

Who Do You Say I Am?

Reframing Jesus
in Light of
Perennial Wisdom
and
The Gospel of Thomas

Thomas James Hickey

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Dedicated to
AVATAR OF THE AGE
MEHER BABA

The Divine Romance

In the gross, subtle and mental spheres the lover is conscious of being separated from the beloved, but when all these spheres are transcended, the lover is conscious of his unity with the Beloved. The lover loses himself in the being of the Beloved and knows that he is one with the Beloved. Divine love is entirely free from the thralldom of desires or limiting self. In this state of infinity the lover has no being apart from the Beloved. He is the Beloved Himself.

We thus have God as infinite love, first limiting Himself in the forms of creation, and then recovering His infinity through the different stages of creation. All the stages of God's experience of being a finite lover ultimately culminate in His experiencing Himself as the sole Beloved. The sojourn of the soul is a thrilling divine romance in which the lover, who in the beginning is conscious of nothing but emptiness, frustration, superficiality and the gnawing chains of bondage, gradually attains an increasingly fuller and freer expression of love, and ultimately disappears and merges in the divine Beloved to realise the unity of the Lover and the Beloved in the supreme and eternal fact of God as Infinite Love.¹

Meher Baba

¹ Meher Baba. *Discourses*. Edited by Don E. Stevens. (San Francisco: Sufism Reoriented, 6th ed. 1966), Vol. 3, p. 179-180. URL=<<http://discoursesbymeherbaba.org/v3-179.php>>.

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PREFACE

*The Grape that can with Logic absolute
The Two-and-Seventy jarring Sects confute:
The sovereign Alchemist that in a trice
Life's leaden metal into Gold transmute.¹*

The Jesus tradition greatly exceeds what is now normally considered to be Christianity. The range of early writing about Jesus and quotations of his sayings range from Palestine, where they originated, east to Ireland and West to China, and include Jewish, Islamic and Hellenistic sources.² An ancient tradition holds that Thomas the Apostle traveled to India, and there is evidence of the Jesus tradition there that appears to be very old, possibly first century.³

The Jesus tradition has to do with Jesus. Therefore, the question, "Who do you say I am," which Jesus asked his disciples, is central to this tradition. The answer to this question was the subject of many early controversies. For in the course of answering questions such as this, the "orthodox" faction ruled out a number of answers as "heretical" and denounced those holding such view as heretics.

¹ Omar Khayyam. *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam of Naishapur*. XLI. (Lines 241-244). Translated by Edward Fitzgerald. Second Edition. *English Poetry II: From Collins to Fitzgerald*. Vol. XLI. The Harvard Classics. (New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1909-14); Bartleby.com, 2001. Public Domain. URL=<www.bartleby.com/41/>. The *Rubaiyat* is a description of mysticism on the Sufi path of love. "The Grape" signifies the "wine" of divine love that "intoxicates" the soul as lover, making it forget the world to unite with the Divine Beloved.

The "wine" of divine love is a common symbol in Sufism. The alchemical transmutation of lead into gold symbolizes the soul's spiritual transformation. "Lead" is the symbol of ordinary awareness filled with thoughts, desires, and worldly cares, while "gold" symbolizes the union of the soul with God in the Beatific Vision. The most famous line of the *Rubaiyat*, "a loaf of bread, a jug of wine, and thou," signifies that on the path of love all that is needed is bare subsistence (bread), divine love (wine), and the presence of the Beloved (thou) in one's heart.

² Andrew Phillip Smith. *The Lost Sayings of Jesus: Teachings from Ancient Christian, Jewish, Gnostic and Islamic Sources — Annotated and Explained*. (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2006).

³ Leslie W. Brown, Bishop of Uganda. *The Indian Christians of St Thomas: an Account of the Ancient Syrian Church of Malabar*. (Cambridge At the University Press, 1956).

What is taken for granted today was far different in the early days, and it might easily have turned out differently at a number of turns.¹ Actually, things did turn out differently at several important junctures, most notably the Great Schism and the Protestant Reformation. As a result there are several versions of normative Christianity, with different denominations putting in place different sets of norms.

In spite of this eventual disunity and the differences it brought, the faction that emerged victorious early on largely determined the traditional answer to the question, "Who do you say I am?" for most subsequent Christian believers. This picture has also carried over into the culture at large, so that even people who do not accept Jesus view him in terms of the prevalent understanding.

This cultural tradition has now become a convention, putting a "frame" around the way Jesus is perceived, incorporating certain matters and excluding others. For example, the argument over whether Jesus was only divine, only human or both divine and human is no longer argued among Christians, the first two having been excluded from the orthodox frame.

Those who reject the traditional view of Jesus as divine strive to show that he is either a mythological character who never actually lived or was only human, merely a historical figure around whom a myth grew up. Others, like Geza Vermes, a Jewish historian and scholar of the New Testament, have sought to present a historically accurate account of the Jewish Jesus in contrast to the Gentile Jesus of contemporary Christianity.²

These are all different ways of "framing" Jesus in order to answer his perennial question to the world — "Who do you say I am?" There are many others that lie beyond the scope of this undertaking.

But one view that will particularly concern us is that of perennial wisdom. Perennial wisdom provides another answer to Jesus' question. In this view, Jesus is seen as one of many advents of the God-Man, "Avatar," or "Buddha,"— the same one who descends repeatedly into human form to save humanity when it is in crisis. Moreover, an important part of the God-Man's mission is to remind humanity of its divine birthright and the divine destiny of everyone as a "child" of God. Meister Eckhart alluded to this message when he wrote:

¹ This contest lasted hundreds of years, and one might even say that the early controversies lasted until the Eastern and Western Churches split in 1054 CE. While the schism resulted from a variety of causes, principally papal authority, it also involved a doctrinal matter called the *filioque* clause. The Western Church had added to the Nicene Creed that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father *and the Son* (Latin: *filioque*), which the Eastern Church rejected.

² Geza Vermes. *Jesus the Jew — A Historian's Reading of the Gospels*. New York: Collins, 1973; *The Authentic Gospel of Jesus*. London: Allen Lane 2003.

“What a man loves a man is.” [St. Augustine] If he loves a stone he is that stone, if he loves a man he is that man, if he loves God — nay, I durst not say more; were I to say, he is God, he might stone me. I do but teach you the scriptures.¹

Eckhart affirms, "We love God with His own love; awareness of it deifies us."² This is a perennial teaching of mystics and masters. Krishna, held to be a divine incarnation in the Vedic tradition, is reported to have said:

Many are the means described for the attainment of the highest good, such as love, performance of duty [Sanskrit: *dharma*], self-control, truthfulness, sacrifice, gifts, austerity, charity, vows, observance of moral precepts, I could name more. But of all I could name, verily love is the highest: love and devotion that make one forgetful of everything else, love that unites the lover with Me. What ineffable joy does one find through love of Me, the blissful Self! Once that joy is realized, all earthly pleasures fade into nothingness.³

This gives insight into the cornerstone teaching of the religions of the Book, Judaism, Christianity and Islam:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD [YHVH] our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts.⁴

Perennial wisdom is so significant because it is the teaching of those not only widely recognized as spiritual luminaries but also in a position to know, having realized union themselves. These are the masters whose lives founds religions, the mystics whose testimony reveals the spiritual path through the inner worlds, the prophets whose preaching animates religious traditions, and the role models whose lives inspire emulation.

The figures of perennial wisdom are spiritual giants of Jesus' caliber. What they say about the matter is therefore not only weighty in a cultural sense. Their words also carry the weight of authority for those who acknowledge their spiritual status. For their privileged knowledge puts them in the position of knowing whereof they speak on the basis of expanded experience, the basis of spiritual wisdom.

¹ Frantz Pfeiffer. *Meister Eckhart*. Translated by C. de B. Evans. 2 Vols. (London: John M. Watkins, 1924), 1, p. 57. Compare: "God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him." 1 John 4:16.

² Pfeiffer. 1, p. 147.

³ *Srimad Bhagavatam*, 11.8, translated by Swami Prabhavananda. *The Wisdom of God*. (Hollywood, CA: Vedanta Press & New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1943).

⁴ Deuteronomy 6:4-7 (King James Version).

Even those who only accord them respect recognize that the words of spiritual luminaries are weighty culturally, even though they may not understand them. The wise are the gold standard of historical evaluation, eclipsing even the greatest speculative thinkers.

Therefore, we will investigate the conventional framing of Jesus in light not only of the Jesus tradition but also the perennial tradition of the world's mystics, masters, saints, sages, and prophets. With respect to the Jesus tradition, we will take into account historical methodology and research, as well as exciting new discoveries, such as the recently unearthed text of *The Gospel of Thomas*, which put a new slant on conventional wisdom. With respect to perennial wisdom, we will examine the Jesus tradition in light of the world's great spiritual teachers and their teachings.

The subtitle of this work is "Reframing Jesus in light of perennial wisdom and *The Gospel of Thomas*." "Framing" is perhaps an unfamiliar concept to many people. However, a few examples will serve to illustrate it. For instance, everyone who has encountered detective stories or films knows that the obvious suspects were likely framed by planting evidence. Similarly, in the Jesus tradition, it now appears that many of the so-called heretics were also framed by "orthodox" polemics aimed at discrediting them. Therefore, it is necessary to revisit these charges in the light of new knowledge, especially that which *The Gospel of Thomas* provides.

Moreover, perennial wisdom and the Jesus tradition deal with many of the same issues. The contention herein is that it would be very surprising if they did not have many things in common and much to say to each other. Conversely, present-day Christianity has effectively marginalized this dialogue, claiming to be not only unique but also superior.

In addition to the negative sense of being "framed" for something one did not do, there is another important connotation of "framing." Everyone is familiar with how branding is used in advertising to "hype" products, and how political operatives "spin" political positions in order to present them more favorably for a particular faction than they actually are. This is like putting a gilded frame around a mediocre picture to make it seem grander than it actually is.

It is now clear that almost from the beginning of the Jesus tradition various parties also represented — "framed" — matters from angles favorable to their faction and its position. This included giving answers to such doctrinally central questions as, "Who do you say I am?" a particular "spin," or forced interpretation. When the dust had cleared after years, decades and even centuries of such controversies, the victorious party was recognized as "orthodox." Its frame had triumphed and became the uncontested orthodox teaching accepted by all believers as divinely inspired truth, held to be the teaching of Jesus transmitted through the apostles and their successors.

That viewpoint and interpretation has become tradition, and that tradition has also passed over into cultural convention. The early controversies were largely forgotten until the discovery of ancient documents, such as *The Gospel of Thomas*, which raised fresh questions and shed new light on the early times. Moreover, scholars developed much more powerful methods for doing research into evidence and interpreting texts, and they were aided in this by the discovery of ancient documents and artifacts. As a result, much that was previously shrouded in the mists of time and garbed in the venerable robes of tradition is now coming to light.

In the course of this undertaking we will revisit the early years of the Jesus tradition and its subsequent development into the Christianity of today, examining this on the basis of new knowledge that sheds light on how the traditional frame was shaped and contemporary methodology revealing how this frame needs to be modified — “reframed” — in order to be brought in line with evidence.

The aim is to show how normative Christianity is only one framework for interpreting the Jesus tradition, and not the best one at that. “Normative “ is a word scholars use to indicate a universe of discourse whose criteria are “norms.” A norm is a standard against which subordinate statements involving truth, belief, value, and so forth are judged or evaluated. Norms also play the part of rules that prescribe procedure. The role they play as foundational criteria privileges them from challenge, error, or even question, since they are stipulated as ultimate in the system. In this sense, they function as absolutes with respect to the system in which they set the standards.

In religions, articles of faith and dogma play the role of norms, with respect to doctrine, trumping all other claims in the realms over which they rule authoritatively. Established rubric sets the standard for ritual, and commandments, precepts and injunctions are ultimate prescriptions with respect to observance and action. Canons regulate an ecclesiastical institution in the same way that constitutions and laws regulate political entities. In the sphere of normative religion, these are all norms, and the different normative religions and sects are distinguished on the basis of norms.

Justification in the case of religious norms is by appeal to established religious authority. In the history of Christianity, religious authority includes scripture, tradition, and ecclesiastical authority. Custom and convention can also play the role of super-criteria, even though these norms are often unconscious and may be unstated.

Norms need not be specifically declared, for their usage identifies them by the key role they play in justification. Many key doctrinal beliefs serve as norms, for example. Certain customary ways of behaving do also. Religious norms generally encompass doctrine, ritual and observance, and they may extend to virtually all areas of life in highly religious or theocratic societies.

This undertaking considers norms primarily in terms of their objective manifestation, that is, logically and historically, instead of psychologically. This is neither to overlook the psychological component of norms nor ignore its importance. Rather, it is the result of a choice to limit the scope of the undertaking to the manageable, since the issues involved in the psychological side of norms and the subjective aspect of values is controversial and constitutes something of a philosophical morass that is beyond the scope of this undertaking. The difference between norms and values, and the issues involved in the subjective versus the objective are set forth in Appendix Five: Norms and Values — Subjective or Objective?¹

The argument herein compares and contrasts the normative approach to Jesus' teaching characteristic of most Christian sects and denominations with a mystical approach to the Jesus tradition in light of the perennial wisdom contained in the testimony and teaching of the world mystics and masters, saints and seers, prophets and holy ones. It seeks to establish that mystical experience, which is self-evident to those experiencing it, is the ultimate criterion in matters spiritual rather than authoritatively imposed norms. For the justification of norms involves either a vicious circle or an infinite regress in appealing to norms to account for norms, or else it involves an appeal to some arbitrary authority such as the infallibility of the pope.

Justification must come to an end if an infinite regress is to be avoided. Justification ends either in experience or elsewhere. "Elsewhere" includes stipulations such as assumptions, axioms, postulates and similar norms, or else some supernatural source, such as divine inspiration. Stipulations are arbitrary, and appeals to a *deus ex machina* such as divine inspiration (whose truth is guaranteed by the Holy Spirit) are appeals to norms based on belief rather than grounded on either fact or experience.

Justification based on experience can relate either to objective experience, this is, facts verifiable ultimately through sense experience, or subjective experience, such

¹ The subjective aspect of religious norms is particularly important because it involves "sin" as a "thought-crime," which entails the self-punishment of guilt that applies even when one is not subjected to the public punishment of blame and shame. Guilt is a major motivator in religion, and in normative Christianity in particular. At the other end of the spectrum is the charismatic movement. Ironically, many Fundamentalist and Evangelical sects, who are most literal in their approach to scripture as a key fundamental, also regard being "born again in the Spirit" as even more basic. Certainly, the charismatic experience of being born again in the spirit as they regard it is a mystical phenomenon. While it is subjective in the sense of intimately personal, it is also objective in the sense that it involves alterations of lifestyle that would be very difficult to persist in faking, absent a genuine change of heart. It is also a norm required for full participation in the community.

as a person's own inner states. For example, emotions, such as joy, sorrow, love, hate, and anger, are immediate and unmistakable to the person undergoing them. The inner experiences of mystics are similarly immediate and self-evident.

In the physical sphere, scientists hold that the fundamental level of justification is experience. Although experience is subjective, the fact that it is shared to the degree that agreement is possible renders it objective. Similarly, in contrast to normative believers, those adhering to the mystical interpretation hold that in the spiritual sphere the ultimate justification is mystical experience rather than religious authority. While mystical experience is admittedly subjective in that it is intimately personal to the mystic, perennial wisdom amply demonstrates that this experience is shared widely and arrived at independently.¹

In this view, mystical experience trumps other norms because it is direct and intuitive rather than mediated and discursive. Even those who deny the primacy or even the value of mystical experience with respect to norms ground their adherence to the founder and the prophets on the basis of "privileged" knowledge that is unavailable to other human beings.

In other words, is the source of religion merely stories or is it experiential reports? The answer of normative Christianity is that "the Holy Spirit" guarantees the truth of the stories through "inspiration." However, this sounds all too "mystical" in the pejorative sense of credulous, or as we say colloquially, "airy-fairy," instead of being experientially based. Ironically, this is just the sort of gratuitous otherworldly explanation that many normative Christians decry as "New Age."

The answer of those holding to the mystical interpretation of the Jesus tradition say that mystical experience is foundational, primarily that of Jesus and the Hebrew prophets, but also of other mystics who appeared later. Paul, who is rightly held to be the formulator of the Jesus tradition for the Gentile world, which became what we now call "Christianity," was a mystic. On his own testimony his teaching is based on his mystical experience, not merely inspiration, albeit an experience

¹ The Bible itself testifies that wisdom is perennial and ubiquitous: "For wisdom is more moving than any motion: she passeth and goeth through all things by reason of her pureness. For she is the breath of the power of God, and a pure influence flowing from the glory of the Almighty: therefore can no defiled thing fall into her. For she is the brightness of the everlasting light, the unspotted mirror of the power of God, and the image of his goodness. And being but one, she can do all things: and remaining in herself, she maketh all things new: and in all ages entering into holy souls, she maketh them friends of God, and prophets. For God loveth none but him that dwelleth with wisdom. For she is more beautiful than the sun, and above all the order of stars: being compared with the light, she is found before it." (Wisdom of Solomon (Apocrypha), 7:24-29 King James Version)
URL=<<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/bible/kjv.Wis.7.html>>

received through grace rather than self-effort, and, indeed, in spite of it, since Paul was persecuting the followers of the Way of Jesus at the time.¹

The mystical interpretation holds that the spirituality that Jesus taught is an expression of perennial wisdom, or “the perennial philosophy” that lies at the heart of all religions and wisdom traditions in their mystical core. Perennial wisdom is found in the testimony of mystics and the teaching of masters around the world from time immemorial. It illuminates the core spirituality that constitutes the ancient religion of humankind as it appears in different linguistic and cultural garb at different times and places.

I will argue herein that an interpretation emphasizing the consistency of Jesus’ teaching with perennial wisdom has the advantage of being more in tune with evidence, while also avoiding dubious sectarian exceptionalism and “Messianic” triumphalism.²

On this interpretation, the Jesus tradition is far broader than normative Christianity, and contains many strains in addition to Catholicism, Orthodoxy and Protestantism, although this has been obscured by the normative viewpoint that frames the conventional universe of discourse. Moreover, the Jesus tradition contains a mystical teaching dating to its origins. This mystical Way of Jesus constitutes the Master’s teaching about the spiritual quest; hence, it lies at the very heart of the Jesus tradition. It is similar to the mystical core of other religions, such as Qabalah in Judaism Sufism in Islam, and Vedanta in Hinduism, aligning it with timeless truths of perennial wisdom.

The mystical tradition stemming from Jesus as yet has no specific name. “Christian mysticism” and “mystical Christianity” are insufficient because they presuppose the existing frame of reference, and this frame excludes important factors, as the present undertaking will show.

I propose calling the mystical tradition stemming from Jesus, “the Way of Jesus.” It is capitalized to call attention to this technical use, as well as to conform to the convention of capitalizing the name of other mystical traditions within major religions, such as Qabalah in Judaism, Sufism in Islam, and Vedanta in Hinduism.

At the core of all universal mystical teachings is realization of the *nondual* state of consciousness. This state is not commonly known in the West and has not acquired a specific name as it has in other traditions. Moreover, there is much

¹ Before the earliest groups began to become institutionalized, the first followers of Yeshua spoke of their discipleship as “the Way.” See Acts 9:2; 18:25-26; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22.

² “Messianic” is intended in a pejorative ideological sense here, not in its Hebrew meaning of God’s anointed one.

confusion about this state of awareness as set forth in Eastern traditions, e.g., as Sanskrit *nirvikalpa* and *nirbija samadhi* in the Vedic tradition, *nirvana* and *shunyata* in Buddhism, Chinese *wu ji* in Taoism, and Arabic *fana fillah* in Sufism. An objective of this undertaking is to remedy this deficiency.

The Gospel of Thomas makes an unequivocal assertion that realizing the nondual state is a prerequisite to “entering the kingdom,” a metaphor for enlightenment.¹ *The Gospel of Thomas* therefore emerges as a key contribution with respect not only to the early Jesus tradition but also to perennial wisdom.

This study joins critical methodology based on reasoning with insights from mystical experience in order to reframe the historical and theological universes of discourse. To the degree that doctrine and theology eclipse history, including the history of mysticism, normative Christianity often misses core aspects of who Jesus was and what he taught. This study calls for a larger, more universal reframing of the Jesus tradition in terms of both mystical experience and critical methods.

The Jesus tradition is a combination of many factors, including historical fact and religious belief, as well as mythological symbolism and mystical reports. Generally speaking, the religious element has dominated the universe of discourse. Beliefs have often been confused with facts, symbols and analogies taken literally, and mystical experiences marginalized or excluded.

The religious element includes doctrine, ritual and observances, as well as quasi-religious and merely cultural conventions. The predominant frame of reference is normative Christianity, comprising a variety of denominations and sects, which are characterized by common or at least similar fundamentals, while differing substantially over a spectrum that ranges from ultra-conservative to ultra-liberal. This multi-faceted frame, influenced by many sects and the controversies that differentiate them, affects not only the public universe of discourse. It also impinges upon scholarly investigation and debate in that many scholars are at least subliminally influenced by their religious background and affiliation.

The first requirement of this proposed investigation is to show how normative Christianity in general is expressed in terms of a conceptual model and that this map is typically confused with the territory it purportedly represents. This analysis necessitates an exploration of how framing structures a universe of discourse. An essential aspect of this investigation shows how norms are not absolutes independently of their privileged role in a system.

The privileged elements — dogmas, articles of faith, rubrics, behavioral injunctions and the like — determine the game by determining the rules of play, for example, what is in-bounds and out. They also set priorities and establish

¹ Sayings 3, 22.

hierarchies of value. Most religious people are unaware of this dynamic, into which they are “programmed” from childhood.

The second requirement is to show the normative model of Christianity is challenged not only by historical methodology and rigorous scholarship that reveal discrepancies between doctrine and evidence, but also by logical analysis that shows how its norms are functions of the framework, not the absolutes represented.

Regarding the former, scholarship illuminates the confusion of belief with evidence and the conflation of myth with fact. Investigation into the theoretical “frames” that normative Christianity imposes on the life and teaching of Jesus reveals that some elements that were mythic and symbolic were taken literally, represented as factual, and asserted as historically true. The most extreme examples are literal interpretations of the Genesis creation myths, which asserted that the universe is only a few thousand years old in spite of the scientific evidence contradicting this. However, there are many other instances that are much less obvious. Many people who regard the literalist interpretation of Genesis as obtuse would likely be surprised to find that they take less obviously non-historical symbols literally also.

Understanding how framing operates in the construction of conceptual models enables a logical critique of normative Christianity separate from the historical one. This analysis shows that normative Christianity is only one possible interpretation of Jesus' life and teaching. Other interpretations may be more appropriate in accounting for the data, which includes a great deal of mystical testimony. Moreover, this mystical testimony is similar to that of other traditions.

Normative Christianity marginalized the mystical core of Jesus' teaching and even declared books such as *The Gospel of Thomas* to be heretical. However the historical evidence reveals that normative Christianity erred; it shows that the mystical and perennial wisdom teachings were central rather than peripheral in Jesus and the earliest tradition.

This undertaking combines the results of historical research and logical analysis to show how evidence not only does not support the current framework but also often contradicts it, revealing that the normative framework stands in need of reworking. In addition, different interpretations of the same data — texts and historical events, are possible. For example, it is possible to interpret the Jesus tradition as consistent with perennial wisdom instead of as opposed to it, as normative Christianity tends to do.

Here it is important to note that there is a significant difference between conflicting interpretations and historical revisionism. Reframing requires attention to both. It is my contention, first, that the Jesus tradition can be interpreted as consistent with perennial wisdom — indeed, as an expression of it. Secondly, historical revisionism shapes in the narrative according to normative Christianity.

Reframing affects the whole of the Jesus tradition, including both the popular perception and theological understanding of Jesus himself. This study proposes that such reframing be accomplished by viewing the Jesus tradition in the light of perennial wisdom. This view sees Jesus not as unique and exceptional but as one of the great spiritual luminaries of humanity, who all reiterate perennial wisdom for their time in their particular way. The rationale is that virtually all other religious traditions fit into this model, so it would be surprising if the Jesus tradition did not, too. This is not to denigrate Jesus' divine role, however, but to reinterpret it in terms of perennial wisdom about the periodic advents of the God-Man.

Most importantly in this argument, the fundamental emphasis of perennial wisdom is on spiritual experience, in particular the realization of nonduality, which is found in virtually every mystical tradition. I will argue that the Jesus tradition can be interpreted as being based on nonduality also. The interpretation put forward herein has the advantage of harmonizing Jesus' teaching with perennial wisdom instead of opposing it, as the normative frame does.

Analysis shows that normative framing marginalizes mysticism and excludes so-called heretical works supporting it on the basis of arbitrary norms. Historical research also puts it in conflict with evidence. On this interpretation, both traditional Christian mystics and non-traditional sources such as *The Gospel of Thomas* become central instead of peripheral.

When the ground of religion is to be spiritual experience instead of a privilege conveyed by conceptual framing, the frame itself becomes secondary; it only a teaching device, not an absolute. In the normative interpretation, the frame is equated with absolute truth. When spiritual experience is foundational, the framework for thought and communication is simply interpretive, and a variety of frames might apply. The test is practicality, since its ground in reality is spiritual experience, and its connection to the world is correspondence to evidence.

The difference between the normative and the experiential is that when experience is foundational, it can be admitted that any teaching that demonstrably leads to this is valid. Since the realization of nonduality is exhibited in all religions and wisdom traditions, there is no reason to question their fitness for reaching this goal. Perennial wisdom is the story of many paths leading to the same goal, realization of nonduality. On the other hand, while realization of nonduality is reported in normative Christianity, it is neither regarded as the goal, nor valued as such. Indeed, unless such reports are qualified in terms of its norms, they are subject to rejection as heretical.

The interpretation I propose allows not only for incorporating mystical testimony and teaching but also for according it foundational status in the framework, regarding the way and the goal. Realization of nonduality, evidenced by such statements as "I and the Father are one," assumes a privileged position in the

account, replacing supposedly absolute norms guaranteed by “revelation.” The difference here is that those who have realized union with God have a privileged status as teachers and exemplars based on this.

The foundational status found in the experience of nonduality is the way that perennial wisdom finds credibility and truth. According to perennial wisdom, realization belongs to everyone as a birth right as a “child of God.” Only the blinders of spiritual ignorance need to be removed to discover it already within as eternal reality. In contrast, normative Christianity makes a bid for authority by claiming that its unique revelation is absolute, but such revelation is logically more problematic and experientially more unverifiable than the universal wisdom that directs everyone on the path toward realization of nonduality.

Those who have achieved union are leaders and role models who point the way to replicating this realization of union for oneself through their teachings about the way and the goal. They are also fountains of grace. In contrast, the theological doctrine of revelation is obscure and is beset with many problems, as the arguments about revelation that have divided normative Christianity into many sects serve to show.

Realization of nonduality is a mystical experience that is widely reported in the spiritual literature of the world. Spiritual masters set this ideal forth as the goal of life and show the way to it. The interpretation of the Jesus tradition I put forward views religion chiefly as an invitation to spirituality instead of a set of beliefs to be professed and norms to be followed for a heavenly reward. As such, religion is seen as the quest for ultimate realization through love, wisdom and action by uniting with the Divine Beloved, and Jesus is seen as one of the great teachers of this truth, which he embodied by epitomizing realization of nonduality.

In the interpretation proposed herein, *The Gospel of Thomas* emerges as the expression of a mystical framework arising within the Jesus tradition in the period of its early development. It is neither separate from the tradition stemming directly from Jesus through his close disciples, nor even peripheral to it. Rather, *Thomas* can be interpreted as a necessary complement to the canonical gospels in creating a framework adequate to account for Jesus’ mission and message, generally understood to be his preaching the advent of the kingdom of God. On this interpretation, the central thrust of this preaching is that the kingdom of God is within, a teaching that reflects perennial wisdom in Jesus’ idiom.

The later part of this exploration reveals the Way of Jesus as a way to realize that “the kingdom of God” lies within you and also at the core of all. According to perennial wisdom, knowing oneself is realizing who one really is as a spiritual being. This is realized through the mystical experience of nonduality. This realization lies at the center of the teaching of *The Gospel of Thomas*. It is also reported in the works of the greatest mystics of the Jesus tradition, as it is also in

perennial wisdom. The conclusion of the investigation is that the Way of Jesus is a timeless teaching expressed in a form characteristic of its historical period, and which also harkens back to ancient Hebrew teaching. *The Gospel of Thomas* is not only an important early contribution to the Way of Jesus but also one that remains relevant to spiritual seekers today.

At the risk of seeming redundant, significant but complex issues are presented from different angles. I trust that those more familiar with these points will bear with some repetitiveness in the interest of clarity. I have conceived of this undertaking on the model of a university course. The task here is not so much to convey information as to inculcate a framework through which an entire subject can be grasped. You may remember from your university days, the way to “ace” your courses was to “psych out” the profs to determine what they were most interested in, and which, therefore, would likely be asked in the final exam.

Similarly, I emphasize and revisit what I think is most important. Hopefully, it will allow the reader to view the Jesus tradition in a fresh way. This fresh way of seeing not only questions cherished beliefs on the basis of historical evidence, but it also integrates the teaching of Jesus into perennial wisdom.

The objective of this endeavor is to reframe the Jesus tradition, making spiritual experience central, instead of providing additional information in terms of an existing frame. The principal point is that the existing frame is only one interpretation of the Jesus tradition, and one that is in the process of breaking down owing to the emergence of historical evidence that questions or even contradicts the established narrative. Moreover, the meeting of East and West through increasing globalization of knowledge has resulted in popular appreciation of perennial wisdom and increased interest in universal mystical spirituality. The new frame has to take these major factors into account, so I will keep coming back to them repeatedly.

In addition, there is the logic of framing itself. When one grasps this logic, one begins to see how the trick of “creating reality” is done through framing a universe of discourse. This logic applies not only in religious discourse but also in most other fields of life. Understanding it will illuminate much else as well. The route will be through the logic of framing first, and then on to viewing the Jesus tradition in terms of perennial wisdom. *The Gospel of Thomas* will emerge as a key text, not only of the Jesus tradition but also of perennial wisdom.

Finally, in criticizing normative Christianity for historical revisionism in addition to selective interpretation, it is necessary to acknowledge that while all interpretation is selective to some degree, the facts are not amenable to revision. Accordingly, no exclusive claim is made about the interpretation being put forward. Its justification if any lies in its alignment with perennial wisdom, and it stands or falls with perennial wisdom. However, perennial wisdom is testable in the

laboratory of experience. If there is a proof of the interpretation it lies in the testimony of the so-called heretics who have tested the Way of Jesus and discovered its alignment with perennial wisdom in their own mystical experience. All can put this interpretation to the test in their own experience.

It is also necessary to beware of committing the sin of historical revisionism. For example, in claiming that nonduality is a feature of the Jesus tradition, it will be necessary to distinguish between union of the soul as lover and God as Beloved in a state of glorified duality and the soul's identification with God as the only reality in realization of the nondual state. On the other hand, mystical theology has traditionally divided the mystical path into purification, illumination and unification, following Pseudo-Dionysius. Rather than revise history and claim that there are really four stages in the Jesus tradition, namely, purification, illumination, unification, and identification, we have preserved the traditional three stage path of purification, illumination and unification, distinguishing two stages within unification, namely, divine union in the glorified duality of sacred marriage and realization of the soul's identity with God in the nondual state.¹

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Avatar Meher Baba has been the most significant influence on my life, and his teaching has shaped my outlook more than any other. He famously said, "I have come not to teach but to awaken."² What he awakens is divine love, felt as presence in the heart of hearts. Although he emphasized that he did not come to teach, he left an extraordinary body of highly nuanced teaching that continues to guide and inspire me.

I rely on Meher Baba's teaching as a framework for approaching perennial wisdom. His teaching is articulated clearly in contemporary language and is set in a contemporary context. As a result, it is easily available to a contemporary audience, something that is not the case with most ancient teachings. Moreover, the framework that this teaching presents is comprehensive in scope, yet precise in detail. Like a zoom lens, it can pull back to take in the big picture while also zooming in sharply on specific issues. Above all, it is grounded in spiritual experience, whose facets it also articulates conceptually with clarity and brilliance.

¹ Dr. Neale Lundgren first pointed out to me the possibility of confusing or conflating divine union and identification in the Jesus tradition. See Appendix Four: Unification in the Jesus Tradition.

² Meher Baba. "Universal Message." in C. B. Purdom, *The God-Man: The Life, Journeys and Works of Meher Baba With an Interpretation of His Silence and Spiritual Teaching*. (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1964), p. 343-344.
URL=<<http://www.ambppct.org/meherbaba/universal-message.php>>.

I have also drawn upon Meher Baba's life and teaching to understand the Way of Jesus as an expression of perennial wisdom that sets forth the way of the God-Man, which is distinct from the ways of the Perfect Master and the saints. For example, it was not until I read the detailed biography of Meher Baba that I began to grasp what Jesus was about, something which previously I had only been able to glimpse at though the distorted lens of the Jesus myth.¹

While I did not have the opportunity to come in contact with Avatar Meher Baba while he was in the body, but I have had the good fortune to meet a few of his close disciples. In particular, I have had the opportunity to work closely with Baba's close disciple and worker, Don Stevens, as a friend, companion, mentor, and elder brother on the Way of the Avatar. His friendship, inspiration and example continue to be invaluable. All spiritual masters impart a different facet of himself and his teaching to each of their close disciples. I have imbibed especially from the particular facet that Meher Baba revealed to Don Stevens and which he has shared with his own companions directly and with the world through his work. This facet emphasizes achieving a balance of head and heart.

I also owe a particular debt of gratitude to Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, into whose meditation program I had the good fortune to be initiated in 1971, and also to teach for many years. Maharishi's teaching was instrumental in shaping my development and setting me on my present course. Maharishi himself lays full credit for this teaching at the feet of his own master, Swami Brahmananda Saraswati, late Shankaracharya of Jyotir Math (Badrinath), Himalayas, and the holy tradition of Vedic masters, stemming from the Vedic seers and passing through Adi Shankaracharya, who Meher Baba revealed as a minor advent of the Avatar.²

Through Maharishi's teaching of Vedic science and its application to modern living through Vedic technology, I was educated in the theory and practice of an extremely ancient wisdom tradition, which I could approach more or less with an open mind since I had no cultural background or investment in it.³ Through this, I

¹ Bhau Kalchuri. *Lord Meher: The Biography of Avatar of the Age Meher Baba*. (N. Myrtle Beach, SC and Asheville, NC: Manifestation, 20 Volumes, 1980-2001). URL=<<http://www.lordmeher.org>>.

² Ivy O. Duce. *How A Master Works*. (Walnut Creek, CA: Sufism Reoriented, 1975), p. 437.

³ Maharishi credits his master Jagadguru Swami Brahmananda Saraswati, late Shankaracharya of Jyotir Math, Himalayas, for this knowledge. For an overview of Vedic science, see: *Journal of Modern Science and Vedic Science*. Fairfield, IA: Maharishi University of Management. URL=<<http://mum.edu/msvs/>>. Anna Bonshek. *Mirror of Consciousness: Art, Creativity and Veda*. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2001). Barbara A. Holdrege. *Veda and Torah: Transcending the Textuality of Scripture*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).

learned about the key fundamentals underlying the eternal Way that could be found in any genuine wisdom tradition¹.

Through Maharishi's teaching also, I came to recognize experientially that the universal spirituality written in the heart is the ancient religion of humankind. The same truth reappears continuously in different garb from age to age, gets lost over time, until yet another messenger of truth arises to renew it. Owing to this realization, I became determined to pursue finding it in other traditions, as well as to appreciate its expression at the very core of life.

This ancient wisdom of Vedic seers about the integration of life on the ground of unity opened the door to the experience of nonduality that mystics of all traditions report as their deepest experience. It was through this lens of the Vedic wisdom that I could initially taste by direct acquaintance "the knowledge of the One" that links all religions and wisdom traditions "like beads on one string," in the words of Avatar Meher Baba.²

Even a fleeting glimpse of nonduality is enough to know that mystical knowledge of the One is undifferentiated. Being beyond all mental distinction, it transcends all attachment to limited self. It is also independent of space, time, form and change, so it transcends the phenomenal world, too. It is obvious to anyone having such an experience, however fleeting, that this experience must be essentially the same for all, there being absolutely nothing in it or relative to it to distinguish it. On tasting even a drop of this knowledge, one realizes that if even a glimpse is so vast, what must be the life of those who have more than a glimpse. One can only marvel at those who have quaffed the full cup so that their inner eye is opened fully, allowing them to remain established in this state continuously: Not only does the most dynamic activity not disturb it, but also the deepest sleep does not obscure it.

Maharishi's Science of Creative Intelligence and Vedic Science also provide a contemporary framework for understanding the ancient Vedic tradition in relation to modern knowledge. This has been invaluable in approaching perennial wisdom through the frame of one of its principal and most venerable traditions of knowledge. By locating one frame and its themes, I was also able to see similar frames and themes in other traditions.

While my primary influences are Avatar Meher Baba's approach to spirituality as independent of any particular tradition and Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's emphasis on the Vedic *sanatana dharma*, I have also been deeply influenced by other traditions, including Qabalah, Sufism and the "Red Path" of the Native American tradition in

¹ The Sanskrit *sanatana dharma* means "eternal religion" as the spiritual teaching that imparts integration of life.

² Meher Baba. *God Speaks*. xxxvi.

the West, as well as Taoism and Buddhism in the East, and I bow to my teachers in all of these traditions.

I also acknowledge the assistance of my friends and students, often unbeknownst to them. Without their openness, curiosity and questioning, I would not have looked into many of the details to the degree I have. Their sincere questions about matters that either perplexed or even troubled them also altered me to the importance of framing and the power of established narratives. Many of their difficulties had to do more with myths and norms than historical evidence, logical reasoning, or universal spiritual principles. My way of approaching such questions has consistently been to examine the issues objectively in the light of evidence, being careful not throw the baby (Jesus) out with the bathwater (mythology). That is what I intend to do herein.

For those still embroiled in normative Christianity or in reaction to it, the simplest course may seem to be either stuff down one's questions and fall in step, or else throw up one's hands and walk out the door. Neither are good solutions. It is possible to see Jesus as a great spiritual force without cloaking him in the garb of myth. Gilding a lily does not make it more beautiful and actually kills it. I will argue that normative Christianity has not only obscured the Way of Jesus but also often tried its best to extinguish it through its misguided efforts to gild the lily.

My dear friends and companions on the Way, Dr. Neale Lundgren and Jack Graham, encouraged me in this work and proofread the manuscript, as well as offer valuable suggestions for improvement. Will Graham and Ken Neunzig were also kind enough to offer their corrections.

In commenting on the first draft, Dr. Lundgren made two especially important contributions, which I must specifically acknowledge, since these observations led to a major revision of the work. First, he pointed out that I had not drawn a clear enough distinction in the Jesus tradition between divine union as the sacred marriage of the soul as lover and God as the Divine Beloved, and the realization of identity of soul and God that occurs in the nondual state. In perennial wisdom, this is the distinction between "seeing" God of spiritual advancement and "realizing" God.¹ Normative Christianity is somewhat ambivalent about the seeing God while alive, depending on how it is stated, but rejects realizing God as heretical.

However, according to a number of Church Fathers and Doctors, "God became man, that man might become God."² In mystical theology, this is called the doctrine

¹ The inner planes through which the soul passes on the ladder of spiritual ascent are also called "stations" and "mansions." For an explication of the stages of the spiritual path, see Appendix Two: Meher Baba on the Ten States of God.

² St. Athanasius, *On the incarnation of the Word*, 54, 3; St. Augustine, *Sermons* 13; St. Thomas Aquinas, *Ps* 8; II Pt. 2:4, *Summa Theologica* III,1,2. "Thus saith the Lord: Ye are gods and children of the Most High" (Psalm 82:6) "Jesus answered them, Is it not written

of deification (Greek *theosis*). However, it is virtually unknown outside of monastic circles. When normative Christianity does acknowledge it as an early and consistent teaching, it is generally interpreted to apply only to the afterlife, in spite of the testimony of many mystics to the contrary.¹ Moreover, this is a consistent teaching of perennial wisdom, based on the spiritual experience of the world's mystics and masters, and saints and sages.

I can well imagine some saying at this point that this must be wrong. After all, wasn't Satan's paradigmatic sin of pride manifested in the desire to be God? In this, Satan represents the ego run amok. Indeed, the "hell" of atheist Jean-Paul Sartre is man's inherent desire to become God, while knowing that this is impossible since "God" doesn't exist, which reduces the human condition to absurdity.

Doctor of the Church and premier Roman Catholic theologian St. Thomas Aquinas addressed this very question of Satan's sin in the *Summa Theologica*. He observed that while Satan's sin was, indeed, desiring to be God, the desire itself is not wrong, but only how it is couched. According to Aquinas, desiring to become God is not sinful, "provided that [one] desires such likeness in proper order, that is to say, that [one] may obtain it of God. But [one] would sin were [one] to desire to be like God even in the right way, but of [one's] own power, and not of God's."²

What Aquinas is saying here is that no creature is capable of realizing God on its own, regardless of the amount of self-willing and self-effort. One cannot "storm heaven." God's grace is necessary, and the God-Man makes this grace freely available through the Church, not as a human institution, but as the Mystical Body of Christ. This is essentially the teaching of perennial wisdom expressed in the terminology of the Jesus tradition.

Thus, it is actually normative Christianity that is often "heretical" in this regard when it holds that human beings cannot realize God in this life, condemning those

in your law, I said, Ye are gods?" (John 10:34 KJV) "Yea, I say, the Word of God became a man so that you might learn from a man how to become a god." (Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Greeks* 1) "If the Word became a man, it was so men may become gods." (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5)

¹ Some qualification is in order here, however. This does appear in U. S. Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Second Edition*. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 2003), Pt. 1, Sec. 2, Ch. 2, Art. 3, 1, #460. See also CCC, Pt. 3, Sec. 1, Ch. 3, Art. 2, 1, #2028, which quotes St. Gregory of Nyssa, "Christian perfection has but one limit, that of having none." However, neither of these instances are mentioned specifically in relation to mysticism.

Deification or *theosis* remains a feature of Eastern Orthodoxy, even though it is no longer well known in the West.

² St. Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica* I, 63, 3.

who truthfully report having mystical experiences whose implications are at odds with a normative doctrine that even Fathers and Doctors of the Church deny.

This “normative heresy” involves holding the norms of an ideology above criteria provided by mystical experience and evidence based on historical investigation. This is to substitute credulousness for rationality, and in the extreme it is to slip over the line into religious fanaticism, which is a form of mental instability. Moreover, there have been occasions when those in authority deliberately represented ideological claims and subjective beliefs as factual in spite of evidence to the contrary, or else on the basis of spurious “evidence.” This phenomenon is common enough to have been given a name. It is called “pious fraud.”

The retort, of course, is that it is mystics who are mistaken about their experience, or even mentally unstable. But the justification of such objections relies on an appeal to arbitrary norms rather than evidence or reason. Are we to believe that most of the world’s most recognized saints and acknowledge holy ones were either deluded or crazy because what they claimed to have experienced exceeds the norm? That, I submit, is absurd on the face of it.

Secondly, Dr. Lundgren’s observations awoke me to the fact that it was really an impossible task to approach mysticism in the Way of Jesus from the vantage of normative Christianity. For normative Christianity effectively marginalized or even excluded Christian mysticism’s deepest implications, namely, the enjoyment of divine union and realization of nonduality in the present life, thereby narrowly defining “Christian mysticism” and turning “mystical Christianity” into an oxymoron.

This led me to the defining insight of this work: *Mysticism is central to the Jesus tradition* rather than marginal or peripheral, as the normative point of view holds. The Jesus tradition is based on and grounded in the Way of Jesus as a mystical teaching about the spiritual quest that leads to realizing God.

The various sects of normative Christianity unanimously claim, albeit in different ways, that they are the official voice of the Jesus tradition. To accept this is to concede the argument before it begins. Therefore, it became clear to me that fundamental presumptions, commonly received as norms, need to be challenged and changed.

The normative position sets Jesus’ teaching at odds with the testimony of many of the most revered mystics not only of the Jesus tradition but also of perennial wisdom as well. This effectively stands the Jesus tradition on its head by placing ecclesiastical authority, which justifies itself on the basis of norms it defines and canonizes, above spiritual experience and purity of life.

Since the bastions of normative Christianity seem to remain in denial about this contradiction, I concluded that it was necessary to “reframe” the Jesus tradition.

The intention here is to set the Jesus tradition on its feet, so that the Way of Jesus might be seen through the eyes of mystics on the basis of spiritual experience, instead from the mouths of clergy and pens of theologians, on the basis of thought and convention. Then, the Jesus tradition emerges not only as consistent with perennial wisdom but also as contributing significantly to the perennial tradition in its own unique way.

Hopefully, through this undertaking and others like it, the world will become more open to seeing mysticism as central to the Jesus tradition instead of peripheral at best and heretical at worst. When the balance is righted, the Way of Jesus will be correctly recognized as the central teaching of Jesus and a significant contribution to perennial wisdom.

Then, normative Christianity will be recognized as a superficial interpretation that misses the point and accordingly misrepresents it. However, this isn't even quite right, because normative Christianity is diverse and the various sects disagree over norms, sometime violently. Since Jesus' life and teaching are opaque historically, tradition is also questionable concerning precisely what Jesus taught, this is a contention that can never be resolved other than personally "on faith," that is, subjectively, or by assuming a normative authority as an "objective" criterion, even though it is arbitrary.¹ It would therefore be more correct to say that many if not most forms of Christianity are normative, although norms may differ from one group to another, or within a single group over time.

Hierarchical institutions such as Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy chose the arbitrary "objectivity" of ecclesiastical authority, justifying it on the basis of scriptural interpretation and tradition claimed to date to the apostles, who purportedly received their authority from Jesus. Doctrine and dogma (read "ideology") is in turn justified on the basis of the doctrine of the *magisterium* (teaching authority) of the Church supposedly conferred by Jesus on the apostles and through them to the bishops who succeeded them. In the Roman Catholic Church the magisterium is asserted to rest with the pope as the successor to Peter as

¹ The Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions accept scripture and tradition equally, but as interpreted by the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Protestants admit scripture alone, allowing for personal interpretation. But, practically speaking, personal interpretation is usually sanctioned only to the degree one's interpretation is in accord with the norms and customs of one's sect and congregation.

None of the major branches of the Jesus tradition accept as definite the testimony and teaching of mystics as mystics. Even though many Fathers and Doctors of the Church were mystics, their teaching was enshrined not chiefly because they were mystics but on account of their sanctity of life and obvious wisdom, often in spite of their mysticism. Moreover, many significant teachers, such as Meister Eckhart, were excluded because of their mystical testimony, which was not sufficiently qualified to pass muster.

the leader of the apostles, to whom, it is claimed, Jesus entrusted the keys and called the foundation.¹

Protestants by and large chose subjectivity of scriptural interpretation but not of norms, which are determined by sect and congregation instead of being dictated by a traditional hierarchy. While Protestantism, at least in the low churches,” is not hierarchically authoritarian, it is usually normative, particularly in Fundamentalist sects. Admittedly, there are liberal pockets in all sects and denominations of Christianity, but they are the exception rather than the rule.

While the Protestant Reformation threw off the shackles of an authoritarian hierarchy, pruned the pomp and ceremony, and dismissed theologizing on the basis of tradition by emphasizing the primacy of scripture, it did nothing to emancipate mysticism from its dungeon. In fact, despite Martin Luther’s translating *Theologia Germanica*, an important mystical work, into the colloquial language, Protestantism was even less open to mysticism in many ways than Roman Catholicism or Eastern Orthodoxy. Even though a number of important mystics arose in Protestantism, many, such as George Fox, the founder of the Society of Friends, were initially unwelcome.

It would seem that the testimony of mystics constitute the most reliable guide to the teaching of Jesus. For their lives show that they were not only close to God in spirit but also conscious of spiritual realities of which ordinary people are unaware. Moreover, testimony and teaching based on conscious experience of spiritual reality is the basis of perennial wisdom, not only the teaching of Jesus. Everywhere, the testimony of mystics is regarded highly since they can claim to be in a position to know whereof they speak.

The fundamental presumption of this undertaking is that the testimony of mystics and the teaching of masters are the best criteria of spiritual values and truths, until one is able to experience them for oneself. Moreover, when one does experience such things for oneself, this testimony and teaching serve as landmarks confirming one’s experiences along the spiritual path.

¹ The papal insignia prominently includes crossed keys, one of silver, symbolizing the power to bind, and one gold, signifying the power to loose. The principal text on which the magisterium rests is the saying of Jesus in which he reportedly called Simon “the rock” (Aramaic *kephas*, Greek *petra*. Latin *petrus*) and said that he would build his Church on this foundation (Matthew 16:18). Scholars doubt the authenticity of the text as it appears in Matthew. For example, John gives a different account of Jesus’ bestowing the name “rock” on Peter, omitting bestowal of authority (John 1:42). Of course, Protestants reject the Catholic interpretation, so that even those who accept the New Testament as literally inerrant read the “bestowal of authority” text differently.

I do not claim to have made any definite contribution to this project of reframing the Jesus tradition other than stating as clearly as I could and making a case for a particular interpretation. What is put forward is offered as one interpretation. If it gets people thinking about these issues, it will have served its purpose. If it opens doors to testing its proposals in the laboratory of one's own experience through spiritual practice, all the better. For only in experience can one test the contention that such works as *The Gospel of Thomas* were intended for use as mystical manuals instead of as doctrinal treatises.

Such manuals are to be followed spiritually rather than understood conceptually. But to do this, one must penetrate their opaque symbolism. Why are such works so opaque? Traditionally, mystical manuals were meant for use in conjunction with the tutelage of a competent guide, who had gleaned the inner meaning from mystical experience by treading the path personally.

I also must acknowledge the contributions of the many scholars who contributed toward my understanding of *The Gospel of Thomas* in the context it was written nearly two millennia ago. While I drew on many sources too numerous to mention, I would like to particularly acknowledge Michael W. Grondin for his interlinear Coptic-English translation of *The Gospel of Thomas* that he has freely made available on the Internet.¹ For those like me who are not conversant in ancient Coptic, it is particularly helpful as a guide to translation. Stevan Davies' contribution of compiling relevant resources on *The Gospel of Thomas* Homepage has also been an indispensable resource.² Both are highly recommended for study of *The Gospel of Thomas*.

I also wish to acknowledge the frequent use I made of Whitall N. Perry's compilation of quotations relating to perennial wisdom, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*.³ Perry has done a fine job of tracking down quotations from the principal contributors to the perennial tradition. Moreover, he has arranged them according to major themes, categories and sub-categories, making it very convenient to access key texts by subject. Perry also provides introductions, extensive bibliographical references and sources, which many other compilations omit. I heartily recommend this useful text to anyone interested in pursuing the study of perennial wisdom.

This book is offered as spiritual education under the auspices of the Institute of Core Spirituality, and it is made possible by generous support through donations to the Circle ministry.⁴ My sincere appreciation goes to all who have participated in

¹ URL=<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/9068/z_index.htm>

² URL=<<http://home.epix.net/~miser17/Thomas.html>>

³ Whitall N. Perry. *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971)

⁴ URL=<<http://www.corespirituality.com>>

making this work possible. Special thanks go to David and Erica Taylor and family, for a contribution in honor of the seventieth birthday of David's mother, Jean. She requested it be given in the name of Avatar Meher Baba, in order to disseminate this work on perennial wisdom in light of the God-Man's teaching.

Finally, no expression of gratitude is sufficient to express my indebtedness to Janet Luise, my closest companion in life, whose never-wavering support over several decades has sustained this work through thick and thin, and inspired me onward during the hard times as well as the good. She reminds me to keep it simple when I tend to wax overly eloquent (read "get too pedantic"). She also cheerfully manages the tedious tasks of proofing, formatting, and preparing the material for publication. She was kind enough to do the first correction of the draft and make suggestions for improving clarity.

Thomas James Hickey, Ph.D.
Boston, May, 2007

INTRODUCTION

In the beginning was the word.¹

What started out as an introductory chapter to a commentary on *The Gospel of Thomas* rapidly took a different shape than first expected. One thing led to another and then branched out in many unanticipated directions. It soon became apparent that much more needed to be said on the subject than could be contained in an introductory chapter or two, or even fit into a commentary on the individual sayings. Its scope was far broader. So this endeavor turned into volume one of a series in which the second will be the commentary on *The Gospel of Thomas*.

It needs to be stated at the outset that this is not book about history, theology, comparative religion, or even Christianity. It is an adventure into how “the Jesus story” might be expressed in terms of perennial wisdom, understood as the common testimony of mystics and the core teaching of spiritual master worldwide across time.

This undertaking is a tentative “working out” of the problems involved, rather than the claim to be a definitive solution. I invite you to come along with me as I work in this direction as someone trained in philosophy, whose specialization is the philosophy and logic of mystical spirituality. I have also spent many years pursuing mystical spirituality through various wisdom traditions and with a number of teachers, so I also draw on this knowledge and experience in addition to philosophical studies.

You will, of course, have your own angle of vision based on your background and tendencies. Hopefully, this work will give you something on which to reflect and, consequently, perhaps come to question some of your presuppositions and hidden assumptions, as well as broaden your vision.

What I want to suggest is *a fresh way of thinking about and seeing* these things, many of which have crystallized — or perhaps fossilized — into conventional wisdom. Therefore, I also invite you to consider these issues carefully from your own point of view and areas of expertise, asking whether the solutions put forward might be better expressed differently.

In addition, I realize that further work may be required, perhaps in the form of a subsequent volume or volumes to round out the picture. For example, this undertaking focuses primarily on *The Gospel of Thomas*, in preparation for the commentary to follow. However, there are other early texts that are relevant for the

¹ John 1:1.

Way of Jesus in relation to perennial wisdom that are not mentioned herein in order to limit the scope. *The Gospel of Philip* and *The Gospel of Truth* are particularly significant, for example.

However, the frame of reference has swung so far from that of the early days of the Jesus tradition that the majority of the so-called apocryphal works of the time, lumped together as Gnostic, are now barely recognizable as “Christian.” Moreover, the success of the normative authorities in marginalizing or even demonizing them was so successful that it is presently difficult to see them in their original setting as important contributions to the Jesus tradition. In addition, the unfortunate inclusion of such works under the single rubric of “Gnostic gospels” leads to the erroneous implication that they are of a piece and represent a coordinated “heretical” tradition against which the early Fathers had to contend.

Thus, these works have been set aside for consideration in this undertaking not only to limit the scope but also to make this work more available to contemporary readers. Without adequate background and preparation in how to read them in the context in which they were written, these “gospels” are difficult to approach. The symbolism of the more mythological gospels, especially, may be too great a stretch for many who are not used to the literary figures employed. In contrast, *The Gospel of Thomas* is quite available, with much less required to access its message, even though it, too, is symbolic and appears to be abstruse.

It is also necessary to investigate more deeply the works of later mystics as they relate to perennial wisdom and the Way of Jesus, especially Meister Eckhart as the exponent *par excellence* of nondualism in the Jesus tradition, along with his contemporary, John of Ruysbroeck, and others. I have only touched on some of the high points regarding them in this work in order to stay focused on the objective of investigating chiefly *The Gospel of Thomas* as an early example of perennial wisdom in the Jesus tradition.

As a practical matter *The Gospel of Thomas* is emerging as historically the most influential text of early Christianity other than the New Testament. Indeed, some scholars have even begun calling it a “fifth gospel.” Moreover, it is capturing the popular attention, albeit for some dubious reasons in addition to its inherent attraction as a spiritual work. Therefore, it will be stage center and receive the limelight.

RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

Religion can be conceived in many ways, for example, as an expression of ideals, values and cultural norms through doctrine, ritual and observances, and also as a social manifestation of interior spirituality. This investigation will focus more on the later, while contrasting the two.

Henri Bergson contended that religion has two sources, the first arising from human psychological needs, such as that for structure and explanation, and the second from intuition. A great deal of this undertaking will involve an examination of the interplay between these sources, and how the former often dominates the latter, obscuring it and even suppressing it. This investigation will focus in particular on the tradition that emerged from Jesus' example and teaching.

On one hand, psychological needs drive humans to explain the human condition first in terms of myths and then doctrines, as well as to develop ritual and observances that give structure to individual life and society. These often manifest as a cultural *ethos* and *mythos*. Since the earliest times, human beings have apparently engaged in propitiatory and eschatological activities. For example, humans propitiate the "powers" for survival and progress in the world, e.g., through prayer and sacrifice, and they also perform funeral rites for the wellbeing of the soul in the hereafter. Such psychological drives are a component of religions.

On the other hand, social needs also shape religions. Religions are also typically the repository for rites of passage and the injunctions regulating individual and social life. Such forms and activities are ancient and persist in similar manifestations to the present in most religions.

Most importantly for our consideration, however, is that doctrine, ritual and observances also provide religious and cultural *norms*, *rules* and *standards* governing individual and social life. These norms, rules and standards — implicit and explicit — furnish *fundamental criteria* for acceptable behavior and communication. For example, doctrine eventually becomes an established narrative that provides a framework for religious, philosophical, legal, and cultural discourse, and observances become cultural standards of behavior. For this reason, conventional expression of religion is termed "*normative*."

While psychological drives and social needs engender normative religions, the *religious impulse* also arises out of the intuition, insight, illumination, and realization that human beings — especially extraordinary human beings, such as mystics and seers — have into principles, causes and forces that underlie both the working of the mind and worldly existence. This is the dimension of *interior spirituality*, whose roots extend back into animism and shamanism and reach forward to the highest flights of mysticism that are sometime displayed extraordinary expressions of the human spirit in religion, philosophy, the arts, humanities and sciences, and in the lives of sages, seers, saints, heroes and geniuses.

This force is also at work in the lives of all, whether they realize it consciously or not, since it is inherent in the human spirit. It is the force or urge that drives human beings to realize their potential as spiritual beings. It is the ground of spirituality

that lies at the *core* of all religions, for its home is the human heart. Thus we call it *core spirituality*.

Interior spirituality is about *communing* with one's ideal, however one conceives of this ideal. The numinous, divine, or spiritual can be encountered in various ways. For example, according to perennial wisdom, there are several aspects of God — the personal, the impersonal and the universal — which one can encounter as supreme person, formless absolute and indwelling spirit, respectively. In theistic traditions devotees typically commune with the Supreme Person, while in non-theistic traditions the communing is with impersonal being, truth or principle, e.g., the formless One or the Absolute. In animism the shaman or “medicine man” communes with the spirit world of nature, which reveals its secrets of knowledge, power and healing. However, it is possible to encounter God as personal, impersonal and universal in all religious traditions, albeit many religions emphasize a particular avenue of approach.

In the Jesus tradition, these were combined. Theologians married Judaic scripture with Greek philosophy by taking the Absolute of the philosophers to be the impersonal aspect of God and the God of Abraham, Jacob and Isaac to be the personal aspect of God, like “two sides of the same coin.” Moreover, the Holy Spirit as indweller entered the Jesus tradition through the Hebraic tradition. “Holy spirit” translates Hebrew *ruach ha qodesh*. One might commune with God as personal in the form of Jesus through prayer and contemplation of the Lord, or with God without form in the “dark cloud” of unknowing through the *via negativa*. Or like, Mother Teresa, one might serve indwelling God in all, in the spirit of the saying: “What you did to the least of these, you did also to me.”¹ In all cases, one is communing with God through a most intimate personal revelation. Reports of mystics show this to be so, or at least they interpreted their experience this way.

This communing results in an internal rapport with one's ideal, be it conceived as personal, impersonal or universal, that *reveals* itself personally, impersonally, or universally. Communion and revelation are fundamental to interior spirituality, for communing and revealing are interior and intimate to the person.

There are mystics in virtually all traditions that report seeing visions or experiencing a visitation of God with form; many saints in the Jesus tradition report either seeing Jesus in visions or conversing with him mentally. Others report mystical experience that is formless; the reports of Ruysbroeck and Eckhart are similar to Buddhist testimony about the Void. Some also report mystical experience of God as the indweller in others. For instance, Mother Teresa not only served the poor but also testified to serving Jesus in them.

¹ Matthew 25:34-45.

The dimension reached in communion and revelation has been called “the numinous,” from Latin *numen*. *Numen* signifies presence, especially that of a deity.¹ “Numinous” is a fifty-cent word, and “presence” does the job just fine.

Saints and sages commune with presence, which has revealed itself to them inwardly, and their lives are centered in it. Prophets and seers speak from it and for it. Masters transmit it to others directly. Priests, bards and poets celebrate it. A single person can even play all these roles simultaneously. For example, the Psalms are songs as well as scriptures, and David was famous for playing the lyre. Kabir, Rumi, and Hafiz were all world renowned poets as well as being spiritual masters.

It not difficult to know who such people are, for history has preserved many of their names, for example, Zoroaster, Abraham, Moses, Rama, Krishna, Mahavir, Buddha, Lao Tzu, Chuang Tzu, Confucius, Jesus, Muhammad, Al-‘Arabi, Guru Nanak, Francis of Assisi, and Sri Ramakrishna. Nor is this field limited to religious figures. It includes philosophers, artists, scientists, poets, musicians, and others of genius, who have not only lived from the deepest levels of the human spirit but also expressed them.

From time immemorial, human beings have celebrated “the numinous” as a sacred presence in story, art and ritual. This presence or “spirit” is what distinguishes the sacred from the profane.² The human spirit is an aspect of pre-conceptual, pre-logical and pre-linguistic presence. Its works, celebrated in history, legend, and art, may be taken as evidence of the immanence of “the spirit” that makes man a spiritual being. In the vernacular, it is called “being human” or “having soul.” It distinguishes someone who is “alive” and sensitive from those walking in their sleep.

The human spirit moves humanity through its urges, comparable to the way hormones underlie biological urges. A fundamental urge of the human spirit might be called “the spiritual impulse.” It is the urge to live in the presence of the sacred and to unfold one’s full potential as a human, who is not only a rational primate but also a spiritual being. It is an impulse of the heart rather than of the mind, passions, or senses. The “wise fool” cares not for what the worldly value — fame, fortune, power and pleasure — and does not pursue them to the detriment of higher values.

¹ Rudolf Otto first proposed the idea of the “numinous” as the basis of “the holy.” It was later developed and amplified by C. G. Jung and Mircea Eliade. Rudolf Otto. *The Idea of the Holy*. Translated by John W. Harvey, (London: Oxford University Press, 2nd edition, 1973 (1923).

² Mircea Eliade. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1957).

Our ancestors lived in communion with the spirit world, and for them there was no distinction between the sacred and the profane. Life was “holy,” in the sense that they saw it as a whole, in which spirit and matter were not separate and distinct.

This attitude seems rare today. Apparently as life in civilization becomes more complex, the mind is engaged more than the heart.¹ Moreover, a consumer society trains its young from an early age that instant gratification is good. Moreover, in modern society the great accumulator is the hero, not the great distributor as in ancient cultures, a vestige of which still exists in the Native American potluck or giveaway, for instance.

While the sacred has largely given way to the profane in modern life, mystics have arisen in all religions and wisdom traditions over the ages and continue to do so. Moreover, in the past several decades the interest of the public in mysticism and spirituality has greatly increased, judging by the number of offerings the market supports in terms of books, courses and the like. Whether this has actually produced more mystics remains to be seen, but at least people’s minds are open to it and their hearts are eager for it.

From ancient times, individuals expressed their interior adoration of the Supreme Person or the Formless One behaviorally through worship, and they assembled collectively for this purpose. Communication about this ideal became revered teachings, and implementation of the means to realize the objective of such teachings became disciplines and practices. Eventually, what began as a wisdom tradition became a normative religion, in the sense of having a fixed teaching and a formalized practice. All developed religions have mystical traditions associated with them. Indeed, mysticism was the foundation of many religions to the degree that they originate in interior spirituality rather than external norms.

For example, the Jesus tradition began with Jesus teaching a few followers a “way.” Subsequently, this teaching diverged. The majority branched off to follow the emerging normative Christianity, which now bears scant resemblance to the pristine Way of Jesus. The Way of Jesus was preserved in a relatively pure state by bands of monks, and accomplished spiritual masters renewed it from time to time,

¹ Julian Jaynes offered a theory purporting to explain primitive numinosity on the basis of bicameralism. He explained this in terms of the split function of the mind, similar to schizophrenia, in which one part speaks to another part as the voices of the gods. According to Jaynes, this accounts for the communing and revealing that was apparently experienced widely by ancient people before the complexities of civilization forced an adaptive change upon them. His theory has not found favor with his peers, however. Most do not see it as either helpful to psychological explanation or entirely consistent with historical evidence. However, the theory did achieve popular notoriety, even though it was controversial professionally. Julian Jaynes. *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Revised Edition 1990).

such as St. Francis of Assisi, who founded the Franciscan Order. However, even before the death of Francis, the rule he gave was already being modified. The Way of Jesus as Francis sought to live it was too demanding even for many of his own friars, it seems.

Beneath the superficial differences, the forms of communing and revealing are universal. To be communicated, teachings must be expressed in the language of the day, including the cultural context of the times in terms of which language is construed. Consequently, similar teachings and the experiences on which they are based were explicated differently in different places, and even in different periods in the same place. Thus, superficially they may seem to be diverse, even contradictory or mutually exclusive.

Over time, the differences of a teaching begin to overshadow its universality. This is especially the case where bias is operative, particularly when such biases are due to investment in a particular point of view. For example, this typically results when a religion becomes institutionalized and gets conducted as a business or even run as an empire, as did Christianity to the degree it became Christendom. Even many monasteries became inns with their own breweries. When differences become important, branding is not far behind.

It can be argued that Jesus did not come to found a religion, at least the religion that grew up around his name. Rather, he taught a small group of followers what might be called “the Way of Jesus.” This is the initial basis of the Jesus tradition. It is now becoming evident how this teaching gradually grew into normative Christianity as a primarily Gentile religion that eschewed its Jewish roots, beginning with Paul, when theology began to replace experience. Yet, mystics still arise in the Jesus tradition in spite of this.

In order to approach such expressions of spiritual experience with as little personal and cultural bias as possible, it is first necessary to appreciate their common basis in mystical experience. Secondly, it is also necessary to investigate how and why different people couched these similar experiences differently, leading to a plethora of religions, sects, and schools.

Therefore, we must locate the commonalities underlying spiritual or mystical experience. Then, we must see how and why these similar experiences were framed differently in different contexts, thus giving the appearance of diversity. This will lead us to understand how the ancients endeavored to demarcate the boundary of the known and the unknown, the sacred and the profane, the spiritual and the material, using a variety of means to express their deepest insights, including descriptions of fact, metaphors, analogies, symbols, legends, poetic imagery, myths, parables and teaching stories, as well as the muses, poetry, song, music, and graphic representation.

Taking literally what was intended symbolically misses the point by mistaking the finger for the moon at which it is pointing. This is to mistake the container for what it contains. Without tracing expressive communication back to its source in experience, a once living teaching devolves into an empty, lifeless construct, a sort of museum piece illustrative of strange things that people used to do at one time, apparently out of superstition. The ironic thing is that most people who criticize others in this light do not see that it is true of their own approach also.

CONSCIOUSNESS AND EXPERIENCE

Religions are generally eschatological, that is, concerned with the fate of the soul after death. Western religions are mostly focused on salvation, that is, a heavenly reward to be enjoyed by the good. Eastern religions tend to emphasize liberation, that is, the end of the round of births and deaths in the cycle of reincarnation or “metempsychosis,” from the Greek doctrine of transmigration of souls.

But neither salvation nor liberation would hold out any great appeal if they did not involve continuation of consciousness and some desirable sort of experience. Heaven, for example, is pictured as a place of enjoyment, on the one hand, and peace, on the other. Liberation marks the end of suffering not in a state of inertia or stupor but rather in the enjoyment of abiding peace and fulfillment.

Most developed religions present their aim in terms of an ultimate experience based on the continuation of consciousness after the death of the physical body. Often this experience is set forth in terms of union with the divine, e.g., the Beatific Vision in Christianity and “enlightenment” in Eastern religions. But many other forms of spiritual experience are set forth in addition to the ultimate experience.

Since spiritual experiences are non-ordinary, they must be set forth either by way of negation, denying all aspects of ordinary experience, as in the experience of nonduality, or through the use of analogy and hyperbole, as in the experience of divine union. These forms of experience are often represented as more advanced, expanded or comprehensive forms of ordinary experience.

Everyone is familiar with the ordinarily experienced states of waking, dreaming and deep sleep, but many are less familiar or even ignorant of non-ordinary states. In the waking state, one is conscious of oneself and the world through the physical senses. In the dream state, one is conscious of oneself but not the physical world. Instead, one imagines a dream world. In deep sleep, one is conscious neither of oneself nor world. Non-ordinary experiences parallel ordinary ones but differ in important essentials.

The mystical state of nonduality is analogous to that of deep sleep, however, in the nondual state one is consciousness of non-distinction instead of being

unconscious. This state is reported as being one of pure consciousness, pure awareness, pure subjectivity, or consciousness without an object.¹

The various visionary experiences as well as experiences of inner worlds are analogous to the dream state in that one experiences forms within the mind without the use of the physical senses, while one is simultaneously self-aware.

Mystics also report a number of non-ordinary experiences during waking, such as the nondual state of awareness as foreground of experience instead of being unnoticed in the background, as in ordinary experience. Sometimes this is reported as the forms of the world appearing superimposed on the nondual existence, and at other times it is reported in terms of the forms of the world being experienced as fashioned from a single refined substance, such as, radiance, effulgence, beauty and even divinity. Also characteristic of mystical reports are numinous presence, surpassing love, rapturous beauty, liquefying awe, blissful raptures, and other hyper-affective states. There are also reports of visions of the subtle while awake, such as awareness of ethereal beings, spirits of the departed, and other refined perceptions similar in some ways to the hallucinations of the mad.

Such experiences are characterized as not only intimately personal but also indubitably real, so intimately real as to be their own self-evident criterion of truth. In fact, such experiences are often reported as more real than the worldly phenomena of sense perception and even one's own existence as an individual in the world. That is to say, in comparison to the reality of such experience, the world seems ephemeral and even illusory in comparison.

These major types of spiritual experience can be found the world over from time immemorial. They appear not only in religious traditions and wisdom literature, but also in the arts and humanities. For example, Mircea Eliade, notable for his work in the history of religious ideas, has spent a lifetime illuminating this dimension of expression of the human spirit through religious expression and practice.² Other proponents of perennial wisdom, such as René Guenon, Fritjof Shuon, and Ananda Coomaraswamy, have also been influential in pointing out common themes.³ There

¹ Bernadette Roberts. *The Experience of No-Self: A Contemplative Journey*. (Boston: Shambhala, 1982), p. 144-145. *The Philosophy of Consciousness Without an Object: Reflections on the Nature of Transcendental Consciousness*. (New York: Julian Press, 1973), p. 61-76.

² Mircea Eliade. *A History of Religious Ideas*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 3 Volumes, 1981-1988).

³ "Perennial wisdom" has also been called "traditional wisdom" and "the unanimous tradition." Whitall N. Perry. *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971); Ranjit Fernando (Editor). *The Unanimous Tradition: Essays on the Essential Unity of All Religions*. (Colombo: Sri Lanka Institute of Traditional Studies,

have also been notable collections of comparative quotations organized on these themes, such as Aldous Huxley's *The Perennial Philosophy*, Whitall N. Perry's *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, and Andrew Wilson's *World Spirituality*.¹ In the humanities, for instance, Alfred North Whitehead observed that subsequent Western philosophy is a series of footnotes to Plato.² Perennial wisdom has also been the subject of authors with an Eastern background, such as Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Phiroz D. Mehta.³

Aldous Huxley set forth a working definition of the perennial philosophy in his book of that name:

PHILOSOPHIA PERENNIS — the phrase was coined by Leibniz; but the thing — 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 similar to, and even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being — the thing is immemorial and universal. Rudiments of the Perennial Philosophy may be found among the traditionary [sic] lore of primitive peoples in every region of the

1991). It is also known as “the perennial philosophy,” or *philosophia perennis* in Latin. Aldous Huxley. *The Perennial Philosophy*. (New York: Harper, 1945). The term *philosophia perennis* is usually credited to the seventeenth century German philosopher Leibniz, but Agostino Steuco seems to have been the first to use it in Western literature, in 1540. Charles B. Schmitt. “Perennial Philosophy: From Agostino Steuco to Leibniz.” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (Oct. - Dec., 1966), p. 505-532. The most ancient similar use is perhaps the Vedic conception of *sanatana dharma* as the eternal way, which in Buddhism becomes simply the Dharma or “teaching.” Tao has a similar meaning in Taoism.

¹ Andrew Wilson. *World Scripture: Comparative Anthology of Sacred Texts*. (New York: Paragon House Publishers, 1998).

² Alfred North Whitehead. *Process and Reality*. (New York: Free Press, 1979), p. 79

³ S. Radhakrishnan was an Indian philosopher and president of India (1962-1967). His voluminous contribution is set forth in: Paul Arthur Schilpp (Editor). *The Philosophy of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan* (Peru: IL: Open Court, 1952). P. D. Mehta, in particular, emphasizes the transcendental basis of religion in mystical experience. Phiroz D. Mehta. *Buddhahood*. Edited and Introduced by John Snelling. (Shaftesbury, Dorset: Element Books, 1988); *Holistic Consciousness: Reflections of the Destiny of Humanity*. Edited by John Snelling. (Shaftesbury, Dorset: Element Books, 1989); *The Heart of Religion*. (Boulder, CO: Great Eastern, 1978); *Zarathushtra: The Transcendental Vision*. (Shaftesbury, Dorset: Element Books, 1985).

world, and in its fully developed forms it has a place in every one of the higher religions.¹

To ignore that such experiences provide a basis for personal spirituality and that attempts to communicate these types of experience ground much of religion and philosophy, as well as the arts and humanities, is to miss a depth and breadth of human expression and relationship. However, in modern times especially, two serious challenges to this have arisen. One is an attempt to reduce all explanation to what can be substantiated empirically. This is the program of scientific materialism. The other is an effort to contain religious discourse within the bounds of established norms. This is the program of normative religions. This investigation will focus chiefly on the later.

Those who espouse such narrow views can be compared to people who neither travel widely nor take the trouble to learn another language. Those who do so, soon realize how limiting their language and culture are, and that there are vast other “worlds” out there inhabited by people who see things differently. This is especially true when mystical experience is taken into account. Not to have traveled to that realm is to miss not only an essential aspect of human potential but also to narrow one’s vision to the gross world of physical objects, in which materialists argue with true believers over matters concerning which they have neither awareness nor knowledge.

FRAMING

I first became aware of the power of framing in shaping a universe of discourse when I was a graduate student in philosophy. The department in which I chose to study emphasized the history of philosophy, so I was required to read in depth the works of idealists, realists, rationalists, empiricists, positivists, and so on, as well as philosophers of very different historical periods and geographical locations. In order to understand their positions in the depth that graduate study requires, I had to view the world through the lens of their thought. Through this, I realized that these philosophies are different lenses for viewing the world. Each is a framework for explaining phenomena in terms of key fundamentals.

Such explanations are conceptual models that purport to represent not the world — that is the business of science — but rather the overall scheme of things in terms of principles, causes, and other such instruments. Different philosophies present

¹ Aldous Huxley. *The Perennial Philosophy*. , vii. Robert K. C. Forman has called this documented persistence of the experience of pure consciousness as the primary psychological event at the basis of perennial wisdom, “perennial psychology.” Robert K. C. Forman. *The Innate Capacity: Mysticism, Psychology, and Philosophy*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

different ways of viewing the world and the place of humanity in it in terms of key fundamentals. Certain key fundamentals are presumed by philosophies of the same type. For example, in Christian philosophy, God, the soul, the creation of the world and its ending in time are foundational, not because they are self-evident or rationally compelling, but because they are fundamental Christian doctrines.

People often presume that the view in which they have grown up as self-evidently true because it has become “second-nature.” For example, virtually every educated person in the modern West thinks it obvious that the universe came to be in time and that the earth revolves around the sun. Yet, the ancient Greeks thought that the world had no beginning and no end. Investigating this issue, Christian philosophers decided that the issue was not rationally decidable. Creation remained a matter of faith until cosmologists formulated the theory of the Big Bang, and it was largely corroborated through experiments that gave the theory credence. But even the scientists cannot say what preceded this initial event. Similarly, until the Renaissance, most people in the world took it as obvious that the sun actually rose and set, and did not suspect that “sunrise” and “sunset” were illusions created by a spinning earth. It was not until this time that the belief that the earth is flat was disproved by courageous adventurers, who had to wrestle with the fears of their crews that the ship might fall over the edge.

Today, we may think of such beliefs as quaint, but at the time they were matters of life and death, and not only for sailors afraid of plunging into an abyss. Such a worldview discouraged exploration. Moreover, the all-powerful Church regarded the notion of the earth’s not being the center of the universe as threatening the view that humanity is at the center of things. Wouldn’t such a view call both scripture and tradition into question and denigrate Christ’s sacrifice, they asked, if humanity was taken to be an afterthought at the periphery instead of the reason for creation, hence, at its center. These were not merely speculative questions when the Inquisition was asking them, as Galileo Galilee and Giordano Bruno learned, when they were faced with the stake. Galileo finessed an “abjuration” and escaped, but Bruno courageously went to his death.¹ This attitude of normative religion inhibited science immensely at the outset, and the consequences are reflected today in the uneasy relationship of science and religion.

Are we secure today in the presumption that such “superstitions” are entirely things of the past, or are we, too, entangled in a framework of our construction that doesn’t quite mesh with reality? And how could we know for sure that we were right? As we will see, many of our criteria are fundamentals of the very framework

¹ Bruno was not condemned solely on the grounds of scientific issues. The principal charges against him were strictly theological, but there is little doubt that his scientific views were also a factor in his condemnation and execution as a heretic.

itself, so that appeal to them to justify the framework involves circular reasoning. The way to investigate this conundrum, thinkers have concluded, is to explore how framing works.

Sentient beings must organize data for survival. Using language, which other primates can do only primitively in comparison, human beings organize information cognitively not only to survive and prosper but also to explain the human condition. Science and technology were developed for the former purpose, while philosophy and religion, as well as the arts and humanities serve the later. In these endeavors, human beings are capable of expressing themselves in abstract concepts that function as “universals,” which allow it to organize particular data into sets or classes on the basis of similar properties, qualities or other characteristics. They can also color these concepts with sentiment, emotion, and feeling.

Language-use requires a context to give words meaning and to relate descriptive statements to the environment. The overall context we call “the world.” In order to handle the immense amount of data economically, we use not only concepts as universals but frames of reference to organize knowledge in more easily available packets.

Philosophers and scientists have known for a long time that naïve realism is mistaken in thinking that human beings are directly cognizant of our world as it “really” is. The mind does not know its objects directly but through sense data. As the philosopher Hume observed, the mind then presumes on the basis of “commonsense” that its perceptions are identical with objects. That is to say, the mind does not know this connection directly, but only presumes it, owing to a powerful natural inclination to do so. Hume offered a theory of his own about how this comes about, but it was inchoate, appealing to a somewhat simplistic theory of perception.¹ However, Hume’s insight that information is a combination of sense data and logic led Emmanuel Kant to exclaim that Hume had awakened him from his dogmatic slumbers. Kant’s insight elaborated a theory of experience that emphasized the *a priori* contribution of the mind in structuring the objects of experience.²

¹ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, and *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, in *The Philosophical Works of David Hume*. Edited by T. H. Green and T. H. Grose. 4 volumes. (London: Longman, Green, 1874-75).

² *A priori* is a Latin terms meaning “prior to.” It signifies that which is purely mental, hence, independent of experience. Some knowledge is of the mind alone, e.g., logic and mathematics, and other syntactical systems expressed as algorithms, like computer programs. The truth of such knowledge is determined entirely by the system itself. Such knowledge is called “analytic.” Knowledge involving sense data is *a posteriori*, meaning “after.” Such knowledge is called synthetic, and its truth claims are judged empirically,

Kant observed that the mind not only contributes the fundamental categories we use to organize knowledge, it also leads us to posit wholes, of which we have no actual experience, as ultimate foundations.¹ “Self” is posited as a substantive unity to account for the integrity of the subjective pole of experience.² “World” is posited as a substantive unity to account for the integrity of the objective pole. “God” is posited as a substantive unity to account for the unknown and apparently unknowable as an overarching integrity. Kant called such assumptions psychological, cosmological and theological ideas, respectively, and denies that they are able to capture the supposed realities that they assume, which lie beyond the bounds of both experience and reasoning. They are the stuff of “pure reason.”

The unity of being that most people presume of personal self, world, and God can neither be observed as entities nor deduced by reasoning from first principles that

through observation. Kant held that some truths are both synthetic and a priori, combining experience of objects and innate logical structures of the mind. For example, Hume held that causality is a logical principle only; hence, its extension to experience is merely a projection based on belief. This essentially destroyed knowledge of the world as resting on anything more than belief.

Kant was able to counter this view with the claim that first principles like causality yield *synthetic a priori* judgments, hence, provide knowledge that is both necessary and also empirical. However, they apply only to phenomenological experience, not to things-in-themselves. While commonsense takes for granted that our experience conforms to reality as it exists independent of experience and we act *as if* we knew the things-in-themselves, we do not know actually them directly for the simple reason that knowledge is confined to experience.

While few thinkers today accept Kant’s analysis at face value, most agree that human knowledge is a combination of empirical data, gained through sense experience and logical construction, contributed by the mind’s peculiar functioning. “Facts” are framed with a great deal of subjectivity, not merely received “objectively” as they are in themselves, independently of experience. So-called objectivity is based on intersubjective agreement because humans structure knowledge in essentially the same way owing to their neurological makeup.

¹ Emmanuel Kant. *The Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated by Norman Kemp Smith. (London: Macmillan, 1953, Reprint of 1933 Edition, which was “with corrections”).

² Hume and Kant held that the self is not known in itself but only empirically, that is, as the self appears. This accords with the Buddhist deconstruction of the self. The Buddhist teaching of no-self (Pali *anatta*) also corresponds to the teaching of the Upanishads about the self as “not this, not this” (Sanskrit *neti, neti*). Intuitionists hold that human beings have intuitive knowledge of the self as a metaphysical entity. Descartes asserted such intuitive knowledge in *Discourse on Method*, where he wrote his famous, “I think; therefore, I am.” The others would counter by enquiring into the nature of the ‘I’ that is asserted to exist. Undertaking such an enquiry is the basis of perennial wisdom.

are both about reality and necessarily true, e.g., self-evident on the basis of intellectual intuition. Cognitively, these constructs are primarily organizational — structural rather than substantive. They are constructs, seemingly forced upon the mind by its own proclivity to organize data and seek closure, imposing it where need be.¹

Kant published his monumental work in the late eighteenth century and an enormous amount of work has been done since then to establish not only the contribution of the mind to experience but also of language to structuring information. In spite of these advances in knowledge, most people take the framework in terms of which they view themselves and the world as being substantive in the sense of objectively existent rather than logical in the sense of subjectively structural.² But this attribution of reality to what are essentially logical constructs — concepts without empirical content, such as self, world and God — involves a leap of faith, as Kant points out.³ Not only does it amount to a leap of faith to take these constructs as real, but it also involves structuring information in accordance with the human mode of knowing, which is not necessarily “the way things really are.”

Intellectual intuition is the ability to penetrate the veil of sense experience and know what lies beyond sense perception, abstraction, reflection, imagination, and reasoning. Not having developed intellectual intuition, which is required to transcend the boundaries of ordinary knowledge, those in gross consciousness do not know that to which the terms “self” or “soul,” “world” or “universe,” and “God” or “Supreme Being” refer. However, mystics do claim to have this

¹ Buddha put forward as similar view of the self, world and God in the sixth century B.C.E., and he taught that holding such views uncritically gets in the way of realizing what *is* ultimate but cannot be captured by conceptual understanding, logical reasoning, imagination, or language. However, Buddha’s approach is quite different from Kant’s, and it would not be correct to connect them other than superficially in this regard, as Edward Conze shows in “Spurious Parallels to Buddhist Philosophy,” *Philosophy East and West*, January 1963, Vol. 13, No. 2, p. 105-115.

² Kant uses the term “transcendental” in accounting for the mind’s contribution to structuring the data of sense experience on the basis of purely subjective conditions, independent of the given of experience. This is similar to what we are calling “logical,” although Kant’s approach was chiefly epistemological rather than strictly logical, since it was a study of the conditions for thought rather than the use of symbols.

³ In subsequent works, Kant offered non-cognitive rationales supporting Christian belief in the soul, creation, and God to avoid Hume’s conclusion that these beliefs are grounded ultimately in feeling. However, he is remembered chiefly for his insights into how human beings structure experience and understanding to arrive at knowledge in accordance with their mode of knowing.

knowledge of what is beyond ordinary modes of knowing. Mystics claim transcendental knowledge of the immortal soul, the three worlds, and God, through intuition when “the eye of the heart” is opened. They invite us to see for ourselves by following them.

The epistemological and linguistic devices through which ordinary humans organize data and structure information are largely subliminal. All this takes place behind the scenes, as it were, in the cerebral cortex. We learn to use these structural devices along with learning to speak a language and create our cultural context without becoming conscious of the process. Philosophers, cognitive psychologists, and linguists have reflected on the process and articulated it, however. They have discovered that these frames of reference are the lenses through which we “see” the world in the sense of organizing it on the basis of the way we process data and communicate about this.¹

Since the days of Hume and Kant, a great deal has been discovered about these processes from a variety of angles. We will be concerned primarily with the process of framing at the outset. However, subsequently we will also consider the spiritual “problem” of the reality of the self, world and God. According to perennial wisdom, the solution lies in knowing oneself. When one knows oneself as one really *is*, one knows that one’s reality is spirit, that which is eternal, immutable, and self-existent. Then, one realizes that the relative, changing world of phenomena is only appearance and that the formless Absolute (spirit) is the only reality.

According to the wise, there is a vast difference between the ego or individual self and universal Self. The ego or individual self identifies with body, mind and personality. The limited self experiences itself in a world of objects and may posit a God that either transcends the world (*theism*), is immanent in the world (*pantheism*), or both (*panentheism*). The universal Self is conscious of being the sole reality.

For example, in the Vedic tradition the individual self is called an embodied self (Sanskrit: *jivatma*). The universal Self (*atma*) is called the self-existent (*swayambhu*). Having neither body or form, the universal Self is formless, unchanging, eternal, and infinite, i.e., absolute. One who has realized the nonduality of universal Self is called God-Self (*shivatma*). The universal Self is identified with Absolute Reality (*brahman*). The totality is called *atma-brahm*. Realization of nonduality (*advaita*) is realization of oneself as the totality of Self and Reality, *atma-brahm*. It is only through spiritual ignorance that the ego and the objects of the world seem to be separate and to have their own individual reality. When ignorance gives way to knowledge, this illusion of separate reality simply

¹ George Lakoff. *Don’t Think of an Elephant: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate*. (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2004), xv.

disappears, like waking from a dream. This supreme state of knowledge bestows omniscience.

Prior to realization of nonduality, knowledge is only partial. Moreover, in the state of spiritual ignorance of one's true nature as spirit, knowledge is discrete rather than continuous. The duality of subject and object and the multiplicity of different objects seem real. In order to make sense of this complexity, the mind fashions mental models that are logical constructs. Humans communicate these mental models using language. The container within which communication takes place is called the universe of discourse. A universe of discourse has an overarching framework that organizes it.

Frames of reference are used to structure information. Sense data are so numerous and diverse, a framework needs to be imposed, first as a net in gathering information, secondly, as a filter for processing it, and thirdly, as a paradigm for displaying it in thought and communicating it through language.

In order to organize information we use cognitive shortcuts, comparable to the way we use habits as behavioral shortcuts. These shortcuts are called "memes," or "mnemes." Memes are mnemonic devices for transmitting embedded meaning in packets, so to speak. The information contained in memes can both be cognitive, relating to knowledge, and affective, relating to feeling. They can also be descriptive, indicating what how things stand, and prescriptive, enjoining what to do or to avoid.

For example, "Jesus" is not only a name but also a powerful meme, which is both descriptive and prescriptive. The name "Jesus" calls up what scholars call "the Jesus myth" to distinguish the meaning of "Jesus" in the popular mindset from what is actually known about the historical Jesus. The name "Jesus" can also be prescriptive, as is shown in the question, "What would Jesus do?" Many people pose this question before undertaking any activity of significance.

Memes are compared to genes. Genes pass information through inheritance; memes, by acquisition. Genes transmit biological information physically through genetic material, DNA and RNA, while memes transmit packets of conceptual information culturally through social interaction, education, and media exposure. Humans are social animals. Through upbringing and education, they acquire a cultural worldview or *Weltanschauung* that provides a cognitive and valuational framework for gaining and using knowledge.¹ This results in cultural bias. Different cultures and even radical subcultures within a culture have significantly different worldviews that distinguish them, sometimes making mutual understanding difficult and even pitting them against each other.

¹ Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckman. *The Social Construction of Knowledge: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966).

A worldview is not the same as an ideology. A worldview is like the hidden assumptions underlying a scientific theory, while the theory is like an ideology. For example, most Americans subscribe to a common worldview, but they differ about it ideologically, as reflected in the platforms of the opposing political parties. Similarly, most people calling themselves Christian have a common viewpoint, but when they attempt to express this viewpoint, then differences become apparent regarding theory practice and organization, hence, the proliferation of Christian sects.

A principal reason that a cultural worldview is subliminal is due to its manner of acquisition. The acquisition of a worldview begins with an infant's first imprinting and is bound up in the learning of one's native language, in which meaning is shaped by contextual usage. A worldview is neither taught nor learned in the ordinary sense. It is acquired through cultural osmosis, so to speak. It seeps in and is stored in the unconscious, where it serves as an organizational framework and set of norms. It becomes part of the system software, as it were, that determines how the neurological hardware is used to process information and apply values.

Not only the environment and social norms but also the predominant media influence this process of information acquisition. For example, Marshal McLuhan is famous as one of the first to observe the contribution of the medium to the message, going so far as to say, "The medium *is* the message."¹ He observed that each time the predominant medium changes, there is a change in corresponding culture.

Initially the spoken word was dominant. Most people don't realize it, but most of the people in the period in which Jesus lived were illiterate. Most people are familiar with the biblical phrase, "the scribes and the Pharisees," but don't know who they actually were. The scribes were those who knew how to write and they prepared legal documents; they were the first lawyers. The Pharisees knew how to read scripture and they were the teachers. They taught the scriptures and their meaning to the people that couldn't read them for themselves, or if they could, didn't have time to study them. In the age of the spoken word, people necessarily had to develop prodigious memories, since there was no other means of recording information available to most people.

Humanity is characterized by language and communication. The first major transformation occurred with writing, which emerged around the third millennium BCE. Initially, writing was done on stone, and later on pottery, animal skins (parchment), and metal, usually copper. This was laborious, inefficient and difficult to store and transmit.

¹ Marshall McLuhan. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964).

The second major transformation took place with the invention of papermaking, which permitted the written recording of information in book form. This facilitated storage and transmission. However, books had to be hand copied, which was laborious and expensive, so they were reserved for those who were wealthy enough to afford them and had a secure place to keep them. Subsequently, monks performed this task and kept the books in their monastery libraries.

The third major transformation took place when Johannes Gutenberg (c. 1400 – February 3, 1468) invented the printing press in the middle of the fifteenth century. Until this time, the written word was largely unavailable to the masses. This was not felt as a deprivation, however, since very few people were literate.

The advent of the literary age began with the invention of printing. Soon, the written world became dominant. This was a real revolution, resulting in mass communication and the development of literacy. The proliferation of books undermined the centralized authority of the local priests and the institutional church, leading to the Protestant Reformation. It also contributed to the autonomy of thinking, hence significantly advanced the development of individualism, democracy, and capitalism. This shift to mass communication meant that communication was no longer bound to locality, and established a structural linearity to philosophy and thought, including a new rationalism.

The fourth major transformation began with the invention of electronic technology. The electronic shift released the potential for communication to be non-local, instantaneous, non-linear, episodic, and non-authoritarian, making possible a universal and instantaneous community worldwide. Moreover, the Internet externalized an entire world of discourse that was hitherto internal, as though our internal brain has become a global brain. The information itself is altered, the structure and form of information is altered, the language is altered, and the transfer rate of the memes is incredibly accelerated. Each of these transitions has altered the information itself, in addition to increasing its volume and speed of transmission. As a consequence of this change in communications technology, the community itself is not only altered but is quickly able to alter itself.

Without some awareness of these historical processes, one is liable to presume that people in the time of Jesus were pretty much like us, except they dressed kind of funny. There is a humorous but apparently true story about a state legislator in Texas arguing against bilingualism by asserting that if English was good enough for Jesus, it ought to be good enough for us. However, Jesus and his followers not only spoke a different language that is now all but defunct, but also even the best historians cannot recapture the cultural context of Jesus' period. For example, our word "spirit" was to them "breath," and our word "heaven" they understood as "sky." Clearly, a lot of theology has intervened in the meaning of these terms, as well as a lot of science about how nature works. We can no longer imagine the

world as people of that time saw it, any more than they could imagine the world as we see it.

This media transformation in the Age of Information has resulted in both a speeding up of communications and also the proliferation of content. As a result, shortcuts are taken in order to facilitate the flow of information, reduce the noise of irrelevance, and moderate overloading the brain, as well as enhance the experience by combining information with entertainment.

Our age is such that we use shortcuts to deal with the volume and complexity of information economically. For example, newspaper headlines summarize a whole story, and many people read mainly the headlines because that is all they have time for. However, the story often is quite different from what the headline suggests. Yet, the public reacts to the headline.

Observing this phenomenon, advertisers, politicians and others highly dependent upon rhetoric as a means of persuasion speak on television in “sound bites,” similar to musical jingles, knowing that complexity and sophistication are lost on most of the audience.

More and more, complex information is transmitted by meme-complexes or “memplexes,” analogous to packets of DNA and RNA. Meme-complexes function as codes that the mind uses to process large amount of abstract information quickly, without need for reflection on detail, which is necessary in structuring the data from an information and emotion rich environments.¹ This shorthand language is useful in that it permits humans to communicate easily about complex subjects without needing to be overly explicit regarding the details unless the context calls for it. The downside is that often some rather relevant details may be ignored inadvertently.

A great deal of information is transmitted by means of memes and meme-complexes fundamental to frames of reference used to organize data into universes of discourse. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein called this “seeing as” in contrast to seeing objectively.² These frames combine to produce overarching viewpoints.

Such issues faced the early Jesus tradition. Was Jesus for the Jews or was he for the world, hence beyond the Jewish worldview? Where one stood on such an issue depended on their viewpoint. The Acts of the Apostles suggests that James and the other apostles did not share Paul’s views about embracing Gentiles into the fold other than in terms of Jewish Law. Yet, Paul’s viewpoint subsequently became

¹ Edward O. Wilson. *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*. (New York: Knopf, 1998).

² Ludwig Wittgenstein. *Philosophical Investigations*. Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe. (New York: Macmillan, 1953).

dominant, and the views of those who had been with Jesus during his ministry were modified or eclipsed.

Wittgenstein also observed that the various frames of reference individuals use are combined into an overarching framework he called a “world-picture.” A world-picture is a framework for dealing with reality. Everyone has one, regardless of whether they realize it or are conscious of what its framework and norms are.

Not only do individuals have world-pictures they uniquely construct through the process of learning, but also cultures and sub-cultures impose their collective world-pictures on individuals through socialization. While the world-pictures of individuals may differ somewhat in detail from person to person, these differences are slight in comparison with the general agreement fostered by cultural and social world-pictures imposed through socialization, for their acquisition is necessary to function “normally” in such social contexts.

Those who do not function within the bounds of the norms are considered outsiders, eccentrics, criminals or insane. There is immense pressure to stay within the bounds of the dominant world-picture by conforming to its norms. Those who do not do so sufficiently are either marginalized or excluded from participation.

On Wittgenstein’s analysis, the foundational propositions of a world-picture are privileged in that they are criteria against which all other propositions are evaluated.¹ As such, they are presumed to be “certain” and placed beyond questioning. They function in ordinary language like axioms or postulates in mathematics, first principles in philosophy, and laws in scientific theories. In religion some of the privileged propositions are identified as dogmas, creeds, or articles of faith, but many of the memes and memplexes are implicit also. For example, Catholicism requires weekly Mass attendance, whereas Protestant churches make attendance an expectation rather than an injunction. In practice, the unformulated Protestant expectation has often been considered more socially binding than the formal Catholic injunction.

Individuals often mistake their world-picture for reality instead of recognizing that it is a representation and as such an interpretation of information that can potentially be interpreted differently. Alfred Korzybski warned against the propensity to mistake the map for the territory.² For example, in normative religions the power of established narratives often result in the confusion of doctrine with

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein. *On Certainty/Uber Gewissheit: bilingual text*. Edited by G.E.M. Anscombe & by G.H. von Wright. Translated by Dennis Paul & G.E.M. Anscombe. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969).

² Alfred Korzybski. *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics*. (Lakeville, CT: International Non-Aristotelian Library, 5th Edition, 2000 [1933]).

evidence, and beliefs with facts. In ideologies in general the ideology is often confused with reality. When the divergence becomes too great, the ideology no longer functions effectively enough for survival. Ideologies may also be suppressed by the competition. History is replete with failed and suppressed ideologies, although the particularly persistent ones are resurrected in a new form to live again.

Memes and memplexes that are used in constructing frames of reference are found in most areas of a culture, for example, the key areas of politics and religion. Memes exhibit a tendency to both “drift,” that is, change slightly in the process of communication between individuals, and also to persist intact through a sort of “inertia” created by the “momentum” of established meaning.

For example, in the political arena, memplexes underlie the two major political trends in British and American politics, the conservative and liberal, which are constantly being reinterpreted through their dialectical interaction, while maintaining their fundamental coherence, preserving traditional values in the case of conservatism and fostering human progress in the case of liberalism. Liberals remain liberals and conservatives even though the issues change over time, and they may even change sides on them. Recently, politicians have become aware of the power of an established narrative, especially when it is based on memes that have demonstrated popular appeal.

Normative Christianity exhibits similar memplexes, such as the doctrines of the Incarnation, Resurrection, Ascension, and Second Coming of Christ. Other memplexes were taken over from earlier teachings, such as the creation of the world, Adam and Eve, the Fall, the Last Judgment, and the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Many of these came through Judaism, but historical research shows that many were found in the ancient world adjacent to the Hebrew people. The first study to appear on comparative mythology and religion was George Frazier’s *The Golden Bough*. Its impact exceeded its actual historical contribution. Subsequent research, however, reveals that there are indeed not only common themes but also historical evidence of remarkably similar stories.

Scholars treat Hebrew mythology as a subset of Semitic mythology, in which lines of influence are observable on the basis of evidence. Apparently, the contribution of the Hebrew tradition is the concept of monotheism. Yet, this did not spring into existence suddenly with Abraham and maintain a pure form. The Bible itself gives many instances of backsliding, at least as late as the period of Exodus, when Moses discovered the people to be worshipping the ancient Semitic god, Baal, apparently still YHVH’s chief rival.¹

¹ *Baal* means “bull.” Baal was originally a fertility deity. Exodus 32, Deuteronomy 9. There are instances of backsliding that extend much later than Exodus. See Kings and Jeremiah.

The notion that YHVH revealed himself to Adam at the beginning and that some of Adam's children remained faithful to YHVH over the generations, while others departed from this faith, is a myth that was imported into the cultural world-picture and passed along to Christianity through the Jewish scriptures. Why did Gentile Christianity import Hebrew scripture while rejecting the Law it set forth as being from God? Hebrew scripture was used to justify Jesus as the Jewish messiah whose advent the prophets of old had predicted.

However, in Christianity a very different view emerged from those texts than the ancient Hebrews or the Jewish contemporaries of Jesus had seen in them. In Western religion, Christianity reinterpreted memplexes of Judaism, giving rise to original doctrines. For example, the normative Christian doctrine of original sin and divine redemption by a savior identified with the Jewish messiah are not found as such in Judaism, although they are derived from Hebrew teachings such as the story of the Fall. The Christian view was that "the Jews" refused to accept Jesus as the divine messiah, whereas the historical record shows that this was not a Jewish concept at all but a construct of what began as a Jewish sect and very quickly branched out to become primarily Gentile. This is why many Jews resisted the very idea. It was regarded as an unacceptable innovation that was not compatible with their ancestral norms, as they understood them from scripture and tradition.

Subsequently, the Eastern and Western churches differed over significant memplexes, leading to the Catholic versus Orthodox schism that split Christendom. Still later, Protestantism reinterpreted more memplexes in the course of the Reformation. There has been considerable meme-drift in Christianity, such that there are now literally thousands of different sects. But even though different parties may interpret some doctrines differently, they remain in basic agreement on the foundations of the overarching framework, so that it still makes sense to speak of a Christian tradition.

Similarly, there is also a Judaic-Christian-Islamic tradition, since all take Abraham to be one of their principal prophets. However, it has not yet produced an overarching cultural framework. For example, Harold Bloom examines the different meanings of the fundamental meme, Yahweh, in the different traditions, ancient and modern.¹ When the details are taken into consideration, it may seem that different parties are not even worshipping the same God. When Islam is included in this historical tradition stemming from Abraham, the matter becomes more complex and controversial. Some Christians argue, for instance, that Allah is fundamentally different from Yahweh. Here we see an especially emotional clash of frames that goes well beyond the bounds of reason. However, such a framework is

¹ Harold Bloom. *Jesus and Yahweh: The Names Divine*. (New York: Riverhead/Penguin Group, 2005).

now evolving as Jews, Christians, and Muslims are forced more and more to interact in close quarters, and conflict gets in the way of this.

Mememes replicate themselves in the minds of individuals and are transferred collectively to the groups to which they belong. They also combine with other mememes. For example, Augustine (354-430 C.E.) imported the Platonic forms into Christian theology through his concept of divine ideas in the mind of God, which God uses to create. Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-1274 C.E.) imported Aristotelian rationality wholesale into Christian theology also. For instance, the five ways of proving God's existence that Aquinas offers are based on first principles inspired by Aristotle. Aquinas's proofs do not lead directly to the existence of "God," but to the necessity for a prime mover, first cause, architect of creation and the like, to which Aquinas deftly adds that we understand that this is God.¹ Here, "God" is clearly the Christian conception of God that Aquinas put forward in *Summa Theologica*, but the principles underlying his proofs are consistent with Aristotle's *Metaphysics*.

Aquinas was awarded the title, "Angelic Doctor." He established an entirely new tradition in Christian theology, called Thomism, which subsequently became an important mememe that dominated Catholic theology for centuries. Thomism's chief aim was to show that faith is rational by fusing Christian doctrine with Aristotelian logic and metaphysics. The medieval Thomistic view dominated Catholic theology until quite recently. Jacques Maritain (1882-1973) was one of its chief contemporary exponents. Many if not most conservatives in the Catholic hierarchy are still Thomists. The worldview that they project as normative authorities reflects this exceptionally rational orientation.

Sometimes memplexes are combined with other memplexes to generate an original contribution that replicates previously existing mememes while also combining them with newly emerging ones. Mormonism is a familiar recent example on the periphery of Christianity. It is possible that something like this was going on with at least some of the so-called Gnostic Christian myths, although scholars are still uncertain about their origins, symbolic interpretation, and use in religion.

Many mememes and memplexes play key roles in the structure of a framework. They are foundational in that they constitute fundamental structures of frames of reference. The cornerstone of Christianity, for example, is the divinity of Jesus Christ: "Jesus is Lord." The "foundation pillars" are such doctrines as the Incarnation, Passion, Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension and Second Coming, which function as memplexes. Virtually every normative Christian sect is accepts

¹ St. Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica*. Translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province. (Public Domain), Part I, Question 2, Article 3.
URL=<<http://philosophy.tamu.edu/~gary/intro/paper.aquinas.html>>.

these established doctrines as constituting articles of faith. Therefore, such memplexes serve as norms, adherence to which is required for good standing in that community.

Science, which is often contrasted with religion, also has comparable methodological norms, adherence to which is required for recognition by one's peers as being legitimate. Those who play by the rules are acknowledged as peers, while mavericks are marginalized or even ostracized.¹

Both scientific materialism and many normative religions exclude or marginalize mysticism by framing universes of discourse that downplay or exclude non-ordinary experience. The former does this ostensibly to overcome superstition; the latter, in the name of establishing and preserving orthodoxy. In both cases, mystical experience is either put outside the frame, being excluded as unscientific or heretical, or else located at the edges of the frame, being marginalized as poetic and inspirational perhaps, but essentially irrelevant to scientific methodology and normative religious doctrine.

Perception and understanding have no anchor without a frame of reference. Just as facts do not exist independently of the world; so too, language has no meaning without context. For example, just about everyone has had the experience of awakening from a deep sleep and not knowing who and where one is. In those seconds in which one is getting one's bearings, confusion prevails until one's frame of reference returns, i.e., the sense of being a particular individual located in a familiar place in the perceptual world. (Mystics say that this is a glimpse of the undifferentiated, nondual self in the gap between sleep and waking.)

Philosophers, cognitive psychologists and linguists have studied how frames of reference are necessary for interpreting experience for oneself and communicating one's experiences to others who must share at least the outlines of that frame. Indeed, it is now evident that one constructs a world picture on the basis of personal, social and cultural factors that one identifies with reality. While the minutiae of one's world picture are individual and personal, the broad outlines are culturally shared. Anthropologists, sociologists and psychologists know that different cultures see the world differently. Moreover, translators are required to confront the difficulties of rendering communication dependent on unfamiliar and often no longer extant contexts. In such cases, the clash of frames makes itself evident. Most people never notice this, however, for they remain principally within

¹ Cultural historian William Irwin Thompson wrote several books on this topic in the 1990s: *Imaginary Landscape: Making Worlds of Myth and Science*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989); *Gaia Two, Emergence: The New Science Of Becoming*. (Hudson, New York: Lindisfarne Press, 1991); *The American Replacement Of Nature*. (New York: Doubleday/ Currency Books, 1991). (Thanks to Jack Graham for pointing this out.)

their own accustomed frames of reference, dismissing conflicting frames as based on ignorance, error, willful deception, or madness.

Sometimes these frames of reference are consciously constructed and sometimes not. As a former philosophy professor, clergy person and spiritual counselor, I have long dealt with presenting complex material to a broad range of people. For example, in academic philosophy the same issues come up with freshman undergrads, doctoral candidates and peers, but at different levels of complexity and sophistication. Essentially the same messages need to be framed differently based on the audience.

To approach undergraduates with the sophistication one would talk to a graduate student would be to lose them, even though the same text is under consideration. Similarly, treating peers as one would undergrads or even graduate students would risk losing not only their interest but likely their respect as well. For example, a peer in one's field is presumed to be familiar with the literature of the field, while students are not, nor do they have the same skill developed to deal with it. In such cases, a suitable framework has to be constructed consciously and intentionally, and modified on the basis of feedback from results. Each person is a unique individual and must be approached as such.

On the other hand, most of a world picture is unconscious because it is constructed gradually as an integral component of the learning process beginning at birth. It contains hidden assumptions that are very difficult to isolate and identify, even when experts combine their efforts to do so. It is like asking the eye to see itself.

One of these foundational constructs of an overarching cultural framework is religion as the universe of discourse relating to the known and unknown. Religions deal with this interface between the known and the unknown in two ways, faith and experience. If admitted to the universe of discourse, spiritual experience is capable of rolling back the horizon of the unknown. Then faith is faith in previous experience, e.g., of the sages of the religion, which constitutes a teaching for extending one's own experience. If spiritual experience is excluded or marginalized, then faith becomes belief in the authority of established norms as ultimate criteria concerning the interface between the known and the unknowable.

How a religion gets formulated is still a matter of controversy. However, there are several key factors that play significant roles.

First is the role of tradition. Almost everyone grows up in a culture that contains a religious component. Even if one grows up in a group that opposes or rejects that tradition, one is involved in it reactively. This becomes an incipient framework guiding further development.

Second is the role of experience. Virtually all religions and wisdom traditions are based at least in part on the teaching of sages, from which these teachings derive their authority. Such teachings are not based on ordinary observation or reasoning from empirical facts. Rather, they are based on seership or prophecy as inner experience involving absolute conviction that is characterized as “revelation.” This anchors the frame for those who believe in the authority of the prophets and seers, who purportedly received these revelations from the divine and communicated them faithfully.

Some accept supposed revelation as genuine and take it as literally true. Others regard the authority of sages and prophets as bogus, regarding it as superstitious. Others accept the revelations of the prophets and seers as genuine but symbolic, therefore, requiring interpretation. Thus, an ongoing dialectic is constituted as frames of reference intersect and often collide, for example, as different schools pit the testimony of different sages and prophets against each other, or “believers” and “non-believers” confront each other. This interaction further elaborates the respective frames, shaping them by hardening their outlines and defining their contours.

On the one hand, scientific materialists would like to reduce explanation solely to the empirical by applying Occam’s razor as a law of parsimony to reject non-empirical assumptions and explanations as redundant. However, the human spirit resists this, likely owing to the deep feeling that reality exceeds the physical and observable. This impulse toward self-transcendence is the basis not only for religion but also for many philosophies and wisdom traditions, as well as the arts and humanities, which all attempt to provide food for the human spirit where scientific explanations do not.

On the other hand, normative religious authorities often exclude or marginalize the role of spiritual experience, perhaps because such personal experiential criteria challenge their authority, which derives from established norms as ultimate criteria. As a result, normative religions have also often attempted to narrow the focus of the universe of discourse, thereby excluding significant dimensions of human nature, such as the chthonic (related to earth and nature), which seem to threaten individuals and society by overwhelming the rational faculties with the raw energy of passion.

