundaries between different religious traditions and paradigms will continue (as they have recently) to become more fluid and permeable as human consciousness evolves and more people move away from the dogmatic and primitive notion that "there is only one right way, and it's our way."

The Shape of a Universal Spirituality

As a universal spirituality begins to emerge, how might it take shape? There are some who

would like to place it on a continuum with science. Just as we presently have natural and social sciences, we could have a “spiritual science” (proposed originally in the 1940s by Yogananda) or sciences that seek to understand the more subtle and transpersonal aspects of consciousness and the cosmos at large. As more people come to agree on the reality of processes and phenomena such as ego-transcendence, the soul, survival after death, or karma and reincarnation, perhaps humanity would develop *a more consensual, worldwide body of spiritual knowledge* just as we have consensual bodies of knowledge presently in the natural and social sciences.

Such an approach seems fine up to a point and may eventually occur, encompassing a field of inquiry that has traditionally been called “metaphysics”: those aspects and dynamics of the Cosmos that exist beyond the physical universe as presently understood by science.

Where such spiritual knowledge might be limited is in dealing with the *normative and ethical dimensions* addressed by present-day religion, which focus on our personal relationship with Deity and how we should ultimately behave toward one another—rather than how the universe works. It seems quite possible in the future that science and religion may be *partially* integrated in some more

comprehensive understanding of the complete structure of reality. Yet there are aspects of science and religion/spirituality that will continue to remain separate: those aspects that refer to very different types of basic questions: *descriptive vs. normative*. Surrender of personal ego to a higher power or forgiving one's fellow human beings for their limitations is not the stuff out of which one makes a "science."

How might we go about defining the so-called perennial philosophy, the common spiritual core or transcendent unity that exists prior to all religious differences? What might be the dimensions of a universal spirituality?

Such a spirituality, in the author's opinion, ought to address at least three basic questions:

- What is the nature of reality? (to be explained through a “universe story” or cosmology)
- What is the meaning and purpose of human life?
- How should we as humans act toward one another?

What follows is a very provisional attempt to suggest how a universal spirituality might begin to answer the first two of these questions. See the essay on “Natural Ethics”

for a provisional answer to the third question.

Nature of Reality

A universal spirituality might include *at least* the following basic assumptions about the nature of reality or the cosmos at large:

Everything is one

At the highest level of reality, things are not separate. The world of distinct objects and events that we perceive ultimately emanate from one source. Apparent dualities, such as good and evil, light and dark, and male and female, prevail at our level of existence but are ultimately transcended at the highest level of

reality. It is through consciousness, not the material forms of objects, that all things are interconnected. By implication, all of humanity—indeed all living things—are emanations of One Being.

**Every separate object, at whatever level,
partakes of consciousness**

Reality is intelligently ordered at all levels from subatomic particles to galaxies. Wherever an “organized whole” (what Ken Wilber refers to as a “holon”) exists—be it an atom, molecule, crystal, cell, organ, organism, culture, race, humanity, planet, solar system, galaxy, or the entire universe—consciousness is active in both establishing and maintaining the integrity of

that particular unit of reality. Organized wholes are not created by purely mechanistic processes (studied by science) but require an intelligent ordering principle that is both inherent in and transcendent of physical reality. Mystics have referred to this principle as “Cosmic Consciousness,” “Spirit,” “Essence,” “Logos,” or the “Ultimate Ground.” Religions use names such as God, Allah, Brahma, and Yahweh.

Assuming that the cosmos is not just neutral or purely objective but *subjective* and in some sense “conscious,” the entire universe as we conceive it becomes holy or sacred. The universe is not just a meaningless object (though science treats it as such for the purpose of mechanistic-causal analysis). Rather it is meaningful, enchanted,

purposeful, and deserving of our reverence. The wonder that we might feel in looking up at the stars at night is a reasonable response to a sacred universe.