This has often provoked a reaction, such as mystic poet William Blake expressed forcefully in the illustrated poem, “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,” which may be read as an argument for balancing head and heart, thinking and feeling, reason and intuition. Excessive emphasis on reason results in spiritual dryness and unbridled energy is self-destructive. But when reason and passion are melded by balancing head and heart, the mystic vision ensues, along with the spiritual life that it inspires. In a full human life the inherent interplay between Apollonian reason

and Dionysian energy is harmonized, as Nietzsche observed in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Nietzsche also put his finger on the spiritual impulse when he has his Zarathustra — obviously a surrogate for Nietzsche himself — preach in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* that man is to be transcended.¹

Some may raise their eyebrows at the mention Blake and Nietzsche in the context of spiritual transcendence, since neither are thought of as “spiritual” writers. But that is the point. Human spirituality is different from normative religious conception of spirituality. Both Blake and Nietzsche recognized this and rejected the old frame, which they regarded as lifeless. When Nietzsche had his Zarathustra declare the death of God, it was the obituary of the nineteenth century *conception* of God, which was indeed turning out to be *passé*.

This impulse requires frames of reference that are open rather than closed, in order to allow for the horizon between the known and the unknown to be pushed back through progressive self-actualization. Normative religions tend to close off this possibility, lest one stray from the “truth,” i.e., the normal. While science is open-ended to some degree, it is restricted chiefly to the rational and empirical, and normal science operates within the confines of a well-defined paradigm. There are eccentrics and even “heretics” in science, too. In cultures where the principal frames of reference are closed, the human spirit seeks other outlets for its expression, such as art, or by going underground in secret societies.

The impulse toward the mystical has never been suppressed successfully, either by materialism or normative religion. This impulse toward encompassing more than the visible and tangible, as well as embracing the full range of human experience, is not limited to individual spirituality. This impulse and its expressions in spirituality, philosophy, art and the humanities encompass much of what makes humanity not only human but also humane.

This impulse is ancient and is typically expressed through myths and teaching stories. It is not accidental that ancient religions used literature and the arts as primary means of communication. This communication is neither primarily factual nor meant to be taken literally. Rather, it is chiefly symbolic and poetic. To try to reduce poetry and symbol to the literal in religion is a modern tendency. It did not emerge until the canonization of reason, particularly in the West, and this tendency did not triumph until modern science eclipsed philosophy.

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche *Thus Spoke Zarathustra A Book for All and None*. Edited by Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin. Translated by Adrian Del Caro. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), I, “Prologue”, 3-4. On Nietzsche as a mystic of sorts later in life, see “Friedrich Nietzsche,” based on Lou Von Salome’s *Friedrich Nietzsche in seinen werke*, (Vienna, 1894). URL=<<http://home.wxs.nl/~brouw724/Nietzsche.html>>.

When the principal religions arose in ancient times, technology had not yet provided the leisure necessary for modern education. Education was not separated from cultural life. The chief means of teaching was not the textbooks or catechism, but the oral story. At the first stage, the story served to fascinate children who took the fantasy literally. Subsequently, the maturing adolescent had to learn to appreciate the tales as myths or teaching stories. Finally, the wizing adult had to extract the kernel from the chaff using the mill of experience to realize the inner core.

STORY AND MYTH

Greek *mythos* means story in English. It is comparable to the Hebrew *midrash* or parable as a teaching device. All ancient cultures taught using stories. A culture lives through its stories. Even today, Native American elders are storytellers in this sense.

Teaching stories contained a blend of historical fact, legend, and symbol to convey the experience the elders, the inspiration of the sages, and the revelations of prophets. The importance of the stories was not what was said but what was meant. This was expected to take a lifetime to discover, as the horizon of significance gradually rolled back through the interplay of experience and understanding.

The challenges that the wise of ancient times faced in communicating their culture across generations can be likened to explaining sexuality to children. A pre-pubescent child lacks the development and experience necessary for understanding this deeply significant dimension of the human condition that contains the dichotomies of life that need to be appreciated, confronted and mastered through the integration of opposing qualities and forces. Similarly, those without sufficient experience do not have the context necessary to appreciate the teachings directly. They must be approached obliquely, directed through hints rather than descriptions and guided by broad pictures rather than detailed maps. Teaching stories simple enough to be understood by children yet rich enough to unfold in experience over time were ingeniously developed for this purpose.

While the teaching stories appear to be quite different from culture to culture and even in the same culture across time, those who have studied them closely have shown the similarity of “deep grammar” through which they communicated common messages. These messages are common because human beings participate in the same human spirit that manifests in many different ways from place to place and age to age. Joseph Campbell has perhaps been foremost in this field recently, and he is well known for his popularizing of scholarly research in the field without diluting it. His work has shown how the same themes are found as cultural memes at the basis of virtually all myths the world over.

What Joseph Campbell accomplished as a mythologist, Carl Gustav Jung did as a psychologist. Jung looked at the ancient stories as expressing archetypes of the collective unconscious. Through their spirituality, individual human beings strive to make what is unconscious (unknown) conscious (known) in their quest for individuation as a whole person. Humanity itself manifests this through culture.¹

Jung, in particular, saw that spiritual and religious literature is an expression of common characteristics of the human condition, and he was interested in the literature of early Christianity, including the Gnostic Christian literature. Unlike those who had an orthodox axe to grind, Jung was able to see that this literature was more about the human spirit than superstitious myths opposed to normative Christian doctrine, therefore to be condemned as heresy and eradicated.

Whereas the orthodox apologists who confronted the so-called Gnostic heresy had done so by constructing their own religious framework, Jung looked at this material through the framework of the process of cosmic individuation, by which human beings and humanity itself becomes increasingly transparent. He saw the ancient teaching stories expressing the common themes of this process instead of error inspired by the devil.

Whether this process unfolded consciously and intentionally is now difficult to determine. Jung was more concerned with the process itself, which he approached from his own point of view. It is known, for instance, that he did not subscribe to the view that the Eastern seers were omniscient and that their teachings lead to realization of the universal Self.²

However, from the perspective of mystical experience a good case can be made that the sages who fashioned these symbols and myths as teaching stories were likely acting consciously and intentionally. In this, experience guided them, rather than their merely being “inspired” unconsciously by archetypes from the collective unconscious. For instance, in the case of perennial wisdom, including significant Christian literature, we will argue that the wording is too precise and its intent too practical, not to be consciously and intentionally elaborated as an intended teaching.

While it is possible that the similarities that run through perennial wisdom were merely inspired and not developed consciously, that hypothesis seems to be less likely than the hypothesis that pursuit of the spiritual quest has produced sages in all

¹ Jung was followed in this undertaking by such as Edward F. Edinger, Jolande Jacobi, Eric Neumann, Marie-Louise Von Franz and James Hillman, to mention only a few who carried on and expanded his investigations in this regard. Their work further illuminates the deep psychological forces at work in the human spirit.

² J. J. Clarke. *Jung and Eastern Thought*. (New York: Routledge, 1994). Howard G. Coward. *Jung and Eastern Thought*. (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1985).

times and climes who knew by direct acquaintance whereof they spoke. The prevalence of mystical reports, clearly conscious and voluntary, argues for this, as does the existence of wisdom traditions in which this knowledge was preserved and transmitted from teacher to disciple in lines of transmission stretching across time and spanning the globe.

The sages themselves have clarified this issue.¹ They testify that ordinary intuition and poetic inspiration are capable of reaching levels that perception and reasoning cannot. They further say that adepts on the inner planes have a deeper knowledge that is grounded in higher cognition. This knowledge is said to be “immediate.” Immediate knowledge is contrasted with knowledge that is “mediated” by sense data, concepts, and reasoning. Immediate knowledge is without such mediation. Immediate knowledge is direct, such as intuition.

According to perennial wisdom, those on higher planes also have more expanded knowledge than those on the lower. Higher cognition in the subtle world is in terms of life energy. Higher cognition in the mental world, inhabited by the true saints, involves direct knowledge of the nature of mind itself.

But even the knowledge of highest planes of finitude — the realm of the saints — is less comprehensive than the knowledge of the Perfect, all of whom have realized God. Having realized God, the Perfect enjoy omniscience in the sense that they know all there is to know in the Eternal Now.

Therefore, all mystical reports are not equal and all teachings do not stand on the same level. Failure to realize this or appreciate it properly has often led to confusion, as different levels have been conflated or mistaken for each other.

Jung does have a point, however. Regardless of their source, the themes that underlie the deepest expressions of the human condition are universal. They communicate universally because they are shared at a deep level, levels of which most are not even conscious. Such levels of universality are called poetically, “the human spirit.” People often do not know why they are attracted to a particular piece of literature or art but nevertheless they feel deeply moved by it. Similarly, the world’s religions contain these archetypes that influence people subliminally, even if their minds refuse to acknowledge this for fear of violating the religious norms. Perhaps this explains the persistent interest in such works as *The Gospel of Thomas* even among some who consider themselves to be staunchly orthodox. Its words

¹ Meher Baba provides a detailed articulation of the various levels of awareness and the corresponding levels of cognition in Part 5 of *God Speaks*, “The Planes.” Meher Baba. *God Speaks: The Theme of Creation and Its Purpose*. (Walnut Creek, CA: Sufism Reoriented, 2nd Edition, 1973), 44-58. Note: This edition was reprinted 1997 with different pagination from that of the 1973 Edition.

contain a spiritual power and authority. As the canonical gospels say, Jesus spoke with authority, unlike the teachers and learned of his day.¹

Yet, to one who is familiar with some these experiences, experience does count. These types of experience have become evident to me not only through the study of reports about them but also by direct acquaintance through participation in some of these lines of transmission. If there is a ready explanation for something in terms of possible experience, is it not more reasonable to accept it even if it happens to be extra-rational? To me the claim that such experiences are possible is established both historically in report and through personal replication.

While the interpretation of such experiences is admittedly open, the bare experiences themselves seem to be beyond question. So I will take the possibility of such experiences as a given and focus on how their mystical interpretation has contributed to the development of (1) a perennial wisdom of integration of life on the basis of realizing nonduality, (2) the spiritual tradition of the Way of Jesus in contrast to normative Christianity, and (3) *The Gospel of Thomas* as a teaching manual in the Jesus tradition that remains living and vital.

The spiritual literature of the world is replete with testimony to such experience and includes teachings about how they are to be realized. My contention is that the Way of Jesus in general and *The Gospel of Thomas* in particular are examples of this perennial wisdom. This investigation of interpretation will involve an examination of the role of frames of reference and the use of teaching stories in its unfolding.

¹ Matthew 7:29; Luke 4:32.

Part One

REFRAMING THE UNIVERSE OF DISCOURSE

The one God hath tempered the Holy Scriptures to the senses of many.¹

CRITICAL AND CREATIVE THINKING

This endeavor is founded on the methodology of critical and creative thinking. Critical thinking examines assumptions and presuppositions, which are often hidden, tests logical validity and investigates the soundness of positions by critiquing both form and content. Creative thinking attempts to overcome imposed boundaries that limit thought, speech and action and stifle progress. The combination of critical and creative thinking enables one to “think out of the box,” and “push the envelope”

Part of this process involves deconstruction and reconstruction. Deconstructing old ways of thinking must precede reconstructing a fresh vision. This is especially true to reinvigorate an existing body of knowledge and restore its vitality, enabling it to meet current challenges. Traditions that do not adapt to changing times become museum pieces. However, the kernel of the knowledge must be preserved in this process if the initial teaching is to survive intact.

This undertaking is an attempt to apply this methodology to the tradition arising from Jesus. This involves deconstructing the old and reframing it through a different way of looking. This viewpoint is based not only on new knowledge that logic and cognitive psychology provide but also on appreciating the ancient wisdom of humankind in a new light. This light reveals the encrustation that has grown up over perennial wisdom as a universal teaching about the core spirituality of humankind, concealing this ancient wisdom of timeless truth that lies at the heart of normative religions like Christianity.

The new way of seeing all religions and wisdom traditions in terms of the threads running through them reveals that they are like beads on one string. On this necklace of gems linked together by core spirituality, each of the gems has its own distinctive facets. The string that unites them is knowledge of the One, which mystics of all traditions have discovered within themselves by reading the book of the heart.

It is quite different to suggest a possibility, hypothecate a thesis, assert a fact and prove a conclusion. Very often, edges become blurred, so that an author's own confusion results in the readers' misunderstanding. The issues involved in this

¹ St. Augustine of Hippo. *Confessions*. Translated by Edward Bouverie Pusey. Book I2, page 31. URL=<http://www.4literature.net/Saint_Augustine/Confessions/>.

investigation are certainly susceptible to this affliction, which might be termed “scholar’s syndrome.” A typical manifestation is that what begins as suggestion shifts to hypothesis and then is put forward as a conclusion without the intervening logical steps, so that this progression is rhetorical and remains unfounded.

In order to avoid falling into this pitfall, I’ve chosen to focus on how framing itself is the issue here, not history versus tradition, for example, the tension between the quest for the historical Jesus and the established narrative. Rather than attempting to show that the normative positions is flawed, which is already quite evident, I will be concerned with how its frame is skewed away from what is actually most important in Jesus’ historical teaching, namely his call to enter the kingdom, instead of the later theological doctrines of original sin, redemption and salvation in the heavenly hereafter, which are not found there.

Rather than argue within the existing frame, I’ve attempted to reframe the debate by advancing a fresh interpretation seen through a new framework that emphasizes spiritual experience and historical evidence as key norms instead of canonizing “articles of faith.”

In this view, normative Christianity dominated the universe of discourse for millennia by imposing a frame that is too narrow and overly contrived in light of current knowledge. However, the inertia resulting from the momentum of this frame is still hurtling it forward. Its trajectory needs to be deflected in a direction that put it more in line with historical evidence.

This framework has constrained the universe of discourse by imposing doctrinal norms that define it too artificially. The frame needs to be made simultaneously more factual than narrative and more spiritual than normative. In order to do this, it is necessary to call attention to the power of the established narrative that gives the existing frame its momentum. This narrative, consisting of scripture, tradition, and theology, is based on biased beliefs that have become cultural memes instead of being grounded on historical evidence.

Moreover, normative interpretation is often overly literal. This leads to the confusion of long-standing and deep-seated beliefs with established facts, either where evidence is lacking or where existing evidence is not supportive. Recognizing that much teaching is expressed through symbols and stories, many of which were likely never intended literally as descriptions of fact, is a necessary step in reframing.

For example, the four evangelists were neither historians nor biographers of Jesus. They each wrote from a particular point of view, which is reflected in the different pictures of Jesus they paint. Matthew writes out of the meme that holds that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah who came to fulfill the Law. Mark writes from the perspective about the suffering Son of God whom nobody recognizes. Luke-Acts has the angle that the Jews rejected Jesus, so his salvation goes to the whole world.

Among the writers of the canonical gospels, John alone discloses Jesus' divine identity as God in human form. And there are more than six or eight additional memplex perspectives in the New Testament reflecting various sociological, historical, and theological perspectives — Paul, Peter, James, Revelation, Hebrews, Deutero-Pauline, Mary Magdalene, as well as five groups of so-called Gnostic writers. These strains proliferated greatly in the second century, each with a specific meme version of its gospel, and each claiming to be orthodox.

They were composing teaching stories for their respective communities, which were generally overseas Hellenistic Gentiles rather than indigenous Palestinian Jews like Jesus and his disciples, and Greek-speaking rather than Aramaic-speaking, as Jesus and his audience certainly were. Nor were the evangelists eyewitnesses to events. They disagree on events, places, and dates. They betray ignorance of Palestinian Jewish customs.

Moreover, these teaching stories have been conflated into “the Jesus myth,” in spite of contradictory passages, owing to the belief that everything must be historically true and of a piece, since the Holy Spirit revealed it and guarantees its truth. This conflation of stories resulted in the construction of a religious myth about Jesus that is often confused by believers with the historical Jesus.

The purpose of the evangelists was more theological than historical or biographical. It is reflective of different doctrines and norms in separate communities. Scholars have shown that early Christianity was diverse, and that different communities held a variety of views. The range of these views was initially broad. There was as yet no orthodox authority in place to impose uniformity. Only later was the focus narrowed through a heavily political process that eventually resulted in the imposition of certain views and the exclusion of others.

The views excluded included many of the issues to be investigated herein. These views are generally termed “Gnostic,” as in “Gnostic heresy.” They were excluded as heterodox, that is, in conflict with criteria established by normative authorities that determined what was orthodox and what was not. These authorities erected a framework that continues to dominate the universe of discourse owing to its momentum. This momentum makes it difficult to slow the juggernaut of tradition or deflect its course. Rolling along on the wheels of piety and prejudice, its inertial mass continues to cut a path through history even though its halcyon days have past.

Legalistic terms like “dogma” and “canon” show how “orthodox” teaching was conceived as a normative framework. Similarly, “orthodox” versus “heretical” reflect the early conflict between frames of reference based on different criteria. History shows that these criteria were established through a process that was as

much political as religious, and more theologically driven than historically warranted.

In this process through which orthodoxy developed, the “people of faith” who accepted belief in norms as determinative stood in opposition to “knowers,” who emphasized mystical experience as the ultimate criterion. The Gnostics got their name from the Greek term *gnosis*, meaning “knowledge,” or “wisdom,” and they called themselves *gnostikoi* or “knowers” to distinguish themselves from the party of believers. The believers carried the day, and the knowers or Gnostics were relegated to the dustbin of history as eccentric heretics.

The normative authority of the “orthodox” framework established by the party of believers — they would prefer the term “faithful” — maintained its supremacy for almost two millennia, when it began to be successfully challenged in the nineteenth century by liberal German theologians. That challenge was successful to the degree that the normative authority of the traditional framework is neither sanctioned politically nor dominant academically. Nevertheless, its cultural effects persist at least subliminally.

For example, many scholars working in the Jesus tradition do not consider themselves to be influenced by their beliefs even though they grew up in normative Christianity. However, the inertial momentum of these norms is a cultural force that works subliminally, often unbeknownst to those who consider themselves to be objective historians and scholars. While one can put one’s explicit beliefs aside, it is difficult to step outside of one’s cultural frame of reference. This is especially the case when its influence results in unconscious bias and hidden assumptions. This bias is an unconscious way of seeing that frames the way one looks and consequently shapes one’s vision.

WHAT IS TRUTH?

Pontius Pilate is famous for asking skeptically, “What is truth?”¹ Questions regarding truth appear very early in Western thought. *Epistemology* as the study of the fundamental principles of knowledge is center stage in Plato. *Protagoras* is one of Plato’s dialogues exploring the nature of truth.² It purports to be the report of a

¹ John 18:38.

² Plato. *Dialogues*. Translated by Benjamin Jowett. (Public Domain, 1871).
URL=<<http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/plato/index.htm>> “Epistemology” is likely an unfamiliar word to many people who have not studied philosophy. It comes from the Greek *episteme* meaning knowledge. Epistemology is the study of the fundamental principles of knowledge. Epistemology is a branch of philosophy rather than psychology or logic, since psychology deals with the empirical aspect of mind that is capable of scientific hypothesis, and logic deals with the formal characteristics of expression.

dialogue between Socrates and Protagoras, a Sophist. The historical Protagoras is famous for asserting, “Man is the measure of all things,” meaning that truth is relative to the knower. Much of Western philosophy has been aimed at refuting or countering this claim, which seemed to many to be crass, aimed at gaining the upper hand in an argument through specious reasoning and rhetorical manipulation. Indeed, sophists are pictured as making their living by teaching how to make the worse case seem the better. Protagoras likely saw that truth is largely a matter of agreement, and that is probably what he meant by man’s being the measure of all things.

When the criterion is obvious, truth is evident, as is the case with most simple assertions of fact. People who are directly acquainted with what is asserted to be the case can easily come to agreement on the truth or falsity of the statement simply by checking the facts. However, when the criterion is not so obvious, as is the case with generalizations and appeals to principle, which are matters where reference to facts is not a viable option to corroborate the claims, then truth is less evident. Agreement is more difficult to reach on the basis of evidence. Hence, persuasion can play a pivotal role.

Recognizing that much truth is shaped by agreement, the purpose of rhetoric is to produce agreement on the basis of persuasion by using rhetorical devices and questionable logic instead of objective criteria. A well-known contemporary example of specious logic is the book, *How To Lie With Statistics*.¹ The advertising and marketing industry provides ample evidence of the use of rhetorical devices to entice and convince. Branding, for example, is based on creating mass agreement regarding desirability and value. For example, in marketing to youth where image is everything, the “coolness” factor is paramount since everyone wants to be perceived as being “with it” or “in.”

Frames, memes, memplexes, norms and established narratives are rhetorical devices that generate agreement. This agreement results in what might be called social or cultural “truthiness” in contrast to truth.² Politicians and propagandists have used “truthiness” to their advantage for a long time. Marketers honed this skill to perfection. For example, branding creates not only consumer acceptance but also brand loyalty. This type of agreement can generate Pavlovian responses, which may even contradict standards of rational behavior by leading people to act against their best interests by resisting change when it is called for by changing circumstances, such as better value in a less well-known and accepted product.

¹ Darrell Huff and Irving Geis. *How To Lie With Statistics*. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1952).

² Comedian Stephen Colbert coined the term “truthiness” in a satirical context relative to contemporary political discourse. URL=<<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truthiness>>.

CULTURAL MOMENTUM

Cultural memes are not only “sticky,” but cultural agreement is also often subliminal. Many people do not even realize that they have caught a good case of it. Cultural memes and the framework they describe generate levels of agreement that entrain thinking and behavior, often unconsciously. Merely being aware of this process intellectually is not sufficient to rescue one from it completely. Hidden assumptions bias virtually everyone subliminally; for they are the glasses through which we see. Therefore, we can see them only with difficulty, and often we even forget that we are wearing them. I certainly do not wish to imply that I am beyond the bias of hidden assumptions, for that itself would be a gratuitous presumption.

Philosophers of language such as Wittgenstein have noticed that this kind of agreement is found in cultural frames of reference, such as the dominant religious universe of discourse. Moreover, those in positions of responsibility in a culture and those who aspire to such positions risk their positions by failing to fall into line with major strands of agreement in the culture, such as religion. Even those not subscribing to the norms of the frame find themselves entrained by its memes in reacting to it. For example, the opposite of theism is atheism. The atheist is therefore drawn into the theistic meme unwillingly by opposing it explicitly.

Only a relative handful of scholars have risked their reputations by seriously challenging sacred cows outside abstruse professional literature and debate, and have largely been satisfied to chip away gradually at the edges rather than mount a headlong attack publicly, let alone attempt to shift the predominant frame significantly. Many other scholars dismiss such challenges out of hand as peripheral or beyond the pale, not realizing that they are acting on the basis of hidden assumptions fostered by the dominant model. Moreover, scholars are employed by universities, which are generally conservative institutions in the sense of being preservers and transmitters of traditional knowledge and values, even when these happen to be liberal traditions and values.

There is an old saying that it is difficult to be against something one is being paid to be for. A certain degree of questioning gives the veneer of the academic freedom expected in a liberal democracy, but there are limits that the societal norms set at any particular time. While these norms do shift, there is generally a bias toward preserving the status quo, and those who make waves do so at their own risk. Societies are conservative in general, preferring to stick with traditional values even beyond their time, because too rapid change is distrusted, on the principle that it's better to stick with the devil we know than take a chance going with one we don't.

Questioning key fundamentals of the dominant worldview seriously can even be interpreted as questioning the foundations of Western civilization — and its superiority. Western civilization was shaped by a few principal factors: (1) the Judeo-Christian religious tradition, in particular through the beliefs it has inculcated

as fact and the norms that it has imposed as absolutes, (2) Greek thought, especially as it was expressed in rational argument and Athenian democracy, (3) Roman law and organization, especially the rule of law, and (4) modern science and technology, promising material progress without limit. The majority of people are no longer conscious of these inputs or their historical interaction to provide the frame of reference for contemporary Western culture. As a result, they are also ignorant of the predominant framework through which they see the world and in terms of which they evaluate. Nor do they understand how other cultures might see things differently from the perspective of a different history.

Many are aware, however, of the clash that occurred when the scientific method was introduced. While the Church attempted to control the process, and was successful in delaying it for a time, the power of the new frame was too great for the *ancien régime* to resist indefinitely. As Western civilization moved to the next major stage by incorporating science, normative religion was increasingly forced to share the stage and finally to cede the limelight.

Remarkably, this dialectic is still working itself out, as current events in U. S. politics show. Twenty percent of the U. S. population thinks that the universe is only six thousand years old, and fully fifty percent does not believe that human beings are descended from primates, even in the face of overwhelming scientific evidence to the contrary. Even the current scientific worldview held by the general populace is dominated by classical Newtonian physics, a century after the introduction of relativity and quantum mechanics. Studies show that major advances in knowledge require long periods for integration into a society's worldview, to the degree that the society actually shifts its vantage.

At the moment, Western civilization is speeding toward a head-on collision with the rest of the world as the progression of mercantilism to colonialism to imperialism to Western exceptionalism comes to a head. Advances in science and technology, especially transportation and communications, have been bringing the world together for some time. Now the Internet is providing a real-time *global* forum available to virtually everyone, since even those too poor to own a computer have access to the Internet via cyber-café's and public libraries. Moreover, trade is uniting the world economically as never before. Interdependence is becoming more important than narrow national interests.

One of the biggest problems that the West faces in this rush toward globalization is the normative perception that its system is superior to all others. Exacerbating this is the historical coincidence that the West is economically, politically and militarily dominant. This reinforces the presumption in the West that its culture and civilization are socially and even spiritually superior.

That smarminess of presumption is being challenged. Traditional cultures and their frames of reference may not be as advanced scientifically or economically, but

they have withstood the test of time and have millennia of experience under the belt, and still have many things to teach from which the technologically more advanced West can learn, as recent appreciation of Eastern spirituality shows. However, the West has often been interested in so-called primitive cultures only to the degree that their lore can be turned into profit, e.g., through the pharmaceutical industry.

COLLISION OF IDEAS

One of the major forces involved in this collision of ideas and their respective frames of reference is religion and spirituality. Traditional religions most often have vital and vibrant spiritualities underlying them, and they are often replete with genuine mystics and accomplished masters. The influx of Eastern teachers and teachings since the Sixties has resulted in a renewed interest in spiritual experience and a greater emphasis on it. As the generation that was coming of age in the Sixties itself ages, this phenomenon is no longer limited primarily to the young. In addition, other influences have also been at work. For example, the rise in interest in “earth spiritualities” has also resulted in a changed emphasis in the relation of the society to the environment from one of dominance to stewardship. An increasing number of people identify their religion simply as spirituality.

The process of globalization is bringing the West in contact with new frames of reference that are also most ancient. These ancient wisdom traditions have often been heretofore misunderstood by the West as being primitive. But as a new crop of more open-minded scholars is approaching them, they are now emerging as originators of perennial wisdom. They are also finding a popular audience among Westerners no longer satisfied with the crumbling normative religious frames of reference that have long marginalized mystical experience and insight.

Many people are now measuring Western normative religions against this challenge and finding them lacking, especially when the normative frames of reference dismiss or even exclude spiritual experience in favor of piety, morality and adherence to established doctrine and theology. These factors are often confronting normative Christian frames of reference through competition for adherents. These alien influences sometimes provoke a reactionary response from established institutions. But many in the establishment are coming to the realization that the “good old religion” must grow or die. But too often their answer to enhancing experience and becoming more open is to allow guitars in church.

On the other hand, many religious people in the West are resistant to change, especially when it involves shifts in cherished religious norms that powerfully affect culture as a whole and their subculture in particular. People are sensitive to the norms that structure the predominant frame, even though they may not be able to identify just what constitutes these norms. That is the business of philosophy in

the broad sense of “punditry,” a great deal of which is devoted to justifying the contemporary lifestyle and the ideology upon which it rests. Most people pay little attention to this other than on talk shows, in which social conventions are confused with moral absolutes and where criticizing deviation from the norms is a form of entertainment. A lot of the punditry revolves around contemporary norms in flux, where the bias is toward resisting change, or at least being skeptical toward it.

While people will allow adjustments to the superstructure, people in general feel threatened when the foundation itself wobbles or the infrastructure is sufficiently bent. This, after all, is the lens through which people “see” their own collective construct as reality. As a result significant changes in the lens are interpreted as distortions of reality. In fact, even cleaning the lens can have a similar psychological effect.

Normative religions often play the role of providing the bulwark of social conservatism that supports the status quo by upholding the norms maintaining the predominant framework. Thus, the clergy has tended to be even more reticent than scholars to challenge the predominant framework, even though they may realize that they are contributing to the pious fraud by perpetuating a status quo that is no longer in tune with the times or current in terms of the latest knowledge.

Moreover, normative authorities often have sought to perpetuate the pious fraud, some even harkening back to a status quo ante, when normative religion was determinative socially. It is no wonder then that many believers unsuspectingly find themselves agreeing with a framework that is out of date and needs to be adjusted in the light of evidence, if not reframed. Many professionals whose charge it is to promulgate truth have inadvertently not informed them of developments in a timely way, or may have actually concealed discoveries unwelcome to vested authority. Yet others feel, not without reason, that informing the public about such developments would be too confusing for people steeped in a belief system that provides the underpinning of their lives, so they conclude that the pulpit is better reserved for piety than education.

The bias of most cultures is against change when it is not mandated by overwhelming circumstances or forced by impending disaster. Most people know from experience that it is smoother to go with the flow than make waves. While there are relatively few periods of absolutely calm waters, there are also few tsunamis.

PARADIGM SHIFT

But tsunamis do come from time to time, and when they do there is a rather abrupt shift in the entire field. In the history of Christianity, no person is more notable than Martin Luther in this regard as the spearhead of change. The Protestant Reformation also led to the Counter-Reformation in the Catholic Church,

completely reshaping the religious framework in the West, but only at the expense of great social turmoil and much bloodshed, which still continues in places like Northern Ireland, serving as a reminder of what drastic change can entail.

Galileo is the person most associated with the confrontation between science and religion at approximately the same period, when the dominance of the Church in the Middle Ages was being challenged by the rise of modernity. The introduction of scientific methodology would have an even greater impact on the history of Christianity than the Protestant Reformation. The former simply shifted the norms slightly, in some ways even more conservatively since scripture alone became the ultimate basis for the norms. On the other hand, the latter confronted religious norms head on, by questioning the basis of their supposedly absolute status.

Yet, even scientists have their own norms, which they presume on the basis of their success and from which they deviate only when circumstances show a shift is required on the basis of the data.¹ Generally, scientists do the “normal science” or articulating the implications of a paradigmatic view. Then consensus for change builds. Until then, radical change is resisted, and changes are only made piecemeal and *ad hoc*. Finally, when the foundation of the old paradigm is creaking so much that it can no longer be repaired satisfactorily, a new one arises to take its place.

Shifts in scientific paradigms occur only when a paradigm breaks down to the degree that it loses its ability to explain the data. Thomas Kuhn calls this abrupt paradigm-shift, “scientific revolution.” After a shift, normal science continues using the norms of the new paradigm. This can happen rather quickly as historical events go, although the old guard with its tremendous investment in the old paradigm resists meaningful change, and wholesale change must wait until its aging members are replaced by a rising generation that embraces a new vision.

Like scientists doing the “normal” science of articulating the dominant paradigm, most scholars work within the confines of a normative system. They are very reluctant to deviate from the normative status quo until the normal paradigm actually begins breaking down, calling for a paradigm shift. Patching up the old paradigm is where a great deal of scholarship about Christianity is today. Some are calling for a paradigm-shift, but so far, no alternative has been persuasive enough to carry the day.

CRISIS IN CHRISTIANITY

Nineteenth century theological liberalism launched such an attempt, which was moderately successful but not adopted universally. Then Christian Fundamentalism arose to counter it by returning to a status quo ante. This dialectic is still taking

¹ Thomas Kuhn. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

place, with Fundamentalism the most vocal proponent, putting it to the fore both socially and politically in the United States, at least, where its proponents have even attacked science with some success, for example, by questioning the theory of evolution as the basis of biology on the basis of “creationism.”

The popular notion of Christianity is much less advanced than the scholarly, remaining somewhere in the late Middle Ages in the minds of many Catholics and the beginnings of the Reformation in the minds of many Protestants. Moreover, where the momentum of the old normative view has been broken to a degree, the necessary force has often been generated on the basis of dubious reasons that cannot carry in an enduring way because its solutions do not lead to the abiding fulfillment of inner peace. Here I am thinking, for example, of the enormously popular fictional accounts pretending to be grounded in factual evidence, but which are instead sensational — emotionally seducing rather than logically and factually compelling. It is no use rushing from one kind of wishful thinking into another. That is not the kind of new Renaissance we need today to meet challenges and seize opportunities.

THE QUEST FOR THE HISTORICAL JESUS

On the other hand, many scholars are doing a lot of useful deconstruction, especially in relation to the history of early Christianity, the development of the New Testament, and the quest for the historical Jesus.¹ This quest is revealing just

¹ The term “deconstruction” is often associated with Jacques Derrida. However, I am not limiting its use to this meaning, and no connection is implied to his work or methodology. In the sense it is used herein, “deconstruction” may bear some relation to postmodernism and deconstructionism, owing more to similarity in results than method. Biblical scholars and historians of the period have developed their own methodologies, and much of the deconstruction of the Jesus myth flows from their approach. My own methodology, employed herein for exploring and critiquing how the normative universe of discourse is framed, is based more on language analysis in the tradition of Wittgenstein, whose work was the subject of my doctoral dissertation, as well as on contributions of the Alfred Korzibski’s General Semantics, philosophy of science, e.g., the work of Thomas Kuhn, and cognitive psychology, e.g., the work of George Lakoff.

Deconstructionistic programs are criticized as being relativistic and ultimately nihilistic. However, I will use deconstruction to show the relativity of conceptual frames, while asserting the absolutism of nondual realization, which is ineffable, as the basis of spirituality as the ancient religion of humankind. All attempts to express this realization or communicate it conceptually are necessarily interpretative, hence, relativistic. Therefore, religion is best seen as a call to spirituality as experience, where the only absolute experience is nonduality, precisely because of its not being subject to relative distinctions in that it lies beyond space, time, form and change. In short, I am an absolutist with respect to experience and a relativist with respect to communication. It is possible to be certain

how much of the Jesus myth cannot be substantiated on the basis of evidence, as well as how much of it is questioned or even contradicted by the evidence. A realization is emerging that it may also not be possible to arrive at any solid conclusions regarding this period for lack of sufficient evidence. But, while definitive answers may or may not be forthcoming on the basis of evidence yet to be discovered, it has already become clear that previous “certainties” were subjective rather than objective, in that they were based on normatively determined beliefs instead of historically documented evidence.

After all, Jesus was seemingly a simple peasant who lived in one of the outposts of the Roman Empire, which was a backwater at that. The most notable historical event of his life was that the Romans apparently executed him for a capital offense, likely sedition. However, his crime was not of sufficient consequence to the Empire to be recorded in official records. There is virtually no record of Jesus until decades later, when what was likely an already rich oral tradition began to be written down by his followers.¹ Previous to that, Jesus is mentioned in the letters of Paul, who never met Jesus while he was alive. However, Paul says almost nothing about the historical Jesus, and his emphasis is almost totally on the risen Christ. Who the Jesus of history was and what he actually did has been determined chiefly by the New Testament narratives, which until recently was never subjected to serious critical review.

regarding what is essentially supramental on the basis of realization, without relying on blind faith, and not be able to conceptualize or account for it. One can merely label the experience and speak of it negatively, e.g., as “empty,” “void,” or “nondual.”

Therefore, there is a great difference between nondualism as a realization and monistic or nondualistic philosophies. The latter can only claim to be grounded in the former but not to be the exclusive account of it. For example, Advaita Vedanta and Buddhism are two sides of the same coin, offering different interpretations of nonduality. For example, Advaita characterizes the nondual realization as fullness and Buddhism, as emptiness. They are in agreement that it experienced as freedom from boundaries. The one calls for the other to complement it.

¹ In *Jewish Antiquities* (93 C.E.) Flavius Josephus putatively mentions the historical Christ, but the authenticity of this passage is controversial. Virtually no scholar thinks that Josephus is responsible for it as it stands. Many scholars believe it to be either partially interpolated or a later, forged addition. Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 18.3.3 § 68, in *The Works of Josephus, Complete and Unabridged New Updated Edition*. Translated by William Whiston. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1987). Recent research based on statistical reasoning suggests that it was incorporated from an earlier Christian text. G. J. Goldberg, "The Coincidences of the *Testimonium* of Josephus and the Emmaus Narrative of Luke," *The Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 13 (1995) p. 59-77.

Over the past century, these writings have begun to be examined more closely in the light of the methodology of modern scholarship and compared with other literature of the period, including the recently discovered Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi Library. Emerging from this study is not so much a definitive answer as a mountain of questions. Moreover, research suggests that the “definitive” answers provided by normative Christianity are not objective, but rather constructed to establish and defend a particular point of view.

This point of view has framed the predominant religious universe of discourse in the West since the first millennium and continues to do so for most. Even scholars familiar with the field have a difficult time approaching scenarios suggesting that the Jesus myth is a shaping of the story by a party. For example, Robert Eisenman’s work suggests that John the Immerser (Baptist), Jesus, and Jesus’ brother, James the Righteous (Just) resemble the Essenes of the Dead Sea Scrolls more than the Hellenized Christ of Paul and his followers.¹

Others suggest that the Jesus presented in the Gnostic texts found at Nag Hammadi may also be closer to the truth than comfortable for many who cling to traditional conceptions, or misconceptions.² Not many scholars are yet venturing into this morass, preferring to stick with central issues or at most wrestling around the edges without confronting the demons of the swamp.

Interestingly, the ones daring to enter the lists to challenge conventional wisdom have been feminists, and they have been encouraged by popular interest.³ The institutions of male monotheism and consequent patriarchy are found to be innovations replacing a previous goddess religion and more matriarchal culture. This illustrates how a framework can be radically reversed.

The Jewish culture in which Jesus lived, as well as the Hellenistic world ruled by imperial Rome, was patriarchal. As a result, women were marginalized. However, there is good evidence that Jesus broke with tradition by associating with women

¹ Eisenman, Robert. *James the Brother of Jesus: The Key to Unlocking the Secrets of Early Christianity and the Dead Sea Scrolls*. (New York: Penguin, 1998); *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the First Christians: Essays and Translations*. (Shaftesbury, Dorset: Element Books, 1996); *The New Testament Code: The Cup of the Lord, the Damascus Covenant, and the Blood of Christ*. (London: Duncan Baird Publishers/Watkins, 2006).

² Elaine Pagels. *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*. (New York, Random House, 2003).

³ Some of this work is solid and some, not. The work of Marija Gimbutas, Merlin Stone, Gerda Lerner on the ancient Goddess and the rise of patriarchy has not only been influential; it is based on solid research. Raphael Patai’s work on the Hebrew Goddess is also recommended. Raphael Patai. *The Hebrew Goddess*. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 3rd edition, 1990).

openly, which was considered improper for a teacher. Apparently women also occupied positions of leadership in the early Church. Now this is coming to light once again after having been submerged under centuries of male dominance.

Most significantly, Mary Magdalene (also Magdelene) is capturing popular attention, especially because of her special relationship with Jesus that is emerging from the apocryphal literature, where she plays a central role and often occupies a pre-eminent position. Just what the nature of the putative relationship Jesus and Magdalene may have been is unclear, recent sensationalism notwithstanding.

It seems to be bogus in that there is virtually no compelling evidence for it and the rationale for its supposed cover-up seems implausible, the alleged romance of Jesus and Mary Magdalene has legs, as they say in the newspaper world. It is already shaking the frame.

This is important to the consideration of framing because Mary Magdalene was apparently airbrushed out of the picture, like Jesus' brother James, and later even associated with a prostitute to discredit her, as John's gospel discredits Thomas as a doubter. Penetrating scholars see these matters as evidence of rival factions telling their own stories, which confront each other. The victorious party got to canonize its version and exclude the rest, thereby establishing its framework as authoritative.

It is no longer possible to brush Mary Magdalene aside by making her out to have been a prostitute, as Western orthodoxy attempted to do much after the fact. While a later tradition makes her a prostitute, there is no mention of such mention in the gospels, and most biblical historians now reject the association.

Mary Magdalene is traditionally thought of as the woman from whom Jesus cast out seven devils.¹ She was also identified with the "sinful woman" who anointed the feet of Jesus, whom John identifies with Mary of Bethany². However, the story of the "sinful woman" does not appear in the earliest copies of the gospels and some scribe apparently added it.³

In 591, Pope Gregory I gave a sermon in which he equated Mary Magdalene with: 1. the sinful woman (Luke 7: 36-50), 2. Mary of Bethany (John 11: 1-2), 3. the woman from who Jesus cast out seven demons (Mark 16:9, Luke 8:2), as well as 4. the adulteress brought before Jesus. While this was never made an article of faith in the Catholic Church, it was widely accepted. In contrast, the Eastern Orthodox Church consistently rejects such associations, holding that Mary Magdalene was chaste.

¹ Mark 16:9, Luke 8:2

² Luke 7: 36-50, John 11: 1-2

³ Bart D. Ehrman. *Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene: The Followers of Jesus in History and Legend*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

The gospels put Mary Magdalene at the crucifixion, along with Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary the wife of Cleopas, and Mary the sister of Jesus.¹ They also ascribe to her the unique role of being the first to see the risen Christ at the tomb, and to tell the other apostles.² For this reason she is called “the apostle to the apostles.”

Mary Magdalene also appears in *The Gospel of Mary* and *The Gospel of Philip* as an apostle proclaiming Jesus as savior and lord. A Mary is mentioned in *The Gospel of Thomas*, Sayings 22 and 114, but is not designated as Magdalene, although many scholars assume that she is meant.³

Mary Magdalene has also been put forward as possibly the author of the fourth gospel.⁴ While this gospel is traditionally attributed to John, scholars generally agree that the author is unknown. The argument is interesting because it relies on research of premier Catholic biblical scholar Raymond E. Brown.

Whether we ever discover historical evidence that gives a definitive answer to Mary Magdalene’s role in “the Jesus puzzle” is questionable. A great deal of research already calls much venerable tradition into question and even invalidates key pieces of the existing frame. Moreover, there is significant difference between the traditions of the East and West regarding her. For example, the Eastern Church has her buried in Constantinople, the Western in various places in Provence.

A FRESH VISION

I intend to contribute to calling the existing frame of the Jesus tradition into question and, hopefully, to put it on a more solid basis. This involves deconstruction and reconstruction.

I take the existing frame and its cultural momentum to be a diversion from the Way of Jesus as a spiritual tradition consistent with perennial wisdom. For example, I regard it as inconceivable that a great teacher like Jesus would originate a teaching that contradicts every other spiritual teaching and all of perennial wisdom, and requiring belief in it as the sole criterion for salvation. This requires dismissing all other traditions, many of which have indisputably produced great mystics, masters,

¹ Matthew 27: 55-62, John 19:25. Instead, Mark 15:40 puts Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the less, and Salome “far off.”

² Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24, John 20.

³ Stephen J. Shoemaker argues that this unidentified Mary is more likely the mother of Jesus. Stephen J. Shoemaker, “Rethinking the ‘Gnostic Mary’: Mary of Nazareth and Mary of Magdala in Early Christian Tradition”, *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 9 (2001), p. 555-595.

⁴ Ramon K. Jusino. “Mary Magdalene: Author of the Fourth Gospel?”
URL=< URL=<http://ramon_k_jusino.tripod.com/magdalene.html>.

prophets, seers, saints and sages. Such a course seems to be preposterous on the very face of it, and unworthy of an all-knowing, all-powerful and totally compassionate God. Such a view sets up a God who is an arbitrary tyrant. To me this smacks of not only of spiritual ignorance and religious arrogance, but also idolatry.

The Gospel of Thomas is another gospel, that of a different early community of followers of Jesus. As a gospel about Jesus, it is similar to other gospels insofar as it is a teaching story. It is different from the other stories and myths in that it is a series of aphoristic sayings attributed to Jesus, and it lacks a narrative linking such sayings. As a result, it does not present itself as historically factual but as a thread of precepts, composed of many interwoven strands. This may also be evidence of its being an early work remaining in a more primitive state than the narrative canonical gospels or the more mythological Gnostic gospels.

Examination of *The Gospel of Thomas* reveals a different picture of Jesus and his teaching than is set forth in the canonical works and the letters of Paul. Was this picture aberrant, as the orthodox claimed? I will argue that not only was it not aberrant, but rather, it is in tune with the deepest levels of Christian teaching interpreted mystically, as well as being consistent with perennial wisdom. Moreover, its picture of Jesus accords with that of other great Masters of wisdom and founders of the great religions.

As we will see, *The Gospel of Thomas* is based on a mystical interpretation of the affirmation of unity, "God is one." This interpretation affirms that only God is real as indivisible existence fully aware of itself as Truth. The proof of this lies in the spiritual experience of metaphysical nonduality that is reported in all wisdom traditions from time immemorial.

METAPHYSICAL NONDUALITY

In my view, the most exciting thing about *The Gospel of Thomas* is that it can be interpreted as being a very early example of perennial wisdom occurring in the development of Christianity. For it is explicit in its assertion that the object of the spiritual quest is realization of metaphysical nonduality in conscious identity with God as the only reality.

Metaphysical nonduality is the view that reality is quintessentially one, and all apparent diversity is merely appearance. The spiritual quest culminates in realization of the soul's intrinsic identity with this One in the indivisible unity of God. Mystics representing virtually all major religions and wisdom traditions have asserted this view, as well as some independently of any tradition. Among these traditions are Vedanta, Buddhism, Taoism, Sikhism, and Jainism in the East, and

Hermeticism, Platonism, Neoplatonism, Qabalah, Sufism, mystical Christianity and Western esotericism in the West.¹

Many scholars initially wrote off statements in *The Gospel of Thomas* supporting this view as examples of “Gnostic” influence, hence essentially independent of Christianity and antithetical to it. However, this objection gratuitously assumes Jesus’ teaching to be congruent with the normative frame. I will argue that at least some sayings of *The Gospel of Thomas* are evidence of an early mystical strain in Christianity linking it to other key nondual traditions of perennial wisdom, such as Shankara’s Vedanta, Chuang Tzu’s Taoism, Buddha’s Dharma, and ibn ‘Arabi’s *Wujudiyyah* Sufism.

Moreover, the nondual view espoused by *The Gospel of Thomas* is neither opposed to nor even separate from the Hebraic mystical tradition from which Christianity arose and in terms of which it was initially expressed. For example, the key teaching of Judaism, reiterated by Jesus, and adopted by both Christianity and Islam is, “The Lord, our God, is one.”² The mystical interpretation of this affirmation of unity is that only God is real, as we will see in the course of this investigation.

The reports of mystics and the teaching of masters worldwide across time can be viewed as constituting a perennial wisdom. Perennial wisdom holds that a common spirituality runs through all religions and wisdom traditions. However, this assertion should not be mistaken as a claim that all of them are “saying the same thing,” at least in the same way. Rather the idea is that many mystics report a common experience of nonduality, even though it manifests in diverse contexts, is couched in different terminology, and is arrived at through separate means.

How can we be sure then that it is a common experience? One answer is logical. That which transcends all distinction, even the individuality of the experiencer, cannot be distinguished, hence, must be identical. The experiential answer is that this awakening to consciousness without an object, wherein the boundary between subject and object disappears, is its own criterion.

Moreover, the fact that different mystics are saying the same thing in different ways argues for the originality of the data. If mystics were all saying the same

¹ “Mystical” is used in the technical sense of knowledge based on non-ordinary experience, which is not dependent on the physical senses, imagination, mental conception, understanding, intellectual discrimination, or logical reasoning, but is gained through supramental cognition. Although it may include some of the more exalted forms of ordinary experience, such as that of love, it is not limited to these, and it extends to dimensions of knowledge such as realization of nonduality, which can be neither conceived nor imagined on the basis of ordinary experience.

² Deuteronomy 6:4. The Hebrew reads, *YHVH elohenu YHVH Echad*.

things in the same way, this would argue for a historical diffusion of ideas geographically across time. This would serve to counter the claim of perennial wisdom that the basis of human spirituality is internal and capable of being discovered independently.

The issue of the geographical diffusion of ideas is part of a larger issue of the origin of mystical testimony and teaching. There are essentially three possibilities, *invention* of something new, *discovery* of what is already there, and *revelation* through divine intervention.

Normative approaches to religion generally presuppose that sacred knowledge is transmitted directly through “revelation,” in a process that is supernatural, hence, not understood. Sometimes revelation is represented as the “word of God” spoken to a prophet and God is said to have spoken directly to Moses on Mt. Sinai. Later, revelation came to encompass the invisible working of the Holy Spirit, who guided the pens of the writers of the New Testament. Normative viewpoints generally do not recognize mysticism as revelation in the conventional sense, nor do mystics report it this way either.

In contrast, many scholars presuppose that human knowledge is invented by the mind and then passed on, during which it gets modified and elaborated. This view would hold, for instance, that mysticism is a holdover of prehistoric ideas and imaginings whose origin is unknown but whose trail can be traced through documentation. While some think of invention as a result of speculation and imagination, others look to more physical causes. A strong presupposition, based on what is known of contemporary shamans, for example, is that such notions arose from the ingestion of psychotropic agents or ascetic practices that affect biochemistry and neurology.

On the other hand, mystics claim that their knowledge is discovered within in states of higher cognition, independently of the thinking mind and ordinary emotions. Even those who have tasted but a drop of divine love or a whiff of the nondual state of consciousness report that this experience is not obtained through revelation in the conventional religious sense, nor is it merely invented as an intellectual idea or concept, or a poetic symbol. Rather, a hitherto unknown dimension of awareness is discovered experientially through expansion of the heart in the case of divine love and awakening in the case of nonduality, both of which are experiential and not intellectual or conceptual.

Reports that express mystical experience conceptually or symbolically do not imply that their origin is conceptual or symbolic rather than experiential. Confusing a report with the experience it reports is simply a mistake in logic.

This is significant in that many scholars reduce mysticism to reports. They attempt to trace the appearance of such ideas and teachings backward in time, trying to determine where they were invented and if possible, by whom. They then attempt

to trace the development of these ideas as they are transmitted temporally from generation to generation and geographically from location to location. The notion is that mystical phenomena are reducible to mystics' reports and that mystical teaching is reducible to ideas about these reports.

The mystical viewpoint contends that experiences elaborated in mystical reports are neither "revealed" by some mysterious process nor are they invented as intellectual ideas or poetic symbols devoid of underlying experience. Rather they are discovered within through direct acquaintance in experience.

While many mystics' employ spiritual practices that they claim leads to such experiences, it is also true that masters of wisdom can transmit this wisdom directly, including realization of the nondual state of awareness. Direct transmission may seem to be like revelation. However, most of those adhering to normative approaches to religion would not admit that realization of nonduality constitutes sacred knowledge, let alone divine revelation. Moreover, even if transmission takes place or "grace" is acknowledged, the awakening is a personal discovery in terms of experience.

Mystics discover dimensions of possible experience within and then attempt to communicate about them in language and other forms of symbolism. While such testimony and teaching may be preserved and transmitted through time, as well as diffused geographically, this is neither necessary to the process of discovery, nor can external means alone spark discovery.

One must personally go within to discover the deeper dimensions of awareness. Reading or hearing about realization does not produce realization through understanding concepts or appreciating symbols.

Therefore, my argument attacks the notion that common threads of perennial wisdom are reducible to geographical diffusion of ideas alone.

This is not to claim that wisdom traditions do not spread, influencing seekers to pursue the mystical knowledge about which they testify and purport to teach. However, everyone must discover this personally, in the cave of the heart.

Neither do I claim that prior teaching does not influence mystical reports. Since reports must be expressed in language, mystics often use tools that are at hand. I do contend, however, that prior reports do not necessarily determine mystics' experiences in all cases, precluding individual discovery.

The reports of many mystics worldwide from time immemorial show that essentially the same ground state of unity can be realized in the heart independently of the diffusion of ideas or teachings and that they were not primarily constructed

out of pre-existing cultural material.¹ That is to say, the teachings are sufficiently different to be independent while the realization toward which they point is identical because no distinction exists in it to differentiate it.

As a student of comparative spirituality as well as a spiritual aspirant acquainted with a variety of teachers and traditions, it was clear to me on the basis of both understanding and experience that there was something going on in the case of nonduality that seems to exceed reduction to either diffusion and coincidence. I found *The Gospel of Thomas* to be a clear expression of correspondence with other mystical traditions in this regard, emerging apparently independently in the milieu of early Christianity. It is expressed in terms sufficiently original to differentiate its origins from other traditions, and possibly connect it with Jesus himself. For the pithy sayings of *The Gospel of Thomas* seem consistent with the style scholars attribute to Jesus as a teacher, in contrast to the convoluted theological disquisitions of the gospel attributed to John, for example. If those can be believed to be from the mouth of Jesus, the sayings of *The Gospel of Thomas* would seem to have an equal or better claim.

THE JESUS PUZZLE

This endeavor to look at *The Gospel of Thomas* in terms of both perennial wisdom and the Christian mystical tradition also grew out of a long fascination with what I have come to call “the Jesus puzzle.” Having been a lover of Jesus since early childhood, I discovered that it is a fascinating enterprise to separate received belief from historical evidence, as one attempts to develop a plausible interpretation of Jesus’ life and teaching that is based on fact as well as grounded in faith. While this study did not shake my faith as trust in Jesus as a spiritual personage *par excellence*, it certainly changed my views on what received religious tradition teaches about his life and mission as doctrinal norms, for example, in so-called articles of faith.²

¹ In *The Innate Capacity*, *Op.cit.*, and *Mysticism, Mind and Consciousness*, Robert Forman argues for perennialism against the constructivism of Stephen Katz and others, citing the numerous documented reports of the experience of pure consciousness as evidence for a “perennial psychology” independent of cultural construction. Robert K. C. Forman. *Mysticism, Mind and Consciousness*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999); Stephen T. Katz. *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*. (New York: Oxford, 1978).

² Norms may be either explicit or implicit in a culture. For example, in Roman Catholicism, dogmas are explicitly stated norms. These are the system’s absolutes, the abridgment of which constitutes grounds for censure and even excommunication. On the other hand, many norms are implicit and even variable. The long-standing norm that the pope be an Italian was implicit. Perhaps it was least in part a vestige of the implicit

I came to see a great deal of normative Christianity as a spiritual tradition turned on its head, emphasizing the letter rather than the spirit, and requiring conformity to convention in place of undertaking the spiritual quest. Needless to say, this was a great disappointment at the time. It turned out to be a blessing in disguise, however; for it set me on a path of discovery that has been and continues to be extremely fruitful. I would now like to share some of these discoveries that led me eventually to this undertaking.

My studies and life experiences led me to conclude that social norms and conventions, including religious ones, have largely replaced spiritual principles and precepts that were once living and vital. Today, instead of Christians smiling in the face of lions, we find that many are triumphalists smug in their exceptionalism, presuming that adhering to their beliefs and norms will save them, while they ignore key fundamentals of Jesus' teaching in their daily affairs. They do now what Jesus criticized in his day, apparently unmindful that this is why he condemned the normative teachers of that time for being hypocrites.

When I began to study the issues with an open mind, I was disappointed that the normative institution in which I grew up had misrepresented many key issues by conflating belief and fact.¹ For example, I found that normative Christianity often confused religious belief with historical evidence, faith with fact, subjective convictions with objective criteria, and religious dogma with the actual words and deeds of Jesus, most of which remain uncertain historically.² It boggles the mind to

identification of the pope with the Roman emperor after the fall of the empire, so that the pope was traditionally of Roman descent. This norm may not even have been conscious and intentional in later years, but rather merely vestigial, which is why it could eventually be replaced when John Paul II, a Pole, was elected. And I remember wondering what was going to happen to all the people who went to hell for eating meat on Friday after that norm was rescinded. I sure hope they got out.

¹ I was raised Roman Catholic. I attended Catholic educational institutions from grammar school through Ph.D., with the exception of spending the eighth grade in public school and getting a master's degree at Columbia. This included four years at a diocesan seminary during high school. Theology and Scholastic philosophy courses were also required at the Jesuit college that I attended. So I would say that I had an above average education in religious subjects. Subsequently, I became a priest and then a bishop in an independent Catholic rite. It was only during this time that I was exposed to studies revealing the degree to which religious belief had been conflated with historical fact.

² For example, Jesus presumably spoke Aramaic, the vernacular of his time. The New Testament was originally written in Greek, and there are no surviving Aramaic documents of the period. The *Peshitta*, the Aramaic New Testament used by Chaldean Christians, was translated from the Greek back into Aramaic. Hence, the Aramaic words that Jesus physically spoke are unrecorded and remain unknown, other than the few recorded in the gospels.

realize that the entire course of Western civilization has been largely determined by this conflation of faith and fact. It is also disconcerting to find that enormous pressure still exists to continue this trend.

I raise such issues in a spirit of neither complaint nor “sour grapes” about the situation in which humanity presently finds itself. Rather, I am convinced that spirituality is ultimately practical in the world and therefore needs to be advanced not only for personal growth but also for the common wellbeing. I am also convinced that failure to do so will compound the already serious challenges humanity now faces.

One of the greatest obstacles to peace and the wellbeing of humankind is religious narrowness that seeks to impose its own norms, especially when they thwart the natural development of interior spirituality. I would contend that this is a result of ignorance of the spiritual depth of the various religions involved. This ignorance leads to a literal approach that misses the point of the teaching or actually distorts it. Therefore, it is to be regarded as of vital importance, especially at this time when globalization is the predominant cultural meme, to educate people about the inner meaning of their own religion and those of others, all of which are grounded ultimately in spiritual experience rather than external norms, for even the most orthodox admit that the prophets from whose revelations the norms are derived were privy to privileged knowledge in their heart of hearts. That is to say, they were people of wisdom, not people of the book.

REFRAMING

This reframing involves several pre-intellectual steps. First, a person’s level of awareness determines what that person can comprehend. Therefore, the fundamental step in education is raising the level of consciousness. Many factors contribute to such a process, the most important of which might be called “spiritual” in the broad sense of “inner work.” Studies have shown, for example, that certain types of meditation can augment intelligence and creativity, and increase energy and relaxation, when practiced regularly. R. Buckminster Fuller’s work also reveals that increasing the general level of education creates an environment in which opportunity that would not otherwise be either recognized or seized can flourish. While these may be broad areas to implement, the alternative is staying mired in a status quo, where the majority of people, even those who are well educated by ordinary standards, are several hundred years behind the leading edge of contemporary knowledge. This undertaking is an attempt to address the issue of raising consciousness from the perspective of the Way of Jesus, especially as set forth in *The Gospel of Thomas*, as well as in relation to perennial wisdom.

Secondly, philosophers, linguists, cognitive psychologists and sociologists have discovered the importance of *framing* in communication. This begins with

establishing a universe of discourse, such as political or religious discourse, and then directing it in particular channels.¹ Frames are controlling, and frames based on normative framing are especially controlling. But even frames that are merely operational are also controlling.

For example, when I was a student, I was interested in psychology as a possible major. But the field was then dominated by behavioral psychology, or “rat psychology” as students used to call it, and its god was statistics. I was not only uninterested in this approach; I was offended by it. So I pursued philosophy. But here I found that in the United States and England, philosophical logic and linguistic analysis were the dominant fields. My field of interest, comparative spirituality, was peripheral to the prevailing universe of discourse. I found myself marginalized, having to work around the edges.

However, I saw the situation change, first, in psychology, where humanistic psychology challenged behaviorism, and then transpersonal psychology took the field in a radically different direction. This alerted me to the power of changing frames of reference.

Frames of reference do shift, changing entire universes of discourse and the contexts in which they are conducted. For example, Abraham Maslow spearheaded an attack on behaviorism, and, eventually, humanistic psychology would moderate academia away from the strict behaviorism of B. F. Skinner. Subsequently transpersonal psychology, would attempt to integrate perennial wisdom into

¹ In his definitive work, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Emmanuel Kant launched the first sustained articulation to appear in the West of the mind’s subjective, *a priori*, contribution to constructing its knowledge of reality. The contributions of Freud and Jung showing the role of the unconscious on knowledge and behavior were also key factors in appreciating how thought and action are shaped by subliminal influences. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche also attacked hidden cultural presuppositions from different angles. Heidegger and later Derrida carried this forward using novel approaches to language to shock one out of the grip of unnoticed presumptions. In England and America, philosophers of language and linguists investigated the role of language in shaping thought and behavior. Here the seminal work of Ludwig Wittgenstein stands out, bridging English and continental thought. My doctoral dissertation was an investigation of the logic of justification in ordinary language, principally on the basis of Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty*. Alfred Korzybski’s *Science and Sanity*, S. I. Hayakawa’s *Language and Thought in Action*, Benjamin Whorf’s *Language, Thought, and Reality* also merit mention.

Korzybski’s aphorism, “The map is not the territory,” was especially influential. These works are representative of important initial contributions that led into a still ongoing debate over how reality is constructed on the basis of objective data and subjective structures. The contribution of subjective structure provides the framework in terms of which data is processed into information and communicated logically and rhetorically.

scientific psychology. It can be argued that something similar is taking place in both philosophy and theology. This trend has affected normative religions, too, as spirituality has gone from underground to mainstream since the Sixties.

Framing is the angle of view, so to speak, from which a subject matter is approached. This angle may be likened to the lens of a camera. The type, quality and positioning of the lens determines what the camera “sees.” The senses are like a lens. However, a lens simply passes light through an aperture to the film that records an image of the scene. The data of the sense, on the other hand, must be processed selectively, filtering out the “noise” and organizing the “signal.”

“Mindset” is also a type of lens mechanism that shapes the raw data of experience into cognitive information and interprets it in relation to other information. This is a complex process that occurs behind the scenes, so to speak.

POINT OF VIEW

The mind is capable of many points of view, but it must adopt one of these almost innumerable viewpoints for any particular task, for it does not function as an all-seeing “eye.” Humans organize data into information differently on the basis of philosophical presuppositions, psychological mindset, language use, and social context, for example. Indeed, the vantage of each individual is unique since no one experiences in precisely the same way. Rational interaction is possible only when there is sufficient agreement to facilitate it. When agreement is lacking, problems in relating arise, for instance, psychologically, socially, or culturally. This is becoming all the more evident as the tempo of globalization increases owing to advances in communications and transportation technology, and different individuals, groups and even entire cultures interact.

Viewpoint is not merely an individual matter; it is shared. Most of a society’s members share principal viewpoints, which are shaped by language, culture and education. These viewpoints provide the framing characteristic of a mindset.

The key fundamentals of these viewpoints become the norms of the universes of discourse predominant in the society and its sub-groups. These are the presuppositions that ground a worldview as an interpretation of reality. Most suppose that their worldview is faithfully reflective of reality rather than constructing it, and they naively mistake the foundations of the edifice for principles, precepts and norms that are self-evident instead of constructed. As a result, such people see other viewpoints as evidence of error or dissembling, if not mental or moral imbalance. The consequence is conflict that has often led to violence, or else the dominant group marginalizing the others, making them submissive.

Within a single culture are various sub-cultures. Although people may speak the same language and participate in many of the same activities socially, age-old

divisions separate religious worlds and their universes of discourse, consequently affecting the attitude and orientation of the people belonging to them. Christians, Jews and Muslims live in different worlds sub-culturally, and even within these principal divisions, sects also result in artificial divisions — Catholics and Protestants, as well as Fundamentalists and liberals, Orthodox and Reformed, Sunni and Shiite, and so forth. Many of these sub-groups have their own distinctive universes of discourse and contexts. Sometime others even find the special terminology of some groups difficult to understand.

“THE BOOK” AS FRAME

The overarching framework in Western religious discourse is “the Book.”¹ Various views of the meaning of scripture have framed the Judeo-Christian tradition over time. These views have often shifted, markedly at critical points such as the Protestant Reformation. Moreover, at any particular time different interpretations by various schools of thought have competed against one another across a spectrum. Historians are now discovering how this was true of early Christianity also, virtually from the beginning. For example, Paul’s disagreement with prominent apostles such as Peter is recorded in Acts.²

Historically, Western “religions of the Book,” namely, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, have been predominantly normative, although their approaches have been very different for the most part. For example, they all agree that “God is one” is fundamental, but their universes of discourse are also characterized by many norms that are quite different. These norms have not been exclusively religious. Rather they have shaped vast areas of Western culture, controlling many other significant universes of discourse, including science, with which they have often collided. This dialectic has been formative in the development of Western civilization virtually across the board, and it continues to be in many areas.

In normative Christianity especially, the institutional Church determined these norms, and the hierarchy established many of them almost two millennia ago. There

¹ The word “bible” is from Greek *biblion*, which simply means book in English.

² The work of Robert Eisenman suggests that these disagreements may have run much deeper. The views of Eisenman based on his work with the Dead Sea Scrolls are controversial, and most scholars of this field reject his conclusions. But regardless of whether one agrees with Eisenman’s conclusions, the research brings out material that is relevant to the debate, for example, that James was the leader of the Jerusalem Church and the dominant figure in the Jesus movement immediately after Jesus crucifixion, while Paul was initially merely a blip on the screen and his work was as yet meager and far-flung. It was not until much later, after James was murdered and the Jerusalem Church was destroyed, that Paul’s Gentile version of Christianity became dominant and rewrote history from the viewpoint of the victors.

have been reactions of note against perceived excesses, for example, the Protestant Reformation, but these have been chiefly reactionary rather than radical. That is to say, principal norms have been adjusted but not replaced or modified significantly, so that the framework remained essentially the same. There have been some changes made around the edges and a different emphases added, but the overall thrust was retained.

In the end, Protestantism dug its heels in hard over the Bible as the “word of God,” hence, normative to the extreme. Moreover, it insisted on scripture alone as *the* norm. As a result, little was done to examine scripture in terms of its underpinnings. The foundation was presumed to be solid and postulated as such. Thus, the scriptural framework was taken to be even more controlling than it had been in Catholicism, which had also admitted tradition.

For example, the essence of the Jesus tradition is, of course, Jesus. Jesus is famous for saying in the New Testament:

I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also.¹

Protestant Christianity generally interprets this to mean that one must believe in the testimony of the Bible about Jesus, as the sect reads it, or suffer eternal damnation. Remarkably, people actually think this is the only valid interpretation. This shows the power of an established narrative and the norms it sets up, seemingly in defiance of reason.

Fortunately, this is not the only interpretation. Rather, the same passage can be interpreted mystically in the sense that the Master as the embodiment of God is the door through which one must pass by deserving the Master’s grace. This is the teaching of perennial wisdom, and Jesus’ assertion is found in similar terms in other traditions.² It is significant for the mystical interpretation that the last sentence of this quotation, “If you know me, you will know my Father also,” relates to realization of God. It is the perennial teaching of the God-Man. I subscribe to the view that Jesus can be viewed as a manifestation or “advent” of the God-Man, Avatar, or Buddha, comparable to other manifestations of the personified Absolute in human form, such as other traditions consider Rama, Krishna, and Gautama Shakyamuni (Buddha) to be. This interpretation will be examined subsequently, and I will simply put it forward here.

¹ John 14:6-7.

² “I am the goal of the wise, and I am the way.” Krishna, *Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana* 11.12; “He who sees the Way (*Dharma*), he sees me (Buddha). He who sees me, he sees the Way.” *Samyutta Nikaya* 3.120; “I am the door. Whoever enters by me will be saved.” John 10:9; “I am the door. I am the Way and I am the Goal.” Meher Baba, quoted in K. T. Ramanujam, *Much Love*. Madras: Avatar Meher Baba Information, 1994, p. 572.

The problem that arises when the frame of normative Christianity begins to be deconstructed is what happens to Jesus. As one studies the scholarly literature, one finds that the historical Jesus is very different from the Christ of faith. The difficulty is that it is possible to see how the Christ of faith is a theological construct, but it is not possible to determine with any degree of assurance based on evidence, who the historical Jesus was. Thus, a gap arises. Sometimes it is presumed that if the theology of the Christ of faith is seriously questioned, then the conclusion is that the historical Jesus was merely an ordinary man around whom a legend grew up, which then got extrapolated into a powerful religious myth.

As the facts now stand, it is doubtful that much will be known conclusively about the historical Jesus, unless a trove of new evidence is uncovered. However, it is not necessary in questioning or even rejecting the traditional theological norms to conclude that Jesus was merely human, even though he was apparently a charismatic teacher and possibly a great person. But this does not account for Jesus' extraordinary influence of world history that continues today. Moreover, mystics from the beginning — Paul, for instance — report experiencing Jesus' presence. This has been a continuing phenomenon over millennia, and it is still being reported. Jesus doesn't seem to be going away anytime soon.

Rather than being limited to the dilemma of either accepting the Christ of faith or relegating Jesus to human status, it is possible to see Jesus not as the exclusive “son of God,” but as God-realized in the sense that perennial wisdom views many others. Moreover, there is a solid tradition in perennial wisdom that distinguishes those who realize God from the direct descent of God into human form as the God-Man or Avatar. Jesus can be viewed in either way, but there is no barrier to taking him as an advent of the God-Man, since the Jesus tradition itself makes room for such an interpretation. Moreover, recognized spiritual masters not of the Jesus traditions have also acknowledged Jesus as God-Man. Notable among these are Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Avatar Meher Baba. I will delve more deeply into this issue in this work in looking at the Jesus tradition in relation to perennial wisdom.

EXTERNAL NORMS VERSUS INTERIOR SPIRITUALITY

Foundational norms not only claim that the viewpoints they define are exclusive. They also pit different viewpoints against each other, sometimes encouraging conflict that has even led to violence. History reveals that religious wars are often some of the most violent and cruel.

While we may consider such thinking to be medieval, largely a phenomenon of the past, we are now witnessing it arise once again in as a principal factor shaping world, as “the people of the Book” struggle with each other in the most volatile part of the world. Psychologists warn that the human spirit has its “dark side,” and

everything has a shadow. Religion is no exception. Some of the greatest crimes have been committed in the name of religion by people who took the norms to an extreme.

Religious frames of reference have had enormous influence on whole societies and cultures because they provided the principal *mythos* and *ethos* extending over millennia. Therefore, such frames have been determinative internationally in ways that national politics, economics and culture never could be.

The problem is that such exterior norms focus on differences. This obscures the fact that not only is the religious impulse in the human heart based more on interior spirituality than beliefs or norms but also that human spirituality is universal, grounded in the innate desire for fulfillment through self-actualization. Chiefly normative viewpoints not only obscure this elementary and foundational realization about the very nature and purpose of religion, but normative Judaism, Christianity and Islam also rule it out.

Primarily following external norms makes one outer-directed. Those who chiefly pursue interior spirituality are inner-directed. Outer-directed people chiefly use the mind; whereas inner-directed people, the heart. Since the mind is like a monkey, flitting here and there, it requires rigid norms to keep it in line. Since the heart is one-pointed on what it loves and appreciates, spiritual life lived on the basis of heart is centered rather than dispersed by thoughts and distracted by doubts. Those who are internally centered do not need external props. Even though they may be one-pointed with respect to their spiritual ideal, they are less rigid in life, for the views of others do not threaten their own internal centeredness.

Until spirituality becomes a personal reality for a significant portion of a religious population, it remains only a vague idea, hence, an empty shadow of the reality. Then, external norms dominate the religion. Eventually, these norms devolve into social conventions, and instead of encouraging interior spirituality the religion becomes chiefly an extra-legal means of exerting social control on the basis of positive and negative reinforcement in the form of reward and punishment in the hereafter.

The scriptural teachings on which the external norms purport to be based are derived from the personal interior revelations of the prophets and saints of the various religions. But, ecclesiastical authorities, the clergy and the learned are seldom on that level of experience themselves. Consequently, they interpret the scriptures from their level, far lower, and they fix norms on the basis of their own limited comprehension. The gospel sayings about hypocrisy are well known. Moreover, *The Gospel of Thomas* reports Jesus purportedly saying of these

religious leaders of his day that they are like dogs in a manger, who neither eat nor permit the cattle to eat.¹

As the clergy and learned become more invested in perpetuating the status quo over time, the norms they promulgate and enforce become cultural as well as religious, not only widespread but also difficult to counteract. Then, as the investment grows even larger, the religion becomes a business and the norms produce profit. When that happens, the end is near. A Luther arises to give voice to what a great many people are thinking and feeling.

While the power of the institutional churches may have been largely broken as a controlling force in society, the norms remain and the pressure they exert is still powerful. Now we are seeing these norms pressed into the service of politics and economics to justify wars on religious grounds or else to whip up sentiment for them indirectly. No matter, the result is the same, more bloodshed.

However, this obvious insanity is bringing about a reaction. Many people are seeing that the traditional frames of reference not only obsolete but also dangerous. As a result, there is a strong impetus toward rethinking them and getting back to what the original message of the founders was about.

This is a historical constant that can be observed repeating itself. However, contemporary times make this a greater problem than it has been in the past. The lens of normative Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are too narrow to encompass the breadth necessary for this age of rapid globalization. Religious blinders are especially problematical, as current events show all too clearly. Conflict will prevail over harmony as long as different groups focus on their differences instead of recognizing their common humanity and the unity that underlies all life, which spirituality reveals in the heart. Given modern technology, the world can ill afford new religious wars. Recognizing that this would be the challenge of the twentieth century and beyond, Hazrat Inayat Khan advised in *The Unity of Religious Ideals*:

Religions are many and differ from each other, but only in form, like water which is always the same element and formless: it only takes the shape of the channel or vessel that holds it and that it uses for its accommodation. Thus the water changes its name to river, lake, sea, stream, or pond; and it is the same with religion: the essential truth is one, but its aspects are different. Those who fight about external forms will always continue to fight, but those who recognize the inner truth will not disagree and will thus be able to harmonize the people of all religions.²

¹ Saying 102.

² Hazrat Inayat Khan. *The Sufi Message: Vol. IX, The Unity of Religious Ideals*. Part I, ii, "Religion." URL=<http://wahiduddin.net/mv2/IX/IX_2.htm>.

It is now imperative to begin to reframe the issues and widen the focus. This means revisiting the norms that set this focus and seeing how they determine the universes of discourse and behavior, ruling on what is acceptable on the basis of the norms and ruling out what is not. Humanity can become the master of its destiny or the victim of its fate.

DECONSTRUCTION AND RECONSTRUCTION

Reframing involves *deconstruction* of the previous frame and *reconstruction* on a different foundation. Scholars have already gone a long way in deconstructing the normative Judeo-Christian *mythos*.¹ This is finally filtering into the popular consciousness through the work of a number of writers, some of them prominent scholars.² Again, it should be mentioned that work from the feminist perspective is now powerfully shaking norms imposed by a patriarchal and authoritarian *ancien régime* that have become cultural presuppositions and postulates.

¹ The term “Judeo-Christian” is not meant to conflate Judaism and Christianity, which take different approaches to Hebrew scripture, but rather to call attention to the historical fact that Christianity adopts the Hebrew scripture as its own and interprets it in accordance with its viewpoint. Normative Christianity not only interprets the New Testament in terms of Hebrew scripture and vice versa, but also appeals to it for some of its key norms, such as original sin and divine redemption, which are essential to normative Christianity. Indeed, when the Fall is interpreted symbolically and mystically rather than literally and normatively, an entirely different frame results. Jews do not share this interpretation, but those living in the West have been inexorably caught up in the frame. While it has often worked against their interests, it has also resulted in the hidden blessing of coherence in opposing it, which has preserved the Jewish spirit and culture.

² Some noteworthy accessible works deconstructing the ancient Hebrew mythos of Judaism and the Christian Old Testament mythos include Harold Bloom’s *The Book of J*, David Rosenberg’s *Abraham*, and Richard Eliot Freidman’s *Who Wrote the Bible?* Archaeology seems to agree. Neil Asher Silberman and Israel Finkelstein. *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts*. (New York: Simon & Schuster/Free Press, 2001).

Best-selling author and prominent scholar Bart D. Ehrman’s *Misquoting Jesus* is a popularization of his more scholarly but still accessible, *The New Testament*, which is now an academic standard in the field of New Testament studies. These works show that Moses did not write the five books attributed to him, nor were the gospels written by those to whom they are ascribed. Studies such as these suggest that norms regarding the origins of both Judaism and Christianity fail the test of history and need to be re-examined in the light of evidence in order to bring the frame in line with facts. While anyone is free to adopt whatever beliefs one wishes, belief does not constitute fact, especially when the facts themselves argue otherwise.

An important step toward reframing involves bringing to light the common thread running through all religions in order to emphasize the underlying unity over superficial differences. This common thread is interior spirituality.

Spirituality is universal because it is a fundamental impulse inherent in human nature that seeks progress toward abiding fulfillment. This universal spirituality is the birthright and heritage of humankind. It has been called poetically, “the human spirit.” It is responsible for not only the religious impulse, but also the desire to know that underlies the search for truth that has manifested as philosophy and science. It is also the basis for creativity in the arts, humanities and other branches of human endeavor that contribute to civilization and its culture.

Civilization “civilizes.” Culture “cultures.” Without them humanity lacks spirit and remains in the wilderness, foraging for sustenance and struggling for survival. Religion and other bearers of wisdom such as philosophy, the humanities and the arts are external manifestations of the human spirit. Their mission is to preserve and transmit this interior reality called “the human spirit, which is constituted of the interplay of awareness, cognition, volition, and affect.

THE HUMAN SPIRIT

Perennial wisdom is the wisdom of the human spirit. It is not itself a religion, for it is the basis for all religions and the foundation upon which they were built initially. All the great religions point to a founder who is regarded as spiritually realized, “enlightened.” Otherwise, why would anyone follow such a person or why would interpretation of that teaching be translated into norms?

A problem arises when the founder’s call to the inner life is no longer heard, and the founder’s state is put out of reach of common people. Then, a priestly or teaching class arises to organize and interpret the teachings for the ignorant masses. Overtime, this class becomes invested in a particular point of view that it vigorously defends in the name of preserving the integrity of the teaching or keeping the faith.

As a result, a normative framework gets established and eventually crystallizes into venerable tradition and then devolves into mere convention as changing circumstances and lack of true understanding of its principles makes framework obsolete and renders once vital teachings lifeless. Then doctrine and norms replace the living spirit, and the rivers of living water begin to dry up. This is the state of many sects today, especially in the West, where many sects are dominated by literalism and fundamentalism, often denying their spiritual heritage instead of celebrating them and chopping off their mystical roots instead of watering them. But our concern here is particularly with the Jesus tradition.

The very act of naming the tradition that takes Jesus as its founder, “the Jesus tradition,” instead of “Christianity” serves to reframe the issue. For it implies that normative Christianity is but one point of view regarding this tradition built on

Jesus, and its framework is limiting. The Jesus tradition is much larger than the normative framework allows and includes a great deal that this frame rules out.

ORIENTATION

Fundamental differences in orientation are often indicative of fundamental differences in the psychological characteristics of different personality types, for example, ideological versus mystical, analytic versus synthetic, rational versus intuitive, outer-directed versus inner-directed, head versus heart, and so forth. The normatively oriented personality is dominated by the mind and intellect, the sentimentally oriented person is dominated by the emotions, whereas the integrally oriented personality, by a balance of head and the heart. This manifests in a very different approaches to meaning, truth, and value.

The mind and heart are designed to work in tandem, not at odds with each other. When mind dominates the heart, then religion descends into ideology. When the heart eclipses the mind, then sentimentality prevails. When ideology and sentimentality combine in a dissociative personality that swings between extremes of mind and heart, then fanaticism is often the result.

The ideal is when there is a balance of head and heart where the heart leads and the mind serves. The spirituality takes its rightful place as the basis of religion. Experience is not blind because it is guided by understanding, reason and discrimination, which are all necessary for the heart to be spiritually discerning. Moreover, intellectual concepts are not empty categories, for the heart fills them with experiential meaning.

The mind loves precise boundaries, logical reasoning and clearly defined norms. The mind is good at intellectual discrimination, for example, but is deficient in spiritual discernment, which is the province of the heart. The heart recognizes that since the truth is the whole, boundaries are unable to capture it within boundaries so that concepts and logical reasoning based on them not only cannot fully grasp ultimate truth but also misses it when they tries to express it. Moreover, the heart also recognizes that just as concepts and propositions cannot capture ultimate truth; so too, fixed norms cannot reduce the moral sphere to rules, since love is greater than law. For love unites and law divides.

As a result, normative procedure has generally been to formalize and systematize doctrine and norms in terms of precise concepts and categories in an attempt to construct a systematic ideology based on principles and precepts that are postulated as absolutes. This process of codification robs an initially vital teaching of its spirit and reduces it to convention.

JUSTIFICATION

In a religious context, ultimate justification is based on “revelation,” that is, an appeal to scripture as “the word of God” and “revelation” as truth guaranteed by the Holy Spirit. In the development of normative Christianity, teaching stories were often taken literally, and such interpretations were taken to be unquestionably true in the literal sense, even though they could also be interpreted symbolically and likely were meant to be. For example, did Jesus really mean, “hate,” when he said that unless one hates even one’s own closest family members, that person could not be his disciple? Rather, it seems more likely that he was using hyperbole to enforce a point rhetorically, emphasizing the importance of cleaving to the Master above all worldly relationships and concerns. Similarly, given the practice of the time, most teaching stories should be viewed as rhetorical devices rather than literal descriptives. The parable of the talents was not a teaching about stewardship of funds, as some currently understand it, using this interpretation to argue that Jesus wants you to be rich.¹

While there were admittedly some brilliant intellectual achievements in this direction, for example, the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas, the overall result was generally much less noteworthy. After two millennia, not only do many contradictions still plague the various intellectual attempts to create a comprehensive Christian doctrine, but also competitors inevitably arose. When the Church lost its undisputable position as the central authority, the result was a proliferation of sects with different views about “correct” doctrine and norms, all claiming to represent Jesus’ true teaching. Then the champions of the competing theologies set themselves to arguing for their own superiority and criticizing the inadequacies of the opposition.

But no philosophy or theology is logically compelling on rational grounds. Intellectual arguments end in appeal to fundamentals, and where there is disagreement over fundamentals, argumentation comes to an end. Since key fundamentals are reflective of a worldview, different fundamental principles are indicative of different ideologies. For example, if one takes the Bible to be literally true and indisputable as “the word of God,” then for that person the world is only about six thousand years old, all evidence to the contrary, ending argument.

¹ I happened on just this argument while driving and trying to find NPR news on the car radio. I confess I had to pause and enjoy the humor of it, but the speaker was being perfectly serious. This view actually has a name. It’s called “prosperity theology,” and there are “theologians” who are writing books about it.

METAPHOR AND MYTH

On the other hand, mystical parties have preferred the language of the heart to that of the mind. Mystics approach to truth is typically experiential and poetic instead of ideological and literal.¹ Mystical views are presented either in terms of art, poetry, and music, or expressed through philosophies that recognize the primacy of synthesis over analysis. Synthesis resists capture within the boundaries of concepts and propositions, and it uses symbols that point and hint instead. As a result, teaching stories are recognized as symbolic representations of what is essentially ineffable.

¹ In “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,” William Blake asserted that prophetic revelation is an instance of poetic genius, virtually equating the Christian concept of the working of the Holy Spirit or Spirit of Truth through humans with the ancient Greek concept of “genius” (Greek *daemon*). According to perennial wisdom there is some truth to this claim; yet, it is also necessary to distinguish between inspiration, insight and inner vision or seership, on the basis of where an individual stands. It is possible for a person of ordinary consciousness but extraordinary genius to rise to the level of inspiration and even insight, but seers are said to have access to the more expanded levels of awareness of the inner planes and higher worlds.

For instance, Meher Baba had J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy read to him several times. He commented that it is a symbolic representation of the soul’s journey through the subtle world and that Tolkien arrived at this insight through poetic inspiration rather than inner sight. He further explained that although Tolkien was not consciously aware of the subtle realm, hence not directly acquainted with journey through the subtle world on the basis of experience, he nevertheless represented it quite accurately through symbols and analogy on the basis of his poetic inspiration.

On the other hand, those established on higher planes of knowledge report on the basis of direct acquaintance through refined experience; yet, they too must use symbol and analogy to communicate with those whose inner eye is not yet open. Meher Baba further revealed in this regard that the Vedic seers said that sweet basil (*tulsi*) plant is sacred is owing to the role it plays in the evolution of forms. In the long journey of the soul’s evolving a human body capable of realizing God, it passes through many forms of life with which it identifies and gleans experience through.

On the journey there are important points where the form turns in a new direction, for example, from mineral to vegetable and from vegetable to animal. One of these important “twists” occurs at the level of the *tulsi* plant. Since humankind was not yet ready for a fuller explanation at the time, the seers merely declared it sacred in order to call attention to this important stage of development. As a result, eventually people misunderstood the import and worshipped the *tulsi*. The purpose of the seers was accomplished, however, since they desired to preserve and protect this important species, and they used the prevailing level of collective consciousness to do so through symbols that few were capable of understanding at the time. See Bhau Kalchuri. *Lord Meher*. Vol. 8, p. 2883.

Platonism exemplifies the influence of mystical teaching in the West. Plato makes profuse use of myth and symbol to convey the ineffable wisdom that descriptive language cannot communicate intellectually, since this wisdom is essentially experiential, just as one can report on one's pain but others cannot feel it.

Academics often miss this, however, when they try to interpret Plato literally, or to help him out by explaining his teaching conceptually when the teaching itself disallows this. Needless to say, they end up missing the point and misrepresenting his thought, so that now a number of people regard many of Plato's most profound teachings as being primitive or quaint.

MIDRASH

It can be argued that normative theologians do something similar when they interpret Jesus' teaching literally, apparently unmindful that the Semitic people of the Middle East characteristically used teaching stories, called *midrash* in Hebrew, to make a point symbolically. As George Lamsa, points out someone with a background in Semitic languages like Hebrew and Aramaic and the Semitic culture in which their use is embedded would not be apt to make such an obvious mistake.¹

However, those who acceded to normative authority were Greek or Latin speaking Gentiles whose background was Hellenistic or Roman rather than Jewish or even Semitic. After the destruction of Jerusalem, the Christian community in general quickly distanced itself from its initial Jewish heritage and Semitic language and character. Paul, who wrote the earliest texts included in the New Testament, wrote in Greek to largely Gentile Greek-speaking communities, even though he was Jewish.

Many if not most scholars now reject the idea that the gospels were written by the apostles or other eyewitnesses to whom they are piously attributed, surmising that they were written decades later by Greek-speakers who were personally unfamiliar with the events about which they wrote. As a result the gospel should be read as theological tracts typical of their time instead of being confused with contemporary historical biography, a genre developed much later. The methodologies employed in the two types of approach are quite different. Confusing them leads to a misunderstanding of early Christian teachings.

For example, the gospels present different pictures of Jesus. Conflating them into a single historically accurate account results in contradictions in the picture of who Jesus was and what he actually did, and it also presents a confused and contradictory ideology as normative Christian theology. The surprising conclusion to which scholars have come is that the popular notion of Jesus based on such a

¹ George M. Lamsa. *Gospel Light: An Indispensable Guide to the Teachings of Jesus and the Customs of His Times*. (New York: Harper Collins, revised edition, 1936).

conflation of texts is legendary and mystical rather than historical. Such a Jesus never in fact existed. Whatever Jesus may have been like, it wasn't this.

For the mystic, ultimate truth is ineffable because limited concepts cannot capture infinity and eternity. However, while ultimate truth cannot be conceptualized adequately, it can be experienced and reported either by denying all limited characteristics to it or hinting at it symbolically. All that can be said about this experience is, "Not this or that," or else analogy must be employed, with the proviso that every analogy breaks down when pushed far enough. The essence of gnostic mysticism is unitive experience. Where all distinctions cease, description becomes logically impossible. Then poetry is the sole recourse. Hence, all great scripture is either negatively descriptive, denying all attributes and categories to the unitive experience, or else it is symbolic, hinting or pointing rather than describing literally.

What can be described is methodology. Here, care must be taken not to confuse spiritual means and the mystical goal. While the goal is ineffable and can only be hinted at obliquely, means can be prescribed fairly explicitly in terms of views, attitudes and behaviors to be adopted or avoided. But here again, there are a variety of paths characterized by different means. Conflating the path work of different paths also leads to confusion.

REFRAMING THE JESUS TRADITION

The present undertaking focuses on how the spiritual heritage of Jesus and mystical roots of his teaching can be interpreted as an expression of perennial wisdom instead of normatively, as they generally are in the predominant conventional framework. Undertaking this involves several steps.

First, one must deconstruct one's presumption that normative Christianity is the theological absolute it claims to be. The good news is that there is a massive amount of scholarship extending back over a century that questions key fundamentals of that frame. A lot of that scholarship remained inaccessible to the public for a long time, buried in scholarly publications and discussed mostly in academia. Moreover, the clergy did not rise to meet their professional responsibility to educate the laity, in fact, largely covered up developments or denied them, in what some have termed "a pious fraud."

But more recently scholars have begun to publish popular works, making arcane points more available to non-specialists. Perhaps the success of some of these books, such as *The Gnostic Gospels* by Elaine Pagels, winner of the National Book Critics Award and the National Book Award, opened doors. Moreover, there was gold in them th'ar hills, and some celebrity, too. Scholars aren't the most highly paid professionals, and they don't mind a bit of fame in recognition of their

considerable efforts, either. As this material became more available, many people started to get interested.

Many people have either already begun this process of deconstruction themselves, are a good way along it, or have even come out the other side. In fact, given the recent popular success of some of the material, one could say that deconstruction is now in the air.

Some may say that they never bought into the normative frame in the first place. However, it is difficult to live in a culture without absorbing its hidden presumptions, or reacting against what appear to be excesses. Very few people can truly say that they have reached equanimity relative to religion and can approach the subject with an open mind. Most are still struggling with it in one way or another, often in ways that they do not themselves realize.

Deconstruction is often easier than it sounds, since many people have a deep-seated and highly emotional charge implanted in them owing to the framework in which they were nurtured and educated. Normative authorities have placed many obstacles in the way of believers doing this, however, using all the buttons available, including ostracism (excommunication, shunning) in this world and the threat of eternal damnation in the next. Deconstruction is not difficult for those on the periphery of the normative framework, but those enmeshed in it often have a soul-searching and often gut-wrenching time. For example, this process may put a strain on one's most intimate relationships, or result in leaving one's social group to find something more compatible. There are many wounded lovers out there, as spiritual counselors know from experience.

After deconstruction, one must then reframe the universe of discourse by making spirituality the priority instead of conformity to the norm. Since the mystical surpasses understanding and most people are not experientially familiar with it, mystical spirituality is difficult to grasp. Many, for example, often confuse it with psychic phenomena or "the occult." Discovering genuine spirituality is not all that simple in this age of competition for attention. Many forms of so-called spirituality being marketed are bogus and simply offer "cheap thrills" (that may be not so cheap) in the form of "experiences" such as lucid dreaming, shamanic journeys, out of the body travels, communication with the departed, channeling entities, and the like. Moreover, even genuine traditions are being pirated.

CORE SPIRITUALITY

Nevertheless, virtually all religions hint at the truly spiritual dimension, at least obliquely. For instance, probably most Christians are familiar with the gospel saying, "The kingdom of God lies within you," as well as, "Seek first the kingdom

of God and all things will be added to you.”¹ This can be read as a promise of realizing abiding fulfillment through the pursuit of interior spirituality. Eventually, many people come to realize this and begin their own search in earnest after discovering that church isn’t the place to find it. To paraphrase comedian Lenny Bruce, “People are leaving the churches in droves — and going back to God.”

While it is important to appreciate the centrality of the mystical not only in religion but also in human life, it is much more important to practice it. For it is through such practice that the real spiritual leavening takes place, leading to personal transformation. If more people can be led to understand this about religion in general and their own religion in particular, then perhaps some of them will be inspired to actually engage in these practices that not only expand the dimension of awareness and intelligence, but also culture the heart and make behavior more life-supporting in all respects. As people not only change their frame of reference through expanded understanding but also their experience through spiritual practice, then the society itself is transformed as a consequence.

The common thread of universal spirituality lies at the mystical core of all religions and wisdom traditions, which are strung on it like beads on a string. It is also found at the heart of philosophy, literature and the arts, as well, all of which are expressions of the human spirit. It has only been excluded from scientific discourse, or at least marginalized therein, as consequence of and reaction to the overly narrow focus of religion that has set many scientists in opposition to religious ideology couched in these narrow norms. Too often, scientists have reacted by treating religion as a vestigial superstition. Fortunately, the broadening of spiritual discourse of late is resulting in a broadening of scientific discourse to include it. For example, many scientists are now investigating the measurable results of practices such as meditation and attempting to understand them naturally. This is contributing the acceptance of spirituality as the natural process it is, rather than something supernatural that is solely the province of prophets or saints.

PRACTICAL SPIRITUALITY

Therefore, this type of undertaking is coming to be appreciated as not only intimately personal but also ultimately practical. Not only is spirituality essential to life’s very mission to actualize one’s potential as a human being; it is also necessary for human survival and progress owing to the character of the times in which we live. Hence, reframing the debate over fundamentals, especially religious fundamentals, is vitally important. Of course, I am not under the illusion that a single study such as this will have a wide impact directly. However, voices are

¹ Luke 17:20-21; Matthew 6:33.

being lifted in many quarters now that call from many directions for reframing the debate. This is one voice being raised among many others.

A principal objective of this undertaking is to reframe the Jesus tradition, first, by illuminating the spirituality at its core, and, secondly, by showing this core to be an expression of perennial wisdom.

This is not a random exercise or even merely a desirable option. It is a high priority, both individually and socially. This is especially pressing in light of the influence of some literal interpretations of the Bible on contemporary politics, where a powerful faction is now bent on hurtling toward Armageddon in order to bring about the Second Coming.

Many other people are being distracted by the worldly, that is, the pursuit of fame, fortune, power and pleasure against which the sages counsel for the wise know that the consequence of this unbridled pursuit is bitter disappointment. Only by engaging the human spirit in the way best suited to one's constitution and circumstances can these trends be countered in one's own life and collectively.

The universal spirituality of humankind reveals that the purpose not only of religion but also of life is to actualize full human potential by realizing ultimate truth. This is to be accomplished through the spiritual quest.

Genuine spirituality, when rightly guided, is one of the greatest boons to humankind, vastly superior to all the technological advances that have resulted in modern civilization. For it works on many levels, not merely the physical, and it increasingly results in growing realization of freedom and completion, eventually giving the peace that the world cannot. Lacking inner peace, people are internally compelled to pursue self-interest, often ignorantly at the expense of both self and others, in a vain search for satisfaction that can never be gained from the ephemeral and passing, but only from the eternal.

The alternative to genuine spirituality is an existence bereft of peace, in which the ship of life is buffeted by the waves of stress and blown hither and thither by the winds of anxiety, so that eventually one eventually succumbs to illness, old age and death, no matter the degree of fame, fortune, power and pleasure one may have amassed during life. These things are their own reward, and in the end when they have been burned through, only smoldering ashes remain, and on one's deathbed one is left thinking, "This was it?"

Moreover, without a proper approach to spirituality humankind all too often descends into bestiality by falling victim to a mass psychology that not only condones the unthinkable but also encourages it. In an age of advanced weaponry and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the prospects are not pretty. Over the past century humanity has witnessed a number of tragic holocausts, and the level of suffering and destruction is increasing, not decreasing. For example, R.

Buckminster Fuller reported in the Forties that he had taken an inventory of human resources and units of power and discovered that it was sufficient to create a utopia on earth; however, his research also showed that over ninety percent of these resources were being committed to military use.¹

A PERSONAL ENDEAVOR

Reframing is not only ultimately practical; it is intimately personal. This is not chiefly an intellectual undertaking. It is primarily a work of the heart that requires engagement with the human spirit not only with the mind and heart, but also it must be put into action. Genuine spirituality is about living a natural life, an integrated life and a full life that progressively unfolds the unlimited potential of the spirit in total living.

Therefore, while much of what we will do here requires the application of the mind, it would be a mistake to take it as a mental exercise or simply as a way to satisfy one's curiosity. I entertain the hope that this kind of work will contribute to reversing the seemingly disastrous direction in which humankind is heading, in a significant part through a misunderstanding of the essence of religion and how to incorporate spirituality in life in order to enliven the human spirit as a force for personal transformation and positive change. In order to emphasize this, I have attempted to show my personal involvement in ways that would be inappropriate in an academic study or scholarly research.

Instead of seeing this endeavor as merely an academic exercise or an interesting historical investigation, I embarked on it and continue to follow it in the conviction that it will transform me positively, and also influence others to undertake such an exercise for themselves. An account of my personal quest is included as Appendix Three. I will provide only an outline of it here.

For me this has not been merely a search in the abstract. I became convinced on the basis of my own experience and study, as well as scientific research, that spirituality operates behind the scenes and underneath the surface to support life generally, in addition to fostering personal growth.² Coupling this realization

¹ R. Buckminster Fuller. *Utopia or Oblivion: The Prospects for Humanity*. (New York: Overlook Press, 1969).

² See, for example, the many peer-reviewed scientific papers on the effects of Transcendental Meditation and the TM-Sidhi Program® on social behavior and peace, as well as health and wellbeing, in addition to producing both subjective and objective artifacts of higher states of awareness. To date, the predominant amount of research has been conducted on subjects practicing the Maharishi Vedic Technology of the Unified Field owing to Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's long-standing encouragement of scientific validation. Similar studies are available on other spiritual practices associated with other traditions also, such as Buddhist mindfulness meditation. These practices are being used in

attained initially through the Vedic tradition with the study of other teachings and wisdom traditions, I sought to make sense out of the spiritual quest on the basis of whatever seemed to contribute to the unraveling of the riddle of life. Eventually, I discovered a perennial wisdom lying at the core of virtually all religions and wisdom traditions.

Early in my life I was inspired by a quest for truth that led me to major in philosophy as an undergraduate, and later to pursue advanced degrees in philosophy, as well as to seek out spiritual teachers and teachings of a variety of traditions. This study allowed me to explore the spirituality of both East and West. I had the good fortune to encounter some premier resources and to study with some of the outstanding exponents of this wisdom.

The most significant of these was Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. Maharishi had said that this was the scientific age so he was bringing out the teaching in terms of science at this time, but that in another era it could just as well be brought out in terms of religion. This piqued my interest and I decided to pursue that understanding myself. After receiving a doctorate in philosophy in 1975, I specialized in comparative spirituality and mysticism. In studying the mystics of different traditions it struck me that there were similar principles underlying differences in expression. Although I began mostly with Eastern mystics, I later revisited my roots and sought to discover perennial wisdom in the Christian tradition.

In the course of this investigation *The Gospel of Thomas* turned up. Even though it was often obscure and paradoxical, many sayings were evidently based in the same mystical experience of nonduality found throughout the testimony of mystics and the teachings of masters worldwide across time. Soon, it became obvious that these apparently different traditions shared a common thread. They were grounded from their inception in the higher knowledge that leads to the unitive state, and that the great prophets of humankind were themselves fully established in this unitive state of nonduality.

Many normative Christians would likely regard this notion of commonality among mystics as heretical since it conflicts with the norms to which they subscribe. This heresy even has a name, “syncretism,” or the conflation of religious ideas and principles. Many scholars would also dispute the contention that different religions have a shared basis in mystical spirituality, citing differences in expression

alternative medicine, e.g., the emerging field of mind-body medicine. See, for example, “Meditation for Health,” National Center of Complementary and Alternative Medicine, National Institutes of Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. URL=<<http://nccam.nih.gov/health/meditation/meditation.pdf>>.

among the mystics of different religions. We will, of course, investigate such objections in the course of this study.

PERENNIALISM

Such objections notwithstanding, “perennialism” is a well-established point of view. Perennialism holds that there is a common thread uniting all religions and wisdom traditions at their mystical core.¹ This timeless teaching has been called “perennial wisdom” and “the perennial philosophy.” Moreover, it has been gaining ground now that normative religious authority is less able to suppress unwelcome views. Moreover, as the world shrinks due to the global proliferation of communication and transportation technologies, East and West are meeting and finding that they have more in common in many areas than had been suspected, including spirituality.

Even though its lock on doctrine is breaking at the grass roots level, normative Christianity has regarded itself as the sole bearer of religious truth and the custodian of spiritual rectitude for so long, rejecting all other claims as spurious, that its momentum continues. Consequently, the intellectual climate and universe of discourse is still somewhat skewed. Even many scholars exhibit some bias toward the prevailing norms, often unconsciously and in spite of their best intentions to be objective.

In studying the matter, not only was I struck by a lack of awareness of the parallels in Christian mysticism to perennial wisdom in general, if not outright denials of it. I was also concerned that scholarly translations and commentary did not sufficiently illumine the mystical basis of *The Gospel of Thomas*, or rushed to judgment that it was not Christian but Gnostic, hence heretical.²

¹ “Perennialism” in this sense is also called “the perennial philosophy” or *philosophia perennis*, “the perennial tradition,” and “perennial wisdom.”

² On the one hand, the term “Gnosticism” refers to a Hellenistic religious phenomenon conflicting with normative Christian doctrine, whose manifestation occurred principally in the Near East and Egypt in the centuries surrounding the lifetime of Jesus. On the other hand, the term “gnosticism” refers to the view of the perennial teaching that God is knowable while one is still in the body. It is a feature of perennial wisdom, hence, is timeless and ubiquitous. Both were considered heretical by normative Christian authorities, but Gnosticism was the immediate threat initially, so it bore the brunt of the polemic of early normative Christian apologists. Neither should “Gnosticism” be confused with “gnosticism.” Nor should the two be conflated. The referents of these two similar but different terms are not the same. Some of Gnosticism is gnostic but not all. Moreover, some Gnostic works are also in the Jesus tradition and some not. Sorting out the differences and not confusing them is essential, which is sometimes difficult when a single charged word is used to cover too much disparate ground.

Therefore, I first completed a free rendering from the mystical vantage, included herein as Appendix One. Later, I set to work on a commentary, showing that *The Gospel of Thomas* is not only consistent with early Christian teaching but also with perennial wisdom. The present endeavor is the outcome of research in preparation for undertaking for that project. In fact, this undertaking began as an introduction to the commentary, but soon grew too large for that purpose.

It is my own deep conviction that the pursuit of spirituality is natural to human life and therefore essentially simple. The all-knowing, all-powerful and all-compassionate One who fashioned us did not set up the game so that only highly intelligent, highly skilled, or well-educated people could play it successfully. History attests that many of the greatest spiritual luminaries and prophets were people born in relative poverty and grew up illiterate. Jesus was one of these. The tradition based on him is available to all types of people, even children. My first interest in this quest began very early in my life as a child-lover of Jesus. Since then, it's been quite a ride — sometime smooth, sometimes rough, sometimes challenging, sometimes blissful, sometimes painful — but never dull or boring.

A NEW FRAMEWORK

The man who reads scripture without insight is blind to the inner meaning.¹

This study will attempt to reframe the Jesus tradition on the basis of the following points:

1. Perennial wisdom lies at the heart of the world's religions as the core of all wisdom traditions.

Perennial wisdom is the spiritual teaching of mystics and masters, prophets, saints, sages and seers across the world from time immemorial. It is also written in every human heart, waiting to be discovered by those who seek it within themselves. The core spirituality that perennial wisdom sets forth is the ancient religion of humankind, and the different religions and wisdom traditions are its historical expressions in different linguistic and cultural garb. This is not always evident because over time conventional wisdom supplants perennial wisdom. When appreciation of mystical experience declines, the spirit of a teaching loses much of its life. Then the passage of time encrusts such religions and wisdom traditions with doctrines, norms and interpretations, obscuring their core teaching.

2. In the Jesus tradition, the Way of Jesus can be interpreted mystically as an expression of perennial wisdom.

This interpretation articulates the perennial wisdom of Jesus' teaching and example as it is reflected across time in the lives of the greatest of his followers. The Way of Jesus as a mystical teaching constitutes a universal wisdom tradition that can be viewed in contrast to normative Christianity, just as Sufism can be seen as a universal mystical teaching independently of normative Islam, Qabalah as a universal wisdom tradition independently of normative Judaism, and Vedanta as a universal wisdom tradition independently of normative Hinduism.

3. *The Gospel of Thomas* can be read as containing a teaching consistent with the Way of Jesus and perennial wisdom.

The primary teaching of *The Gospel of Thomas* is about unifying that which is divided. Underlying this unification is realizing identity with the nondual state, which is also characteristic of other nondualistic wisdom traditions. This establishes *Thomas* not only as a key document of the Way of Jesus but also as a seminal expression of perennial wisdom in the Jesus tradition.

¹ Honen, quoted in Shunjo. *Honen the Buddhist Saint*. Translated and edited by Harper Havelock Coates and Ryugaku Ishizuka. (Kyoto: The Society for the Publication for the Sacred Books of the World, 1925, 1949), p. 584.

PERENNIAL WISDOM

The present endeavor is primarily concerned with the place of mysticism arising out of the Way of Jesus, and specifically *The Gospel of Thomas*, in relation to perennial wisdom. Therefore, it will explore the nature of perennial wisdom and show the relation of the mysticism of the Jesus tradition and *The Gospel of Thomas* to this timeless teaching, whose expressions are age-old and worldwide.¹

It is beyond the scope of this work to enter the lists here in support of the thesis that a perennial wisdom exists and that it is based on independent mystical experiences rather than either reducible to cultural constructivism and the diffusion of ideas among cultures beginning in ancient times. A great deal of literature already exists debating these issues, which admittedly remain somewhat controversial.

An extensive literature arguing for perennialism supports the view espoused herein. See, for example, the works of René Guenon, Fritjof Schuon, Mircea Eliade, Hossein Seyyed Nasr, and Ananda Coomaraswamy. The idea is as ancient as the Vedic notion of *sanatana dharma*, conceived as a universal teaching grounded in a transcendent source that is cognized by prophets and seers through their inner vision.

Wilhelm Gottfried Leibnitz (1646-1716) is one of the early pioneers of a “pansophism” or universal wisdom. While he was not the originator of this notion, he was perhaps its chief exponent, or, at least, is remembered today as such. Much before that, however, many early Christian Fathers embraced wisdom wherever it was found as the manifestation of divinely inspired truth. Even though Plato and Aristotle were pagans, they heavily influenced Christian theologians. Aldous Huxley popularized the term “perennial philosophy” through a book bearing this title. Recently, the concept has been the recipient of increased attention due to growing interest in universal mystical spirituality.

Long before that, however, the Vedic seers revealed an “eternal teaching,” *sanatana dharma* in Sanskrit, which purports to be universal wisdom because it is “non-human” (*apaurusheya*) in origin, structured in the transcendental nature of consciousness itself as the self-knowledge of the Absolute (*brahman*). In expanded states of consciousness, seers “see” this knowledge with their inner vision or, in the most advanced state, realize this fully as self-knowledge. This is a state in which infinite consciousness is realized as absolute reality (Sanskrit: *atmabrahm*).

Buddha later reframed the Vedic conception of fullness from the opposite pole, emptiness. Buddha’s framing is also found in the Vedic Upanishads. Buddha’s

¹ See, for instance, Matthew Fox. *One River, Many Wells*. (New York: Jeremy Tarcher, 2004).

Dharma is considered to be the universal teaching of enlightened ones from time immemorial. Similarly, Tao, meaning “the way,” is asserted as ultimate truth, discoverable both within oneself and at the core of all through self-cultivation. Tao is also said to be eternal.

Revelation plays a similar role in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, which consider the revelations of the prophets to be “the word of God,” that is, eternal truth. According to the mystical core of these normative religions, the prophets were not merely divinely inspired. They knew whereof they spoke on the basis of their spiritual status, which gave them a share in divine knowledge as a seer, if not divine knowledge itself as a spiritual master. According to Prophet Muhammad, Archangel Gabriel (Arabic: *Jibril*) dictated the verses of the Qur’an to him, not on his own knowledge or authority, but as the direct word of the God. According to Meher Baba, Muhammad was actually an advent of the Avatar and so was omniscient and omnipotent, but he concealed this publicly, owing to the needs of the time¹. To preserve this anonymity, Muhammad used the agency of Gabriel, although it was unnecessary for him.

ONE TRUTH, MANY EXPRESSIONS

It follows, then, that if ultimate truth really is known in different religions and wisdom traditions, it must be the same truth, albeit expressed differently. Perennialism seeks to illuminate such correspondences through comparison and contrast. Comparison reveals an underlying unity while contrast shows how apparent differences arise from diversity of expression and context.

Basically, religion is one. There is only one religion. The source from which this religion has come is continuous, despite the lapses of ages. Yet several branches have come forth from this one religion, like the Zoroastrian, Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and Mohammedan religions. There have been many others...

For example, water from the tap fills the different pots for different purposes, like washing, cooking, drinking, etc. The source, the tap, is the same. Similarly, the Hindu or Muslim religion, or the Zoroastrian or Buddhist or Christian religion, springs from the same source, which is God.²

It might be objected that these correspondences can be accounted for on the basis of constructivism, perhaps beginning in primitive superstition. Moreover, it is also possible that the ubiquity of these themes can be ascribed to geographical diffusion

¹ Jim Mistry (Editor). *Letters from the Mandali*. (Myrtle Beach, SC: Sheriar Foundation, 1981), p. 76. URL=<<http://home.online.no/~solibakk/nextavat.html>>.

² Meher Baba, in Bhau Kalchuri, *Lord Meher*. Vol. 1, p. 252.

of ideas of among cultures over time through emigration of peoples and trade over routes like the Silk Road, for example.

Opponents argue against that while admittedly there has been considerable diffusion of ideas and likely of specific spiritual teachings also, the phenomena are not reducible to *historical* diffusion alone: Mystical experience transcends culture, since *in principle* it is inherent in the nature of consciousness, hence, capable of being experienced independently of external influence. There is no compelling evidence showing that either constructivism or diffusion are the only explanations, and it seems that at least some mystics arose independently of them.

But, even if constructivism and diffusion do play a significant part, the fact remains that mystics do report experiences of an undifferentiated, nondual state, showing that this state is inherent in the nature of consciousness. To claim that mystics were simply repeating claims on the basis of constructivism or diffusion seems farfetched, in that mystics were generally people not given to dissembling.

The only other argument seems to be that they were deluded about their own experience. But while one may be mistaken in one's interpretation of an experience, the experience itself is a datum that is "immediate" in the sense of not being mediated by perception, conception, reason, or imagination. In other words, mystics assert that the experience of the nondual state as being undifferentiated takes place by direct acquaintance with the nature of consciousness through reflexivity, as awareness is turned on itself. The result of reflexivity is realization of the nondual state as pure consciousness or consciousness devoid of any object or boundary.

The cultural influences exhibited in mystical reports and teachings can be accounted for on the basis of the need to communicate in terms of contemporary context so the expressions are colored by the language and customs of the period, including their historical antecedents. Therefore, such expressions do not necessarily indicate either cultural constructivism or diffusion of ideas as exclusive explanations of the phenomena; they only show possible influence on the reports. For example, every teacher speaks in the language of the time, including the context of the period, and draws upon existing knowledge as well. An entirely new teaching in a fresh idiom would otherwise not be understood. Knowledge progresses by integrating fresh insights and ideas into existing containers.

These issues are still being debated, and it would be disingenuous to represent that they are resolved in favor of either party. However, I stand solidly on the side of the perennialists in this controversy, chiefly because this view is corroborated by my experience.¹ It seems evident to me that anyone experiencing what is indistinguishable because it admits no distinctions would have to agree that such an

¹ See Appendix Three. P. D. Mehta also strongly appeals to his own experience of transcendence in *The Heart of Religion*.

experience is neither derived from culture nor constructed from perception, conception, reasoning, or imagination. To attempt to deny or reduce such experience is to impoverish the human spirit, as well as to go against the evidence of experience, if reports of pure consciousness or consciousness without an object are credible.

W. T. Stace accepts as a datum the experience of undifferentiated nondual awareness that mystics and meditators widely report, while observing that their interpretation of this experience is open to question. He also notes that the mystics' interpretations are not always in a direction where exaggeration might be suspected, e.g., claiming knowledge of the divine. Stace cites the case of Martin Buber, who shortly after having a mystical experience of undifferentiated nondual awareness interpreted it as "a union with the primal being." Later, however, Buber softened the interpretation, saying instead that he had merely experienced the undifferentiated unity of his own self or pure ego.

In critiquing the discrepancy between Buber's interpretations, Stace notes that the second interpretation was offered much later, long after the experience was fresh in memory; hence, it is not as credible as the initial one. More importantly, he observes, Buber's Jewish normative religion is intolerant of mystical assertions of unity with the divine. Therefore, there is a strong presumption that Buber modified his interpretation in conformity with accepted norms. Stace suspects that this is true reason for the change in interpretation.¹ Similar cases of softened interpretations can be found in normative Christianity and Islam, neither of whose norms permits assertions of divine knowledge.

All experience is open to interpretation. But the *occurrence* of the bare experience is a primary datum. The bare experience of transcendence, for instance, is ubiquitously reported as unbounded, timeless, formless, unchanging, fulfilling, peaceful and the like.

However, to claim that transcendence is an experience of God or spirit defines the terms "God" and "spirit" in terms of this experience. There is considerable disagreement over whether terms like "God" and "spirit" are appropriately defined in this way. The normative religions of the West, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, do not accept it. Mystics in normative religions that rule this out prudently generally avoid making such claims overtly.

Moreover, similarity or even identity of terminology does not prove identity or even similarity of experience, independently of context. Once language enters into the mix, meaning admittedly begins to get slippery. Moreover, there is often the tendency to shape meaning in order to make one's point by using symbol and

¹ W. T. Stace. *Mysticism and Philosophy*. (Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, 1960), p. 156-157.

analogy. When symbols and analogies are taken literally confusion results. For example, Zoroastrians are thought to worship fire. However, fire is symbol of the self-effulgence of God, which mystics report. The mystical interpretation of Zoroastrianism is that Zoroaster praised God's light because he actually saw it. This is the inner meaning of "bright mind (Avestan: *vohu manah*).¹ Sun worship is similar, both fire and sun being ancient symbols of the divine self-effulgence. Fire and the sun are principal symbols in the Vedic tradition also.²

THE JESUS TRADITION

A good case has been made in the literature that there is a perennial wisdom tradition. The notion of perennial wisdom presumes that the timeless truth of perennial wisdom arise from the higher cognition of sages. It assumes there is a timeless teaching grounded in transcendence underlying the principal religions, and holds that this teaching has not been shown to be reducible to intellectual constructivism or diffusion of ideas. Our concern will be with how the Jesus tradition fits into this picture. This interpretation is neither historically established beyond question nor logically compelling, and it is not asserted as such. Perennial wisdom holds that "the proof is in the pudding," so that one must test it in the laboratory of one's own awareness.

Normative Christianity is based on "revelation," conceived as either direct communication from God to man, as in the case of the prophets of Hebrew scripture, or else the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, for example, in the case of the authors of the New Testament. In other words, revelation is mental and conceptual, even perceptual, and not imaginary. It is received through mediation rather than realized immediately through higher cognition.

The perennialist view is that the primary support rests with mystical experience that is supramental and extra-rational, as well as "immediate" in the sense of not being mediated by perception, conception, reason or imagination. Mystical experience appears cognitive primarily through the interpretation through which it is communicated.

The principal difference between these two views is that the normative position holds that God is entirely separate from man and communicates with man as a discrete entity, while the mystical view is that at the most exalted degree of such

¹ Dr. Daryoush Jahanian. "Zoroastrian Mysticism and Illumination." *USHAO*, Nov-Dec 2001. URL=<<http://www.zarathustra.com/z/article/zmysticism.htm>>.

² *Rig Veda* 1.1.1 begins "I worship fire" (Sanskrit: *agnim ile*). The foremost mantra of *Rig Veda* is the Gayatri Mantra, offering worship to the sun. Fire and the sun are symbols that go proxy for the deity being worshipped, God's "light." or self-effulgence, called in Judaism "infinite light" (Hebrew: *ayn sof aur*).

experience man transcends ordinary human limitations to unite with absolute reality and realize ultimate truth. This may seem like an astonishing claim to many, especially in the West, where it has long been ruled out by the norms of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. However, it is foundational to Eastern wisdom traditions such as the Vedic, Buddhist, Jain, Sikh, and Taoist. It is also found in the West in the various “gnostic” strains, such as Hermeticism, Platonism and Neoplatonism, for example, as well as among those mystics of the normative religions who stepped out of the bounds of the norms in giving their reports.

Foundational to the framework of this view is the call to “know thyself,” not through psychological investigation but by going within spiritually. In knowing himself, Jesus could say, “I and the Father are one.” He invites us to realize this by “entering the kingdom,” which he said is within.

MYSTICISM IN THE JESUS TRADITION

The Jesus tradition can be framed normatively or mystically. It is framed normatively by doctrines, rituals, and observances as expressed as narratives, norms and conventions. It is framed mystically through testimony and teachings concerning inner spirituality and how to realize it in life. Normative Christianity is communicated through a narrative and normative framework shaping its universe of discourse. The mystical teaching of Jesus is based on higher cognition and spirituality. We will explore how the latter expresses the core spirituality of humanity by comparing mystics of the Jesus tradition with the sages of perennial wisdom.

Unlike Qabalah in Judaism and Sufism in Islam, the mysticism characteristic of the Jesus tradition has acquired no distinctive appellation *per se*. Sometimes the mysticism of the Jesus tradition is called “Christian mysticism” or “mystical Christianity.”

However, “Christian mysticism” and “mystical Christianity” exclude many important mystics and mystical teachings of the Jesus tradition as “heretical.” Moreover, normative Christianity marginalizes mysticism as a spiritual factor, and it interprets many canonical texts and saying of saints in such a way as to preclude a mystical understanding of them, unjustifiably.

Sometimes, “Hesychasm” is suggested as a special term to characterize the mysticism of the Jesus tradition. However, Eastern Orthodox Hesychasm is not broad enough in scope to embrace the entire phenomenon of mysticism in the Jesus tradition.

More promising is the word used by the early Church Fathers for divine union, namely, “divinization” or “deification” (Greek: *theosis*). “Theosis” can also serve to distinguish the mystical path that aims at deification from the normative goal of salvation.

“Theosis” or “deification” refers to the process of “divinization” that mystics follow. The source of the teaching about deification in the Hebrew scripture comes from the Book of Psalms: “Thus saith the Lord: Ye are gods and children of the Most High.”¹ Jesus was apparently referring to this when he said, “Is it not written in your law, I said, ye are gods?”²

St. Basil (c. 330-379), brother of St. Gregory of Nyssa (c. 331-396), is primarily known as the founder of monastic institutions. He was also bishop of Caesarea and was later declared to be a Doctor of the Church. According to Basil, “Man is a creature who has received the order to become God.”³

Moreover, according to St. Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-1274), also a Doctor of the Church, it is not sinful to desire to become God, “provided that [one] desires such likeness in proper order, that is to say, that [one] may obtain it of God. But [one] would sin were [one] to desire to be like God even in the right way, but of [one’s] own power, and not of God’s.”⁴

Meister Eckhart (c. 1260-1327) held that the righteous person is one having realized identity with “the Son,” who alone knows the Father, according to Jesus.⁵

That man alone is righteous who, having naughted all created things, stands facing straight along the unswerving line into the eternal Word, where, in the right, he is idealised and transformed. That man is gotten where the Son is gotten and is the Son himself.⁶

Quotations such as these, as well as the testimony of many mystics, show that deification is integral to the Jesus tradition, rather than being either peripheral or even heretical. Yet, it is probably safe to say that most people who call themselves Christians have not only never heard of them but also believe just the opposite on the basis of what they have been taught.

Mystical theology is a spiritual discipline comprising the theoretical and practical teachings about deification. The term “mystical theology” has the contemporary connotation of being chiefly a conceptual endeavor. This is misleading, for “mystical theology” originally meant mystical teaching and practice, rather than merely intellectual speculation. Its original meaning is comparable to the meaning of Sanskrit *yoga* and *sadhana* in the Vedic tradition, for example. Deification and

¹ Psalms 82:6 (King James Version).

² John 10:34 (King James Version).

³ Frithjof Schuon. *L'Oeil du Coeur*. (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), p. 88.

⁴ St. Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica*. I, 63, 3

⁵ “No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.” (Matthew 11:27).

⁶ Pfeiffer, I, p. 52.

mystical theology rest on solid historical precedent, dating back to early times, and they distinguish the perennial aspect of Christian mysticism, while also showing the uniqueness of approach of the Jesus tradition.

Christian theologians do not use “theosis” consistently. For example, Eastern Orthodox, Western Catholic, and Protestant uses of the term differ in key respects. In addition, theosis and mystical theology in the ancient sense are predominantly associated with the Eastern Orthodox tradition. In Eastern Orthodoxy theosis and mystical theology have been chief concerns throughout history, while Roman Catholicism and Protestantism have tended to submerge them in the West in favor of piety. “Theology” has come to signify intellectual speculation in the West, so “mystical theology” is understood more as thinking about mysticism than actual practice. Therefore, neither “theosis” nor “mystical theology” is a satisfactory candidate for incorporating the full range of perennialism exhibited in the Jesus tradition.

“Gnostic Christianity” might also be a candidate, but using it in relation to Christian mysticism and related phenomena threatens to conflate the first century historical phenomenon called Gnosticism with Christian mysticism in general, which would be a grave error. Moreover, the emphasis of many first century Gnostic texts is on transcending the world, while an important factor in Christian mysticism is discovering God’s immanence in the world.

Changing “Gnostic” to ‘gnostic’ as in “gnostic Christianity in order to emphasize its relation to perennial wisdom instead of first century Gnosticism is not satisfactory either, since confusion with first century Gnosticism is still possible. Hence, it would be better to avoid this term also.

The mystical aspect of the Jesus tradition that emphasizes immanence has acquired the name “creation spirituality” chiefly through the works of Matthew Fox.¹ However, some might argue that it does not do justice to the significance of the *via negativa*, also an important component of mystical practice in the Jesus tradition.

“Christian mysticism” serves to distinguish the Christian mystical tradition from normative Christianity, with which it has often been at odds. However, Christian mysticism is usually understood in terms of normative Christianity, as a sort of odd subset or stepchild. The same can be said for “mystical Christianity.” I had originally thought to use “mystical Christianity” in contrast to “normative Christianity.” However, I soon realized that “Christianity” is a term inexorably

¹ Matthew Fox. *Creation Spirituality: Liberating Gifts for the Peoples of the Earth*. (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991); *Original Blessing: A Primer of Creation Spirituality*. (Santa Fe: Bear & Co., 1983); *A New Reformation: Creation Spirituality and the Transformation of Christianity*. (Rutland, VT: Inner Traditions, 2006).

bound up in the framework that denigrates mysticism; hence, it had to be rejected as a candidate also.

The mystical aspect of the Jesus tradition is also far broader than Christian mysticism as generally understood in the dominant framework today. In most Christian dictionaries and encyclopedias, mysticism is a rather small entry considering its contributions to the Christian tradition and its importance to spirituality. Many of the greatest saints and theologians were mystics, e.g., St. Augustine, but this is often overlooked in normative circles.¹ Moreover, many great mystics who arose in the Jesus tradition, such as Meister Eckhart and Madame Guyon, were condemned on normative grounds.

The phenomenon called the “Gnostic heresy” that appeared almost at the outset was not only excluded but its works were mostly destroyed. Only through serendipity were copies of some of these works recently discovered. This find included an almost intact copy of *The Gospel of Thomas*, known previously through only a few fragments. Hence, mysticism in the Jesus tradition is a much broader category than “Christian mysticism” from early times.

Because the viewpoint that became “orthodox” (normative) Christianity excluded many other forms of the early diversity, many mystics of the Jesus tradition have been excluded from consideration. We will not mention many of them owing to the scope of this undertaking, which focuses largely on the role of *The Gospel of Thomas*. However, the Way of Jesus was far broader in the early days than most people realize now, and it included mystical teachings and even communities, of which the community that produced and used *The Gospel of Thomas* was only one of many.² However, the scope of this undertaking does not allow examination of significant works such as *The Gospel of Truth* or *The Gospel of Philip* here.

Moreover, while many people are familiar with the names and perhaps even the lives of great saints, most do not know much about their mystical dimension. For

¹ The irony is that while the greatness of these teachers was recognized, their mysticism was often marginalized. For example, it was idealized as a special gift of the spirit reserved only for the most deserving, putting it beyond the reach for ordinary people, who are told that they should therefore not be concerned with it. People in the normative fold also regard mysticism as “dangerous” in more ways than one. In the first place it is represented as “quietism,” and, “An idle mind is the devil’s workshop.” Secondly, those inquisitive enough to be interested in mysticism are also educated enough to know that mysticism has gotten many people in trouble with normative authority.

² Bart D. Ehrman. *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). Meyer, Marvin. *The Gnostic Discoveries: The Impact of the Nag Hammadi Library*. (New York: Harper San Francisco, 2005); *The Gnostic Gospels of Jesus: The Definitive Collection of Mystical Gospels and Secret Books about Jesus of Nazareth*. (New York: Harper San Francisco, 2005).

example, normative Christianity emphasizes the martyrs over the mystics. Still fewer know even of the existence of many of the mystics and mystical influences that were excluded.

These teachings continued to flourish underground.¹ They occasionally rose to the surface, as in the case of the Cathars who were exterminated like pests at the time of a crusade against the so-called “Albigensian heresy,” principally in southern France. This resulted in the virtual genocide of the sect, taking the lives of thousands.

Sometimes, however, these teachings even became overtly influential, as when Platonism and Hermeticism were rediscovered during the Renaissance and gained some prominence. Alchemy was a forerunner of modern science, but it was also the carrier of an esoteric teaching about spiritual transformation.

The mystical spirit awakens those whom it calls in every generation. From the normative Christian viewpoint, Dante, Blake, Rilke, and Whitman, for instance, may have been only poets, who composed on the basis of imagination instead of experience. But they were apparently also genuine mystics arising in the Western tradition.

Therefore, they were necessarily strongly influenced by the prevailing environment even as they themselves exerted a powerful influence on it. It is often the duty of poets to act as prophets by issuing a call their people to turn from the false way of convention to the true way of spirit. As with the prophets of old, many either turned a deaf ear to them or read them merely for edification.

As a prophet whose work is universal, Jesus had a much more profound influence on Western culture than merely through normative religion or even his enormous influence on world civilization and culture. His influence was and is primarily spiritual, and it continues to be so. On the one hand, we will see how Jesus’ teaching can be understood from the viewpoint of mystical spirituality. On the other hand, if Jesus is indeed a divine incarnation, then his kingdom would not have been of this world, as he himself said it was not. His work in establishing that kingdom would manifest in hearts, likely in unexpected ways.

For example, normative Christianity has had difficulty with Jesus’ saying that he would appear “in the clouds” and that he would come again in the lifetime of those listening to him.² For he apparently did not appear physically as some thought he

¹ Richard Smoley. *Forbidden Faith: The Gnostic Legacy from the Gospels to the Da Vinci Code*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2006).

² “Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who shall not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom” (Matthew 16:28, Mark 9:1, Luke 9:27). Matthew and Luke also say, “This generation will not pass away until all these

had promised. Mystics know, on the other hand, that he was referring not to clouds in the sky but to the inner planes, where many would see him with their inner vision when their spiritual eye, “the eye of the heart,” was opened. He is still appearing in his way, as mystics continue to attest over the span of millennia.¹

THE WAY

I will use “the Way of Jesus” technically to designate the distinctive mystical tradition arising from Jesus’ teaching and example, similar to other distinctive mystical traditions such as Sufism, Qabalah, Vedanta and Zen.

There is considerable historical precedent for using the term “way” to designate a wisdom tradition. In the first place, Acts indicates that the followers of the way proclaimed by Jesus were at first called followers of “the way” even before becoming widely known as Christians.² Although the Acts of the Apostles does not restrict use of the term “way” to a mystical sense, it does indicate that the followers of Jesus were apparently instructed in a path rather than merely given a doctrine to be believed and norms to be followed.

That is to say, early on the Way of Jesus was understood as a way of life characterized by values, means and practice leading to an end in view rather than being a normative belief system. The teaching of Jesus was interpreted as being a way that followers of Jesus were invited to join, long before it became understood in terms of an institutional church with a doctrine and theology, ritual and rubrics, and a codified set of injunctions and observances.

Scholars are now recognizing that anti-Nicene communities of Jesus’ followers were quite different from the post-Nicene. Even previously most scholars presumed that the early Church was uniformly “apostolic,” excepting the peripheral heresies that were rooted out. This supposed initial orthodoxy supposedly provided the basis for a uniformity of doctrine, ritual and observance, although this uniformity was actually traceable only to the fourth century, after the orthodox party had gained ascendancy.

This presumption of early uniformity is now turning out to be erroneous on the evidence. Recent research and discovery reveal that the earliest communities of the

things have taken place” (Matthew 24:34, Luke 21:32). For the reference to “clouds,” see Matthew 24:29-31, 26:63-65; Mark 13:25-27, 14:61-63.

¹ Meher Baba. *Shri Meher Baba The Perfect Master, Questions and Answers*, p. 10-11. URL=< <http://members.aol.com/markar1/LifeEternal/Jesus2.html>>

² Acts 9:2, 18:25-26, 19:9, 19:23, 22:4, 24:14. The name, “The Way” has been trademarked by a contemporary Christian cult, also called ‘The Way International,’ in an attempt to reserve this ancient name of the followers of Jesus for its exclusive use. The use of the term “Way” herein should not be confused with this contemporary cult.

Jesus tradition were diverse in belief and practice. Instead of stemming directly from Jesus through the apostles and their successors in a uniform way, excepting a few isolated heretics that were dispatched, as long-standing tradition holds, the early Jesus tradition was made up of diverse communities that were hardly in agreement on many key issues.¹ Even the four gospels reveal such discrepancies when read carefully with an eye to history.

On the other hand, Jesus did preach a message. The gospels tell us that his public teaching was different from the private instruction he imparted to his close ones, similar to many other teachers of perennial wisdom. Precisely what this distinction may have been is lost to view. However, the outlines of Jesus' teaching shine through the gospels. Some of it can possibly be gleaned from the artifacts of other communities, such as those that produced the so-called Gnostic gospels, most notably *The Gospel of Thomas*.

Most scholars agree that Jesus' way involved entering the kingdom, said to be of God or of heaven, which Jesus emphasized was not "of this world." Jesus says on many occasions in the canonical gospels that the kingdom is "near," and in *The Gospel of Thomas* that it is even already present in the world for those capable of realizing this.²

Compare Luke with *The Gospel of Thomas* in the two following quotations that appear to be similar but are actually significantly different:

"The kingdom of God does not come through your careful observation, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you."³

"His followers said to him: 'When will the kingdom come?' [Jesus said:] 'It will not come by your expecting it [watching for it]. No one will say: Look here! or Look there! Rather, the kingdom of the Father is spread out over the earth, and people do not see it.'"⁴

Many will be surprised at this comparison, which suggests that Luke is more mystical than *The Gospel of Thomas*, in that the former emphasizes inner knowing whereas the latter emphasizes that the kingdom is actually present in the world but people fail to appreciate this. However, this is not necessarily the case.

¹ Elaine Pagels. *The Gnostic Gospels*. (New York: Random House, 1979). Paul F. Bradshaw. *Eucharistic Origins*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).; *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy*. (New York: Oxford University Press, USA; 2nd edition, 2002).

² John 18:36, Matthew 10:7, Mark 1:15, Luke 10:9, *The Gospel of Thomas*, 113.

³ Luke 17:20-21. New International Version. In Luke 17:21 "within" translates the Greek preposition *en*. It usually means "in" but it can also mean "among."

⁴ *The Gospel of Thomas*, 113. Rendered by the author.

In this quotation from Luke, the Greek preposition *en* translated as "within" can also mean "among," so it is not unreasonable to argue that they two are essentially the same. *The Gospel of Thomas* seems to prefer "among" in the sense of "all around" signifying that God's presence is immanent in the world. If "in" is a valid reading of Greek *en* in Luke, then Luke seems to be saying that God is immanent to the soul. However, this reading is questionable, and "among" may have been intended, so that both are saying essentially the same thing.

Both of these quotations contrast with the normative notion that God is transcendent, hence, separate from creation. If God is completely transcendent and entirely separate from creation, then it follows that God's presence is neither in the soul nor world, hence, is unknowable unless God communicates this by grace. According to the normative teaching, the view that God is immanent is pantheism, the notion that God is the universe and limited to it.

Neither of the above quotations necessarily contradicts the view that God is transcendent. Rather, they can be read as consistent with God's being both immanent and transcendent.

The view that God is both immanent and transcendent is called "panentheism."¹ We will have much more to say about *panentheism* in the course of this investigation as distinct from both *pantheism* as the view that the cosmos is God, and *theism* as the view that the Creator is entirely separate from creation.

In Qabalah, God's presence is designated by the Hebrew word *shekhinah*, which is also associated with the kingdom (*sefirah malkhuth*). It is conceivable that Jesus was alluding to this understanding himself, since it is an ancient teaching of Jewish mysticism.² On this reading, the Way of Jesus is the path to this inner vision by opening "the eye of the heart," making it consistent not only with Qabalah but also other traditions of perennial wisdom.

Secondly, "way" is also used by many mystical traditions to signify the spiritual path. For example, the Chinese term *tao* or *dao* literally means "way." In Japanese, it becomes *do*. The Sufi name for the spiritual path is also "way" (Arabic: *tariqa*).

¹ See *The Gospel of Thomas*, 22: "When you make the two, one, and when you make the inner as the outer and the outer as the inner, and the upper as the lower, ... then you will enter [the kingdom]." Rendered by the author.

² Scholars of Hebrew mysticism might object that Qabalah, including the notion of Shekhinah, is post-biblical, not appearing in the literature until much later, so that Jesus would not have known about it. However, tradition holds that Moses received the oral Torah on Mt. Sinai in addition to the written Torah. The oral Torah was transmitted orally from master to disciple in private, and this teaching were not committed to writing until relatively recently and then only partially and symbolically, so that it can only be properly understood through transmission from a master.

The Vedic tradition speaks the spiritual path as the way of the Supreme Self or Oversoul (Sanskrit: *adhyatma marga*). There are also the ways of knowledge (*jnana marga*), devotion (*bhakti marga*) and action (*karma marga*). Buddha called his teaching the Middle Way (Sanskrit: *madhyama marga*, Pali: *majjhima magga*) that lies between the ways of indulgence (*tantra marga*) and asceticism (*yoga marga*). This involves being “in the world but not of it,” which has also been used to describe the way Jesus taught, based on John 17:14-15.

THE WAY OF JESUS VERSUS CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM

In this use, “the Way of Jesus” is similar to “theosis” and “mystical theology” in early Christianity, where these terms were used to designate mystical teaching and practice with a view to deification. Thus, “the Way of Jesus” refers to the perennial wisdom springing from Christian mysticism, irrespective of denomination, sect or historical period, as well as from mystics who followed the Way of Jesus independently of or at odds with normative Christianity.

There are admittedly doctrinal differences among Christian mystics within the normative frame, as well as those outside of it. However, we will focus attention on the similar principles underlying their writings rather than debating differences. In this interpretation, the Way of Jesus is a specific wisdom tradition within a framework stemming from Jesus as teacher, exemplar, and master. It is also a distinctive tradition contributing to perennial wisdom independently of the norms that regulate doctrine, ritual, and observance.

The term “Christian” has come to be associated with normative Christianity. Hence, there is a difference between being “Christian” and “Christic.” It is possible to be Christic by following the Way of Jesus without being “Christian” in the normative sense. Indeed, Hindus may choose the name and form in terms of which they worship the One. There are Hindus who accept the divinity of Jesus, who do not consider themselves “Christian” in the conventional sense of being affiliated with the specifically Christian religious tradition.

Similarly, Messianic Jews who follow Jesus as the Hebrew *mashiach* do not call themselves “Christian.” Rather, they see themselves as a messianic sect of Judaism that recognizes Jesus (Aramaic: *Yeshua*) as the Jewish messiah.¹ This is, after all, the way that the Jesus tradition was born, before it morphed into Christianity as an organized religion in its own right, bearing its own distinctive name.

In fact, there is scant indication in the gospels that Jesus intended his teaching to be interpreted in the fashion it came to be. Scholars now recognize that the gospels were not written as historical biography but as documents of a normative tradition in the making. Many of the key glosses of the gospels attributed to Jesus cited in

¹ Yeshua is pronounced yeh-SHOO-uh. Shoo is pronounced like “shoe.”

support of his having established institutional norms and authority are due to later redactions, presumably for this normative purpose. Moreover, given the controversy between Paul and the Jerusalem community presided over by James as reported in Acts, it seems that the original apostles and disciples did not understand it this way at the beginning. Whether they did latter is unknown, since there is no historical evidence about this one way or the other, other than various subsequent claims not directly traceable to the original Twelve.

Thus, we could say that the Way of Jesus is primarily related to mysticism and to a great extent an outgrowth of it, and that this occurred in early communities of the Jesus tradition. It is “Christic” but not necessarily “Christian” in the normative sense or conventional meaning, for it extends beyond these boundaries that were constructed long after Jesus himself had departed the scene.

Was the experience of mystics who were excluded on normative grounds thereby actually invalidated? Such cases as such as those of Meister Eckhart (1260-1327) and Madame Guyon (1648-1717), to cite only two egregious examples that occurred centuries apart, were often controversial at the time. Many historians now see Eckhart’s condemnation as politically motivated, but he has not yet been rehabilitated. The great mystic François Fenélon, himself a bishop, defended Madame Guyon, but to no avail in the face of more powerful opposition, and excluding her from the Jesus tradition now seems overly narrow.

Christian mysticism is embedded in normative Christianity, even though often marginalized by institutional authorities. In fact, some prominent Christian mystics were not merely marginalized. Their works were condemned, and they themselves were even persecuted. But, in spite of this, many if not most Christian mystics considered themselves Christians in good standing. Most of those who came under censure remained obedient to authority when faced with censure. Moreover, most believed that they were orthodox, even when misunderstood by the normative authorities.

Virtually all mystics of the Jesus tradition were distinctively Christic if not “orthodox” in the normative sense. However, examination of the writings of those that followed the *via negativa*, especially, reveals a wisdom that can be considered universally when read in light of key fundamentals of perennial wisdom.

In normative systems, independence implies difference. Normative Christianity itself has seemingly confirmed this in its treatment of many mystics and mystical writings, questioning them on doctrinal grounds and rejecting many of them. Incredibly, some of the most prominent mystics condemned in the past, such as Meister Eckhart and Madame Guyon, cited above, have not yet been exonerated, even though their teachings continue to inspire and instruct many seekers. Today, many seekers are turning to ancient sources, many of which normative authorities

reject as heretical, that have recently been discovered and translated into contemporary languages.

Most Christian mystics were probably unaware that they really were independent voices in an institution that requires their subservience to established norms. It was not these mystics intention to establish an independent wisdom tradition within the Christian framework, and likely none of them were conscious of this taking place. However, they spoke with the authority of non-ordinary experience grounded in higher cognition; hence, their words often became key pronouncements of the Way of Jesus. This, perhaps, more than what the mystics actually had to say, was the political reason that normative authority resisted the emergence of a strong mystical current in the religion that might challenge the hierarchy and its norms on the basis of personal revelation grounded in higher cognition.

Mysticism is naturally at odds with normative authority because it claims an internal criterion independent of the externally established norms. This is perceived as a challenge by normative authority. Therefore, the debate over the orthodoxy of mystics, especially outspoken ones, can turn out to be as much political as religious, and often more so.

Now that the shackles of institutional religious authority have loosened, many people are taking spirituality into their own hands and looking for guidance wherever they find it. They are recognizing that many of the Christian mystics are enunciating perennial wisdom in Christic terms.

Many people are also exploring sources at the periphery of Christianity, as well as beyond. We are also coming to realize through the work of many scholars that many of those marginalized by the normative authorities in the course of constructing orthodoxy were likely following the Way of Jesus or at least believed themselves to be. Perhaps there is something worthwhile to learn from them, too. But that's beyond the scope of this undertaking, and we will put it off for another day so that we can focus chiefly on *The Gospel of Thomas* herein.

OTHER MYSTICAL TRADITIONS

Vedanta, Taoism, Buddhism, Sufism and Qabalah, for example, have extended their influence beyond the religions in which they arose, to become appreciated as universal teachings. While critics in the normative traditions from which they sprang may object to such expropriation, many people today practice these traditions independently of the normative religions with which they were originally associated.

Similarly, the teachings of many Christian mystics occupy such a place. Notable among these is Meister Eckhart, whose teachings Matthew Fox relates to creation

spirituality.¹ Another is Hildegard of Bingen.² *The Gospel of Thomas* is also gaining universal recognition as containing a vital spiritual teaching, putatively stemming from Jesus, even though normative authorities consider it spurious. Such writings now inspire many people and are not limited to the framework of institutional Christianity.

Every religion has its own mystical core. This core may be viewed as either part of the religion or as universal enough to exist independently. Thus, there is a Hindu Vedanta and a universal Vedanta, an Islamic Sufism and a universal Sufism, a religious Taoism and a philosophical Taoism, a Jewish Kabbalah and a universal Qabalah, and so forth.³ The religions from which these universal interpretations emerged often reject their validity on normative grounds. Yet, these universal interpretations have many adherents. This is especially true now that ancient teachings are being adapted to contemporary needs and interests, irrespective of their origin.

Similarly, the mystical underpinnings of Christianity are grounded in the universal teaching of Jesus, whom many recognize as a world teacher without accepting normative Christianity.⁴ Hence, the bulk of these teachings can be viewed as universal rather than as exclusively Christian.

The Way of Jesus can embrace all expressions of a mystical approach to Christianity, as long as they emphasize spiritual experience rather than belief in doctrine and adherence to norms. Not all the data relevant to the Way of Jesus is derived from the Christian mysticism that sprang out of normative Christianity.

¹ Matthew Fox. *Passion for Creation: The Earth-Honoring Spirituality of Meister Eckhart*. (Rutland, VT: Inner Traditions, 2000).

² June Boyce-Tillman. *The Creative Spirit: Harmonious Living with Hildegard of Bingen*. (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2000).

³ “Kabbalah” is usually used for Jewish mystical tradition, while “Cabala” and “Qabalah,” which is the literal transliteration from Hebrew, is more often used for the Hermetic, Magical or Practical tradition based on Hebraic mysticism. “Qabalah” is also used for the universal tradition as well. In general, “Qabalah” is used herein as the literal transliteration.

⁴ John Sahajananda. *The Hindu Christ: Jesus's Message through Eastern Eyes*. (Hampshire, UK: O Books, 2006). Tarif Khalidi (Editor). *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003). Javad Nurbakhsh. *Jesus in the Eyes of the Sufis*. (New York: Khaniqahi-Nimattulahi Publications, 1983). Rev. James Robson, M. A. *Christ in Islam*. (London: John Murray, 1929). URL=<<http://www.sacred-texts.com/isl/cii/index.htm>>. Thich Nhat Hanh. *Living Buddha, Living Christ*. (New York: Riverhead Books, Penguin Putnam, 1995).

There have been theosophical undercurrents associated with Christianity for centuries, such as Hermeticism and Rosicrucianism.¹

The Way of Jesus differs from both esoteric Christianity, such as that of Theosophist Annie Besant, and also Gnostic Christianity, as well as Neo-Gnostic Christianity, such as that set forth by Stephan A. Hoeller, founder of the Ecclesia Gnostica. Yet, the Way of Jesus can include their mystical aspects.² The creation spirituality advanced by Matthew Fox, which he sees sparking a “New Reformation,” would also be germane to the Way of Jesus.³

The Way of Jesus can be viewed as one facet of a gem representing core spirituality, whose other facets are the various expressions of perennial wisdom. This facet interfaces with the wisdom traditions influencing it, such as Qabalah, Platonism and Neoplatonism, Hermeticism, Gnosticism, and more peripherally Sufism. Facets on the opposite side of the gem, with which early Christianity did not interface directly, are the traditions and teachings further removed from its development, the Vedic tradition, Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, for example. Since then, Christianity has been exposed to many other ancient traditions in the Americas, Asia and Africa, along with their mystical traditions.⁴ As we shall see, the tradition is that the Apostle Thomas went to India, and there are Indian Christians in Kerala, for example, who maintain this tradition.⁵

In the process of becoming a world religion, Christianity reciprocally influenced and was influenced by other religions, cultures, and philosophies, and its mysticism, by world spirituality. Almost from the outset, for example, Christianity absorbed the influence of Platonism, which had become Neoplatonism by Hellenistic times.

¹ Richard Smoley and Jay Kinney. *Hidden Wisdom: A Guide to the Western Inner Traditions*. (New York: Penguin, 1999). Richard Smoley. *Inner Christianity: A Guide to the Esoteric Tradition*. (Boston: Shambhala, 2002).

² Annie Besant. *Esoteric Christianity: Or The Lesser Mysteries*. (Adyar, India: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1914). Stephan A. Hoeller. *Gnosticism: New Light on the Ancient Tradition of Inner Knowing*. (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 2002).

³ Matthew Fox. *A New Reformation*.

⁴ Martin Palmer. *The Jesus Sutras: Rediscovering the Lost Scrolls of Taoist Christianity*. (New York: Wellspring/Ballantine, 2001). Ray Riegert (Editor), Thomas Moore (Editor). *The Lost Sutras of Jesus: Unlocking the Ancient Wisdom of the Xian Monks*. (Berkeley: Seastone, Ulysses Press. 2003).

⁵ C. V. Cherian. *A History of Christianity in Kerala*. (Kottayam, 1973). See URL=<<http://www.acns.com/~mm9n/Malankara/parvom.htm>>. A.E. Medlycott. *India and the Apostle Thomas*. URL=<<http://www.indianchristianity.com/html/chap4/chapter4a.htm>>. Indian Christianity site. URL=<<http://www.indianchristianity.com/>>.

Further East, Gnostic influences were also absorbed. In the West, Celtic Christianity provides an example of how Christianity blended with the Old Ways without entirely replacing them.

Moreover, Christianity survived in Islamic environments in the form of Chaldean and Coptic Christianity, for instance, thereby imbibing Islamic and Sufi influence. Indeed, the mystical bent of Eastern Orthodox Christianity also resembles Qabalah and Sufism in its emphasis on the prayer of the heart as divine remembrance, called *zachor* in Hebrew and *zikr* in Arabic.

One of the most interesting developments is the ecumenical work of Fr. Bede Griffiths, a Roman Catholic priest who established a Christian “ashram” in India and emphasized the commonality among religions, which he called “interspirituality.”¹ Owing to these reciprocal influences, Christian mysticism is rich with comparisons, and the Way of Jesus is taking its place in perennial wisdom.

THE WAY OF JESUS AS PERENNIAL WISDOM

The Way of Jesus can be viewed as an expression of perennial wisdom in that it is grounded in mystical experience rather than cultural norms. In contrast, normative Christianity is anchored in norms not based on mystical experience but rather on theological interpretations of putatively revealed scriptures and sacred tradition. Normative Christianity emphasizes reliance on the interpretation of scriptural revelation on the basis of norms governing doctrine, ritual and observance. In contrast, the Way of Jesus emphasizes being guided within so as to experience one’s own personal revelation in the heart of hearts.

The Way of Jesus is not antinomian, however. It recognizes as a criterion the wisdom of those who have trod the path previously and reported on it, particularly those guided by experienced elders who had trod the path themselves.

The Way of Jesus is characterized by experiential knowledge assessed against the template of perennial wisdom, as well as competent guidance where it is available. Normative Christianity is characterized by conceptual knowledge of scripture and theological doctrine, as well as institutional authority. The Way of Jesus is based on inner experience and competent guidance. Normative Christianity is based on doctrinal belief and established norms.

There are many sources contributing to the Way of Jesus — the canonical New Testament, the testimony and teaching of the orthodox mystics, the noncanonical literature of early Christianity, the testimony and teaching of non-orthodox mystics, and also the insights of philosophers, poets and similar contributors.

¹ URL=< <http://www.bede-griffiths.com/>>.

The testimony of the mystics and the teaching of the saints and masters can be read independently of normative Christianity and often in contrast to it. Therefore, it can be viewed as an independent teaching in its own right. It can even be argued that it is more faithful to Jesus' teaching and example than the so-called orthodoxies, which themselves cannot agree over what is orthodox. This applies to both canonical and noncanonical scriptures, as well as mystics within normative Christianity and those peripheral to it, such as Valentinus. Then, there are those in between. Meister Eckhart and Madame Guyon were anathematized and never rehabilitated, even though they are widely recognized as not only genuine but also inspirational.

The Gospel of Thomas is one of these noncanonical scriptural sources. A contention in this investigation is that *Thomas* may be read as an especially foundational document in the literature of the Way of Jesus. Not only can *The Gospel of Thomas* be seen as fundamental to the Way of Jesus, perhaps even associated with Jesus himself. It can also be appreciated for the significant contribution it makes to perennial wisdom. Normative authorities reject it as spurious and heretical, and some scholars dismiss it as chiefly first or second century Gnostic. Investigation shows that this is unwarranted, and that *The Gospel of Thomas* can be interpreted as a text consistent with early Christianity.

MYSTICAL VERSUS NORMATIVE IN THE JESUS TRADITION

Those familiar with a normative form of Christianity will already see clear differences between the normative and the mystical from the description of the mystical. Many people are unaware of this difference or even of the existence of the mystical tradition in Christianity and religions in general. Indeed, many associate the mystical with "the occult" in a pejorative sense or the "heretical." The concepts of the occult and heretical as pejorative presuppose norms that marginalize or exclude them, separating them from "the orthodox."

Normative religion is essentially of three types:

1. The first type is institutional religion, where institutional authorities dictate the norms, for example, of doctrine, ritual and observances. In such cases, established doctrine is considered dogma, ritual is prescribed as approved liturgy and rubric, and observances are injunctions to be followed scrupulously in order to avoid committing sin. "High" churches, such as the Roman Catholic, Anglican and Eastern Orthodox, as well as some Lutherans tend to be institutional and prescribe doctrinal, liturgical and behavioral norms on the basis of hierarchical institutional authority, for example, councils of bishops. Norms are promulgated and enforced by local authorities, such as bishops in charge of dioceses that are comprised of parishes headed by pastors who are priests or ministers.

2. The second type of religion is organizational. Institutional religion is one type of organizational religion, but all organizational religion is not institutional. Organizational religion that is not institutional is more loosely organized than institutional religion in that institutional authorities do not dictate the norms. In such organizations norms are decided more on the basis of consensus than hierarchically. Nevertheless, adherence to the norms determines members “in good standing.”

Some organized religions are rather strict in their approach to norms and others quite lenient. Nevertheless, even in the case of the more lenient there are generally boundary conditions defining the sect or school. Most Protestant churches fall under the category of organized religions that are non-hierarchical. The more organized the church, the more specific the norms tend to be and the more structured the hierarchy.

For example, at the outset of the Jesus tradition, there was no ecclesiastical hierarchy resembling the one that was later created, and it is questionable whether Jesus meant to establish one, at least like this. It seems from Acts that Jesus brother James (*Yakov*) was his acknowledged successor rather than Peter. Bishops (overseers) and priests (originally presbyters or “elders”) were a later addition, as was the doctrine of apostolic succession of holy orders.

Subsequently, the hierarchy acquired princely powers with the pope playing the role of emperor of the faithful. While the Protestant Reformation reformed some of those excesses, the high churches preserved ecclesiastical hierarchy and holy orders, while the low churches abandoned them. Elders or “presbyters” direct worship in the Presbyterian Church, but they are not considered priests. The Greek term *presbuteros* literally means “elder” rather than “priest,” as it is incorrectly rendered when describing the early Church.

Ministers of congregational churches serve at the pleasure of the members; hence, an unpopular minister can be removed at will. This makes for a much looser establishment at the local level. In such congregations, norms are cultural rather than being established by a normative authority. But they are imposed socially through peer pressure. Even in very loosely organized groups norms can be quite rigidly determined. Where such views predominate, the cultural norms can extend socially beyond the walls of the churches. In the United States this area is called “the Bible belt.”

In addition to the level of organization, the biases of the adherents figure heavily in the determination of norms. For example, most religions have conservative and liberal adherents. In Christianity, for example, Fundamentalism was a movement called into being early in the last century to counter the growing dominance of liberal theology. While most Fundamentalist sects are not hierarchical, their structure is patriarchal and authoritarian, mimicking more hierarchal institutions *de facto* with respect to imposing norms.

3. The third type of religion equates religion with spirituality. It is personal rather than social, and it is now a growing force today as more and more people choose to come to their own conclusions. Many who choose this alternative do not associate with groups where there are established norms or pressure to conform to a shared point of view. Some do not belong to groups at all, choosing to go their own way, exclusively within.

Personal religion then becomes either a matter of composing one's own doctrine, ritual and observances or else manifests as a commitment to the pursuit of spirituality primarily as an inner quest for transcendence in loose association with others so committed. Either one establishes one's own norms and can change them at will, or the norm becomes either one's own intuition or the teaching one chooses to follow but to which, one is not intrinsically bound.

There is also a different type of normative tradition associated with a spiritual order or particular wisdom tradition in contrast to a religion as such. Such traditions are often nested within a particular religion. This has heretofore been more a characteristic of the East than the West, although some Western secret societies would fall into this category. Moreover, many Eastern wisdom traditions have recently been imported into the West, and Eastern teachers have also taken Western disciples. Some of these have become teachers in their own right, shaping the wisdom tradition in accordance with the needs of Westerners.¹ In such cases, the orientation can be primarily spiritual but also highly normative, in the sense that the wisdom tradition has a teaching expressed in principles and a practice set forth in precepts, as well as allegiance to a teacher, to which one commits oneself by becoming a disciple. The closest thing to this in the West is probably monasticism, but Western monasticism has generally been normatively religious.

Norms are not necessarily the enemy of spirituality, and differentiating between normative and mystical is often ambiguous. In almost every case, there are norms, because norms provide the invariant principles necessary for structure, without which continuity in life is not possible. Regardless whether the "invariant" principles are personal, voluntary or imposed, they are norms while they are followed, even if on a purely internal basis. In this sense, norms are much like habits, tools when used appropriately but cages when not. These shortcuts obviate the need to make decisions regarding similar matters on a regular basis. Rather, one just follows the norms in ordinary situations, like a habit.

For example, most people pursuing mystical spirituality as a personal quest without guidance develop a personal program, explicitly or implicitly, that they follow on a regular basis, such as a form of meditation, which becomes a norm for

¹ In addition to Western adaptation, there have been specific orders formed for Westerners, e.g., the Western Buddhist Order and the Sufi Order of the West.

them. Interestingly, there is actually a type of spiritual practice that avoids all structure in the effort to break the bonds of attachment to structure. But this antinomianism, too, becomes a norm of behavior. Even the *sadhu* or *bhikshu* who quits the world and leaves off worldly affairs to wander aimlessly as a spiritual discipline is following such a norm.¹

Nor are norms necessarily insurmountable obstacles. Many great mystics, for example, developed in normative circumstances, and many of them exemplified the norms or at least adhered to them. Some even became normative authorities in their own right as mystics. Augustine of Hippo is one the most influential Christian theologians in East and West. Both Teresa of Avila and Catherine of Sienna were declared Doctors of the Church, in spite of the being women in an institution dominated by a male hierarchy. While Francis of Assisi wrote nothing to speak of and gave little explicit teaching that endures, his loving example became a norm of its own, and his statue is found in a great many gardens, as a reminder of his love for nature. Significantly, none of them sought to overturn or replace the norms, even though they were all great mystics.

From this analysis it should be evident that abandoning norms is not necessarily either necessary or even helpful. Moreover, the pursuit of mystical spirituality without recourse to some norms of thought and behavior is not possible. Great mystics arose even within the most rigid manifestations of normative Christianity. Rather, what is required is the inner centeredness allowing one to prioritize and follow the way even while remaining within the boundaries of one's culture and environment. In mystical spirituality, it is the inner that is paramount. It matters little whether one renounce the world externally, or simply internally by being in the world but not of it. Similarly, it matters little whether one rejects the norms externally or follows them while making inner spirituality the priority.

Where the norms do matter most with regard to this undertaking is the degree to which they affect doctrine. Institutional Christianity is especially characterized by doctrinal norms that distinguish orthodoxy from heresy. "Heresy" comes from the Greek word meaning "opinions or views." "Orthodox" literally means "right doctrine." Here, the truth of correct doctrine is regarded as guaranteed by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, while heresy is erroneous opinion. In institutional organizations, orthodox doctrine has only one correct interpretation, that given it by the institutional authorities. For centuries, the institutional authorities of the Western Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches were the sole arbiters of dogma.

¹ A *sadhu* is a Hindu holy person and a *bhikshu* is a Buddhist monk. This custom never appeared in the West, although Jesus lived this type of wandering life himself during his ministry, e.g., saying, "Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head" (Matthew 8:19-21, Luke 9:57-59).

SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION

The Protestant Reformation saw the breaking of this lock on interpretation through institutionally determined dogma. Perhaps the fundamental cornerstone of Protestantism is the doctrine of *sola scriptura*, or “scripture alone,” as the norm rather than either tradition or institutional authority. The Roman Church had given equal status to scripture and tradition, and had taught that apostolic tradition was that normative authority rested with the hierarchy alone, so that their interpretation of scripture and tradition established the norm. The reformers rejected this view, holding that the only norm was scripture and all were free to interpret it. But even though no normative authority was erected to canonize any particular interpretation, the prevailing view was that a literal interpretation was to be preferred. Subsequently, conservatives would impose this view through social pressure if not hierarchical fiat.

Therefore, Protestantism did not cease to be normative. The norms just shifted a bit. The reformer did find norms in scripture that supported their views, such as the guarantee of the truth of scripture on the basis of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, it was assumed that scripture was genuine and intact, and that its correct interpretation was reasonably obvious. Both of these assumptions proved erroneous in the light of history and scholarship.¹ As a result, the conservative wing of Protestantism has come under increasing pressure itself.

Historical investigation and textual criticism show that there are no “autographs,” i.e., originals, of the scriptures have survived. Moreover, the oldest copies are not only relatively late, but they are also in considerable disagreement. There are literally thousands of copies, most from the Middle Ages, with hundreds of thousands of variant readings. Therefore, some scholars have even proposed that it is now impossible to know what the original scriptures were. So it is hard to claim that what exists now is that which was inspired, even after the most meticulous reconstruction. The question then becomes, which version of the text was inspired.

Moreover, scholars are discovering how diverse early Christianity was with respect to doctrine and practice. Rather than being uniform it was comprised of groups whose teachings would be unrecognizable today as “Christian,” in view of the normative religion that prevailed.² Many teachings that were once in

¹ Ehrman, Bart D. *Misquoting Jesus*. (New York: Harper San Francisco, 2005); The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

² Such views were apparently also held in the early Jesus tradition. For example, by Valentinus, who was a contender for the papacy in his day, was a so-called Gnostic.² However, there is good reason to think that he was in the line of Paul. Certainly, he was a considered Christian teacher in his own time, even though his teaching appears curious

competition with what is now considered not only orthodox but the “original” teaching of Jesus were subsequently labeled heresies.

The early controversies were largely over two principal issues. The first was the composition of scripture. The second was over correct interpretation. There was an intense controversy over the texts that should be included in the canon as orthodox scripture and regarded as inspired by the Holy Spirit. The question today from the historical perspective is what actually transpired in this determination so as to exclude many texts and effectively marginalize entire communities, eventually excluding them from the normative community that prevailed.

While many normative believers are convinced that this was the work of the Holy Spirit, it still had a historical development. This tale of this development suggests that the process was complex and to some degree arbitrary. For example, St. Irenaeus (130-202), bishop of Lyons, was one of the chief contributors to the development of the now canonical New Testament. He argued that there must be only four gospels because there are only four directions and four winds, not a particularly weighty argument by modern standards.

Most importantly for our purposes, in addition to ascertaining the correct text there is also the question of the correct interpretation. For example, many of the heresies that arose involved interpretation in addition to norms of canon. Was Jesus a man only (*adoptionism*), God only (*docetism*), both man and God (*separationism*), or a single being with two natures, human and divine (*proto-orthodoxy*)? Adherents to these views defended them on the basis of their own understanding, often with the same texts.

INTERPRETATION

The text itself first must be established and authenticated. This is called historical and textual *criticism*. Next, every text requires understanding. First, the meaning must be construed. This is called *exegesis*. In the case of any degree of complexity of meaning, this involves interpretation. This is called *hermeneutics*.

All but the simplest of words and phrases are capable of diverse interpretations. Some of these stand in opposition, even being mutually exclusive or contradictory. While hermeneutics is a scholarly approach to interpretation, every reader interprets the text, knowingly or unknowingly, and either in an informed way or naively.

A principal reason for the establishment of institutional normative authority was to provide a sure means for establishing uniform interpretation of scripture, especially with respect to doctrine. The normative authorities could claim with some justification that expertise is required to interpret a text in accordance with the

today because it is highly symbolic and not easily understood from the spiritual viewpoint, even by scholars of the period. See Meyer, Marvin, *The Gnostic Discoveries*, p. 117-141.

best information available and rigorous methods. History shows that this reason has not always been operative. Today, many normative beliefs are historically untenable, for example.

Once this interpretation was established it became norm and the most salient were canonized as articles of faith promulgated as dogma, that is, normative doctrine. Those who did not profess such articles of faith subscribe to such dogma were excluded from the community of faithful and those who subsequently abjured them were excommunicated until they recanted. Of course, when Christianity became Christendom, the pressure to conform was immense, not only to play a role in the community but also as almost a matter of survival.

Why this is especially important for this undertaking into the difference between normative Christianity and the Way of Jesus is that normative Christianity excludes interpretations that conflict with its norms. Of course, there is no single normative Christianity, since many sects regarding themselves as Christian disagree over interpretation of scripture, even though they agree about the text itself. Yet, in general at least, normative Christianity has established certain boundaries for the application of the term “Christian.” Most normative Christians allow that they are all Christians regardless of sect, even though they may disagree over doctrine and practice, sometimes even violently.

When it comes to alternatives beyond the pale of the norms, most normative Christians would also agree about what is to be excluded as not Christian at all. The difficulty here is that this involves interpretations that do not seem to be necessarily in opposition to Jesus’ teaching, as it might reasonably be understood. The conclusion is that such interpretations are only ruled out on the basis of norms that are themselves constructs, whose final appeal is either to institutional authority or convention.

The fact of the matter is that people disagree over interpretation and in the end there is no final arbiter that is absolute. This is the difference between science and the humanities, including religion and philosophy. Scientific hypotheses are testable on the basis of observation, which provides publicly available criteria for corroboration. Philosophy rests on arguments whose logic may be shown to be valid, but whose first principles are neither demonstrable nor testable on the basis of publicly available criteria.

Religious faith appeals to norms that are a matter of interpretation, and its ultimate justification involves belief. However, belief is no guarantee of truth, regardless of how deeply held. Appeals to the inerrancy of scripture on the basis of divine inspiration or the infallibility of authority also rest ultimately on belief rather than either reason or empirical corroboration. As long as one acknowledges that belief is the ground of religious doctrines, no problems arise. But when one group

asserts that it has the ocean in its bucket, then all hell breaks loose, as the history of internecine conflict in the history of Christianity goes to show.

It is necessary to recognize and acknowledge that all scriptural religions involve interpretation, and that every interpretation is a construct grounded in a variety of factors. Good interpretations take historical criticism, textual criticism, informed exegesis and rigorous hermeneutical analysis into account. Poor interpretations are generally uncritical, or even naïve, and rely on convention instead of relevant information. Unfortunately, many of the faithful assume that the clergy have done their homework regarding informed interpretation, but often this is an erroneous presumption. What is even worse is that, in spite of being informed, some continue to perpetuate pious beliefs they know are in conflict with historical evidence, so as not to rock the boat or upset the passengers.

Scholars cannot be relied upon completely to provide informed interpretations either. In the first place, scholars often disagree, in which case it becomes a matter of choosing scholarly views with which one agrees, hardly a justifiable rationale since it begs the question. Secondly, scholars are generally experts only in a rather narrow field. One should rely on their expertise in this field only. Scholars do sometimes exceed their limits. This means that an informed opinion regarding interpretation requires consulting many scholars in many fields judiciously, especially when one is not an expert in these fields oneself and is influenced by one's own biases, many of which many be unconscious.

In the final analysis, the interpretation on which a person settles is based on one's own level of awareness and experience, colored by the influence of one's natural tendencies and subliminal psychological impressions. One's interpretation of life is based on what one is and where one stands. For example, a person who is ignorant of spiritual things does not understand the inner significance of scripture and often rejects it even when someone with the experience attempts to explain it. Such people naively assume that their own level of awareness is universal, and highly intellectual people often cannot accept that mystics may be privy to privileged knowledge that surpasses their abilities.

Moreover, one may presume on the basis of conventional understanding that one has understood when one has not at all. Many normative Christians marvel at how even the apostles seem not to have understood Jesus, presuming that had they been there they would clearly have known. But on their conventional understanding, it can be asked whether this is actually what Jesus meant.

THE GOSPEL TRUTH

"The gospel truth" became a cliché because so many people regarded the gospels as unquestionable. What is a "gospel?" The Greek term *euangelion* means "good news." There is no comparable genre outside the Jesus tradition; however, in this

tradition there are many, many “gospels.” At the outset of the Jesus tradition, the news of Jesus and his message was communicated orally. Only decades later did it begin to be written down as “gospels.” Subsequently, when uniformity of norms began to be imposed, certain of these texts were selected for inclusion in the canon. The others were rejected and thrown into the dustbin of history. Many did not survive and are now known only through ancient references to them. Others are known to scholars but to few others. The recent discovery of the “Gnostic gospels,” as Elaine Pagels called them in a book of that name, transformed this previous lack of interest into something of a sensation.

Many of these ancient texts were called “gospels” at the time of their writing. For example, the title of *The Gospel of Thomas* that appears at the end of the text, the customary position of a title at the time, reads, “The gospel according to Thomas.”

At that time, the meaning of “gospel” was very different from what it became two millennia later. The cliché, “the gospel truth,” reflects the status of the canonical gospel in the popular mindset, at least within memory if not as widely held now. Today, the appearance of “gospel” in an ancient title gives it the aura of being asserted as “the gospel truth.” This is not a correct presumption, however, since that was not the original meaning. Given what is known about the context of the period there was as yet no normative canon widely represented doctrinally as “the word of God.” Of course, this is not to say that the early gospels were not highly revered; they apparently were, as their attribution to various apostles shows. But they had not yet assumed the supernatural status with which they would be endowed later.

Scholars who work carefully with the texts and study their origins, development and setting realize that every text is itself an interpretation of events with which the writers were likely not personally familiar. Each of the gospels is a different version of the events and even sayings attributed to Jesus as determined by the authors’ interpretation. Thus, each text is itself a construct based on a point of view. The viewpoints of the gospels differ significantly, presenting different pictures of Jesus. Even in the case of canonical gospels, these interpretations are somewhat at odds with each other.

Moreover, the predominant scholarly opinion is that the texts in our possession were not the apostolic autographs as believed and that the apostles Matthew and John did not write the texts attributed to their hand. Similarly, it is questionable whether Thomas the Apostle was the author of the gospel attributed to him.

Different followers of Jesus would have received the teaching from their own standpoint, and this would have involved interpreting reports of original sayings and events. Each major disciple, the apostles certainly, would have also attracted a group of associates. These associates would have been linked to an apostle or close disciple of Jesus by affinity. Esotericists would even say that some of these internal links were the result of connections established in previous lives.

Eventually communities would have formed around different views of Jesus seen through different eyes, from different stances. In addition, controversies would also have influenced these communities, further shaping their viewpoints. The various gospels would have grown up in these environments, hence, differ accordingly. There were many such communities in early Christianity. While it may be doubtful that Matthew or John wrote the gospels bearing their names, it is possible and even probable that there was some connection between the apostle and the community in which the gospel attributed to him was produced and initially transmitted through scribal copies.

Further complicating matters is the fact that the various gospels were not only based on different viewpoints but they also contain internal inconsistencies that point to either multiple authorship or subsequent alteration. In some cases, for example, scribes copying the texts seem to have changed them in order to convey a doctrinal interpretation that can often be connected with a controversy apparently raging at the time the copy was made.¹

Bart Ehrman observes in the conclusion to *Misquoting Jesus* that there are three levels of interpretation involved in most texts of the New Testament. (1) The first and perhaps most significant level of interpretation is the viewpoint from which the account was composed. The four canonical gospels were composed from different viewpoints reflecting different approaches to Jesus mission and message. That is to say, all of the gospels are constructs based on their authors' interpretation of events, or more likely, reports of events to which the authors were not themselves witnesses. (2) Secondly, there are the intentional alterations of scribes with a view toward influencing meaning and interpretation. (3) Thirdly, every reader brings an interpretation to scriptural texts based on personal and cultural biases. In addition, this individual interpretation is not completely independent, since readers are influenced by the prevailing framework, which they acquire culturally, and also through participation in cultural subgroups, such as a particular sect and even local congregation. In this sense, it could even be said that no one reads the same gospels even though they may read the same texts.

There are also the issues of text, translation, authorship and dating. There is no original text of the New Testament extant today; copies that survive are from later times, often much later. Moreover, there are literally thousands of variations in the earliest texts, due largely to scribal errors and alterations. Reconstructing a text that approximates the original involves a certain degree of interpretation by the scholars involved. Thus, when naïve Fundamentalists claim that the Bible is the inerrant

¹ Bart D. Ehrman explores these alterations and the circumstances surrounding them in *Misquoting Jesus*.

word of God, faithfully recorded by the evangelists to whom they are attributed, the obvious question is, “Which bible might you be talking about?”

Secondly, Jesus and his followers spoke Aramaic. The original texts of the New Testament were apparently written in Greek. There is no record of an original Aramaic version extant today. The Aramaic New Testament or Peshitta is apparently a translation from the Greek.¹ Jerome subsequently translated the Greek New Testament into Latin, called the Vulgate. He used texts selectively also. Even later the Greek and Latin texts were used selectively in translating the scriptures into other languages of the day such as English. The most influential English translation, even today, is the King James Version. It was based on texts known now to be faulty.

Moreover, every translation is an approximation that involves interpretation. For example, knowing this Islam does not permit the use of the Qur'an as scripture other than in the original Arabic. Translations into other languages are regarded as renderings rather than literal translations on the grounds that a perfectly literal translation is impossible.

Obviously, the problem of translation is compounded in Christianity because the original words of Jesus were never recorded in Aramaic, as far as scholars have been able to determine. Aramaic is a Semitic language, which is very different in meaning and construction from Indo-European languages such as Greek, Latin and

¹ This is disputed by the Eastern Christians who use the Peshitta text: "With reference to... the originality of the Peshitta text, as the Patriarch and Head of the Holy Apostolic and Catholic Church of the East, we wish to state, that the Church of the East received the scriptures from the hands of the blessed Apostles themselves in the Aramaic original, the language spoken by our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and that the Peshitta is the text of the Church of the East which has come down from the Biblical times without any change or revision." This appears over the name of Mar Eshai Shimun by Grace, Catholicos Patriarch of the East, dated April 5, 1957. URL=<<http://www.peshitta.org/initial/peshitta.html>>.

While some Eastern Churches claim that the Syriac New Testament, or Peshitta, that they have used traditionally is primary instead of the Greek New Testament, Western scholars have not been convinced by their evidence or arguments. This is beyond the scope of my expertise to comment on this controversy, and I rely on the scholars here instead of apparently questionable tradition. The difficulty seems to be that the Eastern argument is not based on historical evidence as much as logical reasoning without its premises being grounded in documentary evidence. Nor does it have linguistic support. The oldest extant Peshitta New Testament, the Mt. Sinai Palimpsest, dates only from the middle of the fifth century C.E. and is not in the dialect of Aramaic that Jesus and his followers would presumably have spoken, but in a later form of Syriac. Western scholars in general still remain convinced of Greek primacy. For an overview, see “Aramaic Primacy” online in Wikipedia. UFL=<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aramaic_primacy>.

the European vulgar tongues. Just what has survived of Jesus sayings after translation is questionable, let alone the issue of their historical authenticity as speech that Jesus actually uttered.

Clearly, scriptural interpretation is a “hot potato” on many counts that are not easily resolvable. Moreover, the issues are too nuanced for most people to grasp. Even few of those able to understand these issues bother to study them in any depth. As a result, a rather superficial approach to the scriptures predominates in conventional circles. Conventional notions of Christianity are not only normative but also naïve.

From the outset, there were very diverse viewpoints regarding Jesus’ life and teaching and how it was to be understood spiritually, for personal use on the spiritual quest, and religiously, for community practice and observance. What was taken as “gospel truth” by one person might be regarded as erroneous heresy by another.

The problem of interpretation besets all religions, especially those with putatively “revealed” scripture. Christianity in particular had difficulty in this regard almost from the outset. Not only was it a contemporary construct rather than an ancient religion with millennia of tradition extending into prehistory, like the Hebrew and Vedic traditions, but also, it cut itself off from the Judaic tradition from which it had sprung, declaring itself to be a new dispensation that replaced the former covenant. Some early Christians, Marcion in particular, took Paul’s teaching to the extreme and held that Christians even worshipped a different deity than the Hebrews had. There was no doubt in many people’s mind at the time that this was an entirely fresh teaching. Today, very few people see Jesus as a reformer of Judaism. He is perceived rather as the founder of an entirely new religion that supersedes and replaces the previous one.

Almost from the beginning, then, competing interpretations came into conflict since there was not established tradition on which to fall back. Generally speaking, the pious of all revealed religions hold that revelation is absolute truth, since it is from on high. In the case of normative Christianity, scripture is regarded as the word of God either spoken directly, e.g., the words of Jesus or the words God spoke to Abraham and Moses, or else words inspired by the Holy Spirit, as in the case of the gospel narratives.

Quite naturally, each faction considers that its interpretation is true. As a result, there is competition to determine who is correct. Since there are no absolute criteria available in the field of religion that are publicly available, norms are constructed as postulates and justified on the basis of some rationale like inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This conflict of interpretations is the reason the norms of “orthodoxy” were established in the early days of Christianity, and this system was overthrown in the Protestant Reformation because of its perceived excesses. In the end, it is the victor

that gets to write history. The justification is, of course, that it was God's will that this party prevailed.

Over time, the story is redacted. Many if not most Christians today presume that there is an original apostolic teaching stemming from Jesus and that it was uniform. Heresies were odd phenomena that were summarily put down by those on the side of the Holy Spirit. However, historical investigation reveals another picture altogether. The early differences were legion and the process of imposing uniformity was messy. Indeed, it involved persecutions that rivaled and exceeded the persecutions of the early Christians by the Roman Empire.

TIMELESS TRUTH

There is another view of truth, however, that is based on perennial wisdom. Perennial wisdom holds that Truth is One, ultimate truth being the identity of absolute being and absolute knowledge. Absolute knowledge is infinite, hence, all-inclusive. Therefore, in infinite knowledge there are many truths and many levels of truth that comprise this totality. Knowledge is grounded in consciousness, and the type and content of knowledge is different in different states of consciousness. There are differences among levels of consciousness, so different aspects of truth manifest at different levels of knowing. Ants, animals and humans inhabit the same world existentially, but they experience it differently, in accordance with their capacity. Similarly, different humans inhabit the same world and undergo the same events, but they experience, understand and appreciate them differently, on the basis of their individual awareness. Creatures know only relatively, in accordance with their mode of knowing. Truth is unitary and absolute only for God (the Absolute) and the God-realized (those who have realized the Absolute).

If God is infinite, then all types of experience are not only possible but also made manifest. If God is Infinite Consciousness, then this infinity of experience also manifests numberless interpretations at various levels of consciousness by innumerable individuals. Every point of view, no matter how limited or partial is an aspect of the infinite knowledge of God as absolute being and infinite consciousness. Absolute knowledge is infinite consciousness of absolute being. Since infinite knowledge includes everything, all possible experiences and understandings are necessary in the manifestation of totality. It could be said symbolically that all experiences are the "thoughts" of the One Mind. This is to picture the matter anthropologically, since by definition the Absolute is beyond space, time, form and change; hence, all real distinction. Difference "appears" only in finite minds, which are bubbles, as it were, in the ocean of universal mind.

In this view, the life of every conscious individual is the expression of a different aspect of divine knowledge. But only God (including those who are God-realized) know the totality from the vantage of eternity, which is Truth. For the rest, truth is

partial, obscured by limited mind and self-delusion owing to egoism, as well as being misled by errors in judgment.

The spiritual journey is the path from ignorance to knowledge, where “sin” is taken to mean that which separates one from God, i.e., selfishness, and salvation is understood as liberation from the illusion of limited selfhood. The spiritual quest is the journey of self-realization that leads through the finite, through states of awareness characterized by separation, to the infinite, where unity is discovered to underlie all apparent differences and distinctions.

The separate states might be thought of as the mind identifying with its various thoughts, unmindful of its underlying unity. Awakening to the state of unity might be compared to the mind’s realizing that it is not its thoughts, nor even its stream of thoughts, but the screen on which they are projected as fleeting images, as well as the projector and the film, too. On this journey truth appears in many garbs, partially, until the totality is realized as wholeness.

Given the variety of possible interpretations, it is no wonder that different sects and schools of thought arise in a single religion. Each group represents a caravan on the path, some just starting out and some close to the destination. Those who are most rigid are the least natural. Those who are the most natural are the closest to the goal. Thus, in early Christianity even the same texts came to be interpreted differently by different individuals and communities. Presently, there are literally thousands of different sects that call themselves Christian, and they are distinguished in part by differences in interpretation of the New Testament. Even at the periphery of institutional organizations imposing strict hierarchical authority with regard to the norms of doctrine, there are divergent views that are tolerated as long as their adherents are not so outspoken as to create waves.

When the apocryphal gospels are taken into consideration as genuinely representative of early Christianity, the situation becomes much more complex than the normative position makes out. Among these possible interpretations of Jesus’ life and teaching, some accord more closely than others with the teachings of saints, sages, seers, prophets, mystics and masters across time in all parts of the world. For example, we will attempt to show that *The Gospel of Thomas* can be read as being consistent not only with the perennial wisdom found in other traditions but also with an interpretation of canonical texts read from the viewpoint of the Way of Jesus.

The point of religion as “the way home” is that individual transformation is possible and personal revelation is realizable. Transformation and revelation are attested to not only by many Christian mystics but also saints, sages, seers, prophets, mystics and masters the world over. They invite us to join them.

We would argue that this invitation to experience “the kingdom” in this life can be seen as the thrust of Jesus’ teaching rather than belief in correct doctrine or

leading a “pious” life so as to gain salvation hereafter, as represented by normative Christianity. This is the interpretation of many early Christians, among whom many were marginalized or excluded. The community that produced and used *The Gospel of Thomas* was likely such a community and their gospel is such an invitation to experience.

As a result, we would also claim that those who read Jesus’ life and teaching in this way are following a legitimate interpretation of Jesus’ mission and message, which seems to be entirely consistent with the way many early followers of Jesus understood and practiced it — even though they might not qualify as “Christians” today in light of the conventional norms constructed after the fact.

Many of these would not want to be called “Christians” anyway, in view of what has happened historically. While no name has been given them, perhaps something like “followers of the way of the Way of Jesus” might suffice. Many probably would not even wish to go this far, preferring instead to view themselves as “aspirants” to the Way of Jesus. For they recognize that one can only become a true follower through grace.

CRITERIA

A principal assumption of this work is that there is a perennial wisdom in the sense that genuine mystics and masters have access to privileged knowledge grounded in levels of consciousness and degrees of awareness transcending ordinary cognitive and affective states. There is really no way to justify this fundamental assumption. It seems self-evident to some, gratuitous to others who do not feel this, and credulous to yet others who regard it as irrational and primitive.

Would it not be more reasonable to presume that such interpretations are at least as likely as conventional notions of Christianity, if not even more reasonable than normative ones that conflict with perennial wisdom? It would seem so, especially when an interpretation (1) accounts for more of the data, such as the so-called “hard sayings of Jesus,” (2) requires less curve-fitting, like harmonizing obvious contradictions in the texts in order to induce the semblance of uniformity, and (3) does not need to appeal for its justification to a *deus ex machina*, such as the inspiration of the Holy Spirit or the infallibility of a hierarchical authority?

Those who experience mystical spirituality hold that their claims can be “tested” in the laboratory of experience. Mystical interpretations of texts like the Hebrew scriptures by Qabalists, the Qur’an by Sufis, the Vedas understood from the viewpoint of inner wisdom called *jñāna kanda* in Sanskrit, and the like, are therefore invitations to experience by adopting a spiritual point of view and way of life. Those who follow mystical spiritualities arising from Jesus, which we are calling “the Way of Jesus” for convenience, read the scriptures from a mystical standpoint and follow the teachings as they interpret them from an internal

perspective based on spiritual experience rather than on the basis of externally established norms.

Even if this assumption about there being a perennial wisdom is granted, it must be admitted that not all who claim to possess such knowledge actually do. There may be both bogus and mistaken “mystics.” There are also different degrees of knowledge, and one may be mistaken in the interpretation of one’s experience. Therefore, it is not always the case that what looks like wisdom indeed is. Nor is it necessarily original. There are seers and there are also editors. Hence, it is necessary to be selective.

Two principal criteria for selection are employed herein. The first is the verdict of history. Those who have withstood the test of time, many in the face of opposition, reproach and contempt, are deemed to possess genuine knowledge. Moreover, history assigns a particular stature also. While the judgments of history cannot be followed blindly, they do provide important data and criteria that must be taken into account.

The second is personal conviction. On the basis of this inner conviction, I have views of various mystics, teachers and teachings that go beyond the conceptual and emotional. I do not claim this conviction is infallible and do not expect others to share it. However, this conviction has been an important influence shaping this work, and it would be disingenuous not to acknowledge this openly.

Those mystics and masters meeting these criteria then become criteria themselves. Testimony and teachings accepted as genuine become eligible for inclusion, and conversely, those rejected are passed over. Similarly, teachings of mystics regarded as genuine become privileged and also become criteria against which to measure other mystics and teachings.

The strongest evidence is specific mention in a teaching instead of extrapolating from it or mining it for ideas. Extrapolations and mining that make judgments or draw conclusions on the basis of circumstantial evidence rather than on the basis of direct observation are error-prone, hence, less weighty and more suspect. Nevertheless, accord with the tenor of a teaching regarded as genuine is taken to be a positive factor.

The problem is that it is often difficult to tell when gratuitous extrapolation or mining is taking place or erroneous assumptions being injected. Sometimes what may seem to be quite logical is just wrong. Even direct quotations are also easily subject to misinterpretation when they are taken out of context.

SELECTIVITY

Additionally, when writing on a broad subject such as perennial wisdom, a further need for being selective is imposed by the scope of the undertaking. I have

preferred some mystics, masters and teachings over others, and some are not included that might have been otherwise. Such selectivity is necessary given the limitations of this undertaking. This choice does not necessarily imply that those who are not included are less important or less worthy.

This choice among many worthy options is often personal. Some mystics and masters speak to a particular person more than others do. For example, I profess an indubitable conviction in Meher Baba's claim to be the Avatar of the Age. As a consequence, I use his account of perennial wisdom as a standard. Moreover, I rely heavily on his teachings and quote him frequently to establish points or clarify issues.

While I do not expect others to agree with his claim, Meher Baba's teaching accords with perennial wisdom. Indeed, he relates it specifically to Vedanta, Sufism, Zoroastrianism and Christianity, and cites many previous masters.

Moreover, I have found his explanations of key fundamentals to be some of the clearest available. Consequently, I use them to illustrate many points. Not only are these explanations clear, incisive and comprehensive, but also they are composed in the current idiom and reflect contemporary context. A great disadvantage affecting previous teachings is that they must be approached through translations. Moreover, the context in which these teachings were given, shaping the meaning of key terms, is no longer extant. Therefore, confusion often abounds and misinterpretations arise. This is not the case with Meher Baba's words.

For example, one of the principal issues on which I have chosen to follow Meher Baba's account is that of the nature of the soul in relation to God. According to some teachings, mostly Eastern, the soul and God are of the same nature, so that in realizing one's own nature one realizes God. This has led some to conclude that there is no barrier to full Self-knowledge. Conversely, the normative teaching of Judaism, Christianity and Islam is that the soul is not of the same nature as God; hence, to know God, God must infuse the soul with grace, raising it above its own nature. Many Christian mystics adopt this view. According to Meher Baba and many other masters, the soul and God are one; yet, grace is necessary in order to remove the final obstacles in the way of realizing this.

While it is important to recognize there are nuances in an investigation like this, such fine points regarding advanced states of consciousness and the like are not worth arguing about. In fact, doing so is a distraction from the work at hand. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi once said about such questions, that one should first get to the level of real knowledge about the matter oneself, and then one can enter the debate with the sages about how best to express in words that which is essentially ineffable.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Everyone brings their own experience to the table and sees through this context. The theses addressed herein owe a great deal to my own personal experience. Therefore, it would be somewhat disingenuous not to share my experiential background in this regard. For it underlies the vantage from which this endeavor is launched, combining scholarly research with internal exploration.

The interpretation proffered herein is not based solely on a scholar's attempt to approach the texts objectively, independently of any subjective influence. Rather, this investigation is a combination of scholarly procedure and personal exploration of the subject matter through spiritual introspection. Hence, my own experience in the matter was crucial in the development of the argument being advanced. Although this internal quest guided me in formulating the argument and interpreting many of the texts, I do not offer it in justification of the argument in any way. The argument, I believe, must stand on its own legs.

On the other hand, some may see this approach as vitiating the entire undertaking by conflating the subjective and objective. Allowing the subjective to influence the objective is often considered to be the antithesis of both scientific and scholarly research. However, it can be argued that combining the subjective and objective approaches often has its merits and in some cases may be recommended or required. For example, it may be required for a comprehensive investigation, especially when it is precisely the subjective that is at issue or in question.

This is indeed the case with mysticism and spirituality. Insofar as they involve consciousness and its modifications, it would seem that someone familiar with these states through personal experience is in a better position to understand them than someone lacking such experience. Placing them out of bounds would unduly limit the inquiry.

Nevertheless, we must be circumspect about this. Even though human consciousness in its essence may be the same for all, there are broad differences in the manifestation of intelligence and aptitude. Moreover, everyone is influenced by culture, social status, education, and upbringing. Hence, all approach a subject matter from a particular angle or a point of view. Some of these influences may be visible, but many are not. Scientific and scholarly methodologies have been developed in order to reduce this bias of personal and cultural point of view. This is admitted and should be incorporated as far as possible. However, even these methodologies cannot completely eliminate subjectivity, as is sometimes supposed.

Every individual inevitably sees through the lens of a personal viewpoint and every group exhibits a collective consciousness with its shared point of view. Moreover, hidden assumptions and biases are virtually impossible to detect. However, to rule out key areas germane to an investigation on methodological

grounds may bias the investigation and skew its outcome. For example, scholars working in peripheral fields of study and experience often inspire controversial views and are marginalized in the prevailing universe of discourse.

In the middle of the last century behaviorism dominated the field of psychology, and anything smacking of a non-empirical consideration of internal events was excluded. Reductionists held that consciousness and its contents are nothing but an “epiphenomenon of matter.” Thus, the use of so-called philosophical terms such as “self,” “consciousness,” and “mind” were excluded from the purview of scientific psychology in favor of empirical methods alone. This bias is a philosophical presupposition itself, lacking scientific justification as a principle. It is simply one heuristic option. Reductionism is still widespread, although its materialistic bias is now increasingly being questioned or opposed.

Trends change. In the third quarter of the last century humanistic psychology challenged the “nothing but” assumptions of reductionism and ushered in the human potential movement. This was largely inspired by the pioneering efforts of Abraham Maslow.¹ Opposing the overly strict Behaviorists, Maslow took up the study of psychology where William James had left off, renewing an examination begun, for example, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.²

Subsequently, interest in Eastern spirituality and alternate states of consciousness spawned transpersonal psychology. Then, the study of mystical experience became fashionable even in academia.³ This has created a more auspicious environment for investigating mysticism than previously existed. Mainstream scientists are now seriously studying consciousness, including non-ordinary states such as are reported by mystics. *The Journal for Transpersonal Psychology* and *The Journal for Consciousness Studies* are bringing together premier contributors to a multi-disciplinary approach in developing a rigorous science of consciousness.

A similar situation arose in the field of religion. Until the countercultural revolution of the Sixties, religion was principally normative, and mystical pursuits were largely considered to be either a form of occultism or the province of that specially privileged class of individuals called saints. In short, mysticism was in the closet for the most part, ruled out or at least marginalized in normative Christianity.

¹ Abraham H. Maslow. *Farther Reaches of Human Nature*. (New York: Viking Press, 1971); *Religions, Values, and Peak-Experiences*. (Ohio State University Press, 1964); *Toward a Psychology of Being*. (Toronto: Van Nostrand, 1962).

² William James. *The Varieties of Religious Experience. A Study in Human Nature being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion Delivered at Edinburgh in 1901-1902*. (London, Longmans, Green, 1903).

³ Charles Tart (Editor). *Altered States Of Consciousness: A Book Of Readings*. (New York: Wiley, 1969).

While normative Christianity might admit that Paul had been swept up into “the third heaven” as he claimed, this clearly wasn’t for ordinary folks, outside of an overly emotional Pentecostalism that was looked down on by the rational mainstream.

Reformers inspired by inner illumination changed normative Christianity, or added significantly to it. Here Martin Luther, John Wesley, George Fox and Mary Baker Eddy come to mind. All had a significant impact on the interpretation and practice of Christianity. But by and large the institutions that grew up around their teaching were not successful in communicating the experience to others. Even Fathers of the Church like Augustine of Hippo are now remembered more for their theological contributions, which became enshrined in doctrine, than their rich inner life as holy people, inspiring future mystics.

Beginning with the countercultural “revolution” of the Sixties, interest in interior spirituality began to arise, often in opposition to the norms of doctrinal belief, ritual performance and traditional observances. Many people sought a more personal approach, and they used their feet to find it elsewhere than in the normative churches.

Losing adherents to Eastern teachers migrating to the West, Western normative religions were forced to reconsider their mystical roots in response. For example, some Trappist monks previously practicing “TM,” developed Centering Prayer as a Roman Catholic alternative to Maharishi Mahesh Yogi’s Transcendental Meditation ProgramTM.¹ A Catholic priest wrote a book on “Christian Yoga.”² A Jesuit in Japan became a recognized Zen *roshi*, taking a Japanese name and teaching traditional Zen in a universal context available to Christians.³

As a result, many people with a Christian background are now open to exploring the mystical side of spirituality themselves, either within a Christian setting or independently of it. The writings of Christian mystics are now popular. People are not only studying the theory but also adopting the practices recommended. Interest in *The Gospel of Thomas* is part of the expression of this realignment occurring in

¹ M. Basil Pennington. *Centering Prayer Renewing an Ancient Christian Prayer Form*. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980). Fathers Thomas Keating and Basil Pennington developed centering prayer in the late 1970’s, and they have written a number of books about it. Centering prayer has become the foundation for a lay contemplative movement.

² J.-M. Dechanet. *Christian Yoga*. Translated by Roland Hindmarsh (New York: Harper, 1960).

³ Hugo Enomiya-Lassalle. *Living in the New Consciousness*. (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1980). “Enomiya” is Fr. Lassalle’s Japanese Zen name. He has written a number of books on Zen meditation, linking it to perennial wisdom and also Christian teaching and practice.

Christianity in which the grass roots is usually leading the normative authorities resistant to change.

It is possible to study the phenomenon of mysticism “objectively,” without actually examining the mystical in the laboratory of one’s own consciousness. However, there is also justification for approaching this study through all available channels, including one’s own inner experience. This is no longer a method ruled out by so-called scientific objectivity. Moreover, there are now fewer and fewer who are interested enough in the phenomenon of mysticism to be willing to forego subjective investigation of it in the interest of so-called objectivity.

While my personal experience is not included in the argument specifically, it does however contribute to the point of view and interpretation. For example, scholars studying mysticism are in disagreement over whether there is a unifying experience underlying mysticism. My own experience of nonduality strongly suggests there is a common factor at least in this regard.

Clearly, there are different kinds of experience reported, visions involving form in contrast to experiences of “emptiness.” However, in almost every mystical tradition experience of a nondual state of “pure consciousness” or “consciousness without an object” is found. Therefore, there seem to be two distinct categories of mystical experience.

According to Christian mystical theology, there are two great mystical paths: 1) the *via positiva*, using symbols and analogies, and 2) the *via negativa*, emphasizing negation of difference, as well as the ineffability of such experience.¹

The *via positiva* is strongly influenced by the linguistic and cultural context, as well as religious teaching and practice. Mystics following the *via positiva* typically report mystical phenomena in relation to their own religious context, e.g., Christians typically report visions of Jesus rather than a figure from some other tradition. Apparently, the context has influenced the experience, judging by the way it is reported.

On the other hand, mystics who follow the *via negativa* typically report their experience in terms of nonduality. Being formless and unchanging, there is no differentiation of formal content in the state of nonduality. This unique mystical phenomenon cannot be distinguished with respect to personal traits, the influence of tradition, cultural context, or any other distinctions involving form.

¹ Matthew Fox also mentions the *via creativa* and the *via transformativa* in addition to the *via positiva* and the *via negativa*. However, the *via creativa* and *via transformativa* can be viewed as subsets of the *via positiva* in its traditional sense. Fox describes the ways somewhat differently than the traditional in elaborating his view of creation spirituality. Matthew Fox. *Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Spirituality*. (Santa Fe: Bear & Co., 1983).

Are these experiences of nonduality essentially the same? Based on personal experience, I am convinced that they are in essence, and I take the position herein that such transcendental experience is universal, a reflection of the essential structure of consciousness, not shaped by language, culture, type of practice, or teachings.

However, mystics may report nondual experience somewhat differently. Indeed, the same mystic may report a growth of the experience over time. An experience can be “smoky,” “hazy” or “crystal clear.” Moreover, a temporary state is different from a permanent state. Even a clear and continuous state has no form but it does have duration. The eternal state has neither form nor duration. According to the masters, once it is attained in its fullness, it becomes permanently established and is never lost. These are successive stages of spiritual growth, reflecting different grades or stages of nonduality.

Spiritual literature also reports that there are varying degrees of nondual experience, and so not all experiences of nonduality are identical. For example Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras* describes gradations of nonduality in different levels of transcendental consciousness, called *samadhi* in Sanskrit.¹ Failure to notice these gradations or assess them correctly can lead to misinterpretation and confusion, as one state is mistaken for another, or different states are conflated. It is even possible to mistake intellectual conviction for genuine mystical experience, which it is not, because it does not transcend ordinary modes of knowing.

POINT OF VIEW

A point of view is the angle of vision. This angle can be narrow or wide, superficial or deep, rational or emotional, and a host of other opposite qualities. Every point of view falls somewhere along the range of this matrix of possibilities.

The fable of the elephant in the dark, or a group of blind people describing an elephant, is found in Buddhist, Jain, Sufi and Hindu versions. Each person touches only a part. The one touching the tip of the tail says the elephant is a brush; another touching the middle of the tail says a rope. The person grabbing the leg says a pillar or a tree. The one feeling the elephant’s side says a wall. The one grasping the tusk says a pipe. The one feeling the tip of the tusk says a spear, and the one encountering the trunk says a snake. All are correct from their limited point of view, but they all miss the elephant.

The moral of the story is that humans are limited in their perception of reality. Those who are both biased and ignorant waste their lives arguing about who is

¹ Alistair Shearer. *Effortless Being: The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*. (London: UK Wildwood House Publishers, 1982).

right, when none of them are. For the truth is the whole, and every opinion is only partial. Rumi sagely observes:

The eye of the Sea is one thing and the foam another. Let the foam go,
and gaze with the eye of the Sea. Day and night foam-flecks are flung
from the sea: How amazing! You behold the foam but not the Sea. We
are like boats dashing together; our eyes are darkened, yet we are in clear
water.¹

The most expanded point of view is called “the bird’s eye view.” An eagle scans the horizon in every direction in search of its prey and can pick out the slightest movements of a tiny mouse from the sky. This is the perspective from which the whole can be seen as well as every point of it.

The “eye of God” sees all in every direction without limitation because God dwells in every point. This is the vantage of the perfect, as they themselves describe it.² This is the vantage from which Rumi calls and to which he beckons. Only those who can see from this exalted level can appreciate truly and comprehensively what the perfect ones are saying from their vantage. All other views, understanding, beliefs, and other logical constructs fall short.

Some are however more expansive and closer to the truth than others. For example, the commentaries of the illumined saints are much more insightful than those of ordinary scholars, and scholars often have a much more realistic view than a general audience, which is often taken in by convention. But no matter the nature and scope of the text, it is one’s level of awareness along with one’s individual group biases that determines what one makes of a text. Moreover, the general level of the collective consciousness of a particular audience determines how the audience as a whole interprets the text in question, for social conditioning is entraining and difficult for many to rise above, especially the uncritical. People often question or even deny their views when this view does not accord with the conventional view, leading to cognitive dissonance. Psychologists have discovered the strange phenomenon called *pluralistic ignorance* in which the majority of people in a group or society actually see things the same way unbeknownst to each other, but each suppresses this publicly in the erroneous belief that the prevailing view opposes it.³ This often happens when there is a vocal minority that is mistakenly presumed to be enunciating the majority viewpoint.

¹ A. J. Arberry. *Tales From the Masnavi*. (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1961). This is a quote from a translation of Rumi’s *Mathnawi* III:1259-1274.

² Meher Baba. *The Everything and the Nothing*, 33-36. (Beacon Hill, N.S.W., Australia: Meher House Publications), p. 38-40.

³ Wikipedia entry: Pluralistic Ignorance.
URL=< http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pluralistic_ignorance>.

In approaching any text, particularly in the case of spiritual literature, the point of view of the author of the text must be taken into account. This is especially true where an author who is a mystic either claims or implies not to be speaking or writing from an ordinary vantage. For example, some who approach spiritual literature may presume that mystics must be speaking from ordinary consciousness, hence, consider them to be merely poets using hyperbole, delusional, or even heretics or charlatans instead of advanced souls. Others accept mystical claims uncritically and fail to distinguish between those that are likely genuine and those that are more probably bogus.

Point of view also applies to the scholar who studies a text, and the reader of the commentary as well. Because there are many possible readings as there are points of view, many different interpretations of a text may be possible which combine the point of view of the text's author as seen from the point of view of the one studying the text, even if the person is an experienced scholar supposedly applying a rigorously objective methodology.

Hence, there is controversy not only about the point of view of the original author but also commentators, which in turn may give rise to yet different interpretations. Thus, controversy abounds, especially regarding the abstractions typical of theology and philosophy. Yet it is also true of obscure historical matters as well. Historians typically speculate on the basis of extremely fragmentary data and spin complex hypotheses from these murky sources. Often, somewhere along the line, the interpretation gets presumed as fact.

Moreover, the point of view of the one studying the text is also often obscured by that person's presuppositions and deep-seated biases. It is not coincidental that most Catholic scholars develop interpretations consistent with Catholic doctrine, Protestant with Protestant, and Orthodox with Orthodox, for example.

Those who don't are either marginalized or even excluded. For example, Matthew Fox was forced to leave the Roman Catholic Church because of the controversy swirling around his views. Normative authorities also silenced other Catholic theologians, even such respected scholars as Karl Rahner and Charles Curry, owing to the influence they were exerting.

Even nonaligned scholars often operate on the basis of hidden assumptions and biases, of which they are minimally aware. However, to the degree that one does hold a point of view consciously and intentionally as a methodological principle, both honesty and rigor demand that the person should make this as transparent as possible.

This endeavor is based on not only applying scholarly methodology but also replicating personally the way of the mystic through non-ordinary experience. The methodology of both is in fact quite rigorous, although in different ways. The former is dependent on the instrumentality of intellect and the ability to

communicate logically. The latter is based on what Christian and Sufi mystics have called “knowledge of the heart.”

Mystics claim that “the heart” has its own type of knowing. Knowledge of the heart is able to reach levels of feeling and cognition beyond the bounds of sensory perception, ordinary emotion, conceptual understanding, and intellectual reasoning. Spiritual literature draws a distinction between discriminating truth from falsity and discerning of spiritual things from others. Discrimination is an activity of the intellect as the faculty of judgment. Discernment is an activity of the heart as the faculty of deep insight, in which intuition and refined feeling are harmoniously combined.

Mystics hold that there is indeed a science of the soul, whose principles are precise and its methodology, rigorous. For example, *Patanjali's Yoga Sutras*, a primary text guiding my own training under an accomplished teacher, is such a spiritual science. Its laboratory is one's own consciousness.¹

The most salient matter regarding point of view is that to which Rumi calls attention in the quotation cited above: The objective is to expand one's vantage until one can see with “the eye of the Ocean.” This is the aim of perennial wisdom, the Way of Jesus and also *The Gospel of Thomas*.

There are essentially three points of view regarding God: 1) dualism, 2) qualified nondualism and 3) unqualified nondualism. They can be seen not as competitive positions, as they usually are, but as successive levels of awareness that develop as one matures spiritually and advances on the Way:

1. *Dualism* is the most common in normative religion. It holds that God is transcendent and that the creation is separate from God. This view is normally called *theism* in the West.
2. *Qualified nondualism* is the point of view of mystics who are aware of God's presence but who are not yet united with God. For them, God is both immanent and transcendent. The view that God is in everything and also beyond everything is *panentheism*. According to this view, God's being is indivisibly one, but God's experience is all-inclusive, comprehending finitude within infinitude. God experiences Himself as limited and separate through finite consciousness, which God must include as Infinite Consciousness. In finite awareness, God may seem present, but God cannot be completely present if consciousness remains finite. Since God is infinite, God can only be completely present when consciousness is

¹ Alistair Shearer. *Effortless Being: The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*. Sutras are like aphorisms strung together in logical progression. Interestingly, the sayings of *The Gospel of Thomas* are similarly aphoristic although not entirely in logical series.

infinite. Therefore, in finite consciousness, God may manifest (incompletely) within oneself as “presence,” while remaining beyond as infinite.

3. *Unqualified nondualism* is the third point of view. It is the comprehensive knowledge of those who have realized God and attest that only God exists. This sounds like pantheism, which states the all things are God and God is all things. However, it is not. According to the God-realized, God is indivisible unity and diversity is mere appearance “masquerading” as reality in finite minds, not reality itself as known in Infinite Consciousness. This view is known as *monism*. It is often confused with *pantheism*, the notion that God is the universe, which it is not. Because absolute reality lies beyond perception, conception, reasoning and imagination, it also lies beyond predication; it is said to be “ineffable,” although knowable in the nondual state of consciousness. For this reason, Buddha chose not to speak of it directly, but only to point toward it. Other traditions speak of it in terms of “mystery.”¹

God seems different at different levels of awareness. From the vantage of ordinary (gross) consciousness, experience is characterized by the dualism of subject and object, so the dualistic view of God predominates. Illumined saints see God and only God but have not yet realized God. Hence, they see God as the ground of being but do not yet experience themselves as that unity being. They speak, therefore, from the point of view of qualified nondualism.

The God-realized on the other hand, have realized God as the totality. While they know that only One really is as the formless, changeless unmanifest reality, they also know the manifest that appears to be relative in finite minds, and they know this with the universal mind as a totality of all finite minds. They speak paradoxically, since they can see from every point of view simultaneously, from the infinite to the most finite.

Therefore, a key point in approaching perennial wisdom is keeping in mind that knowledge is structured in consciousness, hence, different in different states of

¹ Normative religions often condemn those who speak of undifferentiated unity as “pantheists,” that is, those who assert that all is God. This is inaccurate, however. If the Absolute is indivisible unity, there is no question of “all,” which implies multiplicity. For nonqualified dualists such as Shankara and Ibn ‘Arabi, so-called multiplicity is only “illusion” or “imagination,” not reality. Diversity appears in a finite mind when the infinite takes itself to be finite. When the infinite realizes its true nature in God-realization, this “mistake” is overcome and simply disappears in the light of knowledge, as a dream disappears when one wakes up. Ordinary people can be compared with dreamers who take their dream for reality. Saints can be compared to being conscious in a dream, rather than being fully awake. The God-realized can be compared with the fully awake. The Sanskrit term *buddha* means “one who is awake” or “the awakened one.”

consciousness. Or, as Aquinas puts it, knowledge is in accordance with the mode of knowing of the knower. The corollary to this principle is that reality appears to be different in different states of consciousness.¹ Without keeping this in mind, it is easy to become confused when studying the various expressions of perennial wisdom.

¹ These are fundamental principles of the Science of Creative Intelligence, elaborated originally by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, who traces this teaching to the *Rig Veda*.

PERENNIAL WISDOM

Truth is one; the wise speak of it variously.¹

SPIRIT

Since spirit is unbounded and non-localized as pure consciousness, it is said to be absolute. The etymology of the term “absolute” is traceable to the Latin prefix *ab* meaning from and the infinitive *solvere* signifying to loosen. Spirit signifies that which is loosened or released from all limitations and distinctions. It is formless, immaterial, unlimited, and unchanging. The essence of spirit is to exist in itself as its own source, by itself as the sole reality, through itself as *sui generis*, and for itself as its own end. Realization of this as one’s true nature is called “release from bondage” or “spiritual liberation.”

Consciousness capable of knowing itself as subject is reflexive. That is to say, humans have the capacity for self-awareness, in that they are capable of referring back to themselves as knowing subjects. This direction of attention back on oneself as the knower rather than on objects as the known is called “self-referral,” or “epistemic reflexivity.”²

When epistemic reflexivity proceeds to the point of excluding all objects of knowledge so that the knowing subject alone remains as pure “knowingness,” unadulterated by any objective content, what remains is consciousness without an object, or pure subjectivity. This is the objective of the fundamental spiritual teaching is to look within. By looking within oneself, one can discover what one really is as pure consciousness, or pure subjectivity through self-referral. This pure subjectivity is formless and impersonal in the sense of being independent of individual personality. Therefore, it is sometimes called “knowingness” in order to distinguish it from ordinary knowledge.

In this state, pure subjectivity is realized as self-existent and self-conscious. In philosophical terminology, what is self-existent is said to be *in itself*, *by itself* and *through itself* alone, and what is self-conscious is said to be *for itself*.

¹ *Rig Veda*, 1.164.46. The Sanskrit is *ekam sat*. *Eka* means one. *Sat* literally means existence but is often translated as truth.

² “Epistemic” is likely an unfamiliar word to most. It comes from the Greek *episteme* meaning knowledge. It means having to do with knowledge. *Epistemic* reflexivity is therefore different from *logical* reflexivity, the later having to do with the expression of thought.

This pure subjectivity, formless and impersonal, may be equated with “spirit.” Once it is realized, then it can also be realized that all the objects that were apparently separate from spirit are really objects *of* spirit as self-existence and *for* spirit as self-consciousness. This is the realization that spirit is both the transcendental source of its objects and also their immanent ground. Being *of* spirit and *for* spirit, all objects are *in* spirit, while spirit is not itself confined to any of its objects, but exists *in* itself, *by* itself, *through* itself, and *for* itself alone.

Those familiar with the history of philosophy will recognize these terms as Hegelian. I do not wish to suggest that what is being put forward here is Hegelian, however, but rather to show that this view has Western antecedents as well as Eastern, modern in addition to ancient, and philosophical as well as mystical. If this terminology is unfamiliar to you, do not struggle with it, since it is not essential to the development of the rationale being presented.

Spiritual truth is timeless because spirit is unchanging and eternal. Spirit is equated with truth because “spirit” denotes that which is consciously aware of its own unbounded nature in the realization of the nondual state. This is the realization of infinite consciousness. Infinite consciousness transcends form, limitation and distinction, existing through itself and by itself alone. Hence, it does not change, but remains what it is in itself as self-existence and for itself as self-knowledge.

“Perennial” signifies recurrent. Perennials are plants that bloom in the spring, lie dormant over winter, and bloom again the next spring. The same timeless truth of consciousness aware of its own unbounded nature recurs in the spiritual teaching of various sages, appearing at one time, here and at another time, there.

The term “wisdom” has many levels of meaning. Some equated it with exhibiting good judgment and having commonsense. It also is used in the expression “the conventional wisdom” to indicate the normative framework operative at the time. At the apex, wisdom signifies God-realization as full and permanent realization of the nondual state, which is different from preliminary “glimpses” that are not complete or do not persist.

Perennial wisdom is wisdom in the latter sense, which is called “perennial” to indicate that this wisdom is found universally in the testimony of mystics and the teaching of masters, manifesting around the globe in different places across the ages. Here, “universal” should not be taken to mean uniform. Although the matter of the universal teaching is essentially the same, the manner of its expression is diverse. The same truth appears quite differently in the garb of the different languages and cultural context of various time periods and geographical locations. Thousands of years ago, *Rig Veda* 1.164.46 acknowledged this unity in diversity: “Truth is one; the wise express it in many ways.”

GNOSIS

Perennial wisdom is about the spiritual quest. This wisdom teaches that the purpose of life is to realize ultimate truth. Perennial wisdom teaches how to realize the goal of life by treading the spiritual path and mounting “the ladder of ascent.” This pursuit manifests in different ways, for example, as the pursuit of ultimate truth in realization of identity through the path of knowledge, as union with the Beloved through the path of love, as being in the world but not of it through the path of internal renunciation, and as the way of self-sacrifice through the path of selfless action.

The different types of yoga are forms of discipline and practice present in most spiritual traditions, and they all are ways to move from one’s ego-self to one’s true and eternal nature, or God-Self.

In *karma yoga* one tries to lose one's "self" in selfless service for others; in *dnyan yoga* one tries to lose one's self in contemplation and meditation. In *raj yoga* one tries to lose one's identity with the individual self and establish identity with the Universal Self by aiming, through constant mental poise and non-attachment, to be in the world and yet not of it. In *bhakti yoga* one tries to lose one's self in devotion to God. Even in these *yogas*, only when the zenith is reached can the individuality of the lower self be lost, yet consciousness remain.

But the easiest and safest way to lose one's self is by completely surrendering to the Perfect Master. Then the past, present and future of the one who has surrendered are drowned in the Master, and he is no longer either bound by or responsible for any of his actions whether good or bad, expressed during his implicit obedience to the Master. Thus, complete surrenderance to the Perfect Master is, in itself, freedom.¹

Perennial wisdom sets forth the means for traveling the spiritual path through the inner planes and higher worlds, culminating in the realization of ultimate truth as the goal of life. This realization is called “gnosis,” a technical term imported into English from the Greek, which is derived from Sanskrit *jnana*.²

The Greek term *gnosis* simply means knowledge, but like the Sanskrit term *jnana* it has the technical meaning of the highest wisdom or spiritual wisdom. The term “gnosis” has been imported into English to signify spiritual wisdom grounded in mystical experience. Like *jnana*, the Sanskrit root from which it is derived,

¹ Meher Baba, in Bhau Kalchuri. *Lord Meher*. Vol. 12, p. 4303.

² Since English does not have the precise sound corresponding to the first syllable in Devanagari script, the Sanskrit term is transliterated variously as *jnana*, *gyana*, and *dnyana*. Colloquial Indian languages based on Sanskrit, such as Hindi, often drop the final “a,” so that Sanskrit (formal) *gyana* becomes Prakrit (colloquial) *gyan*.

gnosis signifies wisdom as supreme knowledge or ultimate truth. One who has realized ultimate truth is a “gnostic,” a knower of reality in contrast being under the spell of mere appearance. Or, as philosophers would say, one is acquainted with the noumenal ground of being underlying the ongoing stream of phenomena that appear and disappear as thoughts, feelings, and percepts.

Those who have not yet realized this wisdom and become gnostics are “agnostics,” literally “those who do not know.” Being ignorant of their own nature, such people — the vast majority — do not know who they really are. Since that includes just about everyone, the spiritual path leading to this realization becomes a principal concern for humanity. Perennial wisdom lays out the map, sets forth the means, provides the vehicles and furnishes the guides for the many caravans of pilgrims on the way of life.

There is a difference however, between those who do not know but do not realize this, and those who do not know and also realize their predicament. Realizing one’s ignorance is generally prerequisite to undertaking a serious quest for spiritual knowledge. It separates the seekers from the vast majority of humanity who do not know and do not realize it. With respect to religions, this is the division between those following a normative tradition blindly, as it were, and those who are consciously on the Way or seeking to enter it.

There is a difference moreover between spiritual wisdom and spiritual understanding. *Spiritual wisdom*, or gnosis, is gained by realizing ultimate truth. *Spiritual understanding* is the deepening insight and discernment that develop on the spiritual quest. This type of understanding becomes sufficiently compelling to be acted upon as knowledge of the heart begins to unfold through intuition and refined feeling. As such, spiritual understanding is the basis of spiritual living, and it is spiritual living that leads one toward the goal of life, realization of spiritual wisdom as the Beatific Vision in which one sees “face to face.” In this regard, spiritual wisdom and spiritual understanding are very different from information about spirituality that is merely intellectual, gained from reading or listening to discourses, for example, or theorizing.

According to perennial wisdom, only One is. Gnosis is the realization of this One. It is also called “unification,” “divine union,” and “enlightenment,” among other things. There are two stages of this that are often confused and conflated. Genuine saints see God as the only reality but are not yet identified with “God.” Perfect ones are those who have realized identity with “God.” “God” is placed in quotation marks here to indicate that what this term means at these levels cannot be conceived or imagined by those in ordinary consciousness. For in the realization of identity, neither soul nor God, neither lover nor Beloved, nor any other relation, exists. Such relative terms simply point to what remains a mystery for those who are not yet realized.

Hence, placing the term “God” in quotation marks is a warning not to confuse these mystical states with normative conceptions of God. As Nietzsche declared, the normative conception of “God” is dead, i.e., the concept of God is lifeless and unreal, existing merely as a figment of the limited mind. In contrast, the mystics speak of “That” to which they are pointing as “the Living One.” Here, initial capitals signify that the terms are being used in a sense that transcends ordinary usage.

Realization of ultimate reality is often confused or conflated with intermediary states and stages, and the application of these terms is not consistent across spiritual literature. In this investigation, we will carefully differentiate the different states and stages. Herein, “gnosis,” “Truth,” “realization,” and “perfection” designate mystical experience of identity with ultimate reality, unless otherwise qualified.

Philosophers call this “the One,” “the Absolute,” or “Absolute Reality,” which is unlimited, formless, and unchanging, and some religions do also. For example, in the Vedic tradition, Brahman and Parabrahman mean the Absolute or Absolute Reality.

Religions also hold that God is personal. For example, in the Vedic tradition God is also called the “Supreme Self” (Sanskrit: *paramatma*) and “Supreme Person” (*purushottama*).

One way of seeing divinity is formless and impersonal, and another is personal. In addition, the personal God may be viewed as formless, as in the case of the Jewish YHVH, Christian God the Father, and Muslim Allah, and also as having form, e.g., the Hindu pantheon. God with form can also be viewed as embodied in human form, e.g., Jesus Christ, Rama, and Krishna.

On the other hand, other traditions emphasize that ultimate reality is ineffable, being beyond ordinary human perception, conception, understanding, reasoning, and imagination. They therefore designate ultimate reality by negating all limitation and relation. Thus, the One is sometimes called “nonduality,” e.g., by Vedanta, or is simply pointed toward as “that” (Sanskrit: *tat*).¹

Traditions that employ primarily negative attributions, for example, Buddhism, also use such terms as “void,” and “beyond.” Even traditions that primarily worship the personal God admit that God’s essence can only be expressed negatively, using such terms as “not,” (Hebrew: *ayin* and *lo* and Arabic: *la*), “Great Mystery” (Native American: *wakan tanka*), “original source or mystery” (Chinese Taoism: *hsuan yuan*), and Meister Eckhart’s “Godhead” (German: *Gottheit*).

¹ David Loy. *Nonduality: A Study in Comparative Philosophy*. (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1988).

It is important to note here that the term “negative” here means “negation” as the antonym of “affirmation.” There is no pejorative connotation associated with it. Rather, it simply conveys the notion of “no-thing,” or “without form.”

Ordinary awareness is *dualistic*. In dualistic awareness, the knower is the subjective pole of knowledge, and the known is the objective pole, for example, “I” in contrast to “the world,” taken as separate. Gnosis is the *nondual* state, in which conscious knows itself directly, without an object. In this unified state of consciousness, the subjective and objective poles are identical.¹ This, it is claimed, is knowledge of the One, or in terms of negative attribution, not dual.

The nondual state is realized in mystical experience by unifying the subjective and objective poles of awareness. While this nondual experience may be clear for mystics, problems arise when they attempt to communicate it to those not familiar with this experience. Mystics must use language familiar to their audience, framed in terms of dualistic awareness.

The trick lies in accounting for nonduality while “saving the appearances,” i.e., preserving the apparent diversity of creation without conflicting with the absolute nature of God. This is very “tricky” indeed, given the limits of language. Let us see how this might be accomplished, keeping in mind that the problem is not with reality but arises from a limited mode of knowing and the attendant limitations on expression.

The ultimate state of mystical experience is said to be “unitary,” or “nondual.” Conversely, ordinary “gross” awareness is dualistic, since it is a relationship between subjective and objective in which the knower (“I”) and known (“world”) are taken to be separate and distinct, each seeming discrete as an entity (“self”) or collection of related entities (“world”).

These two different frames of reference, —monistic and dualistic — are fundamentally at odds over the way of picturing self, world and God. Those viewing things through a dualistic frame have great difficulty understanding things presented in terms of a nondualistic frame. If they do grasp what is being said, they cannot accept them, in that they seem counter-intuitive. It is not possible to speak coherently in terms of a dualistic frame about the One in relation to the many,

¹ “Consciousness without an object” is Franklin Merrell-Wolff’s term for the nondual state. Merrell-Wolff was a mystic who explored the nondual state he characterized as “consciousness without an object” in his writings, which are noteworthy since he was also a trained philosopher who knew the issues and how to express them precisely. Franklin Merrell-Wolff. *The Philosophy of Consciousness Without an Object: Reflections on the Nature of Transcendental Consciousness*. Ron Leonard. *The Transcendental Philosophy of Franklin Merrell-Wolff*. (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999).

whether the One is conceived as God, the Absolute, or anything else. As a consequence, such concepts as God are held to be mysteries.

Monism seems counterintuitive and logically contradictory from the vantage of dualism, because those in dualistic awareness perceive themselves and things as both separate and real. As long as one remains in the grip of dualism, concepts involving unity are empty of the content of experience, and imagination cannot fill in the gaps either. When examined by reason, they appear to be contradictory. Several solutions to these difficulties in conception and expression have been proposed.