Reality consists of multiple dimensions, one or more of which exist beyond the physical, space-time dimension we inhabit

All religions throughout history have pointed to a realm beyond the physical, referring to it by different names, such as heaven, nirvana, bardos, or Summerland. Esoteric spiritual philosophies such as Vedanta and theosophy, and modern spiritual philosophers such as Huston Smith and Ken Wilber, speak of multiple dimensions beyond the physical such as the subtle (astral),

causal, and ultimate levels of reality. All of these ideas share the notion that there are nonphysical dimensions of reality that exist outside of physical space-time. Many religions hold that various types of nonphysical beings exist in these subtle dimensions, such as angels, devas, spirit guides, various kinds of positive and negative spirits, as well as discarnate human beings.

Science cannot presently give a coherent account of how such dimensions might exist or how they might articulate with the physical, three-dimensional reality making up the known universe. Thus many scientists remain dismissive of the idea of nonphysical

dimensions. However, anyone who believes in the survival of the human soul beyond physical life needs to assume such a dimension or dimensions exist. This idea is also required by the previously described notion that “all things are one at the highest level of reality” and would be a fundamental tenet of any universal spirituality.

Reality in general, and humanity specifically, are always evolving

The direction of history moves from the One to the many and ultimately back to the One.

Duality and a multiplicity of forms evolved out of the One Ultimate Ground or God. However, as time passes, all apparently separate beings

are gradually evolving in the direction of reunifying with their Source. In brief, God first differentiates into the many and then, over eons, gradually reintegrates the many back into the One. Hinduism specifically describes this idea of the evolution and involution of Deity, but all religions and spiritual paths make assumptions about the desirability of being “right with God,” “aligned with God’s Will,” or even “unified or one with God.”

This raises the second question that any universal spirituality needs to answer: What is the purpose of life?

Purpose of Human Life

Does life have an ultimate purpose beyond mere gratification of the ego's basic needs (well described by psychologist Abraham Maslow) for survival, security, comfort, love and belongingness, as well as self-esteem and recognition? Most religions and spiritual paths would maintain that we are here to grow, through life experience, and become more loving, compassionate, tolerant, patient, and kind. Most religions center around exemplars who illustrated this ideal behavior, such as Jesus, Buddha, Mohammed, and Krishna. It is a common belief that these figures were a replication or emanation of the Divine on Earth.

So, basically, human beings are here on Earth to grow and evolve—to become more “Godlike,” as demonstrated by God’s exemplars. Yet is this not just an extension of the last principle listed under “nature of reality” above? Are we not here, then, to evolve toward becoming more like, aligned, or unified with Divinity, because that is the direction in which everything ultimately is going anyway? In an evolutionary cosmos, everything originally evolved out of God and is ultimately returning back to God. When our personal life is growing in this direction, we are aligned with the natural direction or “flow” of the universe. When we are not—when we are acting from a place of fear, anger, greed, prejudice, envy, or jealousy, for example—then

we are out of alignment or “out of the flow” with the natural direction of the universe.

Sure enough, it does not feel very good—for us or for others with whom we interact—even though our ego inclinations may lead us that way. So the purpose of life, first and foremost, is simply to evolve toward being in alignment with the natural flow of the universe—that is, toward increasing unification with Spirit or Source. Our purpose is also to learn from our many mistakes that tend to lead us away from this flow. In this light, *life is a classroom for growth in consciousness*—for the development of wisdom and the capacity to love.

The tasks and challenges that come up in life, and our response to them, do not have eternal repercussions. Nor do they have no meaning at all. They are more like lessons in a classroom, lessons to which we apply ourselves, and which we try to master as best can. Each lesson is repeated until it is mastered. As we master old lessons, new ones are put before us. This “earth school” is thus a place where each of us can learn and grow; it’s not our final dwelling place. Eventually it’s time to leave this classroom and move on.

Conclusion

Humans have always looked with awe upon the intricate order of nature and imagined that there

must be some Creator behind it all. Innumerable views on the nature of Deity (or groups of deities) date back to the origins of humanity. A great divergence of views on the nature of God and God's relationship to humans is likely to continue into the distant future. Racial, cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity guarantees an assortment of views. A single, universal paradigm defining the nature of God, as well as the meaning and purpose of life, is possible but unlikely to develop in the foreseeable future. Eventually humanity may come to understand that the purpose of our earthly life is to transcend our own personal selves and connect with something larger, whether the needs of others or the consciousness of the universe as a

whole. No doubt, though, that there likely exists somewhere an advanced extraterrestrial civilization that has already achieved such an understanding.

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