One answer is that the nondual state is ineffable and so it cannot be spoken of meaningfully, nor can any metaphysical implications be drawn from it, e.g., that "reality is one." This has typically been the answer of Buddhism, which has often been misunderstood as denying the existence of God, even by Buddhists. Buddha simply remained silent about such issues, admonishing that one should not waste one's time trying to understand what cannot be understood by the mind. One should occupy oneself by arguing about such things even less. Rather one should busy oneself with realizing the ultimate state for oneself by emptying the mind of that which obscures this state.¹

Suppose, Malunkyaputta, a man were wounded by an arrow thickly smeared with poison, and his friends and companions brought a surgeon to treat him. The man would say, 'I will not let the surgeon pull out the arrow until I know the name and clan of the man who wounded me; whether the bow that wounded me was a long bow or a cross bow; whether the arrow that wounded me was hoof-tipped or curved or barbed.' All this would still not be known to that man, and meanwhile he would die. So too, Malunkyaputta, if anyone should say, 'I will not lead the noble life under the Buddha until the Buddha declares to me whether the world is eternal or not eternal; finite or infinite; whether the soul is the same as or different from the body; whether or not an awakened one

¹ Attributed to Gautama Buddha. Thich Nhat Hanh. *Old Path White Clouds: Walking in the Footsteps of the Buddha*. (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1991), p. 299. Here is a condensed version of the one cited above: "But the man refuses to let the doctor do anything before certain questions can be answered. The wounded man demands to know who shot the arrow, what his caste and job is, and why he shot him. He wants to know what kind of bow the man used and how he acquired the ingredients used in preparing the poison. Malunkyaputta, such a man will die before getting the answers to his questions. It is no different for one who follows the Way. I teach only those things necessary to realize the Way. Things which are not helpful or necessary, I do not teach." Attributed to Gautama Buddha. Thich Nhat Hanh. *Old Path White Clouds: Walking in the Footsteps of the Buddha*. (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1991), p. 299.

continues or ceases to exist after death,' that would still remain undeclared by the Buddha, and meanwhile that person would die.¹

Others attempt to account for this state within the limitations of language. The naïve suppose that language, even with its limitations, can capture that which is without limits. This leads to the contradictions and confusion typical of unsophisticated approaches to religion, as well as anthropomorphism, i.e., picturing deity in human terms. In this state, opposing factions argue and even come to blows over terms and distinctions that are vacuous of experience and even logically contradictory, at least as they understand them from the level of dualistic awareness.

On the other hand, philosophers and theologians reflecting on the logical problems involved have developed strategies for accomplishing as much as possible within the limitations of language. On the one hand, this involves using the way of negation, by denying limitation and relationship to ultimate reality. For instance, “infinite” and eternal may seem to convey information with content, but “infinite” just means “not finite,” and “eternal,” “not temporal.” Such terms define by denying.

On the other, analogy is pressed into service to hint and point rather than capture completely. For example, the ultimate state is compared with “an ocean without shores,” or “a sky without horizons,” even though no claim is made that God is actually either water or air. But it must be kept in mind that all analogies break down when pushed too far, which many people are wont to do in forming their concept of God. Moreover, analogies only provide hints and do not capture the essence of what they point toward, as in the Zen adage not to confuse the finger that points with the moon to which it points. Therefore, many people construct a conception of God and endow it with reality and veracity. They should not be surprised, then, when such a conception breaks down under scrutiny.

This presents problems, since the theological notion of God’s being absolute seems counterintuitive in light of the commonsense view of the world. If God is absolute, then the world and the beings in it cannot be real in the same sense that God is called “real,” or God would be relative also. That is to say, if God created the world separate from Himself, then He thereby limited Himself and is not infinite. So either God is not infinite and absolute, or the creation is not separate from God, and God is relative to creation and limited by it.

¹ Buddha, as recorded in *Cula Malunkya Sutta*, the sixty-third discourse in the *Majjhima Nikaya* of the Pali canon. Cited by Stephen Batchelor in an edited version of a talk given at the symposium "American Buddhism Today" to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the Rochester Zen Center, Rochester, New York, June 22, 1996.
URL=< <http://www.westernchanfellowship.org/agnostic-buddhist.html> >.

TRANSCENDENCE AND IMMANENCE

Theologians have attempted to avoid these problems by drawing distinctions. One of the most important of these distinctions for this investigation is that between transcendence and immanence, where transcendence is connected with the unmanifest aspect of God and immanence with the God's manifest aspect.¹

"Transcendent" means "beyond." "Immanent means "within." While these terms can be applied in a variety of circumstances, they are generally used in theology to distinguish between God as beyond creation as its source and in creation as its ground. God as creator is beyond the creation, and God as preserver (Vedic) or indwelling spirit (Christian) underlies and supports creation as its ground of being. It is also used to distinguish God as Creator being beyond his creation and the "breath" of God as the "living spirit" in man. Moreover, the biblical creation account asserts that man is created in the "image and likeness of God."²

The creation story also pictures Adam and Eve in a "praeternatural," semi-divine state before the Fall. The Latin term *praeter* means "beyond," For example, the angels are said to have praeternatural knowledge and powers. According to normative Christian theology, relying especially on the teaching of Paul, Christ redeemed humanity from the fallen state, thereby making Adam's lost praeternatural state available again. Reports of "charisms" or "gifts of the Spirit" in early Christianity suggest the possibility of at least a vestige of "praeternatural" knowledge and powers emerging in the gifts of prophecy and healing, for instance. Here, humanity is pictured as potentially having a share in divine knowledge and power.

¹ The distinction between immanence and transcendence accounts for realization (gnosis) as knowledge of the One by making difference and distinction a matter of aspect rather than essence, and appearance instead of reality. That is to say, for God, who is one and indivisible, being and consciousness are one. God's unity is a matter of God's essence, while (apparent) differences *appear* in the different types of experience possible for God as Infinite Consciousness. The course of spiritual unfoldment is the progressive realization of this unity underlying apparent differences.

For if Infinite Consciousness is infinite in the sense not only of unlimited but also inclusive of all possibilities, it must include all possible finite experiences. Since God is the only reality, it is God as *immanent* who is really having these experiences, even though they appear to be occurring in finite minds seemingly independent of God as *transcendent*. So-called "creatures" mistaking the finite mind as separate from God is called "illusion" or "spiritual ignorance." Spiritual knowledge or gnosis is waking up to the unity underlying diversity, and realizing that immanent and transcendent are really One.

² Hebrew *adam* means man.

On the other hand, many normative theologians hold that “only One is,” is the province of Absolute Knowledge alone; hence, it is beyond the capacity of any creature to realize. The logical difficulties can be avoided but not solved by declaring such things “mysteries” to be accepted on faith as revelation. This is generally the normative position in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The mystics of Judaism, Christianity and Islam do not dispute this. Their teaching is that “praeternatural knowledge” is not divine knowledge, even though, like Adam and Eve, it is possible to see God. However, it is universally agreed that to know God as God, one must be united with God, such that limited individuality is extinguished in God.

The God-realized person is the embodiment of God appearing in human form, but the reality is that of God. Jesus, for example, asserted, “I and the Father are one.” In the words of Eckhart, “The man who is separate from all things enjoys divinity as God enjoys it.”¹ “Wouldst thou be very Christ and God? Put off, then, whatever the eternal Word did not put on.”² While those who use primarily negative attribution would not put it this way, e.g., Shankara and Buddha, it captures the essence of what they mean by realizing nonduality (*advaita*) or awakening to suchness (*tathata*).

Only in the state of absolute knowledge is it possible to know directly that God is one and indivisible. From the limited vantage of dualistic awareness, God must be conceived indirectly, through negation of limitation or by analogy. Theology uses various conceptual models.

One of these models is based on the distinction between conceiving God as immanent ground and as transcendent source. The existence of both ground and source is God’s being, hence, this existence is identical for both immanence and transcendence. However, from the human vantage, which is inherently dualistic, God’s unitary existence can only be considered dualistically, as transcendence (beyond) and immanence (within), even though they are not different in the reality of God’s unitary essence. The apparent difference arises through manifestation, which is based on the dualism of subject and object.

From the human vantage, God’s being is paradoxical, because we can only consider dualistically what is essentially nondual. The distinction between immanence and transcendence is an intellectual one, necessitated by the limitation of finite mind.

Thus, our asserting that ultimate reality is the immanent ground of the manifest as well as its transcendent source, in which source and ground are identical, is a

¹ Raymond Bernard Blakney. *Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation*. (New York: Harper Bros., 1941). Vol. 1, p. 128.

² Franz Pfeiffer. I, p. 275.

corollary of holding that only One is. An intellectual stratagem like this is necessitated by the human condition and the limitations of knowledge and expression that this entails. It's about as close as we can get, given our limitations. At the margins, the precision of language breaks down. The finite cannot capture the infinite.

Normative theologians and philosophers try to avoid the conclusion that God's being as immanent ground and transcendent source are identical, however, for then the creation and its creatures would be God, which the norms disallow: This runs counter to the interpretation of the biblical creation story, accepted by normative Judaism, Christianity and Islam. So another distinction is drawn. It is said that the being of creatures is "dependent" or "contingent," since creaturely being is "accidental" as opposed to essential, whereas God's is "independent" and "necessary," God's essence being to exist.

This account is supposed to paper over the discrepancy between God and creation, so that creation is not relative to God, which would limit Him. It is not a move that resolves the issue, but it has generally passed muster with normative authorities and has generally satisfied normative theologians, too, since any logical difficulties can be relegated to the category of mystery and dumped into the lap of faith.

On the other hand, those who hold to the absolute unity of God are required to account for how creation seems separate from God. Their answer is, "through ignorance." The creation only appears to exist. It has no real being separate and distinct from God. Separateness and division is the result of an "illusion" created by duality, or a chimera engendered by imagination.¹

Meher Baba's spiritual grandfather (the master of one's master) was Sai Baba of Shirdi (1856-1918). Shirdi Sai gives a clear description of the immanence of gnosis, *jnana* in Sanskrit, through removal of ignorance:

Ignorance conceals the pre-existent Knowledge just as the water plants cover the surface of a pond. Clear away the plants and you have the water. You don't have to create it; it is already there. Or take another example — a cataract grows on the eye and prevents a man from seeing: remove the cataract and he sees. Ignorance is the cataract.... *Jnana* (Knowledge) is not something to be attained. It is eternal and self-

¹ "Illusion" is a rendering of the action of *maya* in Shankara's Advaita Vedanta. "Imagination" is a rendering of ibn 'Arabi's answer to this problem in his Wujudiyyah Sufism. In both cases, the appearance of diversity and separation appears owing to "smoke and mirrors." Dualistic awareness, which is only a reflection of the infinite in the finite, is the mirror. The impressions, which the mind mistakes for real, are the smoke. Gaining knowledge of the One by realizing nonduality is like waking up from a dream and finding that what one took for real was just a hallucination of the mind.

existent. On the other hand, ignorance has a cause and an end. The root of it is the idea that the devotee is separate from God. Remove that and what remains is *Jnana*.¹

THE TWO WAYS

There are two principal ways that mystics follow to rise above duality and realize knowledge of the One. The first is the *via negativa*, or way of negation, and the second is the *via positiva*, or way of affirmation.

The *via negativa* lies through transcending all pairs of opposites, such as spiritual and material, subject and object, self and world in order to realize the nondual state of awareness as the transcendent source of all manifestation. The *via positiva* lies through integrating all opposites in order to realize the nondual whole, of which apparent opposites are the poles, two sides of the same coin. The *via positiva* focuses more on the immanent ground underlying all apparent difference, whereby God manifests His presence in the world. The *via negativa* focuses more on the transcendent source beyond all apparent difference, where God is eternally unmanifest.

For example, Pseudo-Dionysius used the way of affirmation in *Divine Names*, and the way of negation in *Mystical Theology*.² His works are seminal in the Jesus tradition, and his theology is central to normative Christianity, for it established the normative universe of theological discourse on the basis of this framework, where God is spoken of either negatively, by denying all attribution, and analogously, for example, through the use of superlative attribution.

The God-realized, which is in essence the Self-realized, report that reality is one and indivisible. Hence, the ways of transcendence and immanence are two avenues leading to the same destination. Moreover, they are complementary rather than mutually exclusive. For example, one may practice the *via negativa* in meditation, leaving limited self and world behind in communing with the infinite, while

¹ Arthur Osborne. *The Incredible Sai Baba*. (London: Rider 1958), p. 26-7.

² Pseudo-Dionysius. *The Complete Works*. Translated by Colm Luibheid. (New York: Paulist Press, 1987). Public Domain version online. Translated by Rev. John A. Parker, M.A. (London: James Parker and Co, 1897).
URL=< <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/dionysius/works.html> >.

The Zoroastrian *Khordeh Avesta* contains a list of a hundred and one names of God, while the list of God's names in Islam numbers ninety-nine, not including Allah, which is not descriptive like the others. "101 Names of Ahura Mazda."
URL=<<http://cobweb.ecn.purdue.edu/~bulsara/ZOROASTRIAN/101names.html>>.

Al-Ghazali. *The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God*. Translated by David Burrell and Nazih Daher. (Louisville KY: Fons Vitae/The Islamic Texts Society, 1995).

following the *via positiva* in daily life by viewing all as the manifestation of God and everything that happens as the will of God. In this way, the transcendent source and immanent ground come together in a growing awareness of the wholeness of life. Spiritually, this is called the integration of life.

The *via negativa* is a way that aims at realizing nonduality by *transcending* phenomenal difference and mental distinction. The *via positiva* aims at realizing nonduality by integrating all apparent opposition in terms of the all-inclusive, comprehensive wholeness of reality. The *via negativa* proceeds by entering “the cloud of unknowing,” to unite with the source of thoughts and things in pure consciousness or consciousness without an object. The *via positiva* proceeds by uniting apparent opposites — finite and infinite, self and other — by losing oneself in the union of lover and Beloved.

The *via negativa* emphasizes self-emptying. It is characterized by the mystical experience of emptiness, for example, in reports of no-self. The *via positiva* emphasizes mystical experience as fullness, for example, in reports of the union of the soul as lover with God as the Beloved,

The *via negativa* is a method that *extinguishes* opposites by transcending all distinction. The *via positiva* is a means that balances opposites, finding the material as the manifestation of the spiritual. While the *via negativa* seeks to leave behind both head and heart in total self-transcendence, the *via positiva* seeks to balance head and heart in spiritual living, by adhering to true values as intuited by the heart, corroborated through discernment, and applied in life through discrimination and discipline.

Those who follow the *via negativa* of self-effacement and self-emptying speak of spiritual advancement in terms of the realization of no-self, meaning by this no limited self or egoism. Those who follow the *via positiva* speak of spiritual advancement in terms of realization of Self or Universal Self, that is, personhood transcending limited individuality. Both are in agreement that in final realization limited individuality is extinguished. Some say that “no-self” remains, while others say that universal Self is awake to itself.

For example, Buddhists generally speak of no-self; Vedantins, of universal Self. Those who prefer to speak of no-self say that all talk of “self” results in confusion about the goal, in which selfhood is transcended. Those who prefer to speak in terms of universal Self counter that no-self is also confusing because it seems to imply a goal that is inert and hardly worth striving for. Yet others would say that both views are complementary and, indeed, necessary for a more complete picture of what is essentially beyond the ability of language to capture.

Mystics who are primarily devoted to the personal aspect of God often express their mystical testimony and teaching by way of affirmation. They speak in terms of transcendence and immanence, for example, God as “Father” and “Indwelling

Spirit,” where the Father is the transcendent source and the Indwelling Spirit the immanent ground. Mystics who are primarily focused on the impersonal aspect of God often express themselves in terms of the nondual state of awareness, described by way of negation as formless, empty of thought, unchanging, unbounded, and so forth. They often speak of the unmanifest and manifest aspects of Absolute Reality, which appear separate but are not really so.

Those who favor the way of affirmation use beliefs couched in analogy as ladders to be thrown away after they have been mounted to the top. Those who favor the way of negation jettison beliefs from the outset as misleading and focus instead on practices. They, too, emphasize that practices are only the boat that ferries one across the stream and is discarded when the other shore is reached. Thus, religions, along with their doctrine, ritual and observance, and wisdom traditions, with their teachings and practices, are seen as instruments rather than ends in themselves, to be discarded eventually and not worshipped in themselves, to become idols and therefore obstacles rather than vehicles.

The *via negativa* and the *via positiva* are essential in appreciating the Way of Jesus. We will revisit them in detail in a subsequent chapter.

PANENTHEISM

Theism views God as above and outside of creation, that is, as being wholly transcendent. Pantheism views God as all in all, that is, as being completely immanent.

There are various forms of the theism. Polytheism posits many gods. Henotheism makes one of many gods supreme. Monotheism holds that there is only one God, e.g., “the creator of heaven and earth.”

Panentheism combines theistic and pantheistic views. It is the view that God is in all things as immanent ground and also beyond all things as transcendent source. In this view all things are in God and God is in all things, but God is also beyond all things.

Panentheism is expressed in the view, for example, that God, or Absolute Reality, has two *aspects*, unmanifest and manifest, depending on whether the mode of knowing is finite or infinite. From the vantage of limited awareness, this indivisible One is said to be manifest as “appearance,” since it appears under the guise of the duality of subject and object, in which thoughts come and go in the mind and objects appear and disappear in experience. The relative, manifest “other” appears in finite minds as the apparent diversity of phenomena constituting the universe, and this appearance is mistaken for reality.

When the limitations of the mind are removed, then reality appears as it really is. As Blake wrote, “If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear

to man as it is, infinite.¹ For man has closed himself up till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern." On the other hand, reality is one and indivisible for the realized. From this vantage, the unmanifest is the ocean and the manifest, the waves.

The Absolute, or God, remains ever one and indivisible. The Absolute appears as both the self as knowing subject and the relative world as the objects of knowledge through its reflection in finite minds. That which is eternally unmanifest is the very being of the manifest, underlying the manifest as well as transcending it, just as the reflection of an object in a mirror has no intrinsic reality of its own. Its own nature is that of an image, or replica, while its existence is dependent on that of the object of which it is the image, as well as the mirror in which it is reflected. The mirror image is a likeness created through an optical illusion that mimics an object and goes proxy for it.

This likeness has no real existence separate from the object of which it is the reflection, just as a shadow has no real being of its own independent of the object whose projection it is. To take the image for the object or the shadow for the person would be to fall under the spell of an illusion. Similarly, the world is a reflection of the Absolute as the sole reality in the "mirror" of mind, which is itself only the reflected "light" or intelligence of the Absolute, as the moon reflects the light of the sun. In ancient symbolic systems, the mind is often compared to the moon and the Absolute to the sun.

A likeness in a mirror is an optical illusion resulting from the reflection of light from a surface capable of reflecting light. A shadow results from an absence of light falling on an area. Spiritual teachers compare the manifest realm to a reflection in a mirror as an illusory appearance, as well as to a shadow as the absence of the light of knowledge. Mistaking an appearance (reflection) for reality or an absence of knowledge (shadow) for knowledge is ignorance. This ignorance does not result from stupidity, however. Nor is it the consequence of failing to see the obvious. Nor even does it arise from lack of intellectual inquiry.

According to perennial wisdom, this ignorance arises from a fundamental error of judgment about reality and unreality, truth and falsity, which is caused by accumulated impressions shrouding the mind like a curtain or veil. This veil of accumulated impressions limits the mind and makes the infinite appear as finite. This teaching appears in the Judeo-Christian tradition as the symbolic meaning of the Fall, where eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of "good and evil," i.e., duality, brings about a fall into dualism. This dualism is both of subject and object, and the opposite values of objects, which engenders the illusion of separation and diversity and which makes "knowledge of good and evil" possible.

¹ William Blake. "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell — A Memorable Fancy 2."

In the course of knowing in terms of duality, the subject receives impressions from its objects as a result of thought, speech and action. These impressions accumulate in substratum of the mind that is part of what psychologists call “the unconscious.” These impressions are not only the residue of past experience retained in memory. They also include a residue that “follows” the soul on its journey after the death of the body. This is found in a gross form in the notions of sin and merit, reward and punishment in normative religions. They are understood differently in esoteric traditions, where this residue is the veil of ignorance that follows the soul over lifetimes as it reincarnates.

Finite awareness of human beings stands in contrast to the infinite consciousness of God. Infinite consciousness (God) knows all from every possible vantage, hence, knows the indivisible unity of the Absolute (God) as both unmanifest and manifest. Infinite consciousness knows that apparent difference between the reality and its “reflection” or “shadow” in finite minds. Infinite Consciousness also knows that the manifest is finite, mere appearance with no independent existence, and the unmanifest is infinite, reality existing in itself, by itself, through itself and for itself alone. At the same time, Infinite Consciousness knows that the manifest is the expression of the unmanifest.

While this may appear to be contradictory, it is actually a paradox. For all-knowing Infinite Consciousness, the appearance of diversity in an apparently finite mind is a result of the illusion of separateness arising from ignorance. Yet, it is the internal dynamic of Infinite Consciousness, which must include everything in order to be infinite. Thus, owing to its very nature, the infinite includes the finite; the eternal, the temporal; the unmanifest, the manifest, and so on. God is “all and all,” even though diversity is an illusion. But because diversity is an illusion, God is also in addition to all in all.

BUILDING FRAMEWORKS

While those who are familiar with Eastern spiritualities or have studied philosophy, psychology, higher math, or quantum mechanics, are probably comfortable at this level of abstraction, others may feel that it is somewhat abstruse. So we probably need to back up and consider framing in a bit more depth, introducing some new terminology that will allow finer distinctions and clearer explanations.

Almost from the outset of analysis and speculation, a controversy has raged concerning what is inherent in human nature, or “innate,” and what is acquired through experience. The matter is not evident because what is acquired, .e. g., through infant imprinting and cultural upbringing is presumed to be inherent. However, evidence provided by anthropology and sociology show that this is not

so. Things that get deeply imbedded through conditioning, like habits, are called “second nature,” even though they are acquired and can be altered.

This debate turned to the question of how much of human knowledge is inherent or natural, and how much is the result of a process of construction from data received from without, e.g., culturally. Structuralism is a theory in psychology, linguistics, anthropology, sociology and the humanities based on the hypothesis that meaning is structural.¹ These structures are frameworks for communication that exhibit similarities and differences not only across groups and societies, but also in individuals as people change over time. For example, authors might communicate from different points of view in the process of their development. Structuralism was never able to establish its hypotheses in order to turn the theory into law. The upshot is that the degree to which human knowledge and communication are innate or acquired has not yet been established with any degree of scientific certitude.

What emerges from the controversy, however, is the evidence of anthropology and sociology that many fundamentals of frame building are not as innate as they seem to those who have acquired a frame as second nature. For example, much of the conflict in the world today as it hurtles in the direction of globalization is not so much a conflict of ideas as colliding frames of reference, traditional and modern, tribal and national, national and international, as so forth. Each side may think it sees the other as having bad ideas or exhibiting bad behavior, but the problem goes deeper than that. For example, the conflict between the West and Islam is largely a “war of civilizations” in the sense that Western culture and Muslim culture have different worldviews that are at odds over essentials. For instance, religious fundamentalists on both sides “see” the world through the frame of a literal interpretation of their scriptures, which says that God is on their side and their cause is righteous.

This is fairly obvious to anyone who takes the time to examine the issues. However, there are aspects of frame building that are less obvious that are often confused with being natural and innate. Differences in frames are obvious when differences are reflected mostly in norms. For example, if normative Christianity as an overarching frame is compared to a frame for a mirror, then the “high” Churches, e.g., Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy and Anglicanism, might be seen as glided, whereas the low Churches as plain. But the center is the same, and the differences are at the edges.

The difference is greater among normative Judaism, Christianity and Islam, which share key norms and memes but interpret these norms differently. For instance, Christianity adopted the messiah memplex from Judaism and adapted it to its own

¹ Jean Piaget. *Structuralism*. Translated by Chaninah Maschler. (New York: Basic Books, 1970).

purpose. Similarly, Islam recognizes Jesus as a prophet and rules out saying that Muhammad is greater than Jesus, but denies that Jesus was God's "son," or divine, as Christians believe. These normative religions could be compared to mirrors with frames of different shapes, for example, square, rectangular and oblong. While the center is similar, the view is rather different on the basis of what the frame contributes. The Vedic tradition, Buddhism and Taoism can be compared in this way, too.

However, when normative Judaism, Christianity and Islam are compared with normative Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism in terms of the difference between Eastern and Western religion, the distinction is on the basis of the type of mirror itself rather than just the frame. An analogy might be mirrors with different tints, the different coloring representing fundamental differences between the overarching religious views of East and West. The images reflected in these mirrors are colored by the tint of the mirror, indicating that the differences are not merely at the edges, but at the very center. For example, Eastern religions tend to be monistic while Western religions are dualistic. Being based on the theory of karma and reincarnation, Eastern religions are fatalistic, whereas in rejecting reincarnation and the influence of previous lifetimes Western religion seems to be based on "the luck of the draw." As a result, both seem unreasonable to each other owing to ingrained cultural bias.

But here, we are still dealing with identifiable content more than form. Moreover, these structures are clearly acquired through cultural influence instead of being innate, even though those who use these frames to structure the context of their lives and world may assume that they are divinely imparted, hence, part and parcel of the scheme of things.

There are subtler forces at work in frame building that are embedded even more deeply at subconscious levels, where it is much more difficult to determine whether they are innate or acquired because they are aspects of one's level of consciousness. In this sense they are innate, but they are not necessarily fixed, in that there are different levels of awareness.

Most people view the world in terms of commonsense. This is called "the commonsense view of the world." It is a form of *dualism* that takes the subject to be separate and distinct from its objects, mind to be different from body, and oneself and others to exist independently of the world. The subject is taken to be a real entity as a person, and the object is a real entity also, whether as another person or a material "thing" in the physical world, externally to the mind. This is called *naïve realism*.

The commonsense view of the world is the fundamental *form* taken by the frames that the majority of people use to view themselves and the world. Even though the content of the norms of these frames may make them appear quite different in

substance, they share the same epistemological form. The commonsense view is determined on the basis of “naïve” realism involving the dualism of subject and object. This view is called “naïve,” because it entails conclusions that are untenable under rigorous logical and scientific scrutiny.

Many other views have been proposed. The ancient Greeks speculated about a first principle (Greek: *arche*) as cause (*aition*). The Greek term *arche* means “beginning,” and by extension it was used to signify first principles and causes. The Greeks considered the universe eternal, so they were not looking for a first cause in time. They were interested in discovering that from which everything proceeds.

There were many proposals, some based on single principles (energy, intelligence), some dual (attraction/repulsion), and some pluralistic (atomism). Western philosophy can be read as a continuation and elaboration of these early theories. In the West, normative doctrine and theology largely replaced theoretical speculation (*theorein*) as the pursuit of wisdom (*philosophia*). It was not until the Renaissance that questioning outside the norms was allowed. At that time, many of the subjects that had been investigated by “natural philosophy” were subsumed under science. Soon, religious doctrine would be pitted against science, and science would replace religion as primary in the minds of many.

In the course of this development that spanned millennia, many frames would be advanced to account for both the human condition and the state of the universe. None succeeds in replacing naïve realism as the majority view. The reason for this is not hard to find. In spite of its deficiencies in light of rigorous investigation, naïve realism seems to be self-evident to most people, and other frames strike them as counterintuitive. It appears that this frame is possibly acquired en masse culturally, but it may be particularly fitted to the way most people are constituted. Using an analogy from the computer world, is this a result of the hardware or the software? That is to say, is the nervous system “hardwired” to see the world this way, or is it a matter of the operating system that is installed?

There are several indications that this bias is an outcome of the software. In the first place, anthropology reveals there are cultures that do not see the world in terms of naïve realism. Many so-called primitive cultures see the world differently, although it is difficult for those who study them to penetrate their view themselves. They can only record it.

For example, anthropologists discovered a primitive tribe convinced that the center of the world is in the center of their village, which they erect in the form of a circle that represents the universe. A pole placed at the center of the circle marks the center of the universe. The difficulty is however that they are a nomadic tribe. They see no contradiction in moving the pole that marks the center of the universe, from place to place. In their view, the center of the universe is relative to them. This seems self-evident based on their norms. Upon pressing them on this apparent

discrepancy, the anthropologists found that the tribe found no contradiction in this seemingly (to us) bizarre conviction.

Nondual mystical experience also often runs counter to naïve realism and seems to accord with philosophical theories that are described as monistic instead of dualistic. Nondual mystical experience views all in terms of a single whole, seeing reality as consciousness rather than as a dualism of mind and matter. In this view, reality is compared to the mind and its thoughts, where thoughts exist in the mind, not separate from it. The mind does not lose its unity and integrity even though many different thoughts, feeling, and percepts manifest in it. In a similar way, the “things” that finite minds take to be separate and different in existence are the thoughts of “universal mind.” Nondual mystics claim to transcend limited mind and to use universal mind.¹

The difference between monistic idealisms as philosophical theories and the various monistic and idealistic spiritual teachings is that the former are merely intellectual and do not produce conviction, for they are not demonstrable and also seem counterintuitive. On the other hand, the spiritual teachings are based on the realization of nonduality, hence, they are convincing. Moreover, they can be replicated by following the teaching. When one has even a glimpse through this frame, the frame of naïve realism gets shaken, as if by an earthquake, and its foundation begins to crumble.

Moreover, the frame of nonduality does not stand on the same level as naïve realism. The frame of naïve realism is exclusionary because it is dominated by the principle of non-contradiction, which holds that a thing cannot both be and not be at the same time in the same respect. In the frame of nonduality, this principle does not apply in the same way because one’s inner vision is more inclusive. Monism (the view that everything is one) and idealism (the view that everything is consciousness) seem not only counterintuitive but also logically impossible from the vantage of naïve realism. This is not so from the vantage of nonduality or at least so sages report.

MONISTIC IDEALISM AND PERENNIAL WISDOM

The monistic idealism characteristic of nondual expressions of perennial wisdom posits that reality is one in *being* and that diversity arises only in *appearance*. This is foundational in grasping the explanation of nonduality. Nonduality is accounted for on the analogy of one’s own mind, whose unity and integrity are preserved while the mind is filled with content — thoughts, feeling, percepts, kinesthetic sensations, and so forth. Just as the mind does not become many when filled with many thoughts; so too, the unmanifest symmetry of universal consciousness as an

¹ Meher Baba. *Discourses*. 7th revised edition, p. 279-280.

integral totality is not actually broken by the apparent separateness and diversity of the manifest, relative worlds.

Infinite consciousness unifies all apparent diversity just as the mind unifies its thoughts in terms of its own being, thoughts having no being independently of the mind entertaining them. This is the testimony of the masters of perennial wisdom who have realized nonduality.¹ While their experience may elude our capacity to grasp or even imagine, we can get some understanding of it through the analogy of mind.

The separation that a conscious subject feels from the objects of its knowledge of the world is not inherent. Rather, it is imposed on the knowing subject in the process of knowledge. The internal dynamics of one's level of consciousness constitutes the mode of knowing. Where mind remains finite, limited by its impressions, the mode of knowing is inherently dualistic.

While this is inherent owing to the residual impressions that limit the mind and impose the individuality of a particular form on the unlimited soul, there may also be a dimension that is acquired. For example, Infants do not appear to have a subject-object consciousness but rather a symbiotic one. Naïve realism is taught as we name objects with the infant and teach possessiveness, identity with self and difference from others.

As a result of learning, a characteristic subject and object mode of consciousness emerges and gets progressively reinforced as "reality." In normative knowing, this subject-object dualism is the frame in terms of which everything is viewed. Those who do not successfully make this transition from the symbiosis of the infant to naïve realism are considered to be mentally deficient or disturbed.

There are different types of monism, not all of which are idealistic. Scientific materialism is a type of monism. It holds that everything is material. Consciousness is explained as nothing but an emergent property of matter and mind, merely an epiphenomenon. Scientific materialism denies the existence of a deity or a spiritual dimension on the grounds that they are unscientific.²

¹ Appendix Two: Meher Baba on the Ten States of God, summarizes this teaching in *God Speaks*,

² Scientific materialism accounts for mind and consciousness by reducing these to empirical accounts. Behavioral psychology purports to account for psychological phenomena solely on the basis of the observable, and neuropsychology attempts to explain mental phenomena in terms of brain states, with the assistance of biochemistry. Humanistic and transpersonal psychologists reject exclusively materialistic accounts of self, world and their relationship as unsatisfactory, especially as treatment models. In practice, neither behavioral nor pharmacological solutions have replaced psychoanalysis or psychotherapy. On the other hand, many contemporary therapies being practiced are as yet lacking

However, this is based on the presumption that “matter” included energy in the scientific sense. Energy in this sense is a more refined aspect than mass, mass being congealed energy. Thus, consciousness is a type of energy, thought to be electromagnetic since it is associated with the electrical activity of the brain. The brain is therefore conceived as “machine” that produces consciousness as a result of its activity.

William James suggested that considering the brain to be a producer of thoughts, feelings and sensations is only one model, however.¹ He points to other functions in

scientific validation. So there is a cognitive dissonance developing in psychology as a field of study and practice.

¹ William James. “Human Immortality.” Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, Ingersoll Lecture, 1898. URL=< <http://www.des.emory.edu/mfp/jimmortal.html> >.

“When the physiologist who thinks that his science cuts off all hope of immortality pronounces the phrase, ‘Thought is a function of the brain,’ he thinks of the matter just as he thinks when he says, ‘Steam is a function of the tea-kettle,’ ‘Light is a function of the electric circuit,’ ‘Power is a function of the moving waterfall.’ In these latter cases the several material objects have the function of inwardly creating or engendering their effects, and their function must be called productive function. Just so, he thinks, it must be with the brain. Engendering consciousness in its interior, much as it engenders cholesterol and creatin and carbonic acid, its relation to our soul's life must also be called productive function. Of course, if such production be the function, then when the organ perishes, since the production can no longer continue, the soul must surely die. Such a conclusion as this is indeed inevitable from that particular conception of the facts.

“But in the world of physical nature productive function of this sort is not the only kind of function with which we are familiar. We have also releasing or permissive function; and we have transmissive function.

“The trigger of a crossbow has a releasing function: it removes the obstacle that holds the string, and lets the bow fly back to its natural shape. So when the hammer falls upon a detonating compound. By knocking out the inner molecular obstructions, it lets the constituent gases resume their normal bulk, and so permits the explosion to take place.

“In the case of a colored glass, a prism, or a refracting lens, we have transmissive function. The energy of light, no matter how produced, is by the glass sifted and limited in color, and by the lens or prism determined to a certain path and shape. Similarly, the keys of an organ have only a transmissive function. They open successively the various pipes and let the wind in the air-chest escape in various ways. The voices of the various pipes are constituted by the columns of air trembling as they emerge. But the air is not engendered in the organ. The organ proper, as distinguished from its air-chest, is only an apparatus for letting portions of it loose upon the world in these peculiarly limited shapes.

“My thesis is now this: that, when we think of the law that thought is a function of the brain, we are not required to think of productive function only; we are entitled also to

addition to the productive, for example, the “permissive” or “releasing” function, and the “transmissive” function. For example, a trigger releases previously stored energy when it is pulled, and a prism transforms colorless light into the spectrum of colors when light is transmitted through it. In contrast to the brain as producer, James suggested that the brain-thought relationship might better be conceived on the model of the brain as a permissive or transmissive device. He speculates that the brain may act more as a transformer than as a producer in giving rise to thoughts.

James surfaced this idea prior to the invention of the radio. If he had known of it, he would likely have suggested a receptive function, in which the brain acts as a receiver of preexistent signals. Consciousness is then conceived as a pervasive medium that is not dependent on the brain for either its existence or activity, just as the electronic broadcast is not dependent on receiving devices for either its existence or structure. On this model, the brain as receiver “tunes into” particular frequencies of consciousness, without consciousness *per se* being dependent on the brain in any way. James observes that idealists have held similar positions for millennia.

Idealists argue that rather than being an emergent property of matter, consciousness is instead the primary constituent of reality. Indeed, consciousness is postulated as being the infinite, absolute reality (*noumenon*) in which finite, relative appearances (*phenomena*) manifest. In this view, consciousness, which is ever present, is not detected until sufficiently complex nervous systems develop in the course of evolutionary development.

In the mystical view, ordinary human nervous systems are not capable of receiving the entirety of the signals that are ever present in the all-pervasive consciousness. Mystics hold that they receive more of them than others. For example, mystics are said to know in “visions.” That is to say, through inner sight they are capable of seeing what is already there, but which others are incapable of seeing. However, the inner sight of different mystics is not equally comprehensive. Only those that have realized God as infinite consciousness are capable of completely comprehensive knowledge.

consider permissive or transmissive function. And this the ordinary psycho-physiologist leaves out of his account.

“Suppose, for example, that the whole universe of material things--the furniture of earth and choir of heaven--should turn out to be a mere surface-veil of phenomena, hiding and keeping back the world of genuine realities. Such a supposition is foreign neither to common sense nor to philosophy. Common sense believes in realities behind the veil even too superstitiously; and idealistic philosophy declares the whole world of natural experience, as we get it, to be but a time-mask, shattering or refracting the one infinite Thought which is the sole reality into those millions of finite streams of consciousness known to us as our private selves.” [Public Domain]

The point of mysticism's being a type of spiritual knowledge is that mystics receive their visions instead of producing them. In the Vedic tradition the seers are said to "see" and "hear" the structure of pure knowledge (Sanskrit: *veda*). The notion of God-realization includes the idea that the reception of the God-realized is complete, being infinitely encompassing. Perennial wisdom holds that spiritual practice refines the nervous system, enabling a person to cognize deeper dimensions of consciousness through living the interior life.

In this view, consciousness is ultimate. Mind proceeds from consciousness, thence life energy, and finally space and material objects. Pure consciousness is unitary, formless, unbounded, eternal and unchanging, that is, absolute. The relative dimension manifests "in" Infinite Consciousness as its finite expression. The relative sphere of appearance is typified by apparent multiplicity, form, boundaries, change and temporal sequence, while consciousness *per se* remains unaffected.¹

The view that consciousness is ultimate is known as idealism, and the view that this ultimate is unitary — "one without a second" — is called "monism."

There are different types of idealistic monism. Absolute monism holds that all is indivisibly one with no difference or distinction. Qualified monism holds that there is a single conscious principle, which we might call "spirit," but the individuality of persons (souls) is fundamental. This distinction between unqualified and qualified nondualism is reflected in Vedanta in the contrasting work of *Advaita Vedanta* whose principal exponent was Shankara, and *Visishtadvaita Vedanta*, whose principal exponent was Ramanuja. It was also reflected in Sufism in ibn 'Arabi's Identism (*Wujuddiyyah*) and Suhrawardi's Apparentism (*Shuhudiyyah*).

The unqualified nondualist view is that substance and existence are identical, thus only One is real: Absolute reality is identical with absolute knowledge in the infinite consciousness of the universal self. This entails that personal identity as a limited individual ceases to exist after realization. When one realizes one's true nature as universal self instead of continuing to identify with the limited mind, the "illusion" of separation is recognized for what it is — nothing at all.

For example, when children see a movie, they are completely engrossed in it and think it is really happening before their eyes. However, experienced filmmakers working on a film just see light flashing on a screen and are not taken in by the illusion. In fact, they are consciously working to create the illusion, for that is their art.

On the one hand, those focused on the way of knowledge and the impersonal aspect of God tend to speak of realizing identity with the One, using monistic and idealistic terms. The classic example is Shankara's unqualified nondualism in the

¹ See Appendix Two: Meher Baba on the Ten States of God.

Vedic tradition. On the other hand, those who are focused on the ways of devotion to the personal aspect of God often speak in terms of separation and eventual union, using realistic and dualistic terms. Taking God to be separate, devotees adore God as lovers and servants. This is the manner of speech of Madhvacharya and Chaitanya Mahaprabhu of the Vaishnava sect that worships the Incarnations of Vishnu or God as preserver, the immanent ground. This was also the manner of speaking of Ramanuja, also a Vaishnava, although he used qualified nondualistic language.

Mystics and masters use all of these ways of speaking, sometimes combining them. Thus, they may seem to be disagreeing with one another or even contradicting themselves in different places. For example, teachers use different frames of reference and different memes in speaking to different people, based on what is suitable given their needs.

WESTERN THOUGHT

Nondualism is not only a category of mystical experience. It is also a philosophical position based on the assumption that being is one. Philosophical nondualism is called *monism*. Monism is the position that being is one and indivisible, diversity being merely apparent difference in being owing to differences in the forms that the one being takes; just as many different pieces of jewelry can be made from the one substance, gold, without changing the nature of gold or multiplying it.

The difference between monism as a philosophical position and nondualism as a mystical experience is that between experience and explanation. Experience is immediate, whereas explanation depends on concepts, understanding and reasoning. Philosophical positions are grounded in assumptions, whereas mystical testimony is justified on the basis of experience supposedly gained through supranormal cognition.

The ongoing controversies over monism versus dualism or pluralism, realism versus idealism, and rationalism versus empiricism as competing metaphysical and epistemological theories began at the outset of Western thought. This debate took place primarily among speculative philosophers and theologians on the basis of observation and reasoning.

However, these controversies were paralleled to some degree in mysticism and mystical expression, because they were often bound up in the norms of doctrine being articulated and elaborated by theologians. Western mystics either used the prevailing norms of discourse, essentially realistic and dualistic, or qualified their testimony and teaching to fit these norms in order to pass muster. Yet, the implication of monism and idealism is often present in them. When anyone's straying from the norms became too evident, the normative authorities often

objected. Mystics were forced to retract or modify their expression, or else suffer condemnation.

The two streams of philosophy and mysticism were not mutually exclusive, since some philosophers and theologians were mystics themselves, for example, Socrates, Plotinus and Augustine. Plato also reported what was apparently a mystical experience in his Seventh Letter, although he was otherwise generally silent about himself.¹ In addition, mystics influenced philosophers and theologians. For example, German mystic Jacob Boehme influenced both Leibnitz and Hegel, which is surprising since Boehme was an unschooled cobbler while Leibnitz and Hegel were among the most learned German intellectuals. Moreover, Jesus was a mystic, claiming to be God-realized if it is true that he said, "I and the Father are one," as is reported in the gospel account.² Just as Whitehead observed that Western philosophy is a footnote to Plato, it might also be said that Western theology is a footnote to Jesus.³

We will look at the mystics subsequently and examine, first, the impact of philosophers and theologians on the unfolding of perennial wisdom in the West. In the East, on the other hand, most of perennial wisdom stems from acknowledged spiritual masters rather than what we call philosophers or theologians in the West. Shankara was the founder of a lineage of spiritual teachers that still exists, called the Shankaracharya tradition. Similarly, the great Sufi orders preserved the teaching of its masters. In Islam, bridging East and West, some of the greatest philosophers and theologians were also spiritual masters, notably, Al-Ghazali, and Al-'Arabi.

The Presocratic philosophers were the first Western thinkers, prior to whom myth and story were the primary forms for preserving and transmitting wisdom. The earliest of the Presocratics, Thales of Miletus, lived around sixth century B.C.E. This was approximately the same period as Gautama Buddha, Lao Tzu, and Mahavira the Jain, although all these dates are conjectural. Some place Zoroaster in this period also, but many consider him much earlier.

¹ Plato. "The Seventh Letter," 344 a-b. Translated by J. Harward. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1928. URL=<<http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/plato/seventh.htm>>.

² John 10:30. John is the only evangelist who mentions this key saying supporting the Christological doctrine of Jesus' divinity.

³ It might be objected that Plato wrote voluminously but Jesus left nothing other than some sayings attributed to him, which may or may not be his exact words. This objection can be countered by pointing out that a great deal of what Plato wrote, including the overall thrust of his writings, came from his teacher, Socrates, who, like Jesus, wrote nothing. Similarly, it is not possible to determine from Plato's works precisely what Socrates contributed directly, but his influence is not only unmistakable but also large.

There are striking similarities between the statement of Heraclitus that all things flow (Greek: *panta rei*) and Buddha's teaching of impermanence. There is also a close resemblance among the Greek notion of *logos* as cosmic ordering principle, the Buddhist idea of Dharma, and the Taoist conception of Tao. While it might be tempting to infer the possibility of cross-influence through the geographical diffusion of ideas, this is doubtful, since these ideas did not spring up of a sudden but appeared in a context already welcome to them. Thus, this time period is of particular importance in the historical unfolding of perennial wisdom globally.

Operating on the Greek assumption that reality is rational, the Presocratic philosophers primarily sought to discover the first principles (Greek: *arche*) that account for all that exists. The so-called Presocratics put forward a variety of ingenious solutions, followed by Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and then many others, who elaborated more detailed and complex ones.

The Presocratics began the dialogue by proposing air, water, fire (energy), attraction and repulsion, cosmic order (*logos*), and others. Socrates said that on studying the matter the proposal of Anaxagoras that mind or intelligence (*nous*) is key seemed to him most promising. On the other hand, Socrates was disappointed that Anaxagoras did not develop *nous* into a coherent ordering principle instead of leaving it dangling as an indeterminate *deus ex machina*.¹ That would be left for Plato to do, probably influenced by Socrates.

The foundation of Western idealism was poured into the frame apparently erected by Socrates through his student Plato.² Even though there is no record of Socrates writing anything himself, like Buddha and later Jesus, their influence on humanity has been enormous. Thereafter, *nous* would become the overarching principle. The Stoics went on to integrate *nous* (intelligence, ordering principle) and *logos* (intelligibility, cosmic order).³ But before proceeding forward in time, it is necessary first to consider Plato's contribution more closely.

¹ Plato, *Phaedo* 98B.

² Whether these ideas are entirely of Greek origin is unknown. There is reason to think that early Greek thought was influenced by more ancient Egyptian ideas. Early Egyptian thought is lost, but the Hermetic literature, although much later, may reflect its influence. However, now it is not possible to document the degree to which Hermetic thought influenced Hellenistic thought and vice versa. The *Corpus Hermeticum* has been dated anywhere from 500-200 B.C.E. to 200 C.E. See Abel, Christopher R. and Hare, William O. *Hermes Trismegistus: An Investigation of the Origin of the Hermetic Writings*. (Sequim, WA: Holmes Publishing Group, 1997).

³ Early Greek writers used *nous* and *logos* somewhat differently. These terms also evolved subsequently. In Hellenistic times, for example, Philo Judeaus of Alexandria used "Logos" as one of his key concepts, linking the Greek concept of ordering principle to God's creative word in the biblical creation story. This influence also appears in the

Plato wrote a dialogue called *Parmenides* that tells a story of a meeting between Parmenides, a monist who posited that all things are one, Zeno, a logician famous for his paradoxes of motion, and the young Socrates as a proponent of the Platonic theory of forms. Whether this occurred or is fictional is not known, but it is extremely important because it is a detailed investigation of monism and its implications.

Parmenides posited that all things are one and attempted to defend this obviously counterintuitive claim from critics' attacks. Opponents questioned how the obvious diversity in our experience of the world can be accounted for on the basis of monism. These critics pointed out that the plurality of existences is far more evident than unity of being. Since Parmenides could not rely on an appeal to ordinary experience, which seemed to contradict his assertions, he would have to argue against everyday experience and "common sense" in order to prove his point.

Plato's dialogue is more an exposition of the theory of forms that Socrates is made to espouse than an argument put in the mouth of Parmenides. But it is Parmenides who leads the investigation, which to date no scholar has been able to explain to the satisfaction of all.

What the dialogue does demonstrate is the difficulty of speaking logically of the paradoxes of unity and diversity, or "the one and the many," such as Zeno had pointed toward mathematically. The theory of forms that Plato has Socrates put forth in the *Parmenides* does not seem to have satisfactorily resolved the conundrum of the one and the many, and the investigation seems to be inconclusive.

Later in the dialogue, the discussion turned in the direction of investigating similarity in difference. Accounting for similarity in difference gives rise to the *problem of universals*, namely, how is it that apparently separate and distinct "things" are known on the basis of their sharing common properties. The theory of forms attempts to resolve this by positing the Platonic forms as metaphysical universals existing independently of both individual minds and material things.

prologue to John's gospel: "In the beginning was the Word (*logos*, intelligibility, cosmic order) and the Word was with God (*theos*) and the Word was God." John 1:1.

In early Christian theology, God is conceived as intelligence (*nous*), and John's prologue links God's creative intelligence with cosmic order or "intelligibility," in the equation of *theos* and *logos* through *nous*. Later Christian theologians will interpret God's Word as God's intelligibility, which is identical with God's being in God's self-knowledge. God the Son (Word) is God's knowledge of Himself: "No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and no one knows who the Father is except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." Matthew 11: 27, Luke 10:22.

The theory of forms also attempts to solve the issue of how knowledge gets from material things (which are apparently alien to the mind) *into* the mind (which is apparently immaterial, at least in comparison to things). Moreover, it would seem that if material things actually did enter the mind, then the mind would become many, just like things in the world, in spite of the strong conviction that virtually everyone has in one's personal identity.

According to the myth that Plato proposed in explanation of how knowledge of universal concepts is possible, the soul existed in the world of forms prior to taking birth, so the soul is already acquainted with the forms. Therefore, it need not acquire these forms through its knowledge of things. This is significant because it means that knowledge is innate instead of being acquired from without. Mind and world are symbiotic. While perception of events in the world determines the content of the mind, it does not actually inform the mind from without. Events simply trigger the appropriate forms, which are already present in the mind's deep memory.

Plato's theory of forms proposed that all knowledge is innate in the mind. Thus, if forms are compared to thoughts rather than "things," the mind does not become many by entertaining many thoughts, and no one cared to claim that in knowledge "things" themselves actually enter the mind. This was, therefore, a powerful argument concerning an issue that has not yet been resolved satisfactorily, either philosophically or scientifically.

According to Plato, when we are presented with a stimulus such as the perception of an object, we remember what is already within us. These are the universal forms of "ideas" (Greek: *idea*), which are invariant patterns of "things." Things are similar to the degree that they "participate" in the same forms, which serve as templates, like cookie cutters. Knowledge of universals is possible because intelligibility is shared by mind and object. In this view, mind provides intelligence and the forms provide intelligibility. Mind's *intelligence* knows the connection between its own *intelligibility* and that of material things on the basis of universal invariant forms or "ideas," which are *intelligible*.¹

¹ Intelligence and intelligibility will play a key role as we proceed. Philosophy can be gainfully approached as the study of the intelligibility of being. For example, the attributes of being are said to be the one, the true, the good, and the beautiful. The major branches of philosophy, metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and aesthetics, respectively study being under these four intelligibilities.

Mysticism can be viewed as the direct cognition of the intelligibility of being as simultaneously one (unitary), true (self-knowing), good (desirable, attractive, "appetible") and beautiful (enjoyable, satisfying). What philosophers speculate about, mystics claim to experience.

The Platonic view of form (Greek: *idea*) as intelligible (*logos*) came to be known as *metaphysical idealism* in contrast to *metaphysical realism*. The Platonic view of knowledge as internal came to be called *epistemological rationalism* as opposed to *epistemological realism* and *empiricism*.

Metaphysics is the study of being as being, and epistemology is the study of knowledge. Idealism holds that what is, is the intelligible, and rationalism holds that human knowledge of what is, comes chiefly through intelligence knowing intelligibility (which humans share with divinity) rather than through the senses being influenced by material things (which human share with other sentient beings such as animals, birds, fish, and insects).

The dialogues present the theory of forms intellectually and do not hesitate to ask the tough questions. As a result, many have concluded that Plato himself was not convinced of the coherence of the theory, or if he was, he never presented it in a compelling way. This reading seems to be bolstered by the fact that Plato's most famous student, Aristotle, challenged him on this and offered a counter-proposal.

However, this objection can be met by observing that Plato's theory is too close to the view of perennial wisdom about the identity of name and form in the Absolute to be coincidental. This is especially true in light of the fact that Plato places all knowledge in the mind, and sense perception only triggers remembrance rather than informing it intelligibly. Given the correspondence of Plato's account with that of mystics in other traditions, there is ample reason to suspect that Plato's account was based on mystical experience, either his own or another's, perhaps that of Socrates. Moreover, Plato generally spoke metaphorically and in myth, ostensibly for a reason. The public *Dialogues* were not meant to reveal the secrets of Plato's school, called the Academy.

For perennial wisdom, the process of manifestation that takes place through the three "worlds," from the causal sphere to the subtle sphere "nested" in it, and from the subtle sphere to the gross sphere "nested" in turn in it. Consciousness of the relative, manifest dimension in contrast to the formless unmanifest ground constitutes *universal mind*. The contents or universal mind are the three worlds—gross, subtle and causal. The universal mind is "the mind of God" as Lord of the Universe playing the roles of Creator, Preserver, and Dissolver. (This will be explained in greater detail in the chapter on perennial wisdom.)

In the Vedic tradition, name (Sanskrit: *nama*) is identical with form (*rupa*) in the Absolute. Similarly, in classical Greek thought, intelligence (Greek: *nous*) and intelligibility (*logos*) are identical in God. For example, in Aristotle, God (*theos*) is described as being self-cognizing cognition, or intelligence reflexively knowing its intelligibility in knowing its own nature, being as such. In normative Christianity this relationship also holds: "In the beginning was the Word (*logos*), and the Word

was with God (*theos*), and the Word was God.”¹ (If this paragraph is not yet clear to you, don’t worry. This will be the subject of a great deal of what follows because it underlies the understanding of nonduality.)

According to perennial wisdom, the Absolute, being infinite consciousness, knows itself fully. In knowing itself fully, it knows itself as infinite, i.e., unlimited and all-inclusive. Knowing itself as all-inclusive, the Absolute as infinite consciousness also knows itself as finite. In knowing itself as finite, the Absolute as infinite consciousness manifests or *appears* as finite minds. This means that the Absolute manifests or *appears* as relative and limited. That which is *noumenal* and unchanging appears as *phenomenal* and changing — seemingly coming to be and passing out of existence.

The initial bifurcation of name and form, intelligence and intelligibility takes at the most refined level of finite mind, the mental sphere, which projects the causal world. For example, Aristotle recognized the form or intelligibility of a thing as its “formal cause,” and Augustine held that the divine ideas are seeds in terms of which God creates.

At the level of the causal world, name and form are no longer identical, as they are at the level of the Absolute in infinite consciousness. Subjective intelligibility (name) is distinguished from objective intelligibility (form). These subjective and objective poles manifest in terms of energy in the subtle world where subjective and objective poles begin to separate and appear to be distinct. The appearance of physically embodied minds and the material things that are their objects occurs at the level of the gross world.

Each “stepping down” is a successively less refined “shadow” or “reflection” of the former. This would account for Plato’s theory of forms in which consciousness or intelligence is primary.

It can be argued that the analogy of the cave in *The Republic* is a myth picturing the three worlds of manifestation symbolically, underscoring Plato’s mysticism and adherence to the perennial wisdom.² In the analogy, prisoners symbolizing the souls imprisoned in bodies are chained in a cave facing a wall on which the shadows of imitations of things are projected from behind, symbolizing knowledge in gross awareness. They are then turned so as to be able to see the imitations whose shadows are projected by a fire, which is symbolic of developing knowledge of the subtle sphere. Then, they are taken out of the cave to see the real things in the light of day, i.e., the Platonic forms in the causal sphere. Some fortunate ones may even

¹ John 1:1.

² Plato. *The Republic* VII, 514a-521b.

glimpse the sun, symbolizing the self-effulgence of divine intelligence by which the intelligible forms are illumined.

If this is what Plato intended, apparently it was lost on his student Aristotle. Aristotle opposed Plato's idealistic theory that knowledge is essentially remembrance of forms that are innate to consciousness, proposing instead the realistic theory that the mind is as a blank slate, which receives all its input through experience. At this point the debate between idealism and realism was joined and would unfold in Western thought in the course of several millennia.¹

¹ My own reading of Aristotle is somewhat different; however. In my view, he is not as far from his teacher Plato as many represent. Plato and Aristotle agree that mind or intelligence (*nous*) knows the rationality or intelligibility (*logos*) of objects that constitutes their essence (Greek: *ousia*). The two views can be seen as complementary rather than contradictory, in that both Plato and Aristotle account for knowledge on the basis of the unity of intelligence and intelligibility. It is true that Aristotle makes more of the role of experience than Plato does, but that can be seen as a matter of emphasis. This emphasis is admittedly a significant distinction regarding the process of knowing, but it is not a difference in kind with respect to knowledge itself.

Plato held that the mind can know the intelligibility of objects because this intelligibility is inherent in intelligence. Intelligence does not need to go outside of itself. Aristotle held that the mind knows through intellectual intuition, which, unlike sense perception, grasps the essence or essential nature of objects rather than their superficial "accidents." Both Plato and Aristotle agree that intelligence (*nous*) is capable of knowing the intelligibility (*logos*) of essence (*ousia*), only they accounted for this differently.

Empiricists following Hume denied this, holding that the mind knows its sensations as phenomena. Rationalists, e.g., Descartes, Leibnitz and Spinoza followed in Plato's footsteps and sided with intelligence to one degree or another. Locke formulated a realism similar to Aristotle's, rejecting innate ideas and holding that the mind is a blank slate that must be informed through experience. Locke replaced Aristotle's intellectual intuition of essences with abstraction from and reflection about simple ideas received directly, although Locke is not clear how the senses convey these simple ideas. Idealists beginning with Berkeley held that not only is intelligence primary, but also it is the only reality, at least in the sense that all experience of self and reality necessarily takes place within consciousness.

The principal ways around this are to 1) assert the view of commonsense realism as self-evident and leaving it at that, 2) to deny that mind and consciousness exist other than as an "epiphenomenon" of matter, which is the tack taken by radical empiricists who advance reductionistic theories of materialism, 3) to assert that knowledge is essentially linguistic, hence, limited to the relative meaning of terms, or 4) to avoid the argument by talking about experience rather than consciousness, which is the tack taken by some pragmatists, for instance.

Neoplatonists, notably Proclus and Plotinus, carried the Platonic tradition forward into Hellenistic times. In nascent Christianity, the prologue to John's gospel wed the conception of God of the patriarchs of old to the *logos* of Greek thought as the ordering principle of the universe, identified with as Jesus Christ, the Jewish messiah. For some centuries more Plato's influence was fostered by Augustine's favor.¹ Augustine, who was a former Neoplatonist, argued against that view. Nevertheless, he did import Plato's forms into Christian theology as the eternal "divine ideas" as the pattern of intelligibility in terms of which God as supreme intelligence creates.

Aristotle's works, which had been lost to view, were preserved by the Arabs and reintroduced into the West in the thirteenth century. Thomas Aquinas catapulted Aristotle's influence to the fore when he attempted to give a rational account of Christian theology along Aristotelian lines.

Islamic thought also entered the West at this time, too. Aquinas commented on the major philosophers and theologians through the disputation of objections characteristic of medieval scholasticism. In *Summa contra Gentiles* Aquinas set forth his Christian response to Islamic thought. Interestingly from the viewpoint of perennial wisdom, Aquinas opposed Al-Ghazali, who was an acknowledged spiritual master and presumably knew by acquaintance whereof he spoke.

In addition to the influence of the Greeks, there was a mystical literature available in Christianity and Judaism from the earliest days, evidenced in Jewish mysticism, Gnosticism, and also the early mystics of the Church, beginning with Jesus himself and Paul, too. There was also an undercurrent of Hermetic esotericism that remained largely in the closet due to normative disfavor and later, suppression. Occasionally it bubbled into view, as in secret societies such as Rosicrucianism and Free Masonry, and also in the work of philosophers, such as Marcello Ficino in the Italian Renaissance. Esoteric alchemical traditions contributed, too, with great names like Jacob Boehme and Paracelsus participating.

At the beginning of modernity, the seesawing continued between realism and idealism, with the Rationalists, René Descartes (1596-1650), Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), and Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716), reiterating the Platonic position regarding innate knowledge on the continent, and the British empiricists, Bishop George Berkeley (1685-1753), John Locke (1632-1704) and David Hume (1711-1776), replying from across the channel in favor of the mind's receiving its data on the basis of experience. There is some evidence that Descartes developed his philosophy, the starting point and methodology of which are subjective, on the basis

¹ Augustine's theology occupied a central place in Western Christianity until Aquinas displaced Plato with Aristotle. Augustine remained influential in Protestantism through Luther, formerly an Augustinian monk, who remained loyal to Augustine's thinking.

of an early mystical experience, the character of which he did not reveal. In his notes he wrote only, “I go forth masked” (Latin: *prodeo ludens*).¹ Some speculate that he was a closet mystic, even to the extent of being a Western Vedantin. While Descartes may well have been a mystic, it is doubtful that he was a nondualist. Descartes thought that animals are soulless machines, for example, and he strove to prove dualism is real on the rationale that God would not deceive us into thinking that the world is existent and separate from us.

However, Spinoza developed the implications of Descartes’ position and advanced the position that God’s existence is the only reality, all apparent diversity being “modes” of God’s being. Unlike Descartes, Spinoza held that God is knowable rationally, and he was excommunicated from his synagogue for his trouble.

Leibnitz also stood on the shoulders of Descartes. He studied Eastern thought as well as Western, and his contributions were as sophisticated as they were enormous. Leibnitz was put off by the homogeneity of Spinoza’s pantheism. In the *Monadology*, he proposed a philosophical definition of soul as spirit in which every conscious subject is an independent and autonomous “monad” or spiritual atom. The world has no “real” existence independent of subjectivity. Monads experience the world as consistent and coherent owing to the infinite correlation among monads induced by the Divine Monad.

The philosophies of Spinoza and Leibnitz recall Advaita Vedanta and Visishtadvaita Vedanta in the Vedic tradition. But the similarity is only superficial, since the former were developed largely through reason and insight, while the later were the outcome of nondual mystical experience and were only expressed with the aid of reasoning without being dependent upon it.

Although Spinoza and Leibnitz made important contributions to the understanding of monism and idealism, neither was influential outside a narrow audience, although Leibnitz did make other contributions that were influential, for example, to mathematics, anticipating computer science. Nevertheless, their ideas no doubt played a significant role in the appreciation of perennial wisdom in the West by providing the context for its understanding in terms of a dialogue already underway.

Though also a relatively minor figure in Western philosophy, Berkeley made significant contributions that contribute to this investigation. George Berkeley is famous for his dictum, “to be is to be perceived” (Latin: *esse est percipi*).² Berkeley

¹ I first learned of this from Professor Thomas McTighe, who taught classes in Plato and Descartes when I was in graduate school at Georgetown University. He also pointed out Plato’s description of a mystical experience in the Seventh Letter, mentioned above.

² George Berkeley. *The Works of George Berkeley*. (London: Th. Tegg, 1843).

was led to his philosophical conclusions by this pioneering research in the science of optics, where it is found that vision is an interaction of light with the eye. He was also a bishop, hence, was concerned with philosophical and theological matters of interest in his day. He therefore applied the scientific understanding he arrived at through optics to the broader questions of metaphysics, the study of what is, and epistemology, the study of how we know.

Paraphrasing Berkeley, God is conscious of being absolute, and God's comprehensive knowledge is the source and ground of all that appears. On the other hand, what creatures perceive is partial and relative, appearing in terms of space, time, form and change. Thus, the world they take for real is dependent on their limited mode of knowing. Owing to this, reality as it appears to creatures is relative and incomplete, while it is unified and whole in God's knowledge, which is identical to God's is God's indivisible being. The sight of our eye is limited, whereas God's all-seeing "eye" is unlimited. Our vision is limited to a specific location and God's is not.

Since sentient beings were presumably evolved, hence not always present in creation, they could not perceive its existence. If the characteristics of existence are somehow dependent on perception, then the existence of the universe while not perceived becomes questionable. Bishop Berkeley observed, however, that while the perception of creatures is limited by time and space, God's is not.

God is omniscient and perceives all in eternity. Therefore, trees continue to exist in the forest even when no one is there to see them, because God continuously perceives them with an all-seeing eye that never shuts. So the world does not disappear when we are asleep and do not perceive it. This was a rather ingenious view that parallels the Vedic teaching about the universal mind, in which manifestation emanates and which constitutes their immanent ground of being.

Of course, this is not a scientific explanation, and even as philosophy it has the drawback of requiring an appeal to God as a *deus ex machina* to save the appearances. Nevertheless, it got some people thinking. One of these was the young David Hume, who suggested that we have no direct evidence of anything existing independently of sense data. Rather, we only believe this. However, this is not a conscious or intentional belief but one forced on us by nature, unconsciously, as "second nature." The significant advance Hume made was noticing the mind makes an active contribution to the construction of "reality" in addition to sense data that are passively received. Sense data are organized under logical categories. According to Hume knowledge is limited to sense data and logical operations on this data. Sense data are presumed to be *a posteriori*, caused by the perception of the external world, while logical operations are *a priori*, that is, come from the side of the mind.

In Hume's view, called *empiricism*, human beings take their knowledge of the external world as being received passively through the portal of the senses, showing them how things actually exist independently of the mind. But they do so on the basis of an unconscious *belief* in the real existence of external reality rather than any intrinsic connection between subject and object of which they are aware. For causes are not sense data. Appearances are not only recorded as sense data, but this data also structured by the logical operations into a "reality" that appears for us as a construct instead of being entirely given to us as it is "in itself." In this construction, there are no independent "causes" existing in the world to be perceived as sense data.

For Hume, this construct of "reality" is a combination of sense data and mental operations, which are both internal, existing in the mind. We merely *believe* that there is a connection of our knowledge with the external world that "causes" it, but we do not know this by acquaintance with "causes" and simply infer it owing to an inherent tendency of the mind to do so.

Hume denied that causality is self-evident. He opined that it is inferred from the observation of *constant conjunction* of like phenomena instead of being intuited as a self-evident first principle, as had formerly been supposed.

Empiricists, who emphasize the observation of the sense as the primary means of gaining knowledge, are often considered to be realists and materialists. But their view of the role of perception and sense data as primary make them idealists of a sort, since everything that human beings know by acquaintance, that is, in terms of sense data, is psychological rather than physical.

Scientific materialists who adopted empiricism as a standard would account for this apparent conundrum of mind and matter by holding that only matter exists, there being no observable evidence of mind existing independently of a body. Hence, for materialistic reductionists what we call "mind" is "nothing but" a different form or state of matter.

According to physicalism, mind an "epiphenomenon" of matter. Here, matter is understood as a state of transformation of the ubiquitous "energy," which is sometimes congealed as mass, and at other times expresses itself as potential or kinetic energy. In this view mind is reduced to being an emergent property of matter, hence, merely an epiphenomenon whose basis is thoroughly material.

On the assumptions of this view, mental events are theoretically capable of being completely accounted for in material terms, e.g., through scientific explanation based on neurology, biochemistry, physiology, and bodily behavior. Hence, in principle if not yet in practice, all mental phenomena, including knowledge, can be reduced to explanation in terms of states of the brain and nervous system that are measurable through scientific observation of such phenomena as electro-magnetic impulses and biochemical changes.

This is a heuristic assumption guiding a particular approach to research. It is not scientific in the sense of being grounded in evidence. This assumption forms the basis of a sort of materialistic monism, the mirror image of the notions of idealistic monism that we have been considering. The empiricist view became dominant not only in science, but also in English and American philosophy.

Few scientists have recognized or confronted the consequences of empiricism. By limiting knowledge to sense data and logical operations, “reality” is reduced to appearance, and the existence of an external world of things and events becomes belief-based rather than knowledge-based. In the final analysis, Hume’s epistemology ends in belief rather than knowledge, albeit belief enforced by nature.¹

Emmanuel Kant (1724-1804) did notice this, however, and took issue with it. Accordingly, he took steps to articulate the implications of Hume’s observations with a view toward clarifying them. Most significantly, Kant believed that by clarifying them he would also be able to clarify the traditional problems that had plagued philosophy since the inception of speculation.

Emmanuel Kant turned Hume’s inquiry in a different direction, and one that would determine the direction of subsequent Continental thought. Hume’s insight into the active role of the mind in constructing its knowledge inspired Emmanuel Kant’s Copernican revolution in philosophy.

Through reading Hume, Kant realized that the human mind contributes to structuring its objects on the basis of “a priori categories,” that is, logical principles like causality that regulate the internal dynamics of the knowing process. Since the human mind is so bound up in the creation of its objects, it cannot know things-in-themselves directly, but it simply infers that something underlying knowledge is given.

The mind cannot know more about this given — the so-called thing-in-itself inferred as standing behind appearances — on the basis of its own internal “formal” structure, which it applies to the given to arrive at knowledge. The given presumably conditions knowledge externally, and the formal structure of the mind conditions it internally, mediated though perception. However, as Hume noticed and Kant agreed, sense data are the appearances of things to a mind, but they are not the things in themselves.

¹ That Hume’s epistemology ends in belief is the accepted interpretation. I recall writing a paper on Hume in graduate school that challenged this view, pointing out that Hume describes foundational belief in terms similar to the way that intuitionists describe intuition. I was, however, unable to convince the professor, whose mind was already made up, and was downgraded for suggesting something so audacious.

The mind is unable to make either the external or internal conditions of knowledge an object of knowledge, because it is dependent on these conditions for gaining knowledge. The conditions of knowledge do not enter knowledge as objects. Rather, the conditions of knowledge *structure* knowledge.

Kant's program in the *Critique of Pure Reason* is to show that the mind cannot prove through reason that either the self as real subject or things-in-themselves as real objects exist. The first part of the *Critique*, the transcendental analytic, investigates what Kant calls the transcendental conditions of knowledge. The second part, the transcendental dialectic, shows that the mind assumes it knows the existence of metaphysical entities such as God, self and world on the basis of false inference.

Kant's objective was to turn Hume's natural belief into faith. He thought that Hume had gotten it partly right in saying that human beings do not have real knowledge of self and world, but only of knowledge of appearances. But Kant did not want to settle for a purely natural explanation like Hume's either, for Hume's analysis led to religious skepticism.

Kant realized that *the structure of the mind contributes the form used in building the framework of knowledge and communication*. He attempted to determine the fundamental building blocks of this formal structure by identifying basic logical categories resident in the mind that the mind uses to frame data as knowledge. While there is disagreement over whether Kant identified these structures correctly, there is general agreement among experts that the mind contributes actively to its frameworks of knowledge in collecting, organizing and presenting and communicating information.

Kant's insight into the active nature of the mind in structuring knowledge on the basis of received data, the "given," called into question the nature and reality of the "given" as being caused by things-in-themselves that supposedly constitute a world external to the mind. If the mind not only does not know things-in-themselves but also cannot know them because of its very nature, then excising the thing-in-itself in the interest of parsimony was a short step for Kant's successors to take. Fichte, Schelling, and then Hegel went on to develop German Idealism, followed by Schopenhauer, who was strongly influenced by reading Eastern thought. They gave primacy to *Geist*, a German term that can be translated into English as either "mind" or "spirit."

Hegel (1770-1831) enjoyed wide recognition academically until Karl Marx (1818-1883) turned the Hegelian dialectic on its head. Marx substituted matter for spirit as the underlying substance and motive force as a brand of monistic materialism paralleling scientific materialism but significantly different from it as the basis of an ethical, political and economic ideology. He launched a political movement based on dialectical materialism that still persists in various forms.

Ironically, Hegel is mostly remembered for the influence his dialectical methodology exerted on Marxist thought.

Philosophically, the advantage of both scientific materialism and dialectical materialism is that they are monistic rather than dualistic. Therefore, it is just a matter of taking a few steps to transform them into idealistic materialism, which is the view of perennial wisdom. For example, science is now discovering that mass is convertible into energy, and that due to the wave nature of “matter,” energy is primary. According to perennial wisdom, energy (not the same concept as physical energy, but similar) is the primary constituent of the subtle world, just as space underlies the gross world. The next step is to see energy in terms of intelligence, the primary constituent of the causal world.

Science has already had a taste of this insight, since it has discovered that energy is structured in terms of invariant principles, identifiable as scientific laws, that can be articulated as mathematical equations describing how motion (change) takes place at the level of the gross, observable world, thereby uniting intelligence and intelligibility. It may be remembered from previous exploration that the unity of intelligence and intelligibility is at the basis of the framework of idealistic monism. It can be argued that even science is moving in this direction, as many proponents of the “new science” have observed. This is further buttressed by the observation of prominent scientists that the developing scientific worldview, especially in the light of quantum mechanics and unified field theory, is comparable to ancient spiritual teachings based on mystical experience.

Backing up a bit historically, J. M. E. McTaggart (1866-1925) and F. H. Bradley (1846-1924) developed English versions of idealistic monism similar to Hegel.¹ However, these involved rather tedious metaphysical arguments that never took root in the more empirically oriented British mindset. The American Transcendentalists led by Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) was somewhat more successful in influencing the practically oriented American psyche, however. This influence was preserved mostly through New Thought Christianity, for example, in the work of Ernest Holmes and the Church of Religious Science.²

¹ There were a number of other influential British and American idealists of this period. Along with German idealism, British and American idealism produced many outstanding thinkers. They remain underappreciated at present since idealism has fallen out of favor and has been marginalized in the philosophical universe of discourse. However, recently it is making a comeback, especially owing to increasing interest in ancient idealism advanced in perennial wisdom, along with an increase of interest among humanistic and transpersonal psychologists.

² Holmes, Ernest. *The Science of Mind*. (New York: Robert M. McBride, 1938, Revised Edition).

On the continent, Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), the founder of phenomenology, also came to idealistic conclusions, especially in his last work, *Ideas*. However, like Hegel his methodology became much more popular than his idealism.

Although there was a confluence of influences from East and West in Alexandria in the first several centuries of the Christian era, there was little awareness of it in the European West until great nineteenth century scholars such as Max Müller made translations available in Western languages. The multivolume *Sacred Books of the East* provided scholarly translations of the principal texts of Zoroastrianism, the Vedic tradition, Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism in English.¹

In 1898, E.H. Whinfield's translation of Rumi's *Mathnawi* (also transliterated *Masnavi*) was published for the English-speaking world, and then R. A. Nicholson's in 1926-1933. Wilberforce-Clarke's translation of the *Divan* of Hafiz appeared in 1891. The *Mathnawi* and the *Divan* are principal works of Sufism composed by highly acclaimed Sufi Masters.² While they are great works of poetry in their own right, they are also mystical texts of the highest level.

Translations such as these brought the two parallel currents of Western monistic idealistic thought and Eastern mystical teaching into close touch for Western readers. Since then, the number of translations has exploded, along with rising interest in perennial wisdom.

Also important at this time was the development of Theosophy, an outgrowth of Eastern thought, into an influential esoteric movement in England and America. Theosophy spilled over into esoteric thought as an alternative to normative Christianity through the establishment, for example, of the Liberal Catholic Church, founded by Theosophist James Ingall Wedgwood (1883-1951).³

Western scholars knew of Eastern traditions for some time, but the public was scarcely aware of them at all in this period. Moreover, most scholars in the West were committed normative Christians, who either regarded Eastern teachings as outside religious norms or primitive in comparison to Western methodology and accomplishment. German philologists like Max Müller published many works on

¹ *Sacred Books of the East*. Fifty Volumes. (London: Oxford University Press, 1879-1910). URL=<<http://www.sacred-texts.com/sbe/index.htm#sbetab>>. Thirty six volumes are available online as of August, 2000.

² Reynold A. Nicholson. *The Mathnawi of Jalaluddin Rumi*, Six Volumes. (London: E.J.W. Gibb Memorial Trust New Series, Vol. 1 & 2, 1926, Vol. 3&4, 1929, Vol. 5 & 6, 1933). Hafiz (Khajeh Shamseddin Mohammad Hafiz Shirazi). *The Divan: The Divan-I-Hafiz*. Translated by Lieut. Col. H. Wilberforce-Clarke. (Calcutta: Government of India Central Printing Office, 1891).

³ C. W. Leadbeater. *The Science of the Sacraments*. (Adyar, India: Theosophical Publishing House, 1920).

Indian thought in the nineteenth century, and the Sacred Books of the East series in fifty volumes made English translations available.

However, it was not until Swami Vivekananda visited America to address the World Parliament of Religions in 1893, that a great Eastern teacher appeared personally in the West. Vivekananda (1863-1902) was a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836-1886). Swami Vivekananda wrote voluminously on the Vedic wisdom and founded an ashram for Vedantic monks and nuns that later proliferated worldwide in the form of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda centers and retreats.¹

Not long thereafter, Hazrat Inayat Khan (1882-1926) brought a universal approach of Sufism to the West in 1910. His teaching emphasized “the unity of religious ideals.” Paramahansa Yogananda (1893-1952)) then brought Kriya Yoga to the West, while also emphasizing Jesus as a great spiritual master. Although Sri Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950) never left the spot near Arunchala where he had settled himself, many Westerners visited him there and some wrote about his teaching of Advaita Vedanta, which became popular spiritual fare in the West.

Since all these teachers were spiritually advanced, their influence was and continues to be enormous, immeasurable by ordinary means. East and West were meeting, albeit not yet on a large scale. Some of Meher Baba’s key disciples were Westerners also, and he traveled in the West on numerous occasions, commencing in 1931. Inayat Khan had made Rabi’a Martin the head of his Sufi order in America, and after his death Murshida Martin brought her order to Meher Baba. He gave it a new charter and fresh instructions, and renamed it Sufism Reoriented.²

The monistic idealism of the East made its biggest inroads in the West, which is predominantly realistic and dualistic in outlook, as well as active and extroverted rather than contemplative and introspective, by influencing the avant-garde and the intelligentsia. The intelligentsia and artists who were influenced by these teachings relayed this influence to many more people through their work. This would include, for example, painter Wassily Kandinsky, Christopher Isherwood, Christmas Humphries, Aldous Huxley, Alan Watts, Mircea Eliade, and Joseph Campbell, to mention but a few well-known personalities of wide influence.³

¹ Swami Vivekananda’s address to the World Parliament of Religions is available online: URL=<<http://www.sriramakrishna.org/chicago.htm>>.

² Ivy O. Duce. *How A Master Works*.

³ Wassily Kandinsky. *Concerning the Spiritual in Art and Painting in Particular 1912*. (New York Wittenborn, Schultz, Inc 1947); *The Art of Spiritual Harmony*. (Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1914.)

More recently, George Lucas, wishing to create a modern myth, engaged Joseph Campbell as an advisor to his Star Wars film project. It is hardly possible to miss the relation of “the force” to mystical traditions, as commentators observed. Even though they may not have understood the message explicitly, children were not only delighted by this action series, but also influenced by the theme on which it is based. This trend also finds expression in the Matrix trilogy, in which a Vedantic influence has been seen, for example, in depicting the world as pure illusion. The cinematic arts are hugely influential in unconscious framing, comparable to the ancient mythologies on which children grew up and later came to see as symbolic spiritual teachings as they matured. Whether this will occur in the case of audiovisual media remains to be seen, but when Meher Baba visited Hollywood, he emphasized harnessing the power of media for spiritual purposes.

Zen became *au current* in the United States in the late Fifties and early Sixties through the writers of the Beat Generation. For example, the title of Jack Kerouac’s novel *Dharma Bums* brought West Coast Buddhism out of the closet and made it an “in” topic throughout the literary world. When Shunryu Suzuki, a Japanese Zen master (*roshi*), relocated to San Francisco from Japan in 1959, he found a thriving community had already gathered around the Soto Zen temple. Later, the community founded the San Francisco Zen Center.

In 1949, the People’s Republic of China invaded Tibet and annexed it, taking full control in 1959. At this time the fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gatsyo, emigrated to escape the Chinese and many lamas accompanied him. This resulted in the opening to the world of a previously closed tradition that was known primarily through legend. Soon, Tibetan Buddhism began to flourish in the West, where it found not only welcome refuge, but also a new home. Now Buddhism is one of the fastest growing spiritual traditions in the West, in spite of the rigor of its practice and the discipline of its simple lifestyle.

The stage was set for the burgeoning of interest in spirituality in the Sixties along with the counterculture. Eastern teachers flooded into the West, including my own meditation teacher, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. This is not to overlook the parallel traditions of Christian and Jewish mysticism that were also present, although mostly in the background. The growing interest in Eastern spirituality also resulted in renewed interest in Western spirituality and its contemplative traditions.

Maharishi Mahesh Yogi taught Eastern spirituality in a universal context and used terms that Western people could understand and appreciate. Recognizing that the West is scientifically and practically inclined, He brought out parallels of Eastern mystical teaching with Western science and encouraged scientists to undertake research into the physiological, psychological and social effects of the practice of meditation. A great deal of this research has been published in the scientific literature, beginning with the groundbreaking article on states of consciousness by

Robert Keith Wallace, which appeared in *Scientific American* in 1972.¹ This was happening at the same time that “the new science” was becoming popular, for which consciousness was a central focus. No longer was subjectivity ruled out.²

THE NEW SCIENCE

Even though science was generally opposed to the mystical, scientific advances offered support of the mystical vantage. As we have seen, the science of optics showed conclusively that the subject plays a key role in structuring the object of knowledge. Advances in physics in the twentieth century would dwarf that contribution.

Science took another giant step forward with the discovery of relatively and quantum physics, which indicated that the entire universe is composed of energy alone. Here, energy is conceived in terms of fundamental forces propagating in a quantum field. Mass is a state in which energy is densely compact, as revealed in Einstein’s famous equation, $E=mc^2$. Physics identified four fundamental forces, gravitational, electro-magnetic, and the strong and weak forces. The race was one to find the set of equations that would unify these forces and account for all physical phenomena in terms of a unified field.

Significant progress has been made in unified field theory, so it is now generally accepted that the material universe is the manifestation of this energy field in the sense of being explicable in terms of a fundamental set of equations the way Maxwell’s equations account for electro-magnetism and the electro-magnetic wave equation can be derived from the combination of Maxwell’s four equations dealing with electric fields, magnetic fields, electric charge and electric current. Maxwell did not discover all these equations, but he used them in an 1861 paper explaining electro-magnetism in terms of these four factors. However, he put forward eight equations in an 1864 paper. In 1884, Oliver Heaviside with Willard Gibbs put Maxwell’s initial four equations found in the 1861 paper in vector notation, the form in which they are presently used, so that some attribute the equations to Heaviside instead of Maxwell. From this development, we see that the evolution of such a set of equations is not necessarily the discovery of one person, like Einstein’s special theory of relativity, published in 1905, and the general theory, published in 1915. Many theoretical physicists are presently contributing to the development of a unified field theory.

¹ Robert Keith Wallace and Herbert Benson. “The Physiology of Meditation.” *Scientific American*. (February 1972, Vol. 226, No. 2).

² B. Alan Wallace. *Taboo of Subjectivity: Toward a New Science of Consciousness*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Consciousness also emerges from this field in the course of evolution, as nervous systems develop that are capable of supporting, first, sentience, then, awareness, and finally self-awareness. Even before proto-nervous systems appear, vegetation exhibits tropism, and the motion of one-celled organism is directed by proto-sentience.

Even though there are no scientific hypotheses yet formulated and tested concerning consciousness itself, a great deal is known about the nervous system as a necessary condition for sentient consciousness to exist, and as well as the human consciousness, which exhibits highly developed self-awareness, the ability to use concepts, language and tools, and refined feeling, and large scale organization, co-operation and creativity that is purposeful. Moreover, the science of psychology is now investigating the phenomena of mystical experiences seriously as perhaps an apex in the expression of human development.

While the biological theory of evolution strongly suggests that the evolution of species is the result of a long process of natural selection, this does not fatally undermine the possibility that the process of manifestation follows invariant patterns, just as the fact that subatomic particle emerge from the quantum field randomly doesn't vitiate the possibility of science.¹ These processes are random in so far as predicting the next occurrence but their emergence does follow identifiable patterns with a high degree of probability.

The fact is that human beings develop notation algorithms in mathematics that are later interpreted semantically through scientific hypothesis and experimental corroboration. For example, before Newton could state the laws of classical physics he needed a suitable notation to express his theory. Before he could proceed, he had to develop what we now know as calculus. It is true that he had to improve on the state of calculus at the time, he did not have to invent it himself, but he is credited with making significant advances. Similarly, Einstein needed geodesic geometry capable of being applied to the curvature of space in order to state the theory of

¹ Jack Graham included the following note in his comments on the manuscript: "...your allusion to natural selection may be outdated. Neo-Darwinism and its view of natural selection is now passé as a significant force in evolutionary change. Marguiles as a microbiologist has shown that half of the world's DNA is exchanged every day at the micro-organismic level. That is major change. Similarly symbiosis is a major change factor where we have independent organisms living within us, such as mitochondrial DNA and these play a far more major role in evolution than natural selection. Cell-biologist Bruce Lipton's (*The Biology of Belief*) work on cellular environments now makes it clear that cells create certain environments, and they recreate cellular development, and there is an interactive and developmental process here far more dramatic than our old picture of evolution. In fact it lends itself much more to your suggestion of the importance of frames.

relativity. Conveniently, Bernhard Riemann had developed the necessary algorithm decades previously, having published it in 1854.¹

The really astonishing thing in the philosophy of science is that the mind is able to generate logical structures that correspond to physical structures, from language to the mathematical notation used in science and technology. This suggests that there is an intrinsic connection between the structure of the mind and the structure of the world, which would clearly be the case if their source were the same. A major difficulty infecting dualistic realism, which sees matter and mind as inherently separate (as well as monistic materialism, which sees mind as material) is accounting for knowledge. Dualistic realism has difficulty explaining how mind knows material things, which are essentially different from it. Material monism has difficulty explaining how matter can know anything.

But, if consciousness is primary, then the intelligence of the mind and the intelligibility of the objects are found to co-exist in the confluence of intelligence and intelligibility. Indeed, mystics testify that at the ultimate level of realization intelligence and intelligibility, subject and object, are identical.

According to Plato's theory of knowledge the mind or intelligence "remembers" the intelligibility of things in terms of universal forms that are innate to it, when presented with them through experience. According to Aristotle, and articulated by Aquinas, in the act of experiencing the active function of the intellect impressed the intelligibility of things on the passive function, which receives and comprehends this intelligibility in terms of universal forms. The difference here is procedural rather than substantive.

Something similar to this is also the Eastern view. For example, Upasni Maharaj, Meher Baba's spiritual master, had this to say. The Sanskrit word *chaitanya* can be translated as "consciousness" or "intelligence," although its significance as he uses it is more refined than the common meaning of these English terms.

Now, when do we understand a thing? The reply is when our mind becomes one with it; it really means that when the Chaitanya—principle of life or Life-energy—underlying the mind joins with the Chaitanya of that particular object, we understand that object. It may be that a Chaitanya of a particular object attracts the mind, or that the Chaitanya

¹ Jack Graham observes: "William Irwin Thompson (*Transforming History: A Curriculum for Cultural Evolution*, Lindisfarne Books, Great Barrington, MA, 2001) makes the case for how mathematics was used to structure reality from the very beginning of civilization and culture, how the third millennium BCE relied on enumeration (regular mathematics) and counting to create cities, how the Greeks needed geometry to build the Parthenon and society, how Newton needed calculus to create what became transoceanic culture, and how imaginary and irrational mathematics has opened up exploration of galactic space."

underlying the mind joins with the Chaitanya of that object; in any case, when both the Chaitanyas identify themselves with each other, that thing becomes known. We find that some things we understand very quickly while for some we take a longer time, it means that the extent to which the Chaitanya underlying the mind is able to join with the Chaitanya of a thing, that thing is understood by us to that extent.¹

Moreover, according to the Vedic tradition, name and form are identical in transcendental consciousness, and only appear to bifurcate and become successively gross in the process of manifestation that leads from transcendent to the causal sphere, then to the subtle sphere, and finally to the gross sphere. At more inclusive dimensions of knowledge what appears to be separate in the gross world is realized as being “two sides of the same coin” — intelligence and intelligibility — which are characteristics of the subjective and objective poles of a singular wholeness.

The best candidate for a primary “stuff” seems to be consciousness. Many who subscribe to scientific materialism resist this as smacking too much of a religious solution, since most religious world-pictures take the consciousness of God to be primary. However, perennial wisdom counters that this hypothesis of the primacy of consciousness is not based on faith or reasoning but on well-attested mystical experience.

Vedanta takes consciousness as primary, without reference to a personal God. Taoism, Qabalah, Sufism, Christian mystics and other mystics who report on nonduality also express this state through negative attribution and claim that the nature and character of the nondual state is ineffable but real. While Buddhism holds that appeal to any conception of God as substantial is unverifiable and also contains inherent contradictions, as a practical matter Buddhism seeks to realize the essence of awareness as transcendental and calls this realization, “wisdom” (Sanskrit: *prajna*).

Consciousness remains largely a mystery to science, however. There are two principal theories regarding it. The first is that consciousness is an emergent property of matter, appearing only when physical nervous systems conducive to it are developed, which occurs quite late in the evolutionary game as a random outcome. The opposing view is that consciousness is a primary factor, from which energy/intelligence proceed, and which unfolds purposefully through evolution to express itself in a form through which it can become aware of itself. The scientific jury is still out on this.

Perennial wisdom holds that consciousness is primary and that science will ultimately discover this. In this view transcendental consciousness is the source of

¹ Upasni Maharaj. *Talks of Sadguru Upasni Maharaj*. Volume II. Part 6. (Sakori, Maharashtra: Shri Upasni Maharaja Ashrama, 1923.)

empirical consciousness as consciousness associated with a physical nervous system and measurable in terms of it.¹ Transcendental consciousness manifests first as intelligence (causal sphere), then as energy (subtle sphere) and finally in a physical nervous system as brain/mind (gross sphere).

Mystics testify on the basis of experience and perennial wisdom teaches that consciousness is primary. This view lies at the foundation of the new science.

This should not be confused with “scientific creationism” and “intelligent design,” which are a veiled attempt to account for the Biblical worldview of creation in a pseudo-scientific format for teaching in public education. “Intelligent design” is not a scientific explanation. It is framework for interpreting science in terms of theism.

The frames of pantheism and panentheism are better suited for this than theism since they find the ground of intelligence inherent in the universe instead of imposed from outside by a *deus ex machina*. Moreover, the creative process involved can never be expressed in terms of scientific hypotheses testable on the basis of empirical evidence because the fundamental principle adduced to explain it lies outside the system it is adduced to explain. Causal arguments such as this which are neither testable in fact nor in principle are philosophical rather than scientific. Therefore, such frames of reference are in the domain of the philosophy of science rather than science. Such speculation is legitimate in the philosophy of science, but it cannot pretend to be scientific explanation grounded in the scientific method.

The evidence for the primacy of consciousness is that the data do conform to invariant principles imposed not from without but discovered through the application of human intelligence. Mathematicians develop syntactical systems by formulating algorithms expressed in a notation. The logic underlying this process of discovery and invention is inherent in intelligence.

¹ Jack Graham points out that intelligence is not limited to neural systems. “We realize that first consciousness is throughout the body, but not limited to it. I believe there are at least four other non-neural systems of knowing, such as the immune system. The endothelium (lining of the blood vessels) is both causal and non-causal in its “knowing.” There is the “field awareness” probably electromagnetic in nature where we feel the look of others, we can tell others are in a perfectly dark room, etc. The data seems to suggest that we have more than two hundred senses, not five. The data suggests we pick up four billion bits of information a second. There is also “enthymia,” that “thought of the heart” which is a “fifth brain” but totally non localized and functions as a “torus” allowing us to directly attune and adapt to other toruses, i.e., other creatures, the earth, the solar system, the galaxy.” Note a torus is a doughnut shaped pattern, It is characteristic of circulating energy, e.g., in the brain. Itzhak Bentov. *Stalking the Wild Pendulum: On the Mechanics of Consciousness*. (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1977).

What is most surprising, however, is that some of these algorithms correspond to facts such that they become the language in terms of which such observations are explained by a scientific theory capable of empirical corroboration. This is the meaning of the oft-heard saying that mathematics is the language of science.

Applying a purely syntactical (logical, mathematical) notation in order to describe observable facts and explain them in terms of logical relationships such as entailment (conditionality) is called *semantic interpretation*. An algorithm that is interpreted semantically is called a *scientific theory*, and that which the theory describes is a *theoretical model*. Empirical testing is possible to the degree that a model can be compared experimentally to what is the case through observation and measurement.

Syntactical notations are applied semantically as models in creating scientific hypotheses and theories that are testable in terms of empirical evidence. Semantic interpretation of mathematical models in science connects logical, syntactical, a priori knowledge derived from purely mental operations with observational, synthetic, a posteriori knowledge derived from sense experience and empirical experimentation.

A question then arises as to how this correlation of mind and world occurs through the medium of thought and gets expressed through language. If mind and matter are entirely separate and distinct, as dualism presupposes, it does not seem possible at all. Are thought and communication that effectively mesh with events merely a matter of happy coincidence?

Or perhaps there is only a “nominal,” arbitrary connection. However, this seems hard to understand in the case of scientific theories, which are highly predictive. This constant correlation of knowledge with events does not seem to be at all arbitrary, accidental, or coincidental.

But rather, it seems to be quite orderly, at least in the sense of constant and predictable. Indeed, scientific laws are expressions of such invariance.

How does invariance arise if the collection of elements (atoms, subatomic particles) is truly random, as the notion of inert matter would suggest? How does that matter become aware of such invariant relationships through increasing complexity of organization? Increasing complexity alone does not seem to account for it.

The close correspondence of thought to things seems to indicate that there is an intrinsic connection between them. The ancients explained this connection through the notion of intelligibility. Mind as a type of intelligence is capable of conforming itself to the intelligibility of things.

But if matter is the only reality, as materialists assume, how is it that matter is not only intelligible but also intelligent? For it would seem that matter is essentially

inert. Therefore, the problem of explaining how knowledge takes place in a purely material medium has not only not been overcome, there is no obvious direction from which a solution would come, other than by equating thought with something like neural activity or chemical changes. But that seems to beg the question in that while there may be a constant conjunction observed between thought and neural activity and biochemistry, there is no compelling reason to think that this is the entire explanation, especially in the face of the mystics' testimony to the contrary.

The advantage of taking consciousness as primary is that it is a more economical and elegant alternative than realistic dualism or materialistic monism. On one hand, in taking mind and matter as separate, realistic dualism has to make the connection between thoughts and things arbitrary. If matter is taken as primary, then it has to be explained how inert matter can generate subjectivity, which is reflexive, and at higher levels, intentional, something materialists have not been able to do.

What is known scientifically is that the interaction of energy states and "consciousness" gives rise to a *subjective* perception of the *objective* world in knowledge. This relation of a subject and object to yield knowledge is called "intentionality."

"Intentionality" in this sense means that consciousness as subjective is always consciousness of an object. But in addition to being consciousness of objects either in the world (things) or in the mind (thoughts), consciousness can become conscious of itself. That is to say, *consciousness is reflexive*.

A principal characteristic of human consciousness that distinguishes it from less capable forms is the capacity for self-reference. All human beings are self-conscious in that they know they exist. Even small children can identify the mirror image of their bodies, which most animal species cannot learn to do.¹

However, even though they are self-conscious, most human beings do not know the *nature* of their own consciousness. Therefore, assuming this is possible, as mystics assert, then this knowledge of the nature of consciousness is "privileged." That is to say, such experience is available only in more expanded states of awareness than are ordinarily experienced.

Different levels of consciousness construct and project different perceptions of the world on the basis of the type and condition of the nervous system involved. Scientific research shows, for example, that cats are color blind since they lack the requisite receptors. Hence, they inhabit a world that appears different to them than it does to humans. But animal perception is not necessarily limited in relation to

¹ Julian Keenan, Gordon G. Gallup, and Dean Falk. *The Face in the Mirror: The Search for the Origins of Consciousness*. (New York: Ecco Press, 2003). H.S. Terrace & J. Metcalfe. (Editors). *The Missing Link in Cognition: Origins of Self-Reflective Consciousness*. (New York: Oxford, 2004).

ours; for instance, dogs have a far more extensive range of hearing and smell. Being much more sensitive to sound and scent than humans, dogs inhabit a world whose context emphasizes this. Human beings have learned how to train dogs in order to harness this extra capacity, e.g., for hunting, as watchdogs, and most recently for locating concealed drugs and bombs by smell. Different nervous systems support different types of awareness and different processes of knowing, therefore, yield different constructs of what appears as “reality.”

From the vantage of quantum mechanics, everything emerges from the quantum field alone. Arising from the quantum field are subjective and objective poles, consciousness and the material world. The material world, as humans know it, is an interaction between themselves and energy states as they emerge from the quantum field. We take for “real” what largely results from our own contribution through the act of knowing. We take for real something that isn’t the given it appears to be, but contains much that we bring to it.

We ourselves are deeply involved in the structuring of the given as a world of objects in relationship with each other, transforming over time in ongoing events. Because we are so intimately involved in structuring the given, we cannot isolate the given from our knowledge.

The upshot is that we are convinced on the basis of common sense that there is a given that exists independently of us, since we do not either chose or control what happens. But we do not know what the basis of this conviction is in terms of direct acquaintance with things-in-themselves independently of sense data and the mind’s contribution to organizing these data. One thing is relatively certain, however. Things in themselves are not identical with the data we receive, because appearances vary on the basis of the functioning of the senses, as we all must learn to our chagrin as we age, and our senses become less and less acute.

Realists hold that there is “something out there” underlying the given, which gives it reality independently of us. Invoking the principle of parsimony, idealists hold that consciousness is primary. They propose that just as the subjective pole arises out of consciousness, so, too, does the objective. The energy that is the one stuff generates both the inanimate and animate, sentient and non-sentient, consciousness and matter. It can do this because energy and consciousness are one.

To date, this is a philosophical matter and the competing theories have not yet been framed as scientific hypotheses capable of being tested empirically in such a way as to resolve these problems. On one hand, so-called common sense indicates that the given is real and independent of our minds, producing a conviction of the reality of the external world in us. On the other hand, when one examines the conditions of knowledge rigorously, one is led to the conclusion that what we “know” is taking place in our own mind and brains. In addition, mystics testify that both the given as the objective pole and mind as the subjective pole emerge from a

common source in which consciousness is primary, where “consciousness” is defined as the unity of subjective pole and objective pole in the subject-object relationship that is characteristic of knowledge.

In the history of thought, common sense has generally been proven wrong by rigorous methodology. First, the science of optics showed that we see reflections of light rather than things in themselves. Similar discoveries were made about the other senses as well. Secondly, the theory of evolution showed that natural selection is responsible for diversity, not difference of “essence” or “nature.” Thirdly, relativity showed that we inhabit a non-simultaneous universe, in which visible phenomena are relative to the speed of light and auditory phenomena to the speed of sound. This shows that the conviction we have about perceiving the state of the universe as it exists at any moment of time is a construct of the mind.

Fourthly, quantum physics shows that underlying the diversity of phenomena is a single “stuff,” energy. At the quantum level energy behaves in ways that are considered to be contradictory at the classical level. For example, “matter” has a wave nature and also a particle nature, depending on the observer, and something can be two places at once when localized by observation, and no where and everywhere when non-localized. Clearly, this takes us far beyond the presumption of common sense that what we see is real (realism) and is separate from us (dualism), and in the direction where everything is reducible to a single substance that involves consciousness if it is not essentially consciousness.

Many expect the next step to be the discovery of the nature and role of consciousness as fundamental. This involves not only consciousness, but also life itself. Perennial wisdom also attacks these questions in the laboratory of the soul and seeks answers through personal revelation.

TRANSITION FROM REALISM TO IDEALISM

We are now in a position to see the historical unfolding of the dialectic between realism and idealism. In ancient times, the primary concern was with the questions, “What is,” where the answer aimed at was an explanation in terms of first principles or fundamental causes (Greek: *arche*). It was presumed that we already are in contact with what is.

This presumption persisted until after the Renaissance, when the rise of science at the beginning of modern times began to question it. With the rise of scientific discovery in the seventeenth century, the role of the subject in perception was realized. The study of optics, for example, showed that light falling on the eye influences perception at least as much as the object from which the light is reflected. Moreover, the lens of the eye also adds its share. So it began to be obvious that objects are as they *seem* rather than as they *are*. Then, the question turned to, “What can we know about what is, beyond what appears to us?”

This was further elaborated with the discovery of relativity that the universe that the mind perceives is not existent simultaneously. The “stars” we see and take to be existent in the way we see them as we see them are actually the light emitted by them millions of years ago.

The next great step was taken when it was realized that the mind contributes a great deal to structuring objects on the basis of a priori, subjective conditions. The mind actually creates its objects to a significant degree, in the sense that we do not simply see objects that are “out there.” We see whatever is “out there” as objects. There is a huge difference between seeing and seeing-as, in that, in the first case, the mind is written on, like a blank slate. In the second case, the mind structures its objects on the basis of a given that it does not know directly.

In recent times, two great advances were made. The first was the development of the philosophy of language. This inquiry revealed that the question, “What do we know?” is premature. We must first answer the question, “What can we say?” That is, we must first determine how language functions. This investigation revealed that the notation employed profoundly influences thought. Often, we think illogically and think we know something when we do not.

The second recent discovery was that of quantum mechanics. Not only does quantum mechanics reveal that monism is essentially correct, it also suggests that consciousness is a quantum effect more than a classical one. This explains why classical methods have not been successful in explaining consciousness. The energy that quantum mechanics discovered as the one “stuff” is not merely physical. Consciousness directly affects the wave behavior of this energy field, causing a non-localized wave to “collapse” into a localized particle.

This suggests that consciousness is not simply an emergent property of physical energy, but rather it is primary, involved in the very makeup of the one stuff. For example, consciousness may be viewed as the subjective pole and physical energy the objective pole of a unified field, which itself is neither conscious nor unconscious, but rather the source of consciousness and matter, organic and inorganic, animate and the inanimate. The invariant intelligible principles underlying this energy field get expressed in part as the invariant laws of nature that science discovers as the basis of changing states of matter. They are also expressed in terms of the invariant intelligible principles of logic and mathematics, which provide insight into the fundamental structure of human consciousness as a manifestation of this field.

Were these connections to be made, the program of science and that of spirituality would reflect each other. According to spiritual teachers such as Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, speaking on the basis of their own mystical insight, this is the direction in which science is unfolding. According to Maharishi, the unified field

now at the fore of scientific inquiry is identical with the nondual state of consciousness that mystics have realized from time immemorial.

My own premonition is that we now stand on the brink of a reversal of the contemporary mindset and the rising of a new *Zeitgeist*. Until recently the prevailing mindset has been dominated by dualism and realism. It seems to me that the confluence of the rivers of science and spirituality in the ocean of nonduality is about to shift that mindset to monism and idealism. Most are probably familiar with the optical illusions of Gestalt psychology that can be seen from differing perspectives, such as a duck or a rabbit. This is the sort of attitude shift that I envision taking place, as understanding of how subjective knowledge is grows, and the discoveries of quantum mechanics replace classical physics in public awareness.

The shift changes nothing in the visual field, other than the attitude and appreciation one has of it. Instead of seeing oneself in the world and the world as separate, one sees the world as one's experience of it.

The eye itself is not in the visual field; the visual field is the horizon of vision that does not include the eye itself but only what appears for the eye. Similarly, the "I" is not in the world, but is its conscious limit. As the limitations of the "I" recede, one's world expands, in the sense that its horizon includes more and more of the known and less and less of the unknown.¹ The task of religion, philosophy and science is to demarcate this horizon between the known and the unknown. Science does this in terms of that which observable and measurable. Philosophy does it through reason. Religion accomplishes this on the basis of "revelation" as the testimony of prophets and seers. Intuition and inspiration seek to push the horizon back through genius, while mystical experience can succeed in expanding the horizon of consciousness to infinity, thereby embracing the gross, subtle and causal worlds, as well as their transcendent source.

EXPLANATION

Even if mystics experience a nondual state, what guarantee is there that this, too, is not merely a mental event or even a psychological aberration? Without providing an explanatory account, testimony to experience is hardly decisive, in spite of great conviction. After all, those who follow the dictates of common sense are just as convinced of the reality of the given as the mystic is of the reality of union. Simply citing the experience is not sufficient.

Human knowledge has advanced through explanation. Aristotle observed that speculation begins in wonder. Through speculation alternative accounts are proposed. At first, these accounts were argued on the basis of reason and logic. But

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Translated by D. F. Pears & B. F. McGuinness. (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), 5.633-5.641, p. 69-70.

great advances made when explanations were framed as hypotheses capable of being corroborated by empirical testing became obvious and science eclipsed philosophy. For science, knowledge is the conjunction of experience and understanding. Some time ago, philosophy and science went their separate ways, often hostile to each other. Science had an even more precarious relationship with theology and religion. Now we are at the point at which science is meeting philosophy, theology and religion, including spirituality, as more and more people are taking mystical experience seriously as not only a form of human cognition but also perhaps the epitome of it.

For example, scientists are now seriously investigating meditation and finding that what was once the province of spirituality has important scientific ramifications that also account for the previously unsubstantiated claims of mystics and masters. This has led to interest in cooperation among formerly disparate groups.

Generally what has happened previously is that philosophers have attempted to organize a subject matter in terms of key fundamentals, by advancing principles, causes, and reasons. Later, when advances in understanding and technology permit, the field came under scientific scrutiny, and a science was born from the womb of philosophy. This is now taking place in the case of the study of mysticism and the types of spirituality purporting to culture it.

In the course of the history of philosophy, monists pointed out that dualists must explain how the mind knows reality if it is not essentially connected with it. Moreover, dualists must account for knowledge of things-in-themselves when science has shown that we know in term of sense data and the brain's processing of this data. This data processing is an operation that takes place through nerve firings in the cerebral cortex, structuring "reality" in terms of universal features that do not exist as such in the world of objects. For example, universals such as "man," designating the set of all male human beings, do not exist outside of brain's mind as perceivable entities. Yet, such universals are the substance of the world we structure in thought and language on the basis of perception, not ancillary to the process.

Moreover, scientific study of how the senses operate reveals that even knowledge of so-called external objects and events is mediated by sense data, which only represent presumed external objects. Sense data manifestly do not bring the presumed objects themselves into the mind. How, then, are we to know that there are even objects "out there."

Monists hold that we can know the nature of reality itself because everything is the manifestation of consciousness. The mind is the subjective pole of consciousness and the world the objective pole: Existence is one, albeit bipolar like electric current.

Science has shown incontrovertibly that sentient subjects (people, animals) perceiving objects (things, events) in the world do so by means of sense data. The

mind assumes that these sense data correspond with an external reality. However, monistic philosophers point out that this is merely an assumption, a “meme” that has gained an evolutionary foothold because it leads to successful coping with the environment. However, like many other memes promoting evolutionary advantage, it is accepted as self-evident when it is not. It is based chiefly on the experience that so-called external events cannot be controlled by the will, as can mental events like thoughts. But this is a reason for belief, not proof based on evidence.

Moreover, quantum physics has strongly suggested that underlying the material world studied by classical physics is a quantum realm in which classical laws often seem to be contradicted. One could say that classical physics describes the world as seen by dualistic realists and that quantum physics describes a structure underlying it that describes the worldview comparable to monistic idealists. A fundamental conclusion of quantum physics is that energy is a single basic “stuff,” and that mass is densely compact, congealed energy.

The wave-nature of energy fields seems much closer to the nature of consciousness than the particle-nature of visible matter, which is the subject of classical physics. Students of contemporary physics and perennial wisdom have pointed out remarkable similarities.¹

We have not yet arrived at a scientific account of consciousness or life that would resolve the question of monism versus dualism, idealism versus realism, and account for mysticism and perennial wisdom. But encouraging steps are being taken in that direction through interdisciplinary cooperation. Not only is such inquiry no

¹ Sir Arthur Eddington had suggested this in the famous words with which he concluded *Space, Time and Gravitation*: “The theory of relativity has passed in review the whole subject-matter of physics. It has unified the great laws, which, by the precision of their formulation and the exactness of their application, have won the proud place in human knowledge which physical science holds today. And yet, in regard to the nature of things, this knowledge is only an empty shell- a form of symbols. It is knowledge of structural form, and not knowledge of content. All through the physical world runs that unknown content, which must surely be the stuff of our consciousness.” Sir Arthur Eddington. *Space, Time and Gravitation: An Outline of the General Relativity Theory*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1921).

Fritjof Capra’s *The Tao of Physics*, and Gary Zukav’s *The Dancing Wu Li Masters* were two of the first popular contemporary accounts. Since then there have been many other. Fritjof Capra. *The Tao of Physics*. (Berkeley: Shambhala, 1975). Zukav, Gary. *The Dancing Wu Li Masters: An Overview of the New Physics*. (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1979).

longer banished from the universe of discourse, it is now a “hot topic,” being considered by serious thinkers from a variety of disciplines.¹

PERENNIAL WISDOM AS EXPLANATION

Most interesting for our purposes is that from time immemorial mystics have testified to the oneness of reality. Masters have also taught the why and how of this paradox of knowledge, which we will explore in the course of this endeavor. While it must be emphasized that the ground of perennial wisdom lies in mystical experience, perennial wisdom also provides a level of explanation. If mystical experience is indeed based on deeper insight into reality than ordinary or “gross” consciousness is capable, as it claims, then its explanations would also be truer in the overall scheme of things. Let us see what perennial wisdom has to say.

Mystics have employed different logical constructs to explain their experience. For example, the Vedic tradition draws the distinction between the manifest (Sanskrit: *vyakta*) and unmanifest (*avyakta*), as well as reality (*brahman*) and appearance (*maya*). Neoplatonists and others spoke in terms of emanation in contrast to separate creation, for example, comparing the One to the sun and world to its rays. Qabalists following the lead of Rabbi Isaac Luria spoke of the “contraction” (Hebrew: *tzimtzum*) of God’s being.

Mystics also employ the way of affirmation and negation, but somewhat differently. The ways of affirmation and negation are manners of expression but they also relate to the principal spiritual methodologies, the *via negativa* and the *via positiva*. The *via negativa* is *apophatic*, and proceeds by negating all difference to arrive at nonduality as the transcendent source. The *via positiva* is *kataphatic* and proceeds using all means, senses, feelings, imagination, understanding, reasoning and intuition in search of the immanent ground as the presence of God within self and world.

The apophatic *via negativa* aims at nonduality by transcending difference and distinction. It uses chiefly negation as its means of expression. It is the way of denial of all attributes and qualities to the impersonal, formless and unchanging Absolute. The *kataphatic via positiva*, aiming at nonduality through integration of opposites, employs primarily affirmative means of expression. It is the way of balancing and integrating everything in terms of the ultimate wholeness of being as being, while appearing to be this and that.

The way of negation as a manner of expression holds that terms used with reference to what exceeds conception and imagination, like the Transcendent, the Absolute, God, and One do not apply at all in the way that these terms are used in

¹ The credentials of many people involved in this project are prestigious. For example, Brian Josephson is a Noble-laureate in physics.

discourse. Hence, they are, in the final analysis, nonsensical and only cause confusion. Buddha was very clear on this point, for instance, and he eschewed “God-talk” for this reason. He counseled busying oneself with spiritual practice leading to realization instead of wasting one’s time trying to understand the unfathomable. The *via negativa* is a spiritual practice involving self-emptying and self-effacement, and it eschews conceptualization of any form. It is often expressed using negation as a manner of speaking about spiritual matters. For example, Buddhists call the ultimate, “void” or “emptiness” (Sanskrit *shunyata*).

The way of affirmation as a manner of expression holds that even though terms cannot apply univocally to what is beyond perception, conception and imagination, it is still possible to point in that direction using analogy. While the way of negation would say that God is unfathomable, the way of affirmation would say that God is like the ocean. The intended denotation of these two expressions, “unfathomable” and “ocean” are similar, but the connotations are different. The *via negativa* puts a negative spin on expression; and the *via positiva*, a positive one.

The *via positiva* is a spiritual practice that involves discovering God’s immanence through God’s “scent” or “tracks” in the world. Therefore, the *via positiva* often uses affirmation as a manner of expression, for instance, speaking of God’s light in the soul, God’s beauty in nature, or God’s awesome power in a storm. Placing God outside one’s self, e.g., as Beloved or Master, through prayer or obedience is also an example of affirmative expression, for contemplative prayer and loving remembrance of and obedience to the Master use apparent separation in order to realize divine union.

The mystical terms used by saints, sages, seers, masters, and prophets are not empty concepts for them; they are living symbols pointing beyond themselves to the experience of these mystics, even terms like “emptiness.” Zen Patriarch Hui-Neng cautioned: “When you hear me talk about the Void (*shunyata*), do not fall into the idea of vacuity.”¹ Similarly, the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* wrote:

What is he that calleth it nought? Surely it is our outer man and not our inner. Our inner man calleth it All.²

Another way of saying this is that what is everywhere is nowhere. We are unconscious of space, for example, because it is everywhere. But it can only be

¹ Osvald Siren. *The Chinese on the Art of Painting*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1963), p. 95. Hui-neng (637-713) was the Sixth Patriarch of Ch’an Buddhism after its founder, the Indian Master, Bodhidharma who brought Buddhism to China .c 500 C.E.

² Anon. *The Cloud of Unknowing*. (14th century) Edited by Dom Justin McCann. (London: Burnes Oates and Washbourne, 1924-1943), LXVIII. Compare Exodus 14: 20. “It was a cloud and darkness to them [by day], but it gave light by night to these.”

everywhere by being nowhere and no-thing. However, without space nothing else could be. Space is the unmanifest ground of the manifest. It is the “shadow” of the infinite, formless, unchanging Absolute at the level of the gross, just as energy is the shadow of the Absolute in the subtle realm and intelligence, in the causal.

When we appreciate this, what seems illogical when taken literally appears instead as paradoxical. What is a manner of expression to the non-mystic is a report of intimate spiritual experience for the mystic. In this light, mystical testimony shines forth as metaphorical and symbolic, whereas when it is taken literally, it may be confusing or even seem contradictory to us, instead of paradoxical.

Mystical experience may sound contradictory, for example, “seeing one’s face before birth,” “meeting the one not born of woman,” and “making the two one.”¹ But according to mystics these paradoxes are resolved in the experiences themselves. Those who traverse the path report that such is the case. Understanding mystical experience is beyond the capability of the mind to grasp on its own, either from ordinary understanding and reason, or by way of symbol and analogy. Spiritual understanding is provided by the experience itself.

Ch’an (Chinese) or Zen (Japanese) uses such paradoxes as contemplative aids in culturing this experience.² From time immemorial, virtually all religions encouraged hearing the scriptures or stories, and now that printing has made the texts available, reading is generally encouraged as well. These scriptures and stories contain manner of expression that transcend ordinary understanding and stretch the mind. This is particularly true of *The Gospel of Thomas*.

Because it is based on intimate experience, the mystics’ manner of expression touches the heart, whereas philosophy and theology often come across as spiritually dry and overly intellectual. Interestingly, Aristotle, who was one of the greatest rational thinkers in history, reportedly spent his last years contemplating the myths.

It is no accident that mystics and masters have often used poetry as their preferred medium. In the Vedic tradition, the *Bhagavad Gita* is the scripture that is best known and most loved among all sects and schools. Thousands of years after it was revealed, many people today still chant its verses in Sanskrit as a daily practice. It is but a small part of one of the world’s longest epic poems, the *Mahabharata*. The Vedas, too, are chanted in metered verse. Many Jews chant the Psalms as a practice, and many Muslims, the Qur’an. Buddhists, too, chant their sutras, and religious Taoists do likewise. Christian monks chant the Divine Office at appointed times throughout the day and night.

¹ Saying 22.

² Chinese *ch’an* transliterates Sanskrit *dhyana*, meaning “transcendental meditation,” or the natural, effortless flow of awareness on itself instead of toward objects. The Japanese transliteration of *ch’an* is *zen*.

Some of the greatest Sufi masters, e.g., Rumi and Hafiz, also relied chiefly on poetry to express perennial wisdom. Ancient traditions often preferred the teaching story and song. In the Hebrew tradition, this manifested in the form of Biblical stories like the creation accounts, the Fall, and the Flood, and so forth, as well as midrash, mashals, and parables, and psalms and songs of praise. These modalities were imported into Christianity and adapted. Native American spirituality also employs teaching stories and chants. Even the aphoristic style of many spiritual writings is poetic, that is, symbolic, in its approach. Zen koans and Japanese haiku poetry come to mind here, as well as Vedic and Buddhist sutras. In approaching these writings, it is necessary to distinguish the manner in which the account is couched in order to access the matter it contains.

Regarding God's existence with respect to the soul and the world, the way of negation denies real existence to the world on its own. Regarding God's existence with respect to the soul, the *via negativa* seeks God in the depths of soul as "pure spirit."

According to the way of negation, only God has independent, unconditional, self-sufficient existence, while the being of creation is dependent and conditional. This implies that only God is real in the sense of substantial and unchanging, whereas creation is unreal in the sense of accidental and changing. Here, "real" is defined as that which exists in itself (existence) and for itself (consciousness), while the unreal exists only through another (cause, condition). That which depends upon another for its existence is like an image in a mirror, a shadow compared with the thing, or the reflection of the moon in a pond in comparison to the actual moon.

In this view, the whole of creation is as nothing in comparison with the absolute reality of God. In contrast to God, creation is mere appearance, "illusion" according to Vedanta, "insubstantial" or "empty" according to Buddhism, "imagination" according to Sufism, and "dead" according to *The Gospel of Thomas*. This is the way of negation at work, denying real existence to anything that comes to be and passes away, and taking as real only that which does not change. What changes is material. What does not change is spiritual, which is the essential nature of both God and soul. Thus, spirit is called "living," and matter, "dead."

Distinguishing that which is unchanging for that which changes is not the result of conceptual analysis however. Its realization is gained only in experience. I recall the Venerable Kalu Rinpoche describing a practice of Tibetan Buddhism in which monks sit alone, immobile, for long periods, working up to several years. Kalu said that after a stint of three years, three months, three weeks and three days, one has some idea of that which changes and that which does not. Kalu confined himself in a narrow cage for long periods. This is clearly not a way for the fainted-hearted.

The second is the way of affirmation. As a manner of expression, the way of affirmation says that God has both an unmanifest aspect and a manifest aspect. God

is eternally unmanifest, whereas creation is God's manifest aspect. God is unmanifest as transcendent. God is also unmanifest as immanent. Creation is the "expression" or "manifestation" of God, the transcendent aspect of God being its source and the immanent aspect of God, its ground. Since God is indivisibly one, God as the transcendent source is identical with God as the immanent ground. This distinction is only an intellectual one, necessitated by the limitations of human knowing.

By analogy, the transcendent aspect of God is the Father in heaven, while the immanent aspect of God is like the soul and creation like the body that the soul enlivens through its presence. The immanent aspect of God is also the Indwelling Spirit in Christian theology. In this view, everything is holy, even that which comes to be and passes away. The *via positiva* emphasizes this in its expression and seeks to experience it through its practices.

Science also furnishes analogies used in spiritual expression. In terms of contemporary scientific explanation, mass is actually densely packed energy. According to the first law of thermodynamics, energy is neither created nor destroyed but rather transformed in the process of change. In spiritual terminology, this physical energy field that science has recently discovered is the "reflection" of God's power expressed in the finite, which constitutes the subtle world.

Subtler than this is intelligence as a field of invariance, patterning the field of energy. Change also takes place on the basis of invariant patterns, which science identifies as the "laws of nature" that energy transformation is observed to follow. This field of intelligence, yet to be discovered by science, is the causal world.¹ According to spiritual terminology, this intelligence is a "reflection" of God's knowledge expressed in the finite. In both cases, the subtle and the causal, the "reflection" is not reality. But neither is it sheer nothing, being God's reflection. This is the inner meaning, for example, of the Platonic forms, especially as revealed

¹ One of the unsolved mysteries of the philosophies of science, mathematics and language is how something apparently a priori and purely subjective matches exactly with the external world. For example, it might be argued that Euclidian geometry was abstracted from observation. But Riemannian and Lobashevskian geometries were developed subjectively, prior to their scientific applications. Similarly, Richard Feynman said of Einstein's discovery of relativity that he didn't see how Einstein ever thought of it. These anomalies seem to point to the conclusion that consciousness and the world, subject and object, are not as separate as they seem, but are "joined at the hip." According to mystics, as well as Plato's philosophy, the causal realm is the link between the invariance of consciousness and matter. Plato's forms or ideas are causal invariants, which Plato claims exist in a metaphysical state beyond change as patterns in terms of which objects appear and transform.

in the Cave Analogy of *The Republic*, which symbolizes the inner worlds through which mystics make their way in experience.¹

God's "reflection" in the finite also includes the life of animate beings and the intelligence of sentient beings, in addition to the existence of all finite beings. Hence, God can be "seen" everywhere in His reflection. Since God is one, His reflection is identical with Him, although this reflection appears only obscurely in finite minds. This is similar to the way a painter attempts to capture the spirit of the subject, knowing that the reality cannot be communicated fully through the medium of paint on canvas.

The mistake of common sense is to confuse a shadow or reflection with reality. The mistake of reductionism is to miss the truth that the world is God's shadow or reflection in the finite. Hence, both ordinary common sense and scientific materialism fail to see that all is holy.

The soul is embodied, but it is not body. The soul is in the world but it is not of the world. Rather, the soul stands at the junction between finite and infinite. The paradox of transcendent and immanent is therefore resolved in the soul's knowledge of itself. When the soul identifies with a finite body and mind, it forgets its true status. But the soul contains the seed of the truth within it that awakens it to the numinous. This idea of the holy draws the soul toward knowledge of its true nature.

This drawing of the soul toward God takes place through a dialectical interplay of opposites. One step is to see the numinous in the spirit world. This is the basis of the spirituality of shamanistic religions, for instance. Another step in the dialectic is to reject God as being in things, and to posit God as separate and transcendent. This is the state of the normative religions of the West. A synthesis takes place in the realization that God is transcendent but not separate, for then God would be relative and limited. Therefore, the world must be in God. If the world is in God, then God is also in the world although not limited by it, as a pot thrown in the ocean fills with water without limiting the ocean. When the soul takes this understanding that God is within seriously enough to act on it, then the interior quest commences in earnest, and it continues until it ends in the realization that only God is.

Because God is present within, God's presence can be discovered inwardly by plumbing the depths of the heart. God's presence can also be located at the ground of all, e.g., in nature mysticism. Indeed, scholars of religion posit that primitive religion grew out of an apprehension of the "numinous." Animism was likely experiential. Rudolf Otto developed this concept of the "numinous" at the basis of

¹ Plato. *The Republic* VII, 514a-521b.

religion through his investigation of the “holy.”¹ Henri Bergson also posited two sources of religion, one grounded in thought and reason, arising from psychological needs, and the other grounded in intuition, arising from deep insight into reality.²

The teaching of divine immanence looks not only for the ground of the self, but also the world. Many mystical traditions focus on seeking within. There are also wisdom traditions that locate the spiritual ground at the core of the natural world, notably shamanistic wisdom traditions such as the Native American. This was also evident in Celtic Christian spirituality, which is an amalgam of “the old ways” and new Christian missionary teaching. Some missionaries, for example, were recognized as revitalizing the old ways, for those familiar with them saw the correspondence of the old and the new in terms of a common spirituality in that both sought “the kingdom” at the core of all. Earth religions are experiencing a contemporary revival in earth religions such as Wicca but it is also being brought to light in Christianity through “creation spirituality,” especially under the aegis of Matthew Fox.³ Fox left the Roman Catholic clergy under pressure, owing to his support of earth-based spirituality such as Wicca.

On the other hand, most Christian mystics primarily sought for divine wisdom within themselves by entering the cave of the heart and plumbing the depths of their own soul. This is generally true of Yoga, Vedanta, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Taoism, Neoplatonism, Qabalah, and Sufism, because oneness is found through the heart rather than the head. The purpose of the heart is to unite and synthesize, while that of the intellect is to discriminate and analyze. So-called primitive religions and wisdom traditions, which appeared before the age of intellect, tended to emphasize the heart as well.

The path of love combines the inner and the outer. One projects God or the God-realized Master as being outside of oneself but the love one finds for God or Master grows within oneself, eventually to annihilate all separation. The path of service is related to the path of love, and it also combines the inner and outer: One serves God by serving God in all. In this way, immanent and transcendent are reconciled in practice.

¹ Rudolf Otto. *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine*.

² Henri Bergson. *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. Translated by R. Ashley Audra and Cloudesley Brereton. (New York: Macmillan, 1935).

³ Fox, Matthew. *Original Blessing: Primer in Creation Spirituality; Creation Spirituality: Liberating Gifts for the Peoples of the Earth*. (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).

SEEING WITH THE EYE OF THE HEART

A mystic may be defined as one who has spiritual understanding in the sense of “knowledge of the heart,” so that the person is able to “see” with “the eye of the heart,” as Sufis say. This is a poetic way of saying that the mystic has opened a channel that enables supernormal perception, cognition and affect. Mystical testimony abounds with evidence of this. Recent scientific research on subjects who practice spiritual disciplines such as meditation also confirms such reports of non-ordinary physiological and psychological states exhibiting unique parameters.

Mystics have testified to having supernormal experiences but, clearly, not every one who claims to be a mystic is genuine. Some may be self-deluded and others may be bogus, for example, those who are intentionally hypocritical to augment self-importance or prey on the spiritual aspirations of the gullible.

A true mystic or sage is one who is actually spiritually advanced, that is, is established on the inner planes or has realized ultimate truth. The question of criteria for distinguishing the genuine from the deluded or bogus exceeds the scope of this undertaking, since it is the subject of ongoing controversy among philosophers and psychologists. Suffice it say for current purposes that one significant criterion seems to be the verdict of history.

Certain saints and sages, mystics and masters stand out across time, and many of these are revered or at least highly regarded, many being respected across cultures. Some of these are accorded the highest place and are thought by many to be God-realized masters. One indication of this would be their ongoing ability to guide people even after they have dropped the body, and even after millennia have past. Zoroaster has this reputation among Zoroastrians, Rama and Krishna among Hindus, Buddha among Buddhists, Lao Tzu among Taoists, Abraham and Moses among Jews, Muhammad among Muslims, and, of course, Jesus among Christians.

One consequence of the verdict of history, however, is that the original historical figure comes to be represented as a “hero” around whom a legend grows up. Later, a myth gets constructed, including miraculous deeds and pious stories that glorify the figure, magnifying them historically and often raising them to a superhuman if not a supernatural level. For example, historical research is revealing that the present day popular conception of Jesus, fostered by conventional religion, is mythical in addition to historical. Actually, the situation was perhaps even more exaggerated in early Christianity as some infancy gospels relating miraculous exploits of Jesus as a child go to show. These texts were not admitted to the canon of the New Testament and have presently been all but forgotten other than by scholars of the period. Interestingly, similar tales are found regarding the founders of other religions as well. Similar stories are told of baby Krishna, and pious Hindus implicitly accept them as true historically.

THE SOURCE

A principal objection to holding that perennialism is indicative of a universal mystical spirituality grounded in experience is the historical diffusion of ideas geographically over time. This reduces the metaphysical basis and psychological content of mystical testimony to a form that can be expressed empirically, e.g., as the replication in similar form of an initial belief, often with the implication of superstition. Occam's razor is the position that simplicity is to be preferred in explanation, and unverifiable matters such as appeals to subjective experience or metaphysical speculation should be reduced to empirical accounts wherever possible.

Perennial wisdom does not claim that all religions or wisdom traditions say the same thing in the same way. Nor do perennialists represent perennial wisdom as uniform, but rather call attention to the unity of truth underlying diversity in expression, and the universality underlying superficial differences in mystical testimony and spiritual teaching.

In the first place, it is obviously not the case that perennial wisdom is uniform, as opponents of the perennial view are quick to point out, claiming that these differences argue against uniformity of expression and practice, and, *a fortiori*, against the identity of wisdom traditions. Perennialists do not seek to ignore differences and conflate different traditions into a meta-tradition that does not exist. Secondly, if perennials were to hold that all were saying the same thing in essentially the same way, then, it would seem that the diffusion of ideas was indeed operative. Generally, when scholars find the same teaching in the essentially the same terminology and behavioral practice, they conclude that some cross-influence is operative.

Perennialists do not deny all cross-influence, either, for some diffusion of ideas is evident historically. For example, the accounts of the virgin birth and the visitation of the magi occur only in Matthew's gospel. The virgin birth is found centuries earlier in the teaching of Zoroaster, where it is associated with the *Saoshyant*, a savior to come. The magi are Persian priests of the late Zoroastrian period, still running at the time of Jesus' birth. These associations in the gospel attributed to Matthew suggest that they are influenced by Zoroastrian ideas about the savior to come, and identifying that savior with Jesus.

This is all the more suggested by the fact that Matthew's gospel was used by Eastern Christian communities that were most closely associated geographically with Persian ideas and those who held them. Hence, it might be argued that these ideas influenced the author of the gospel attributed to Matthew. For example, it may be that the community that used Matthew's gospel itself was under this influence and saw Jesus not only as the predicted Jewish messiah but also as the predicted Zoroastrian *Saoshyant*, similar to the way Hebraic prophecies were adduced to

show those familiar with Hebrew scripture that Jesus was the expected messiah. Alternatively, the stories in Matthew may have been inserted to attract those influenced by Zoroastrian ideas to Jesus as *Saoshyant*, or perhaps both of these motives were operant.

On the other hand, perennial wisdom holds that instead of saying the same thing in essentially the same way, the various religions and wisdom traditions point toward a shared human spirituality. In doing this, they use different means, such as myths, metaphors and teaching stories, as well as mystical reports of experience, prophecies, and philosophies. On the surface, many of these seem to be in disagreement, if not mutually exclusive. They only reveal their compatibility and complementarity through mystical interpretation. Moreover, different means for pursuing spirituality also characterize different traditions and schools within a single tradition. Perennial wisdom is highly nuanced in its multifarious expressions; yet, its teaching can be shown to share key fundamentals, which are ultimately reducible not merely to historical diffusion of ideas but to commonality of mystical experience.

So it must be emphasized that perennialists do not deny that the geographical diffusion of ideas in the spread of human knowledge influenced perennial wisdom. What they deny is that perennial wisdom can be reduced to the geographical diffusion of ideas.

Perennialists hold that mystical experience is a necessary and sufficient condition for perennial wisdom. Similarity of teaching is not entirely reducible to the historical diffusion of ideas, nor can mystical testimony be reduced to cultural constructivism. However, they would agree that geographical diffusion often facilitated the spread of perennial wisdom among different cultures, as well as that terminology that happens to be at hand often gets picked up and used. At the same time, not all mystics use the same or similar terminology in precisely the same sense. They shape it to their own needs, based on their own experience, and the need to make themselves understood to those with whom they are communicating.

There is indeed abundant evidence of contacts among ancient peoples leading to probable diffusion of ideas among disparate cultures.¹ However, there is scant evidence of the diffusion of complex spiritual teachings or testimony regarding mystical experience in ancient times. Rather, diffusion is often hypothesized on the

¹ Thomas McEvilley. *The Shape of Ancient Thought: Comparative Studies in Greek and Indian Philosophies*. (New York: Allworth Press, 2001); H. G. Rawlinson. *Intercourse Between India and the Western World: From the Earliest Times to the Fall of Rome*. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1926. 2nd Edition); M. L. West. *Early Greek Philosophy and the Orient*. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971).

basis of contact of cultures. At that time, trade would account for most intercultural contact.

Taking India as an example, the Brahmins (Sanskrit: *brahmana*) were the teaching class, and they were prohibited on religious grounds from traveling away from India. It is therefore unlikely that teachers of the Vedic tradition would have been found plying the trade routes.

Moreover, tradition prohibited non-Brahmins from entering the inner circle of teachers, and only males of the upper three classes, the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas, were permitted initiation into Vedic study. Similarly, the secrets of the Greek mystery religions were so tightly held that they remain unknown to scholars of the period other than in broad outline.

Even today, initiation into Qabalah is only open to Jewish males over forty, who are regarded as highly qualified on the basis of demonstrated piety of life. Non-Jews wishing to study the higher levels of Qabalah with an Orthodox teacher often find themselves running up against a glass wall, even if they are admitted to the outer courtyard. Until quite recently, this was true of the Chinese marital arts, as well. So it is difficult to see how traders traveling to ancient India or similar cultures would have been able to penetrate cultural barriers and cultic restrictions of this kind.

Similarity of expression does not necessarily imply the borrowing of ideas. Existing terminology might be borrowed in order to express similarity of ideas and experience. For example, the Jesus tradition, notably the prologue to *The Gospel of John*, borrowed terminology from Platonism and classical Greek philosophy, as well as Neoplatonism and Hellenistic philosophy, in order to express its own doctrines when ideas overlapped.

More recently, Meher Baba used terminology of Vedanta and Sufism in particular in articulating his teaching, which is based on personal experience of awakening. It is clear from the account of his life that he did not borrow ideas, for his awakening occurred prior to any study of either Vedanta or Sufism. He picked up terminology at hand that was familiar to those with whom he was dealing in order to communicate about what he knew from his own inner experience, independently of these traditions. Moreover, like other masters, he sometimes modified or corrected traditional terminology that was misunderstood or misapplied.¹

¹ “Meher Baba is equally connected with Islam and its Sufism, Christianity and its Mysticism, the Orient and its Vedantism, broad Buddhism, practical Zoroastrianism, Jainism and many other such isms which all speak the same divine Truth and lead to the same divine goal. Meher Baba is also detached and above all these divine paths. He has to awaken the followers of these paths to the real meaning of these isms in their true spirit by reorienting these isms, and in this capacity He has reoriented Sufism in the charter to be

But this is not the place to debate the merits of the diffusion of ideas hypothesis versus the independent discovery hypothesis in any depth, since its scope extends far beyond this undertaking. However, the objection must be acknowledged and the challenge met, at least with the outline of a preliminary answer sketched out suggesting why the simplification of appealing to diffusion alone may be an oversimplification.

Understanding this point is central. Otherwise, perennial wisdom can be mistaken for being just another curious framework of memplexes that arose historically and was propagated geographically across time because enough people found it interesting or engaging. This is to base perennial wisdom on cultural and psychological sources, rather than recognizing it as an articulation of mystical experience.

It can just as well be argued that the language at hand was put to use to express experiences and yearnings that are found to be universal because they are integral to the human spirit. In terms of molecular biology, it could be said at least analogously that perennial wisdom is constituted of memes about self-transcendence.¹

Even if geographical diffusion accounts for some of the proliferation of spiritual ideas, including those involving gnosis, the notion would have had to start somewhere. Evidence for this idea goes back to the dawn of history and is lost in the dusk of time immemorial. Moreover, it is found in virtually every culture across the globe, even so-called primitive ones. It is difficult to argue that diffusion alone could be accountable for this ubiquity, especially in the absence of any concrete evidence for the dissemination of such ideas.

It is inconceivable to many that ultimate truth would not be archetypal, given the universality of human nature. In this view perennial wisdom resides in the very structure of human consciousness, waiting to be discovered by those who plumb the depth of their hearts.

This view can admit that some diffusion of teachings may have played a role in the spread of gnosis: Certainly, there was a temporal diffusion of teaching through long-established traditions. These also resulted in some geographical diffusion also.

universally adopted.” Meher Baba Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, on June 17th, 1952 quoted by Ivy Oneita Duce in “Sufism,” *The Awakener*, Vol. 7, No. 4, 1961, p. 35.

¹ Dean H. Hamer. *The God Gene: How Faith Is Hardwired into Our Genes*. (New York: Doubleday, 2004). While it not established conclusively that there is a particular gene that accounts for self-transcendence, molecular biologist Hamer’s suggestion marks a beginning of the search for the roots of spirituality is the human genetic make-up.

Mystical experiences usually result from putting spiritual teachings into practice instead of arising spontaneously through independent discovery. However, in this view, the spread would not necessarily be totally responsible for appearance of similarities in mystical testimony and spiritual teaching. There are in fact significant differences in expression among the various traditions, as well as development of expression within particular traditions.

On the other hand, mystical experiences can and do arise spontaneously and independently of influence. Many people report that even as children they experienced some sort of self-transcendence that influenced their life subsequently.

The cognitions of mystics worldwide across time closely resemble each other. While some of these experiences are spontaneous, most follow a period of practice in which spiritual aspirants intentionally plumb the depths of consciousness. At the depths of soul, similarly reported experiences arise, which seem to be universal among human beings. This is especially true of the nondual state, in which there is no specific content whereby to differentiate the experience among different subjects. While the language of the reports may differ, the experience reported is devoid of form.

Those who reject the claim that diffusion can exclusively account for the spread of mystical terminology without reference to corresponding experience view this position as a form of reductionism that misses the key role consciousness plays. In its attempt to simplify, it oversimplifies. In such cases wielding Occam's razor as a principle of parsimony kills what is living and reduces it to a dead body, empty of vitality. The notion that so-called mystics simply mouth ideas that they have heard seems overly reductionistic. It seems much more likely that a mystic would first have an experience and then seek means of expression, picking up what lies at hand even if borrowed.

Especially when specific evidence suggesting diffusion is lacking, it is questionable to reduce the spiritual dimension to material causes and explanations. Rather than presume a historical spreading of ideas, it would make more sense to posit that this knowledge is structured in consciousness itself, as perennial wisdom holds. Instead of being a received belief transmitted from person to person back through an endless chain, the journey toward realization takes place in individual consciousness on the basis of its own internal dynamics, in which the inherent potential of the soul for self-discovery and self-realization are gradually unfolded over time and occasionally blossom into mystical experience.

Ultimate realization of full human potential comprehends the perfection of human nature not on the surface but in its innermost depths, where psychological differences give way in the face of spiritual wholeness. According to perennial wisdom, this is hardly accidental. It is the very purpose and aim of life — a spiritual truth — rather than the result of a series of historical accidents as required by

theories about the diffusion of ideas, evidence regarding the details of which is obscure.

THE GOAL

Ultimate reality is transcendental, that is, beyond the limitations of space, time, form and change. It is nondual in the sense of beyond the duality of subject and object, and the opposite qualities of objects also. As such, it is completely undifferentiated within itself, and there is and can be no contrast within it, or it would not be nonduality. The ultimate reality can be compared to space. We are aware of space only because there are things in space that create a contrast in terms of which space is noticed as the background. Nevertheless, like fish in water it is very easy to overlook this transparent background. To paraphrase William Blake, "We read the same Bible but where you read the black letters of the text, I see white," meaning you see surface differences, while I see the unifying backdrop.¹

In a vacuum, there is nothing but void, emptiness. However, the void is not *merely* nothing, in the sense of a logical contradiction, such as a square circle. The void *exists* as vacuum. Another analogy would be the null set in mathematical set theory. The null set is empty. As such, it is the source, so to speak of all other sets, which are simply additions of content to the null set. In both these cases, there is no difference within the simple state providing contrast.

Being no-thing, ultimate reality is not relative to anything familiar in ordinary experience. Perhaps the closest approximation to it would be imagining what it would be like to be fully aware in deep sleep. The vacuum state, or state of least excitation, as the ground state of quantum mechanics has also been used as an analogy for the state of nonduality which mystics report.

As a result, the goal toward which perennial wisdom points and core spirituality leads is ineffable, being beyond ordinary perception, conception and imagination, hence, beyond predication. It can only be described negatively, e.g., as emptiness, or else hinted at symbolically or pointed to poetically. According to perennial wisdom, this knowledge cannot be communicated intellectually by concepts or description, but it can be known intimately through personal revelation in one's own heart of hearts. Testimony to it and teachings about it plant a seed that sprouts within, to bear fruit when cultivated through spiritual living.

Although principles and precepts can be attributed to perennial wisdom as a teaching, the reality of this wisdom is purely experiential, involving the

¹ "Both read the Bible day and night; but thou read'st black where I read white." William Blake, in "The Everlasting Gospel." D. H. S. Nicholson and A. H. E. Lee (Editors). *The Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse*. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1917). Public Domain. URL=<<http://www.bartleby.com/236/58.html>>.

development of cognition and affect to a supernormal degree. Hence, nonduality exceeds the knowledge ordinarily available to most people. But, while the mystical apprehension of nonduality is said to be “transcendental” to ordinary experience since it is beyond the reach of perception, conception and imagination, it is not completely foreign to human knowing, or it could not enter awareness at all.

TRANSCENDENTAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Most spiritual traditions have developed a highly technical algorithm to articulate the way, goal and means. The Vedic tradition serves as an example.

In the Vedic tradition the nondual state is called *samadhi* in Sanskrit. It is a technical term that does not have a corresponding term in English. Sometimes it is translated as “trance,” but that is inadequate since it is unlike the states that are ordinarily associated with trance. “Enstasis” has been suggested, and it is more correct but rather unhelpful, since it doesn’t have a clear use in English. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi calls *samadhi* “Transcendental Consciousness.” It is defined as a fourth state of awareness (Sanskrit: *turiya*) in addition to the three accustomed states of deep sleep, dreaming and waking. Transcendental Consciousness is the basis for the more advanced spiritual states precisely because it is transcendental, that is, “beyond.”¹

According to the Vedic tradition *samadhi* is the state of consciousness characterized by supramental awareness. *Samadhi* is called “supramental” or “transcendental” because it is beyond mental activity, in which the interior silence of the soul is known directly as “the peace the world cannot give.” It is initially experienced as a separate state in contrast to the alternating states of deep sleep, dreaming and waking, hence, is called “the fourth state,” *turiya* meaning “fourth” in Sanskrit.

When the fourth state is established along with the other three states, a fifth state of consciousness is reached, called *turiyatita*, literally beyond the fourth state. The symptom of establishment in this state called “witnessing.” It is the continuity of the fourth state of unbounded awareness along with other alternating states. This state is said to be established when it is never lost, even in deep sleep. The sixth state of consciousness is the state in which unbounded awareness is stabilized and one simultaneously perceives everything as the self-effulgent light of God. This is “seeing God,” or God-Consciousness (*deva chaitanya*).

The seventh state is realization of the identity of the unbounded Self (*atma*) and God (*paramatma*) as the Truth of Absolute Being (*parabrahman*) fully knowing itself as the only reality. This is the God-Self (*shivatma*) or Universal Self

¹ Anthony Campbell. *Seven States of Consciousness: A Vision of Possibilities Suggested by the Teaching of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi*. (New York: Harper Collins, 1974).

(*atmabrahm*). Most who get final liberation realize it after dropping the body. Only rarely is this state attained and the body retained. Liberation while remaining embodied and being consciousness of creation is called *jivan mukti* and without consciousness of the body or creation, *videha mukti*. The Perfect Masters (*sadgurus*) are those who realize God and retain the body along with consciousness of creation do so in order to carry out their duty to guide humanity and administer the Divine Plan for the universe. The God-Man (*avatara*) is the periodic manifestation of God in human form, called “Lord” (*prabhu*, *bhagavan*), “the Highest of the High” (*purushottama*) and “the Ancient One” (*purana purusha*).

Nothing is added to consciousness in the course of the spiritual quest. The veils obscuring awareness get progressively lifted. The process of development involves removing the obstacles (*klesha*) in the form of latent impressions (*sanskaras*) gathered as a result of past actions (*karma*) in form of thoughts, words and deeds, which takes place in accordance with the law of action and consequence, similar to the laws of cause and effect, action and reaction, governing natural processes. These impressions get stored in the unconscious, which follows the soul on its journey across lifetimes through reincarnation. Liberation is attained only when this storehouse (*chit*) is emptied of its accumulated impressions through one’s own efforts (*sadhana*) and grace (*kripa*).

Comparable models of ascent can be found in other expressions of perennial wisdom. In *God Speaks*, for example, Meher Baba sets forth the progressive stages involved in the unfolding of awareness toward final realization of truth, giving the correspondences in terms of Sufism as well as Vedanta.¹ Daniel Feldman explores similar correspondences in terms of Qabalah.²

INEFFABILITY

Transcendental experiences involving nonduality cannot be expressed other than by negation, such as denying all content to the experience, or else by analogy, for example, comparing the experience to the unboundedness of the sky or the vastness of the ocean. Owing to the limitations of language, words cannot convey the

¹ Meher Baba. *God Speaks*. See also Appendix Two.

² The term “Qabalah” is used rather than the more usual “Kabbalah” in order to reflect the Hebrew root letters, Qof Bet Lamed. For an excellent account of Mystical Qabalah as an expression of universal mystical spirituality, see Daniel Hale Feldman. *Qabalah: The Mystical Heritage of the Children of Abraham*. (Santa Cruz, CA: Work of the Chariot, 2000), also available online: URL=<<http://www.workofthechariot.com/TextFiles/Trust.html>>. Leo Schaya. *The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah*. Translated from the French by Nancy Pearson. (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1971).

experience itself to someone who has not had it, any more than the taste of a strawberry can be communicated to someone who has never eaten one.

The difficulty here is that this experience is non-ordinary in the sense of being “transcendental,” but not in the Kantian sense of being a condition for experience. Rather, the sense is that this experience is on a different level than that of customary experiences. Since there is nothing in ordinary experience with which to compare it, the only way that mystics have reported it is in terms of comparison or contrast. However, it is important in reading them to keep in mind that there is a difference not only in the kind of object but also in the level of subjectivity. Transcendental consciousness is “pure consciousness,” in the sense of consciousness without an object, or consciousness in and for itself alone. There are many degrees of transcendental consciousness prior to that of totality.

This experience is characteristically reported paradoxically. On the one hand, it is said to be vacuous or empty, — “nothing” in the sense of no-thing. Yet, it is also full in the sense that the experience is so real and so fulfilling that the one having feels that nothing is lacking in it. Indeed, when one tastes even a drop of this “wine,” as the Sufi poets say, one realizes in an instant that everything that one desired or accomplished was for this. Being a “taste” or “whiff” of the nature of the universal self in contrast to the accustomed limited self, nothing in ordinary experience could ever contain or convey this in precise language. On hearing it reported, those without this experience often decried it as solipsism, or condemned it as “quietism.” But those having even a fleeting glimpse of nonduality know otherwise.

This is an experience whose reality is so self-evident that it is its own criterion, calling for nothing outside of itself to verify or confirm it. In saying, “I think; therefore, I am,” Descartes asserted that the existence of subjectivity is self-evident, beyond all doubt or deception.¹ What he meant was that a self-conscious subject knows its own existence *a priori*, in itself, directly through its own self-knowledge, without need for further proof. Indeed, no further proof is even possible. Not only is it not to doubt one’s existence, one cannot be deceived about it either. For example, one can be deceived about sense experience through erroneous judgment, like mistaking a piece of rope for a snake. But one cannot be wrong in thinking that one exists, for the existence of subjectivity is entailed in the very nature of thinking.

Descartes may have been correct in thinking that human beings have an intuition of the existence of subjectivity, but he was incorrect in thinking that this intuition provides any more than certitude about the existence of subjectivity. It shows *that* I

¹ René Descartes. *Discourse on Method, IV; Meditations on First Philosophy, I and II*. Incidentally, the observation, “I think, therefore I am,” was not original with Descartes. For instance, Augustine had anticipated it in *On the City of God*, XI, 26.

am, but it does not completely reveal *what* I am as subject. Be that as it may, Descartes transformed the focus of Western philosophy from focus on the nature of being, or metaphysics, to focus on the nature of knowledge, or epistemology.

Descartes apparently did not realize a state of awareness empty of mental activity, or at least did not report on it if he did. If he had, he might have said something like, “I don’t think, I just am.” Here, however, both “I” and “am” are used quite differently from the ordinary sense of these words in ordinary language, where “I” signifies the individual personality separate from the world “out there.”

In the state in which mental activity ceases but self-awareness remains, “I” refers to what might be called the “transcendental ego” in contrast to the empirical ego. This differs from the meaning of Husserl and phenomenology, where the transcendental ego is arrived at through a type of intellectual abstraction Husserl called “bracketing.” Here, rather, “transcendental ego” signifies the experience of pure consciousness prior to the complete and permanent transcending of limited individuality. There are many states and stages on this path toward the goal, among which is experience of the transcendental ego in this sense.

Nonduality can occur in a number of ways, varying in clarity, intensity, length, and completeness. Until the apex is realized, these states are incomplete in the sense that greater awareness of nonduality is possible. Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras* distinguishes various states of samadhi.

When one has a nondual experience and returns to ordinary consciousness afterward, one may speak of the nondual state as an experience “I had,” although “experience” is used not univocally but analogously. In this case, “I” refers the self who recalls the experience, not pure subjectivity. In the nondual state, then there is no sense of individuality comparable with the individuality of ordinary awareness.

At its apex, this state is called “aloneness,” *kaivalya* in Sanskrit. Plotinus called it “the flight of the alone (soul) to the Alone (the One).”¹ This state of awareness transcends space, time, form, and change. Being undifferentiated, it is at once unique and universal. Because this experience is undifferentiated, unique and universal, it is independent of any tradition yet can be experienced through any tradition. If there would be some objective proof for the reality of validity of this experience, it would lie in the testimony of those who have gone before and left a record of their travels.

CATEGORIES OF MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

It should also be pointed out that according to perennial wisdom, there are many levels and types of non-ordinary experience. Not all of these are “real” in the

¹ Plotinus. *Enneads*. 1.6.8.

metaphysical sense of being established as continuous and unchanging. What changes is not “real” in the ultimate sense since what changes comes to be and passes out of existence. The truly “real” is eternal.

In the Vedic tradition and Sufism, a level of experience established as continuous is called a “station” (Sanskrit *sthan*, Arabic: *muqam*). An experience that is temporary is called a “state” (Sanskrit: *bhav*, Arabic: *hal*). For example, it is possible to have a “taste” or a “whiff” of the undifferentiated experience without its being established continuously. It is also possible to mistake a taste or a whiff for the ultimate experience of Truth, or the persistence of a partial experience as full realization. As a result, there is a plethora of “half-baked” teachers.

Complicating the matter, there are many mystical experiences differentiated by form, for instance, visions. These may be reported in terms of the coloring of the particular tradition in which they occurred. As a result, some have concluded that all mystical experience is conditioned by circumstance, erroneously we would hold, in view of the universality of the undifferentiated state. Therefore, the mystical literature is replete with testimony about different types and levels of experience. As a result, many who have studied the phenomenon of mysticism have been confused by this spectrum of difference, owing both to the difference of phenomena reported and also different ways of expressing similar experiences.

The Christian mystics have reported a wide variety of experiences, many of them differentiated, set forth in typically Christian terms and themes. However, the Way of Jesus also contains both testimony to the undifferentiated experience and teachings about it, for example, in the works of Meister Eckhart, who was more outspoken in this regard than many mystics. In addition, the testimony of other Christian mystics has been found similar to Buddhist teachings of emptiness — John of the Cross and Ruysbroek come to mind, for instance. Ruysbroek described the undifferentiated state as “nudity” of the soul, apparently a way of testifying to what Buddhism and Taoism call the empty state (Sanskrit: *shunya*, Chinese: *wu ji*). Moreover, some of the great works of mystical theology have been teachings about the *via negativa* — the way of negation, or the way of “unknowing.” The work of Pseudo-Dionysius (ca. 500 C.E.), especially his *Mystical Theology*, lays the groundwork for the way of negation or *via negativa* in the Way of Jesus.¹ *The Cloud of Unknowing*, written by an anonymous medieval English mystic, announces the way of negation in its title.²

As we will see in the course of this investigation, it can be argued that *The Gospel of Thomas* is based on realization of the undifferentiated, nondual state of

¹ Pseudo-Dionysius. *The Complete Works*.

² Evelyn Underhill. *The Cloud of Unknowing: The Classic of Medieval Mysticism*. Mineola, NY: Dover, 2003. Facsimile reprint of first edition (London: 1912).

“consciousness without an object,” in which the two — subject and object — are made one.¹ One who is permanently stationed in nonduality is established in immortality while yet living in the physical body. Having already died to the limited self, such a person will not have to experience death at the time of the passing of the physical form.² This is not only entirely consistent with perennial wisdom, but also its treatment in *The Gospel of Thomas* is one of the clearest expressions of this perennial teaching in the Jesus tradition.

A key point here is that such an experience is possible. It has been reported by mystics worldwide from time immemorial and has been put forward by saints, sages and masters as foundational for genuine spirituality as knowledge of who one really *is* and endures as a *person* or soul as immortal spiritual being in contrast to the *personality* or self-image, which *appears* for a time and then passes away with the death of the body.

The person is the soul as a spiritual entity, whose nature is to exist, to be conscious, and to be fulfilled. The embodied soul is limited by its material sheath and projects itself outward into the world, thereby objectifying itself both for itself and for others. Its self-apprehension identified with a form, modified by the way others perceive it in its embodied state, gives rise to personality. Thus, the person forgets its real nature as unlimited and identifies with a limited form playing a role in the world, “full of sound and fury but signifying nothing,” in the words of Shakespeare.³

Spirituality is about breaking the lock of identification. Then, one can be in the world but not of it. One is inevitably in the world through one’s personality as long as one is embodied. But when one does not identify oneself with that personality but merely uses it to play one’s role, one can also transcend the world as the person or soul that one really is. The spiritual mission of that person as soul is to efface all traces of limited individuality in order to realize unity.

JUSTIFICATION

It would be cavalier to pass off such experience as something more than a peculiar phenomenon without adequate justification, let alone take it to be true. However, the scope of this undertaking does not allow for such an investigation, beyond admitting that the interpretation of such phenomena as having metaphysical import is controversial. This subject has been considered, for example, by Steven Katz in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, W. T. Stace in *Mysticism and*

¹ *The Gospel of Thomas*, Saying 3, 22.

² *Ibid.* Saying 1.

³ William Shakespeare. *The Tragedy of Macbeth*. Act 5, Scene 5.

Philosophy and Robert Forman in *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy*.¹

Suffice it to say here that mystics have never doubted the veracity of their inner life. For they testify that the content of the experience is such as to produce complete conviction in the reality of this experience. It is also the teaching of renowned masters of spiritual wisdom who comment on this. While this will remain a gratuitous presumption of the present work owing to its scope, the reader is invited to undertake the discipline and practice to corroborate it in experience, as I have sought to do myself. In the course of this inner journey, I became satisfied that the claims of mystics are neither bogus nor entirely subjective in the pejorative sense.²

The realization of identity of being and knowing is neither perceptual nor conceptual. For example, everyone knows whether they are a man or a woman without checking. In the Vedic terminology, this is called *swayambhu* knowledge, meaning knowledge that is self-evident. In ordinary knowledge, this knowledge relates only to one's limited being, not one's true nature. As Descartes famously observed in *Discourse on Method*, "I think therefore I am," is the primary datum, because human knowledge is reflexive, capable of knowing itself directly.³ But what does this self-certainty actually involve?

For Descartes, the meaning of the term "think" includes the full range of mental activity, including the reflexivity of consciousness that self-awareness entails. Descartes' observation is that because we are self-aware, we know that we exist beyond any reasonable doubt. That is to say, the identity of self-awareness and existence is self-evident in the ordinary knowledge of human beings. However, this

¹ Stephen Katz (Editor). *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); W. T. Stace. *Mysticism and Philosophy*. (Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, 1960); Robert Forman (Editor). *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

² I do not claim to have attained any spiritual status and do not represent myself as a spiritual person, for I am well aware of my many weaknesses and considerable failings. I am simply one among many who have not only studied but also practiced a discipline regularly over an extended period and have at least tasted something of the places whereof the mystics speak. The principal value of such experiences, the masters say, is to inspire one in the discipline. Masters also say that often experiences are granted to those most in need of them. Others are strong enough to proceed in a disciplined fashion without them, and most are taken veiled so as to protect them from distraction. So having so-called spiritual experiences is of no great account on the spiritual quest. See Appendix Three for an abbreviated account of my own quest.

³ René Descartes. *Discourse on Method*, IV; *Meditations on First Philosophy*, I and II.

awareness of existence includes the knowledge that our existence is contingent rather than necessary, owing to our being aware of the inevitability of death.

That the soul is “living” in the sense of its being immortal is not self-evident to us. It is only a matter of belief until it is experienced through higher cognition. Self-evidence in the realization of truth is direct evidence of the Universal Self, whose nature is “not this or that,” i.e., infinite (not limited), eternal (not temporal), without form and unchanging, in short, absolute in the sense of “unloosed,” or free of encumbrance by not being relative to anything else.

In the reflexivity of higher types of cognition, this self-evident quality of reflexive knowledge is characteristic of more expanded states of awareness, and it culminates in the realization of one’s true nature in the nondual state. This is the state of, “I [alone] am,” as unlimited, formless, unitary being, existing in itself, through itself, by itself and for itself alone as the sole reality. This is the final answer to the soul’s original question: Who am I?

This original question initiated apparent separation. Symbolically, eating of the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge of “good and evil” reveals the inner meaning of “original sin” as the fall of the soul into duality. In the myth of the Fall, Eve or Adam or “man” represents the soul. The eating of the fruit is symbolic of their union, that is, the soul identifies itself with the limited mind. The fruit is called “forbidden” because it breaks the original oneness of the God state. The snake, an obvious phallic symbol, represents desire. It is desire that begins the process. Desire arises from latent impressions resident in the mental body, so it is the woman, symbolic of mind, which first falls under the spell of desire and then “seduces” man, symbolizing the soul, to go along.¹ The initial impression is imprinted due to the initial “urge” or “whim” of God for self-knowledge.

This is the seed of all desires that arise, which are really manifestations in one form or other of the original question or attempts to answer this question. Thus, the original question begins a process that will lead inevitably and inexorably to the realization that “I” is God. The search for the answer to the original question impels the soul relentlessly through the process of evolution, reincarnation and involution to realization of its true nature as God, who revealed his name to Moses as “I am that I am.”² Thus, the final answer is, “I (alone) am.” This is the liberation of the soul from “original sin,” which resulted in duality. It is also said to be “salvation”

¹ In ancient times, snakes were believed to cast a spell on their quarry by their look.

² Meher Baba. *The Everything and the Nothing*, 47. , p. 49; Exodus 3:14. “I am that I am” is one common translation of the Hebrew phrase *eyheh asher eyheh*. Another is “I will be that I will be,” which may emphasize continuity rather than futurity, possibly as symbolic of eternity. “I am that I am” is often compared with the Vedic *mahavakya* or “great saying,” *aham brahmasmi* —“I am Reality.”

or “redemption” because, according to the wise, the soul cannot take the final step from duality to nonduality, that is, from finite to infinite, without the Master’s *coup de grace* that dispatches limited individuality.

THE PATH

According to perennial wisdom, this primordial knowledge resides in everyone in the depths of one’s own soul. Everyone has the capacity as a human being to unfold it within. Indeed, the stirring of this knowledge subliminally, as it were, results in a “divine discontent” that goads one toward its realization, first unconsciously and later consciously. In the familiar prayer, St. Augustine alludes to this when he says: “Thou made us for Thyself, and our heart is restless, until it repose in Thee.”¹

The soul desires the peace the world cannot give. Even though it may be difficult initially for ordinary people to heed this call of the soul, it becomes more and more powerful and more and more pressing. Everyone’s process is different, but virtually everyone finds it a challenge to break free from the cage of convention and commit to the quest. Usually, it is only after a period of great effort and perhaps turmoil that one is ready to set aside the old and familiar and take up the new and promising by embarking on the spiritual adventure.

This knowledge that is within everyone lies waiting to be “remembered” by instituting the conditions, primarily by removing the obstacles that veil it. From the impersonal vantage, this sought-after realization is of the formless Absolute, and from the personal stance, it is of the various forms through which the Divine is revealed. For example, pursuit of realization of ultimate truth is characteristic of the impersonal, while seeking union with the Divine Beloved is typical of the personal, the ways of knowledge and love being the principal avenues for the spiritual quest.

Perennial wisdom is concerned with the way and the goal, that is, the spiritual path leading through the inner planes toward realization of Truth, together with the means for traversing it. There are various means of traversing this path corresponding to the various faculties, for example, knowledge corresponding to the intellect, love to the heart, and action to the will. While perennial wisdom regarding the path and goal is expressed in the testimony of the mystics and teaching of the Masters, its essence as “core spirituality” transcends expression and must be experienced oneself by actually traversing the spiritual path and realizing the goal. Indeed, the ultimate wisdom remains a mystery until it reveals itself within through mystical experience.

According to the Vedic tradition, this wisdom is not of human origin but is an eternal reality, lying at the root of consciousness itself as the source and ground of

¹ St. Augustine of Hippo. *Confessions*. Book I, page 1. <
http://www.4literature.net/Saint_Augustine/Confessions/>

all knowledge. Therefore, this knowledge and its pursuit are called “eternal spirituality,” called *sanatana dharma* in Sanskrit. Buddhism calls it simply *Dharma*, or *Dhamma* in Pali. The etymological root of *dharma* is *dhri*, signifying that which upholds. In its technical sense in the Vedic and Buddhist traditions, *dharma* signifies that which upholds life by unfolding life’s meaning and purpose, which is the aim of true spirituality. Sometimes it is translated “duty,” “righteousness,” or even “religion.” Thus, *sanatana dharma* is often translated as “the eternal religion.”

In Sanskrit, *dharma* has the wider meaning of the nature of a thing. Dharma as applied to humanity would be living in accordance with human nature, that is, conforming one’s self to natural law. While this law is written in the hearts of all, it is also given expression by the example and the teaching of the sages, who serve as its living exemplars. Note that this meaning of *dharma* differs from the way the term has entered English, where it has chiefly come to signify one’s life mission in terms of profession or career.

THE WAYS OF LOVE, KNOWLEDGE AND ACTION

There are three principal aspects of awareness — cognition, volition, and affect. Each has its own respective spiritual discipline through knowledge, action and love.

In the Vedic tradition these three ways have specific names: *Jnana Marga* is the way of transcendental knowledge; *Bhakti Marga* is the way of transcendental love, and *Karma Marga* is the way of action surrendered to God. Each of these ways has its discipline and practices as its corresponding *yoga*: *Jnana Yoga*, *Bhakti Yoga* and *Karma Yoga*.

Jnana Yoga proceeds to answer the question: Who am I? It does so primarily on the basis of discrimination between that which changes (phenomena) and that which does not change (pure consciousness). This involves self-abnegation and effacement as one observes the changing nature of body and mind, while and countering these negations with the unchanging existence of consciousness in itself: “I am not this (body), nor this (mind); I am THAT (Universal Self).”

Raja Yoga, *Laya Yoga* and other ways emphasizing meditation are also part of *Jnana Marga*, but are somewhat different from *Jnana Yoga*, which nowadays is understood as pertaining more to Advaita Vedanta, especially as Sri Ramana Maharshi presented it in terms of self-inquiry (*atma vichara*).

Bhakti Yoga proceeds through love of God or Master. *Karma Yoga* is action performed without attachment, where one is motivated by what is right or required, rather than on account of self-interest. Selfless service, duty and meeting one’s responsibilities are expressions of *Karma Yoga*.

Although these disciplines are distinct conceptually and involves different practices, it would not be correct to see them as mutually exclusive. They can be

complementary. The Vedic tradition is integrated and different means are assigned by wise guides as appropriate to the needs of their charges. Moreover, individuals may find themselves using different disciplines at different points in their development, depending on their needs at the time.

Buddhism emphasizes both knowledge, *prajna* in Sanskrit and *panna* in Pali, as well as compassion for all beings, *maitrii* in Sanskrit and *metta* in Pali. The Eightfold Path is the means. Its eight limbs are based on what is “right,” *samyak* meaning “right,” “correct” and “perfect” in Sanskrit. Thus, the Eightfold Path is right thought, speech and action, grounded in wisdom and compassion. It also includes self-effacement through meditation.

Love plays a key role in the Mosaic teaching, along with righteousness, that is, obeying God’s injunctions (Hebrew *mitzvot*, *halakah*) as set forth in the Law (*Torah*). The most important text in Hebrew scripture is the *Sh’ma*, which affirms God’s oneness and admonishes loving Him with all one’s capacity.¹ Self-emptying is also emphasized in Qabalah for those who are qualified to undertake it.

Jesus singled out this teaching of unity and love as the very basis of the Law, adding to it the text admonishing love of others.² Yet, he also related love to action on a number of occasions, saying that obedience to God is a proof of love. Generally speaking, the Way of Jesus has chiefly emphasized the way of love, and the ways of the knowledge and action secondarily. Self-effacement is a prominent mystical practice in Christianity, often mixed with extreme asceticism. Obedience to authority plays a strong role not only in normative Christianity but also in Christian mysticism.

Love is also assigned the primary place by Sufis, who generally emphasize the affective over the cognitive. Sufism also strongly asserts the need for self-effacement through obedience and surrender, in addition to love. Indeed, the Arabic word *islam* means “submission” or “surrender.” But ideally, one obeys and surrenders out of love.

THE MEANS

Since the chief obstacle is one’s own limited self, characterized by identification with one’s limited mind and body, one proceeds by overcoming self-importance and self-interest through self-effacement, so as to bring the mind and body under the control of the higher principle, called variously the soul, the “heart” as spiritual center, or the Higher Self. The corresponding term in Sanskrit is *antaryami*, which might be translated in terms of the inner regulator, administrator or controller as the spiritual element in man directing life toward its true purpose and real goal.

¹ Deuteronomy 6:4-5.

² Leviticus 19:18.

This process of bringing the lower under the control of the higher is called self-discipline, a necessary characteristic for being a “disciple.” In Sanskrit this self-discipline is called *yoga*, the root of English “yoke.” For example, in the Vedic tradition there are four principal yogas or disciplines, the way of knowledge or *jnana yoga*, the way of love or *bhakti yoga*, the way of action or *karma yoga*, and the way of meditation or *raja yoga*, as well as many less known *yogas*. Each of these disciplines has characteristic practices employed as means.

In Jesus’ expression, “My yoke is easy, the burden light,” “yoke” could be construed as “yoga” in the sense of a spiritual discipline.¹ Coincidentally, “yoke” and “yoga” have a common root in Sanskrit *yuj*, meaning to unite. However, Jesus would have been using an Aramaic word, and since Aramaic is from a different language group, this etymological comparison does not hold. As we will see, the discipline that Jesus’ apparently taught was a combination of knowledge, love and action, but his emphasis was on love.

Different traditions, teachers and schools emphasize different means as appropriate for different times, places and people. The various means are different ways of removing the obstacles and limitations which veil the truth of ultimate reality from the limited mind. For example, on the path of the heart one surrenders oneself completely to the Beloved through increasingly perfect love that unites the lover with the Beloved. On the path of knowledge, one discriminates between the real and unreal by rejecting all that changes as truly real. On the way of action, one performs one’s duty and meets one’s responsibilities, accepting the outcome of one’s actions as God’s will. On the way of meditation, one seeks to experience the depths of one’s being by going within oneself.

While these ways can be considered separately, many traditions and teachers integrate these methods, since they are not mutually exclusive but complementary. Indeed, it would be impossible to practice any one of them exclusively for very long with any success, since as one progresses the ways converge.

The Way of Jesus is chiefly a path of the heart, for its principal means is the way of self-surrender through love. However, it also includes a combination of the ways of knowledge and meditation, called the *via negativa* or way of negation as the entrance into the “cloud of unknowing,” in which all forms fall away to reveal the formless One. The Way of Jesus is also a path of action, since a traditional practice dating to the example of Jesus himself is internal renunciation in the sense of “being in the world but not of it.” Hence, the Way of Jesus includes the principal disciplines, the ways of love, knowledge, action, and meditation, which are

¹ Matthew 11: 28-30. Here again it is necessary to distinguish this technical sense of *yoga* in Vedic spiritual parlance from the way the term “yoga” has entered English, meaning a system of bodily postures associated with *hatha yoga*.

expressed in forms characteristic of Christianity as the way of following the teaching and example of Jesus as spiritual Master.

THE ANCIENT RELIGION

This wisdom is preserved in the records of the saints and sages, spanning all historical periods and geographical regions. According to perennialism, the testimony of the world's mystics is cut from the same cloth, and the teaching of spiritual masters ubiquitously sets forth key fundamentals of a core spirituality found at the heart of all religions and wisdom traditions.¹ This core spirituality often goes unnoticed in normative religions because surface differences occupy the majority of people, whose focus is outward rather than within.

Core spirituality gets expressed age after age, albeit in different forms. This perennial teaching of integration of life on the ground of unity can be seen as “the one true religion” and all religions and wisdom traditions as expressions of this single truth concerning knowledge of the one behind the many. Thus, the same wisdom appears in different garb from age to age.

This wisdom may be considered primordial because, being grounded in mystical experience, it is structured in the very nature of consciousness itself. Hence, it is capable of being discovered by those who seek it out. The wise of different places and periods have discovered it within, at the depths of soul. Hence, the universal admonition of sages to “know thyself.”

While expressions of this wisdom differ on the basis of history, geography, culture and language, the message is universal. For example, Delphic oracle's, “Know thyself,” and Jesus', “The kingdom of heaven lies within you,” may be interpreted as pointing to the same goal of Self-knowledge which is available by plumbing the heart.

While the message of the path and goal remains essentially the same from age to age and place to place, linguistic and cultural diversity can obscure these similarities, particularly if attention is focused on differences rather than on the underlying unity. As a result, scholars and religionists without inner experience argue intellectually over textual issues and often confuse the letter with the spirit. Sectarian controversies also arise among different schools of thought espousing different interpretations. Over time, these controversies come to dominate the universe of discourse, and the core message, which is experiential rather than intellectual, gets lost to view. Eventually, a teaching that was once vital passes into venerable tradition and finally ends up degenerating into mere convention, characterized by belief and opinion, or worse, dogma. In the end, what is meant to enlighten, obscures.

¹ Whitall N. Perry. *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*.

Nevertheless, the mystical testimony and teachings at the heart of every religion and wisdom tradition preserve the core message of the way to union and eventual realization of identity, which is the goal. This message renews itself from age to age in the hearts of sincere seekers who intuitively heed its call when they are ripe for hearing it. As Jesus said, “Let those who have [spiritually attuned] ears, hear,” implying that until a person ripens, one is spiritually deaf.

By hearing the various scriptures a seed is sown, and this seed gets cultivated by acquainting oneself with the lives of the saints and teaching of the sages, inquiring into spiritual subjects, and most importantly, coming into contact with genuinely spiritual people and having their company, along with leading a good life. Eventually, this seed which has sprouted from the rudiments of religion begins to blossom in experience, and one is inspired to strike out on one’s own spiritual quest.

So, on the one hand, the various expressions of perennial wisdom necessarily wear the linguistic and cultural garb of their period. Moreover, the teaching of the prophets and sages is given on the basis of the needs of a particular time, place and people. This is the basis of the normative religions that carry the message but often conceal it beneath fixed doctrine, mechanical ritual, and conventional observance. On the other hand, the religions also bear the testimony of the mystics and the teaching of the masters, which transcends familiar forms and ordinary experience. This testimony and teaching reflect a supramental state of consciousness, universal in scope, based on experience grounded in supernormal awareness. Eventually one rises above one’s historical circumstances and responds intuitively to that call, for it is the call of one’s own soul heard deep within oneself, in the sanctuary of the heart.

The ancient religion can never have a name, much less a visible organization, for any name or structure would limit it historically. While the ancient religion can never be a human institution in the ordinary sense, its organization and structure are always in place as the spiritual hierarchy of the spiritually advanced, under the leadership of the perfect ones living in that period. Its existence and workings are concealed from ordinary consciousness, however. It is only known insofar as has been revealed by masters of wisdom.¹

PHILOSOPHY AS A WAY OF LIFE

Although I was initially quite happy in my parent’s religion, as I matured I was disappointed by its normative rigidity, which seemed to contradict the fundamental teachings of the founder. So I set out to explore alternatives.

This search took me first to philosophy, since I was consumed by a love of wisdom. This investigation led to the conclusion that all speculation rests on

¹ Meher Baba. *God Speaks*. Supplement 32, “Meher Baba on the Hierarchy.”

presuppositions that are purportedly self-evident. The difficulty is that disagreements abound concerning that which is self-evident.

Those who adhere to the various philosophical positions accept their presuppositions as evident, and they cannot justify them beyond that claim without falling into circular reasoning, a *reductio ad absurdum*, of some other logical fallacy. The honest ones simply appeal to a leap of faith. I therefore concluded that philosophizing intellectually is fundamentally the justification of a particular lifestyle, the reasons accepting which are many, and all of them are relative to one's personal situation or one's social group.

During this philosophical quest, two things struck me as particularly noteworthy. In the first undergraduate course I took in philosophy, the professor emphasized that for the ancients philosophy was a way of life rather than an intellectual exercise. It meant actually to pursue wisdom because one loved her.¹ Wisdom requites this love through union with her.

The second point of which I took special note was that some had justified their position on the basis of higher cognition. This piqued my curiosity and seemed to me to be a reasonable approach, even though it depends on transcending reason. After all, science parted company with philosophy when it included empirical testing. Why should not other aspects of philosophy? At that point, it became clear to me that the answer, if there is one, is to be found in mysticism. Therefore, I turned my attention strongly in that direction, yet without forsaking reasoning and observation. After I had read widely about mysticism, I concluded that reading was not going to take me further without engaging in spiritual practice.

Things that had seemed evident to me as a child I found invalidated or marginalized by the normative religion that closed in on me. I had not forgotten this early attitude and experience. I recognized that children in their innocence are proto-mystics. All too often, adults invalidate this, encouraging the child to "grow up." This admonition may be well intended, but it is shortsighted. As one grows up, the attitude of openness is lost, as well as the unrecoverable experience stemming from innocence. Fortunately, I had no doubt that my own experience was trumps, rather than someone else's norms. Therefore, I decided to seek validation elsewhere than in normative religious practices.

Many Eastern spiritual teachers were visiting the West at the time. After surveying the field, I began Transcendental Meditation and was immediately satisfied that there is a dimension of experience transcending ordinary experience. As this experience deepened I was more convinced. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi also encouraged scientific research into meditation and its effects. This has contributed

¹ *Sophia*, meaning "wisdom" in Greek, is feminine. In the wisdom literature of the Hebrew scriptures, wisdom is also portrayed as feminine.

to the development of the emerging multidisciplinary science of consciousness that is taking mysticism seriously.

I discovered, moreover, that Eastern spirituality is not only experiential. It has a strong philosophical basis as well. Maharishi, who belonged to the Shankaracharya tradition, emphasized that the two go together, because knowledge is the meeting point of experience and understanding. Shankara is considered to be not only one of the world's premier philosophers, but also a realized spiritual master.

Since my field is philosophy, I chose to specialize in the foundations of comparative spirituality by exploring perennial wisdom. This led me to investigate the principal mystical traditions, including the Vedic, Buddhist, Taoist, Qabalistic, Greek, Christic, and Sufi. I also studied mystics and spiritual masters irrespective of tradition. Of course, when one admits experience as not only a valid component but also a necessary one, this involves practicing a teaching.

CORE SPIRITUALITY

Through this study and practice, I realized that a core spirituality lies at the heart of all mystical testimony and spiritual teaching. It became clear to me that this core spirituality is indeed the ancient religion of human kind as the way to unification. This unification is realization of the knowledge of the One. On this way the heart leads through love, intuition, sensitivity and appreciation.

At the outset of my study of philosophy, Aristotle particularly impressed me. He observes that every intelligent agent acts for an end. All human beings are motivated by the same desire for fulfillment, *eudaimonia* in Greek. *Eudaimonia* is usually translated as "happiness." But it is literally means "good spirit," much as we say in the expression, "being in good spirits." Aristotle further observes that abiding fulfillment can come only from that which is fulfilling one's potential as a human being. This is the potential of intelligence (*nous*). Human beings share the level of intelligence with the divine.¹

Aristotle held that *eudaimonia* is the by-product of actualizing one's full potential, which he calls "excellence," *arête* in Greek. First and foremost is the potential to realize the highest within us. Our highest potential is divine in the sense of being immortal. This is the object of philosophy, considered as a way of life that is based on the use of intelligence in the broadest and deepest sense.

Motivated by the heart's desire for abiding fulfillment, human beings choose what they perceive as good and useful for attaining this end. However, people disagree

¹ The etymology of *nous* is unclear. It may originate in the verb, "to sniff." Kurt von Fritz, "NOUS and NOEIN in the Homeric Poems," *Classical Philology* 38 (1943): 92. It is also possibly related to Sanskrit *nu*, meaning "human being." Philosophically, it came to mean the faculty of the rational soul capable of apprehending truth.

about what will lead to happiness, some opining that it lies in fame, fortune, power or pleasure. Others hold that it exists in the afterlife, so those who follow the norms will enjoy it after quitting the body. Yet others teach that abiding fulfillment lies in realizing one's true nature, which is immortal, through unification with the One. Only through uniting ourselves with the immortal element within us is abiding fulfillment possible to win.

Aristotle also observed that subsidiary to this divine potential which all human beings share are our talents, opportunities and challenges, which are specific to each of us as historical personalities. Human beings share the essential potential of human nature, but the accidental potential unique to individuals is different. Human beings have the same destiny due to the potential of human nature for self-mastery, but the fate of each is different owing to individual temperament and circumstance. Through proper education and choices based on informed deliberation, we learn to select the mean between excess and defect. This leads, first, to self-discipline and ultimately to self-mastery.¹ Through self-mastery one attains one's destiny as a human being, despite the vagaries of fate. Fulfillment comes through living a full life, whatever the hand we are dealt.

Aristotle was a student of Plato. Both were strongly influenced by the teaching and example of Socrates, Plato's teacher. Socrates may be seen as the exemplar of the ideals they both elaborate in their writings. Socrates was reputed to be a mystic as well as a gifted teacher. He was "seized by the spirit" on occasion, standing transfixed for long periods of time, unmindful of his surroundings. He was also quite charismatic. Even though short, unarmored and barefoot, no enemy ever dared engage him in single combat on the battlefield. Even though he lived in democratic Athens, he was condemned to death by the assembly for allegedly blaspheming the gods and subverting the youth. Although he could have easily escaped by fleeing the city, he accepted his fate rather than to go against his principles and set a bad example for others.

While Aristotle and the later dialogues of Plato sparked my intellect, Plato's earlier dialogues where he describes the life of Socrates along with his teaching touched my heart. I was particularly moved by the *Symposium*, where Socrates describes the path set forth by his own teacher, the priestess Diotima, as a ladder of love. The rungs of this ladder start with the particular and rise in universality until the aspirant attains the summit of Beauty in itself.² This passage is one of the most inspiring texts of Western philosophy and Greek mysticism.

¹Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book One. Translated by W. D. Ross. Public Domain. URL=<http://people.bu.edu/wwildman/WeirdWildWeb/courses/wphil/readings/wphil_rdg09_nicomacheanethics_entire.htm>.

² Plato. *Symposium* 210a-212b.

What especially impressed me about this philosophical approach of the ancient Greeks was its independence from culture and norms, even though it found remarkable expression in individual lives, such as that of Socrates. Even though it is helpful to know something about the period in which these works were written, the arguments are still clear and logical, once one grasps the technical terms. The same questions the Greek philosophers raised are still being debated.

It seemed to me that the foundation of the universal way must be capable of expression in key fundamentals, independent from any particular expressions of it and glorified in the lives of those who express it. For example, when Christianity is stripped of its doctrine, rituals, observances and controversies, Jesus remains. The evidence of this is that few followers of Jesus think of him as the first century Jewish rabbi that he was. Whether one accepts his messianic role or divine status, one can still recognize the principles of his teaching and find them in the other great teachers of the world. These teachings are different expressions of universal principles of human spirituality.

THE HIGHEST GOOD AND THE HEART

The wise teach that apparent goods sidetrack from the end one seeks since they do not satisfy permanently and they are not secure. The *summum bonum* or highest good for man is permanent, existing, beyond the ravages of time and tide. According to perennial wisdom, this real good is knowledge of the One through unification with the One. The testimony of many mystics shows that this is possible. Moreover, as one takes steps on the path, one begins to discover this for oneself.

On the path the heart leads for it can go where the mind cannot. Human beings pursue wisdom for the love of it. The ancient Greeks called this philosophy, literally “love of wisdom.” One naturally loves life, which is their experience of existence. In loving life, they naturally love the giver of life, the “living One,” who is life in all living beings and existence in all beings, animate and inanimate. The wise teach that the way to pursue this love is not by pursuing narrow self-interest but by doing what is right just because it is right, independently of personal advantage. The heart intuitively knows what is right on the basis of spiritual understanding of true values, guided by the precepts and example of the wise of all ages.

These principles are found at the basis of all wisdom teachings. Moreover, the testimony of mystics reveals that by following these principles one advances on the spiritual path, eventually to realize unification.

TENETS

The key fundamentals of perennial wisdom are found in all the world’s scriptures and wisdom teachings, albeit in different garb suited to the circumstances:

- Essence is primary. Of this nothing can be conceived, imagined or predicated, other than as a Void in which everything is latent. It is the state of Absolute Freedom.
- Only One is. Reality is one and indivisible, infinite and eternal, formless and unchanging — Absolute Reality.
- The One is not only self-existent as Absolute Reality but also self-aware as Supreme Self.
- The sole existence is supraconscious, infinitely self-aware.
- Infinite Consciousness is conscious of itself as Absolute Reality. This is Absolute Knowledge and its Truth.
- Infinite Conscious, Absolute Knowledge, and Truth are identical with the Absolute Reality of the Supreme Self.
- Infinite Consciousness knows the finite as its extreme range.
- Knowing itself as finite, the infinite manifests as finite through apparent but not real contraction. What appears as finite, manifest, relative, and changing is the expression of the unmanifest infinity, which is absolute.
- As infinite, the Self Supreme is unmanifest; as finite, manifest.
- As infinite, the Self is one and indivisible.
- Knowing itself as finite the unitary, indivisible Self appears as many selves, or loci of experience.
- Owing to the limited modes of knowing of finite selves, creation manifests in terms of diversity and separation, appearing as an aggregate of relationships of seemingly discrete entities.
- A mode of knowing is dependent on a level of awareness.
- Different levels of awareness have corresponding modes of knowing which project different appearances.
- Finite selves stationed at different limited levels of awareness take their projection of appearance to be reality itself.
- The unmanifest does not appear in ordinary states of awareness.
- The wise testify on the basis of higher cognition that the unmanifest transcends the manifest as source and is also immanent as the ground.
- From the vantage of the manifest, the One is both transcendent as source and immanent as ground, although in reality the One is indivisible.

- The goal of life is to realize this Truth through unification.¹
- Truth can be realized while in the body by going within oneself to discover ultimate reality as immanent. This unifies all duality, e.g., immanent and transcendent, subject and object, spirit and matter, as well as opposite qualities — in knowledge of the One.
- The spiritual path is the ladder of ascent to realization of Truth.
- The means for traversing this path involve removing of the obstacles within one's own self.
- Obstacles are removed through both self-effort and grace.
- When all obstacles are removed, the veils are lifted and Truth realized as the identity of Absolute Reality and Supreme Self.
- The ultimate truth that reality is one and indivisible entails the existential unity of all apparent diversity.
- This existential unity of being implies an ethics of universal unconditional love, i.e., loving all as one loves oneself and cherishing others as one does one's own.

This list does not pretend to be either definitive or comprehensive. It is put forward as a framework for the subsequent investigation, which will hopefully articulate and clarify many of the points.

There is good precedent for taking core spirituality to be the foundation of the universal religion. All the Masters taught on the basis of the truth of their universal existence. Being Truth personified, they taught from a vantage that transcends all boundary conditions. The message is identical in substance, and the teaching of the Masters only seems particular or different on account of the limited comprehension of the audience.

This is not to claim that all Masters taught precisely the same thing historically. They did not; for each taught in accordance with the needs of the time. Moreover, the multifarious interpretations given these teachings subsequently serves to compound the appearance of fundamental diversity, resulting in sectarian controversies. Yet, a common thread can be located at the basis of these teachings as a perennial wisdom about core spirituality because the Masters themselves are united in their realization of Truth. Hence, they know directly and comprehensively whereof they speak.

¹ Truth is knowledge that corresponds to reality. Absolute Truth is Absolute Knowledge as identical with Absolute Reality. This is the Self-knowledge of the Absolute. Absolute Reality/Absolute Knowledge/Truth exists in itself, by itself, through itself, and for itself as the One that *is*.

Most of the founders of the known religions were either not associated with a tradition or revitalized the tradition with which they were associated on the basis of a return to universal principles. Abraham, if the biblical account is accurate, was an innovator, as was Muhammad. Both Jesus and Buddha revitalized the principles of the tradition that was their heritage, the Hebrew and Vedic traditions respectively. Rama and Krishna, the prominent Avatars of the Vedic tradition, provided alternatives to the caste dependency and ritualistic rigidity of Brahmanism. Ramakrishna taught a universal religion of love and his disciple Vivekananda preached it. Hazrat Inayat Khan, who brought Sufism to the West, was universal in his outlook and teaching. Kabir, Sai Baba of Shirdi and Avatar Meher Baba were universal rather than affiliated with any specific tradition.

More than one Master has said that all religions and wisdom traditions are as beads strung on a single thread. The thread that unites all of them is core spirituality. Its perennial wisdom is not merely an intellectual teaching. It is a “living spirit” of awakening and guidance, the only Master, whom all realized masters embody and who resides in every heart.¹ Meher Baba’s account of his mission reveals the basis of this universality of the embodied Master:

I am not come to establish any cult, society or organization; nor even to establish a new religion. The religion that I shall give teaches the Knowledge of the One behind the many. The book that I shall make people read is the book of the heart that holds the key to the mystery of life. I shall bring about a happy blending of the head and the heart. I shall revitalize all religions and cults, and bring them together like beads on one string.²

Religion is one because Truth is one. In the words of Krishna, another embodied Master: “There is no truth superior to Me. Everything rests upon Me, like pearls strung on a thread.”³ Ramana Maharshi comments: “As the string (in a necklet of) gems, it is Thou in Thy Unity who penetratest all the diversity of beings and religions.”⁴ According to perennial wisdom, this unity is realized by mystical awakening from the long dream of separate existence to knowledge of the One as ultimate truth.

¹ Hazrat Inayat Khan gave the following universal invocation: “Toward the One; the Perfection of Love, Harmony and Beauty; the only Being, united with all the illuminated Souls who form the embodiment of the Master, the Spirit of Guidance.”

² Meher Baba. *God Speaks*. *Op cit.* xxxvi.

³ *Bhagavad Gita*, 7.7.

⁴ Ramana Maharshi. *Five Hymns to Sri Arunchala*. (Tiruvanamalai: Ramana Ashram, 1938), p 39.

THE LOGIC OF FRAMING

*The map is not the territory.*¹

THE LOGIC OF FRAMING AND RATIONALITY

The phrase, “the logic of framing,” does not imply a “rational actor” theory of knowledge and decision-making, in which thinking about problems and issues is primarily rational, relying chiefly on reasoning from fact-based evidence, instead of being heavily influenced by non-rational factors, such as intuition, emotion, and biases. Recent research reveals that human beings deliberate, arrive at judgments and make decisions by fitting new material into familiar patterns, similar to curve fitting in mathematics.² The problem lies in ignoring apparently anomalous data that may not fit into the pattern conveniently but may actually be of considerable significance, so that failing to incorporate it weakens or vitiates the outcome. This seems to be due to a preference for the status quo over change, especially radical change, even in the face of evidence and against reason. Putting it another way, the existing trajectory of cultural thought has great inertial momentum, giving it considerable resistance to change of direction.³

In this process of arriving at judgments and decisions, people use intuitive material, such as “gut feelings,” and are influenced by self-interest and emotion in addition to reasoning from fact-based evidence. Moreover, personal and cultural biases play an important part, too. Set and setting can also make a difference: How one feels and where one is located figure into the thought process.

Many more factors are involved in addition to purely rational considerations. They all contribute to framing “knowledge” that is supposedly objective,

¹ Alfred Korzybski. *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics*.

² Daniel Kahneman (Editor). *Choices, Values, and Frames*. (London & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Daniel Kahneman, Paul Slovic, and Amos Tversky (Editors). *Judgment Under Uncertainty, Heuristics and Biases*. (London & New York: Cambridge University Press 1982).

³ Mark Mason (2008). “What Is Complexity Theory and What Are Its Implications for Educational Change?” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 40 (1), 35–49.
URL=<<http://www.blackwell-synergy.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1469-5812.2007.00413.x?cookieSet=1&journalCode=epat>>.

subjectively. For all finite knowers, knowledge is always and everywhere from a particular standpoint or point of view.¹

“The logic of framing” as used herein means that there is an observable organization of knowledge that is revealed in the expression of knowledge through language and communication. Examination of this organization reveals a great deal about what passes for “knowledge.” The phrase, “the conventional wisdom,” indicates that what a majority of people think or strongly believe about something is not necessarily the case. The conclusion of our investigation will be that *framing matters*.

The intricacies of logic are unfamiliar to most of those who have not made a study of it, and few have. Therefore, I will attempt to clarify matters by repeating principle points, returning to them from different angles. Those who may be familiar with the material already will be able skim along and hopefully will also be forgiving of some redundancy to emphasize important points and present them from slightly different angles. On the other hand, those unfamiliar with the territory may have to reread some of the more obscure passages in order to grasp their import. It is well worth the effort, in that one will come to see how one “frames” one’s world subjectively and takes it for objective reality. This realization is a kind of intellectual “enlightenment.”

Without understanding the logic of framing, one cannot understand how language creates the appearance of reality and also shapes this appearance. Since this process extends across language use, it reaches far beyond religion; so investing some effort in grasping it is worthwhile for more reasons than understanding the particular argument advanced in this endeavor.

SUMMARY

Some of the ideas developed in this and the succeeding chapters on reality, knowledge and logic are somewhat complex, and those as yet unfamiliar with them might profit from a road map of where we are headed and how we are going to get there. So here is a “sneak peak” at what is to come.

Naïve realism takes our knowledge of “the external world” for reality as it actually is in itself. This naïve presumption fails to take into account the extent to which (1) the human mode of knowing shapes knowledge, (2) how much enculturation influences it, and (3) how language works to express knowledge. Everyone processes the given of experience into information and organizes information on the basis of structures of the mind.

¹ Wilfrid Desan. *The Planetary Man*, Vols. I & II. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1972). Dr. Desan was one of my philosophy professors while I was in graduate school at Georgetown University, working toward a doctorate in philosophy.

Our knowledge of what we call “reality” is an *epistemological (mental, conceptual) construct* rather than a mirror *image* of what is actually “out there” independently of knowledge. Our expression of such knowledge through language also uses *logical constructs* and *conceptual models*. Understanding this process of *construction* allow us to see how we impose *epistemological and logical structure* on thought. It also allows us to *deconstruct* the process and *reconstruct* or *reframe* it in other ways.

Understanding how this process works enables us to clarify thinking as well as to shape the structure of knowledge more intelligently and purposefully. For example, scientific methodology has proved to be a more efficient and effective way to structure knowledge of “the external world” than so-called common sense and conventional wisdom, which are often erroneous, e.g., on account of hidden assumptions and subjective bias.

A fundamental insight of Korzybski’s general semantics is that the map is not the territory.¹ The correspondingly fundamental mistake of naïve realism is to take one’s worldview to be a mirror image of reality exactly as it exists independently of our knowledge about it. For one’s world view is a mental construct which the mind shapes on the basis of the human process of knowing and expresses in language through logic.

Human beings use language to structure information. While thought takes place privately, language use is publicly available. Therefore, it is difficult or impossible to study the knowing process other than by subjective introspection, while the expression of thought in language is capable of being examined objectively. By examining the logic of our language it is possible to determine how language works to communicate. In this way, we can gain insight into the way that a worldview is constructed, thereby illuminating its angle of vision and particular biases, as well as clarifying logical confusion.

Examination of the fundamental structure of a universe of discourse reveals a framework determined by organizational rules. Discourse begins with the use of signs, e.g. terms related to each other to form sentences, in order to express meaning. Signs having sense are symbols, e.g., words and propositions. Ordinary language involves the use of signs meaningfully in suitable contexts by competent users in order to communicate by expressing thoughts.

Broadly speaking, logic as *semiotics* is the study of the rules for (1) formulating and transforming expressions (*syntactics*), 2) interpreting signs as symbols (*semantics*), and (3) relating language and language users (“interpreters”) in particular contexts (*pragmatics*). In this way, communication can be investigated independently of mental activities simply by looking at sign-use.

¹ Alfred Korzybski. *Science and Sanity*.

However, language is indeed used to express thought. Therefore, it conforms to human modes of knowing. Some of the rules governing the use of signs are “hardwired” in the brain and remain invariant, such as the principle of non-contradiction. Others are part of the software. Humans do not all use precisely the same operating system or applications. In addition, there are frequent upgrades to existing software. As a result, humans structure their knowledge somewhat differently.

This process operates largely unconsciously, and most people are not even aware of its existence, let alone of how it works and how to improve it. Continuing the computer analogy, most human beings only execute preprogrammed software. They are not programmers and they do not know either what the programs are or how they work, let alone how to change, modify or replace them. But they can learn these things.

Analysis proceeds by drawing distinctions. Where distinctions are not drawn adequately, important ones may not be noticed and confusion can result. Logical analysis examines sign use on the basis of logical distinctions. Logical analysis shows how language (signs used as symbols) expresses knowledge (percepts and thoughts) to communicate about reality (things and events).

There are different *kinds* of existence, known by different *types* of knowledge and expressed by different *orders* of logic. Failure to pay attention to differences in these kinds, types and orders involves lack of clarity that often results in confusion and error. This lack of clarity is not only mental but also logical. Therefore, paying attention to how language works can clear up confusion and avoid error by achieving logical clarity.

Different types of knowing include perception, imagination, conceptualization, understanding, ideation (thinking), reflection and reflexivity. Appreciating their differences, as well as how they are expressed in language, is vital in avoiding logic confusion.

The most important type of knowledge from the viewpoint of spirituality is reflexivity, which is the capacity of a human knower for self-awareness. The epitome of self-awareness is the nondual state of consciousness without an object, or pure consciousness. Attempts to express reports of this state in language often involve logical paradoxes arising from self-reference, making it seem contradictory. Once these paradoxes are resolved on the basis of different types of knowledge resulting in different orders of logic, it becomes clear that this type of knowledge, putatively of the supreme kind of existence, the Absolute, is not irrational but supra-rational.

The logic of framing studies how frameworks determine universes of discourse using rules. The use of different sets of rules results in different worldviews. Frameworks based on fixed rules functioning as norms are closed systems unless

the norms change. Normative religions tend to be closed systems that resist change because their norms are regarded as absolutes, e.g., dogmas and articles of faith. Frameworks that are based on rules that shift in response to changing circumstances are open systems. Science is an open system in that its hypotheses are heuristic, i.e., working principles responsive to feedback from experiments. Open systems are creative and capable of self-correction, whereas closed systems are restrictive and prone to error.

The rapid pace of change is changing the context of daily life so dramatically that closed systems are breaking down. Simultaneously, open systems are responding to the trend toward unification in all fields. Socially, the world is speeding toward greater globalization, bringing the different peoples of the world in closer contact, thereby reinforcing the trend toward unification. As a result an overarching framework is emerging.

The overarching structures of science and perennial wisdom are converging on a unified field as an ultimate explanation of everything. The nondual state is a state that underlies the duality of subject and object and the diversity of objects. Science is locating the nondual state in the unified field of energy. Perennial wisdom has already located it in the nondual state of consciousness. These states are approaching each other as the basis for an emerging framework whose key fundamental is unification.

Normative religions are dying to the degree that they are closed systems. A mystical tradition based on core spirituality lies at the core of all religions. Perennial wisdom links all of these mystical traditions together like beads on one string, where the string is the nondual state, or knowledge of the One. This is the realization of infinite consciousness as the identity of absolute existence and absolute knowledge.

REALITY, KNOWLEDGE, LOGIC

This section explores the relationship of reality, knowledge and logic. Reality relates to existence, knowledge to the reflection of existence in thought, and logic to the expression of thought in language and other forms of symbolism, such as graphic representation. Because “a picture is worth a thousand words,” an architectural blueprint is a more effective way of communicating an architect’s thought than a verbal description. As we will see, however, the same logic of picturing applies to both descriptive statements and graphic representations, such as blueprints and maps, as well as actual pictures such as paintings and photographs.

Dualistic knowledge has two poles —subjective and objective. The knower, or subject, is the subjective pole, and the known, or object, is the objective pole. Knower and known come together in knowledge through the process of knowing, which links the subject and object in knowledge.

The process of knowing is principally an operation that a subject performs on an object, for example, in acquiring knowledge of the local environment through the senses. The sense data received through the operation of the senses called “perception” must then be combined into a percept through an unconscious operation of the mind that takes place automatically and unnoticed, prior to thinking. Percepts are then also joined together to produce information. This involves several operations of the mind, such as naming, classification, predication, and judging truth-value. Thus, in addition to receptivity through the senses, mental processing is also involved in the acquisition of knowledge by perception, some of which is conscious and some unconscious, and some voluntary and some automatic.

Not all objects are things, facts or events, for contents of the mind such as sensations, thoughts, feelings, and imagination can also become objects for knowledge. When the knower and known are brought together through the process of knowing, that which is known is called “data.” *Datum* means “given” in Latin. *Data* is the plural form. The human knower, or subject, is called “the self,” or “ego.” *Ego* means “I” in Latin. The known as the given can be either objects existing externally to the self, or also the self. Humans are capable of knowing not only physical and mental objects, but also themselves as self-conscious subjects.

The existence of objects is distinguished by *kind*; knowledge of objects is differentiated by *type*, and the logic of expressing this knowledge is distinguished by *orders*. Different *kinds* of objects are known on the basis of different *types* of knowledge, and these different types of knowledge are expressed through different *orders* of logic.¹ For example, things are particular, sets characterized by different properties and relations are general, but they are both objects of knowledge. That is to say, things and sets of things are different *kinds* of objects, one that is individual and concrete, and the other, universal and abstract. They are known on the basis of different *types* of knowledge, perception and conception, involving sensation and abstraction.

These different types of knowledge are expressed by different orders of logic, particular and general. The more general is said to be of a higher order since it includes the less general as being lower. For example, a class or “set” whose members are particular individuals is more general than any of the individuals, hence, of a higher logical order. There are also different orders of generality. Sets

¹ The use of logical “order” indicates hierarchy. Logicians and mathematicians will notice that this use is somewhat of an oversimplification in the interest of making a complex matter simpler to grasp. However, it is not our intention to attempt to formalize the logic of framing in this undertaking but simply to suggest how logical confusion often results from imprecision, and how this confusion is removed by logical clarity, one aspect of which is noticing a hierarchical ordering of concepts in the construction of conceptual models.

whose members are individual objects are less general than sets of sets of individual objects, and so on.

Mixing these up or failing to notice how they operate in specific situations results in confusion. This can be either inadvertent or intentional. Much logical confusion results from either ignorance or inadvertence. However, logic can also be used manipulatively through rhetoric to make things seem different from what they are, or better than they are. In Plato's day this was called "sophistry," and the term has stuck. Sophistry is the intentional confusion of logic and rhetoric in order to gain an advantage by "making the worse seem to be the better," as the ancients put it.

When thinking is illogical, the knowledge it produces is confused. The logic underlying the expression of such is correspondingly unclear. When knowledge and its expression are not clear, confusion about reality arises and error ensues. Just as the way to make thinking true is to corroborate it by evidence, so too, the way to make thinking clear is through introducing logical clarity.

On the one hand, falsity arises through erroneous judgment about facts and is corrected by checking with the facts. If one concludes that an assertion of a possible state of affairs corresponds with the facts when it doesn't, then the judgment is erroneous and the assertion is false. On the other hand, logical error arises when the logic used to frame thinking and express knowledge is invalid.

Judgments must be true and the logical form of inference must be valid in order for argumentation to be sound. That is to say, judgments about propositional truth must correspond to facts, and inference must conform to the rules of logic that govern inference. Otherwise, conclusions based on such argumentation are unsound. When this type of incorrect thinking is not noticed for what it is, confusion results.

Therefore, striving for logical clarity is as imperative as checking the facts, especially when approaching issues combining different kinds of existence, different types of knowledge and different orders of logic. This is called "critical thinking." As the world passes from an age where the word was "law" into an age in which audiovisual media rule, critical thinking is coming into short supply.

CRITICAL METHODOLOGY

Kant based his philosophical inquiry on what he termed the "critical" method. The method is "critical" rather than "dogmatic," in that it takes into account the mind's contribution to shaping knowledge, instead of naively assuming that perception is identical with what is really "out there" as it exists in itself, or that first principles, like causality, are self-evident. Kant discovered that the mind organizes its data on the basis of categories, and that this organization becomes part and parcel of the known.

“Reality” as it appears to the mind is therefore a combination of the given and the organization that the mind contributes on the basis of its inherent structure and its organization of the given. To use a contemporary analogy, data becomes information through processing. The same data can be processed differently.

Because the mind organizes data into information, the mind contains this organization along with the data. According to information theory, information has organizing power. Once data is organized as information, the principles of organization carry forward in the organization of other information. This results in the power of an established narrative to influence subsequent information entering that universe of discourse, for example.

Kant sought to determine these organizing principles that are foundational not only to the knowing process but logic as “the laws of thought,” that is, the rules or norms of thinking. While Kant’s solution is no longer particularly relevant other than to philosophers, his insight that the mind contributes to knowledge by organizing it showed the need for a critical method to distinguish the mind’s contribution from the data in processes into information. This realization marked a decisive turn in thinking about knowledge and reality. In the view of naive realism, for example, the senses simply impress data on the mind as “blank slate;” hence, we know things as they really are in themselves.

Subsequently, philosophers realized that language expresses thought as knowledge; hence, language contains the logic as “the rules that thought follows. These norms of thinking are shown in the logic of language.

Ancient philosophy focused on being; modern philosophy on thinking, and contemporary philosophy on language. In their attempt to discover the first principles and fundamental causes of what exists, the Presocratics launched Western philosophy. As a result ancient philosophy was preoccupied with *metaphysics* as the study of a being as being. In the quest to discover *what can be known* about what exists, René Descartes initiated modern philosophy, which was focused on *epistemology*, as the study of knowledge. Descartes is most famous for saying, “I think; therefore, I am.”

This epistemological turn from preoccupation with metaphysics was then followed by analytic philosophy as the study of expression. Contemporary philosophers realized while a critique of knowledge was needed to determine what human beings can know about being through metaphysics, a critique of language in terms of its underlying *logic* was necessary in order to determine *what can be expressed* in language.

Humans use language to structure intellectual knowledge through conceptualizing, understanding and reasoning. This meant that a study of how language works to express knowledge is fundamental to epistemology as the study of knowledge, just as epistemology is a prerequisite for metaphysics as the study of

being as being. What can be said clearly must be first determined before proceeding to investigate what can be thought clearly and communicated to others about reality.

Knowledge is nebulous to the degree it occurs within the mind, where it is subjective and private. But knowledge can be examined through its expression in language, which is observable, hence, objective. Language is also publicly available instead of private, making agreement based on criteria possible. Therefore, philosophers would subsequently turn attention to investigating the contribution that language makes in the expression of knowledge, leaving knowledge as a mental phenomenon to psychologists for investigations.

This resulted in the logical and linguistic extension of Kant's critical method, which he initially introduced in epistemology as the study of the principles of knowledge. This extension of the critical method to language covered not only the structure and operation of language itself but also its relationship to context through use in particular circumstances.

Ordinary language usage takes place within a context and is relative to it, so there is also a social and cultural contribution to the expression of knowledge. Context connects knowledge with reality in communication by giving linguistic expression specific meaning in relation to the world. Context gives specific meaning to symbols through contextual use. Expression, in turn, shapes context through the logic it imposes on the context.

This process generally goes unnoticed, since ordinary language is shared across a culture. But it stands out when one enters an unaccustomed subculture, such as a religion or sect different from one's own. Then one may find that quite a different use of language and a different context also, depending on the differences in doctrine, ritual and observances. Such differences also make themselves obvious when those adhering to a subculture that is sufficiently distinct from the outlook and attitudes of the overarching culture espouse their ideology in relation to the general culture, for instance, politically. Then, the cognitive dissonance can be so great as to produce consternation and even provoke conflict.

CUTTING THE PIE

By building on the foundation poured in the previous chapters, we are now in a position to delve more deeply into the logic of framing that accounts for different interpretations of the same data. Framing is like cutting a pie; the same pie can be cut in a variety of ways. We have just examined how "reality" can be framed in terms of dualism or monism, and realism or idealism, depending on the angle taken.

Taking the pie to be reality and cutting it to be knowledge, the knife with which the pie is cut can be thought of as intellect, the discriminative faculty. For example,

the knife can be sharp or dull. A sharp intellect can discriminate finely, while a dull one cannot.

Logic is the way the pie is cut up. The same pie can be cut in a variety of ways, but not at the same time. Many angles of view are possible but not simultaneously by the same person. For example, a pie can be cut into equal pieces or unequal, into large pieces or small, or a combination of the two. When one goes to a restaurant, the pie is pre-cut and one takes the piece-size that one is served. This is comparable to normative logics that are rigidly determined by rules. When one is at home, one can cut the pie any way one wants to. This is comparable to a flexible logic that adapts to circumstances. For example, a person on a diet can cut a small piece, while those who are young and active can eat pretty much as they please.

Interpretation is like cutting a pie, so to speak, in that the same events can be seen from a variety of angles for different reasons. Therefore, interpretation involves many issues.

First, interpretation involves a process similar to mapping. Maps conform structurally to the territory they represent on the basis of certain principles of mapping. Something similar also applies to interpretation. This is the logical dimension. It is the “how” of the matter.

Secondly, there is the matter of the particular interpretations that are offered for the same events. This is the historical dimension. It is the “what” of the matter.

Thirdly, there are reasons behind the interpretations that are made. This is the “why” of the matter. This issue is complex because it involves psychological, sociological and cultural factors. The scope of the present investigation is limited to the logic of framing, together with how this manifested historically with respect to the Jesus tradition. However, this is neither to ignore nor minimize the other issues. They are introduced, however, only to the degree necessary for the project at hand, since these other dimensions are rather vast in scope themselves. A detailed investigation of them herein would be a digression from the thrust of the argument being advanced.

On the other hand, it is necessary to understand how subjective belief has often been mistaken for objective knowledge in the development of the Jesus tradition, or how political advantage sometimes influenced religious doctrine. Subjective matters such as belief and self-interest can and do play an important role in framing interpretations.

Naïve realism assumes that human beings know “reality” as it exists “out there,” and that we represent it to ourselves as such. Many therefore people conclude that when others disagree with them over the way things are, they are ignorant, disingenuous, or mentally unstable.

But “reality” as it appears to the mind is more than meets the eye, in that the structure of the mind contributes a good deal to constructing the phenomena of sense experience and then further processing perception through conceptual understanding and reasoning through inference. In the Middle Ages, Aquinas had already noted that knowledge accords with the mode of the knower. It was largely left to Emmanuel Kant to explore the logical contribution of the mind. Later, this would be the focus of not only logical inquiry but also psychological research.

This brings up the questions as to what comes from reality, how much from the knowing process, and how much from language and context. Ancient speculation focused on the question, what is there? Modern speculation, beginning with Descartes, focused on what we know about what there is. Contemporary investigation turned to what we can say about both: what we know and what there is. That is to say, ancient thinkers were concerned chiefly with *being* — what is. Modern thinkers were concerned chiefly with *knowledge* — what and how do we know about what is. Contemporary thinkers with *logic* and *language* — how do we express what we know about what is.

Kant introduced the notion that the business of philosophy is primarily “critical” in the sense of providing a *critique* of knowledge by reflecting on its principles, as the titles of Kant’s major works indicate. *The Critique of Pure Reason*, *The Critique of Practical Reason*, and *The Critique of Judgment* deal with epistemology as the study of knowledge, ethics as the study of morality, and aesthetics as the study of beauty. Taken as a whole, they cover the true, the good and the beautiful. Kant applied his *critical methodology* to judgments of truth, goodness and beauty by examining the logical principles underlying them that contribute to knowledge and value. This means standing “above” such judgments and inspecting them from the point of view of form rather than content.

Kant observed that the boundary between “reality” as what’s “out there” and the phenomena of experience, that is, “reality” as it appears to the mind, is blurred, because it is not possible for the mind to stand outside of the knowing process and see this boundary. Therefore, “reality” as the things-in-themselves “out there” is indeterminate.¹ This is extremely significant because if “reality” is not known directly there is no purely objective criterion for meaning and truth. Human knowledge is relative to the human mode of knowing, which involves a mixture of the senses, mental processes and the given, and precisely what the given is outside of and beyond this process, the mind cannot know.

The questions becomes, if reality for human beings is determined by its appearance to them in terms of their mode of knowing, what is to prevent reality

¹ Will Graham informs that Plotinus broached the issue of indeterminacy centuries before in II *Ennead* IV:10, and III *Ennead* VI:7.

appearing in different ways to different people. Reality obviously appears different to those deficient in one of the senses, for example. Not only is a whole dimension unavailable to the blind, but also the other senses must assist in filling the gap by functioning at a higher degree of their potential than is normally called upon. Anthropologists and sociologists also found that reality appears differently in different cultures, often surprisingly so, since most people are unaware of the strong cultural components operative in forming their perspectives, which they naively confuse with “reality.”

Moreover, human knowledge is not limited to the phenomena of observation. It extends to the universal dimension through which the human mind is able to generalize, e.g., by classifying particular objects in terms of common properties and shared relations. Levels of knowledge more general than the particulars of sense experience are principally concerned with this universality. The capacity to think universally in addition to perceiving particulars opens human knowledge to conception, understanding and reasoning. This is called “rationality.”

The human species is defined as *homo sapiens*, or “rational animal.” The Latin root *sap* means to know in terms of universal categories and principles, which is the characteristic of humans. For example, Latin *sapientia* means “wisdom.” It corresponds to *sophia* in Greek. The root “s_p” is likely derived from the same Indo-European source as Sanskrit *sarva*, meaning “all.” “All” is a logical operator symbolizing universal inclusion. Recognition and expression of logical inclusion requires the intellectual ability called “abstraction.”

Through abstraction human beings are able to use concepts as universals applying to many particular instances on the basis of commonality. Thus, while other animals operate largely on the basis of perception and instinct, which allows them to deal with similar particulars, human beings are capable of understanding and reasoning, as well as perceiving. Through language, they express this knowledge using terminology that is singular, as names of individual objects, particular propositions, such as those involving “some,” or “a few,” and general propositions, like those using “every,” “all” or “none.”

SIGNS AND SYMBOLS

Perception, conception, understanding, and reasoning occur in the mind and involve sense perception and thinking. In so far as they are mental, these are the subjects of philosophy and psychology. Knowledge is expressed through language, which operates on the basis of rules, called “logic.” Logic does not however deal with the mind but with its observable effects in symbolic expression. Logic is sometimes spoken of as “the laws of thought,” but it operates in terms of the expression of knowledge through symbols and their relation in language on the basis of the invariance of logical rules, such as formation and transformation rules.

Signs are publicly available, e.g., as spoken sounds and written markings. These are used as symbols in language. They function as tokens of thoughts and feelings, which are private, and they can also be used as tokens for things through the medium of thought and its expression. This is accomplished linguistically by giving signs meaning through their employment as symbols. For example, an arrow as a sign that may be used as a pointer has no specific meaning on its own. By itself, it points to nothing independent of context; it is merely capable of pointing. The use of an arrow in a context give it a particular sense as a pointer with a specific meaning in that context, e.g. as a road sign marking the route to a destination.

Epistemology and cognitive psychology investigate how such processes work mentally and physiologically. Logic takes it as given that the process does work to express knowledge and focuses instead on the structure underlying expression. Logic examines language rather than investigating the principles of knowledge, which is the province of epistemology, or observing the mind in relation to the brain, which is the business of psychology.

Logic is only concerned with the use of signs as symbols, not with how this occurs in the mind or how the mind relates to “reality.” Thinking and mental operations are subjective and private, but we can observe the linguistic use of signs as symbols. They are objective, and being publicly available they provide the basis for agreement among language-users. Because we use and understand the same language in shared circumstances, we presume that we think alike. However, we do not know each other’s thoughts directly.

Logic is not a science, however, because it does not provide any account of how things stand in the world. Logic simply governs the use of language for clear expression.

SEMIOTICS

C. S. Peirce (1839-1914), one of the most noteworthy American thinkers (who has not yet received the recognition he deserves), was the founder of *semiotics*. Charles W. Morris (1901/03-1979) later codified the insights of Peirce, and they became the foundation for semiotics in the emerging field of linguistics. Semiotics is the study of signs and symbols, especially in relation to how they are used to represent and communicate.

Semiotics is made up of the branches of syntactics, semantics, and pragmatics. Syntactics is concerned with the study of algorithms as logical constructs. Semantics is concerned with the interpretation of algorithms in relation to phenomena (experience). Pragmatics studies uses of language that are not related to either the manipulation of signs syntactically or their semantic interpretation as symbols, but rather with how language-users use language to communicate. (C. S.

Peirce called this later branch *pragmaticism*, not to be confused with *pragmatism*, a methodology advocated by philosopher and psychologist William James.)

Looking in greater detail, semiotics is the study of the logic of language on the basis of syntactics, semantics and pragmatics.¹ Syntactics examines the use of signs in relation to each other on the basis of rules, e.g., as notations such as arithmetic, algebra and calculus. Semantics deals with signs in relation to objects, e.g., with how language works symbolically to express knowledge about how things stand in the world. Pragmatics is concerned with how language is used to communicate, e.g., how language communicates to describe, prescribe, command, entreat, praise, exclaim, persuade, and the like. Pragmatics is more concerned with “rhetoric” than logic or description.

These three functions are generally kept separate in formal subjects such as mathematics, which is purely syntactical, and science, which is a combination of syntactics (notation), semantics (interpretation) and pragmatics (protocol). However, ordinary language makes little or no distinction among these main branches of logic. Hence, there is greater danger of confusion arising.

The study of the structure of algorithms is called “syntactics,” since it is concerned with syntax as the relationship of signs to each other on the basis of rules. Everyone is familiar with syntax through the study of grammar in grammar school. Syntactics is, of course, a broader and deeper study, but it is similar. For example, formal logic is a branch of logic that deals with deductive reasoning on the basis of syllogisms.

The study of how language relates to the world descriptively is called “semantics.” For example, descriptions are interpreted semantically to represent putative states of affairs and assert or deny their being the case. Scientific theories are expressed through mathematical equations that are capable of being interpreted semantically. Through semantic interpretation, experiments can be devised to test these hypotheses in terms of the states of affairs they predict by checking to see whether what is predicted is the case.

The study of how language is used as a tool for communication is called “pragmatics.” Syntactics and semantics do not take the language-user into account. Pragmatics does by studying the ways in which language is used to accomplish

¹ This is the meaning of “semiotics” as logic in the work of C. S. Peirce and Charles W. Morris. Morris was influenced by Peirce and developed the implications of his work in *Foundations of the Theory of Signs* (1938). His later works on semiotics are *Signification and Significance* (1964) and *Writings on the General Theory of Signs* (1971). Morris did not acknowledge Peirce’s influence and critics charge that he altered Peirce’s intent to some degree. Ferdinand de Saussure used these terms somewhat differently, more in a linguistic sense.

various tasks in communication, such as giving orders, questioning and answering questions, evaluating, expressing feelings and so forth. Pragmatic utterances such as injunctions and prescription are of a different category than syntactical tautologies and semantic descriptions.

There are three fundamental categories involved in knowing, namely reality, knowledge and language. That which links them is called “logic.” The study of logic involves investigating the intelligibility that underlies reality, which is grasped in knowledge and gets expressed through language. Epistemology studies the principles of knowledge, and metaphysics studies the principles of reality, or “being as being” rather than as “this” or “that.”

TYPES AND ARCHETYPES

Gottlob Frege (1848-1925) paralleled these developments in England and America on the Continent. Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) and Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) followed them with *Principia Mathematica*, a ground-shaking contribution at the time of its publication in 1910-1913. It introduced a theory of logical “types” to resolve paradoxes that Frege had elaborated. This theory of types launched the formal distinction of conceptual levels and logical orders in terms of hierarchies. The theory of types was elaborated in set theory, where individual members are included in sets, these sets in sets of higher levels, and so forth.¹

The psychological “shadow” of the logical theory of types was the theory of archetypes proposed by Carl G. Jung to account for data revealed by his study of

¹ George Cantor’s work on infinite sets involved its own paradoxes. For example, is the set of infinite sets greater than an infinite set it contains, as seems to be the case intuitively on the basis of commonsense? The answer that the set of infinite sets is of a higher order logically, that is, of a higher type in *Principia* terminology, since it includes sets of a lower order, even though they involve mathematical infinities. But the set of infinite sets does not become actually greater than the infinity of the sets it contains. Mathematical infinity is potential rather than actual, in the sense that “without end” means that another unit can always be added. Hence, what a mathematical infinity posits is indeterminate, as the Greeks had realized in calling infinity the *apeiron*, indicating indeterminacy. For example, the set of integers is infinite not because there is an actual infinity of integers, but because another unit can potentially be added to the series *ad infinitum*. Therefore, such sets are potentially infinite in the sense of being indeterminate. By mathematical definition, adding one infinity, which is indeterminate, to another infinity, which is also indeterminate, yields yet another infinity, which is indeterminate. Introducing the notion of levels resolves the apparent contradiction by showing that there are different levels of inclusion with respect to indeterminacy, which are independent of cardinality as the number of elements of a set. We will return to the notion of indeterminacy below.

the unconscious as it shows itself through art, myth and other non-rational symbolism. This led Jung to hypothesis “archetypes” of the “collective unconscious” as deep logical structures that only show themselves in non-rational forms of expression. Sometimes they emerge through the irrational, as in psychological aberration, but their manifestations are also extra-rational, for example, in the symbols of art and themes of myth. For example, Jung was interested in Gnosticism as a manifestation of this extra-rational activity of the mind and its expression in Gnostic myths and symbols. Although normative Christianity may reject this view, the Jesus tradition as a whole can be viewed as reflecting mythic archetypes such as the hero, an archetype explored in Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*.¹

Jung’s contribution to logic is to notice that some important logical structures are non-rational, in the sense that they are unconscious, operating behind the scenes, subliminally and implicitly rather than consciously and explicitly. Jung’s archetypes suggest that a type of logic is also operative that differs from what is normally thought of as logic. This logic cannot be expressed as science or philosophy, but rather manifests through the inspiration of the muses, for example, in dreams and visions and through art, poetry and myth.

The knowing process is both conscious and unconscious. The “wisdom of the body” maintains homeostasis without the mind’s having to deal with these physical processes consciously. Memory is able to recall a great deal from its database, but this database is unconscious until it is called on for specific items of information. Similarly, there are unconscious structures that shape thought, feeling and action that are not ordinarily conscious. Russell’s types apply to conscious knowing and Jung’s to unconscious “knowing.” Jung’s archetypes of the collective unconscious are different from Russell’s logical types, in the sense that Russell’s types are levels of rational abstraction whereas Jung’s archetypes are levels of non-rational abstraction. Both are extremely important for understanding framing because framing takes place largely unconsciously rather than consciously. The study of logic and depth psychology in relation to language-use make these processes conscious.

LOGICAL THERAPY

Freud’s great psychological discovery was that the unconscious becomes conscious through being named. This discovery became the basis of his therapeutics. Free association, Rorschach testing and the like are procedures that facilitate bringing the unconscious to consciousness by naming it. A great deal of psychotherapy is also based on naming in order to make the unconscious conscious.

¹ Joseph Campbell. *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*. (New York: MJF Books, 1949).

Naming what is ordinarily not noticed. Without naming it, the logic underlying language-use often slips by unnoticed. For example, framing remains largely concealed from view since it is unconsciously imposed in thinking and expressing oneself. Unless one specifically pays attention to its structure and operation, the contribution framing makes to knowledge and expression are ignored. This leads to erroneous assumptions about how language is working in many ways. It is important to pay attention to this in order to avoid being taken in by erroneous presumptions based on incomplete understanding.

Russell's most famous student, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), was influential in calling attention to this predicament and also in suggesting how to introduce logical clarity in order to clear up such confusion. He looked at philosophy as logical "therapy." This emphasis provoked a shift toward logic and philosophy of language in English and American universities, occupying many academics for much of the twentieth century and dominating the philosophical universe of discourse for decades. Cognitive psychology and linguistics subsequently expanded upon this orientation.

Europe played a similar but different part. Structuralism was a broad movement that examined the structure underlying various fields of knowledge. Structuralists looked forward to developing a comprehensive account by articulating the key structures in all fields. Structuralism can be viewed as the swansong of modern essentialism. Eventually this somewhat absolutist emphasis on structure provoked a reaction. Postmodernism and deconstruction held that rather than achieving rational explanation in terms of universal structures, structuralism ran counter to the changing intellectual culture. In the eyes of these critics, technological progress has fractured knowledge, divorcing it from modernism's preoccupation with objectivity.

Nietzsche's Zarathustra declared that God is dead. This can be interpreted as meaning that the tide of essentialism dominating Western thought since Plato had crested and was ebbing. The biblical "God" is believed to have created things on the basis of essences that are absolute and unchanging since they are reflections of the "divine ideas" in things, similar to the "forms" of Platonic thought. The Church Fathers adapted Plato's forms as invariant patterns and definitive structures to Christian theology. Western thinking continued to presume them through modern times. Nietzsche rejected the view that these essences have determinate meaning as supposed absolutes. In doing so, he prophesied the end of the modern period as the post-medieval age that had begun in the Renaissance and the culmination of an epoch that had begun in ancient times and lasted for millennia.

The existentialists hearkened to this "cry in the wilderness" and opposed existentialism to essentialism. Heidegger is known as a "difficult" thinker to understand because he fashioned his own vocabulary in order to avoid definitions in

terms of the old essences. He viewed such worn-out definitions as mere clichés, roads leading nowhere anymore. The essences to which such definitions pointed had decayed because the boundaries they delineated no longer applied to life, especially after technology.

Similarly, Wittgenstein's later thinking emphasized that meaning is determined on the basis of contextual use more than logical form, which had been the focus of his early work. If meaning is based on contextual use and the context shifts, so does meaning. In a world in which change predominates, the context is continuously shifting and so is meaning along with it.

Moreover, Wittgenstein observed that contextual use reveals "family resemblances" among the denotation and connotation of many terms instead of the essences presumed by traditional definitions. When one actually looks for those rigidly drawn boundaries in the use of the terms in the various contexts they play a role, they are not found to apply rigidly, in terms of fixed *boundaries*, but rather flexibly, as open-ended *boundary conditions*.

In the Electronic Age, "the medium *is* the message," as Marshall McLuhan had observed at the beginning of the "television age," meaning that presentation not only influences our knowledge of existence but also becomes equated with it. Large numbers of people think that what they see on television news presents an accurate picture of reality, even though news presentation is notoriously open to manipulation. The propagandists of the past and advertising executives of the present knew this previously and took advantage of it. Soon, political factions realized the importance of adding "spin" to bias news reporting in ways favorable to their position.

Similarly, religious authorities have long sought to control the universe of discourse through the imposition of norms that not only present a particular viewpoint as being unquestionably true, but also rule out other viewpoints, e.g., as heretical. There is a natural tendency in religion and politics to see one's own position as the only correct one. When sects or parties become heavily invested not only politically with respect to power but also economically with respect to control, then the tendency is amplified. Taken to the extreme, corruption begins to dominate.

In the present age, the syndrome is becoming pervasive, as the public becomes fascinated with "reality" programs, for instance. "Talking heads" read partisan talking points and call it objective news reporting. Political commentator David Sirota recently called this the transformation of journalism into stenography, as reporter regurgitate spin instead of looking behind it and objectively reporting all

the evidence that investigative reporters can find.¹ The evening “news” is generally followed by panels of “the chattering class” shouting at each other about the talking points of the day, as the information industry melds with the entertainment industry, and news becomes “infotainment.”

Since religious discourse in America has become entwined in politics, this same travesty of inquiry and truth is pervading the religious sphere as well, as religious leaders attempt to shape the framework of discourse in the public mind to their perceived advantage.

For example, a campaign is now underway to convince the voting public that the United States was not founded on the principle of separation of church and state. This is not a disingenuous argument in that it is the attempt to establish the view of *biblical dominionism*, which holds that God’s law — as interpreted by dominionist sects — is supreme, and that those who hold this view have a divine right to rule. and to posses the fruits of the land.² This view is especially attractive to the authoritarian personality.³ Those attempting to put this frame in place realize that it has to be accomplished by beginning incrementally. It also requires training future generations as a political cadre using religious schools for this purpose, similar to the Islamists have used the Islamic religious school (Arabic: *madrass*) in some places.

While these are extreme examples cited to make the point obvious, there are many other types of religious persuasion also being put forward under the guise of political action that seek to shape the public universe of discourse to the advantage of their position now that religions no longer have the political influence they once exerted in the West. This phenomenon will be examined in greater depth in the chapter on the logic of history.

The present preoccupation of the media is with inter-subjectivity rather than objectivity. This is perhaps not entirely the fault of the media, which is, after all, an industry. Being competitive, the media provides what their customers want to buy into. The majority of people have apparently rejected the quest for reasoned explanations in terms of universal structures in favor of creative presentation, even if it intentionally imposes a particular viewpoint.

¹ URL=<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-sirota/journalism-becomes-stenog_b_48333.html>.

² “Dominionism (A.K.A. Christian Reconstructionism, Dominion Theology, and Theonomy).” URL=<<http://www.religioustolerance.org/reconstr.htm>>.

³ Theodor W. Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, and Daniel J. Levinson. *The Authoritarian Personality: Studies in Prejudice*. (New York: W. W. Norton, Abridged Edition, 1993 (1950)).

The result of this is “presentation as reality.” For example, reporter Ron Suskind wrote in *The New York Times Magazine*:

In the summer of 2002, after I had written an article in *Esquire* that the White House didn't like about Bush's former communications director, Karen Hughes, I had a meeting with a senior adviser to Bush. He expressed the White House's displeasure, and then he told me something that at the time I didn't fully comprehend -- but which I now believe gets to the very heart of the Bush presidency.

The aide said that guys like me were "in what we call the reality-based community," which he defined as people who "believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality." I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. "That's not the way the world really works anymore," he continued. "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality -- judiciously, as you will - - we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors ... and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do."¹

“Reality” gets created rather than simply reported by using the media as an “echo chamber.” Official spokespeople repeat “talking points” bolstered by selective leaking and testimony of sympathetic experts and think tanks that are seeded in media channels favorable to the prevailing ideology. This is picked up by the mainstream media, which reports it widely as news. The result is that the talking points are integrated into the conventional wisdom.

This is essentially the logic of propaganda that has shown itself in the past to be effective in shaping perception of reality. While political regimes employ these strategies, they are called “messaging” and “spin.” When business and industry use them they are called “public relations” and “marketing.” Other influential institutions also use them in their own ways.

Normative religions call this “evangelism,” “religious activism,” or “propagation of the faith.” They are now faced with acting more like political parties vying for power than traditional faiths, as they struggle to satisfy conservative base, whose primary interest is in tradition, while placating moderates and progressives, who want the religious framework to reflect the shifting cultural paradigm. Traditional churches are dividing into factions and even breaking apart over preserving or changing norms, especially ones that define the frame.

Normative religions are increasingly competing with each other for adherents. For example, Evangelical Protestantism has successfully challenged the traditional

¹ Ron Suskind. “Faith, Certainty and the Presidency of George W. Bush.” *The New York Times Magazine*, Oct. 17, 2004.

hegemony of the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America. The answer of many local Roman Catholic clergy was Liberation Theology, which shifted the universe of religious discourse to the left, portraying Jesus in the role of social reformer. This resulted in a reaction from the Vatican, ostensibly on theological grounds. But it was also influenced by the fact that the Roman Catholic Church has been the bastion of the ruling elite. In Latin America, the framework of normative Christianity is now in flux.

On one hand, this is a historical process. On the other hand, being also a dialectical process rather than a series of random events without an underlying rationale, the historical process evinces a logic process. This logic is based on a collision of frames and different normative systems confront each other, where the deciding factor is not necessarily theological “truth” but the pragmatic capacity of a frame to meet felt needs. Shifts in allegiance were based more on individual and social interests than the outcome of deep theological controversies, as in the past.

THE ADVENT OF TECHNOLOGY AND POSTMODERNITY

“Postmodernity” is a term derived from the postmodernism in art and architecture.¹ It refers to the period after WWII, when the world was disabused of its optimism. New terms, such as “holocaust” and “genocide” became commonplace. The world had to learn to live with “the bomb,” and then the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Traditional structures that had been in place since the beginning of the Modern Age that arose after the Renaissance began to crumble. For example, traditional normative religions lost their privileged place in defining social and individual life. Now they have to compete in the marketplace with others.

The dawn of postmodernity became more clearly obvious with the onset of the rapid change introduced by the Information Age and the instability that this is bringing. Many traditional principles and values are now in flux, apparently as a new paradigm is replacing the old one. However, what that new paradigm will be remains unclear.

The power of media in determining perception has increased geometrically with technological advances in communications and the economies of scale that have made such media widely available. Hence, many thinkers speculated that humanity is entering an entirely new logical era.

Both the iconoclastic Jacques Derrida and Michael Foucault initially had affinities with structuralism, but later shifted toward post-structuralism and post-modernity, perhaps as a consequence of their realizing that the ground had shifted away from the underlying presumptions of modernism, owing to fresh developments. Derrida

¹ “Postmodernity.” URL=<<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postmodernity>>.

not only moved beyond structuralism but also became an exponent of deconstruction, a position that argues that when structures are subjected to rigorous analysis their boundaries are found to be porous and indeterminate. Where structuralism had tended toward definitive explanation on the basis of networks of structure, post-structuralism implied that knowledge is relative in that meaning is evanescent and uncertainty prevails.¹

Regardless of how one views the success of postmodernism and deconstruction as philosophy, the fact is that the contributions they made did alter the framework of the universe of discourse by calling into question the presumption that words mean what they purport. For example, Derrida observed that the meaning of key terms often shifts fluidly over the course of even a single work, so that the framework of the universe of discourse surreptitiously shifts as well. This oozing of the logical terrain can occur without an author's even realizing it, let alone the casual reader. Indeed, one of the reasons that scientists use technical terms, operational definitions, and mathematical equations is to limit this possibility of shift in meaning and frame.

While the conclusion that some postmodernists draw on the basis of deconstruction that meaning is therefore relative and indeterminate may be extreme, their point of meaning shift is well taken. For example, contradicting the presumption that the Bible is the inerrant word of God, the degree of shift in the meaning of key terms has been huge over the course of millennia, and many of the original meanings are no longer even known. Even if it could be shown *historically* that we are reading the same words now as people were ages ago, this wholesale shift in meaning would still *logically* invalidate the argument that God's word is inerrant, so that "God's truth" is a historical constant.

In addition to advances in logic such as the theory of types, progress in science also entered the picture, as cognitive psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, historians, and linguists got involved. Historians, literary theorists, and critics like the prolific and influential Harold Bloom threw their hats into the ring also. The critical approach to knowledge became *au current*. As a result, the foundation of many fields began to shake when traditional presumptions were examined critically. This has been especially true in the case of religion, where tradition often trumps evidence.

Beginning in the later half of the nineteenth century, the religious climate became loose enough for established academics not only to examine the foundations of scripture rigorously but also to publish their findings. At first, the Establishment pushed back. But the situation moderated and great names like Rudolf Bultmann

¹ F. David Peat. *From Certainty to Uncertainty: The Story of Science and Ideas in the Twentieth Century*. (Washington, DC: John Henry Press, 2002).

(1884-1976) began to question on the basis of rigorous methodology the underpinnings of long-standing tradition about scriptures. Presently, well-respected academics like Bart D. Ehrman are becoming best-selling authors by informing the public about these issues in a contemporary context.

Moreover, the current political situation particularly in the United States, where politicians and political operatives are using cognitive knowledge like framing and rhetorical devices like “messaging” and “spin,” is resulting in greater public awareness of the power of language and psychology to influence one’s view of reality. It is becoming increasingly clear to more and more people that major fields of life such as religion, government, and politics are susceptible to manipulation on the basis of such techniques. Moreover, it is no secret that the advertising profession and marketing industry have applied these techniques to increase sales by “hype” products and services, as well as downplaying or concealing their disadvantages.

While such techniques work effectively as long as they remain unnoticed, many people are starting to notice them, especially where they are used blatantly. Therefore, *caveat emptor* is becoming a more common attitude as people wake up to the “hype.” In doing so they come to realize that these techniques are often applied beyond the world of advertising and marketing and they are becoming more sensitive to how all products and services are marketed proactively, even apparently non-commercial ones like normative religion, where, for example, evangelical pastors are taught how to apply such techniques to grow multi-thousand congregations for their mega-churches.

The primary function of such logical and rhetorical devices is to shape people’s views of “reality” in the desired direction. This is accomplished by imposing a framework that shapes the universe of discourse, resulting in a map of the terrain from a particular angle. Knowledge purporting to be about “reality” is expressed in terms of an ideology. The different religions can be seen as different ideologies that shape different viewpoints.

REALITY VS. “REALITY”

Most people consider what they *know* to be identical with what *is*. Those with properly functioning sense presume that what they receive through the senses corresponds pretty much exactly to what is “out there.” Others think that what they know is at least congruent to reality in the sense they presume that what they know reflects fairly accurately what exists “out there” in the world even if the two are not identical. While people with visual and auditory defects realize that their senses are imperfect, they still assume that they are getting at least the outlines of what is as it is.

These assumptions underlie the commonsense view of the world, also known as *naïve realism*. This view fails to notice the contributions that the knowing process

and language make to one's world-picture. Thus, they confuse their worldview, which is a conceptual "map." with reality, mistaking "reality" as it appears for reality as it is.

The underlying logic of this view was observed millennia ago. For example, Jain philosophy has a well-developed logic articulating the relativity of viewpoint until complete knowledge is realized in the state of enlightenment. Mahavira, the most revered Jain master, lived in the 6th century B.C.E., contemporaneously with Buddha. He was the 24th Tirthankara in the Jain lineage.

The story of the blind men and the elephant has been told for ages in the Jain, Buddhist, Hindu and Sufi traditions to illustrate that everyone sees the world from a unique point of view that is dependent on one's angle of vision. It is well-known in English through the poem of that name by John Godfrey Saxe:¹

It was six men of Indostan
To learning much inclined,
Who went to see the Elephant
(Though all of them were blind),
That each by observation
Might satisfy his mind

The First approached the Elephant,
And happening to fall
Against his broad and sturdy side,
At once began to bawl:
God bless me! but the Elephant
Is very like a wall!

The Second, feeling of the tusk,
Cried, Ho! what have we here
So very round and smooth and sharp?
To me tis mighty clear
This wonder of an Elephant
Is very like a spear!

The Third approached the animal,
And happening to take
The squirming trunk within his hands,
Thus boldly up and spake:
I see, quoth he, the Elephant
Is very like a snake!

The Fourth reached out an eager hand,
And felt about the knee.
What most this wondrous beast is like

¹ John Godfrey Saxe. "The Blind Men and the Elephant." Public Domain.

Is mighty plain, quoth he;
'Tis clear enough the Elephant
Is very like a tree!

The Fifth, who chanced to touch the ear,
Said: Even the blindest man
Can tell what this resembles most;
Deny the fact who can
This marvel of an Elephant
Is very like a fan!?

The Sixth no sooner had begun
About the beast to grope,
Than, seizing on the swinging tail
That fell within his scope,
I see, quoth he, the Elephant
Is very like a rope!

And so these men of Indostan
Disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right,
And all were in the wrong!

Moral:

So oft in theologic wars,
The disputants, I ween,
Rail on in utter ignorance
Of what each other mean,
And prate about an Elephant
Not one of them has seen!

More recently, Einstein's theory of relativity contradicted the commonsense view of the world of naïve realists, shocking them from their complacency. This wasn't because many people other than theoretical physicists understood the mathematics of the theory, but rather because the theory implied that we live in a non-simultaneous universe, because it takes light and sound waves time to propagate through space. Data generated at the same point in time reaches the senses at different times, depending on the distance, resulting in the appearance that all the data exist in this state simultaneously, which is not the case. This is most evident in the case of starlight. We may be looking at a star in the heaven, for example, that ceased to exist eons ago, but its light emitted then is just reading Earth now. This goes against the apparently intuitive presumption that we are observing things in the state in which they really exist at the present moment.

Subsequently, quantum mechanics revealed that the behavior of quantum phenomena is also counter-intuitive from the vantage of the naïve realism that common sense takes as self-evident. For example, a particle can occupy multiple positions simultaneously.

Heisenberg's uncertainty principle in quantum physics is sometimes stated in terms of epistemological uncertainty, that is, that observation influences quantum measurement so that position and momentum cannot be measured with infinite precision. However, this is not the current understanding. The uncertainty arises mathematically. In classical physics it is possible to predict with mathematical certainty once the initial parameters are determined precisely. However, in quantum mechanics it is not possible to measure the initial parameters to a sufficiently high degree of probability. The fundamental principle of quantum mechanics states that in identical copies of a system in the same state the conjugate qualities of position and momentum will vary over known probability distributions. This entails that quantum mechanics does not result in predictions that are as determinate as classical physics.

This indeterminacy is similar to the indeterminacy of the square root of two, π , and the Golden Ratio. However, it is not a mathematical concept but the result of a scientific discovery about the observable. Of course, the discovery that the square root of two and π are irrational numbers also applies to the observable world, since the square root of two is involved in the computation of the length of the hypotenuse of a right triangle having two equal sides, and π is used in computing the circumference and diameter in terms of their ratio. The Greeks were shocked at finding nature to be irrational, and Einstein objected to similar developments in quantum mechanics on the same logic. As Kant observed, the human mind prefers order and rationality to the extent that it seeks to impose it on the indeterminate given.

This revelation that scientific knowledge conflicts with the commonsense view of the world as rational and determinate is matched by revelations in logic and psychology showing that our knowledge of "reality" is not as intuitively evident as it may seem. Rather, logical exploration and psychological investigation show that "reality" is appearance, in that "the world" is constructed by the mind and senses through perception, conception and inference, and framed by the angle from which it is viewed.

On the basis of his critical methodology, Kant concluded that knowledge determines the way "reality" *appears* to the mind. Aquinas had already observed centuries before that knowledge is in accordance with the mode of the knower. In order to grasp how reality appears through our characteristic mode of knowledge, we must examine the different types of knowledge that relate to the different kinds

of existence of which we can become aware. In order to do this we must also investigate how these types of knowledge are expressed in language through logic.

KNOWLEDGE

*“For every knower has knowledge of the thing known,
not according to the mode of the thing known,
but according to the mode of the knower.”¹*

TYPES OF KNOWLEDGE

Human knowledge exhibits several important characteristics. Knowledge is gained either directly by acquaintance or mediated through testimony, reasoning, or symbol and analogy. Experiential knowledge is gained through direct acquaintance instead of being mediated by testimony or reasoning, or else is approximated through symbol or analogy. Rational knowledge is gained through operations of the mind acting on prior knowledge. For example, abstraction proceeds from the particular to the general, while reasoning articulates the implications of generalities.

KNOWLEDGE BY ACQUAINTANCE

Sense perception or *sense experience* is the first type of knowledge by acquaintance. This is the most common and obvious form that ordinary experience takes, and it is a type of knowledge that human beings share with other animals.

Intuition is a second type of knowledge by acquaintance. Knowledge by direct acquaintance that is not gained through the senses or mediated by sense data is called *intuition*. It is also called insight, “seeing with the eye of the heart,” inner vision, and the like.

Reflexivity or self-awareness is a third type of experience as knowledge by acquaintance, because through self-awareness, the subject or knower is known directly through self-referral without the mediation of the senses, testimony, reasoning, or analogy. Here the means of gaining knowledge is not like ordinary perception that takes place through the sense perception, since awareness has no form or extension and is not localized in space, as are the objects of the senses. Rather than operating through sense experience, reflexivity operates intuitively.

Knowledge based on reflexivity is chiefly intuitive rather than being sensory, cognitive or affective. Moreover, according to mystics, higher levels of reflexivity reveal knowledge of non-ordinary kinds of existence through higher types of awareness, that is, the existence of the inner planes and “higher worlds,”

¹ St. Thomas Aquinas. *Commentary on “The Sentences of Peter Lombard.”* Translated by John Laumakis. I Sentences, Distinction 3, Question 1: Concerning Man's Knowledge. URL=<<http://www4.desales.edu/~philtheo/loughlin/ATP/Sententiae/ISentd3q1a1.html>>.

culminating in the nondual state as realization of the Absolute. Testimony about such experiences involves expression about this experience in terms of higher logical orders. This may lead to paradoxes if differences in order resulting from different types of knowledge go unnoticed. As a result, mystical testimony may seem irrational when it is actually suprarational. For example, the nondual assertion that all is one seems to be contradictory in terms of lower orders of logic.

Psychic experience is a fourth type of knowledge by acquaintance. There are three types of psychic experience that involve knowledge by direct acquaintance. Some claim to have seen non-ordinary phenomena they take as being external to the mind, such as the appearances of the Blessed Mother at Fatima. Others see visions within the mind, as in the visions of religious figures such as Jesus appearing to devotees entirely within. There is a third type standing between these two, where one person knows what is the mind of another person through telepathy.

TYPES OF KNOWLEDGE NOT BASED ON ACQUAINTANCE

In addition, there are types of knowledge not by acquaintance but rather from the testimony of others or on the basis of conceptualizing, generalizing, understanding and reasoning.

Most of our knowledge is gained through testimony. There is a web of knowledge gained by acquaintance through sense perception that we accept without verifying because everything speaks for it and almost nothing against it. This allows one to construct a geographical picture of the world without actually having to travel around through it, for instance. History is also based largely on the testimony of the past.

In addition to testimony, we also gain knowledge through operations of the mind such as conceptualizing, abstracting, generalizing, and reasoning, as well as by approximating and pointing through symbol and analogy. There are many other types of mental operations also, such as remembering and recalling, comparing and contrasting, analyzing and synthesizing, discriminating, judging, evaluating, and the like that are applied to existing knowledge in order to make it more useful to us, but they are more involved with processing knowledge than gaining it.

1. *Conceptualizing*. The first type of knowledge that is not gained from acquaintance but rather by applying a mental operation involves *conceptualizing*. Sense perception yields knowledge of particulars, while understanding involves universals, such as classes into which particular objects fall, which are characterized by shared properties.

Conceptualizing can be more complicated than simple categorization. For example, it is possible to *discriminate* differences in form, thereby drawing distinctions without affecting the existence or nature of the object itself. This can yield a great deal of conceptual information about the objects kind, as well as its

characteristics. Knowing the color, weight, size, and so forth of an object does not actually divide the object existentially, but only analyzes it in thought conceptually without actually taking the object apart. This makes analysis possible without interference or intervention.

For example, to gain knowledge of the period of an archaeological object by carbon testing, it is necessary to destroy a portion of the object, and to obtain knowledge by dissecting an object has to be actually cut. However, ordinary knowledge extensively examines the properties and relations of objects and does so in great detail without the analysis affecting the object at all.

2. *Generalizing*. It is also possible to *abstract* the individual aspects of an object in order to reflect on the form it shares with similar objects. This involves *classifying* and *generalizing* particular data obtained from experience, while maintaining a connection to experience. This makes science possible. Science proceeds by generalizing on the basis of experience and further abstracting from this, while always checking back with experience by testing its hypotheses through experiment.

3. *Reflecting*. In addition, it is possible to *reflect* on the forms of the forms of objects, as well as on the form of knowledge, e.g., as knowledge of particulars in contrast to the knowledge of classes and categories, in order to *understand* them. It is also possible to reflect on the formal structure of knowledge, i.e., logical operations in relation to knowledge. This makes subjects like philosophy, logic, and mathematics possible. Philosophy, like mathematics, is primarily formal, only occasionally intersecting with experience through application rather than empirical testing. Unlike logic and mathematics, philosophy has rarely been formalized, so confusion arising from lack of clarity is a hazard in philosophical discourse.

4. *Reasoning*. Reasoning enables further knowledge to be derived from particulars and generalizations by articulating what their logical relationships entail, for example, deductively through the use of syllogisms. Deductive reasoning proceeds from the direction of the more general to the less general, culminating in the particular. Inductive logic can also be applied, for example, through probability and statistics, to proceed from a collection of particular data to generalizations about it.

KNOWLEDGE BY SELF-REFERRAL

Knowledge of awareness gained through reflexivity stands in contrast to knowledge of objects gained through perception of particulars, as well as knowledge generated from this, such as generalization and the other operations involving objects. Reflexive knowledge is based on *self-referral* as the ability of consciousness to know itself by turning attention toward the subject.

Self-referral enables a human subject to become self-aware and, ultimately, fully self-aware by realizing the nature of pure consciousness — awareness unadulterated by mental activity — as the essence of subjectivity.

The fact that human awareness is reflexive, capable of being directed upon itself, makes it possible to know the *existence* of one's *consciousness* intuitively. When attention is directed toward awareness itself, no intervening media such as sense data or reasoning are required in the process of knowing reflexively.¹ Knowledge of the subject by the subject is direct and “immediate,” in the sense of not being mediated.

This reflexive *intuition* is a higher order of knowledge, akin to mystical experience in that it is direct and unmediated knowledge of oneself through acquaintance, hence, indubitable. Through this conviction of one's own self-existence, one can grasp the testimony of the mystics regarding their experience of higher orders as its own criterion of truth.

Humans can also *reflect on and refer to self-reference* by not only knowing that they are self-aware but also reflecting on this psychological fact and communicating with others about it.² This has traditionally been an aspect of philosophy involving the interplay of introspection and reflection in it. But even reflecting on knowing that one is self-aware does not produce knowledge of what awareness — consciousness — is in itself. In the process of reflection, thinking remains as an intervening medium. As a result the philosophy of mind is still in its infancy with respect to determining the nature of consciousness, especially when compared with the testimony of mystics and the teaching of masters who report experiencing the nature of mind in the mystical state of illumination and the nature of consciousness in the nondual state of realization.

Everyone combines these types of knowledge to form one's worldview. This process takes place largely unconsciously and its principal outlines are drawn very early in life. They are then filled in through enculturation and education. Relatively few people advance to the stage at which this worldview is acknowledged, reflected on, and perhaps questioned, or even revised. Mistaking their worldview for reality, most people are confined throughout their lives to a prison of their own construction, whose walls are made merely of ideas and whose window bars are hidden assumptions and unconscious biases.

¹ For example, let your attention be on your attention.

² In technical discourse, the term “fact” is ordinarily reserved for empirical facts as states of affairs existent in the world. However, this unfairly suggests that everything that happens subjectively has less reality. As a matter of fact, pun intended, no “fact” is as intuitively obvious as one's own existence as a cogitating consciousness. In comparison, empirical “facticity” is more dubious, as Descartes argued.

While few people have mystical experiences themselves, mystical experience actually plays a principle role in the construction of the worldview of many. Most religions are based on scriptures that claim to be true on the basis of revelation. Revelation is thought to be the result of prophecy in the sense of a person's speaking for God or a higher power. However, few people reflect on the origin of prophecy, assuming that the prophets are people like themselves into whose minds God infuse certain ideas that they later reported to others.

However, this is an extremely naïve view. History shows that the prophets and mystics were hardly ordinary people. They may have been illiterate but they were inspired, and they may have been lowly but they were "holy."

What does "holy" mean? It generally signifies that a person is particularly spiritual in one's outlook and way of life. The prophets and mystics were hardly ordinary people that God just happened to pick to communicate some revelation to the community. Rather, the prophets, mystics, masters, seers, sages and saints, were privy to higher types of knowledge that are called "mystical." Investigation of spiritual literature reveals many such types and a variety of levels.

The problem of adapting the testimony and teaching of the mystics and masters gained on the basis of their access to higher types of knowledge is that such knowledge is beyond the ordinary, and so most people do not have the wherewithal to understand it properly. As a result, mystical testimony is often misunderstood either by being taken literally and interpreted as ordinary speech, or else intellectualized or sentimentalized idealized into something that it is not. Consequently, the religious aspect of a worldview may be merely naïve instead of enlightened, mostly intellectual instead of experiential, or largely sentimental instead of truly pious.

HIGHER COGNITION

Mystics ubiquitously testify to *mystical experience* as higher degrees of reflexive knowledge, revealing the "rungs" of the ladder of spiritual ascent and culminating in the nondual state. Perennial wisdom is the mystical dimension at the basis of interior revelation. It stands in contrast to belief in scriptural revelation as inspired prophecy, which is characteristic of normative religions.

Just as science ties its knowledge back to sense experience through experiment; so too, perennial wisdom grounds its knowledge in direct acquaintance on the basis of higher types of intuition. Because these higher types of intuition are analogous to the intuitive conviction everyone has through self-awareness, it becomes possible to understand mystical language to some degree. Even though one may not have access to the mystical dimension of experience oneself, one may nevertheless have a sense of the mystical knowledge from the experience of being self-aware, albeit at the level of one's more limited experience than the mystics.

The gap between the ordinary and the extraordinary is not so great as to be unsurpassable. While the mind may not grasp what the mystics are saying and may doubt or even scoff at it, the heart thrills at the prospect they present because we identify with the mystical at some deep level of our being. But to be open to this dimension of experience, one must temper head with heart in order to overcome the skepticism of the mind, which ordinarily demands the warrant of the senses or the pedigree of reason in order to banish doubt.¹

While we may not yet know *what* we are, each of us knows *that* he or she exists in the sense of being self-aware as a reflexive subject. Most people have not yet plumbed the depths of reflexive awareness. Doing so is the fundamental precept of perennial wisdom, whose fundamental teaching is that the purpose of life is to realize the full potential of consciousness as reflexive, that is, capable of full self-knowledge.

This reflexive quest entails climbing the ladder of spiritual ascent, whose rungs are higher orders of awareness, cognition and affect on the way to realization of nonduality. These higher levels of awareness, cognition and affect are called “the inner planes” on the spiritual path. Perennial wisdom provides maps and directions, as well as instructions in the form of precepts and practices.

But one must go on the spiritual quest in the vehicle of one’s own awareness using self-referral as engine, love as steering wheel, and selfless action as wheels, while sitting on the seat of nonattachment, ideally with a competent guide by one’s side to give directions on the way.

Summarizing, knowledge has both form and content. The content of knowledge is what is known. The form of knowledge relates to how knowledge is gained and presented. These knowledge-types are *forms* that knowledge takes.

REFLECTION

Knowledge gained by direct acquaintance through sense experience is knowledge *of* an object of experience, relationships of objects to each other, or events involving objects in changing relationships. Knowledge gained through reflection is knowledge *about* the phenomena of experience through concepts, ideas and reasoning that are universal instead of particular.

Moreover, knowledge gained through sense experience is objective since it is knowledge of objects acquired by acquaintance with the object, objects or events involving objects. Knowledge gained through reflection includes the aspect and influence of the subject who reflects.

¹ I recall Maharishi Mahesh Yogi once saying in relation to experiences in meditation that doubts are brakes. To be a mystic, one needs to approach the possibility of one’s having mystical experiences with mind and an heart both open.

The phenomena of sense experience are of a different *kind* than ideas of the mind, knowledge gained from reflection about ideas is different in *type* from knowledge gained through sense experience, and it is expressed in terms of a different *order* of logic.

Human beings impose filters on data to sort out the essential from the trivial. We also process data into information and then use this information for survival and progress, or file it in the database of memory for future reference.

However, collecting data and processing it into information for progress and survival are not the only uses of mind. Progress is not limited simply to increasing the odds for survival and getting ahead in life.

Progress results in leisure, and leisure is the basis of culture. Culture requires leisure, for culture is not required for either survival or material progress.¹ Leisure introduced values that are not essential to survival or material progress such as liberal education, art for art's sake instead only for craft, rest and recreation, and friendship for friendship's sake instead of association for pleasure or profit.

Previous to the introduction of laborsaving technology, leisure was largely restricted to the elite. A principal reason for most mystics of old being recluses was that their renunciation of the world gave them the leisure to pursue spirituality intensively. Most others were either too busy trying to survive or else enjoying their privileged position as the elite. Technological progress gradually extended leisure to the masses, transforming culture.

One of the great benefits of leisure is the opportunity for reflection. Reflection as a type of thinking has its own logical characteristics and requirements. In our own minds, each of us gets to play the role of creator, and there is almost no limit to the universes of discourse that the mind can entertain. By creating his own model of the universe in his mind, Einstein was able to devise the thought-experiments that enabled him to discover the theory of relativity through deep reflection that inspired his intuitions.

Human beings are not only capable of knowledge of their environment and themselves as participants in it, but also of reflecting on this knowledge. It is through reflection that human beings process their knowledge on higher levels of universality than the information acquired through perception, which is restricted to the particular.

Reflection results in a higher type of knowledge than knowledge by acquaintance through sense perception, in that it is broader, deeper and more abstract. Moreover, it takes the subject into account. As a result, expressing this knowledge gained

¹ Josef Pieper. *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*. Translated by Alexander Dru. (London: Faber & Faber, 1952).

through reflection requires use of a higher logical *order* to express this difference in epistemological *type* owing to difference in *kind* of object.

For example, the initial type of knowledge is knowledge of particular objects through acquaintance by sense perception. The next epistemological type is knowledge of the general in contrast to the particular. It is expressed in terms of “sets” or classes of particular objects that are categorized on the basis of shared properties or relations. Sets of particular objects are of a different kind than particular objects in that they are more abstract than the objects that make them up.

The next higher type of knowledge is the more generalized knowledge of sets of sets, followed by sets of sets of sets, and so on, as knowing gets more abstract and predication becomes more general. The different kinds of objects, particular things, then sets of things, and then sets of sets and so on are objects that differ in kind, hence require different types of knowledge that are expressed in terms of different logical orders.

Reflection introduces a subjective element not present in sense experience and generalizations on the basis of it, so it involves a different kind of object, a different type of knowledge and a different logical order for its expression. Thus, on the one hand, reflection on particular objects results in increasing levels of abstraction and greater generality. On the other hand, other types of reflection involve reflection on the knowing subject. Reflection can be on the knower, the known or the process of knowing, as well as on knowledge of their confluence in the nondual state.

Knowledge of the knower is reflexive. It is self-knowledge. A human subject is capable of reflecting not only on one’s knowledge of the world and one’s ideas, but also of reflecting on oneself as knower. Through reflexivity one becomes self-aware.

Human beings not only know, but also they know that they know, and know that they know that they know, etc. This reflexive logic parallels the logical order of knowledge from particulars. Knowledge of individual objects proceeds to generalized knowledge. For example, from particular objects one proceeds to sets of objects, from sets to sets of sets, and so on, as knowledge proceeds to higher types through greater and greater levels of abstraction.

There is a similar progression in self-knowledge through reflexivity and self-reflection. For example, everyone is able to know themselves in terms of the body and to apprehend one’s body as an object in the world along with other objects, including other people’s bodies. One also knows oneself as an individual with a distinctive personality, not merely as a body, and one infers from one’s own experience and inner life that other individuals are similar inwardly. One therefore divides the world into non-sentient objects, or “things,” and sentient subjects, like animals and people. While this may seem obvious to adults, children learn through social interaction how to adapt to these crucial stages in which this knowledge is

unfolded. If they are deprived of this, or are deficient in some way, they do not learn to cope properly and are maladjusted.

Beyond these basic stages, everyone also comes to know oneself as a subject, the knower of one's world and oneself. This occurs on reaching the age of reason, at about age seven. At a more advanced stage, one also realizes on the basis of reflection on oneself in relation to other people that one is a human being identical with all other human beings, in being human. One recognizes oneself and others as "persons." This is the basis of equality before the law, rights, justice and other values. It also grounds the humanities that characterize developed advanced cultures. Moreover, it is the ground of spirituality, as we will explore subsequently. Each of these stages has its characteristic logic. Before reaching maturity in these stages, one cannot learn to use the expression characteristic of a stage properly because the thought process is not yet sufficiently developed.

These are all significant steps in knowledge as it proceeds in ascending types and which requires higher orders of logic for expressing these differences in kind.

TYPES AND LEVELS

Human beings are capable of experiencing their environment and reflecting on this experience, as well as of experiencing their inner states, such as feeling. They can also reflect on this experience and also reflect on the knowledge that reflection yields. They are also capable of reflecting on themselves and their knowledge of themselves, as well as on this knowledge. Because human beings are self-aware in addition to being conscious, they are also capable of a special kind of knowledge of a higher type and of great complexity, involving knower, known and the process of knowing. Self-knowledge is of a different *kind* of object, where the object is a self-conscious subject. It exhibits a different *type* of knowledge (reflexivity), which is expressed through a different *order* or hierarchical level of logic (self-reference).

Through the process of human knowing, human beings can gain knowledge:

- of material objects, environmental events, and each other through experience,
- of their existence and mental processes through reflexivity,
- about objects events and ideas through reflection, and
- about themselves through self-reflection.

The reflexive capacity of human consciousness allows humans to know themselves not merely as objects in the world — a body among other bodies or an individual with a particular personality among other individuals — but also as subjects capable of knowing themselves as subjects. That human being can also know themselves as knowing subjects, know that they know this, and communicate about it sets them apart from other primates.

The primary datum of reflexivity is self-awareness. Because human beings are self-conscious, they know indubitably that they exist. Because human being can also reflect on their self-awareness, they can know that they exist as human beings — “persons” — in addition to being embodied and acting as individuals with particular personalities. This self-reflective knowledge of the human condition is what enables human beings to laugh at themselves. For example, sexual innuendo is funny because it is implicitly ridiculous that the human person is trapped in a physical form and led around by hormones.

The reflexivity of human consciousness is responsible for the heights of human culture and civilization, including the various types of knowledge produced by the sciences and humanities, and the creativity that is the outcome of the arts and technology, including the ability to organize, manage, and work cooperatively. Most importantly for our purposes, reflexivity is also the basis of mysticism as inner experience of the nature and structure of awareness, culminating in realization of nonduality. Realization of identity in the nondual state is the apex of reflexivity because it is absolute. Mystics assert that it is identical with God’s self-knowledge.

Human beings are not merely automations going through the motions. They are social beings acting in terms of cognition, volition, and affect to voluntarily cooperate for mutual benefit. Moreover, they do this as human “persons,” in that they share in human nature equally, irrespective of superficial differences. Humans are creators of cultures and even civilizations based on knowledge and values. This record of achievement extends into pre-history. A significant aspect of this achievement is spirituality.

While spirituality is usually conceived in terms of religion, religions are a mixture of culture, convention, ethics, and many other things in addition to being the carriers of spirituality. Moreover, sometimes they are unconscious of this burden or even unwilling to bear it. In addition, spirituality is capable of existing independently of religious expression. The ground of this type of knowledge is self-knowledge, which is the birthright of every mature person. No religion carries the truth exclusively in its bucket, and no priesthood or doctrine holds the key to heaven, just as the ocean is not contained in a puddle. This key is within, and the lock is one’s own made-up mind, thinking that truth is “out there.”

The self-referential nature of human consciousness grounds mystical experience and gives rise to perennial wisdom. While human beings are certain that they exist, they do not know what they are as “persons.” Human nature is defined negatively, as that which humans share after all the differences are abstracted. But what this nature may be, remains unknown to most. Neither is it revealed by ordinary introspection; nor has it been clarified through either philosophical speculation or scientific research. Religions teach that humans are essentially “spirit,” therefore immortal and so forth, but this is a matter of belief for most. Some humans report

such privileged knowledge on the basis of mystical experience, but this testimony remains a matter of belief for most others.

Mystics testify that the apex of human reflexivity lies in the nondual state of awareness, where the nature of consciousness and reality are the same in that there is nothing to differentiate them. That is to say, consciousness as such, rather than consciousness of this or that, is realized as identical with being as such, rather than being this or being that.

The nondual state is the full flowering of reflexivity, in which consciousness alone remains in its pure state, knowing itself and all in itself — as all in one, and one in all. The “one” is from the side of existence, while the “all” is from the side of knowledge. In this state the indivisible unity of self-knowing “knowing-ness” knows itself a wholeness, or totality, in which knower, known and knowing are identical and all-comprehending.

The mystics also testify that at the apex of knowledge nothing is added that was not already present. The dross of the mind only obscured what was always there. Just as the ever-present sun shines forth when the clouds blow away, knowledge is realized automatically when the veil of ignorance is lifted.

INFINITY

Perennial wisdom holds that consciousness is by nature infinite; hence, all knowledge is already present in consciousness, even though in the unenlightened this is obscured by ignorance. Practically speaking, what this means is that finite human consciousness is a shadow or a reflection of infinite consciousness. Being the reflection of infinite consciousness, the mode of knowing in finite consciousness is limited instead of unlimited, temporal rather than eternal, changing instead of unchanging, and apparently diverse instead of whole. Nevertheless, beneath the appearances, the nature of consciousness remains, ever-present and unadulterated by ignorance. As a result, even in ignorance, the vestiges of infinite consciousness remain, but only as shadows, as it were. Therefore, ignorance is not necessarily complete. Once one comprehends the notion, then one can take steps to extricate oneself from it. This is the message of perennial wisdom.

The term “infinite” signifies “unlimited,” “boundless.” Mathematically, it signifies an indeterminate number or quantity, whose definition permits it to be increased or decreased without end. In mathematics, infinity is the result of an operation whose outcome is an infinite series, e.g., the set of all rational numbers, in which it is always possible to add one to the next number, so that an end is never reached. However, when “infinite” is applied to the Absolute or one of its cognates, such as God, it signifies not a potentially infinite series but an actually infinite reality. Here, infinite means all-inclusive in the sense of admitting no otherness.

To speak of “infinite consciousness” implies the identity of knowledge and existence since no boundaries are present to separate them. The *identity* of knowledge and reality in the indivisible totality of infinite consciousness is reflected in finite consciousness as the certainty of self-existence, to which Descartes famously called attention in a different context. The *unity* of knowledge and existence in infinite consciousness is reflected in human knowing by the unity of the knowing subject underlying the diversity of experience. The mind’s unity, revealed in one’s sense of self, is not divided by the multiplicity of percepts, kinesthetic sensations, thoughts, feeling, memories, and so forth, flowing in the stream of consciousness. Identity and unity in this sense are not merely analogies of higher knowledge but reflections of infinite consciousness in the finite mind through reflexivity. Finite mind does not experience an actual infinity but a “taste” of it, or its “scent” in experiencing its own identity and unity through reflexivity.

Although the contents of the mind flow serially, the container is constant. Awareness is always “here and now,” even though knowledge comprises that which is remembered from the past, is apprehended in present and anticipated in the future. It could be said poetically that *eternity* manifests itself in terms of time in this continuity of “being present,” or “being there” as Heidegger put it.¹ Moreover, introspection neither reveals any form nor finds any boundaries delimiting the knowing subject, whose horizon is indeterminate in that it always recedes as one attempts to approach it. It can be said poetically that this receding horizon of awareness as presence is a manifestation of *infinity* in terms of the finite.

It can also be said poetically that the *unity* of infinite consciousness is reflected in finite conscious in that the mind does not itself become many in the process of experiencing and knowing. The integrity of neither the knower nor the known is destroyed in the process of making distinctions. Nor does the process of knowing become fractured itself in apprehending diversity or drawing distinctions. While one may distinguish all the properties of an object and its relationships to other objects, the existence of an object as an entity is not itself affected by the mind’s apprehending these distinctions, nor is the unity of the knowing subject either. For example, analysis by drawing distinctions does not actually divide an entity as object, nor does the presence of such distinctions in the mind divide the subject either.

¹ Heidegger designated human nature as *Dasein*, or “presence,” instead of by giving a traditional definition of essence on the basis of species and genus, as in *homo sapiens* or “rational animal.” The German term *da* means “there” and *sein* signifies “being.” Definition of essence delineates boundaries. Existential definition is open-ended. “Presence” is not described in terms of boundaries but in terms of an ever-receding horizon as one attempts to approach it.

The existential integrity of both the subject and also the object is preserved throughout the knowing process. The cutting up of the object takes place entirely within the mind, using the knife of intellectual discrimination. This is extremely important because it is a reflection in finite minds of the indivisible unity of infinite consciousness as one and absolute knowledge as knowledge of “everything,” however faint this reflection may be. The realized report that this same state of affairs pertains in universal mind, in which the “things” that appear separate to finite minds are not actually separate in universal mind. By using universal mind, the realized know experientially that all is really one in being and that diversity only appears through experience.

Infinite consciousness is the identity of absolute reality and absolute knowledge, in which absolute reality is indivisibly one and absolute knowledge knows that indivisible unity as the ground of what appears in infinite experience as all and everything. As an individual knower capable of knowing the world as diverse, a finite knower is a reflection of this infinity. For this reason, in spiritual literature the finite mind is symbolized by the moon and reality, by the sun. Just as the moon only partially reflects the light of the self-effulgent sun; so too, finite mind only partially reflects ultimate reality.

THE ONE AND THE MANY

At this juncture, the logical paradox of the “one and the many” arises. How are “everything,” “many” and “all,” implying multiplicity, compatible with “one” as the indivisible unity of being?

Unity and diversity are accounted for on the basis of difference in logical order. The “one” is of a higher order than the “all,” since the manifold of appearance — the “many” — is contained “in” the one reality, just as many thoughts are contained in a single mind. This is comparable to ordinary objects in a container, for example, beans in a jar.

When counting the beans in the jar, one does not count the jar also. Nor does the jar become many jars by containing many beans. Just as a container does not become many containers by containing many objects; so too, the mind does not become many minds by entertaining many thoughts. As a logical concept, the mind is of a higher order than its thoughts in the way that a set is of a higher logical order than its members. In mathematics, this is the logical difference between a class and its members in set theory, as well as a function, e.g., $f(x)$, and its arguments, e. g. $x = a, b, c, \dots$

While this clarifies the relation between an entity of a higher logical order and the lower orders it subsumes, logic does not pronounce on the reality of these entities, which may be purely mental or existent independent of the mind entertaining them. Only experience can establish existence as a fact. Is “being” merely a class as a

mental construct that includes “everything,” or can being be experienced. According to mystics, pure consciousness is equivalent to pure being.

However, objectors argue that this is simply a mystic’s *interpretation* of an experience, which is based on subjective conviction rather than an objective criterion, and so the mystic’s assertion does not guarantee the truth of their interpretation. The virtually ubiquitous answer mystics give is that the criterion of the experience of pure consciousness is self-evident to anyone having this experience.

Mystics might also respond that realists’ assertion that their experience of a physical object as external to the mind is self-evident is likewise merely an interpretation without an objective criterion, since all that empirical science can show is that all the mind knows on the basis of sense experience is sense data correlated with as modifications of brain activity. As Hume contended, the jump from sense data to “external objects” may also be seen as the consequence of “belief,” i.e., subjective conviction. In short, what one party asserts as resulting from direct and immediate knowledge based on experience, which includes both mysticism and realism, another party sees as the consequence of a subjective conviction that requires a “leap of faith,” which is subject to error and misinterpretation. This is an ongoing debate between intuitionists and skeptics that we can only mention here in bringing out fundamental issues.

It might be further objected that if absolute reality is one and indivisible and absolute knowledge is identical with it, how is it possible to account for the existence of many finite minds “within” infinite consciousness. Even granting that there is a difference in kind between the mind’s existence and that of the thoughts that occur in the mind and are dependent on it, an objection can still be raised regarding the relation of mind to consciousness. Are mind and consciousness one and the same or are they inherently different?

The answer to this is not obvious to most people on the basis of their accustomed experience. Most people would say that mind, consciousness, and awareness are essentially the same. However, those who experience the cessation of mental activity in the state of transcendental consciousness (Sanskrit: *samadhi*) experience this state as one of pure consciousness, in which the thinking mind is absent.

Reports of transcendental consciousness suggest that mind as the activity of thinking, feeling, perceiving and the like is itself dependent on consciousness as a state, just as thoughts are dependent on a mind’s thinking them.

If many minds exist, as seems to be the case, then it would appear that there are many finite consciousnesses that exist, in addition to infinite consciousness. Therefore, it would seem that infinite consciousness cannot be one and indivisible if it includes many consciousnesses.

One traditional answer has been that the existence of infinite consciousness is self-existent and independent, whereas finite consciousnesses are dependent on it, in a sense that is similar to thoughts depending on the existence of a mind for their existence. Self-knowledge encompassing “all” is not incompatible with self-existence as “one.” One existence encompassing the totality of knowledge implies that all knowledge is contained in the self-knowledge of the one existence. The comparison of jar and beans still applies, infinite consciousness being of a higher logical order than finite consciousnesses. In this view, finite consciousnesses are dependent on infinite consciousness, hence, the existence of finite consciousness is of a different kind than infinite consciousness, which is reflected by different types of knowledge that are expressed by means of different logical orders.

According to the God-realized, this is not an entirely satisfactory answer, however. The perfect hold that only infinite consciousness exists and that infinite consciousness only *appears* to be divided into many finite consciousnesses. However, the truth is that there is only one indivisible consciousness. This one indivisible consciousness appears as many owing to limited mind, which is confused with consciousness.

In this view, there are not many finite consciousnesses, but only one Infinite Consciousness. Rather many minds appear within infinite consciousness in the process of infinite consciousness knowing itself as infinite, seemingly giving rise to many finite consciousnesses.

According to the God-realized, finite mind is the result of *impressioned consciousness*. In its unimpressioned state as *pure consciousness*, consciousness is an unbounded “ocean,” one and indivisible. However, through experiencing of the world of objects, consciousness takes on impressions. These impressions give rise to “bubbles” within the ocean of consciousness. These “bubbles” in the “ocean” of consciousness symbolize finite minds. Finite minds *seem* to be separate from the ocean, but they are actually eternally and inseparably “in” the ocean of consciousness, which is one, indivisible and unchanging. They are seemingly separate from the ocean only because of a “film” of impressions that creates the effect of a “bubble” that separates “drops” in the “ocean” from each other and from the ocean in appearance only.

Therefore, all so-called individuals are really “drops” in the ocean of Infinite Consciousness, hence one with the ocean, even though they seem different because of the impressions that give rise to the appearance of finite minds.¹ But, just as the

¹ Meher Baba sets this forth in great detail in *God Speaks*. According to perennial wisdom, the first impression, which gives rise to individualized, impressioned consciousness, arises from God’s urge to know Himself that initiates the process of manifestation. The entire “creation” is God’s process of knowing Himself as finite in order

water in a jar that is in the ocean is not different from the ocean, so too, the individualized awareness underlying a finite mind is not different in essence from the unbounded ocean of pure consciousness in which it exists and has its being. In fact, remove the accumulation of impressions that individualize awareness and pure consciousness remains.

It is only the impressions gathered through experience that delimit the mind, making individuals seem to be separate from each other and from the whole. When these impressions cease to operate, what remains is unbounded pure consciousness, which is one, indivisible, eternal, unmanifest, formless and unchanging — absolute.

But then a question arises as to how this comes about. According to perennial wisdom one cannot know this prior to realization; however, it is possible to provide something of an explanation that the mind can grasp at least in part.

In knowing itself as infinite, infinite consciousness knows all possibilities. One possibility is for infinite consciousness to know itself as infinite. This is the self-knowledge of the Absolute. The other possibility is for infinite consciousness to know itself as finite. How can what is essentially infinite and unbounded know itself as finite and bound? Since infinite means “all-inclusive,” the infinite must contain the finite. In knowing itself fully, infinite consciousness knows itself as finite. In knowing itself as finite, consciousness *appears* to be finite.

Being finite means being limited. Finite mind is dualistic, being a polarity of subject (finite mind) and object (world), in which the object apparently limits the subject. For example, every human being in gross consciousness feels like a small speck in an unbounded universe of diverse objects that range from stars and galaxies down to gnats and grains of sand. Even though the masters of wisdom teach that the entire universe is contained within us, most people feel on the basis of their experience that the opposite is the case.

The perceived duality of subject and object — individual self and world — leads to multiplicity. A finite mind as subject knows its “world” as a collection of objects. The subject appears to be different from the object and objects appear to be different from each other, as well as from the subject that knows them. The finite mind is not only bound by the confines of the body and the world, but also its mode of knowing. The more one knows, the more one discovers that one does not know.

The knowing subject in the state of dualism appears to be limited by identifying itself with its finite mind and embodied state. However, these limitations and differences only *appear* in the experience of finite minds and do not *exist* in reality

to know Himself as infinite. Process philosophy is a similar notion put forward in Western philosophy.

— pure consciousness — which is ever one, indivisible, formless, unchanging. and unmanifest. But when its impressions are finally resolved at the culmination of the spiritual path, finite mind is annihilated and the semblance of limited individuality along with it. Then, infinite consciousness spontaneously realizes that separation never really existed. Through the medium of that formerly limited individualized consciousness, infinite consciousness can then declare in the full knowledge of the nondual state, “I am,” as did Jesus and others who realized God.¹

REFLEXIVITY AND INTUITION

Self-awareness, self-reflection and self-reference are reflexive operations in which awareness is directed upon itself. This turning of attention toward the subject itself is called *reflexivity*. Reflexivity includes self-awareness, self-reflection and self-referral. *Self-awareness* is being aware of oneself as subject. *Self-reflection* is thinking about oneself as subject. *Self-reference* takes the subject as the primary focus of attention, and the meditative process of *self-referral* intentionally directs attention toward pure subjectivity to the exclusion of everything else.²

Human beings are capable of becoming self-aware. Self-awareness is not always considered a good thing. For example, as self-awareness dawns in children, both self-assertion and shyness often accompany it. Superiority and inferiority complexes can begin to manifest in early development as the ego either asserts itself or withdraws. Teenagers, especially, struggle with self-consciousness about their image. But self-awareness also enables them to begin shaping their personality and character as part of the maturation process.

As one matures not only physically but also psychologically, one’s appreciation of self-awareness also matures and one becomes less concerned with one’s image and more concerned with what is going on “inside.” This is the beginning of self-reflection, which is a type of thinking about oneself, both how one sees oneself and how others see one. A further step in self-reflection is taken when one moves beyond self-concern to consider how others see themselves and feel about themselves, as each of us does concerning oneself. This is the basis of the dictum to love others as oneself. Ideally, this kind of reflection leads to consideration of the

¹ Jesus is reported to have said, “Before Abraham was, I am.” John 8:58 (King James Version). In *God Speaks*, Meher Baba explains “the theme of creation” in terms of how the infinite appears as be finite and then realizes itself as infinite by going through the process of evolution to the human form, reincarnation, and then involution on the spiritual path through the inner planes to the goal of realizing God. See Appendix Two for a summary.

² The basis of the intentional direction of attention toward pure subjectivity in meditation is manifested in the notion of the nature of the self as being empty of form and is reflected in the Upanishadic saying, “not this, not this” (Sanskrit: *neti neti*).

human condition in terms of universality and altruism. This gives morality a rational basis that is grounded in one's self-understanding and self-appreciation.¹

A step beyond self-awareness and self-reflection is letting the attention fall chiefly on awareness itself to the exclusion of other possible points of focus. This is the process of self-referral that is characteristic of some forms of meditation.

Reflexivity is a higher type of knowledge than knowledge of objects and reflection on them instead of oneself as the knowing, willing, and feeling subject. Hence, its expression is in terms of a higher logical order. Human beings are not only self-aware, but also they know that they are self-aware. In addition, they can also reflect on this type of knowledge and its implications, as we are now, for instance. Furthermore, human beings can transcend thinking, willing and feeling to experience the essence of their being as self-knowing subjects in the state of pure consciousness, as many mystics report.

This "reflexive" knowledge is grounded in "intuition" rather than sense perception or abstraction from it. Knowledge of particulars is always traceable to sense experience, either one's own or someone else's, gleaned from testimony. Knowledge of objects in the world can always be traced back to the particulars on which it is founded. If not, the conclusion is that such concepts are empty.

Self-knowledge is always traceable to the intuition of self-consciousness, either one's own or someone's, also gleaned from testimony. Self-knowledge and knowledge proceeding from it can be traced back to self-awareness, which is grounded directly in the intuition that consciousness has of itself. Should this not be the case, it follows that reflexive concepts such as self-consciousness are also empty.

Here, two different types of knowledge are involved, dealing with different kinds of data, hence, requiring different orders of logic to express. Both of these types of knowledge are experiential, however. One is acquired through sense perception or sense experience, whereas the other is the result of awareness experiencing itself directly, without mediation of perception, conception, understanding or reasoning. Being unmediated, this type of direct acquaintance is therefore termed "immediate."

Thus, there are two principal sources of experience, sense experience and reflexive experience of oneself. However, this is only a fraction of the knowledge that most people have. The overwhelming proportion of everyone's knowledge of the world is dependent on testimony based on the experience of others. This is gleaned from a vast array of sources of varying degrees of probability. It is

¹ The sayings, "Do not do to others what you yourself do not like," and "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," are based on self-appreciation.

impossible to verify this knowledge for oneself. For the most part, one accepts what one does on the basis of general agreement.

Similarly, most of the knowledge that most people have of spirituality is based on the testimony of others. The record of this testimony is called mysticism. It is knowledge that is grounded in mystical experience. The teachings based on it constitute perennial wisdom. Its criterion for those who are not acquainted with this dimension of knowledge themselves through their own experience is the test of time. This testimony and teaching becomes “received wisdom” by being widely recognized and accepted as indeed wise, not only on the basis of expert testimony but also for pragmatic reasons. It is found through application to be valuable.

Thus, there are ostensibly three types of knowledge grounded in experience, namely, sense perception, the reflexivity of self-awareness, and mystical experience as a higher type of reflexivity that manifests in a higher type of self-knowledge. This also differentiates reflexive mystical experience in this sense of self-knowledge from non-reflexive mystical experiences, defined as experience of higher types of objective data in worlds putatively of higher kinds than the physical world, for example, the subtle and causal worlds. If mystical experiences are of different kinds of data than ordinary objects of the gross, physical world, that is knowledge of the inner planes and higher worlds, then the type of knowledge is different and their expressions is also of a different order of logic.

This differentiates both reflexive and non-reflexive mystical experiences from non-ordinary experience of the gross world, which, according to mystics, has a subtler level than most people are capable of knowing with the physical senses. These subtler experiences of the gross world are called “psychic” rather than “mystical.” “Psychic experiences” of subtler dimensions of the gross world include such phenomena as seeing auras, clairvoyance and clairaudience, out of the body experiences, recalling past lives, and communicating with the “spirits of the dead” of the “astral plane.” These should not be confused with mystical experiences of higher kinds of existence through higher types of knowledge, the order of whose logic is also higher. For example, since mystical experiences are of a higher order, equating psychic experiences with them is illogical, like mixing apples and oranges when figuring the total number of apples.

These different types of knowledge grounded in different types of experience of different kinds of data are expressed in different orders of logic. In addition, each of these has its particular level of abstraction. Logical clarity requires keeping all of these differences straight. Not doing so leads to logical confusion by mixing “apples and oranges,” and error results when such logical fallacies slip by without being caught.

REFLEXIVITY AND MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

Mystical experience is a higher type of reflexive experience than self-awareness and self-reflection. These experiences are not only widely reported in the history of mysticism, they are also reflected upon and generalized through abstraction. Particular mystical experiences are reported in testimony. Such testimony falls into categories on the basis of common characteristics. The different mystical traditions have developed language and suitable logic for expressing not only mystical experiences but also talking about them through the use of categories.

These categories are often labeled using technical terms or else familiar terms employed analogously and symbolically. For example, higher reflexive experience is called *samadhi* in both the Vedic and Buddhist traditions. There is generally no corresponding technical term in Western traditions, so these types of mystical experience are spoken of symbolically. For example, in the Way of Jesus “entering the kingdom” symbolizes the reflexive mystical experience, based on the saying attributes to Jesus, “The kingdom of God lies within you,” “My kingdom is not of this world,” and so forth.

Since human beings are capable of self-awareness, they can develop higher knowledge on the basis of this intuition into themselves. Even before this happens, we are able to grasp something of the reports of higher types of knowledge through acquaintance with our own reflexivity. All reflexivity is a higher type of knowledge than non-reflexive knowledge. In being capable of reflexive knowledge, human beings have some acquaintance, however minimal or fleeting, of subjectivity itself.

Without some connection to the higher, it would not be possible to bridge the gap mentally, and mystical experience would be impossible to communicate to those with no direct knowledge of it. For example, it is not possible to explain “the facts of life” to little children. An immature child is not capable of understanding factual explanations about sexuality and human reproduction for some time. During the process of maturation, children are given progressively complex information as they become able to comprehend it. Similarly, the process of spirituality involves maturation, during which different levels of explanation are appropriate. Therefore, the logical of spiritual literature is diverse.

Normative religions, as least as far they deal with the average person in the pew, operate in terms of logic similar to telling small children that babies come from heaven and that God puts the baby in mommy’s tummy. Just as children learn more as they become able to comprehend it, spiritual teaching should gradually become richer, until one is ripe for testimony and teaching concerning mystical experience. But often this does not happen. This could be compared to going through life without ever learning about sex. To say that an important dimension of life has been overlooked would be an understatement.

A person either learns the facts of life from one's parents, or elsewhere. Similarly, either one's religion provides knowledge of mystical spirituality, or one has to get it elsewhere. Just as children get a lot of misinformation on the way to a mature appreciation of their sexuality; so too, do spiritual seekers, from either their own religious institution, or else half-baked teachers and even hypocritical charlatans.

If one is fortunate in one's education about sexuality, one receives the teaching when one matures enough to grasp it that in sexual union the two become one in spirit. Similarly, as one progresses spirituality, one learns of divine union, in which the lover unites with the Beloved. Then, one may also learn that in addition to this union, in which one sees God, there is the further step of realization of identity that occurs in the state of nonduality.

Sexual union is a traditional symbol of the divine union of the lover and the Beloved, often used in mystical poetry even by celibates, such as John of the Cross. It is also represented graphically, e.g., in the entwined embrace of the Tibetan *yub-yum*. Here, the higher order logic of spiritual union is symbolized by analogy with physical union.

REFLEXIVITY AND IDENTITY

Identity is a logical concept. Objects of knowledge are said to be identical when they are indistinguishable according to certain criteria specified as the criteria of identity. Absolute identity is self-identity. This is the identity characteristic of self-reference. Multiple objects can be said to be identical with respect to certain properties but only within specified tolerances, as ball bearings are said to be identical to within a 10,000th of an inch as measured by calipers capable of that degree of accuracy. But absolute identity only applies to something with respect to itself as a reflexive relationship.

In terms of logic, identity is defined as, "For every x, where "x" signifies any object, x is identical with x, and every object that is not x is not identical with x." This is expressed symbolically as " $A=A$ and $A \neq B$." While everything is identical with itself, the only beings capable of knowing this with respect to themselves are self-conscious beings.

Many mystics have testified to two types of knowledge involving identity. The first is the uniting of the lover and Beloved, in which the lover loses all sense of separate selfhood in uniting with the Beloved. The second is realization of the identity of the knower and the known in complete self-knowledge.

Realization of identity is knowledge of a higher type, and expression of it is of a higher order than any other. By definition, this is the epitome of reflexivity, since only infinite consciousness knows consciousness fully, in that there is neither anything other than the infinite, nor anything beyond it. For if there were, then the infinite would not be infinite. Thus, the self-knowledge of infinite consciousness is

comprehensive. In this state one realizes one's true nature as absolute — the sole reality — in which Consciousness knows itself as identical with existence in a state that is absolutely fulfilling. This is the realization of being as the one, the true, the good and the beautiful, or in Vedantic terms, existence-consciousness-bliss (Sanskrit: *sat-chit-ananda*)

Mystics not only report their experience but also interpret it. This interpretation of the mystics' realization is that provided by mystics themselves. Since it is their own experience, they are in a position to know whereof they speak. On the other hand, it is not possible for others to know the mystics' experiences on the basis of direct acquaintance with it, or to corroborate the interpretations given by the mystics on the basis of self-reflection and understanding based on it. Therefore, others only learn of such experience from the reports and the interpretations that mystics provide.

Moreover, others can only understand this testimony and teaching on the basis of their own limited reflexive experience of self-awareness, augmented by imagination and reasoning. However, limited experience, imagination and reasoning cannot bridge the gap between the lower and the higher, but only hope to approximate it. But when different types of knowledge of different kinds of existence are involved, such approximations are weak and may be misleading.

But one can understand, to some degree at least, the mystics' testimony and teaching on the basis of one's own reflexive self-awareness. While this is neither as deep nor as comprehensive as the realization that mystics report, it provides a ground for grasping reflexivity and discerning whether mystics could be mistaken about the experience they report or be deceived by it.

This is extremely important: one can grasp what the mystics are saying more on the ground of self-awareness and self-reflection than through sense experience. Not only is one's reflexive knowledge of oneself more important in this than one's knowledge of objects, but also the mystics teach that this is the doorway to higher types of reflexivity as well, including self-realization. This teaching lies at the core of perennial wisdom, for example, Jesus' teaching, "The kingdom of God lies within you."

It is key to notice here that the privileged knowledge reported by the mystics is not simply a higher *type* of ordinary knowledge or merely of broader logical *level* of generality. It is a higher *kind* of existence. Therefore, being a higher kind of existence a higher type of knowledge is characteristic of it, and higher-order logic is required to express it.

Attempting to grasp this higher order logic on the basis of a lower order leads to mistakes and confusion. Mystics have been often criticized or dismissed on specious grounds, or else sentimentally romanticized. Worse, some people have believed erroneously that their own experience was identical with mystics' reports

by ignoring differences in kinds of existence, types of knowledge, and orders of logic.

It is necessary to examine this logic in greater detail, since it involves logical self-reference in order to express reflexivity of knowledge. This requires revisiting territory that should now be somewhat familiar, so we can move quietly though the terrain while observing the details along the way that may have been overlooked previously.

REFLEXIVITY AND LOGIC

Logical self-reference is different from epistemological self-reference. Epistemological reflexivity is the result of the knowing subject's turning attention on itself. This is called "self-awareness" or "self-consciousness." Logical self-reference includes two types of epistemological reflexivity. Logical self-reference can express purely *subjective self-reference* in the sense of the self-referential aspect of self-awareness. Logical self-reference can also express *objective self-reference* by referring to one's body as an object in the world.

Epistemological reflexivity in relation to mystical spirituality is exclusively concerned with subjective self-reference. For example, the nondual state, or consciousness without an object, is a state of self-referential consciousness independent of consideration of body, limited mind, and surroundings.

In addition to expressing epistemological reflexivity as self-awareness, logical self-reference also expresses self-reference as an object for others, as when one refers to oneself in terms of the body and its behavior with which others identify one. In talking to others, "I" generally is understood as pointing to one's body in its relation to the environment. Moreover, most people also identify themselves with their body, mind and personality as self-image rather than the pure subjectivity of "I am."

Most logical self-reference is objective self-reference, which occurs when one uses the personal pronoun "I" with reference to one's relationship to others and to objects in the world. Even most psychological self-reference is objective self-reference, since thoughts, feelings, and other mental events only have meaning in relation to their objective contexts.

One can refer to oneself as an individual in certain circumstances, doing various things, thinking certain thoughts, having particular feelings, and so forth. One can also refer to oneself as self-aware. Most self-reference involves reference to oneself as an individual in the world rather than exclusively as a knowing subject who is self-aware.

For example, in addition to being a synonym for "self-awareness," "self-consciousness" also signifies the kind of identity issues through which teenagers

must pass as they come into their own as adults. In this sense, “being overly self-conscious” means that a person is too reflective on one’s self-image — the way one sees oneself — in relation to one’s persona — the way one wants to be seen — to behave naturally in social situations. For example, teenagers are overly conscious of their bodily appearance and the impression they are making on others, which gets in the way of their being themselves.

“Self-consciousness in this sense is therefore different from reflexive self-awareness. Reflexive self-awareness is intuitional knowledge of self-existence rather than reflection on oneself by thinking about oneself, whereas being self-conscious arises from concern with self-image and persona, and results from reflection on the way one sees oneself vis-à-vis how others see one.

Expressions in which individuals refer to themselves as individuals among other individuals differ logically from reflexive expressions of self-awareness. It is important to distinguish between these differences in expression because they reflect different *types* of knowledge of different *kinds* of being.

“I,” “me,” and “myself” may indicate an embodied individual in a world of other individuals and objects. This individual, to whom one refers as “I” and “me,” is a composite of body, mind, and personality, as well as “person.” “Personhood” is that aspect of oneself that is not individual in that it is the nature one has in common with all other human beings, regardless of individual differences.

“I” and “myself” may also indicate a knowing subject who is self-aware. This is the person that I am as a human being, independently of any individual characteristics. According to the perennial wisdom and religious belief, the self-aware subject — the person in the metaphysical sense, called *purusha* in Sanskrit — transcends the world of objects, even while being embodied in it as an individual.

“Being *in* the world but not being *of* the world” signifies two different ways of being. Because of these two ways of being, it is possible to be *in* the world as an embodied individual participating in daily affairs, yet not be *of* the world by being neither attached to the worldly nor identifying oneself chiefly with one’s body and personality. Spiritually, this is called “internal renunciation” or nonattachment. Here, spiritual nonattachment must be distinguished from psychological detachment as an aberration in which one switches off emotionally.

Ordinary knowledge consists of knowledge of (1) the environment including one’s own body and mind, (2) abstractions from this knowledge, (3) reflection on and reasoning about this knowledge, and (4) self-awareness. However, it does not include knowledge of the nature of consciousness as it is in itself.

Being self-aware, ordinary human beings know *that* they are as self-conscious subjects, but they do not know fully *what* they are; for they are not acquainted with

what consciousness is in itself as pure consciousness. Most people take themselves to be a combination of body, mind, and personality or self-image. Religious people also believe that they have a soul that will survive death, and they generally associate this with their mind and personality, and an ethereal form resembling the physical body. But only the spiritually advanced have realized what soul actually is.

Spiritually, however, terms such as “soul,” “spirit,” “person,” and the like have meaning in terms of self-awareness. Being self-aware, one can conceive of disembodied existence as “spirit,” or being immortal as a soul. However, one does not know the nature of this state by acquaintance until one realizes it through mystical experience. The objective of the spiritual quest is acquiring knowledge of one’s nature in terms of spirit or soul by realizing *what* one really is, in addition to knowing *that* one exists as self-aware. The difference is that in self-awareness one identifies oneself with the limited mind, taking it to be the extent of one’s consciousness, because one does not yet realize what consciousness really is, namely, infinite awareness of absolute existence. This realization requires treading the spiritual path to its culmination.

LOGIC AND LANGUAGE

Philosophy aims at the logical clarification of thoughts.¹

FORM

The term “formal” means relating to form as pattern or structure in contrast to content. For example, an architectural blueprint delineates the form of an actual building through lines on paper that correspond to the structure of the building. The architect uses the blueprint to tell the general contractor what the building is like down to the minutest detail of structure by indicating that structure through the blueprint. The structure delineated in a blueprint corresponds to the structure of a building on the basis of a correspondence in form rather than content (materials). This is obvious in that a three-dimensional building is made of bricks and mortar while a blueprint is only two-dimensional paper. Therefore, the modeling is formal and logical instead of material and physical. The architect’s plan is a “logical construct.”

It is up to the contractor to turn that formal representation of structure into an actual structure as a building by procuring the requisite materials and equipment, hiring skilled workers, engaging subcontractors as needed for the electrical work and plumbing, and so forth. Not only the contractor but also the foremen and subcontractors have to be able to read the blueprint also, so they know what is required of them and those whose work they are supervising. Gradually and methodically, the structure on paper begins to appear as a building on the site, exactly as the architect had laid out its structure on paper and designated the use of particular materials, leaving execution of the operations to the general contractor.

Similarly, philosophers are concerned with structure rather than things. For example, they attempt to elucidate in language how “the scheme of things” is reflected in the structure of knowledge and how the structure of that knowledge is expressed in the structure of language. The structure of knowledge is revealed in the structure of the language in which it is expressed. By examining the structure language one can arrive at some understanding of how language functions to mirror the structure of thought through the logic of the language. Logic is therefore called “formal” in contrast to “material,” in that it is principally concerned with structure.

The present undertaking is a *logical* inquiry to the degree that it attempts to clarify the logic of framing, rather than being a *historical* one. It is vital to grasp this logic in order to understand how the conceptual and linguistic game is played

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 4.112. , p. 29.

with respect to the matter under consideration, namely, religion as normative and spirituality as reflexive.

Norms define frames. Frames shape a universe of discourse. Universes of discourse determine the structure and boundaries of their content by the logic imposed on the data. The same data can be structured in different ways. Therefore, different universes of discourse can be employed to express different “worlds” from the same data. For example, chemistry can be used to explain the same “stuff” that physics also explains from a somewhat different vantage using a different notation and terminology. Both views can be used to do different things and accomplish different objectives. These views are interconnected in that the expressions of one can be translated into expressions of the other. This is possible because the form of the structures they use is the same or similar. The difference between the two lies in the different types of structure. What they have in common is the underlying form.

Normative doctrine and perennial wisdom can be based on the same scriptural text. For example, the saying attributed to Jesus, “I and the Father are one,” are interpreted differently in normative doctrine and perennial wisdom. On the one hand, normative Christianity cites Jesus’ saying this in evidence of the doctrines of the Incarnation and Trinity, claiming that it shows that Jesus asserted his equal divinity as God’s son. On the other hand, perennial wisdom interprets Jesus’ statement as testimony to his realization of identity with God as infinite consciousness. In infinite consciousness absolute existence and absolute knowledge are one and the same as the perfection of self-awareness. This is the fullness of reflexivity.

It is not possible to understand history without understanding the logic that went into creating its expression. A large part of this logic has to do with framing the universes of discourse that determine thought, speech and action. For example, normative religions apply norms to thought, speech and action in order to frame doctrines, rituals, and observances that determine the particular religious “worlds” of the various denominations and sects.

Reflexivity transcends form because it is grounded in self-awareness and awareness in itself is formless. Awareness knows in terms of forms, which is possible because awareness does not have any particular form. Since awareness is formless it also transcends framing as it is in itself. Forms are imposed as frames when awareness becomes “informed” through knowledge. These frames have logical structure that the logic of framing reflects in language and symbol.

While mystical experience grounded in reflexive knowledge is formless, hence, frame-free, its expression is in terms of language and symbol, hence, is logical and formal. Perennial wisdom is therefore also reflected from different points of view.

Hence, it is not the case that perennial wisdom, considered as the testimony of mystics and the teaching of masters, is uniform. Various mystics and masters use

language differently to express essentially the same reflexive knowledge characterized by self-awareness. One of the most ancient expressions of perennial wisdom comments on this very point. According to *Rig Veda*, “Existence (or truth) is one; the wise speak of it differently.”¹ Hence, mystical experience can appear to be different in different accounts because it is framed differently.

Confusion often arises because the logic of expression is difficult to recognize. Since this logic is entirely formal and abstract, shaping content instead of having content, distinguishing it in thought is like trying to see the glasses one is wearing. If one takes them off, one can’t see them, and if one leaves them on, they don’t show up as objects in what one sees. Therefore, the question becomes one of how to look at one’s spectacles without taking them off.

Language is observable, while knowledge is not. The process of knowing is the lens through which we “see,” so we cannot see this lens directly. Using its artifact, language, we can get a glimpse of the structure of the process, however. To the degree that language expresses thought, the structure of expression reflects thought. Inquiring into how language functions to express knowledge provides insight into the logical structure of knowledge itself as it is reflected in expression. This is the basis of logical inquiry into form.

META

Greek *meta* means “above” or “about.” It is used as a label for higher levels and orders of all kinds. Douglas Hofstadter popularized the term “meta” in *Gödel, Escher, Bach*, and *Metamagical Themas*. He also coined the phrase “going meta” to signify moving to a higher order of logic in the course of communication. This is what we are doing by moving the discussion of normative religion from so-called “truths” to norms and from so-called doctrines to frames. Then “faith in revelation” can be distinguished into belief in normative doctrine, on one hand, and testimony from mystical experience, on the other. Norms are based on the logical privilege conferred by the role they play in framing a universe of discourse, whereas mystical experience is grounded in a higher order of awareness, namely, reflexive awareness, which is intuitive.

The first recorded use of *meta* in this logical sense was by Aristotle, who entitled his study of first principles, *Metaphysics*. The Greek title is *meta ta physika*, which reads literally, “after the physics.” Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* is a study of first principles (*arches*) or causes (*aitia*). This study therefore extends beyond the study of nature (*physis*). The Greek word *physis* means “nature.” Physics studies nature, while metaphysics studies being as such instead of particular beings. It does this in

¹ *Rig Veda*, 1.164.46. Sanskrit: *ekam sad vipra bahudha vadanti*. Translation by the author.

terms of the overarching first principles or causes. Metaphysics stands above physics, looking down at it, so to speak.

For example, Plato had posited the Good as that toward which all things are attracted as their end, in the sense of being the fulfillment of their purpose in the perfection of their being. The Good is one, true, good and beautiful, drawing all to it. Plato had also posited ideas or “forms” (Greek: *idea*) as invariant patterns accounting for universality. The Greek term *idea* comes from the root *eid*, “to see,” which comes from Indo-European root *vid*, signifying both to see and to know.

Idealism as a philosophical category comes from Greek *idea* in the Platonic sense. The epistemological problem that the ancients were dealing with was how to explain how physical objects can be known by the mind. Obviously, the physical object does not enter the mind like food enters the mouth. Plato concluded that the mind and the object must share something in common. Aristotle held that the intellect is capable of reaching out and grasping the intelligibility of objects and impressing this intelligibility on the mind, which is by nature intelligence, hence, compatible with intelligibility. In both cases knowledge results from the identification of intelligence with intelligibility in the knowing process wherein the mind (*psyche*) knows an object by means of grasping its intelligible form (*idea*) or essence (*ousia*).

The medieval Scholastics called this intelligibility of objects the “intelligible species” or “essence.” In this view the mind knows objects by means of this intelligible species, which is universal rather than particular, invariant rather than changing. According to Aquinas, who followed Aristotle on this point rather than Plato, the intellect intuits the intelligibility of objects and impresses them on the mind, which is not foreign to them because its nature is intelligence. Knowledge of invariant intelligibility is “real” or genuine knowledge because it is of the unchanging or absolute, whereas experience of the changing superficialities of objects can yield only opinion, not real knowledge.

Plato’s view is somewhat different and corresponds more closely with Eastern views based on the identity of name and form in higher cognition as reported by mystics. Whether he was influenced by these views is not known. According to Plato one grasps intelligibility by “seeing” the ideas or forms with the “eye” of the mind or soul (*psyche*) rather than the eyes of the senses. Actually, for Plato the soul then “remembers” the intelligibility (*logos*) that is already inherent in it as intelligence (*nous*). For Plato knowledge is remembrance (*anamnesis*). Similarly, according to the Vedic tradition the seer (*rishi*) “sees” the identity of name and form at the causal and nondual levels, independently of external objects or events, and through this higher cognition becomes capable of far-reaching knowledge.

What the senses perceive changes, hence, is not “real” in the sense of eternal and unchanging. In contrast, the forms seen by the mind are unchanging and

incorruptible. That is to say, the same universal forms are found in this and that thing, which comes to be and passes away. But the universal forms never change. A human being is always a human being, even though particular humans are born and eventually die. Therefore, Plato concluded, the universal forms are real and indeed divine, in the sense that the divine is that which is unchanging and incorruptible. Because of these divine attributes, Augustine would later make the Platonic forms the “divine ideas” in terms of which God creates. Augustine’s influence as a theologian cannot be overestimated, and through him this view of ideas as ultimately real entered orthodox Christian theology through the front door.

For Plato, things “participate” in these forms. The forms account for the universality and invariance that makes knowledge true knowledge of reality. However, lack of clarity in logic can lead to mistakes about forms or ideas. The practice of philosophy using the methodology of Socratic dialectic clarifies the logic of thought as it deals with ideas as formal, independently of material content. Matter accounts for the multiplicity and diversity of individual existence. Because matter is not intelligible, the mind can be mistaken about it, accounting for relative truth and falsity regarding mundane facts. Something can seem to participate in a form that it does not. In the dark, a piece of rope can be mistaken for a snake.

Plato’s world artificer or “demiurge” (*demiourgos*) organizes the world into an ordered whole (*cosmos*) by arranging the elements of the indeterminate (*chaos*) on the basis of intelligence (*nous*) and reason and intelligibility (*logos*).¹ But the demiurge does not create the world in time, much less out of nothing. The Greeks regarded the universe as existing without a beginning or end in time, so they did not need to appeal to a Creator as a temporal first cause. Asserting that God created the world “from nothing” would be an absurdity for the Greeks, who regarded the principle, “From nothing, nothing comes,” as a tautology. Creation as it appeared in religious myths didn’t fit the logical frame of Greek philosophy. Later, Christian thinkers like Aquinas would admit that there is no logical necessity for creation in time, although a logical first principle is. One of Aquinas’s proofs of God’s existence is based on the necessary existence of a higher *kind* of existence entailed by a higher *order* of logic.

¹ Greek *demiourgos* means craftsman or artisan; *cosmos* means order, *chaos* means disorder, *logos* means word, and *nous* means knower. *Nous* is a cognate of *gnosis*, traceable to Sanskrit *jnana*, meaning knowledge. Intelligence (*nous*) is capable of knowing what which is intelligible (*logos*). The Platonic demiurge is not a creator god, who creates out of “nothing,” for the ancient Greeks held that the universe is eternal. The demiurge orders what already exists in a disorderly way. All these terms acquired technical meaning in Greek philosophizing. Different thinkers used them similarly but often somewhat differently.

Aristotle posited four fundamental causes (*aitia*): formal, material, efficient and final. The formal cause of a thing is its essence (*ousia*) of a thing. The mind (*psyche*) as intelligence (*nous*) knows the essence of a thing as its intelligibility (*logos*). Aristotle's conception of form was similar to Plato's but instead of locating the forms in a separate, higher world, Aristotle emphasized form in terms of the intelligible structure of objects of knowledge through which the mind as subject knows the essence of these objects through thought.

The existential cause of "things" is matter (*hyle*). "Matter" might be thought of as being that which grounds extension in space locally and duration in time as an object. Matter is not itself a thing but that which makes a thing something "real," in the sense of being an object in the world.

The mind knows things in terms of their form, rather than their matter. The mind knows that a thing exists separately from itself on account of the essential difference between mind and matter. Matter remains external to mind, while the intelligible form of things is knowable through intelligence. Whereas the influential Augustine was more under the influence of Plato, Aristotle's view would subsequently be adapted by Thomas Aquinas and integrated into medieval theology and philosophy as the dominant view.

In this fashion, Aristotle replaced the nebulous concept of things "participating" in pre-existent forms with as an explanation of individual existence in terms of formal and material aspects of things. The intellect knows the intelligibility of the formal aspect, but the matter is unintelligible other than as an existent that is separate from the knowing subject. The intellect knows *what* a thing is on the basis of form and *that* a thing exists on the basis of matter. Thus, one significant contribution of Aristotle was to offer an account of realism on the basis of the difference between mind (*psyche*) and matter (*hyle*). Mind grasps form, which is rational and determinate, but mind cannot grasp matter, which is irrational and indeterminate. The mind only knows that matter exists because it cannot influence it directly or control it on the basis of intention.

The efficient cause for Aristotle is that which precedes an object or event and accounts for it. Since the universe is eternal, it does not have an efficient cause. Plato's version of efficient cause, the Demiurge, does not precede the existence of the universe either, but rather orders the already existing *chaos*, turning it into *cosmos*.

Change for Aristotle is also the result of attraction toward the final cause. Change is therefore conceived as essentially the progressive transcendence of state in the direction of perfection in the literal sense of being "finished." An artisan stops, for example, when satisfied that the work can no longer be improved. Organisms, especially, are purposeful in that they have a natural tendency or impulse causing them to strive to reach their proper end (*telos*), at which their purpose aims them.

Human excellence (*arête*) is the progressive unfolding over a lifetime of a person's full potential as a "rational animal" — the essence of being human — by acquiring wisdom and self-mastery through practice of virtues like prudence, justice temperance and fortitude. The by-product of this is the happiness (*eudaemonia*) that all seek and so few find. Through contemplation, one can even be in the same state of self-referral for a time that God (*theos*) enjoys eternally as self-knowing knowledge.

Just as Aristotle treated metaphysics as being of a higher order logically than physics and as exhibiting a higher level of abstraction; so too, science today deals with the principles underlying nature, while the philosophy of science examines the structure of scientific knowledge itself. That is to say, the physical sciences are about nature, while the philosophy of science examines the principles of such knowledge from a higher order of logic and a level of greater abstraction from experience.

The different frames that Plato and Aristotle provide are remarkable on account of the prominent role they played historically. Plato and Aristotle are seminal in Western thought because they established the framework for future thinking. Moreover, the explanations they offered in terms of idealism and realism, monism and idealism, are the poles about which Western thought has revolved since then.

Most importantly, however, Plato and Aristotle contributed a methodology that incorporated not only the nuance of distinctions based on finely tuned discrimination, but also abstraction, formalization, and self-reference. First, let's look at abstraction, and then consider hierarchical levels and orders.

ABSTRACTION

Abstraction is both epistemic and logical. Abstraction begins in the knowing process. At a simplest state, similarities are observed among objects allowing them to be grouped into classes. These classes are then named, not as particular objects but as epistemological categories called concepts. At this level, concepts are mental and are that by which the mind knows universally instead of on the basis of particular percepts. For example, one knows what fits into the category, chair, on the basis of one's concept of "chairness," so that one can recognize what qualifies as a chair without knowing beforehand any of the particulars of any of the objects in the category.

Human beings have greater access to a higher *type* of knowledge — universality — than other animals, at least all but our closest cousins, and even their knowledge of universals is extremely limited in comparison to human language. Moreover, humans are also able to abstract at even higher levels by moving from particular (individual objects) to universal (classes of objects) and then even higher to classes of classes and so on.

The next level of abstraction in the knowing process is that of generalization. Here the elements are not objects but objects in relation to their properties or to other objects. For example, in knowing that an object falls into a particular class, one also knows thereby that the object necessarily has certain properties and relations associated with that class as its characteristics. For example, being an animal implies being mortal.

Higher yet is the level of abstraction called induction. Observation of the constant conjunction of events leads to the hypothesis that there is a connection between them, such that one proceeds from the other, even though it may not yet be known what the nature of this connection may be. This is the epistemological basis of scientific reasoning from particular to general.

Beyond induction lies discovery. The mind makes a “jump” that is seemingly inexplicable other than by attributing it to intuition. This type of intuition underlies not only scientific discovery but also a great deal of other human creativity.

Abstraction as generalization, induction and discovery first arise through the knowing process before it can be formulated as a thought and expressed in language. The knowing process is the subject matter of psychology. The formulation and expression of thought is the subject matter of logic.

Human beings do not ordinarily have insight into how the knowing process works. Neuroscientists and biochemists can describe changes in physiological states, but knowing is not reducible to them because it is of a different order. However, humans can examine language to gain insight into what it reveals about the formulation of thought as expression. Human beings think by using concepts and other symbols and relating them to each other by applying rules of logic.

The point is that the knowing process is preconceptual and prelinguistic. It takes place in ways unknownst to us as thinking subjects. We do not see the process of abstraction taking place, for example. Intuitions that result in discoveries are often “aha experiences” that come “out of the blue.” However, we know that something must be going on to account for our knowledge of particular objects in terms of universal concepts, or to cause intuition to flower. Previously, philosophers speculated about this. Now, psychologists study it using scientific methodology and hypothesize about it in cognitive psychology.

Framing also operates epistemically at the preconceptual and prelinguistic level. Like the glasses we are wearing, we cannot see it in the making. We can only see it through what formulations of thought express in language. While we do not see the framing process taking place, logical inquiry into expression can illuminate the frames that are imposed on thought as angles of vision or viewpoints.

REFLECTION

This brings us to another level of in the knowing process, called “reflection.” Human beings are capable not only of knowing but also of reflecting on this knowledge. Socrates is famous for saying that a life not reflected upon is not worth living.¹ Socrates thereby connected philosophy with reflection, implying that without reflection one’s rational nature is not brought into play, so that one remains at the level of the brute, the level at which Greeks viewed uncivilized barbarians.

Reflection leads to discrimination, and discrimination to drawing distinction with respect to truth and values, as well as more abstract levels of distinction such as those between form and matter, particular and universal, instance and class, and other logical distinctions. While these levels of abstraction are inherent in the knowing process, they are noticed only through reflection on knowledge. Through reflection, human beings are capable of higher orders of knowledge than occur in perception, conception, understanding and even reasoning. Through reflection, humans can not only become aware of these purely logical aspects of knowing, but also gain knowledge of them by reflecting on awareness of them and abstracting further.

This knowledge is expressed first in thought and then in speech. However, both use logic in the sense that thinking conceptually is like talking to oneself internally. That is to say, spoken and written words are expressions of mental concepts. Spoken and written statements are expressions of propositions formulated in the mind.

One does not actually “know” that which is present preconceptually and prelinguistically in the knowing process until the results are expressed in thought as formulated in language. For example, although I know about what I am presently writing, I don’t know it explicitly before bringing it to mind and expressing it to myself. But where it “comes from” remains a mystery, even though it evidently was there, available to be called up in the way a database calls up information.

Writers also edit their work on the way to its final expression by adding nuance, clarifying, and correcting. They are also concerned with the manner of expression; for expression is a combination of matter and manner, content and style. All this takes place spontaneously through the process of thinking while writing.

In this way, writing is creative, educational, and fun as the work evolves. It is also sometimes surprising when one finds that one knew something but did not realize it before putting fingers to the keyboard. Indeed, there is a saying to the effect that the teacher learns more than the student. This is because the teacher brings more than

¹ Plato. *Apology*, 38a.

the student and only realizes it explicitly by bringing it out through teaching and writing.

To summarize: abstraction, reflection and reflexivity are first epistemic, hence, preconceptual and prelinguistic. They only reveal themselves to us through what expression shows of their effects. All of the psychological and physiological operations that go on in the knowing process are accompanied by changes in the brain, nervous system and senses. The resultant is expressed logically in thought and language. The epistemic is first and cannot be ignored or reduced to brain states and neurological operations that dismiss dealing with mind, although some materialists attempt to avoid the issue by doing away with mind altogether, considering it to be merely an “epiphenomenon” of matter. Yet, the knowing process with which everyone is subjectively familiar and which science has yet to explain appears through the expression of its results. Perceptions, conceptions, reflections and reflexivity are all also logical in addition to being epistemic, and they can be examined on the basis of the use of symbols in communication.

Thought is the formulation in the mind of knowledge, and language is the expression of thought in words. These can occur either through thinking using mental symbols in the form of concepts, or through communicating about thoughts by speaking and writing using vocal or written signs as physical symbols. The gathering and processing of data into information, generalizations about this information, and reflections on it that occur in the knowing process manifest in thought and are expressed in language.

A great deal of the epistemic dimension of knowledge is concealed from view, just as are all the myriad bodily processes that keep one alive and functioning from one moment to the next. It would be distracting otherwise, so they are either too subtle for knowledge to grasp or human beings filter them out before they emerge into awareness. While some of these things can be called up intentionally for conscious attention, many cannot. It is only possible to become aware of them by examining their manifestation in language. This is the meaning of logic, broadly speaking. Thus, when we speak of “the logic of framing,” for example, we are referring to the way that framing shows itself in expression, while its mechanics remain hidden in the process of knowing.

Reflecting on a language, linguists discover that language is constituted of vocabulary and syntax, words and grammatical rules for combining words into sentences that are capable of conveying meaning by making descriptive statements, giving instructions, issuing orders, and so forth. There are also higher-level rules for deriving propositions from other propositions through the application of the rules of deduction and induction. All this is gleaned from reflection on the use of language, which is a logical activity that is of a higher order than knowledge of ordinary affairs.

LOGICAL FORM

Ludwig Wittgenstein's later works sought to show how failure to see how language works in complex uses like philosophy, science and religion leads to confusion. It often also results in the erroneous presumption that one has knowledge in hand, where there is only an illusion of knowledge arising from lack of clarity. He specifically treats framing in this regard, although he did not use this term himself. He preferred "picturing" as in "world-picture."

Through language one creates a world-picture that one then mistakes for reality as such, not realizing that every picture is from a point of view, hence, an interpretation of reality. For example, the earth can be mapped using a variety of cartographical projections that present different topographies, e.g., water depth and land elevation. Different maps may represent the territory using different scales or even different types of projection altogether.

The logical form of a map is what the map has in common with the territory. This is formal and structural rather than material and physical. As Korzybski famously observed, "The map is not the territory." Moreover, different types of maps can be drawn faithfully representing the same territory, e.g., by varying the scale or type of projection.

Maps may differ not only by method of projection and scale. Some maps may represent the territory more faithfully than others. For example, the maps of the Western hemisphere by early cartographers are nowhere near as accurate or detailed as contemporary navigational charts. Similarly, frames may be more or less biased or skewed with respect to the data, as navigators sometimes learn from bitter experience

The upshot is that while human beings are capable of incredible feats of abstraction, reflection and reflexivity, extending through many orders of knowledge, they are generally not only unaware of the epistemic processes involved, but also they are unaware of the logic involved in expression. Because both processes are not only concealed from view, human beings uncritically receive expressions of thought fully formed in language, presuming that language is doing its work properly. However, often this is not the case. Then, we fall victim to the logical traps of language that arise from lack of clarity of how the expression actually works in practice.

Wittgenstein claimed that language is not capable of describing its logic in the same way that it describes facts. Rather, the logic of expression is shown in language-use. Consequently, he constructed "language games" to illustrate this logic by showing how language works in simple cases that simplify more complex and potentially confusing ones.

Games are constructed from rules and directions about how they are to be applied. Wittgenstein's language games are simple constructs whose rules are made obvious in their application. They are designed to bring clarity by showing how language often "goes on holiday" and fails to do its job owing to lack of clarity and precision.

An example of a simple language game that comes to mind is that of "having" something. A typical statement in the game of having runs, "I have a dollar." A similar statement is, "I have a headache." A further statement is, "I have a soul." The grammatical form of the statements is the same, seeming to imply that the logical form is also the same. But this is not so. A dollar is a physical thing. A pain is psychological experience. A "soul" is neither a physical thing nor a psychological experience. What the term "soul" stands for is indeterminate for those who are not mystics. Thinking of having a soul or even a pain in the same terms as having a dollar is a logical error encouraged by a similarity of signs where signs of the same time function as symbols for different logical types.

The terms "dollar," "pain," and "soul" function differently as symbols, because the existence of what they symbolize is different in *kind*. Therefore, knowledge of them arises from knowledge that differs in *type*, and the symbols used to express them differ logically in *order*. A dollar is a physical thing. A person who has one can see it, touch it, count it, spend it or save it. A pain is a psychological experience, hence, private to the person rather than being publicly available. However, to the person having the pain it is no less real than the dollar. Even in the case of the phantom limb phenomenon, not unusual after an amputation, the pain is still there, even though the limb is not.

"Soul" is a merely logical construct and a concept empty of experience for anyone not acquainted with soul on the basis of mystical experience. Because the soul is not easily found through ordinary introspection, many people have concluded that it is an empty or at least dubious concept, in spite of many mystics' testimony to the contrary. When the boundaries of the concept of a dollar, a pain and a soul are taken into account, the difference in kind, type and order becomes clear.

Some illustrative examples do not even involve language. For example, Wittgenstein illustrates "seeing as" in contrast to seeing. Pictures that can be seen in two ways, for example, one way as a duck and another way as a rabbit, show that the same data can be structured by the mind differently. However, both viewpoints cannot be held simultaneously. Instead, the mind flips from one to the other.

This illustrates how the same data can be interpreted from different vantages and expressed as information in different ways. For example, sociology and anthropology are replete with examples of different cultures interpreting essentially the same data in terms of different "world-pictures." This is possible because different pictures can have the same logical form as the data, yet, may differ among

themselves with respect to angle of vision, as well as coloring and degree of detail. Some of us live in a world where we see “ducks” and others live in a world where they see “rabbits,” and the two world-pictures apply to the same “reality.” For example, where so-called primitive peoples report seeing “spirits,” moderns see only rocks and trees. Which way of seeing is correct? One way of seeing allows people to live in the forest seamlessly without disruption, whereas the other requires settlers to transform the forest into science-based “civilization” if they are to settle there successfully. What does “correct” mean here, i.e., what is its criterion? Isn’t it a matter of perspective?

We already mentioned picturing above when investigating form. Picturing is another logical game. Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* is famous for using logical form as illustrated in cartography, drafting and other ways of picturing to illustrate the logic of description. He observed that descriptive propositions have the same structure as the states of affairs they represent. It is through this correspondence of structures that descriptive propositions are able to represent states of affairs and assert their truth as fact. Wittgenstein called that which underlies the correspondence of different types of structure, “logical form.”

For example, the blueprint and building share the same logical structure or form; however, this is expressed quite differently in the blueprint and the building, the former being ink on paper and the latter constructed of building materials. Nevertheless, the arrangement of the building materials is on the basis of the blueprint, such that the structure of the building reflects its structure of the blueprint. What building and blueprint have in common is the logical form underlying their structures.

This becomes evident if one looks closely at how description works in comparison with pictorial representation. The logical form of a descriptive proposition is the same as or similar enough to the logical form of the state of affairs it represents to allow the proposition to symbolize the state of affairs.

The term “proposition” is a logical one rather than epistemological or linguistic. Strictly speaking, propositions are neither thoughts nor statements, although the term is often used loosely in these ways. Propositions are logical constructs formulated in thought and expressed in language.

Descriptive propositions represent states of affairs logically, and descriptive statements express these propositions in terms of language. This does not mean that the thoughts involved are “pictures” in the mind in the sense of images of things. This is not the way we think.

On the logical level it simply means that an intelligent subject is able to cognize the intelligibility of the world in terms of “logical form,” as Plato and Aristotle had similarly observed millennia ago. In knowledge, the meeting point of intelligent subjects and intelligible objects as poles of knowledge is the logical form which

they share through the process of knowing that goes on behind the scenes, as it were, of which gross consciousness is unaware. Wittgenstein's contribution consists in elucidating this logic in terms of language usage.

It is important to note that Wittgenstein's analysis is purely logical rather than either speculative or psychological. Nor is it "linguistic" in the sense of falling under the subject matter of linguistics. Wittgenstein was not suggesting that logical form exists independently, as many interpret Plato to be asserting. Nor is his work based on the rationale that the intellect abstracts the form from the object, as Aristotle advanced. Nor was he propounding a psychological theory about how the mind knows.

Rather, Wittgenstein is simply saying that the commonality between subjective and objective — intelligence and intelligibility — is logical form. For example, the pattern of relationships that make a picture a recognizable representation of a situation or event is the logical form they share in common, even though the two-dimensional model is quite different in other respects from the actual situation or event it depicts.

Logical form is that which makes knowledge possible as a relation between intelligent subject and intelligible object, independently of consideration of how this may occur through the knowing process or get formulated through linguistics as the science of language. Logic is neither science nor philosophical speculation. It is the articulation of how signs function as symbols to express meaning and truth.

According to Wittgenstein, the logical form of a picture is what the structure of a picture has in common with the structure of that which it represents. This correspondence does not have to be exact in the sense of being identical in all respects. The structure of the picture may differ significantly from the structure of what is pictured. For example, the picture may be two-dimensional while that which it represents has three dimensions. In abstract art, the structure of the picture may be very abstract, having almost no detail. Yet, if it is a picture, it still observes the rules of picturing in that the structure of the objects pictured are recognizable from the picture.

However, the correspondence of structure linking the picture to that which it pictures must be exact in a logical sense. The logical form underlying picturing is a relation of elements. Think of a draftsman laying out the structure of a building in terms of a blueprint, or an engineer drafting the design of a machine. The relation of the elements of the picture must mirror the relationship of the corresponding elements in what is pictured. This relation must be sufficiently precise for the pictured to be identifiable enough from the picture for the intended use. An engineering design of an aircraft engine has to incorporate much lower tolerances than an architectural blueprint for a barn or shed.

Graphic representation makes its logic obvious, since the picture looks like the object. The structural form of the picture clearly corresponds to that which is pictured. However, sentences do not look like pictures outwardly, nor do they resemble states of affairs.

Picturing is contained in the meaning of the sentence when it is applied in the context of description of a state of affairs. For example, this is illustrated in language games involving finding:

Q. — “Where is my book?”

A. — “Which book?”

Q. — “The book I was just reading.”

A. — “Oh, the book is in the shelf. I put it back where it was.”

Now the person looking for the book knows where to find it. The description acts as a simple sort of map indicating where it is.

Wittgenstein claims that descriptive propositions function on the basis of the same logic as pictures and maps. An elementary proposition describes a state of affairs in contrast to a generalization. The criterion for identifying an elementary proposition is that it describes a state of affairs as possibly being the case. Simultaneously, an elementary either asserts or denies the existence of this possible state of affairs as a fact. If, on checking the description against the facts, an existing state of affairs is found to correspond to the proposition, then the state of affairs that the proposition asserts is in fact the case, and the proposition is verified as true. If not, the proposition is false. This is the basis for testability through scientific experimentation, for example. Ordinary description in everyday language functions similarly.

The elements standing in relationship in the proposition must designate particulars that can be checked by observation. A scientific protocol obtained from an experiment would be such a proposition. For instance, a laboratory log might read, “Observer O observed particle X at position P at time T under experimental circumstances C.”

For example, a simple instance of an elementary proposition in ordinary language would be a proposition having the form, “such and such object stands in such and such relationship to another object,” where the context makes the asserted state of affairs capable of being corroborated in experience, at least in principle. Wittgenstein never gave an example of an elementary proposition, likely because he realized that an *example* differs logically from an actual *description*.

The point is that an elementary proposition is not elementary solely on the basis of its form or the meaning of its constituent terms, independently of its use in a context. While the logical form must make description of a putative state of affairs possible, it is the application of a statement in a context as an assertion or denial of a putative state of affairs that makes it a description of a particular state of affairs.

One knows one has an elementary proposition when one knows where to look for the putative state of affairs whose factual existence is being asserted or denied.

Although descriptive propositions can represent possible states of affairs and assert that they are true or false, propositions cannot vouch for their own veracity. The truth they assert is the factual existence of a corresponding state of affairs. This can only be established through verification that is independent of the proposition.

Because a descriptive proposition does not contain its own truth but only claims it, it can be either true or false as the case may be. Therefore, the truth of an elementary proposition requires checking against the facts by confirming it through experience. The truth and falsity of general propositions stands or falls on the basis of the elementary propositions that they generalize. For example, if it is asserted that all swans are white, and a black swan is discovered, then the general proposition is disproved by this single counter-instance. In this case the proposition describing a state of affairs in which a black swan plays a role as an object would be elementary. If verified as being true, its truth would disconfirm the truth-claim of the general proposition that all swans are white.

LOGICAL RULES

Logical rules contribute to logical form. Everyone is familiar with such rules from grammar, where they are called “syntax.” These are the rules for combining words into sentences and relating sentences to each other. Other syntactical systems, such as mathematics have syntax, too. Just as we learn grammar in “grammar school,” we also learn our addition, subtraction and multiplication tables that teach us how numbers are combined and related.

Logic also studies how meaning arises and is used to think and communicate, how truth-value is assigned and established, and so on with respect to how language functions internally and how it gets applied to “reality” as that which appears to the senses in experience. So logic extends much further than simply to syntax.

Logic can be considered as a study of the rules used in the formulation of thought and its expression in language and symbol. In this meta-sense, logic studies the relationship of intelligence and intelligibility through rationality. As a practical matter, logic deals with the nature of expressions and their relationship. To do this it examines the use of signs as symbols. Signs are representations of symbols having significance. However, only the sign is visible, for example, as a written or spoken word.

The study of logic involves examining the use of signs in relation to each other symbolically in order to identify the underlying rules, sometimes misleadingly called “the laws of thought.” It would be better to view them more neutrally as logical operations, for logic is a “neutral” study in that it contributes nothing to a

subject matter other than articulating and clarifying it on the basis of rules and their application.

Description is only one use of language, albeit a particularly important one. The logic of description is grounded in the fundamental rule that the structure of the descriptive proposition and what it purports to describe have the same logical form, in which the elements of what is being pictured stand in the same relationship to each other as the elements of the picture.

This is important to the logic of framing because knowledge of the world is expressed through descriptive proposition, whose logic is based on picturing. While it may seem that facts are logically prior to the propositions that express them as statements, it is the proposition that “carves us” reality and frames it through knowledge. The picturing that underlies the logic of description is a contribution from the side of knowledge.

Human beings frame descriptive language using the logic of picturing. That means that we impose various frames on the world in order to see it from various angles. For example, different types of picturing can be applied to the same data. Maps of the same territory can be drawn to different scale depending on how close a view is required, just as different nets use different mesh to catch different sizes of fish. The framing of knowledge begins at the level of elementary proposition, on the basic type of expression of knowledge of objects and events gained through experience on the basis of acquaintance with what is known. While it may seem that the facts impress themselves on the mind without intermediation, the mind contributes the logic of picturing to form the propositions in terms of which experience gets expressed in knowledge.

Other language-uses also have logical form, albeit of different types. In some of these, description may overlap other uses. For example, through framing, a picture of the world is created that determines a worldview. However, this picture is not necessarily a picture of reality simply as it stands, as science attempts to do by using mathematics, technical terms and operational definitions.

In general, framing puts forward a view of reality that presupposes the frame as a norm. For example, in areas where a universe of discourse determined by a particular frame is involved, departures from that view are outlawed by the rules. Even in science and mathematics, assumptions and postulates function as theoretical norms. In ordinary language, frames are often more normal than descriptive. This is even more so in the case of specialized areas such as religious and political discourse,

While other uses may employ the logical form of picturing to the degree that they are descriptive, description may be neither primary nor exclusive. For example, instructions for accomplishing a task may be partially descriptive in addition to being prescriptive. The logical form of non-descriptive uses of language is based on

rules other than those that govern picturing. These rules also determine both structure and application. For example, mathematics is not descriptive, but it has precise rules involving both structure and transformations.

Those who have studied logic in freshman classes probably consider it primarily in terms of formal logic and the analysis of argumentation. However, broadly speaking, logic is equivalent to *semiotics*, which is comprised of syntactics, semantics, and pragmatics.

Syntactics deals with syntax, comprising rules for constructing well-formed formula, e.g., sentences or equations, as well as relating them to each other by combining them or transforming them, e.g., through deduction using syllogisms. *Semantics* deals with rules like picturing that are used to “interpret” well-formed formulas descriptively, thereby connecting signs as symbols with object external to them. *Pragmatics* deals with the rest of the rules applied to signs used as symbols in order to achieve desired objectives, like issuing orders, giving instructions, and the like.

Summarizing, logic is largely a matter organizing and manipulating a notation in accordance with rules, like the grammar of a language is used to manipulate signs, e.g., spoken sounds and written marks, as symbols with meaning. The syntactical aspect of logic has to do with applying rules to notation to generate well-formed formulas, as well as relating them through transformational rules such as apply to the articulation of mathematical equations and deduction on the basis of syllogisms. Everyone is familiar with this procedure from the study of grammar. Mathematics is of a higher level than grammar in that it is more abstract, although it is also syntactical. Logic is still higher since it incorporates all of semiotics, not only syntactics, but also semantics and pragmatics.

LOGICAL CLARITY

Logical clarity is necessary to reduce the ambiguities inherent in expression. Clarity and consistency in the use of terms is required especially in complex matters that are removed from the facts through abstraction, reflection and reasoning. For example, ambiguity arises from using the same sign in a variety of ways. This sort of ambiguity is often found even in professional discourse, when an author lets the meaning of key terms drift either inadvertently or in order to sneak a point in by the backdoor.

This is a reason it is so important to understand both how the logic of description functions on the basis of pictorial representation, as well as how the logic of justification operates by applying criteria, e.g., factual evidence in the case of descriptive statements. Many claims masquerade as descriptions when they function differently. For example, statements that grammatically resemble descriptive statements or even overlap them by being partially descriptive instead may function

chiefly as norms, for instance, as rules governing the way a universe of discourse is framed.

Religious dogmas, for example, purport to be true statements. But their truth is not warranted on the ground of evidence but rather is accepted as revelation and “canonized” as an article of faith. The religious term “canon” is synonymous with “law.” Institutional churches, such as the Roman Catholic Church, are regulated in accordance with their “canons,” also known as “canon law.” There are even religious courts, paralleling state courts.

Such statements are unquestionably “true” because those in authority declare them to be true as “articles of faith,” giving them a special privilege that absolves them from the necessity for justification by evidence. Hence, their acceptance is mandated for “the faithful.” Such statements become privileged in the universe of discourse. They are norms against which the truth of other statements is tested.

Dogmas function in their universe of discourse as criteria for truth. The truth-value of other statements is judged in relation to them, and their role is to serve as rules in a game. They may also function like axioms in mathematical algorithms and postulates in geometry, in that subsidiary “truths” are derived from them, as is characteristic in theologies. That is to say, their truth-value as norms acting as criteria is a matter of their privileged position in a universe of discourse rather than on the basis of a factual warrant. Therefore, dogmas are not descriptive propositions even though they may resemble them in grammatical form and act like them in some respects.

For example, it is an article of faith in some sects that the authors of the New Testaments writings accurately narrated the story of Jesus as eyewitnesses to the facts, in addition to being divinely inspired. It is also an article of faith that the original gospels were transmitted though the ages essentially unchanged, so that they represent an unbroken apostolic teaching stemming directly from Jesus. The claim is that this must be so, not only on the rationale that the gospels are revelations received by their authors as the indubitable “word of God” whose truth is guaranteed by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth, but also because the authors were privy to the facts, having witnessed the events themselves.

However, historical evidence not only does not support these claims, but also questions or contradicts them. Although they look and act like descriptive statements, they are not actually, as is shown by the fact that evidence is irrelevant to their truth. In fact, their truth is regarded as so foundational that it trumps both reasonable doubt and also evidence to the contrary. The institutional authorities are committed to standing by the norms of doctrine even in the face of contrary evidence. This reveals the function of these statements as norms rather than descriptions of historical facts, as they purport.

CONFUSION AND CREDULITY

On one hand, confusion can arise owing to the inherently concealed operations of the mind. This can happen both epistemologically with respect to the knowing process and also logically with respect to the expression of such knowledge.

Knowledge is the result of processes that are both complex and hidden. Therefore, some epistemological confusion in this regard is excusable. Logical confusion then arises in the expression of confused thinking. But unlike thought processes, which remain largely hidden, expression is publicly available and can be clarified if one applies the requisite logical tools. Hence, we will examine the logical clarification of confusion. Once the logic understood properly, the thinking process will be rectified also.

Confusion arises from both the epistemological process that takes place behind the scenes and the logical process of formulating thought, which is complex. Such confusion is natural in the sense that it is a consequence of the hardware and its operating system, i.e., the brain and its logic, instead of being acquired through enculturation and learning. Because these processes are so deeply embedded in both thinking and language used for expressing thought, the mechanics may be difficult to extract.

Humans find it difficult to impossible to stand outside of the human condition. Those who manage this to some degree, owing to brilliance of insight or mystical experience, are often either disregarded, or misunderstood, or else they are lionized, but not taken seriously. I recall being a teaching assistant at a major university when I was in graduate school in philosophy. Freshman could choose between two electives, critical thinking or dance. Which do you think the vast majority chose, especially those who needed it the most?

Confusion can also arise when language-users are not paying sufficient attention to what is actually going on, having been lulled to sleep, so to speak, by their acquired presumptions. Psychologists know that the imprinting that children acquire in their first few years remains throughout life and is difficult to change. Moreover, through enculturation the developmental process is heavily biased culturally and socially. Myriad presuppositions are acquired through education, which also influence thinking as well as behavior. Few people reflect on this when they reach maturity. Most simply assume that the world is as they take it to be, not realizing how much the mind contributes to its structuring a worldview, which it then confuses with reality as it is.

Introducing logical clarity to reduce ambiguity is particularly important in complex fields not closely connected with facts, where it is easy for “language to go on holiday.” While falling victim to the natural limitations inherent in acquiring knowledge and expressing it may be excusable, stumbling into traps through

negligence or inadvertence is not. Mistaking the map for the territory when the map is faithful to the territory is somewhat understandable, but when maps are obviously biased or skewed, then factual discrepancies should serve as signals that something is amiss. Only excessive credulity would ignore these red flags waving in the form of a contrary evidence or illogic.

Credulity is pervasive in normative religion because certain traditions are assumed to be true by the vast majority of people. The normative tradition receives social support, and alternative possibilities are never raised or considered. It is not by accident that Judaism is preserved in Jewish households, Christianity in Christian countries, Islam in the Islamic lands, Buddhism in Buddhist cultures, and Hinduism in Hindu societies. Religions with less numerous adherents, such as Zoroastrianism, Sikhism and Jainism, are preserved in cohesive subcultures. There is relatively little conversion in normative religions in comparison with the number of people who acquire their belief system from their parents and immediate society. Few people reflect deeply on this coincidence as they mature, merely accepting what they learned at the knee as true. Credulity in religious matters is the consequence.

When the religion of such people is analyzed logically, it turns out to be mostly a matter of following the established rules and norms that regulate belief in terms of doctrine, creed, and dogma; performance in terms of ritual and rubric, and behavior in terms of codes of conduct, injunctions and observances. Most pious people would likely be insulted to learn that philosophers of religion and sociologists look at what they do in terms of playing a game in accordance with established rules that can be compared and contrasted with similar rules in other religions. Scholars who make a study of such phenomena find it humorous that each group thinks it has the entire ocean of ultimate truth in its own bucket and that others are deeply in error regarding key fundamentals.

Just because the logic of language is based on rules, there is no necessity to conclude that normative religions are merely about norms. Two people may follow the same rules but their hearts may be different. Some may be following the norms out of real love for God and chiefly to please God. Others may do so on the basis of sentimental piety, while yet others may be merely conforming to convention. For many others, religion is more a matter of cultural tradition, patriotism, social regulation and so forth.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are others who view all religions as ways to God or to unfolding one's full potential as a spiritual being. It is not possible to tell from behavior alone what is in a person's heart. Many great saints conformed to the norms in order to set an example and not rock the boat. On the other hand, many others, typically those held to be prophets and messengers of God, excoriated religious hypocrisy and called for a return to spirituality. That, too, is part of the

“game” of religion, which “exercises” the heart more than the mind. What begins in credulity and confusion can be transformed to the degree that one exercises the mind and heart.

FLEXIBILITY OF RULES

Rules are not necessarily fixed by being “written in stone” like dogmas are, for example. Many games have flexible rules. For example, in some card games the joker is declared to be a wild card that can go proxy for any other card the one holding it chooses. In some cases the rules are rigidly fixed, while in others they are more fluid and flexible.

Normative religions can be analyzed and distinguished from each other on the basis of their norms as rules regulating belief, performance and conduct. Denominations, sects and schools can similarly be distinguished within a single religion, although the differences are less since there are areas of broad agreement. Those who play by the rules are considered to be “pious.” Those who violate the rules are sanctioned; while those who abandon the game are condemned as apostates, a term of approbation worse than “unbeliever,” “infidel” or “heathen” in many normative religions. In this way rules exert social pressure to conform.

The important point to note here is that rules and their structure define the logic of normative religions and similar systems. The system can be analyzed in terms of the structure, origin, regulatory power, lines of authority, transformation and other factors influencing rules and the higher level rules regulating their application to general circumstances and adaptation to particular cases.

When such an inquiry is undertaken it often turns out that the logic of the normative religion and its implications is quite different from what most people in the religion think and believe. This is indicative of what psychologists call “cognitive dissonance.” Since cognitive dissonance increases with information and reflection, often there are explicit rules limiting such inquiry. Norms are not necessarily explicit, however. Many norms are unspoken rules conveyed attitudinally. For example, inquiry is often discouraged by a climate of anti-intellectualism, in which inquiry is viewed as an indication of lack of faith.

Normative religions do not exist in isolation from cultures, however. Therefore, it is necessary for their adherents to fit religious norms into broader cultural norms. Some approach this through combination and compromise, while other experience the extreme cognitive dissonance of contradictory norms and choose one set over another. For example, some compromise and combine scientific knowledge with religious belief, while others take sides rigidly, and reject scientific knowledge as incompatible with faith.

COMBINATION AND COMPROMISE

While the commonsense view characteristic of naïve realism presents the world we know as reality as it stands, we know on the basis of science that we inhabit a non-simultaneous universe, in which the waves that carry data to the sense travel in time. Therefore, data from objects closer to us reaches us more quickly than data traveling further. However, the mind does not make such distinctions other than on the basis of reflection. The stars we see, for example, appear as they existed eons ago, but we take them to be as present as the objects we see in the foreground, even though some of them may have ceased to exist millennia ago, just as we see the sun “rising” even though we know differently.

Being ignorant of the universe as being non-simultaneous is hardly either a failing or a problem, however. Yet, it does illustrate how some of what appears most obvious may be quite mistaken, as was the assumption that the sun rises and sets or that the world is flat. But although we may know on the basis of science that our perceptions of such events are not as factual as they appear, this knowledge does not necessarily change the way we perceive phenomena. We still observe the sun rising and setting, and the horizon as a straight line, even though we know that the earth is really a sphere spinning on its axis.

Our world-picture simply takes into account the discrepancy between perception and understanding without landing us in contradiction with respect to its fundamentals. It does this by combining the two, not blending them together, but by not mixing up apples and oranges. We know the difference between perception and reflection on it. The types of knowledge are different, and they give different results. Thus, we separate appearances from understandings about them with no difficulty, and we use the two different dimensions appropriately. We don’t think that someone is ignorant because they still use the anachronism, “sunrise,” for example.

But if one is convinced of the intuitive certainty of the commonsense view as self-evident, then the science becomes counter-intuitive and may be ignored or dismissed. Similarly, if one accepts the Genesis account as the revealed word of God, hence as literally true, then this view is impossible to reconcile with the view that the universe is billions of years old and a result of the Big Bang. Moreover, the theory of evolution, whose hypotheses are corroborated by a great deal of factual evidence, is also ruled out. This makes it difficult to fit into a society whose world-picture accommodates science without either isolating oneself among those in agreement or attempting to change the society to fit one’s picture.

However, if one examines the case of naïve realism in contrast to the non-simultaneity of the universe and compares it with the religious model versus the scientific one, it seems evident that naïve realism can accommodate science and exist along with it by recognizing that the commonsense view of the world is not

absolute but relative to the human mode of knowing, in which sense experience is augmented by abstraction and reason, and balanced by reflection. Similarly, if the Genesis account is viewed as symbolic rather than literal, then it can be interpreted as a teaching story instead of as a proto-scientific description, thereby avoiding a collision with scientific theory buttressed by overwhelming evidence.

The difference in both cases is the difference between a rigid logic and a flexible one. Frames having rigid logical structure present themselves as absolutes and their structures as norms determining what is admitted and excluded. The structure of flexible frames allows them to bend to conform to the data. Science, for example, is recognized as a tentative enterprise, ready to adjust itself to new information coming from both experience and also theoretical contributions involving greater explanatory power, economy, or elegance. Some normative religions are more flexible than others and are willing to accommodate themselves to shifting circumstances, at least to some degree.

LOGIC AND HISTORY

*The world, you see, is like a drum;
there is a Being who plays all kinds of tunes on it.¹*

HISTORY AS EXPRESSION

History is not so much what human beings actually remember about the past as what historians have recorded about it and how subsequent historians reflect on this through the lens of historical methodology. Therefore, history also has a logic and rationale that play a key role in historical expression, hence, the preservation and transmission of historical knowledge. History involves a number of interfacing frames.

Sometimes, these frames do not interface very well. For example, Western scholars ideas about Eastern history is often at considerable variance with Eastern tradition and literature. People in the West generally presume that the Western view is superior since it is founded on a rigorous methodology. However, when a similar variance occurs in the West with respect to history and religious tradition, many people opt for the religious frame. Indeed, many Western historians have let their religious traditions influence their approach to history.

Those who report about events originally and also those who study the evidence subsequently frame history from their points of view. History is objective to the degree that it is based on documentation and other evidence. However, this often must be reconstructed and interpreted, as we have seen this already in the case of history of religions and reconstruction and interpretation of their texts. Moreover, language is dependent on context for meaning, and context often shapes meaning. Human beings see through the spectacles of their culture, for example, without realizing it.

Cultures both change and die out. Many historical reports, as well as much factual evidence, are no longer connected with the context in which they had their original meaning. Therefore, historians must speculate about this. Even if something is known about the context, it may be virtually impossible to recreate this in our contemporary minds. For example, ancient concepts of spirit as breath, heaven as sky and “firmament,” and the like are no longer available in the way that they once were.

¹ Ananda Moyi (also Ananda Mayi Ma), quoted in Whitall N. Perry. *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*. p. 34.

We do have some idea of how we got to where we are, however, and appreciating this is key in understanding the frames that were bequeathed to us and have persisted long after they were originally constructed, shaping the development not only of subsequent history but also prevailing mindsets. When these frames ceased working, then a dialectical solution arose in the form of an opposing frame.

The resulting clash of frames produced a new synthesis, generally in which element of the old were combined with elements of the new. Thus, knowledge progresses gradually enough to maintain continuity with the past, yet, swiftly enough to adapt to emerging needs. This is not always a smooth process, however, and the many wars throughout history, including religious conflicts, show how messy the process can be as mindsets clash.

THE MARCH OF CIVILIZATION

Previously, we saw how Western civilization grew out of a confluence of four principal influences: the Judeo-Christian religious heritage, Greek thought and Athenian democracy, Roman organization and law, and science and technology. I would submit that globalization should now be considered as a principal emerging factor that is shaping civilization as a whole and therefore also Western civilization.¹

Combining these influences into a coherent world-picture required a great deal of adaptation and significant compromises. Moreover, it continues to do so as the boundaries between East and West recede and will likely be largely erased over time. We have already pondered some of the historical implications of this. Now, we must look at the logical implications of this factor as well.

These factors did not act independently but influenced each other. For example, normative Christianity influenced the Roman Empire by replacing its gods. This is a huge influence logically as well as historically, because a culture's religious conceptions influence its most basic rationale. While the Bible says that God created man in His own image and likeness, man also creates God in his own image and likeness. The God of the Hebrews is pictured in much scripture as being a strict authoritarian. This accords with the image of the emperor as secular ruler. The Empire also influenced the Church profoundly in that the Pope of Rome came to be seen as not only the vicar or "stand-in" of Christ the Lord on earth, but also as a

¹ This is a bird's eye view of key factors influencing Western civilization and, now, the planetization of civilization, Hegel's lectures on the philosophy of history were a pioneering attempt to analyze trends of time in terms of a prevailing "Zeitgeist." Contemporary historians have approached such influences in greater detail in the emerging field of macrohistory. See, for example, the work of Jean Gebser and William Irwin Thompson for a panoramic view.

quasi-emperor politically. Indeed, popes sometimes even played the role of a shadow emperor, or did their best to do so by wielding influence that exceeded the purely religious.

All of these influences involve universes of discourse with different logical structures and norms, some expressed in different languages also — Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, Latin, the European languages, and peripherally Syriac, Coptic and others that influenced the development of Christianity. While of minor interest to most, these peripheral languages are important for our consideration of *The Gospel of Thomas* as a key work of both the Jesus tradition and also perennial wisdom. The only extant copy of *Thomas* that is fairly complete is written in Coptic, although many scholars think the now lost original was likely in Syriac. A few fragments also remain in Greek. Clearly, it had a checkered past.

Here we are passing over important influences on the development of the Hebrew tradition that became first century Judaism. Abram of Ur was Sumerian by birth and upbringing, for example. Moreover, conquered by Nebuchadnezzar (605-562 B.C.E.), the Judeans came under Chaldean influence much later during the Babylonian Captivity. After being delivered from this captivity by Cyrus the Persian, the Judeans were also exposed to Zoroastrian influences. All of these influences joined to some degree in fashioning the first century Judaism in which Jesus appeared. Historians are still arguing over what and how much these diverse influences contributed to Judaism and subsequently to Christianity.

In addition, Christianity developed in the Near East, which was the meeting point of East and West, and included ancient Egypt. The number of languages and contextual influences is staggering to contemplate when one considers unraveling the logical, linguistic, and cultural threads involved in the development of the Judeo-Christian tradition. When one extends to the European tribes that were eventually civilized, first, through Roman conquest, and then under growing Christian influence, the situation is found to be almost as complex in the West.

Moreover, this process is continuing. Over half the world's billion Roman Catholics now live in Latin America, further complicating the linguistic and cultural mix as they exert an increasing strong influence on Christianity, not only there but elsewhere as well. The "liberation theology" of Latin America is challenging the more traditional and conservative theology of the normative authorities centered in Europe, at the Vatican.

All of these influences played a part in shaping Western civilization through Christianity its dominant religion, which was for centuries its primary political and cultural force as well. Controversies over doctrine reveal clashes among norms, and the ensuing hegemony of the institutional Church shows the power of a single narrative and the frame it imposes on society. It is probably no longer possible to discover all the sources for the norms that have become conventions. Now, most

people just take things for granted without knowing that they are holdovers from ancient times and faraway places that were blended into Western civilization centuries or even millennia ago, before Western civilization had even begun to arise.

Not only did these varied influences furnish content, but they also contributed to the logic that structures content, thereby shaping the way of thinking as well as thought. We observed above how this logic is constantly in flux, and presently one of the principal factors is the influence of non-linear media, which is now vying with linear thinking. We are aware of this through contrast, but age-old patterns go unnoticed.

TRANSLATION

Translation of one language to another always presents logical problems in addition to differences in meaning. This is especially true when translating across language groups, such as Semitic and Indo-European. When ancient languages are translated into modern, the difficulties are compounded because the contexts that anchor meaning are no longer extant. Even when an ancient language like Aramaic has been spoken continuously for millennia, it shifts considerably over time, so that the modern language is no longer a replica of the ancient one.

Anyone who has examined the literature in the original languages is aware of their differences in logical and linguistic structure that make word for word literal translations all but impossible. One marvels that they were able to coalesce in a comprehensive fashion to form a coherent civilization. This could only take place by accommodation among different universes of discourse.

This accommodation sometimes took place by transferring the logic of one universe to another, as happened when the Roman Empire declined, with the Papacy replacing the emperor and Christendom becoming the new empire. While there is no intimation in either the New Testament or Judaism for such a move in the direction of theocracy, the precedent of the Roman Empire made it seem like a natural transformation in the course of events. Without that precedent it is doubtful that the pope, without armies, could have become dominant other than within the narrow confines of ecclesiastical hierarchy.

The logical structure and rules were already in place, only the players in the game changed. The logical parallels are, in fact, amazing. While the emperor was the called "son of God," that title passed to Jesus Christ, and the pope assumed the status of "vicar of Christ on earth," that is, the stand-in or proxy of the son of God, empowered to speak and act on "the Lord's" behalf. Without the logic being in place to make way in thought for new circumstances closely resembling the old, one wonders whether it could even have happened. There would not have been a ground prepared to accept it.

Sometimes, however, the fit was less than satisfactory. This was especially true when one universe of discourse was imported into another or combined with it through translations of texts from the language of one to the language of the other. The logic often had to be bent to fit. Occasionally, it got bent out of shape and the original meaning was lost or distorted.

For example, while first century Palestine was an occupied province of Rome, only Roman soldiers spoke Latin there, it being the official language of the army but otherwise rarely used in the Near East. The language of period in that part of the world was Aramaic, and Jesus and the original disciples would likely have used it in their everyday affairs. At that time, Hebrew was generally only employed for religious purposes. While there is no indication that Jesus was learned, he is reported to have read from the scrolls in the synagogue, which would certainly have been in Hebrew. Nor is there any indication that Jesus ever spoke Greek, which was the language of the upper classes. It is possible, since he is reported to have spoken with Pontius Pilate directly, with no mention of any interpreter, and Pilate would probably not have understood either Aramaic or Hebrew. So if they spoke without an interpreter, it would most likely have been in Greek. However, it is doubtful that Jesus would have used Greek otherwise in his teaching.

We now know the sayings attributed to Jesus only from Greek. If Jesus spoke chiefly Aramaic and perhaps occasionally quoted scripture in Hebrew, this is significant not only as a historical matter but also a logical one. Both Hebrew and Aramaic are Semitic languages, whose vocabulary, grammar and logic are quite different from the Indo-European language group, which includes Greek, Latin, and most European languages. Most significantly, the roots on the basis of which meaning is constructed are different. Semitic roots are often different enough in meaning from Indo-European roots to make exact translation by corresponding words difficult if not impossible. In such cases, translations are only rough approximations that lack the richness of the original. For this reason, different translations of the same text often differ significantly, sometime conveying substantially different meanings.

There is a huge difference not only in the vocabulary and the surface grammar, but also in what Wittgenstein called “depth grammar,” “Depth grammar” in this sense is what I am terming “logic” in the sense of semiotics. If the depth grammar were completely different, translation would not be possible. But it is different enough to indicate that Semitic people think in somewhat of a different fashion than those using Indo-European languages. Each language-type uses somewhat different structures to express similar things, with the result that the viewpoints are somewhat different, too.

The surface differences of Semitic languages and Indo-European languages, combined with deeper differences also, make translation from Semitic languages

not only difficult but also inexact. It is not always possible to capture the same nuance using similar vocabulary and grammar. Moreover, language is idiomatic. There is not always a one to one correspondence of symbols. For this reason, freer renderings are provided in addition to close translations, multiple translations are made, and commentaries are also often needed.

THE LOGIC OF HISTORY

A similar situation applies in attempting to translate ancient languages into modern ones. For nuances of meaning are dependent on contextual use, and the cultural contexts of ancient times are lost. Even the best scholars cannot recreate these historical contexts; they can only hope to approximate them.

Beyond this, the ancients were most often doing different things that we would be doing under similar circumstances. For example, if Jesus were alive today, he would have biographers who would attempt to record his history. Therefore, the presumption is often that this is what the evangelists were also doing. However, there are problems with that view on both historical and logical grounds. In the first place, biography was not a genre in ancient times, and history was hardly the rigorous discipline it has become. For example, the gospels are not consistent concerning significant facts and each evangelist writes from a different viewpoint.

While these are historical matters, they are also logical issues. The ancients did not think like moderns, and this is shown in their actions. Furthermore, not only is the context not always clear from the gospel narratives. It's not merely a matter of biography being absent as a literary genre. The ancients communicated in terms of stories rather than reports of fact, which they would have found bland and simplistic in comparison, ill fitted to carry teachings. They were not incapable of historical biography. They just did not care to write it when they had the precedent of teaching stories.

In addition to historical speculation about their origins, there are also logical grounds for thinking that the gospels were shaped for a purpose other than recording history or writing biography. On the basis of textual criticism, some scholars suspect that the gospel narratives were constructed around sayings attributed to Jesus that had already been in circulation, in order to shape doctrine through context. This would hardly been disingenuous or manipulative in the view of their authors or audience; for in ancient times, the method of communication of such ideas was through the medium of teaching stories.

The logical underpinning of a teaching story is much different from that of a historical biography. Stories take dramatic liberties with sequence and events for dramatic purposes. Dates and places are not crucial. They also employ metaphor and symbol, which are neither meant literally nor intended to be taken as faithful descriptions of facts, but rather to convey points poetically.

Viewing the gospels as history in the modern sense risks confusing ancient teaching stories with objective reporting. Taking the gospel accounts of Jesus' life and times for historical biographies is anachronistic and misses the point that they were written to furnish teachings tailored to the respective communities for which they were written and in which they were intended to be used, rather than to record events objectively for posterity.

For example, many people have the notion that the evangelists wrote the gospels for posterity when it began to be evident that Jesus might not appear as soon as they had expected, apparently because they had misunderstood his prophecies about the end times. This is historical speculation that doesn't seem to be as warranted as the view that eventually oral teachings were written down for use by different communities. The origin and development of these oral teachings was somewhat different, since different apostles and early disciples were associated with different communities, and they told their stories of Jesus from different points of views. This is the way such stories typically develop historically.

The logic is also clear. When events are fresh in mind, scant detail is required. At first, only the sayings are noteworthy and they are transmitted orally, not for preservation initially but rather in remembrance of well-known events. Moreover, narratives arise that improve upon history through legend. Soon the principal characters of the story become larger than life. Then as memory gets dimmer, an attempt is made to capture detail before it fades from view. The stories of the aging elders, who are by then perhaps not even first-hand witnesses, begin to be written down for those interested. By then, a myth has grown up.

Only much later do people realize that it would have been advisable to record the facts accurately as they occurred, but this happens long after the events actually took place. Then, a further attempt is made to reconstruct the facts. In this attempt, much erroneous information gets included because there are no longer adequate criteria to judge the factual from the bogus. Moreover, speculation often replaces evidence where evidence is lacking.

Moreover, in early Christianity the canonical gospels are not the only "gospels." There were many more gospels in the early days than made it into the canon, although virtually no one knows of them today and only scholars are familiar with them. When they are added to the mix of early documents, the picture becomes far more complex. Then questions arise about the logic of inclusion and exclusion. Why were certain texts chosen for inclusion and others not? What were the criteria? Many presume that the logical criteria were ones that moderns would choose. However, Irenaeus was one of the early authorities arguing for what became the canon. He argued that there are rightly only four gospels, in that there are only four winds and four directions. This reveals a different sort of logic altogether, one that would be quite incomprehensible to most people today.

Each of the evangelists told Jesus' story from a particular angle, illustrating it with sayings that were probably already well known at the time. Therefore, the synoptic gospel use similar sayings and events but the narratives reveal different pictures of Jesus and emphasize different approaches to doctrine. Significantly, some of the key doctrines of Christianity are based on a text or narrative that is only found in a single gospel. This is not only a historical fact, it is also a logical point that likely reveals something significant about the construction of the Jesus story.

Would a court accept hearsay evidence in a capital case? Of course not; this violates the rules of evidence. Yet, an entire civilization has been determined on the basis of a few scriptural texts, some appearing only once in an entire body of scripture such as the New Testament. This could only make sense in terms of a logical frame whose norms determine it and provide a rationale for uncritical acceptance. When one accepts that the canonical gospels as written by the eyewitness to events, as tradition holds, and believes that they were inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that every word is unquestionably true, then the conclusion follows that even single texts are determinative. But if the introduction of evidence and historical methodology is permitted, the contextual frame falls like a house of cards. So requiring that rigorous historical methodology be applied to evidence warranted by supporting factual data must be ruled out.

The overarching logic of the story of Jesus' life and times told in the gospels is their supposed commonality. However, the gospels differ both in expression and inclusion. What is left out can be as significant as what was put in. When only one gospel contains a key text, a question arises as to why that should be, if the matter were truly central to Jesus' teaching. Moreover, where the gospels differ indicates a departure from that which they have in common, which suggests that these matters were neither central nor uniform throughout the developing Jesus tradition at the time the gospels were written.

However, such matters subsequently did become central, playing key roles in the overarching framework. Scholars speculate that this may have occurred more for doctrinal reasons rather than historical ones.

This promotion of a text purporting to be a historical fact to a norm signals a logical jump. Such jumps often seem not only unwarranted by the historical evidence. Representing normative statements as historical truth without adequate evidence is logically specious and requires a *deus ex machina* to justify it, such as an appeal to "revelation."

GREEK THOUGHT

The combination of the Judeo-Christian tradition with Greek philosophy also seems to have begun in the gospels themselves. Most scholars think that the original gospels were written in Greek. Therefore, Semitic logic had to be accommodated to

Greek logic in the process of the translation of the Jesus' story from the oral Aramaic to the written Greek. This meant that much of its initial Palestinian character was lost to view, and Jesus was presented more in Greek terms. It is not by accident that Westerners think of Jesus as "one of us," rather than one of "them."

More specifically, the prologue of the gospel attributed to John identifies God (Greek: *theos*) with "the word" (*logos*). The meaning of "the Word" came to be associated in Christology with Jesus as "the son of God." Few people now, other than scholars, make the connection of the term "word" with the *logos* of Greek philosophy. However, *logos* was a key term in Greek thinking. While its denotation is simply "word" in the grammatical sense, its connotation includes not only "meaning" and "significance," but also the higher order concepts of "intelligibility" and "ordering principle." The English term "logic" comes from this root. Heraclitus had already used it in this sense in the 6th century B.C.E.

The doctrine of the *logos* as the ordering principle of the cosmos first appears in Heraclitus (ca. 535-475 B.C.E.), an Ionian Greek philosopher from Ephesus in Asia Minor (now Turkey). The Greek term, *logos*, simply means "word." Similar to *tao*, which simply means "road" in Chinese, but later was used to signify the Absolute, the everyday term *logos* was used as a technical term in ancient Greek philosophy and theology, where it signifies intelligibility and order.

Through the agency of intelligence (*nous*), the *logos* as intelligibility "informs" the indeterminate and disordered of the original "stuff" (*chaos*) into an ordered whole (*cosmos*). *Logos* came to signify the invariant nature of intelligible form that underlies rationality as knowledge of universal forms or "ideas." The human mind or intelligence is universal in nature, hence, is fitted to know universal ideas as the intelligible aspect of things, that is, their intelligibility as reflected in concepts.

The Hellenistic Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria (ca. 20 B.C.E.-50 C.E.) had already noticed that the Greek term *logos* meant not only "word" but also was used to signify the ordering power of intelligence. It was a simple logical step for a Hellenized Jew to connect the *logos* of Greek thought with the Hebrew creation story in which God speaks His creative word. Whether Philo influenced the author of John's gospel remains controversial. He may have made this connection on his own, or not even intended it at all. In any event, the term *logos* subsequently came to be understood this way in Christian theology.

The early Church Fathers, being well educated by the standards of that period, were both heavily indebted to classical Greek thought and also influenced by contemporary Hellenistic ideas. In this way, Greek logic was melded with the early Semitic mythology, eventually even overshadowing it through the chiefly rational approach to theology that further differentiated the nascent Christianity from its Judaic roots.

ROMAN ORGANIZATION

Initially, the developing Jesus tradition melded the Judeo-Christian tradition with Greek, or at least Hellenistic, thought. When Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire in the 4th century, it was subsumed into Roman organization and law. Organization is the imposition of a rationale and a methodology based on it. The rationale, or logic, of the Roman Empire was uniformity. The emperor could rule from the top without leaving Rome because the same organizational logic prevailed throughout the empire. Every imperial functionary was a proxy for the emperor in that domain of authority and responsibility. Authority extended down from the emperor, and responsibility, back up to him. Not coincidentally, the institutional Church adopted this organizational rationale, too.

In the first centuries of the Jesus tradition, before it became Christianity, the empire was still monolithic and dominant. At the outset the emerging Church was just a blip on the screen. At the time of Constantine, Christianity was fit into the empire, not the empire into Christianity, as one might be tempted to think today as a result of what eventually transpired.

The logic of empire rests on unity; hence, laws impose uniformity. The rule of law was one of Rome's greatest contributions to Western civilization, but its chief purpose in imperial times lay in imposing uniformity on the empire. The diversity of early Christianity had therefore to be replaced by uniform rules regulating its doctrine, and practice and to transform its hierarchy into a chain of command. Thus, the logic of empire was transposed onto Christianity. Eventually, it transformed into Christendom as a quasi-theocracy that ruled the West as a shadow government. But that was still centuries in the future at the time of Constantine. As it happened, Constantine decided to move the imperial capital to Byzantium. This left the pope alone in Rome, the traditional imperial city. As the Church grew in power and influence in the West, the parallel of pope and emperor began to become increasingly obvious. When Roman Empire collapsed in the West, the Church stepped in to fill the gap because it was already prepared to do so. The logic was already in place.

This lasted until the Protestant Reformation, when Martin Luther challenged the supremacy of Church as a monolithic institution. While Luther is credited with sparking this transformation, he was only a historical catalyst. The logic was already in place to question the imperial authority claimed by the institutional Church as the ruler of both heaven and earth. This authority had already been undermined from within by the internal contradictions arising from the excrescence of empire. Luther's ninety-five theses nailed to the door of the Wittenberg cathedral just named publicly that which had already become evident enough for most people to see.

THE RISE OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Yet, there was a deeper rationale lying beneath the corruption of the medieval Church that ostensibly led to the Reformation. There were good reasons accounting for why a counter-reformation was unable to stem the tide of time that was inexorably ebbing at the end of the Middle Ages. At the time of the Protestant Reformation, the logic of the medieval Church was crumbling from within because of changing circumstances that were resulting both in a widespread change of thinking, and vice versa.

Thinking influences circumstances, and circumstances influence thinking. Which comes first is often like asking about the chicken and the egg. Their relationship is synergistic; they contribute to each other in creating a whole greater than either one.

The top-down logic of empire that characterized the medieval Church was conducive to feudalism as the status quo, in which political power was based on fealty in an agricultural economy based on tenancy. Tenant farmers rent land from “nobles” who received “title” from the king in return for fealty and payment of taxes. They in turn get to charge tenants rent for the use of the land. However, by the end of the Middle Ages invention and discovery had begun to driving commerce, supplanting craft guilds as the primary producers of non-agricultural products and services. Agriculture and rent derived from tenancy were also declining as principal economic engines for producing wealth.

Moreover, wider distribution of wealth that would eventually result in the rise of the “middle class” between nobles and tenant farmers resulted in different types of thinking, which provoked transformation in the social and political environment. While these are usually looked upon primarily in terms of historical fact, they reveal a shift in logic also. People as a whole started thinking differently. Creativity resulted in discovery and invention. Industry was rewarded. The extended agricultural era that began when agriculture supplanted hunting and gathering was beginning to make way for the West’s passage into the Industrial Age.

Not only was the tight grip of the Church undermined by the internal logic that led to manifest contradictions provoking opposition to its absolute authority. Conditions external to the Church were driving change also. Freedom is catching. Given the chance, people like thinking for themselves. Moreover, when they do, they get ideas that turn out to be creative. Creative contributions were compensated, often richly by the standards of the time. Tenants could never become landowners, but merchants and factory owners could vie with them eventually. The logic of commerce in contrast to agricultural tenancy and capital in contrast to rent was being born. Discovery and invention were also changing the basis of inquiry.

Personal industry was rewarded with wealth, laying the groundwork for the “Protestant ethic.”¹

Previously, philosophy and theology had been dominant. Their logic rested respectively on self-evident principles and revelation. But discovery and invention requires looking “out there” and checking ideas against evidence. Science was being born, too, and its child, technology was not far behind.

The collision course between science and religion was predictable. The initial outcome of the Church’s persecution of science was also predictable, since the Church still held the power, and science was implicitly challenging its authority as the arbiter of truth. However, progress could not be halted. The power of the Church began to diminish and the influence of science rose as the success of technology became increasingly obvious through the transformations it wrought. The application of science to technology and the use of technology for economic progress ushered in a higher standard of living, trumping the argument of the Church that it alone held the keys to heaven. As more people sought to participate in the new prosperity that was dawning, the old fear-based logic was compromised and it began to wane.

Science and religion tussled for centuries, but finally more or less accommodated each other through compromise when the success of science became overwhelming and Church had to permit normative doctrines like creation to be interpreted symbolically. Some norms that did not fit into the newly emerging paradigm were adjusted; not rejected, but only modified.

Difficulties arose for normative religion as its power and influence waned sufficiently to permit scientific inquiry into norms ground on scripture and tradition. Then, the application of rigorous historical methodology began to show that justification of the norms is questionable in light of evidence. Moreover, textual criticism and hermeneutics investigated the logical and linguistic underpinnings as well. Once the foundations of normative religion began to be undermined, a crisis arose. Conservative factions reacted by calling for a return to “fundamentals.”

FUNDAMENTALISM

An ultra-conservative and reactionary dispensational theology, later called Fundamentalism, had been developing in evangelical Protestantism from the mid-

¹ R. H. Tawney. *Religion and The Rise Of Capitalism. A Historical Study*. Holland Memorial Lectures, 1922. (London: John Murray. 1926). Tawney criticizes Max Weber’s argument that religious conditions chiefly contributed to economic changes. Tawney examines the underlying logic of the period to show that religious, social, political and economic circumstances influenced each other and that all contributed to transformation of the previous status quo.

nineteenth century. It emerged in the period 1910-1915 to oppose what was perceived as excessive liberalism in theology. This meant reverting to a rigid logic that brought religion into conflict with science yet again, as science brings out more and more that seems to be in conflict with Christian fundamentals based on a literal interpretation of scripture. The United States is now in the midst of the working out of the dialectic not only with respect to religion but also politics, and even how science is to be taught in the public schools. What we are witnessing is a clash of worldviews based on different and incompatible norms.

The primary focus of normative Christianity had been eschatological for centuries, that is, primarily concerned with salvation. According to this logic, the sin of Adam and Eve resulted in the Fall that had deprived humanity of its spiritual birthright as children of God to inherit heaven. The sacrifice of Jesus as God's son had restored this birthright by redeeming humankind from original sin, opening the gates of heaven to the faithful who demonstrate their faith through obedience to God's word. However, the reward of faithful in the Beatific Vision is reserved for the hereafter. While the various denominations, sects and schools may argue over the details, most subscribe to this general outline as being normative.

However, dispensationalism advanced the additional view that the new dispensation was not fulfilled through conversion of Gentiles alone, but that Jews would eventually see the light and be converted also. Prophecy includes historical events centering in the Middle East that will signal the end times. As a result, this branch of evangelical Christianity also had a historical focus in addition to an eschatological one, and it became a political interest for them as well.

The logic ran that it was also an evangelical duty to bring about the conditions for the fulfillment of the prophecies that included conversion of the Jews that would culminate in the end time and the Second Coming on earth, initiating a glorious new historical epoch. This logic is quite different from other schools of normative Christianity, and it accounts for political activism, along with a social philosophy that emphasizes economic success, patriotism and military superiority.

Rightly or not, this was perceived by many in Islam as a return to the vision of the Holy Roman Empire as the political, social and military aspect of Christendom, which was co-ruled by pope and emperor, one outcome of which was the crusades. Hitler and the Nazis failed to create the "Third Empire," but as global hegemon the United States is in the position to attempt this, especially if it is ruled as a shadow theocracy masquerading as a liberal democracy. An evangelical in the presidency reinforced this view. From this viewpoint, the next crusade is already underway. This view seemed to be corroborated by the fact that the American president initially used "crusade" about unfolding events.

But overarching this subcontext of conflict is the broader context of the historical trend toward globalization as a drive toward unification. On the way to

globalization, conflicts are inevitable as different worldviews intersect and venerable traditions clash. But the logic inherent in the march of time is toward progress and greater unification.

THE LOGIC OF GLOBALIZATION

The logic of globalization through unification and progress leads to the globalization of logic in the form of a shared worldview and a common paradigm for living that benefits everyone. Humanity is entering the Global Age historically, which promises to be a Golden Age also, provided that humanity can overcome the inertia of the past quickly enough to avoid impending catastrophes that threaten life on a large scale, such as the effects of global warming, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and pandemics. However, the progress that has already occurred, such as instantaneous global communication through the Internet, is having profound consequences with respect to logic.

A global logic is being born, as a global worldview emerges and a paradigm of humanity as an integral whole develops. This is encouraged by the universal application of science and technology irrespective of linguistic and cultural differences, which are superficial in comparison. People may still think differently on the basis of culture but scientific thinking is the same the world over, and technology works the same also, regardless of the language of the instruction manual.

Western civilization is now coming in close contact with Islamic civilization, which is centered in the Middle East and Central Asia but extends to Persia, Afghanistan, and the Indian subcontinent to the east, into Africa to the south, and to the Near East to the north. Increasing immigration is also pushing it directly into the West. Chinese civilization and Indian civilization are also coming on line globally as these regions increase in wealth and power. Moreover, the Internet is making global communication not only instantaneous but also widely available. As a result the different religions and philosophies of the world are coming into contact with each other. In the West, for instance, Eastern philosophy and religion are no longer of interest merely to scholars and “occultists,” but also they are being absorbed into Western culture. For example, “karma” and “dharma” have entered contemporary colloquial English, along with many other such imports such as “guru.”¹

The dawn of globalization is being masked by events, however, and it may even seem at times that globalization is not only off track but also an impractical dream. However, globalization can be expected to result initially in some cognitive dissonance on all sides as not only unfamiliar customs begin to exert their

¹ It is important to note that the meaning of the imported terms often differs significantly from the original in that the transition involves different spiritual and cultural contexts.

influence, but also different logical orientations, or “ways of thinking.” From the viewpoint of the West, oriental peoples are typically said to be “inscrutable,” because they think differently and subscribe to worldviews that make them opaque to Western mindset. For example, when a Westerner first sees an Islamic woman in a *burqa*, clad head to toe in a black robe with only a slit for the eyes, it is somewhat startling. The thought spontaneously arises, “What are they thinking of?” But where the Westerner sees gender-based oppression and sexual repression, the Easterner sees protection and modesty.

Moreover, on seeing someone in a *burqa*, one is struck by how much this contrasts with the semi-nude and sexually provocative appearance of men and women in public that is common in the West. Clearly, there are very different logics at work to produce such extremes, and it is obvious that this difference in logic extends far beyond clothing or the lack of it. It is evident that combination and compromise are going to have to take place as the world shrinks more and more, and that this process is going to stretch many people’s boundaries, not only regarding cultural customs and social conventions, but also fundamental ways of thinking and even deeply rooted conceptions of being human.

THE LOGIC OF UNIFICATION

How does all this relate to reframing the Jesus tradition in relation to perennial wisdom, the Way of Jesus and *The Gospel of Thomas*? My answer will be speculative and even a bit predictive. It seems evident to me that the trend of time is inexorably in the direction of greater unification. Globalization is the social, political and economy meme of this century. Science is pursuing the unified field theory. Awareness of mysticism and nonduality are spreading widely. As we will see, perennial wisdom, the Way of Jesus, and *The Gospel of Thomas* share a teaching related to this, which is also grounded in unification.

I see this working itself out both logically and historically because of the logic of unification that is resulting in the historical process of globalization. Underlying this is the spiritual impetus in the direction of union and realization of identity. If this sounds Hegelian or Jungian to anyone, I accept the compliment, since in my view Hegel had deep insight into the connection of logic and history, and Jung into the subliminal forces motivating the transformation of the unconscious into the conscious through the process of “individuation.” From this viewpoint history is an intelligible unfolding of the potential of consciousness for self-knowledge. Because history is based on the unfolding of the potential of intelligence, the historical process is guided from within by purpose and intelligible on the basis of trends. This purpose is realization of broader and deeper levels of unification, and the trend of time — the Hegelian *Zeitgeist* — is cycling in this direction.

Globalization is a dialectical process involving different cultures, traditions, worldviews and ways of thinking. This makes the process messy as different forces interact and sometimes resolve their differences violently. On the other hand, globalization is being driven by science and technology, which are universal in application. Therefore, the thrust is toward the adoption of a scientific worldview. Normative religions will resist this, of course, because it threatens their underpinnings, weakens their power and influence, and in the end replaces a great deal of religious doctrine with a better explanation.

Scientific humanists look forward to the day when religious views of the world will be looked back on as primitive superstitions. However, their cry that religion is dead is not only premature, it is incorrect because it is partial. It can be compared to Nietzsche's Zarathustra declaring that God is dead. Like the concept of God in the nineteenth century, the concept of normative religion is dying in the twenty-first, because it is becoming increasingly vacuous, its norms are recognized as arbitrary and artificial, and contemporary knowledge is providing better explanations.

The Western normative religions in particular are dualistic, and dualism is a normative article of faith. This dualism is both epistemological and metaphysical: God is separate from the world, the subject is separate from the object, and the objects that make up the world are separate from each other. It is written in scripture that God created everything this way.

UNIFICATION IN SCIENCE

On the other hand, as we saw in the previous chapter, science calls into question the presumption of dualism on which the normative version of creation is based. Quantum mechanics, especially, encourages a monistic view of the world, where the basic "stuff" is energy and mass is congealed energy. Consciousness is thought to be another manifestation of energy, not yet understood but apparently associated with brain activity. This scientific worldview is metaphysically monistic rather than dualistic. However, it is materialistic in the sense that in the materialistic view consciousness emerges quite late in the evolutionary process instead of being primary and fundamental, as idealism holds.

So far, however, science has not seriously affected the dualistic view of the world in the popular mindset. Most people still think largely in terms of classical physics rather than quantum mechanics. While some might hold that this is the result of the power of commonsense as an intuition into the way things really are, it is more likely that what we are seeing is a familiar pattern. Transformations of knowledge permeate a society gradually, from the top down. It typically takes decades for a new view to propagate among the intelligentsia, and it can take a century or more for it to extend into the popular mindset.

The view that “energy” is the single “stuff” is a significant step forward in the search for a theoretical structure that provides a unified explanation of “everything.” Einstein had coined the term “unified field,” but he did not live to see a unified field theory come to fruition through testing. Interestingly, Einstein rejected some aspects of quantum mechanics, which he thought made too much of indeterminacy, famously observing that God does not play dice with the universe. There are several competing approaches to unified field theory but none has carried the day as yet. But this remains “the holy grail” in physics as the focus of the scientific quest.

SPIRITUAL UNIFICATION AND INDETERMINACY

Of course, no one expects science to either account for “God” or explain “God” away. That is not the business of science, as some materialists and reductionists seem to think. They dismiss the concept of God as “unscientific,” as if that were a valid argument against the existence of a dimension that is transcendental to science; for science is limited to hypotheses that are susceptible to empirical testing.¹

The spiritual dimension lies beyond the boundary of rational knowledge and sense experience. In this sense, the spiritual in contrast to the material indicates the horizon at which knowledge meets the unknown. Some would claim that while this horizon can be pushed back through increasing knowledge, it is not possible to erase it. Mystics report otherwise.

However, mystics would agree that it is not possible to erase this boundary through ordinary means of human knowing. Those in gross consciousness are confined to the gross sphere on account of their limited mode of knowing, while mystical experience transcends this limitation because its modes of knowing are not so limited. Mystics assert that the horizon where the known and unknown meet can be pushed back and finally even be erased at more expanded levels of awareness made possible by higher types of knowledge.²

¹ To be fair, many who argue against religion from the scientific perspective are often attacking specious assumptions of normative religion, such as an anthropomorphic conception of God. But this has little bearing on a concept of spirituality based on experience of nonduality.

² Some mystics claim that higher types of knowledge are not merely mental but that they have physiological correlates. These correlates can be measured scientifically by observing changes in the nervous system that take place through refinement. Refinement is the result of purification that removes obstacles to normal and natural functioning, and attunement that produces supernormal functioning. For example, love is cited by virtually all spiritual literature as producing such attunement, whereas lust is claimed to inhibit it. Some spiritual traditions call this dual process of purification and refinement “spiritual alchemy.”

Matter designates that which makes the objects of knowledge “real.” However, the mind does not know matter. Mind knows the intelligible forms of things. That is to say, the “thing” itself does not enter the mind nor does the mind really become the “thing.” The mind grasps the intelligibility of things by means of form alone. Matter remains indeterminate, and as such belongs to the unknown.

“Spirit,” or “soul,” designates the unknown from the side of the subject. Spirit or soul can be thought of as the indeterminate aspect of consciousness. All human beings know that they exist, but few know their nature completely. For example, Jung distinguished between the conscious and the unconscious. Human consciousness embraces both, and the process of individuation for Jung integrates the two by bringing more and more of the unconscious to conscious awareness.

Scientific materialism holds that matter is primary, and that energy is the one “stuff.” But matter is indeterminate. Energy may be the one “stuff,” but what energy is other than as it manifests through experimental observation is not known. For science, energy reveals itself solely through the measurements made of it. For example, fields of energy are known on the basis of their effects in terms of wave propagation. Subatomic particles are never observed themselves, but only their effects on instruments. Mental activity can be measured in terms of brain waves and brain chemistry but not observed or measured directly. Like mind, energy is an evanescent concept when examined for content.

According to quantum mechanics the state of least excitation of energy is the vacuum state from which all more excited states arise and to which they return. In the vacuum, there is by definition “nothing” in the sense that no measurement is possible. Mystics and scientists alike point out that the logic of this model is almost identical with the conceptual model that mystics have used to report the state of nonduality and how the manifest emanates from it.

The nondual state is also reported as an absolute vacuum, a void, where mental activity is extinguished.¹ Yet, like the vacuum state of quantum mechanics, everything arises from this nondual state. There is no way to show that quantum mechanics and perennial wisdom are picturing precisely the same thing, but one wonders whether the logical correspondence between the concepts may not be completely coincidental. Are science and spirituality converging in monism, with the major issue to be resolved being the relationship of energy and consciousness that differentiates materialism and idealism?

The issue of whether energy or consciousness is primary seems difficult to resolve since both are indeterminate, being the source of form and change, hence,

¹ Patanjali. *Yoga Sutras*, 1.2-1.3. “Yoga is the extinction of mental activity. Then the seer [consciousness] is established in [its] own nature [as pure consciousness].” Rendered by the author.

formless and unchanging themselves. While it might be tempting to conflate them, that would be taking “energy” in a sense quite different for the way the term is used in science. For example, energy is measurable, whereas consciousness is not.

On one hand, many would point out that the primary difference seems to be temporal sequence. Energy accounts for the Big Bang that launched the universe, while what we call “consciousness” only emerges later. Therefore, consciousness seems to be causally dependent on energy in the sequence of the universe’s unfolding. Compared to energy, consciousness is a latecomer.

On the other hand, by leaving the nature of the first principle indeterminate, therefore open, then this principle can be seen as a unity underlying the indeterminacy of subject and object, of consciousness as reflexivity, of energy as the basic “stuff,” i.e., of both spirit and matter. Spirit, soul and consciousness can designate as the indeterminacy of the subjective pole of reality, while energy and matter signify the indeterminacy of objective pole. From the vantage of monism these become two sides of the same coin. In this view monistic idealism and monistic materialism are saying substantially the same thing from different angles, whereas in dualistic realism subject and object oppose each other, standing forever separate and distinct, each taken to be determinate in its own way.

The advantages of indeterminacy as an explanation emerged early in the history of thought, although the early thinkers in the East were also mystics and masters who claimed to be teaching on the basis of mystical experience. In the 6th century B.C.E., Buddha made the indeterminate “void” or “emptiness” (*shunyata*) the first principle. This was chiefly from the side of the subject, although Buddha eschewed the use of the designation “consciousness” as too determinate. Similarly, in the view of commentators Lao Tzu makes the empty state (Chinese: *wu ji*) primary, although those words do not appear specifically in the *Tao Te Ching*. Zoroaster is dated at the latest in this period and probably much earlier. Commentators interpret his “good mind” (Avestan: *vohu manu*) as signifying pure consciousness also, of which fire is the symbol, as it is in the *Rig Veda*. The Yoga and Vedanta teachings take pure consciousness to be primary, and they trace the origin of this teaching to the *Rig Veda*. Mahavira (c. 6th century B.C.E.) was the 24th and last Jain Tirthankara or founding master. Jainism also teaches that absolute knowledge (Sanskrit: *kevala jnana*) is primary.¹ Thus, we find the concept of pure subjectivity being asserted as primary at the beginning of recorded history, and it seems to have been around well before that since the teaching is already well developed by historical times.

In Greece, Anaximander (6th century B.C.E.) was roughly contemporaneous with Buddha and perhaps Lao Tzu. He put forward the indeterminate (Greek: *apeiron*) as

¹ The Sanskrit term *kevala* signifies alone, simple, indeterminate, formless, or absolute.

the first principle (*arche*) from which all else is derived. However, his work did not survive and he is only known on the basis of what others report. The *apeiron* is itself unchanging and imperishable, is that from which all things originate and to which they return, and it “encompasses all and steers all.”¹ According to Aristotle, Anaximander identified the indeterminate with God. However, he apparently did not connect it with subjectivity directly. Anaxagoras posited intelligence (*nous*) as a first principle, and he characterized it as unbounded (*apeiron*) and self-directed (*autokrates*). Mind organizes the seeds of things, which are also indeterminate in that they contain a portion of everything. Although the indeterminate seemed to be destined for a prominent role in Greek thought, this was not to be.

Anaximander never made an impression on later thinkers, who connected indeterminacy with a primeval chaos that lacked intelligence or intelligibility. The Greeks did not like the notion of indeterminacy and preferred that everything be rational. It was somewhat of a crisis when a student of Pythagoras, Hippasus (5th century B.C.E.), discovered that the square root of two is an irrational number.² Legend has it that Pythagoras was beside himself over this discovery that mathematic is irrational. Subsequently, the ratio of the diameter of a circle to the circumference (*pi*) and the Golden Ratio (*phi*) were also found to be irrationals.

Aristotle and Augustine both objected to the indeterminate as irrational. As a result the indeterminate *apeiron* never had a future in Greek thought, other than as applied to matter in relation to form and chaos in relation to cosmos, as indeterminate to determinate. This view carried over into Western thought. Western thinkers rejected indeterminacy virtually from the outset as an explanatory principle.

However, there is a difference between the irrational and the extra-rational. Indeterminacy can be considered as being extra-rational as well as irrational. “Irrational” implies being illogical. The extra-rational is not illogical. It transcends ordinary logic. God says through the prophet Isaiah, “My thoughts are not your thoughts.”³

As a philosophical concept, the Absolute is infinite and unbounded, eternal and non-temporal, formless and without attributes, motionless and unchanging. This litany of the Absolute is about as indeterminate as one can get in thought; however, it is not illogical. Indeterminacy in this sense plays an important logical role, marking the boundary between the known and the unknown. The unknown

¹ Aristotle. *Physics*, 203b; Hippolytus. *Refutations*, 1.5; Aetius. *Aetius*, 1.3.

² The Babylonian clay tablet YBC 7289 (c. 2000–1650 BC) and the Indian *Sulbasutras* (c. 800–200 BC) show that the value of the square root of two had been approximated elsewhere.

³ Isaiah 55:8.

“transcends” ordinary knowledge. In this sense the indeterminate is the Transcendent.

Mystics report the nondual state as having the same attributes on the basis of the same logic, which they report has these indeterminate attributes, which are defined negatively, by denying form and limitation of any sort. The state of least excitation in quantum mechanics is also called “the vacuum state,” and most scientists do not consider it as being irrational. It is true that Einstein did not like the inclusion of indeterminacy in science. But neither did Pythagoras like it in mathematics. Nevertheless, indeterminacy became pillars in both physics and mathematics regardless of these objections. The “God” of theology, “the Absolute” of philosophy, the “nonduality” of the mystics, and the “vacuum state” of quantum mechanics all refer to the “ground state” in their respective universes of discourse. In each case it marks the horizon of knowledge.

“God” is also indeterminate. We cannot know that to which “God” refers, not because God is illogical, but because that to which “God” refers exceeds our mode of knowing. Thus, theology says that “God” is not an irrational or illogical concept but rather a place marker for something that transcends ordinary human knowing because it is supramental and extra-rational. The term “God” signifies that which lacks nothing, and so is perfect in the sense of complete. Lacking boundaries, the concept of God is extra-rational. Its content cannot be conceived in terms of form or imagined other than as indeterminate.

From the logical vantage the *indeterminate* can be thought of as that in which all opposites are resolved and from which they arise — timeless and the source of time, infinite and the source of boundaries, formless and the source of form, unchanging and the source of change, absolute and the source of relative. Nicholas of Cusa advanced the view of God as the coincidence of opposites (Latin: *coincidentia oppositorum*), which is logically similar. These opposites can be conceived as the poles of dualism — subject and object, spirit and matter, intelligence (Greek: *nous*) and intelligibility (*logos*), and so forth. They can also be conceived as the opposite qualities of objects —hard and soft, hot and cold, and so forth — which are designated in terms of the logical operators, *yin* and *yang*, in Chinese thought.

The indeterminacy of both the absolute vacuum of quantum mechanics, whence the more excited states arise, and also the nondual state that mystics report, whence the dualism of subject and object arises, as well as the diversity of objects, are non-rational in that they have no boundaries or distinctions, but they are not irrational, because everything that is emerges from them and is grounded in them. Hence, they are the source of intelligibility.

Theoretical physicist David Bohm put forward a promising new paradigm that models the universe on the analogy of a hologram, whose internal structure and

dynamics is based on what he calls “the implicate order” within wholeness.¹ Neurophysiologist Karl Pribram developed a similar point of view almost simultaneously, but independently of Bohm. Michael Talbot brings these views together to set forth the outlines of this new paradigm of a “holographic universe” that promises to unite the subjective and objective in terms of the intrinsic intelligence and intelligibility of wholeness.²

The basis of this paradigm is that reality is a continuum with two aspects, external and internal. Bohm terms this dichotomy “explicate and implicate.” The external manifests as the apparent dualism of subjective and objective externalized as mind and world. Mediating between them is the brain. The internal is the continuum of order, with a subjective and objective pole that expresses itself as intelligence (subjective) and the intelligible (objective). The intelligibility of that which is intelligible permits intelligence to grasp this intelligibility.

Intelligibility is the basis of knowing universal concepts. Intelligence and the intelligible are united, as it were, through the ability of intelligence to reflect intelligibility to itself in the knowing process. If it were not for intelligibility, the objective world would be a chaos instead of appearing as an ordered whole or cosmos. Without intelligibility, thought and language would not be possible, for understanding and reasoning are dependent on universal concepts. The English word “logic” derives from the Greek term *logos*, meaning intelligibility. English “reason” and “rational” come from Latin *ratio*, also meaning intelligibility and order. Intelligibility is fundamental to order as opposed to chaos.

Underlying mind is consciousness and underlying the world is energy. Both are indeterminate and indistinguishable at this level. Mediating between them is orderliness. According to David Bohm, science expresses the implicate order underlying the explicate order.

The Vedic tradition calls the implicate order of the continuum *rta* in Sanskrit. The Sanskrit term *rta* (also transliterated *rita*) means truth, not in the sense of propositional truth but of truth as the cosmic ordering principle as the basis of natural law.³ It is similar to *asha*, meaning order in Avestan; *tao*, meaning the

¹ David Bohm. *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980).

² Michael Talbot. *The Holographic Universe*. (New York: HarperCollins, 1991). See also John Briggs and F. David Peat. *Looking Glass Universe: The Emerging Science of Wholeness*. (New York: Cornerstone Library, 1984).

³ The Sanskrit term *rita* is the root of English “rite” and “ritual,” and it may also be the root of English “right” and righteous.

universal way in Chinese, and Ma'at, the Egyptian goddess of truth and order.¹ The Stoic notion of “word” (Greek: *logos*) as the ordering principle of the universe (*cosmos*) is also similar.² *Logos* implies order in Greek in addition to intelligibility, and it was used to signify the order underlying the *cosmos*, meaning the universe as an ordered whole.

Thus, we see that ancient cultures shared a common theme in taking the ordering principle of the universe to be fundamental in cosmology. Aristotle observed that a similar ordering principle is fundamental to organisms. Although the concepts of ordering principle and natural law have fallen out of favor in scientific discourse because they are virtually impossible to define operationally, David Bohm, Karl Pribram and Ilya Prigogine made contributions along these lines in terms of contemporary science, somewhat reviving these early ideas in a different way.

According to the Vedic tradition, the basis of truth as cosmic order or law (Sanskrit: *rta*) is knowledge (*veda*). Maharishi Mahesh Yogi explains that *veda* is “the structure of pure knowledge and its infinite organizing power” residing in pure consciousness as a field of all possibilities.³ In the Vedic tradition, the identity of awareness and reality is the ultimate continuum, existing as the holon of being and consciousness, which is said in Vedanta to be “auspicious, silent, and nondual” (*shivam, shantam, advaitam*). *Veda* is the unmanifest “blueprint of creation” that “resides” in the ultimate continuum as absolute knowledge, which is established through the reflexive “self-knowingness” of “pure consciousness.”⁴

In the state of infinite consciousness, consciousness knows itself fully. In knowing itself fully, it knows its full range, from finite to infinite. Knowing itself as

¹ Hannah M. G. Shapero. “Asha Vahishta: Truth, Righteousness, Cosmic Order.” 1996. URL=<<http://accessnewage.com/articles/mystic/ash.htm>>.

Richard Hooker. “Ma’at: Goddess of Truth and Order.” World Civilizations: An Internet Classroom and Anthology. Washington State University. 1996. URL=<<http://www.wsu.edu/~dee/EGYPT/MAAT.HTM>>.

² Heraclitus seems to have expressed a similar view much earlier in Greece, although he did not have very much to say about it, at least that is extant, so it is difficult to determine what he may have had in mind. Heraclitus. *The Complete Philosophical Fragments*, 1, 2, 118. Translated by William Harris.

URL=<<http://community.middlebury.edu/~harris/Philosophy/Heraclitus.html>>.

³ Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. *Maharishi Vedic University Introduction: Vedic Knowledge for Everyone*. (Fairfield, IA: Maharishi Intl. Univ. Press, 1995), “Introduction.”

URL=<http://www.vedicknowledge.com/books_maharishi/vedic_know_everyone.html>.

⁴ The quoted terms are used by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi to label aspects of a transcendental experience of undivided unity, the nondual (*advaita*) state of Vedanta. Difficult to grasp intellectually, this is meant rather as a report of a most exalted and comprehensive mystical state.

finite, infinite consciousness apparently bifurcates and the unitary order manifests as the duality of subject and object, intelligence and intelligibility, name and form, limited mind and world. Then, limited minds take the phenomenal world that appears to them as constituting “reality,” while the ordering principle inherent to consciousness is lost sight of, for the most part. Only a tiny portion is recoverable in gross consciousness through such methodologies as science and mathematics, which discover something of the intelligibility of nature, and logic, which discovers something of the underlying intelligibility of conscious mind.

Theoretical physicist John Hagelin, a contributor to superstring theory as a theory of everything, received the Kirby Award in 1992, which mentioned his contributions to supersymmetric grand unified field theory. He also reflected on reframing physics in the light of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi’s elaboration of Vedic Science, bringing together ancient knowledge about consciousness and the contemporary unified field of physics on the basis of new scientific discoveries about the ancient knowledge. Hagelin suggests that acknowledging the identity of consciousness and the unified field accords with the law of parsimony, which states that the simplest adequate explanation is to be preferred over others. He argues that this is corroborated by the testimony of meditators correlated with abundant scientific research on the effects of meditation, suggesting non-ordinary experience and alternate states of consciousness.¹

Also interested in pursuing his scientific insights in relation to Eastern mysticism, Professor Bohm visited the Indian sage Jiddu Krishnamurti. The outcome was a series of conversations that were later published. Since Bohm’s reputation was well established as not only an accomplished theoretical physicist but also a significant contributor to quantum physics, he could not easily be attacked for this association. However, his “Orientalism” was disparaged in spite of this.²

THE QUESTION OF CONSCIOUSNESS

The question in dispute as far as materialists are concerned is whether consciousness exists for individuals apart from the existence of a functioning brain. For example, according to materialists consciousness is an emergent property, which exists as an “epiphenomenon.” This can be explained through an analogy with electromagnetism. When an electrical current flows through a wire a magnetic

¹ John S. Hagelin. “Is consciousness the unified field? A field theorist’s perspective.” *Modern Science and Vedic Science* 1, 1987, pp 29-87; “Restructuring physics from its foundation in light of Maharishi’s Vedic Science.” *Modern Science and Vedic Science* 3, 1989, pp 3-72.

² Martin Gardner. “David Bohm and Jiddu Krishnamurti.” *Skeptical Inquirer*, July, 2000. URL=<http://thinkg.net/david_bohm/martin_gardner_on_david_bohm_and_krishnamurti.html>.

field is generated around the wire as a sort of epiphenomenon. When the current ceases to flow, the magnetic field ceases also. Materialists hold that consciousness is like the magnetic field. When life ceases to flow in the body and the brain cells die, then consciousness ceases to exist in the same way that a magnetic field ceases to exist when current stops flowing through a wire.

Those who hold the opposing viewpoint would argue that this is true only at the level of the gross. Gross explanations are true as far as they go, but that is not very far, for they fail to take into account the subtle, causal and holistic. Those who are subtly conscious, causally conscious, and perfected testify that consciousness does not cease with the death of the body. There are many explicit teachings about such matters as life after death and the soul's reincarnation in another body to continue the journey toward realization of one's true nature, an ongoing process that takes many lifetimes to complete.¹

However, to convince those in gross consciousness about the veracity of life after death, evidence would have to be produced that is strongly suggestive that such subjective reports are not only plausible on objective grounds, but also probable. Reports of circumstances and events of past lives verified by evidence would provide a strong warrant in facts, if such correspondences were not otherwise accountable. Serious research has been done on this, and the results are promising.² This research is much more convincing than research into the near-death experience (NDE) since different lifetimes are involved, so that there is no possibility of death not actually having occurred.

SCIENCE AND SPIRITUALITY

Scientific explanation and spiritual symbolism use different signs to point in the same direction. Difficulties only arise when science and spirituality are mistaken for saying something that they are not, namely, that consciousness and first person experience are entirely reducible to observable effects, or that religious symbolism is to be understood literally on the basis of gross consciousness.

These are normative views of science and religion, and they do not exclude the possibility of competing views. In fact, the scientific materialism, on which reduction to physical explanation alone is based, is philosophical rather than scientific, in that its assumptions are not testable. Similarly, normative religions do

¹ Meher Baba. *Discourses*. p. 301-338. Meher Baba goes into detail on reincarnation and its purpose in the ongoing process of self-discovery that culminates in Self-realization.

² Dr. Ian Stevenson, who served for a time as the chairman of the department of psychiatry at the University of Virginia, wrote a number of books and articles investigating verifiable cases of reincarnation. Ian Stevenson. *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*. (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2nd revised and enlarged edition, 1974).

not disprove spirituality *per se*, but rather they simply rule out aspects that challenge their norms.

There is ample room for science and spirituality to be combined on the basis of indeterminacy without compromising either of them when scientists are willing to lay aside unscientific assumptions about empirical data being foundational and normative religions are able to go beyond their arbitrary norms.

Scientific knowledge is a rational account based on the application of scientific methodology, testable on the basis of experiment; hence, it is limited to the mode of knowing of ordinary awareness. It points in the direction of the indeterminate as a horizon of knowledge from the vantage of the objective. There is no contradiction in admitting that from the point of view of gross consciousness empirical and behavioral explanations can adequately model the observable data. However, this does not prove that other types of knowledge are not possible, with their own levels of explanation and methods based on that mode of knowing.

Spirituality is a symbolic account based on spiritual knowledge based on spiritual methodology, testable on the basis of mystical experience; hence, it is able to draw upon more expanded modes of knowing than are available ordinarily. It points in the direction of the indeterminate as a horizon of knowledge from the subjective vantage. Science and spirituality therefore complement each other by integrating the subjective and objective means of gaining knowledge in terms of both theory and practice.¹

Just as lay people who do not have a grasp of higher mathematics must take most of science on the basis of expert testimony; so too, those who have not yet developed the ability to use more expanded modes of knowing must rely on the testimony of mystics. The logic here is quite similar.

I would submit that this is the direction that knowledge is taking on the basis of the globalization of logic. The scientific genius of the West is meeting the spiritual genius of the East. They are coming together to fashion a new paradigm that reconciles the opposite poles of dualism in a grand unification.

Humanity is potentially entering a bright new age of knowledge, which some call “The Age of Enlightenment.”² In the Vedic tradition, this is called *Sat Yuga*, which recurs cyclically. Meher Baba predicted the imminent dawning of “the New

¹ This is the basis of the Science of Creative Intelligence® as set forth in 1970 by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in series of lectures that were videotaped at the time and later used for teaching purposes. Unpublished.

² *The Dawn of the Age of Enlightenment*. (Fairfield, IA: Maharishi International University Press, 1975).

Humanity.”¹ In ancient Greece this was called “The Golden Age,” but it supposedly occurred ages previously in the mythic past. Judaism calls it “the world to come,” *olam ha ba* in Hebrew, when King Messiah will reign.² The logic is already in place, and the tracks are being laid down.

This will involve the reframing of normative religions in terms of their mystical roots. The Judaism, Christianity and Islam are particularly normative, so one can look for a resurgence of Qabalah in Judaism, Sufism in Islam and the Way of Jesus in the Jesus tradition.

This undertaking attempts to suggest lines along which the Jesus tradition can be framed in terms of nonduality. Not only is nonduality reported in the Jesus tradition, but also it can be seen as being central to *The Gospel of Thomas*. Far from being peripheral in the early days of the development of the Jesus tradition, *Thomas* can be viewed as a principal work of one of the major factions, one that was later eclipsed politically and forced underground. *The Gospel of Thomas* was literally buried, only to emerge into the light of day recently, waiting to be received widely owing to the changing trend of time. What had formerly been underground is not only rising to the surface, but now is going mainstream.

There were two principal factions that interacted in the development of the Jesus tradition into normative Christianity. One was faith-based and the other, knowledge-based. The faith-based faction overcame the rest and became dominant, imposing its norms exclusively. Now it is time to revisit the scene of the “crime,” not so much to reconstruct it — that is the business of historians — but to set the record straight and to investigate the promise of the future.

What happened was that faith-based came to be understood in terms of accepting the established norms instead of understanding faith to be a special type of knowledge. When one understands this distinction one can then understand how the ways of faith and knowledge are not opposed to each other but two sides of the same coin. Faith grows into illumination by “sight” when the eye of the heart is opened, and then into realization of identity when nonduality is established.³ As one mounts the ladder of spiritual ascent, received belief turns into intellectual conviction, then into intuitive certainty, then the certainty of seeing and finally the certainty of being. According to those who have realized Truth, they are as certain that they are the one, indivisible reality as are humans that they are human beings.

¹ Meher Baba. *Discourses*. *Op cit.*, 7th ed., p. 3-9.

² Susan Roth. *Moses in the Twentieth Century: A Universal Primer*. Springfield, NJ: SJR Associates, 1994), p. 94.

³ Meher Baba. *God Speaks*. , p. 72-73

Part Two

THE JESUS TRADITION

A Christ not in us is the same as a Christ not ours.¹

THE JESUS TRADITION

About two millennia ago an event took place that would transform the world. This event was the birth of Jesus (*Yeshua*) of Nazareth, the son of a carpenter named Joseph (*Yosef*) and his wife Mary (*Miriam*). His life was obscure at the time, uneventful on the world stage. The only historical event involving him that was of any note at the time was his execution by the Romans, most probably for sedition.

However, this situation would begin to change almost immediately, as his followers refused to forget him and just go home. Even so, the movement stemming from Jesus would take decades to become noticeable, and centuries to begin exerting the profound historical impact on world civilization it came to have.

Almost nothing is known with any degree of certainty about Jesus, in that there is virtually no historical evidence from his day. The letters and narratives of his followers were written down decades afterward, although they were perhaps based on an oral tradition stemming from Jesus that preserved his words. Some scholars reject even this view, since there is no record of the existence of such a tradition. Therefore, they hold that none of the words attributed to Jesus can be established as his on the basis of rigorous historical methodology. Their conclusion is that we are now dealing with legend rather than history.

No independent reports survive of Jesus' life, which is hardly surprising since Jesus' story was uneventful at the time. Historians Josephus, Tacitus, Suetonius, and Pliny the Younger mention Jesus later in the first century, but their references are not only inconclusive but some, especially, Josephus, were redacted. Modern historians do not take them to contribute much, let alone to be primary sources, since they wrote well after the events and used questionable sources.

Complicating the matter, a mythos composed of teaching stories represented as historical narrative quickly grew up around Jesus, making it difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish fact from legend. Over time, this narrative acquired the power of tradition to the degree that normative beliefs were taken as historical facts.

Because historical evidence is so thin, arguments have been advanced that Jesus never existed, at least as represented, and that his story is largely mythical, or even

¹ William Law. *Selected Mystical Writings of William Law*. Edited by Stephen Hobhouse. (London: Barrie & Rockliff, 1938-1949), p. 285-286.

entirely so.¹ However, even though the evidence is bare, most historians think that because literature about Jesus appeared in coherent form quickly enough after the putative events, it is unlikely that the story is purely invention.

But apparently some invention did take place, because the different stories about the events of Jesus' life and reports of Jesus' words are not completely consistent. Moreover, the inconsistencies seem to reflect different viewpoints rather than simply mistaken memory, suggesting that the authors shaped their stories differently for a purpose.

Even the canonical gospels present different pictures of Jesus that reflect different interpretations. The picture becomes much more complex when other early literature is considered, as historians are required to do even if the views expressed run counter to traditional norms, causing the works to be excluded from the universe of discourse in normative Christianity.

What was invented cannot now be reliably distinguished from what actually happened, given the evidence presently available. Here it must also be emphasized that the New Testament is not the only literature of the Jesus tradition. There were many other "gospels," for example, and many of them include obviously fanciful material, such as Jesus' miraculous childhood. Moreover, intentionally constructed myths concealing an esoteric meaning are found, for example, in the Sethian schools. Between these extremes of sentimental piety and highly symbolic esotericism lies a range of other literature, much of which is now of interest only to scholars.

At the time of deciding what would be included in the normative canon, some rather arbitrary decisions were made that were apparently influenced more by political and theological issues than historical inquiry. As a result of the centuries-long dominance of normative Christianity, the rest of the literature that didn't make the cut has largely been overlooked and forgotten, if not lost inadvertently or destroyed intentionally.

Some doubt the historicity of Jesus on account of the mythic element in narratives of his life. The life of Jesus corresponds to myths that predate him, not only in the mythology of the Near East but also worldwide. Therefore, the argument goes, Jesus is more a mythical character than a historical one. However, another explanation is possible, namely, that Jesus is an archetype precisely because of the historical role he played by manifesting perennial wisdom in terms of his own culture. All heroes, including spiritual heroes like Rama and Jesus, become archetypes for the culture. In their respective cultures, both Rama and Jesus are held up as the archetype of the ideal man because they are God-Man.

¹ Robert M. Price, *Deconstructing Jesus*. (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2000).

Regardless of whether the historical Jesus existed as represented in the extant narratives, his story is archetypal of the spiritual teacher as an unwelcome prophet who is rejected and put to death by his own people. For example, Socrates was condemned to death for impiety and corrupting the Athenian youth, similar to the way Jewish Sanhedrin is reported to have condemned Jesus for blasphemy and then turned him over to the Romans for execution on charges of sedition. As a result, Jesus' story became an archetypal myth of Western civilization, and Jesus is recognized as one of the foremost teachers of spiritual wisdom as well.

Further complicating the story of Jesus is the dual role he plays as both divine redeemer bringing salvation and spiritual master granting liberation. As a result of these two roles, different pictures of Jesus emerged. Normative Christianity would picture Jesus principally as God-Man and redeemer, while Gnostic Christianity would picture Jesus chiefly as spiritual master and teacher of wisdom. The former would emphasize the way of faith, whereas the latter would emphasize the way of knowledge. Almost from the outset, the Jesus tradition was divided into opposing camps.

The fact that there were different pictures of Jesus reveals that there was a significant logical component in the Jesus tradition in addition to the historical component. These different pictures were the different *frames* through which Jesus' life and teaching were viewed.

These frames had their own logical underpinnings, which they imposed on the universe of discourse they framed, thereby establishing the foundational structure of the rationale and the basic rules governing it. On one hand, normative Christianity established a religious worldview in which Jesus stood at the center not only as exclusive but also supreme. On the other hand, Gnostic Christianity represented Jesus as the spiritual master par excellence. These were, however, not mutually exclusive but could be seen as complementary, differing more by way of emphasis than substance, at least in their less extreme versions.

Since the rise of science, most people distinguish religion from science and look to science to provide an explanation of the universe. Similarly, since the 18th century period called "The Enlightenment," in which hereditary aristocracy and institutional religion became targets, most people distinguish politics from religion, and they do not look to religion as the basis for law. However, in ancient times these distinctions had not yet been sharply drawn or were intentionally conflated.

A religious worldview included the explanatory and the normative in addition to the eschatological. In the Hellenistic environment in which the Jesus tradition appeared and developed, there were a variety of competing explanatory, normative and eschatological views. Manichaeism had been extremely influential between the 3rd and the 16th centuries, extending from the Roman Empire to China, but it died out completely as an organized religion. Normative Christianity turned out to be the

most successful in surviving and was the most significant in shaping subsequent events to the present day.

Most people are unaware or forget that religious worldviews played a comprehensive role in ancient times as explanatory and normative as well as what we consider properly religious today. We are only reminded of this when ultra-conservatives assert that God's Law, expressed in the Ten Commandments of the Old Testament, for example, supercedes the United States Constitution, or when they object on religious grounds to the teaching of scientific explanation of the origin of the universe and the evolution of species in public schools and demand including the biblical version in science classes. This viewpoint prevailed until modern times, however, and their complaints are vestigial reminders of this.

The context that provided the original meaning of the early writings of the Jesus tradition has been lost and their original comprehensive purpose has been lost sight of with it. Not only does this result in misunderstanding of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, it also obscures the meaning and intent of much of the noncanonical literature of the Jesus tradition. For example, many of the Gnostic myths were explanatory in ways that are no longer comprehensible, so that they seem far-fetched if not absurd.

Religions previously played many roles that are now played by modern disciplines such as science. In this sense, religions are becoming archaic. But to reject religion out of hand because it once overextended its reach in the light of contemporary knowledge would be to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Religion may no longer be the comprehensive teaching that it once was taken to be, encompassing all areas of life, from the spiritual to the cultural, from morality and ethics to rites of passage, from early education to explanation of natural forces. However, there may be a core teaching about spirituality that is still valid and has something vital to say about the human condition and human destiny.

Presently, there is a running dialectic between the vestigial religious view and the scientific humanism that developed in modern times. The religious view tends to be backward looking and rigid, emphasizing myth over fact. The scientific view often attempts to reduce explanation to material causes. The religious view often bases its norms on fixed injunctions received from the past, whose original intent is no longer known and its previous application is no longer appropriate to present circumstances. The scientific viewpoint tends to make norms relative to situations, where the criteria are humanistic in the sense that "man is the measure of all things."

The position advanced by perennial wisdom moderates between the extremes, belief and experiment. There is a comprehensive viewpoint that transcends the explanatory, the normative and the eschatological that is neither religious in the sectarian sense nor scientific in the materialistic sense. Rather, it is universal. For it

is structured in the identity of reality and consciousness, as realized in the nondual state, and also expresses its unlimited potential in less comprehensive states. Reality is one and indivisible; yet, reality can be known in a variety of ways, making it appear to be different.

When one realizes nonduality, one knows the reality and consciousness are identical and that all differences are differences with respect to different types of knowledge, whereas existence as it is in itself is absolute. That is to say, infinite consciousness of absolute existence encompasses all types of knowledge, just as our minds do not lose their unity and integrity by entertaining many thoughts, feelings and percepts. I will argue that the Jesus tradition includes this position expressed as “the Way of Jesus” in contrast to the views of both normative institutional Christianity and pseudo-scientific materialistic reductionism.

THE JESUS TRADITION AND THE WAY OF JESUS

Jesus’ life and teaching inspired a spiritual tradition that we are calling “the Jesus tradition.” It is different from the religion that grew out of it and eventually dominated it. Initially, there was no “Christian” church and the communities that gathered around Jesus’ mission and message were not only diverse but rather quickly became geographically dispersed.

Normative Christianity developed within the overarching Jesus tradition. This process was gradual, and it did not come to fruition until the Council of Nicea in 325 C.E., which was held under the auspices of Emperor Constantine, who had rescinded the ban on Christianity with the Edict of Milan in 31 C.E. Constantine’s patronage of the institutional Church ushered in the imposition of normative uniformity. Under Emperor Theodosius I, Christianity became the imperial state religion in 391 C.E., completing the process of putting the institutional hierarchy in normative control of “the Church” as the organized Christian community throughout the Roman Empire.

This hardly transformed the Jesus tradition into normative Christianity overnight, however. A lengthy process of controversy and sometimes even outright persecution was necessary for the normative authorities to establish hegemony. On the way to achieving dominance, normative Christianity had to overcome many dissenting groups, or “heretics,” as they were labeled. Subsequently, history was rewritten to suggest that there had been an original uniformity that had been occasionally disrupted by some pesky heretics, whose errors were beaten back. But this is historical fiction written after the fact by the victors.

Moreover, normative Christianity has been far from uniform throughout its history. There have been various communities with different views, different cultures and different languages. Even in the first century, there were three such centers — Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria. Rome was soon to be added. Armenia

was the first country to legalize the nascent Christianity (c. 300 C.E.), and the first to make it the official state religion. So-called heresies persisted for many years, and eventually the Egyptian Coptic speaking Church, the Eastern-Syriac speaking Church, the Roman Latin-speaking Church and the Byzantine Greek-speaking Church were only loosely confederated. The idea of an initial uniformity of teaching or an early “universal church,” is based more on later romanticizing than historical reality.

Nor is there any evidence that Jesus intended to form a religion based on his teaching. Unlike Muhammad who founded a religion as its prophet and giving it a political home as a warrior and statesman, Jesus appeared on the world stage only briefly and left unceremoniously. At the time, his mission — whatever it may have been — apparently ended in failure, and he accomplished nothing noteworthy by his death. Even most of his close followers fled to save their skins at the end rather than stand by him and risk the same fate. Given these unremarkable events, what happened subsequently must be attributed either to historical accident or the power of his persistent influence that has no rational explanation.

Like most spiritual luminaries of the past, Jesus wrote nothing, or at least there is no indication that he did. What he was and what he taught must therefore be gleaned from what others wrote about him. The problem here is that historical biography was not developed at the time, and even if it had been, Jesus was such a peripheral character in his own day, it is doubtful that any highly educated person would have bothered to record his story in a timely fashion. But the time the story began to be recorded it was already some time after the fact.

On one hand, it is evident that little is known about the historical Jesus in spite of great efforts on the part of many outstanding researchers. On the other hand, Jesus is reputed to be one of the foremost spiritual teachers of history, and a tradition grew up around him, his memory and his teaching that still persists strongly. This indicates that what he *was* and *is* transcends both the circumstances of his life, which do not seem in any way remarkable other than through narratives that are obviously embellished with miraculous events and doctrinal interpretations characteristic of the Hellenistic style.

Some would take this as evidence that Jesus was no ordinary historical person but indeed a “mythical” being in the sense of being larger than life, in that he was no less influential in shaping history than conquerors like Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Genghis Khan and Napoleon Bonaparte, scientists like Copernicus, Galileo, Newton and Einstein, and philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Kant and Hegel.

But the strange thing is that no great deeds account for either the subsequent rescue of Jesus’ teaching from oblivion or the personal triumph of Jesus himself in becoming widely recognized as an incarnation of God. By way of contrast,

Muhammad personally left the Holy Qur'an as the scripture of Islam, and he was also a military conqueror and an accomplished statesman who established Islam on a firm footing from the outset. Could Jesus' story alone account for the historical influence it exerted across the globe over two millennia? That seems hardly possible. Moreover, there are also many mystical reports involving Jesus that appear in the testimony of highly acclaimed saints, recognized for their holiness.

There are certain figures whose historical influence seems disproportional to the circumstances of their lives. Zoroaster, Abraham, Rama, Krishna, Mahavira, Lao Tzu, Confucius, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad and Guru Nanak, for example, are all associated with the great religions either as founders or exemplars. Yet, few of them did anything comparable to other legendary heroes or historical greats, other than Rama, Krishna and Muhammad.

What each of them did, however, was to establish a "way" through teaching and example. But much more important in establishing this way was who they *were* rather than what they may have *said* and *did*. All of them are considered exemplars of spirituality as the confluence of the human and the divine in the mystical.

All of the great spiritual luminaries at the foundation of the religions and wisdom traditions are considered by their followers to be spiritual masters who had actualized the fullness of human potential by realizing ultimate truth and value. It is further generally believed that they not only transmitted this to others in the past but also continue to do so in the present. This is not merely through books or stories associated with them. Their inward presence and inner teaching continues because what they *are* in their essence.

Some take the spiritual master to be God-realized. Some even take the spiritual master to be the manifestation of God or Totality in human form, as many see Rama, Krishna, Buddha, and Jesus. Even though their actual words and deeds may be lost to history in terms of evidence and have become the stuff of legend, who they *are* continue to inspire people and lead them inwardly on the spiritual quest.

In the Jesus tradition, both the way of faith and the way of knowledge depend more on Jesus being what he *is* than on what he *was*, *said* or *did* ages ago. If Jesus is truly a realized spiritual master or the God-Man that many take him to be, then the Way of Jesus rests on a solid foundation in being, truth and value. My premise is that he *is*, or I would not be writing this book. The proof of this premise lies in one's own heart. Moving this premise from the head, where it exists merely as a belief, to the heart, where it can become a realization, is the Way of Jesus.

The same can be said of the way associated with other spiritual luminaries. The underlying rationale of the teaching of the great spiritual masters is that life has a purpose: The purpose of life is to realize full human potential, which is infinite. Therefore, the way is transformational and it aims at transcending previous limitations in order to progress toward the infinite goal. The motivating force

driving this quest is within, residing in the heart. The deepest desire of all human beings is to achieve abiding fulfillment, which is not found in the changing conditions of the world or the fluctuating mind and emotions, which involve the constant alternation of happiness and suffering, joy and grief, satisfaction and frustration, and the other opposites in the ongoing cycling of life. In contrast to this turmoil, the Way leads to “the peace that the world cannot give.”

As different ways of traversing the spiritual path, all of the religions can be seen like beads on one string. While each of the religions is different culturally, they are all the same in intent to the degree that they are expressions of the quest for ultimate truth and value, as well as how to express this in daily life through spiritual living. While the means and expression may be different, the objective to transcend the human condition spiritually is the same.

Religions tend to have two interpretations. The first, which is the most common one in the normative religions, is that abiding fulfillment is only possible in the hereafter. The second is the universal teaching of perennial wisdom that it is possible to realize full potential in this life by not only seeing God but also realizing identity in the nondual state.

Both are found in the Jesus tradition. According to normative Christianity the goal is the beatific vision, which is only available in the afterlife through following the way of faith. More universally, the Way of Jesus teaches that it is possible to realize the goal in the here and now by pursuing the way of mystical knowledge.

CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM AND THE WAY OF JESUS

After normative Christianity emerged victorious over other forms of the Jesus tradition, which more or less died out or were extirpated, Christian mysticism developed largely within normative Christianity. Hence, Christian mysticism is largely bound up in normative Christianity.

Normative Christianity imposed a framework on the Jesus tradition and claimed that Jesus gave this frame to the apostles and they transmitted it to their successors, and so on, in an unbroken line of transmission. This frame includes a narrative of Jesus’ life but it is also shaped by doctrine. Historical research indicates that the claim that Jesus initiated this frame and the apostles perpetuated it faithfully through their successors not only cannot be substantiated by evidence but also is questionable.

In addition, historical research further indicates that there were competing frames of reference, with different doctrinal interpretations, virtually from the outset, as is apparent in the Acts of the Apostles, where Paul and key apostles are found disagreeing, and also from the gospels, which are composed from different points of view with different emphases. In addition, scholars observe that the letter attributed

to James not only runs counter to Paul's letters but also seems to oppose it specifically in emphasizing the necessity for works.

Contrastingly, the Way of Jesus is part and parcel of the Jesus tradition as a whole, which can be framed in terms of many different interpretations and doctrines. Hence, it is independent of the frame imposed by any denomination, sect or school, and it can be followed in a number of ways, depending on the framework. One can validly follow the Way of Jesus without even being "Christian" in the sense of accepting the foundations of normative Christianity. Indeed, some of the great Christian mystics were excluded from the normative institution as being beyond the pale of the norms and condemned for being heretical. Therefore, it would be a mistake to equate Christian mysticism and the Way of Jesus, for the latter is broader in scope since it extends beyond conventional frames and their norms, be they Catholic, Protestant or Orthodox. Great mystics who followed the Way of Jesus have been produced by each of these traditions, and also arose outside them.

The normative aspect of a religion is ordinarily quite different from its mystical core. Religions are normative to the degree that they are based on rules regulating doctrine, rubric and observance. Norms are rules. For example, norms can regulate interpretation of scripture. A norm might stipulate that if a text can be interpreted literally it should not be interpreted symbolically. The rule could, of course, also be stated conversely. Adherent to one or the other of these two norms would result in quite different interpretations of the same scriptural passage.

One norm that is especially foundational to normative Christianity, indeed, its cornerstone, is that the validity of its norms is guaranteed supernaturally as the revelation of the Holy Spirit. Later this would be extended to the hierarchical authority of the normative institution as well. As we have seen previously, the logical nature of these norms is determined by the privileged position they play in framing the universe of discourse. As such they are self-justifying.

For example, it is often claimed that religious norms are either absolute in themselves or have been established as such by those who were divinely inspired. But on logical inspection these claims turn out to either beg the question by justifying themselves or involve a vicious circle by appealing for justification to that which they themselves are used to justify. For example, it is sometimes claimed, albeit in a roundabout way that obscures the logic, that we know that the Bible is the word of God because it says so, and we know that this must be true because what the Bible says is the word of God. Not only is this logical gibberish but also it is untrue historically, since no originals of the Bible exist, and it is not possible to reconstruct them with precision from extant copies. It is not possible to establish which words are inspired where there are many options among the surviving copies.

NORMATIVE, ESOTERIC AND MYSTICAL

Virtually every great religion has a normative, conventional aspect that appeals to the masses and an inner or hidden teaching that attracts the few. The inner or hidden teaching itself has two aspects. One aspect is that which emphasizes understanding of or initiation into “mysteries,” occult practices, and the like, which are oriented toward developing psychic experiences and supernormal powers. The other emphasizes treading the path to the goal of realization of ultimate truth through effacement of the limited self.

One can speak of Christianity in normative, esoteric and mystical terms. Normative Christianity divides into various sects, each with its own approach to doctrine, ritual and observance. The esoteric has generally been an underground phenomenon, manifesting, for instance, in Western Hermeticism. Christian Cabala and Rosicrucianism are examples.

The term “esoteric” often implies secret in the sense of private, “closet,” or “closed door.” An esoteric teaching can often be communicated verbally through conceptual understanding. However, “mystical” implies an experience that is immediate, intuitive and experiential, transcending sense data, conceptual understanding and reasoning, as well as ordinary emotion. In this regard, it could be said esoteric knowledge can be communicated verbally, whereas mystical experience is ineffable and can only be discovered within oneself through an inner revelation.

Somewhat surprisingly to many, the mystical often cloaks itself in the normative and eschews the esoteric. Many great mystics have been pillars of the normative religion in which they appeared. In Christianity, Paul, Augustine, Francis of Assisi, John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, Catherine of Sienna, and Bernard of Clairvaux stand out as great saints, for example, some even acknowledged as Fathers and Doctors of the Church. However, considering the teaching that one must become as a little child to enter the kingdom, this should not be surprising. In the pursuit of spirituality, a certain degree of naïveté, or better, innocence, is not only helpful, but also necessary. The pursuit of experience or power, especially for its own sake, inflates the ego instead of effacing it. In contrast, the humility of many mystics in the face of unjust criticism and even condemnation by normative authorities recalls the steps of the Master, who was criticized and then condemned by the normative authorities of his day.

The mystical has generally entered Christianity through the front door of the normative Church rather than the back door of the esoteric. Christian mystics have usually either concealed themselves well enough to pass muster or else submitted to normative authority when confronted by it. Hence, there has never been a separate phenomenon called the Way of Jesus, comparable to Sufism in the Islamic tradition or Qabalah in the Jewish, both of which have produced lineages of teachers who

have left successors and spawned schools. Some great saints like Francis did found orders of monk and nuns to preserve the way of life they lived themselves, but these great ones were the exceptions.¹

THE WAY OF JESUS AS UNIVERSAL

It is time to consider the Way of Jesus as a universal tradition in its own right, which can be viewed independently of the normative Christianity.² What value would there be in this, it might be asked. In the first place, there is precedent. Other mystical traditions have been applied universally. Secondly, it would provide freedom from restrictive norms for those who wish to practice the essence of the wisdom tradition that Jesus inspired. Thirdly, the development of the Way of Jesus as a set of universal principles, precepts and practices would contribute to perennial wisdom.

This would allow this great tradition to assume its rightful place among the branches of the tree of knowledge. This tree is often pictured growing with its roots uppermost, symbolizing that the roots are in the higher realms, whereas the branches of knowledge are manifested in the lower realms. The trunk of this upside down tree constitutes the ancient religion of humankind as a universal spirituality manifesting in many leaves and branches, as it appears in individuals and cultures.

There is ample precedent for mystical traditions at the heart of normative religions being not only viewed independently of the religion but also taught and practiced as such. For some time now Eastern teachers have been traveling to the West to teach, and many of them have presented their teachings in universal terms. When Hazrat Inayat Khan of the Chishti Sufi Order brought Sufism to the West from India, he did so on the basis of universal principles rather than Islamic

¹ The closest thing to a lineage of masters in the Christian tradition is the apostolic succession of orders conferred by the laying on of hand. While this is a feature of normative Christianity and is not considered to be a mystical tradition, it is claimed that ordination and consecration transmit a charism. As one who has been ordained a priest and consecrated a bishop in apostolic succession in a non-normative independent rite, I can personally testify to the experiential effect of this transmission, which is both palpable and life transforming.

² I personally subscribe to perennial wisdom as the ancient religion of humankind, and I regard the Way of Jesus as a branch of that ancient religion. In my view, the Way of Jesus is a more faithful interpretation of the mission and message of Jesus than normative Christianity, which appears to me to be fanciful and erroneous in many respects. And I say this as a person who went to Roman Catholic schools from first grade through graduate school, with a few brief exceptions. Do I now feel that the Christian tradition was misrepresented to me? Yes, I do. See Rudolf Augstein. *Jesus, Son of Man*. (New York: Urizen Books, 1977).

teaching. Sheikh Muzaffer Ozak, who was the head of the Halveti-Jerrahi Sufi Order centered in Istanbul, did the same. Neither required their Western students to convert to Islam in order to practice Sufism.

Almost all teachers of Advaita Vedanta teach independently of Hinduism in the West. Similarly, Western Buddhism is developing along its own lines. Taoism is now also taught in the West primarily in terms of philosophical Taoism, and few Westerners are even familiar with religious Taoism. Qabalah long ago was influential in the development of Western esotericism. Its universal application has been set forth in Daniel Hale Feldman's *Qabalah: The Mystical Heritage of the Children of Abraham*, which is based on the mystical teachings of the mentor with whom he studied for many years.¹

In the course of this study of similarities of the Way of Jesus tradition to perennial wisdom, one also discovers that the Jesus tradition was influenced from the earliest times by other traditions, including mystical ones. Moreover, there is good reason to believe that the universal aspect of the teachings at the core of normative religions is the original teaching of Jesus.

On one hand, normative Christianity continues to promulgate as fact the myth that there was a uniform teaching from the outset that the Twelve received from Jesus and transmitted faithfully to their successors. However, once scholars became free to investigate Christian origins, they discovered that many key facts are otherwise than as represented or else indeterminate. What is emerging is a picture of conflicting views, with the winners of the conflict writing the history and suppressing dissent.

On the other hand, the study of perennial wisdom is revealing that there are shared principles, precepts and practices not only crossing the boundary lines of different religions and cultures but also blurring them. Perennial wisdom illumines the core spirituality lying at the heart of all religions, to which mystics worldwide testify across time and which masters, saints and sages have taught from time immemorial across the globe. These same principles, precepts and practices are to be found at the heart of the Jesus tradition also in the Way of Jesus.

As a result, it is possible to study and practice this wisdom as a follower of Jesus and the genuine tradition he inspired, independently of being a nominal Christian in terms of affiliation with a normative Christian denomination or sect. It is also possible to integrate the testimony and teachings of Jesus and Christian mystics into perennial wisdom as the ancient religion of humankind and thus to live the teaching of Jesus in conjunction with the teaching of other Masters. Jesus was a mystic and Master himself, if the saying, "I and the Father are one," is taken as authentically

¹ Daniel Hale Feldman. *Qabalah*.

his and was said truthfully on the basis of his experience. Many who are not nominally Christian accept this, some with a conviction deep enough to follow him.

Normative Christianity likes to distinguish itself from its Jewish roots. Indeed, it often pretends that Jesus' teaching was entirely original, expressed in a completely new terminology that became the exclusive heritage of normative Christianity, a kind of divine copyright, as it were. Scholars now know that this is not the case.

Many people think that Jesus was actually called "Jesus." However, "Jesus" is the Latinized form of Aramaic *Yeshua*. "Yeshua" is a name from the Hebrew tradition that is usually translated as "Joshua," as in the companion of Moses for whom Jesus was named. Jesus would have been familiar with the Jewish mystical tradition and would have spoken in terms of it when communicating to fellow Jews about spiritual matters. Teachers always speak in the idiom of the time, as they must if they are to be understood by the people of that time. Jesus was no exception in this regard. He spoke to common people in terms of their level of understanding and to the learned in terms of theirs, and apparently reserved his inner teachings for his close circle, as many other spiritual teachers have also done.

Many terms that most Christians think are original with Jesus come from the Hebrew tradition. For example, the term "holy spirit," formerly "holy ghost," translated *ruach ha qodesh*, which is a Hebrew mystical concept. Jesus does not seem to have used this term, however. "Holy Spirit" does not appear in the Gospels. The term that *John* attributes to Jesus appears in Greek as *paracletos*, signifying a comforter or an advocate. The Jesus tradition later equated the Hebrew conception of *ruach ha qodesh* with the "Comforter" or "Paraclete" that Jesus promised to send.¹ Since this seems to have taken place almost immediately after Jesus' crucifixion, the presumption is that the term is not invented. According to Acts, the risen Jesus used it, telling his close ones they would be baptized by the Holy Spirit.²

Moreover, Paul was another good Jew, originally named Saul. He was a mystic who claimed to have been swept up to "the third heaven."³ Paul was also learned. He claimed that he had studied with the premier rabbi of the time, Gamaliel.⁴ So Paul would have been familiar with Jewish mysticism, in terms of which he would have interpreted and reported his experience. Paul's testimony and teaching in his Letters is replete with Jewish mystical ideas and terminology.⁵ So it should be no

¹¹ John 14:26. Acts 1:5, 1:8, 2:4, 2:38. *Ruach ha qodesh* in Hebrew is *Agion Pneuma* or *Hagion Pneuma* in Greek, *Spiritus Sanctus* in Latin, and Holy Spirit in English.

² Acts 1:5.

³ 2 Corinthians 12:2-4.

⁴ Acts 22:3.

⁵ Hugh Schonfield. *Those Incredible Christians: A New Look at the Early Church*. (New York: Bernard Geiss, 1966), p. 227-241.

surprise to find Qabalistic notions and terms in the foundational scriptures of Christianity. Yet, most normative Christians would likely be quite surprised at this.

The Prologue of *The Gospel according to John* also bears marks of Gnostic (Near Eastern), Hermetic (Egyptian) and Platonic (Greek) influences, especially in the identification of the Word (Greek *logos*) with God (*theos*).¹ Therefore, the idea that Christianity was and remains an exclusive tradition independent of foreign and even Pagan influence is naïve. It is a matter of belief in a myth justified as revelation rather than the outcome of investigation of historical evidence, which often contradicts the myth.

In addition, as the teaching of Jesus grew in influence and began to spread, it began to adjust itself to the cultures with which it interacted, and also, them to it. In this way, the Jesus tradition influenced these cultures, and they also influenced it.

At the popular level, Christianity adapted itself to local customs, for example, Christmas as the Christian celebration of Jesus' was combined with the Pagan yule festival celebrating the winter solstice. At a more profound level, Christianity also began to adapt itself to different spiritual environments. Many of the people who became Christians were already well versed in other forms of philosophy and spirituality, and they brought these influences into Christianity as well. For instance, St. Augustine of Hippo, a great mystic and one of the most influential Christian theologians, incorporated Platonic and Neoplatonic ideas in Christian theology. So it is hardly accidental that the Way of Jesus bears close resemblance to other expressions of perennial wisdom.

MYSTICAL VS. NORMATIVE CHRISTIANITY

Normative Christianity has often been ambivalent about its mystics, venerating some as saints, like John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila, while excluding others, such as Meister Eckhart and Madame Guyon, and even condemning them as heretics. Indeed, institutional authorities usually find themselves uncomfortable when faced with the challenge of those whose privileged experience seemed to put them beyond the norms.

One of the purposes of institutional authority is to uphold the norms and enforce them if necessary. Mystics putatively have access to a higher authority within themselves. Hence, they pose a potential threat to institutional authority. So it is not surprising that institutional authorities have been at least suspicious of mysticism, if not opposed to it in principle.

Even in Protestant circles, where authority is less institutional than in Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, mysticism has also been suspect as non-

¹ Schonfield. p. 243-255.

biblical and contrary to the principle of *sola scriptura* or “scripture alone.” It has rarely been supported or encouraged in Protestantism, other than in charismatic sects. But many of these confuse emotional fervor with mysticism.

On the one hand, Christian mysticism and mystical theology can be identified as a specific category within the Christian tradition. It has seldom been thought of as separate, and it has for the most part not been organized, as wisdom tradition have often been in other religions. Others have mystical orders and lineages of teachers who are recognized as being spiritually advanced individuals, hence competent to guide others on the way that they themselves trod. Perhaps the closest approximation of this in Western Christianity is the monastic tradition, in which the abbot is the spiritual father. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, there is a recognized form of natural leadership based on evidence of spiritual advancement rather than office or title. In Russian Orthodoxy, for example, an elder who is recognized as illumined spiritually is called a *staretz*. Such a person, without formal title, draws students unbidden and functions as a spiritual teacher comparable to other wisdom traditions.

The Way of Jesus as a wisdom tradition, on the other hand, differs from normative Christianity as an institutional religion in marked ways. Normative Christianity is concerned with doctrine, ritual and observance, while the Way of Jesus aims at experiencing union with God, especially through unfolding God’s presence in a heart surrendered in love. Whereas normative Christianity sees the accepted Christian teaching as exclusively true, at least insofar as a particular sect interprets it, the Way of Jesus embraces wisdom wherever it is found. Normative Christianity presumes that the entire ocean of truth is contained in its bucket of doctrine, ritual and observance. The Way of Jesus views ultimate truth as synonymous with realization of God, hence, universal and inclusive, available to all sincere seekers.

The term “mystical” differentiates this wisdom from the chiefly normative teaching extracted by most sects selectively from the New Testament, the Hebrew Bible, venerable tradition, and the teaching of the sect’s favorite theologians and moralizers. While normative teaching emphasizes doctrine grounded in belief and observance based on scripture and tradition, mystical teaching emphasizes “knowledge of the heart,” or *gnosis cardias* in Greek. This knowledge realized by progressively uniting the soul with God through love and self-surrender.

KNOWLEDGE OF THE HEART

According to Christian mystical theology, especially Eastern Orthodox, there is a vast difference between knowledge of the mind and “knowledge of the heart.” Knowledge of the mind is based on sense data, concepts and logical reasoning, and it is colored by personal bias and ordinary emotions. Knowledge of the heart is

based on intuition, refined feeling and ultimately union; for love is the great unifier. Knowledge of the mind is linear, analytic, and discursive, as well as influenced by emotional coloring and subconscious bias. Knowledge of the heart is holistic, synthetic, and immediate, independent of other influences.

However, knowledge of the heart is far from being inert with respect to psychological affect. Rather, it is a blending of head and heart in which subjective and objective, cognition and affect, knowledge and refined feeling mutually support each other and indeed interpenetrate each other, instead of conflicting. In the end, knowledge of higher realms terminates in the realization that knowledge is love and love is knowledge in the soul's union with God as the union of love and Beloved. For "God is love."¹ The world's mystical literature and art is replete with poetic descriptions and artistic depiction of mystical union using even erotic terminology and graphic representation. In Christianity, the poetry of John of the Cross stands out, for example.²

Functioning at its highest level in ordinary cognition, the mind relies on intellect as the faculty of discrimination, judging between truth and falsity, as well as reasoning on the basis of logic.³ Intellect in this sense emphasizes differences and

¹ See the First Epistle of John.

² St. John of the Cross. *The Poems of St. John of the Cross*. Translated by John Frederick Nims. 3d edition. A Bilingual Edition. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press). The Nims translation reproduces the more erotic overtones of John's poetry, recalling imagery from Hebrew scripture such as *The Song of Songs*, which is often toned down by other translators.

³ The term "intellect" has come to mean the faculty of reason, and so we will use it in this way. However, the Greek term *nous* and the Latin *intellectus*, both often rendered in English as "intellect," had a different meaning earlier. In Orthodox spirituality, for example, *nous* or intellect is contrasted with *dianoia* or reasoning. Through *nous*, human beings experience what they experience directly. Through *dianoia* humans understand conceptually and reason logically. Thus *nous* as "intelligence" or "intellect" is in this sense more associated with what philosophers call "intuition" in the technical philosophical sense, which is used to signify knowledge by direct acquaintance rather than mediated. According to the ancients, human beings are capable of sense intuition through sense perception and intellectual intuition by directly experiencing the reality of being. Many modern philosophers deny intellectual intuition, notably Emmanuel Kant in *The Critique of Pure Reason*. On the one hand, mystics claim in effect that their mystical knowledge is grounded in intellectual intuition in this ancient sense of providing direct access to reality. On the other hand, many moderns reject the possibility of mystical knowledge as grounded in intellectual intuition. Philosophically, the question remains unresolved. However, those who lay claim to mastery of wisdom testify that genuine mystical knowledge is veridical, while admitting that not all mystical claims are genuine. See, for example, Meher Baba, *The Everything and the Nothing*, p. 35-40.

distinctions. Therefore, it cannot penetrate to the level of wholeness that mystics claim underlies distinction and diversity.

The heart, being grounded in love and longing for union, brings together and unites. Ordinary understanding is based on mental concepts, whereas spiritual understanding is grounded in intuition of true values. Spiritual understanding inspires one to right action based on “natural law,” or *dharma* in Sanskrit, *dhamma* in Pali, *tao* in Chinese. In the Arabic of Islam and Sufism, *haqq*, meaning “right,” has the same root as *haqiqah*, which means “truth.” In Hebrew, both “righteousness” and “a sage” share the Semitic root form, T-D-Q (*Tsade Dalet Qof*). These ancient traditions agree that true values are written in the heart of man and are intuited by those who have ears to hear the whisper of the heart within.

In order for spiritual understanding to dawn, the mind must be made to take its proper place as servant rather than master in establishing a proper balance of head and heart. This involves developing discipline and discernment on the basis of this balance. As long as the mind and senses continue to shout, the inner ear cannot hear the voice of intuition. In order to hear the whispers of the heart, it is necessary to quiet the din of the mind by turning the attention from the outer to the inner. This does not mean that reason is to be abandoned. Rather, the mind, including reason, needs to become the servant of the heart as the seat of intuition and spiritual insight, cooperating with the heart in directing activity in accordance with true values given by the heart.¹

Thus, it can be seen that the normative and mystical teachings are aimed at different stages of spiritual development, distinguished by different levels of spiritual maturity. For example, in the Christian tradition the sacraments are said to be the outward signs of an invisible grace. The normative is concerned chiefly with the outward signs in terms of ritual, simply believing in that grace, whereas the mystical is concerned with the experience of that invisible grace acting inwardly. Observation of its manifestation outwardly serves a confirmation of its inner presence and efficacy.

It may be objected that this critique of normative Christianity is actually more a criticism of Roman Catholic orthodoxy than normative Christianity as a whole. For Protestantism was a reaction to the excessively rational Catholic doctrine, in addition to other excesses. Moreover, Eastern Orthodoxy maintains its rich mystical heritage.

However, Eastern Orthodoxy has not made a significant imprint on the West, the home of most of those reading this. Moreover, the Eastern Orthodox congregations

¹ For elaboration on this point in terms of Meher Baba’s teaching on intuition, see Thomas James Hickey, “Making Intuition Practical,” in Don E. Stevens and Companions, *Meher Baba’s Gift of Intuition*. (London: Companion Books, 2006), p. 49-66.

in the West tend to be ethnic communities that often conduct their services and teaching in the native languages. As a result, little is known of them outside these communities.

While it is true that Protestantism did react away from Catholic rationalism, it overlooked the fact that religion tends to be primarily emotional for many people. Therefore, to the degree that role of reason is downplayed, instead of a balance of head and heart being achieved sentimentality takes over.

Moreover, Protestantism adopted its own rigidity regarding the Bible as the word of God following the *sola scriptura* or “scripture alone” movement of the 15th century. While all were left free to interpret scripture for themselves in principle, the situation was quite different in practice, since non-literal views were mostly unwelcome. This tendency resurged in the 20th century. While liberal theology was in the ascendant in the early part of the century, this sparked a Fundamentalist reaction. American Protestantism is still very much in the throes of this reaction, not only religiously but also politically.

NORMATIVE AND MYSTICAL AS COMPLEMENTARY

Mystical spirituality requires sailing successfully between the Scylla of excessive rationality and the Charybdis of excessive sentiment. It is the old story of the dialectic between reason and romanticism that continues to be played out in the world stage, with a balance seldom being achieved by many for very long. The reason for this can be seen in the stages of development through which people pass. The synthesis of the two antitheses, reason and romanticism in a mysticism in which head and heart are balanced requires an advanced state of development. One way or the other, one must first pass through this dialectic.

Normative teaching seen in this light is preparatory to the mystical, although normative Christianity has generally not recognized this historically. As a consequence normative Christianity has not only missed this key point but also has tended to marginalize the mystical teaching as suspicious, when it has not condemned it outright as heretical — or else held it up as an ideal reachable only by the greatest saints, hence, unavailable to ordinary people.

Therefore, an artificial division has arisen between the normative and mystical approaches to Christianity in the eyes of the self-proclaimed orthodox, whereas there is no such separation from the mystical vantage, which sees only different levels of understanding of the teaching of Jesus and approach to it. While the normative is characterized by ordinary understanding, in which mind and senses are dominant, with coloring from emotions and biases, the mystical is typified by spiritual understanding, in which the intuitive “heart” takes precedence, making not only higher cognition possible but also extraordinary feats of dedication and practice.

This is not to claim that the normative and the mystical are either mutually exclusive or even incompatible. Many of the Christian mystics were also normative in the sense that they respected the status quo and did not make waves. Many of the Fathers and Doctors were also mystics, and many were clergy, monks or nuns in good standing throughout their lives and some were later canonized. Francis of Assisi, whom Meher Baba indicated had reached spiritual perfection, played the role of obedient servant even though he had realized the God-Self. Teresa of Avila and Catherine of Sienna, both simple nuns, were awarded the title Doctor of the Church on the basis of their example and writings. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure, all renowned theologians who shaped Church doctrine, were also mystics. And Paul, who is honored with the title, the Apostle, even though he never encountered Jesus while he was in the body but rather in the spirit, was also a mystic.

Normative Christianity, like normative Judaism and Islam, has traditionally regarded claims of immediate knowledge of God as heretical. In normative Christianity only Jesus can say, "I and the Father are one," and in normative Judaism and Islam no one is permitted to say it.¹ Jesus was condemned by the Sanhedrin for blasphemy, and al Hallaj was likewise executed by the authorities of the day for crying out in mystical ecstasy, "I am the Truth," Truth being a name of God.

From the mystical vantage of Qabalah and Sufism, everyone is at least an aspiring mystic. For there are few of those who have realized their spiritual potential, and most are still in the process of unfolding it. Today's sinner is tomorrow's saint, and today's saint was yesterday's sinner. Here, a "saint" experiences union with God. A "sinner" is one who is separated from God.

Proponents of the mystical viewpoint would argue that according to the canonical scriptures, which Christians take as normative, Jesus himself summons his followers to "be perfect even as your heavenly Father is perfect."² Just as the child is not essentially different from the adult but rather is like a seed in the process of maturing, so too the seed of spirituality is within everyone and is at different stages of maturation in various individuals. In the words of Meister Eckhart: "The seed of God is in us. Now the seed of a pear tree grows into a pear tree, and a hazel seed grows into a hazel tree; a seed of God grows into God."³

What is the seed of God? In terms of biblical imagery it is the breath that God breathed into Adam's nostrils to give him life. The Latin word for breath is *spiritus*, the source of English "spirit." The word in *Genesis* is Hebrew *ruach*, which can be

¹ John 10:30.

² Matthew 5:48.

³ Matthew Fox. *Meditations of Meister Eckhart*. (Santa Fe: Bear & Co., 1983), 28.

translated as both “breath” and “spirit.” Thus, man’s life — Hebrew *adam* signifies man — is God’s breath itself or “holy spirit,” called in Hebrew *ruach ha qodesh*. This breath or spirit, being of God, leads back to God. Through man’s very life, God is immanent as the source and principle of life. Indeed, this is the ancient meaning of the word “living,” as in “the living God.”

In ancient thought, spirit was conceived as living and matter as dead. Spirit is called living because it is immutable and incorruptible, hence, immortal. Matter is called dead because material things like the body come to be in time and then pass out of existence. Spirituality is therefore identifying with what is “alive” in us, namely, the soul, in contrast to the physical body, which will eventually die and become dust.

Christian mystics were constrained by the accepted doctrines and norms of their times. Most of them sought to avoid even the appearance of heresy, often by adding qualifications to their mystical testimonies. Others, notably Meister Eckhart, were less careful or less concerned. Some, including Eckhart, were censured for it. Unfortunately, a good deal of testimony and teaching was lost or destroyed in the battles fought over putative heresy, although in hindsight, much of this conflict was actually political jockeying for power. Historians now see Eckhart’s condemnation in this light.

Moreover, normative Christianity itself has suffered by limiting itself in this way. The writings of Eckhart, for instance, never found admission to the teaching until recently and then not by any official approval or encouragement, even though they contain some of the most honest reports and inspiring teachings found in the Western mystical tradition. If normative Christianity had followed his lead, it might be very different today. But that was not to be, evidently because the time was not yet ripe and the Christian world was not ready for it.

In spite of this limitation, perennial wisdom can be found in the Christian mystics, much the same as is found in many mystics of other more open traditions. Similarly, even though normative Christianity represents the teaching of Jesus more or less literally and interprets it in accordance with accepted doctrine, Jesus’ teaching can also be read as comparable to the teaching of other seers, prophets and spiritual Masters.

INTERPRETATION

Every testimony and teaching can be interpreted in a variety of ways. However, typically the prevailing normative view is privileged as “orthodox,” and other views as labeled heretical. The “orthodox” doctrine is the established norm, promulgated through custom and convention, and sometimes even imposed by social pressure — or in the extreme, through physical force when required, if the normative authorities

have this capability. When they don't, the undermining is subtler but often still quite effective.

But even orthodoxies change over time from the dialectic going on within them. There was a huge shift in normative Christianity at various points, for instance, such as when uniformity was imposed at the Council of Nicea, after the split of the Eastern and Western Churches into Roman Catholic and Orthodox, at the time of the Renaissance when classical Greek writings and ideas were resurrected, during Protestant Reformation when the foundations of Western Christianity were questioned and revised, and in the modern period of liberalization when scholars were free to question issues that had been ruled out of bounds for inquiry or discussion.

History shows that no doctrine in itself holds the power to compel assent, as the competing views, raging controversies and violent conflicts among various schools, denominations and sects implicitly demonstrate. Even during periods of relative homogeneity, there were often strong undercurrents of dissent, as well as views kept in the closet. Throughout the history of Christianity, for example, there have been underground esoteric interpretations and even active schools. Presently, there are literally thousands of expressions of Christianity in different groups, and even within the major branches there are competing schools of thought with different interpretations of key material. Therefore, even to distinguish between normative Christianity and the Way of Jesus is somewhat misleading, since there is such a wide diversity of interpretation and considerable overlap.

Nevertheless, it is often useful to use a broad brush in making a general point, as long as it is acknowledged that exceptions prove the rule. Many forms of normative Christianity would rule out as heretical the definition of the Way of Jesus as a branch of perennial wisdom and as such a component of the ancient religion of humankind. For them this is religious syncretism. On the other hand, one wonders if they would be willing to allow their teachings to be red penned wherever there is a conflict with historical evidence or inclusion of alien influences.

But normative Christianity and the Way of Jesus are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Many normative Christians are inclusive in this regard, either publicly or privately. Some of less normative yet conventional Christian institutions and groups even encourage inclusiveness. Then there are also institutions and groups claiming to be in the Christian fold that "traditional" Christians would not regard as Christian at all. This goes to show that many interpretations of essentially the same material are possible and that none can claim to be absolute, for all have their appropriate roles. Therefore, different interpretations can often be seen as complementary rather than mutually exclusive or necessarily in conflict with each other.

Every interpretation of a teaching is a facet of the gem of that particular teaching and contributes to its richness, for every interpretation speaks to a different level.

All great teachers speak to a broad cross-section. Hence, their teachings must be rich enough to adapt themselves to the needs of different people at different levels of development. A teaching must also be universal enough to be adaptable to different times and climes. The teachings of the great wisdom traditions, even extremely ancient ones like those of Zoroaster, the Vedic seers and Masters, the vestiges of the Egyptian Hermetic wisdom, and the Hebrew prophets still have something to say to those interested in core spirituality. This is also true of the teachings of the Taoist and Confucian sages, Buddha and his enlightened followers, Jesus and the Christian mystics, Muhammad and the Sufi Masters, the Sikh Gurus, the Jain Mahavir, and those independent of any particular tradition, such as Kabir.

The various traditions, with their different teachings, schools and interpretations, may be seen as beads of a necklace joined by the common thread of a core spirituality whose aim is the ineffable experience of ultimate truth. Different interpretations of the teachings contributing to perennial wisdom are indicative of levels of progress on the way to realization of this truth, which is the grand purpose of all religions and wisdom traditions, as it is of life itself. Christianity is one of these beads on the necklace of truth. In the Way of Jesus the common thread running through all traditions is visible. It provides a basis for interpretation of scripture, as well as mystical reports and teachings, in the light of perennial wisdom.

The Way of Jesus is based first and foremost on the teaching of Jesus in the canonical gospels and reliable non-canonical sources, such as *The Gospel of Thomas*, secondly, on the antecedents of Jesus' teaching in Hebrew spirituality, and thirdly, on the testimony and teaching of the followers of Jesus over the centuries, the Christian mystics in particular.¹

The original apostles and disciples down to the present day have successively presented the same teaching in different terms in order to meet current needs. Normative Christianity and the Way of Jesus therefore often overlap, the difference between them being in interpretation. For example, perhaps nothing is more central to normative Christianity than the Incarnation. Normative Christianity takes this exalted state to be exclusive to Jesus alone, making Christianity triumphant over all other religions. However, it can be interpreted differently, often comparable to teachings of perennial wisdom concerning the God-Man, viewing Jesus as one in a series of manifestations of the God-Man. For example, when Sri Ramakrishna

¹ While these may be considered primary, there are many other relevant sources and influences that need to be taken into account. See, for example, Craig A. Evans, *Ancient Texts For New Testament Studies: A Guide To The Background Literature*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2005).

Paramahansa spoke of the advents of the Avatar, he also included Jesus Christ as one of them. His powerful description is worth attending to:

45. As a large and powerful steamer moves swiftly over the waters, towing rafts and barges in its wake, so when a Saviour descends, He easily carries thousands across the ocean of Mâyâ (illusion).

46. When the flood comes, it overflows rivers and streams, and makes one watery surface of all adjacent lands. But the rainwater flows away through fixed channels. When the Saviour becomes incarnate, all are saved through His grace. The Siddhas (perfect ones) only save themselves with much pain and penance.

47. When a mighty raft of wood floats down a stream, it can carry a hundred men, and still it does not sink. A reed floating down may sink with the weight of even a crow. So when a Saviour becomes incarnate, innumerable are the men who find salvation by taking refuge under Him. The Siddha only saves himself with much toil and trouble.

48. The locomotive engine reaches the destination itself, and also draws and takes with it a long train of loaded wagons. So likewise act the Saviours. They carry multitudes of men, heavily laden with the cares and sorrows of the world, to the feet of the Almighty.

48. When Bhagavân Sri Râmakandra [Rama] came to this world, seven sages only could recognise Him to be the God incarnate. So when God descends into this world, few only can recognise His Divine nature.

50. On the tree of Sat-kit-ânanda there are innumerable Râmas, Krishnas, Christs, &c.; one or two of them come down into this world now and then, and produce mighty changes and revolutions.

51. The Avatâra or Saviour is the messenger of God. He is like the Viceroy of a mighty monarch. As when there is some disturbance in a far-off province the king sends his viceroy to quell it; so whenever there is any waning of religion in any part of the world, God sends His Avatâra there.

52. It is one and the same Avatâra that, having plunged into the ocean of life, rises up in one place and is known as Krishna, and diving again rises in another place and is known as Christ.

53. In some seasons water can be obtained from the great depths of the wells only and with great difficulty, but when the country is flooded in the rainy season, water is obtained with ease everywhere. So ordinarily, God is reached with great pains through prayers and penances, but when the flood of Incarnation descends, God is seen anywhere and everywhere.

54. A Siddha-purusha (perfect one) is like an archaeologist who removes the dust and lays open an old well which was covered up during

ages of disuse by rank growth. The Avatâra, on the other hand, is like a great engineer who sinks a new well in a place where there was no water before. Great men can give salvation to those only who have the waters of piety and goodness hidden in themselves, but the Saviour saves him too whose heart is devoid of all love, and dry as a desert.

55. Think not that Râma, Sitâ, Srî Krishna, Râdhâ, Arguna, &c., were not historical personages, but mere allegories, or that the Scriptures have an inner and esoteric meaning only. Nay, they were human beings of flesh and blood just as you are, but because they were Divinities, their lives can be interpreted both historically and spiritually.

56. None knoweth the immensity of the sacrifice which the Godhead maketh when it becomes incarnate or becomes flesh.

57. The Saviours are to Brahman as the waves are to the ocean.¹

¹ Sri Ramakrishna. F. Max Müller. *The Life and Sayings of Sri Ramakrishna*. Reprinted in the Collected Works of F. Max Müller. (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1900 [1898]), p. 107-110. URL=<http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rls/rls25.htm#page_98>.

Compare Meher Baba: “When God manifests on earth in the form of man and reveals His Divinity to mankind, He is recognized as the Avatar — the Messiah — the Prophet. Thus God becomes Man.

“And so Infinite God, age after age, throughout all cycles, wills through His Infinite Mercy to effect His presence amidst mankind by stooping down to human level in the human form, but His physical presence amidst mankind not being apprehended, He is looked upon as an ordinary man of the world. When He asserts, however, His Divinity on earth by proclaiming Himself the Avatar of the Age, He is worshipped by some who accept Him as God; and glorified by a few who know him as God on Earth. But it invariably falls to the lot of the rest of humanity to condemn Him, while He is physically in their midst.

“Thus it is that God as man, proclaiming Himself as the Avatar, suffers Himself to be persecuted and tortured, to be humiliated and condemned by humanity for whose sake His Infinite Love has made him stoop so low, in order that humanity, by its very act of condemning God's manifestation in the form of Avatar should, however, indirectly, assert the existence of God in His Infinite Eternal state.

“The Avatar is always one and the same, because God is always One and the Same, the Eternal, Indivisible, Infinite One, who manifests Himself in the form of man as the Avatar, as the Messiah, as the Prophet, as the Ancient One — the Highest of the High. This Eternally One and the Same Avatar repeats His manifestation from time to time, in different cycles, adopting different human forms and different names, in different places, to reveal Truth in different garbs and different languages, in order to raise humanity from the pit of ignorance and help free it from the bondage of delusions

“Of the most recognized and much worshipped manifestations of God as Avatar, that of Zoroaster is the earliest — having been before Rama, Krishna, Buddha, Jesus and Mohammed. Thousands of years ago, he gave the world the essence of Truth in the form of

GOD THE SON

In the Way of Jesus, the goal is “the kingdom of God,” the way is through knowledge of the Son: “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me. If you know Me, you will know My Father also.”¹ Here is it important to distinguish God the Son, an aspect of God, from Jesus considered to be the biological son of God.

Meister Eckhart, one of the greatest Christian mystics as well as one of the most outspoken, observes: “According to the scriptures, ‘No man knoweth the Father but the Son,’ and hence, if ye desire to know God, ye have to be not merely like the Son, ye have to be the very Son himself.”² Eckhart explains elsewhere that this involves a spiritual rebirth, so to speak:

God the Father has perfect insight into himself, profound and thorough knowledge of himself by means of himself, not by means of any image. And thus God the Father gives birth to his Son, in the very oneness of the divine nature. Thus it is and no other way that God the Father gives birth to his Son in the ground and essence of the soul and thus he unites himself with her. Were any image present there would not be real union and in real union lies true bliss.³

According to Eckhart, the Son — the “Word” in John’s gospel — is the Father’s complete knowledge of Himself, and when Jesus speaks as the Son, he is speaking as one who has realized this Truth. The destiny of the soul is to know its own nature as divine, which, as Eckhart puts, is the birth of the Son in the soul.⁴ He might have said “virgin birth,” since the soul is considered feminine in Mystical Christian symbolism, which also pictures the soul as a bride.

three fundamental precepts — Good Thoughts, Good Words, and Good Deeds. These precepts were and are constantly unfolded to humanity in one form or another, directly or indirectly in every cycle, by the Avatar of the Age, as he leads humanity imperceptibly towards the Truth.”

From Avatar Meher Baba’s message, “The Highest of the High,” given in Dhera Dun, India, September 7, 1953, Zoroaster’s birthday.

URL=<<http://www.ambppct.org/meherbaba/the-highest-of-the-high.php>>. For more quotations of Meher Baba on the Avatar, see “The Avatar” in the online Meher Baba Anthology, URL=<<http://home.online.no/~solibakk/ava.html>>.

¹ John 14:1-7.

² Frantz Pfeiffer. *Meister Eckhart*, I, p. 128.

³ Meister Eckhart. “This Is Meister Eckhart From Whom God Nothing Hid,” in David O’Neal, Ed., *Meister Eckhart: From Whom God Hid Nothing*. (Boston: Shambhala, 1996), p. 50.

⁴ Ibid.

This teaching of Eckhart, presumably grounded in his own mystical experience, is entirely consistent with Jesus' own teaching on his true identity as the Son rather than his being the man called Yeshua. This difference is made clear, for example, when Jesus asserts, "Before Abraham was, I am."¹

Since the period of Abraham took place centuries prior to the birth of Jesus as a human being, it could not have been his human embodiment to which Jesus was referring, and the context of the quotation is a question about whether Jesus claimed to be the promised Messiah who would deliver Israel. The Hebrew term *mashiach*, meaning the Messiah as the "anointed one" (of God), the true king of Israel who would bring salvation to his people, is the same as "Christ," *christos* being Greek for "anointed one." And, even more explicitly, Jesus asserts, "I and the Father are one."²

This identity of Father-YHVH and Jesus as Messiah-Son has significant implications for the relationship of normative Christianity and the Way of Jesus, as well as the relationship between the Way of Jesus and perennial wisdom.³

On the one hand, normative Christianity regards itself as exclusive and privileged when it connects the saying that no one comes to the Father except through me with Jesus in his human form. This presents normative Christianity as not only unique among religions but also the only way to eternal salvation. This isolates normative Christianity from perennial wisdom and puts it at odds with other traditions that have produced profound mystics and realized masters.

As a result of identifying the physical form of Jesus with the Messiah-Son as its exclusive manifestation, normative Christianity has regarded itself as in sole possession of the means of spiritual salvation, isolating itself from other wisdom traditions, which it regards as fundamentally erroneous. Moreover, it makes the mistake of confusing the human nature of Jesus as "the only Son of God" with the divine nature of Jesus as God the Son. This error, from the vantage of the Way of Jesus, is taking the human Jesus to be the only biological son of God.⁴

¹ John 8:58.

² John 10:30.

³ Hebrew is written from right to left instead of left to right. YHVH is written left to right. In a Hebrew text it would appear instead as the letters, Heh-Vav-Heh-Yod (HVHY).

⁴ Interestingly, scholars point out that Christianity represented itself in terms of the Roman Empire and Christ as the Emperor. Title of the Roman Emperor included "Son of God" and *Pontifex Maximus*. Jesus was represented as the Son of God and the pope was subsequently accorded the title Pontifex Maximus when the Church effectively replaced the Empire as the dominant force in the region.

In the view of the Way of Jesus, normative Christianity has conflated Jesus as an individual with God the Son and thus confused God the Son with the biological “son of God.” Here the son of God is taken to be Jesus as a man who was “begotten” by the Father through a virgin birth. This belief is held to confirm that Jesus was God’s only “son,” and the exclusive savior of humankind.

It would naturally be important for those who place great store in the body that the body of the “son” of God should not finally perish and decompose.¹ Hence, the fundamental significance in normative Christianity of Jesus’ bodily resurrection and ascension, along with the traditional belief that in the Eucharist the species of bread and wine are transubstantiated into the body and blood of the Jesus as the (biological) son of God.² While this never seems to have bothered Christians, many so-called Pagans thought it barbaric in the extreme if Christians really took it literally.

On the other hand, according to Christian doctrine the Second Person of the Trinity is God the Son rather than the son of God. Christian theologians such as Thomas Aquinas sought to account rationally for the mystery of God the Son by explaining it in terms of God’s knowledge, which is identical with Himself. God the Father as Absolute Being “begets,” not creates, complete knowledge of Himself within Himself and this self-knowledge of God is identical with God. Because the Father’s knowledge of Himself, identical with Him, and proceeds directly from the Father’s being, the Father’s Self-knowledge is said symbolically to be “begotten” by him, and “not made.” Mystical theologians such as Aquinas and Eckhart call God’s complete knowledge of his own being which is identical with Him “the Son.” In order to realize God, one must realize this state of complete Self-knowingness, i.e., “the Son” in the symbolism of the Way of Jesus.

Thus, the only way to know God the Father is through the Son as God’s knowledge of Himself. For the limited human mind cannot capture the infinite. But, because the soul is spiritual as the very “breath” of God, it can through grace, be emptied of limitation and realize Truth.

¹ Normative Christianity takes Jesus to be the biological as well as the theological son of God.

² This concept of physical immortality was extended to all believers through the doctrine of the resurrection of the body and its heavenly glorification at time of the Second Coming and Last Judgment. For those who identify themselves chiefly with the body, the body *is* the person, and so everyone in this position fears the death of the body, even though they may profess belief in the afterlife for the soul. But those who do not experience the soul do not identify themselves with it and find it difficult to conceive of personal survival in these terms. Thus, eventual physical resurrection and everlasting survival is a comforting belief, even though it conflicts with Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom of heaven as a spiritual reality, not a material one.

Meister Eckhart explains this quite beautifully:

At various times I have declared: I am the cause that God is God. God is gotten of the soul, his Godhead of himself: before creatures were, God was not albeit he was Godhead which he gets not from the soul. Now when God finds a naughted soul whose self and whose activity have been brought to naught by means of grace, God works his eternal work in her above grace, raising her out of her created nature. Here God naughts himself in the soul and then neither God nor soul is left. Be sure that this is God indeed.¹

Understanding this quotation requires knowing that for Meister Eckhart, “God” is different from “Godhead” (*Gottheit*).² “Godhead” refers to God as Absolute, the only Reality. This is the mystical meaning of “God is one” in Deuteronomy 6:4. On the other hand, “God” means the Supreme Being and Creator, which the faithful conceive as separate from creation. However, a relative god would necessarily be limited if anything exists independent of Him, so that cannot be the truth.

Since “only God is,” is the truth of ultimate reality, the separate reality of all that appears to be other than God must be false. In the mystical sense, “sin” means separation. “Original sin” is the falling of the soul into the falsity of separation, from which the soul projects itself as limited and identifies itself with a body, mind and personality. The soul also projects the world as separate from itself. In addition, the soul projects itself as separate from God, thereby conceiving God as a relative entity instead of absolute reality.

This veil of apparent separation obscures the true nature of the soul. So for truth to prevail, this veil must eventually be rent, or, in Eckhart’s terminology “naughted.” This is the spiritual quest. The veil is removed to a degree by self-effort, but the soul cannot completely rend the veil. Grace is needed for this. When God’s grace rends the veil fully and finally, the soul knows itself as it really is in God as the sole Reality and finds that separation was a false projection all along. The drop returns to the Ocean.

This is essentially the same teaching as that of the identity of the soul with Absolute Reality according to Shankara’s Advaita Vedanta.³ *Advaita* means “nondual,” and its aim is the realization of nonduality. Why does Shankara speak of nonduality, rather than unity or identity? In unity, only one exists. But here there are two, namely “one” and “is.” In order to avoid this paradox of language, ultimate truth is expressed through negation in order to indicate that it is beyond conception,

¹ Pfeiffer. *Meister Eckhart*. I, p. 410.

² “God” is a translation of German *Gott* and “Godhead” of *Gottheit*.

³ In Sanskrit “soul” is *atman*, and “Absolute Reality” is *brahman*. The identity of soul with Absolute Reality is called *atmabrahm*.

imagination and understanding, hence, beyond predication. Moreover, the term “nonduality” indicates that realization is through subtraction of the false, without the addition of anything. When the clouds of ignorance blow away, the sun of enlightenment shines. The sun was always there, it was just obscured by the clouds. When the veil is raised, what is behind the veil is seen.

This is also essentially the same teaching as the self-effacement of limited self in God in of ibn ‘Arabi’s identityism.¹ Jami explains:

Self-annihilation consists in this, that through the overpowering influence of the Very Being upon the inner man there remains no consciousness of aught beside Him [Allah]. Annihilation of annihilation consists in this, that there remains no consciousness even of that unconsciousness. It is evident that annihilation of annihilation is involved in annihilation. For if he who has attained annihilation should retain the least consciousness of his annihilation, he would not be in the state of annihilation, because the quality of annihilation and the person possessing such quality are both things distinct from the Very Being, the Truth most glorious. Therefore, to be conscious of annihilation is incompatible with annihilation.²

This is also the meaning of “Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone completely beyond. Hail the Awakening!” of the Buddhist *Heart Sutra*.³ In Taoism it is realization of Tao. The unfolding of this process of realization of ultimate truth through annihilation of limited individuality, or “naughting” as Eckhart puts it, is set forth in detail in Meher Baba’s *God Speaks*.⁴

¹ In Arabic “self-effacement in God” is *fana fillah*. “Identityism” is *Wujudiyyah*. *Wujud* means existence. *Wujudiyyah* is the teaching that existence is one (*wadat-al-wujud*); hence, the mystical realization of this in the nondual state is the realization of the identity of the soul and God. This nondual Sufi teaching did not originate with Ibn ‘Arabi, and he did not use these particular terms himself. However, he articulated it in his extensive writings, and it is often associated with him. Normative Islam considers this Sufi nondual teaching to be a heresy. While this teaching is similar to Advaita Vedanta, it was developed in Muslim Spain and does not seem to have been influenced by Vedic teachings, as some of its normative opponents charge.

² Nur-ud-din ‘Abd-ur-Rahman Jami. *Lawa’ih (Flashes of Light)*. Translated by E. H. Whinfield and Mirza Muhammad Kazvini. (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1902-1926). XXV. (Reprinted by the Theosophical Society, 1978).

³ Sanskrit: *gate gate paragate parasamgate, bodhi svaha*. Translation by the author.

⁴ Meher Baba. *God Speaks*.

GOD IS ONE

From the mystical point of view, God is the eternal unitary and indivisible existence. Hence, the first principle of mystical wisdom traditions is the affirmation of absolute unity. This is true of such traditions in both the East and West. In fact, its statement affirmatively as, “One *is*,” and negatively as, “absolute reality is nondual,” express the key fundamental of perennial wisdom. On this cornerstone rests the whole teaching of man’s purpose in life, to realize this truth of ultimate reality, as well as how to accomplish the great task.

On the other hand, normative religions in the West are dualistic. It is a deep-seated convention in Judaism, Christianity and Islam to regard creation as separate from its Creator, existing “outside” Him. To view God as anything but completely transcendent, hence separate, is considered heretical. Expressions of divine immanence have generally been generally condemned as “pantheism,” a charge typically hurled against “pagan” religions. Therefore, realization of nonduality runs up against the norms that define the framework.

In Judaism Spinoza was excluded from the synagogue for asserting immanence, and in Islam, Ibn Arabi was similarly criticized for teaching metaphysical monism that only God is real, in spite of Sufis considering him to be “the greatest sheikh.”¹

Christian mystics and theologians, too, have generally skirted this question or carefully qualified their assertions in order to escape censure. Even so, Thomas Aquinas was condemned for some time after his passing, although later rehabilitated and declared a Doctor of the Church. Meister Eckhart was never exonerated by the Roman Catholic Church, in part because of his teaching that a person can realize the unity of God’s absolute being.

However, the key passage of the *Torah* is: *YHVH elohenu YHVH echad*, meaning, “YHVH our God is one.” According to Qabalah, “God is one” is an affirmation of metaphysical unity, in contrast to its normative interpretation as an assertion of monotheism, “There is only one God.”² The root of Biblical Hebrew YHVH is thought by scholars to signify existence, while *echad* means “one.” According to the *Zohar*: “You are one but not according to number.”³ This is a

¹ In Arabic, ibn ‘Arabi is called *Al-Sheikh Al-Akbar*, usually rendered as “the greatest sheikh.”

² Deuteronomy 6:4. The Hebrew word for God is *el*, and *elohenu* means our God. The name of God is YHVH. YHVH is usually translated as the Lord since pious Jews do not pronounce it. They substitute *Adonai* instead, which means the Lord. Therefore, this passage is often rendered, “The Lord our God is one.”

³ “Introduction to *Tikkunei Zohar*,” in David S. Ariel. *The Mystic Quest: An Introduction to Jewish Mysticism*. (New York: Schocken, 1988), p. 85.

comment on Qabalists take this to mean that God is the sole reality, likened to the Sufi dictum, “Only God is real.” This Mosaic teaching is not only the basis of Qabalah but also of the Way of Jesus and Sufism, in their mystical interpretation as “religions of the Book.”

In the conventional understanding of normative Islam the Arabic words, *La illaha illa-Allah*, are rendered as, “There is no god but God.” On the other hand, Sufis construe this as the affirmation of metaphysical unity, “There is no god; there is only Allah, the sole reality.” Another Sufi version is, “There is nothing except Allah.” Sufis assert that this is confirmed in the Holy Qur’an, which says: “God is one,” *Allah ho ahad* in Arabic¹ Here, Arabic *ahad* corresponds to Hebrew *echad*, and it is similarly interpreted in terms of metaphysical monism, to signify unity of being rather than one as a number.

Similar affirmations of metaphysical unity are also found in the East. According to the Vedas: “The Existent is one, the sages express it variously.”² In the terminology of Advaita Vedanta also, the Sanskrit term *brahman* signifies ultimate reality as absolute and indivisible.

The same affirmation is expressed in Taoism as, “The sage clasps the Primal Unity,”³ and “There is in reality neither truth nor error, neither yes, nor no, nor any distinction whatever, since all — including the contraries — is one.”⁴

In Buddhism metaphysical unity is expressed in terms of negation instead of affirmation, that is, as nonduality rather than unity.

It is a great joy to realize that in the infinite, thought-transcending knowledge of reality, all sanskaric differentiations are non-existent.... It is a great joy to realize that in the self-emanated divine *Nirmana-Kaya* [literally “the state beyond limited mind”] there exists no feeling of duality.⁵

This ultimate truth that existence is indivisibly one despite appearances of multiplicity, lies at the foundation of perennial wisdom. It is the essence of core

¹ Holy Qur’an, 112:1. Technically speaking there are no translations of the Holy Qur’an. All rendering in other languages are automatically considered interpretations

² *Rig Veda* I.164.46. The Sanskrit is: *ekam sad vipra bahudha vadanti*.

³ *Tao Te Ching*, ch. 22. Walker, Brian Browne (Translator). *Tao Te Ching of Lao Tzu*. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995).

⁴ Chuang Tzu, ch. 2. See Hinton, David (Translator). *Chuang Tzu: The Inner Chapters*. (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 1997).

⁵ “Rosary of Precious Gems,” in *Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrines*, Translated by Lama Kazi Dawa Samdup and edited. by W. Y. Evans-Wentz (London, Oxford University Press, 1935), XXVIII, 3.7.

spirituality, to be realized in the sanctuary of the heart, the mystical “Holy of Holies” at the center of the Temple, the human being. The simplest way to this realization, suitable for most people, is through love, the great unifier. For divine love overcomes all appearance of separation in the experience of divine union, the “sacred marriage” of the soul as lover and God, the Beloved. God as unmanifest is invisible but God as manifest is visible in his creation and its creatures. Therefore, by loving his creation and serving his creatures, one is both loving and also serving their Creator, who as the transcendent Source exceeds the limitations of each but as immanent Ground pervades all.

The primary antecedent of Jesus’ teaching in the Hebrew tradition is his reiteration of the essence of the Torah. When Jesus was asked about his teaching on the Law, he did not answer in his own words. Instead, he quoted directly from the Torah, beginning with the Shema, which is the fundamental tenet of Judaism, now as it was then:

Hear, O Israel, YHVH our God is [the] One. Love the Lord our God with your whole heart, your whole soul, and your whole mind.¹ And love your fellow as yourself [for selfhood is One].²

The inner meaning here is the same as it is in Qabalah and Sufism: God is one in being, hence the sole reality. Therefore, it is our duty to love God as the sole reality with all our faculties. This duty to love God includes loving our own being insofar as it is a spark of the divine fire, as well as loving the being of all others in the same way, for the same reason. Our duty is to cherish all beings in that they are the manifestation of God, who is the unitary Self of all apparently separate selves. Similarly in Buddhism, wisdom regarding the nondual (unitary) nature of reality entails compassion for all beings, since all are manifestations of Buddha-nature or *buddha-dhatu* in Sanskrit.

THE ONE AND THE MANY

How is it that God can be simultaneously one and indivisible yet manifest in time through apparent multiplicity? This is the mystery that philosophers have debated intellectually for millennia without arriving at a logically compelling conclusion based on reason. But the sages have clarified this conundrum by differentiating between existence and experience.

Everyone has many thoughts, feelings perceptions, and so forth — that is, many individual experiences. But even though one has many experiences psychologically, a person does not cease to be a single individual existentially. Everyone experiences multiplicity and diversity in the mind, including simultaneous thoughts, feelings

¹ Deuteronomy 6:4-5.

² Matthew 22:37-40, Mark 12: 28-34, Luke 10:25-28.

and perceptions. However, everyone also experience a continuity running through their lives uniting these mental differences in the apprehension of selfhood. This selfhood may be conceived as a continuous existence underlying all changes in psychological experience, as well as physical changes in the body. Although these forms are myriad in a person's life, one remains the same person throughout.

Although God's essence is eternally one and indivisible, God's unitary existence, being self-aware, is capable of experiencing itself in various ways, both finite and infinite. As infinitely conscious God experiences God as God, unitary, whole, entire and indivisible. Since the infinite includes the finite, God experiences the panorama of manifest creation through the apparent separate consciousness of creatures. That is to say, God is conscious of the finite through the finite consciousness of creatures by being infinitely conscious. Creatures have no real being on their own. Each apparently separate and distinct consciousness of a creature is a locus of experience in the spectrum of Infinite Consciousness. This locus, being God's experience of Himself from a particular vantage, provides continuity to the experience of creatures, which otherwise is an empty construct of impressions.

Perennial wisdom has revealed the mechanics of this, but largely symbolically. However, Meher Baba has presented a clear contemporary articulation of it in *God Speaks*.¹ His account, which he explicitly relates to both Vedanta and Sufism, is explored in Appendix Two. Corresponding explanations can be found in other wisdom traditions as well, although Meher Baba lays it out clearly and systematically in contemporary terminology.

This unitary indivisible existence is capable of experiencing itself in diverse ways, some limited, and also fully in Infinite Consciousness, encompassing all possible experience. Thus, God in knowing himself fully knows himself not only as infinite but also as finite: In Mystical Christian terminology, God's knowledge of himself as infinite is the Son, understood as His self-knowledge identical with His being. God's knowledge of himself as finite is the manifest creation. Paul, whose letters form one of the great pillars of normative Christianity, spoke of God as the one "in whom we live, move and have our being."²

In this view, God does not create a world separate from himself, for that would limit God, who is, by definition, infinite, unlimited in every way. Rather, God manifests apparent diversity within the indivisible unity not by actually multiplying or dividing being but rather by varying experience. Knowing himself as infinite, God is Infinite Consciousness. Knowing Himself as finite, God apparently becomes finite and experiences Himself as finite through finite creatures. Since finitude is fundamentally incomplete, all finite beings eventually transcend temporal limitation

¹ Meher Baba. *God Speaks: The Theme of Creation and Its Purpose*.

² Acts 17:28.

to complete themselves by realizing their eternal unlimited nature. This dialectic, so to speak, is the internal dynamic of God's self-knowledge, in which God first apparently limits Himself to experience His full range as both finite and infinite.

The eternal unlimited nature of the real person as a spiritual being in contrast to the body, mind and personality that come to be in time and pass away is the mystical meaning of the immortality of the soul. It is found not only in the Jesus tradition. The origins of this perennial teaching are lost in the abyss of time. Indeed, almost all so-called primitive cultures made provision for their dead, seemingly indicating survival after physical death.¹

FINITE AND INFINITE

For the infinite to be infinite it must include all possibilities, including the finite. Therefore, the Infinite "contracts" itself, in the imagery of the great Qabalistic teacher, Rabbi Isaac Luria.² In Hebrew this "contraction" within God's being is *tzimtzum*. This contraction then requires "repair," *tikkun* in Hebrew. Qabalah set forth these two directions. First is the direction of manifestation, called "the work of creation," and second is the direction of return to the source, called "the work of the chariot." "Chariot" refers to the chariot of fire that came to take Ezekiel to the heavens. It symbolizes the "vehicle" that takes one along the spiritual path. The door to this vehicle is faith, the wheels are self-effort, and the engine is grace.

Many familiar with physics recognize that this contraction is similar to the collapse of a wave to a point when observed. Similarly, the symmetry of the unmanifest unified field is broken and collapses to manifest the physical universe at the moment of the Big Bang. The force of the implosion is so great that the energy involved produces an explosion. The Vedic tradition calls this "bursting forth."³ This bursting forth may be likened to God's speaking His original Word at the time of creation in the Hebrew mythos of Genesis. Thus, in the spiritual symbolism, the cause of the universe is God's breath (Latin: *spiritus*).

GOD-REALIZATION

This supreme state of self-knowingness is God's knowledge of His unitary, indivisible existence, a state in which perfect knowledge and infinite being are

¹ S. G. F. Brandon. *The Judgment of the Dead: The Idea of Life After Death in the Major Religions*. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967).

² Luria died at age thirty-eight without writing down his teaching. What is now known of them was recorded by his student, Rabbi Hayyim Vital, especially in *Etz Hayyim (The Tree of Life)*. Hayyim Ben Joseph Vital. *The Tree of Life: The Palace of Adam Kadmon*. Translated by Donald Wilder Menzi and Zwe Padeh. (New York: Jason Aronson, 1999).

³ Sanskrit *sphota*.

identical. In the symbolism of the Trinity, God the Father is infinite existence and God the Son is the perfect knowledge identical in nature with this infinite existence. According to Eckhart, this is the knowledge to which the soul is called, a teaching found also in Paul, who wrote: “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face.”¹

The mystical meaning of seeing in a mirror is knowing through an image reflected in the mind, while seeing face to face is direct and unmediated cognition within the soul of its nature as “pure spirit.”

Here, the essence of the Way of Jesus is found in personal realization of the truth of one’s own innermost being, and it is the same teaching that is found in the mystics the world over, for example, in the Upanishadic teaching that the true Self is known in, by and through Self alone:

The Self, smaller than small, greater than great, is hidden in the heart.... That Self, cannot be gained by the Veda [i.e., following scriptural injunctions and observances], nor by understanding, nor by much learning. He whom the Self chooses, by him the Self can be gained. The Self chooses him as His own.²

According to Ibn Arabi: “By Himself He sees Himself, and by Himself, He knows Himself.”³

According to the Way of Jesus, we are all children of the living Father. Our birthright entitles us to inherit the Self-knowledge of God through realization of Truth. It is we who continue to disown ourselves through “sin.” For the Way of Jesus’ definition of sin is that which separates us from God. God mercifully forgives us our sins, but until we cease sinning, we remain separated from God. Sin is essentially selfish self-interest, but it also includes wrong views, as Buddha observed in giving the Eightfold Path.⁴

Selfishness arises from the wrong view that one is separate from God and others. This wrong view itself arises from “eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil” that results in the soul’s falling under the veil of duality. “Original

¹ 1 Corinthians 13:12.

² *Katha Upanishad*, 1.2.20, 23, in Max Müller, Tr. *Upanishads*, Vol. 2, in *Sacred Books of the East*, Vol. 15. The real Self is *atman* in Sanskrit, the lower or false self of ego as limited individuality is *jiva* or *jivatman*. When the limited self or *jivatman* realizes the unlimited self or *atman*, the former ego state or *jivatman* becomes the God-realized state called *shivatman*. *Shiva* signifies God.

³ Ibn Arabi. “Who Knoweth Himself...”: *From the Treatise on Being*, Translated by T. H. Weir (UK: Beshara Publications, 1976), 4.

⁴ The first of the precepts of the Eightfold Path is “right view,” in Sanskrit *samyak darshana*.

sin” is attributing plurality where only unity exists. All are “guilty” of this original sin and fall under its effects until the soul gains salvation. Then the veil of duality is lifted and the God is seen face to face and we know Him even as we are known.

The chief sin in Islam is attributing a partner to God.¹ According to Sufism, this means taking something other than God to be real, including oneself as a separate being. If God is the only reality, then to assert that anything other than God exists is to attribute a partner to God. Thus, as long as one holds the conviction that one’s feeling of separateness from God is real, or that God is absent, one condemns oneself to be separated from Him.

That only the Son knows the Father means that anyone who realizes his or her true nature is an embodiment of the Son as the only one who knows the Father. The only one who knows the Father, God’s Absolute Reality, is God’s knowledge of Himself, which is identical with His being. Hence, Jesus can say from the vantage of God the Son that he and the Father are one.²

In God’s knowledge of Himself, the Father as Absolute Reality “begets,” not makes, the Son as Absolute Knowledge, identical with Absolute Reality. This knowledge may be termed Infinite Consciousness. The Son as the only one who knows the Father is the Infinite Consciousness of Absolute Being.³

Normative Christianity attributes this state to Jesus exclusively. Perennial wisdom, including the Way of Jesus, disagrees. While normative Christianity rests justification for this on belief in doctrine, perennial wisdom cites the ubiquitous testimony of mystics and masters to the contrary, putatively based on direct acquaintance.

According to perennial wisdom, since God is the sole reality, this realization is not limited to one historical personage. It is inherent within all, and it has been realized by a few. Nonetheless, over time all are destined to cease forgetting who they really are. The inner calling of the soul to God is inexorable, for the soul is not only *of* God, but also the soul is in essence *identical with* God.

The purpose of life is to realize this inherent potential as one’s spiritual birthright. According to the creation account in Genesis 2:7, God breathed life into Adam. Hebrew *ruach*, Greek *pneuma* and Latin *spiritus* all mean breath and by extension spirit as that which is living, as do Sanskrit *prana*, Chinese *qi* or *chi*, and Japanese *ki*. Since the ancients considered breath to be the principle of life, these terms also

¹ In Arabic this sin is called *shirk*. In normative Islam it means holding there are gods other than Allah.

² John 10:30.

³ For elaboration see Meher Baba, *Beams from Meher Baba on the Spiritual Panorama*. (Walnut Creek, CA: Sufism Reoriented, 1958). p. 27-32.

referred symbolically to what we now call “spirit” as the divine in man. Indeed, many spiritual practices in a variety of traditions involve working with the breath in order to enliven the spirit, such as *pranayama*, literally “breath management,” in Hatha Yoga and *chi kung* or *qi gong*, literally “energy work,” in Taoism.

The mystical interpretation of the breath as spirit is that God’s own life force is primordially immanent in the human being as “Holy Spirit,” “Holy Spirit” in Hebrew is *ruach ha qodesh*. Unlike normative Christianity, which views the Holy Spirit or Spirit of Truth as one of the persons of the Trinity, Qabalah takes the Holy Spirit as God’s immanent presence in mankind.¹ The Holy Spirit is the breath that God breathes into primordial man as life. Since this is God’s own life, it is immortal, one with God. The Way of Jesus similarly sees the Holy Spirit as God’s life in man and the Spirit of Truth leading us homeward.²

Because life is directly God-given in this sense, God is immanent in humanity as “spirit,” the very life of the self or soul. God also transcends humanity as the source of life. As theologians put it, man is dependent on God, but God is independent of man.

In this view, in which creation is not a separate reality in contrast to the reality of God, there is no insurmountable barrier between God as transcendent source and immanent ground. For in the indivisible unity of God, there is neither transcendence nor immanence. Transcendence and immanence are meaningful only due to the limitations of the human perspective. Hence, it is possible for human beings to realize this essential correlation between individual and universal life by following the life-principle back to its source through the pursuit of its truth, their own true nature. Then they discover that the spiritual journey is not from here to there, but from here deeper into here.

THE GOD-MAN

It would be expected that this inherent potential for realizing truth would be unfolded in the course of historical events. The history of comparative spirituality and mysticism is replete with examples from all times and climes of men and women who claimed to have realized this ultimate truth of life, or were acknowledged as having done so. Therefore, it might be argued, it goes against the evidence to claim this state exclusively for Jesus as a particular historical individual.

Admission that Jesus is not the exclusive God-Man does not diminish the status of Jesus in the eyes of either perennial wisdom or the Way of Jesus. Not only the

¹ Hebrew *adam kadmon* means “primordial man.”

² “Spirit of Truth” occurs repeatedly in *The Gospel according to John*.

Way of Jesus acknowledges Jesus as the manifestation of God in human form but many mystics of other traditions do so as well.

In fact, the Christian concept Divine Incarnation is hardly unique. For example, in the *Bhagavad Gita*, a core scripture of Hinduism, Hindus believe that the ten avatars appearing in different ages are the direct descent of God into human form. Krishna is addressed as Lord and he declares that he is the Supreme Person.¹ He reveals his universal body to his disciple Arjuna, in a scene recalling Jesus' transfiguration. Krishna says:

“Nothing higher than me exists, O Arjuna.
Everything is strung on Me like pearls on a thread.”²

Later Krishna advises Arjuna to rely solely on him as Highest of the High: “Take refuge in me alone.”³ Krishna also promises: “At the hour of death, one who remembers me on giving up the body attains my state of being, of this there is no doubt.”⁴

Initiation into Buddhism begins with taking refuge in the compassionate Buddha as fully awakened. According to the *Dhammapada*, which is attributed to Buddha:

Best of all the paths is the eight-fold,
Best of all the truths are the four noble,
Best of teachings is nonattachment,
Best of people is the one whose eye is opened.

This is the path,
There is no other for clarifying insight.
Enter then upon this path
Completely confounding Mara.⁵

¹ In Sanskrit *Bhagavan* means Lord in the sense of divine. *Purushottama* means “Supreme Person.”

² *Bhagavad Gita*, 7:7. For a translation with Sanskrit parsing, see: Winthrop Sargeant (Translator). *The Bhagavad Gita*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994). Sanskrit *vishvarupa* means “universal form.”

³ *Gita*, 18:66

⁴ *Gita*, 8:5.

⁵ *Dhammapada*, verse 273-274 (20:1-2). See S. Radhakrishnan (Editor and Translator). *The Dhammapada: With Introductory Essays, Pali Text, English Translations and Notes*. (New York: Oxford, 1950). Mara signifies the temptress. In the mystical interpretation, this is the desire-nature of the ego, not an external entity or force.

Muhammad is reported by some to have said: “One who has seen me has seen Truth (God).”¹ This recalls the words of Jesus: “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”²

Muhammad was also reported to have said: “Whoever knows his self (Arabic *nafs*) knows his Lord (*rabb*).”³ Commenting on this, Ibn Arabi observes:

And for this [realization of God’s unity], the Prophet (upon whom be peace) said: ‘Whoso knoweth himself knoweth his Lord.’ and he said (upon whom be peace), “I know my Lord by my Lord.’ The Prophet (upon whom be peace) points out that, that thou are not thou: thou art He, without thou; not He entering into thee, nor thou entering into Him, nor He proceeding forth from thee, not thou proceeding forth from Him. And it is not meant by that, that thou art aught that exists or thine attributes aught that exists, but it is meant by it that thou [as limited self or ego, Arabic *nafs*] never wast nor wilt be, whether by thyself or through Him or in Him or along with Him. Thou art neither ceasing to be nor still existing. Thou art He, without one of these limitations. Then if thou knowest thine existence thus, then thou knowest God; and if not, then not.⁴

Meher Baba drew a distinction between those who tread the spiritual path to realization and a direct manifestation of God in human form. The Man-God undergoes the process of evolution, reincarnation, involution and realization by treading the spiritual path, ascending through the inner planes to realize the goal in the nondual state, as do all the liberated ones. But the perfect ones then regain consciousness of creation through Universal Mind, while maintaining infinite consciousness. A few among the perfect have a special duty toward creation as teachers, guides and overseers of the Divine Plan. They become the Perfect Masters.⁵ Conversely, the God-Man descends directly into a human form without traversing the path.⁶ He is the Highest of the High, the Ancient One come again.

¹ This is not an authoritative saying (Arabic *hadith*) of Muhammad according to the Sunna. Sufis regard Muhammad as a Perfect Man (Arabic *al-insan al-kamil*). The Sufi understanding of the Perfect Man is comparable to the person who has realized truth. In Islam truth (Arabic *al haqq*) is a name of God. Mansur al-Hallaj was executed for blasphemy for saying, “I am Truth” (*ana’l haqq*).

² John 14:19.

³ Orthodox Sunnis contest the authenticity of this putative saying (*Hadith*). However, Ibn Arabi’s commentary shows that Sufis regarded it as genuine.

⁴ Ibn Arabi, “Whoso Knoweth Himself...,” p. 4-5.

⁵ Meher Baba. *Discourses*, 7th revised edition, p. 271-287.

⁶ Meher Baba. *God Speaks*, p. 148-153.

Technically speaking the God-Man does not reincarnate in the same sense as human beings still on the path. Rather, God's descending directly in human form in order to manifest periodically is called an advent or incarnation of the God-Man, rather than a reincarnation. This is in order to emphasize that the God-Man does not go through the process of evolution, reincarnation and involution, as do all other souls in creation.

Both the God-Man and Man-God enjoy God-realization along with full consciousness of creation, which Meher Baba calls "perfection," similar to the Sufi tradition of the Perfect Man, or *al-insan al-kamil* in Arabic. They are both God embodied in human form and are identical in being. However, the roles they play with respect to creation are different. The God-Man manifests at the junction of cycles of time, and gives the new cycle its direction. The Man-God, a role also played by realized women, supports this direction given by the God-Man during his earthly advents.

Both the God-Man and the Man-God also give liberation to those with whom they have connection. The Man-God only grants liberation while in the body, and to relatively few. Since the God-Man's connections are vast, he gives liberation to many. Moreover, he is not limited to acting while not in the body. Hence, in all the great religions, the God-Man of that religion is resorted to.

Meher Baba revealed that the God-Man has come millions and billions of times since the beginningless beginning and will come innumerable times in the future until the endless end. He said that he had come in human memory as Zoroaster, Abraham, Rama, Krishna, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, and now as Meher Baba, sometimes revealing his identity publicly and at other times concealing it, depending on the needs of the time. The God-Man is called variously Avatar (Vedic), Messiah (Messianic Judaism), Christ (Christianity), Buddha (Buddhism), and Prophet or Messenger (Zoroastrianism and Islam). Mystically, all of these signify the same reality, the God-Man who descends periodically into human form in order to give creation a push when necessary.

Meher Baba also revealed that religions other than those inspired by an Avataric advent grew out of the inspiration of a Man-God, or Perfect Master. For example, Sikhism grew out of the mission and message of Guru Nanak and Jainism, from that of Mahavir.¹ However, a religion does not ordinarily grow up around a Perfect Master, although often a cult of the Master does. Recent examples include Ramakrishna Paramahansa, and Sai Baba of Shirdi. There are also cults of Perfect Ones and saints within the various traditions, such as the cult of the Virgin Mary in Christianity. Francis Assisi is not a figure of worship in normative Christianity, but

¹ Both were Perfect Masters according to Meher Baba.

he is perhaps the most widely venerated saint other than the Blessed Virgin Mary, whom Pope John Paul considered co-redemtrix.¹

JESUS AS GOD-MAN

In the Way of Jesus, Jesus is considered to be not only the human embodiment of God, i.e., a God-realized Master, but also a Divine Incarnation in the sense of a God-Man descended directly into human form. Indeed, the history of the Way of Jesus reveals Jesus' ongoing transmission of divine knowledge through grace as an advent the God-Man. Virtually all Christian mystics acknowledge Jesus as Lord, Master and Beloved. Regarding his ongoing role as spiritual Master, Jesus himself is reported to have said: "Remember, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."²

The gospel narratives of the resurrection and the subsequent appearances of Jesus to his disciples, the remarkable enlightenment of Paul by Jesus on the road to Damascus, and numerous visions of Jesus across world in the following times down to the present attest to the ongoing presence of the Christ as Lord and Master and his availability to all.³ This is, indeed, that which constitutes the basis of the Way of Jesus as an ongoing spiritual tradition with a living Master active as its head.

Paul is especially significant for the Way of Jesus. Even though he had never been with Jesus, Paul's stature was so revered by the Church Fathers and Doctors that he came to be known simply as the Apostle. In Paul we have perhaps an explicit testimony of spiritual enlightenment transmitted directly by the risen Christ. Paul testifies: "I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live. Yet not I, but Christ lives in me."⁴

Moreover, in preaching to the Greeks, Paul quotes to them their own teachings, referring to the One "in whom we live, move and have our being."⁵ This is not the transcendent God of normative Christianity who exists beyond and outside of the world as Creator, but the immanent God in whom all subsist. Paul apparently speaks as one who has realized this. Whether Paul actually did is admittedly controversial. In *The Gnostic Paul*, Elaine Pagels suggests that Paul's message contains both exoteric and esoteric elements, which may be two complementary

¹ Meher Baba revealed that St. Francis of Assisi was a Perfect Master. Francis founded the Franciscan Order and gave it its rule.

² Matthew 28:20.

³ Acts 9:1-19, 22:5-16, 26:12-18.

⁴ Galatians 2:20.

⁵ Acts 17:28.

doctrines aimed at different audiences.¹ It is possible that Paul is sending subtle signals to those who can recognize his inner meaning, while at the same time addressing the crowd.

GOD AS ABSOLUTE

It is important to note here that the transcendence of God is not being denied. Rather, the idea is that God both transcends the world as its source and is also immanent to the world as its ground. That is to say, God is not separate from the world, which has no self-sufficient, independent existence. God exists as absolute reality rather than existing as one entity in relation to creation.

God is the only reality, an indivisible unity. Therefore, it is contradictory to say that God is beyond creation or in creation. However, from the vantage of those experiencing themselves separate from God and from others, it makes sense to talk of God's being beyond creation, or in creation, as long as it is remembered that this is a manner of speaking necessitated by our limited mode of knowing.

It is more correct to say, as Paul does, that the world is in God rather than that God is in the world.² While it is true that the unmanifest underlies the manifest as its source and ground, the unmanifest as infinite greatly exceeds the manifest as finite. The *Purusha Sukta* of *Rig Veda* sings poetically that three-quarters of Him is unmanifest, beyond the world, one-quarter manifest in the world.³

In this view, "creation" is not a separate reality standing in relation to God as Creator. Rather, "creation" is the manifestation of the Absolute but not the Absolute, as waves are a manifestation of the sea appearing on the surface, but the waves are not the ocean. The relative creation is, as it were, the tip of the iceberg, most of which remains invisible to the eye. Another analogy often used in perennial wisdom is that of an object and its shadow. The manifest creation is said to be the visible and tangible "shadow" of God's being, which remains eternally unmanifest. In the analogy of Ibn Arabi, the manifest creation is to unmanifest God as imagination is to the mind entertaining it.⁴

¹ Elaine Pagels. *The Gnostic Paul: Gnostic Exegesis of the Pauline Letters*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1975).

² Acts 17:28.

³ *Rig Veda*, X, 90.4. *Purusha Sukta*. Purusha means both "spirit" in the sense of Self (Sanskrit *atman*) and "man." The Ancient One, *purana purusha* in Sanskrit, is the God-Man or Avatar. The *Purusha Sukta* sets forth the nature of the Avatar.

⁴ Henry Corbin. *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi*. Translated from the French by Ralph Manheim. Bollingen Series XCI. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969).

The Absolute does not become relative through creation, since creation only appears separate in limited mind. God is Infinite Consciousness eternally knowing it alone *is*. When limited mind is transcended upon the culmination of the spiritual quest, the Absolute shines forth like the sun, which was always there, and was only obscured for a time by the clouds. Then “transcendent” and “immanent,” “above” and “below,” “beyond” and “in” no longer apply as they do in the state of knowing characteristic of a limited mind.

Since only One is, all apparent diversity and change of form is the manifestation of that One. It may therefore be said that God is immanent in the world as the ground of being, in whose reality the world of form appears, like waves in the ocean when the wind blows.

The world appears different in different states and stages of consciousness. The world as it appears to humans is different, for example, than the world that appears to animals. Similarly, the experience of ordinary minds is different from the absolute knowledge that belongs to Infinite Consciousness alone. Hence, God is also said to be transcendent.

When the limited mind is transcended upon realization of Truth, then this inherently false dichotomy of immanence and transcendence is realized for what it is, appearance and not reality. God’s unitary being does not become differentiated by God’s knowledge, which, being infinite, encompasses all possibilities. Similarly one’s integrity as a person is not disrupted when one’s mind’s is filled with diverse thoughts, feelings and images. “As above, so below.”

PANENTHEISM

This doctrine of transcendence along with immanence underlies the Way of Jesus and is found in many other wisdom traditions as well. It is called *panentheism* in order to distinguish it from both the *theism* and *pantheism*.

Normative theism is dualistic in that it posits a real distinction in the existence of creator and creature, which makes God separate from and therefore relative to creation. This view limits God and implicitly denies that God is infinite and absolute. Therefore, this poses a logical difficulty for many realist thinkers who are also believers operating in a normative context. Hence, they have attempted to circumvent these untoward consequences.¹

¹ Realist philosophers and theologians such as Thomas Aquinas attempted to “save the appearances” by positing the reality of beings in creation, while also accounting for the absolute nature of God. For Christian theologians, however, maintaining the reality of both the divine and human natures of Jesus Christ is more important than saving the appearances. To question or deny the reality of Jesus’ humanity had been condemned as the heresy of docetism, associated with second century Gnosticism.

On the other hand, the simplistic monism of pantheism sees God as identical with the universe and therefore limited to it, thereby confusing God's existence with that of the physical universe. There have been few such views proposed in the West. This charge was leveled against Spinoza, but this is not a fair assessment of his position. This is also a typical criticism of Eastern systems of metaphysics by critics in the West. Actually, most Eastern views are panentheistic, even though their concept of what the West calls God is often expressed differently than it is in the West. When Western thinkers approach Eastern ideas from a Western mind-set, they often misunderstand and misinterpret Eastern teachings, setting up straw men to attack.

Because panentheism is a concept that has generally been missing in the West, I am going to attempt to set it forth in some detail here. Previous exploration of absolute and relative, manifest and unmanifest, immanence and transcendence has prepared the way. We will revisit it later as well, as the argument develops.¹

In order to avoid this, Aquinas posited that creatures have real existence "in itself" (Latin *in se*) but only God's existence is both "in itself" and "through itself" (Latin *per se*). Creatures exist through God's being and they are entirely dependent on God's absolute, independent, unitary being.

The logical underpinning of Aquinas's realism is the separative judgment, *separatio* in Latin, imputing real existence. In simple predication, a characteristic is attributed to a subject without imputing real existence to the subject, for example, "Red is a color," or, "A unicorn is a mythical beast." Here "red" and "unicorn" are not asserted as real entities having existence in the world, and "is" functions only as a copulative. However, certain judgments impute existence to the subject in addition to attributing characteristics, such as, "The United States Capitol is in Washington," where "the United States Capitol" is the name of an actual building existing in the world. In this case the verb "is" serves as both a copulative linking subject and predicate and also as an assertion imputing real existence to the subject.

According to the nondual position, this imputation of separate, real existence is the fundamental error of a person caught in duality. The Vedic tradition calls it "the mistake of the intellect" (Sanskrit *prajna parad*). On Shankara's analogy it is like a someone walking in the dark of night mistaking a piece of rope for a snake. The antidote for "being in the dark" (ignorance) is "turning on the light" (enlightenment). The mistaken reality of the "snake" is seen for what it is. When an illusion is exposed in the light of knowledge, it simply vanishes into the nothingness it is.

¹ My apologies for redundancy go to those who already comprehend this notion. But experience shows that many people find this challenging to grasp, especially those who do not have a background in philosophy or theology, or lack experience working with technical material.

It is not possible to appreciate perennial wisdom, the Way of Jesus or *The Gospel of Thomas*, if one doesn't understand these ideas. Admittedly they are somewhat sophisticated, but they are well worth the trouble acquiring.¹

In contrast to theism and pantheism, panentheism holds that from the point of view of Infinite Consciousness, reality is one and indivisible, and that the universe is the manifestation of an unmanifest reality greatly exceeding it in scope.² This may be pictured in terms of universal mind and its thoughts, which are contained in the mind as its content, but which neither define nor limit the mind itself.³

Ordinary human beings have limited minds. A finite mind cannot grasp this absolute, infinite state directly by means of its relative mode of knowing. The limited mind must either be transcended, or else it must resort to a logical construct erected with concepts or images.

In imagination, we can picture God as an ocean without shores or a sky without horizon. We can also conceive of God conceptually in relation to creation as both transcendent source and immanent ground. This can be further understood in terms of God's unitary existence as being both manifest and unmanifest. God's

¹ I confess that when I began my study of philosophy as an undergraduate. The level of abstraction required often stumped me. The unfamiliar terminology was also confusing at first. But after awhile, it all started making sense, like learning a foreign language. One feels lost at the outset, but then one begins to catch a few words here and there. After that comes understanding, along with some conversational ability, then thinking and speaking in the language fluently. An admonition is in order, however: Being able to manipulate the terminology correctly is no guarantee that one actually understands it. It takes some contemplating to plumb the depths of these ideas.

² Science fiction writer Philip K. Dick, described his own viewpoint "as an 'acosmic panentheist,' which means that I don't believe that the universe exists. I believe that the only thing that exists is God and he is more than the universe. The universe is an extension of God into space and time.'" Quoted from *The New York Times*, July 7, 2006, Movie Review: 'A Scanner Darkly': Keanu Reeves, Undercover and Flying High on a Paranoid Head Trip By Manohla Dargis.

³ This view has been stated in Western philosophy in terms of Idealism in contrast to Realism. Alfred North Whitehead observed that Western philosophy is a footnote to Plato. Plato's is the prototypical Idealist. The first footnote was contributed by his student Aristotle, the father of Western Realism, who tried to "save the appearance," since Idealism seems counterintuitive to many. The ensuing dialectic is the history of Western metaphysics, which culminated in Hegel's Absolute Idealism. Hegelianism provoked an anti-metaphysical reaction in which Western thinkers are still embroiled. In the meanwhile science has substituted for metaphysics, and the result has often been empiricist reductionism and "scientific" materialism. However, the meeting of East and West is beginning to change this.

transcendence and immanence are different expressions of the same indivisible God.

God's transcendence is wholly unmanifest and is the source of the manifest. God's immanence is unmanifest as the ground of being underlying the manifest creation. The unmanifest ground might be compared to the screen on which a film is projected. The light falling on the screen is the "substance" of the movie, whose images are fleeting appearances. The audience is entranced by the film and completely overlooks the screen. In this way, the manifest is fully dependent on the transcendent source for its cause and the immanent ground for its subsistence. Both the transcendent source and immanent ground are unmanifest, invisible behind the scenes, as it were, and the unmanifest is neither limited by the manifest nor dependent on it.

These distinctions are only logical and conceptual. They are mandated by our limited mode of knowing, which cannot grasp the whole. Being unable to penetrate to the ultimate reality of God's oneness, we use conceptual instruments to develop a logical model that attempts to approximate what we cannot grasp directly by acquaintance. Since these distinctions are not real, they do not imply that there is multiplicity or difference in God's being.

All apparent multiplicity and difference is a consequence of the infinity of possible experience available to Infinite Consciousness. If Infinite Consciousness is to know itself fully, which absolute knowledge requires if God is not to be limited, then it must entertain this field of all possibilities in the actuality of its knowledge of itself. Knowing itself as finite, these experiences of Infinite Consciousness appear in limited mind as the manifest "creation," seemingly separate from God but not actually so.

The manifest is itself an appearance projected by the limited mind. What we call "reality" is a mixture of what we apparently received from what is outside of us through the medium of the senses. We conclude that this world and its objects are "outside" since they are not subject to our will, as are our mental processes "inside us." However, we also know from science that we know in terms of sense data, and we know from error that the data of the sense may or may not correspond to that which this data purportedly corresponds "outside." In fact, as we age this fact becomes painfully obvious.

Secondly, psychology has discovered that the knowing process is a relation between subjective and objective components. The subject contributes to organizing the sense data into a percept that is then further organized on the basis of concepts, and ordered logically with respect to other data. All this happens within. In addition, emotional coloring influences not only the data but also the entire process of knowing.

Finally, the “outside” remains a mystery. As Kant pointed out in *The Critique of Pure Reason*, which science has borne out, human beings know the world in terms of phenomena, appearances, and we are not directly acquainted with “things in themselves” through either the senses or the operations of the mind. We know only in relation to the mode of the human knowing process, with all its limitations.

In the view of panentheism, both the limited mind and the world proceed from God as the finite range of God’s infinite being and knowledge. Hence, they only seem separate from God to a limited mind, not to Infinite Consciousness. Should the limited mind cease to be limited, then the limited individuality and limited world would be known by Infinite Consciousness as they really are in terms of God’s indivisible oneness.

This is the key to liberation from the spiritual ignorance of limited mind. Remove the limitations and knowledge automatically ensues without having to add anything from “outside.” Or, in the words of mystic poet William Blake: “If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up till he sees all things thro’ narrow chinks of his cavern.”¹

According to Plato’s philosophy, knowledge is remembrance of what we already knew but have forgotten. Another metaphor is awakening from a dream. Or, as Paul writes in the well known words of the King James Version: “Now we see as through a glass, darkly. Then we shall see face to face.”² “Glass” is an archaic term for mirror. “Darkly” means “obscurely.” The idea is that we see only a reflection in a mirror, but when we are face to face, we see directly. While the mind is limited, we only know ourselves as limited. When we will see ourselves directly, after all limitations have been removed, we will know ourselves as we really are. Then we can say with Paul: “I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live. Yet not I, but Christ lives in me.”³

TOTALITY OF BEING AND KNOWLEDGE

According to perennial wisdom, the God-Man manifests in the physical world as a human being while simultaneously knowing that he is God. Although the God-Man takes human form, he is also fully aware that his existence is not limited to this form. While Divine Incarnations are fully human, they are also fully divine. That is to say, when God descends into human form, he experiences everything that a person would experience under the same circumstances but also enjoys infinite consciousness. Being the conscious embodiment of God, their reality not only transcends the world, but it is also immanent to it as its ground, and they realize

¹ William Blake. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. “A Memorable Fancy,” Plate Two.

² I Corinthians 11:13.

³ Galatians 2:20.

this. Their knowledge is Absolute Knowledge of Absolute Being as total knowledge identical with infinite being, embracing all possibilities.¹

This is the inner meaning of the doctrine that Jesus was God and man, that he had a human and divine nature. For example, Jesus' work of redemption required his passion and crucifixion, to which he submitted as a man. Yet, his claim that he and the Father were one, implied that as God his being, knowledge and power transcended this limited world. As a man Jesus went through what any human being would have gone through, but as God, he retained infinite consciousness throughout it.

Meher Baba clarified this, indicating that as an advent of the God-Man, Jesus suffered everything an ordinary human being would suffer under such circumstances. But the physical life of Jesus, like the life of all beings in creation, took place in the manifest world, which is a realm of appearance. The difference is that creatures experience the manifest world of appearance as real until they realize Truth. The God-realized know the difference between appearance and reality on the basis of Absolute Knowledge.

The early theologians were correct, then, to maintain that Jesus was both fully man and fully God. While the God-Man manifests as a human being, he is simultaneously established in Infinite Consciousness, which is eternally unmanifest.

The God-Man is Absolute Reality realized in Absolute Knowledge manifesting (appearing) in human form. This is the totality of being and knowledge. It is inclusive of the Self-knowledge of Absolute Reality as eternally unmanifest and the manifestation of the Absolute as relative in the "mirror" of finite mind. Divine Omniscience, in which God knows himself fully as the only being, includes the full range of possible experience, infinite and finite, in the eternal now. God's omniscience follows from His omnipresence as the only reality. God knows everything because God *is* everything. This, asserts Meher Baba, is the knowledge of the God-man:

There cannot be anything hidden from the One who is everywhere present, for He is everywhere. And it naturally follows that when there cannot be anything hidden from this One He must also be all-knowing, knowing everything.

This infinite-Knowing is 'seeing' everything at one and the same time, and seeing it NOW. It is that knowledge that does not begin and does not end; which is indivisible and continuous, and to which nothing can be added and from which nothing can be subtracted.

It is that Knowledge that makes God at this moment know that which He knew when it occurred countless aeons ago, and makes Him know

¹ Meher Baba. *Beams From Meher Baba on the Spiritual Panorama*. p. 27-32.

that which will occur countless aeons hence; that Knowledge which makes everything known to God simultaneously and NOW. This is the Knowledge of the Perfect Masters and the Avatar.

In terms simpler to you it means that which you as individuals know at this moment I knew aeons ago, and what you as individuals in ages to come will be knowing at a particular moment, I know now.¹

TRANSMISSION AND GRACE

The spiritual goal of perennial wisdom, including the Way of Jesus, is to unite with the Master as he really is in essence, i.e., God, rather than as he appeared in human form as an apparently limited individual. That is to say, the task is to realize the real being of the Master as the ultimate reality of one's own being. In the Way of Jesus, Jesus is that Master.

According to many masters of perennial wisdom, it is not possible to cross the gap that lies between the finite and the infinite entirely on one's own, because this abyss is infinite. Direct transmission from a realized one is required for realization of one's true nature. The only one who owns this knowledge is God as Knowledge Absolute — Infinite Consciousness. Those individuals who have realized this while in the body are perfected. They alone can transmit this realization to others. For they bridge the abyss between the finite and infinite. For them it is no longer a gap but a junction point.

“Grace” stems from Latin *gratia* meaning “gift.” *Gratia* is from the same root as English *gratis*, meaning “free.” This means that while aspirants may prepare themselves through their own efforts, they cannot compel grace to descend. Grace is imparted freely when the time is ripe.

Knowing everything about a person, Masters know what needs to be done in order for a person to progress spiritually. They also know that at a certain point the knots of tightly wound impression are so entangled they cannot be unraveled by any means other than cutting them. This cutting of the knot is the final stroke of knowledge imparted by the Master's grace. When the time is ripe, the Master cuts the knot of entangled impressions, and limited individuality is extinguished fully and finally. Only then does a person realize one's true nature as unlimited — Infinite Consciousness.

The history of mysticism in the Jesus tradition reveals that Jesus has been and remains active in shepherding his flock. Mystics and holy ones continually arise among those who lose themselves in the Master. The Way of Jesus is no exception. Therefore it is no wonder that his followers still hang on every word that may

¹ Meher Baba. *The Everything and the Nothing*, 33. p. 38.

possibly be attributed to him, even after millennia. This is the excitement around *The Gospel of Thomas*.

THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS

*These are the hidden words that the living Jesus spoke
and Didymos Judas Thomas wrote.¹*

AN OLD FRAME RENEWED

The Gospel of Thomas is particularly significant to the study of the Jesus tradition because it presents a new reference frame through which to view it today. As it turns out, this frame is likely an extremely old one, too. While the date of this gospel is in dispute, at least some of the copy of *Thomas* we now have is almost certainly quite early, possibly in a form closer to the oral teaching of Jesus than the canonical gospels as we have them. Moreover, many scholars find links to what are possibly Jesus' own words in a number of its sayings or at least quite close to them. Like the other gospels, it is probably not entirely attributable to Jesus, but its aphoristic form suggests that it may be more primitive than the narrative gospels are.

The most significant aspect of the frame of *The Gospel of Thomas* from the viewpoint of this undertaking is its clear statement that nonduality is the goal of the spiritual quest. This puts the frame embraced by the communities that used *The Gospel of Thomas* squarely in the nondual tradition of perennial wisdom. Moreover, its origin and use is early enough to suggest that this may have been related to Jesus' inner teaching, as it claims, whereas the canonical gospel represent his outer teaching.

The Gospel of Thomas is not alone in the early esoteric and mystical literature of Christianity. However, it is more available today because the power of the established narrative makes other teachings seem too extreme, even though they were held by many in the early communities of the Jesus tradition, along with a variety of other views.

In addition, *The Gospel of Thomas* is now becoming widely known on account of interest in the putative romance of Jesus and Mary Magdalene that has captured the popular imagination and is giving rise to a new narrative propelled by sensationalism.² While a Mary not specifically named as Magdalene appears in *The*

¹ *The Gospel of Thomas*. Prologue. Rendered by the author.

² In such works as *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* and *The Messianic Legacy*, Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln claimed that Jesus sired a son by Mary Magdalene and this bloodline was the basis for the Merovingian Dynasty in France, and the Templar Order to protect it. Baigent, Leigh and Lincoln are authors, not scholars. The natural presumption is that their motivation was fame and fortune, which they did reap when their books

Gospel of Thomas rather peripherally and not in any romantic role, the mention of *Thomas* in Dan Brown's famous novel, *The Da Vinci Code*, gave *Thomas* notoriety. Most importantly for our purposes, many scholars recognize it as a genuine gospel representing an authentic aspect of the Jesus tradition, perhaps more authentic than some of the redactions that appear in the canonical gospels. Therefore, we will focus our attention on *The Gospel of Thomas* to the exclusion of other apocryphal gospels.

THOMAS THE APOSTLE

The preface to *The Gospel of Thomas* asserts that Jesus transmitted a secret teaching to Thomas, who reports it therein. The term "gospel" has acquired a very specific and indeed pious sense in the past two millennia. A literal translation of Greek *euangelion*, literally means "good news." The good news about Jesus was spread through the reports of the early followers of Jesus, especially the apostles according to tradition.

became best sellers. Scholars regard their work as sensationalism, deeming such claims to be unsubstantiated on the evidence offered and implausible on the basis of the evidence that exists. It certainly did not help the authors' cause when some of the "evidence" turned out to be a hoax based on forged documents.

Examined from the perspective of rigorous methodology, these claims appear to be the stuff of conspiracy theories in the derogatory sense, comprised more of speculation mixed with fiction than history based on documented evidence that can be verified through rigorous methodology. It is not surprising that a talented author like Dan Brown smelled a good story and exploited it artfully.

As a result of the publicity, romance seems to have trumped scholarship in the public mindset, and the story has gained traction, spawning both imitators and debunkers. For example, scholar Bart D. Ehrman wrote *The Truth and Fiction in the Da Vinci Code* to contest the factual claims Dan Brown put forward about the historicity of his novel. Indeed, the putative Jesus-Magdalene affair has become something of a *cause célèbre* on both sides of the controversy, with some shocked at the very suggestion and others titillated by the prospect.

Baigent, Leigh, and Lincoln eventually retreated from their factual claims, asserting only that their work was a plausible hypothesis. In *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, Baigent and Leigh had put forward another conspiracy theory. They asserted that the Dead Sea Scrolls were not Essene documents but rather were written by early Christians, which the Vatican had covered up. Scholars also dismiss this claim as another conspiracy theory based on sensationalism rather than grounded in fact. On one hand, all the publicity has made such works as *The Gospel of Thomas* famous, but on the other hand, it has also muddied the waters by conflating history and fiction.

The term “apostle” signifies a messenger. Originally, the men we now call “apostles” were called the Twelve. Apparently their stature was considerable among the faithful from the earliest days. However, it is doubtful that they were as piously revered in those days as they are now. Indeed, it is known from reports in Acts that there were some strong disagreements in the early days, for example, between Peter and Paul over observing the Jewish Law. In *The Gospel of Thomas*, dissension among the Twelve is also suggested over this secret teaching that Jesus reportedly gave to Thomas.¹ Scholars conclude that early Christianity was uniform neither in doctrine nor norms, at least in the minds of the early writers.

Tradition also has it that the apostles went in different directions spreading the good news, so it is not surprising that differences about Jesus’ mission and message arose almost from the beginning. For example, one tradition holds that Peter went to Rome and Thomas went to the East, even as far as India.²

Ancient geographical names and concepts were quite different from today, and then “India” did not mean what it has come to mean for us. There is scant historical evidence to corroborate these early traditions. Some scholars suspect, for example, that Peter may have been placed in Rome when the Church came to be viewed as the successor to the Roman Empire. Similarly, Thomas seems to be credited with evangelizing the Near East and the Indian subcontinent, and legends even place him in Latin America. So clearly tradition needs to be tempered by reason, especially where evidence is lacking.

The apostles were the messengers of the good news in a day when there were no newspapers or other media. Books were rare and expensive before the invention of printing. As a result most communication was oral or through manuscripts painstakingly copied letter by letter. It is unlikely that something not regarded as important would have been copied down or translated into other languages. The only extant copy of *The Gospel of Thomas* is in Coptic, but there are also a few Greek fragments. Scholars hypothesize that the original may have been written in Syriac. The fact that it was recorded at all, let alone translated into other languages, indicates that quite early those who used it considered this gospel to be an important work whose *bona fides* was not questioned.

The Gospel of Thomas purports to be the good news revealed to an early community through a companion of Jesus named Judas Thomas. But this was no ordinary good news. It claims to be a hidden or “secret” teaching imparted by Jesus

¹ Saying 13.

² Herbert Christian Merillat, *The Gnostic Apostle Thomas: “Twin” of Jesus?* The author has kindly posted the entire book online, and it is also available in print from Xlibris, a division of Random House, 1997.
URL=<<http://members.aol.com/didymus5/thomas.html>>.

directly to Thomas, apparently in private. Although the gospel does not specifically state that this Judas Thomas is Thomas the Apostle, the content of the gospel strongly implies it.¹

In addition, a long-standing tradition perpetuated the view that Thomas the Apostle was the recipient of a secret mystical teaching received directly from Jesus, and that he is the author of this gospel. Whether Thomas the Apostle actually wrote it or part of it is now unknown, but it likely stems from an early school of thought that grew out of his ministry, similar to many scholars' speculation about the origin of the other gospels.

This is not the only mention of a hidden teaching in early Christianity. The New Testament itself asserts that Jesus taught publicly in parables and only revealed the inner meaning to his close ones. What this meaning may have been is controversial. Morton Smith claimed that Clement of Alexandria alludes to a secret teaching of Mark to which he was privy, although this was shown to be hoax.² Many scholars were taken in, however, and references to it abound since thirty years had passed before it was debunked.

One of the difficulties is that it does not seem that Jesus or the apostles were learned men. Matthew, the tax collector, may have had some education, but most scholars do not ascribe the gospel bearing his name to his hand. In those times, only the learned knew how to write. Others depended on scribes for this skill, just as one went to a carpenter for woodworking and a smith for metalworking.

In contrast to Jesus' companions, Paul was a learned person, and his principal works are accepted as being indisputably from his own hand. However, many scholars now dispute Paul's authorship of some letters attributed to him, namely, Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, and Titus. Paul was not a companion of Jesus, and Luke, the author of both the gospel attributed to him and of Acts, is generally thought to be an associate of Paul. Most scholars view Paul's

¹ Saying 13.

² Margaret Baker. "The Secret Tradition, Part 1." *Jewish Roots of Eastern Christian Mysticism Research Seminar*. (Milwaukee: Marquette University). Ongoing, proceedings reported on online at [URL=<http://www.marquette.edu/maqom/tradition1>](http://www.marquette.edu/maqom/tradition1). Morton Smith published a work called *The Secret Gospel: The Discovery and Interpretation of the Secret Gospel According to Mark*, supposedly referred to in letter of Clement of Alexandria. Stephen C. Carlson conclusively debunked it as an academic hoax. Morton Smith. *The Secret Gospel: The Discovery and Interpretation of the Secret Gospel According to Mark*. (London: Victor Gollancz, 1974); Morton Smith. *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973). Stephen C. Carlson. *The Gospel Hoax: Morton Smith's Invention of Secret Mark*. (Texas: Baylor University Press, 2005).

letters as the earliest documents of the Jesus tradition, even though they occur after the gospels in the New Testament canon.

The companions of Jesus not being learned, the other gospels and letters attributed to them would likely have been written later by learned members of the communities gathering around their oral teaching. The written works would most likely have been based on teaching that was initially oral, although the letters of James and Peter might have been given through dictation to a scribe. Similarly, *The Gospel of Thomas* as we now have it might have been the product of learned members of the school of Thomas who collected and wrote down the oral sayings associated with Thomas during a later but still relatively early period.¹

While the historical facts are murky regarding *The Gospel of Thomas* and its context, this is also true in the case of the canonical works. Therefore, it is often not possible to document venerable traditions or even revered texts as being factual. Similarly, some material that is plausibly factual is rejected because it runs counter to prevailing norms.

On one hand, factual evidence is often overlooked owing to longstanding tradition or firmly held beliefs. Indeed, most texts that run counter to tradition are discounted on that basis alone, evidence notwithstanding. So-called apocryphal works are automatically suspect when they conflict with tradition.

The Gospel of Thomas is one of the texts that normative authorities reject as spurious. On the other hand, in the case of canonical works, belief in doctrine is often confused with factual truth grounded in evidence. Those who take scripture as revelation, hence, unquestionably true, accept everything that scripture asserts as being factual on the “evidence” of revelation. The problem here is that revelation as evidence of its own truth constitutes circular reasoning: Claiming that a particular revelation is true because revelation holds it to be so simply begs the question.

It is not appropriate to examine the historical evidence in detail in an undertaking of this scope, and it also lies outside of my field of expertise. Suffice it to say that I am satisfied on the basis of the work of historians of the period that *The Gospel of Thomas* is at least plausibly genuine and indeed a relatively early work. Some date it possibly mid-first century, and most scholars consider it no later than mid-second century.

Most significantly, some prominent scholars even regard at least some of its sayings as probably those of Jesus, preserved in a form closer to the original than other similar sayings, which are not as primitive in the literary sense. Here, the

¹ The stock in trade of scholars is texts. Scholars often overlook or minimize the fact that oral tradition played a principal role in the transmission of ancient cultures. Many ancient works were apparently transmitted across significant spans of time before being written down.

more primitive form is presumed closer to the oral from which the saying was originally given.¹

The Gospel of Thomas states quite explicitly that the spiritual goal is realizing the nondual state. This connects not only *The Gospel of Thomas* with perennial wisdom but also the Jesus tradition in which it is embedded. The significance of this is clear.

On one hand, if *Thomas* can reasonably be shown to be a primary text of the Way of Jesus, this would constitute strong evidence linking the Way of Jesus to perennial wisdom. The argument for this interpretation will occupy our attention in much of what follows.

On the other hand, if it can be maintained that *Thomas* is heretical, then the argument fails. Normative Christianity has argued for the view that *Thomas* be rejected as spurious from ancient times.

Some would like to rush to judgment on this in both directions. The normative view of the rediscovered text is that it is obviously Gnostic, hence, heretical, as the Fathers said ages ago. On the other hand, others see *Thomas* and other such texts as providing sufficient evidence of a conspiracy to cover up the secret teaching of Jesus in favor of their own dominance. A more tempered approach is advisable unless one is preaching to the choir.

Unfortunately, the text of this putative gospel was lost for centuries, and it survived mostly on the basis of works that refer to it. Its message was long suppressed, having been condemned as heretical, and what was known of it came mostly from those opposed to its teaching. It is only through serendipity that the text we have came to light recently.

The historical status of *The Gospel of Thomas* is still unclear. Other than three Greek papyri fragments found at Oxyrhynchus in Egypt containing twenty sayings, there was no explicit textual evidence of this gospel other, than references to it by critics. Moreover, since there was no extant copy of *The Gospel of Thomas* available for comparison, it was not even known for sure whether the fragments were indeed of this lost gospel.

Auspiciously, a relatively complete version appeared on the antiquities market in 1946. It had apparently been discovered in Egypt at a place called Nag Hammadi in December, 1945, when two peasants happened upon a jar containing thirteen leather-bound codices holding fifty-two tractates dating to the second century C.E. Among these treatises was a complete copy of *The Gospel of Thomas* in Coptic.

Comparison of the Coptic copy found at Nag Hammadi with the Greek fragments discovered at Oxyrhynchus showed the integrity of the text. It was assumed that

¹ Robert W. Funk, et al. *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*. (New York: Macmillan, 1993).

The Gospel of Thomas had somehow made it way to Egypt and been translated into Coptic there.

There is no record or tradition about Thomas the Apostle ever having been in Egypt. Nor is there any evidence of an Egyptian connection other than the discovery of the Coptic version of *The Gospel of Thomas*, about whose origins nothing is known. It was most probably part of the library of a nearby monastery. Most of the tractates found with it were unorthodox and would have been considered contraband. So they were likely hidden in a jar safely away from the monastery during a period of persecution.

Ancient traditions about Thomas the Apostle are also ambiguous.¹ Whether Jesus or Thomas were the historical source of this gospel remains uncertain on the basis of the existing evidence. Moreover, it was a literary convention at the time to attribute works to well-known pseudo-authors, so there is good reason to think that this may also be the case with this gospel. But again, there is no solid evidence disproving its authenticity either. The scholarly debate continues and the jury is still out.

But even if *The Gospel of Thomas* did not come directly from Jesus through Thomas, at least in its entirety, some scholars now surmise that it was the gospel used by an early community of the Jesus tradition, perhaps one that was even connected with Thomas the Apostle's ministry, as the Thomasine school has long held. If it is, it may reflect an early acceptance of the essence of Jesus' teaching as a mystical one, namely, a teaching about entering the kingdom within while one is still in this body, as well as discovering it outside oneself as the core of all.²

There are arguments that this gospel is later and derivative, having been influenced by Hellenistic Gnostic ideas foreign to Jesus and his Palestinian Jewish milieu. But there are also counter-arguments that the teaching contained in *Thomas* is early and original, being a source from which similar but later works now considered to be Gnostic were derived. At any rate, *The Gospel of Thomas* suggests that very early in development of the Jesus tradition, there was a significant mystical current that normative Christianity came to reject as incompatible with its official teaching.

This mystical bent was later suppressed and its literature lost to view, much of it destroyed as heretical. These works are now known primarily on the basis of the dismissive criticism of normative apologists. Fortunately, archaeological finds have recovered some of this material, including an almost complete text of *The Gospel of Thomas*.

¹ Merillat.

² Sayings 3 and 22.

DISCOVERY AND SCHOLARSHIP

Until recently, *The Gospel of Thomas* was known directly only through the Greek Oxyrhynchus fragments, although some scholars still suspect that it may have originally been a Syriac text which has been lost. In late 1945, a Coptic version of this ancient text was recovered from the banks of the Nile in Egypt, near a place called Nag Hammadi. It was a small but extremely valuable part of an archaeological find that became known as the Nag Hammadi library.¹

The copy that was recovered probably found its way into the library of one of the monasteries in the Egyptian desert, near Nag Hammadi. Who consigned them there in a sealed jar in a cave and why remains a mystery. Scholars surmise that the works in the Nag Hammadi find were likely proscribed and were secreted to avoid detection. For whatever reason, those who apparently hid these documents were never able to return to collect them. The parchment on which they were written was preserved in the sealed jar for almost two millennia until two peasants serendipitously happened upon the jar and broke it with an axe, finding the parchments within.

After a good many of vicissitudes, the documents were finally put in the hands of scholars to be pieced together and deciphered. This was quite a task, since the parchment was very old and brittle, and many leaves had been badly damaged by not only time but also rough handling after their discovery by peasants who did not initially know what they were. Unfortunately, some pages were even used for fire making before their potential value was appreciated.

Apparently the copy of *The Gospel of Thomas* found at Nag Hammadi was translated into Coptic, most probably from Greek. Nag Hammadi is in Egypt, and Coptic was the language of Egypt at the time. The Coptic script was introduced in Egypt around the second century C.E., when an alphabet based on Greek was devised to translate the scriptures in place of cumbersome hieroglyphics. Coptic is still the living language of the Coptic Church in Egypt, although since Islamization, Arabic is the predominant language there. This being the case, the peasants who discovered the parchments were unable to read the ancient script; hence, they did not realize what it was.

After a lengthy and painstaking reconstruction and editing process by a team of scholars, *The Gospel according to Thomas* was finally translated into English and published in 1959.² This title was apparently appended to the text by a scribe, in accordance with the custom of the time to place the title at the end of a work instead

¹ Marvin Meyer. *The Gnostic Discoveries: The Impact of the Nag Hammadi Library*.

² A. Guillaumont, H.-Ch. Puech, G. Quispel, W. Till and Yassah 'Abd Al Masih. *The Gospel according to Thomas*. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959).

of at the beginning as we do now. Subsequently, the title was shortened, and it is now usually referred to simply as *The Gospel of Thomas*.

The long interval between the discovery and its public release created the suspicion of a cover up. Many thought that normative authorities were suppressing material in order to conceal documents that challenged normative doctrines.

Some political maneuvering was perhaps involved, delaying the process. But the manuscripts were badly damaged, and the rigorous process of reconstructing the ancient texts took a long time since they had to be reassembled from pieces, almost like a jigsaw puzzle. However, when the material was released, there was no evidence of anything that would seriously question key teachings of normative Christianity, and there also did not seem to be any smoking gun pointing to a cover-up of lost secrets either.

The publication of *The Gospel of Thomas* created something of a stir for a while, as did some other works purporting to be from other apostles. But many scholars dismissed these words as being chiefly Gnostic in origin, hence, of little significance historically to early Christianity or its subsequent development. Since *The Gospel of Thomas* was deemed not to be Christian in the normative sense, so its import for Christianity was initially minimized.

Many were disappointed that the Nag Hammadi material did not contain any indication of a conspiracy to conceal damaging evidence. Nor did it contain anything that would definitively challenge key Christian beliefs or norms directly. However, it did suggest that in their rush to defend orthodoxy, early authorities did not present an accurate picture of those whom they opposed. When most scholars concluded that the find was a Gnostic collection rather than a Christian one, and included *The Gospel of Thomas* in it, popular interest waned.

Initially, most of the work on the Nag Hammadi find was scholarly. An English translation of the complete collection did not appear until 1977.¹ Then, in 1979, a well-established scholar named Elaine Pagels published *The Gnostic Gospels*, where she recounted the story of the Nag Hammadi find and its implications in popular format, yet not lacking in scholarship.² It won the National Book Critics Award and was also well received by the public.

In fact, Pagels's book quickly set the standard for approaching the text for serious but popular consumption. The success of the work also showed that there was a

¹ James M Robinson (Editor). *Nag Hammadi Library*. (New York: Harper, 1977). Marvin Meyer. *The Gnostic Gospels of Jesus: The Definitive Collection of Mystical Gospels and Secret Books about Jesus of Nazareth*. Bentley Layton. *The Gnostic Scriptures*. New York: Anchor Bible, 1987).

² Elaine Pagels. *The Gnostic Gospels*.

market for scholarly research presented in a form that educated laypeople could approach without difficulty, even though they knew little about the field. Since that time, this genre has blossomed, especially with growing interest in the historical Jesus. Many such works now regularly make the bestseller lists. This alone has greatly modified the framework of the universe of discourse, as more people become better educated about the historical evidence.

On the basis of her research, Pagels suggested that early Christianity was far more diverse than previously suspected. She called into question the uniformity that normative Christianity attributed to the Christian tradition, supposedly dating from the earliest times. While she did not move the debate beyond the Gnostic controversy or seriously call into question normative doctrines, she did raise serious questions about the relevance of *The Gospel of Thomas*, especially, for Christians today, suggesting that it should not simply be dismissed out of hand as either arcane or heretical.

Subsequently, a group of scholars calling themselves The Jesus Seminar cooperated in assessing the validity of evidence regarding the historical Jesus and the authenticity of sayings attributed to him. These scholars indicated that *The Gospel of Thomas* might well contain early sayings of Jesus, perhaps in a form even earlier than similar sayings in the canonical gospels. Moreover, they published *The Five Gospels*, in which a board of experts ranked the probable authenticity of sayings attributed to Jesus in the canonical New Testament and *The Gospel of Thomas* as well, even calling *Thomas* a fifth gospel.¹

¹ Robert W. Funk. Parenthetically, it is important to note in this regard that orthodox teaching holds that, being divinely inspired, the Bible is privileged communication, and Fundamentalist sects even hold that every word is inerrant. However, this is a matter of belief rather than evidence. Virtually all sayings of Jesus, as well as those of other ancients, are not known on the basis of available evidence to be either verbatim or even authentic. Therefore, such sayings are properly spoken of as being *attributed* to a person, and the probability of their authenticity may vary a great deal, depending on evidence.

For example, the words, “Jesus said,” may naively be understood to assert that Jesus did in fact utter exactly those words under the circumstances reported. However, scholars would interpret such sayings as being *attributed* to Jesus, and try to determine how authentic this attribution might be, given the evidence for it. For example, textual criticism reveals the likelihood of the same person being responsible for several utterances whose wording and style seems different. Nor would scholars presume that the narrative in which a saying is embedded accurately reports the circumstances of the utterance. The narrative might have been adduced to frame the meaning of the saying by imposing a particular interpretation to enforce a doctrinal point. Many sayings of the New Testament are suspect for such reasons.

As controversy began to rage around *The Gospel of Thomas*, especially when some influential scholars began to take its contribution to Christianity seriously, the public's interest was renewed. Since then *The Gospel of Thomas* has appeared in a number of translations, and commentaries continue to appear at an increasing rate as curiosity about it continues to grow. As a result of renewed public interest and scholarly reassessment of its import, *The Gospel of Thomas* is now taking its place as a key early work of the way Jesus showed.

STYLE

While *The Gospel of Thomas* may seem almost shockingly brief to those raised on the narratives of the canonical gospels, its style will be familiar to those acquainted with other traditions. These aphorisms are not only pithy but also challenging to grasp, requiring not so much ordinary understanding, which is of the mind, as spiritual understanding, which is of the heart. These nuggets of simple yet profound wisdom often confound the mind while they touch the heart as the spiritual organ of higher cognition and refined feeling. In this they recall the koans of Zen, the sutras of the Vedic and Buddhist traditions, the crisp style of Taoism, especially the *Tao Te Ching*, and the sayings (*Hadith*) attributed to Prophet Muhammad, as well as much Sufi poetry.

Moreover, the sayings of *The Gospel of Thomas* are not organized systematically on the basis of any obvious internal logic. They are not even separated in the original text, but are run together as was customary in that period. Although scholars have divided and numbered the various sayings for convenience, the sayings are neither differentiated nor divided in the original. In fact, they can even be organized in other ways by breaking the text differently. As a result, they stand independently and can be interpreted without being constrained by a viewpoint imposed through a narrative.

If *The Gospel of Thomas* had not been lost for so long, it would likely be looked at somewhat differently now, especially if it had been included in the canon. Nevertheless, it stands out as virtually the only work in the Nag Hammadi find that is presently shaping not only contemporary understanding of the early Church, but also popular spirituality as well. For example, *The Gospel of Thomas* is linking early teaching with core principles and precepts of perennial wisdom.

A principal reason for its popularity and influence seems to be that many find that these sayings attributed to Jesus ring true intuitively. In addition, the more paradoxical sayings set people thinking. Everyone loves a puzzle, especially when the promised reward for solving it is immortality.¹

¹ Saying 1.

There is already widespread interest in *The Gospel of Thomas*, which continues to increase. Considering that it is the type of document ordinarily of interest only to scholars, its growing popularity argues that there may be something extraordinary operating behind the scenes. Indeed, it might be asked whether it is due to synchronicity instead of coincidence that the Nag Hammadi find came to light just when renewed interest in spirituality was arising in the world, a universal spirituality independent of normative religions and sharply contrasting with them.

The Gospel of Thomas is emerging as a foundational text for the contemporary understanding of the origins of the Way of Jesus. In addition, it is beginning to be appreciated that the key fundamentals of its teaching seem to relate it to perennial wisdom. It promises to become a resource both theoretically and practically for the Way of Jesus chiefly because it clarifies the conception of the kingdom as an internal reality standing ready to be revealed to those who seek to enter it.

THEME

On this interpretation, the underlying theme of *The Gospel of Thomas* is that the kingdom of God is within. God is both immanent and transcendent, and God's immanence in oneself and the world *is* the kingdom.

In early Christianity, there were two ways proclaimed for different types of seekers. The way appropriate for most is the way of faith. The way of inner vision is only suitable for the few who have the discrimination, discipline and devotion to undertake it and see it through. The kingdom on earth is found through the way of inner vision. It is a treasure hidden in plain view, but people do not see it because they are looking outside of themselves instead of within. The kingdom is immanent as well as transcendent, and so it can be found at the core of oneself and at the core of all by turning one's attention toward the inner reality underlying surface phenomena and "seeing" with the eye of the heart.¹ But first one must open this spiritual eye.

This does not preclude its being approached as transcendent through the way of faith as well. The way to seek the kingdom through faith is to surrender to God or to a God-realized Master. Moreover, these ways are complementary rather than mutually exclusive. Unfortunately, they have been interpreted as being in opposition to each other and have often come in conflict, usually when those following the way of faith gain authority and establish their way as the norm.

The kingdom of God might be expected to transcend the world entirely. Yet, if the kingdom of God were exclusively transcendent, how could humans enter it? And according to Saying 113, for example, it is not wholly transcendent but also

¹ Sayings 3, 22, 113.

immanent: "...the kingdom of the Father is spread over the earth, and people do not see it."

Entering the kingdom by discovering one's true nature through supramental experience is realization of that which is "living" — unchanging, absolute — in contrast to "the world" which is relative and impermanent, hence "dead." *The Gospel of Thomas* makes plain that recognizing the world and the body for what they are — "dead" matter — is a prerequisite for spiritual living.

In this, *The Gospel of Thomas* recalls perennial wisdom: Krishna advised his disciple Arjuna to be beyond the three fundamental qualities constitutive of creation, or *triguna* in Sanskrit.¹ Buddha counseled his disciples to recognize that both the limited self and the world are phenomenal, hence, insubstantial.² The notion of "living" spirit and "dead" matter is not only Orphic or Gnostic. It is also a ubiquitous metaphor, clearly arising from the analogy of a breathing body and a breathless corpse. In ancient times people were much closer to these facts of life than we are now, and such analogies would have quite poignant to those who saw life and death close up on a daily basis.

According to the biblical creation account, God breathed life into man, *adam* meaning "man" in Hebrew. God's breath is man's life. Hence, God's living spirit is immanent in man, waiting to be discovered by going within.

When one finds God within as immanent, one simultaneously finds God also as transcendent, that is, beyond one's limited self and the phenomenal world. For "the One in whom we live, move and have our being" is both transcendent source as the reality beyond relative, phenomenal appearances, and also the immanent ground underlying and supporting the phenomenal world.

By way of analogy, everyone experiences that thoughts come and go in the mind and that their continued existence depends upon the mind's entertaining them.

¹ *Bhagavad Gita* 2:45. The three qualities are illumination/purity (*sattva*), desire/energy (*rajas*), and ignorance/inertia (*tamas*). Their interaction determines the characteristics of both the subjective and objective, that is, mind and world.

² "The Blessed One said, "What is the All? Simply the eye & forms, ear & sounds, nose & aromas, tongue & flavors, body & tactile sensations, intellect & ideas. This, monks, is called the All. Anyone who would say, 'Repudiating this All, I will describe another,' if questioned on what exactly might be the grounds for his statement, would be unable to explain, and furthermore, would be put to grief. Why? Because it lies beyond range." Buddha. *Sabba Sutta: The All*. Translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 2001. *Samyutta Nikaya: The Grouped Discourses*, 35:23.

URL=<<http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn35/sn35.023.than.html>>.

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URL=<<http://www.accesstoinight.org>>.

However, it is also clear that the mind exists independently of and beyond any of the fleeting thoughts that come and go in it. That is to say, a thought is dependent on the mind for its existence, but the mind is not dependent for its existence on any particular thought. Just as thoughts depend for their existence on the mind; so too, the phenomenal forms that appear in the perceivable and intelligible world do not exist on their own but only on the basis of an independent existence that transcends the limitations of these forms depending on it. Said in another way, just as ever-fleeting thoughts depend on the mind to exist; so too, the diversity of constantly changing phenomena depends on the underlying, immanent ground of being.

This presents two questions: (1) what is the nature of the mind as the background of changing thought, and (2) what is the nature of the ground of existence as the background of changing phenomena? According to the sages, these are two sides of the same coin. The subjective and objective poles of knowledge are discovered to be identical in the nondual state.

The person who realizes this identity of being in which subjective and objective, and immanence and transcendence are two sides of the same coin does not experience the death of the physical body, which belongs entirely to the phenomenal world. Rather, one knows one's true nature as "immortal soul" or "living spirit," independent of matter even though embodied.

This is called "soul" in Qabalah and Sufism, *neshamah* in Hebrew and *jan* in Arabic, which stands in contrast to the limited self or "ego," called *nefesh* in Hebrew and *nafs* in Arabic. The soul is also "spirit," *ruach* in Hebrew and *ruh* in Arabic, both meaning "breath," as does Latin *spiritus*. In the Vedic tradition, the unlimited or universal "Self," *atma* in Sanskrit, is also called the "person" (*purusha*), in contrast to the limited self (*jiva*). In Buddhism the universal is called "not-self," *anatma* in Sanskrit and *anatta* in Pali, meaning "not the limited self." Taoism calls this "higher soul," *hun* in Chinese.

That is to say, one realizes oneself as "alive" by divine birthright, so to speak, existing eternally beyond the relative, phenomenal world of form, boundaries, change and limitation. Because this is not merely a matter of philosophy or doctrine but grounded in mystical experience of "the living One" within, *The Gospel of Thomas* is a foundational document for the Way of Jesus.

A teaching begins its historical life energized by the spirit of the Master who gave it. Over time, this spirit begins to wane inevitably, as the teaching is passed through generations and becomes a cultural heritage. First, the living teaching becomes venerable tradition and finally mere convention. When the spirit is lost, the center becomes hollow. This emptiness eventually gets filled with the norms of doctrine, ritual and observance, and a normative religion is born.

Nevertheless, the teaching remains potentially alive, because the Master from which it originally flowed is "living," even though no longer in the body. There is

no such thing as a “dead” Master. The Master’s grace remains available to those who can tap it. This constitutes the mystical core of the teaching, its spirit, which continues to be preserved and transmitted among the few.

PRACTICAL VALUE

The Gospel of Thomas can be read as a manual of mystical spirituality independent of the controversies over its historical value. Despite whether the historical Jesus accords with the mythos of normative Christianity, many great mystics have arisen in the Christian tradition owing to their commitment to the spiritual ideal that Jesus embodies and his teaching represents. So too, insofar as *The Gospel of Thomas* is interpreted as an expression of perennial wisdom, the mystical spirituality it puts forward, at least on this interpretation, is found to be universal. As such, it can arguably be used in the practice of core spirituality, either by Christians seeking a mystical foundation for their practice or by others who wish to use these principles in other ways, such as a non-sectarian approach to universal spirituality.

The Gospel of Thomas apparently fascinates people from a variety of backgrounds and different approaches to spirituality because of its simplicity and directness. The sayings of Jesus in the canonical gospels also tend to be pithy, but the narrative of the gospel often casts them in a context that guides their interpretation normatively, arguably for doctrinal reasons. In contrast, *The Gospel of Thomas* is aphoristic rather than narrative, and these trenchant aphorisms are often more poignant because there is no intervening narrative to deflect attention from them or provides explanation for them that shapes their interpretation, unlike the canonical gospels.

Critical scholars typically point out that the narratives of the canonical gospel often added doctrinal material through the narrative setting that forces a particular interpretation on sayings attributed to Jesus. In addition, the arrangement of the sayings of Jesus in the narrative can also influence their interpretation in a desired doctrinal direction.

Questions arise therefore as to whether the narrative is meant as a biographical account in the contemporary sense or as a statement of doctrine through a teaching story, as was often the case in those times. New Testament scholars have pointed out how each of the four canonical gospel puts forward a different view of Jesus and his teaching, for example, and that attempting to conflate the gospels into a homogenous and consistent biography, and even a harmonious one to boot, overlooks this important divergence of viewpoint.

While *The Gospel of Thomas* presents a contrasting view of Jesus and his teaching when compared with normative Christianity, there are significant doctrinal differences in the canonical literature as well. For example, it seems obvious that the letter of James about the necessity of works to complement faith specifically

confronts the Pauline doctrine of salvation by faith alone, which apparently preceded it. Similar observations have been made about other matters in the canonical works that show either differences in viewpoint among different early communities, or even evince matters of controversy.

AUTHENTICITY

At present, some scholars of the period accept that *The Gospel of Thomas* plausibly stems directly from Jesus. Many sayings also seem to be derived from the same sources as the canonical gospels — presumably originating in Jesus himself and being transmitted more or less faithfully through the oral testimony of his followers. Different accounts give different expression to essentially the same saying. Mark is thought to be the earliest gospel since its version of the sayings is less developed than the others. Some scholars see at least some sayings attributed to Jesus in *The Gospel of Thomas* as being more “primitive” than even Mark, in the sense of being closer to the initial oral tradition.

Historians now largely dispute the traditional notion of the gospels as eyewitness accounts written by those to whom they are attributed, holding instead that they were only written down later, likely from oral sources. Many scholars speculate that there was an oral tradition stemming directly from Jesus that preceded them, and which may even have been written down as a proto-gospel. Scholars call this source material, “Q,” for German *Quelle*, which means source. However, neither is there any physical evidence of it, nor any early testimony to it, so its existence remains hypothetical. Nevertheless, scholars have reconstructed what “Q” would likely look like.¹

There are indications that *The Gospel of Thomas* shared the oral tradition that immediately followed Jesus and intervened between his public ministry and the composition of the earliest literature. Presumably, some of those who were with Jesus during his lifetime would have passed on this material. In addition to teachings and stories of Jesus, it would likely have included the teaching and preaching of the Twelve, whom Jesus had apparently commissioned to spread the good news of him. Subsequently, others would have also remembered what those close to Jesus had themselves reported. Thus an oral tradition would have been available first, for it is relatively certain that the letters of Paul are the earliest writings of the New Testament. The gospels came somewhat later.

¹ James M. Robinson, Paul Hoffmann, and John S. Kloppenborg (Editors). *The Critical Edition of Q: Synopsis Including the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, Mark, and Thomas with English, German, and French Translations of Q and Thomas*. (Louvain: Peeters, 2000).

Many sayings of *Thomas* not only resemble sayings from other gospels but also seem more primitive. Therefore, they may be earlier in origin than the narrative Synoptic gospels and the more theological writings attributed to John. Moreover, the aphoristic style suggests that *The Gospel of Thomas* may be a record of oral reports, similar to the lists of sayings attributed to Muhammad soon after his passing, called *Hadith* in Arabic. In fact, there are a number of sayings attributed to Jesus in *The Gospel of Thomas* and other early literature that do not occur in the canonical texts.¹

There many issues concerning words attributed to Jesus in the canonical scriptures. Similarly, it may never be known for certain whether the words attributed to Jesus in *The Gospel of Thomas* are his or how accurate they are. Hence, it may remain ambiguous on existing evidence whether some or all of *The Gospel of Thomas* was given directly by Jesus through the Apostle Thomas as the gospel asserts. Nor has it been established that the Thomas tradition is more than legendary. Solid historical grounds are lacking in the case of *The Gospel of Thomas*, as they are also regarding the canonical gospels.

All these qualifications about the historicity of *The Gospel of Thomas* may sound discouraging. However, that is not the case. If truth be told, such qualifiers need to be applied to virtually all spiritual literature, including perennial wisdom. There is very little historical evidence concerning the major texts of any religion, doctrinal claims to the contrary notwithstanding. Often, there is also considerable disagreement among scholars regarding origins, provenance and dating, as well as suspicions about the accuracy of transmission.

Where evidence is lacking, it is not possible to reconstruct the original in such as way as to determine that the reconstruction is accurate. When there are a number of extant copies or fragments that differ, it seems likely that the originals, which are no longer extant, were redacted and corrupted. Often, not only lack of evidence is operative, but also there may be reason to suspect partisanship in the process of transmission. When there is evidence of conflicting versions initially and the suppression of all but the normative version, then there is a presumption of variation. Of course, this does not mean that the whole of the work is inaccurate or suspect overall. But it does vitiate the normative claim of absolute inerrancy that is often put forward as unquestionable.

The acceptance of such works as being unquestionably true results from a combination of claims, for example, that such works are divinely inspired or result

¹ Ricky Alan Mayotte. *The Complete Jesus: All the Sayings of Jesus Gathered in a Single Volume for the First Time*. (South Royalton, VT: Steerforth, 1998). William Stroker. *Extracanonial Sayings of Jesus*. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989). Tarif Khalidi. *The Muslim Jesus*.

from higher cognition; that they are perpetuated through a venerable religious tradition, and that they have been tested over time. But none of these provides any solid historical evidence regarding origin or accuracy of transmission.

Therefore, the fact that we do not know on the basis of historical evidence who wrote *The Gospel of Thomas*, when, where, and why is not unusual. We do not know this about Hebrew scripture, the canonical gospels and other New Testament literature either. This is also true of other great spiritual literature, such as the *Ramayana* and *Bhagavad Gita*, in which Rama and Krishna are principal figures, along with other luminaries of the Vedic tradition. There are a number of recensions of the *Ramayana*, for instance. Neither do we have solid evidence regarding the *Dhammapada*, attributed to Buddha, nor the *Tao Te Ching*, attributed to Lao Tzu. Even the Qur'an, the most recent major scripture, is suspect.¹ The list goes on.

However, the very existence of *The Gospel of Thomas* and the early appearance and persistence of the Thomas tradition are evidence that the teaching of *The Gospel of Thomas* was a feature of early Christianity not wholly attributable to some peripheral Gnostic sect. The degree to which Jesus and Thomas were involved in it directly may be controversial, but tradition holds this to be the case and tradition is one of the principal sources of evidence for most spiritual teachings.

Indeed, there is now speculation that *The Gospel of Thomas* is an ancient work representative of an early Christian community. In the early days, the diversity seems to have been extensive. However, by the end of the fourth century, the canon was established by the fiat of recognized ecclesiastical authorities, apparently after a long and contentious struggle over "orthodoxy." Yet, even in the orthodox canon some inconsistencies persist, revealing early differences.

SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION

In contrast to the Protestant doctrine of "scripture alone" (Latin *sola scriptura*), it is a historical fact that a great deal of accepted Christian lore is a matter of tradition instead of only scripture. Indeed, the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches recognize both scripture and tradition as divinely inspired teaching. Even Protestants widely recognize traditional interpretations of scripture and also take for granted doctrines that do not appear in scripture. For example, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is not biblical. It was developed over time after much controversy by the early Church Fathers and enshrined by the Councils. The doctrine of *sola scriptura* itself is a Protestant tradition that does not appear in the Bible. Moreover, there is disagreement over just what constitutes scripture. The canon was

¹ Textual Variants of the Qur'an.

URL=<<http://www.answering-islam.de/Main/Quran/Text/>>.

established authoritatively only after much controversy, and Martin Luther subsequently changed it, so that the Protestant Bible is different.

Moreover, modern scholars are finding that the early Jesus tradition was far different than most people presume. Because of the pervasive influence of tradition in normative Christianity, most people are surprised and many even shocked to learn that scholars call cherished traditions into question, such as the authorship of the New Testament. The letters attributed Paul were the earliest written works of the Jesus tradition, and they were all included in the New Testament. However, most scholars conclude that Paul was not the author of all of them.

Modern scholars are in general agreement that First and Second Timothy, Titus and Ephesians are pseudepigrapha, that is, they were written by someone else and attributed to Paul. Scholarly opinion is divided with regard to Colossians and Second Thessalonians. Most scholars also regard the anonymous Epistle to the Hebrew as most likely not from Paul. Apparently, tradition was wrong about this.

Moreover, due to the influence of longstanding tradition, the faithful often erroneously presume that the four canonical gospels were written as historical biographies chronologically recording the principal events in the life of Jesus and that these accounts mesh seamlessly. Most scholars now agree that this view is naïve. In the first place, historical biography was not yet developed. Secondly, the gospels contain different narratives of apparently the same events that seem to contradict each other.

Thirdly, evidence points to the priority of “sayings gospels” that record words attributed to Jesus, which were initially preserved and transmitted by word of mouth. Scholars hypothesize that later perhaps some of the sayings were also recorded in compendia, although none of these texts survive, nor are they referred to in the early literature. Nevertheless, the development of different texts at different geographical points and for different communities suggests that the common features they share, which are based on sayings, were derived from a common source, possibly a written compendium that scholars have designated “Q.”

The Gospel of Thomas is one of the sayings gospels, whereas the gospels of Matthew and Luke are clearly didactic narratives that convey an interpretation of the sayings they contain. Mark appears to be intermediate between them. Scholars now recognize that Matthew did not write the gospel that bears his name. Mark and Luke were not members of the Twelve and likely not eyewitnesses to the events reported. Matthew and Luke are dependent on Mark. According to most scholars, John, the most theological gospel, was not written by John the son of Zebedee and is considered to be a later development.

The sayings gospel like *Thomas* purport to be words uttered by Jesus, and the sayings in the narrative gospels make this claim also. However, in the narrative gospels scholars have detected a development of the sayings together with the

narratives in which they are embedded that suggests the contribution of didactic theological elements. The authors of the narratives embedded familiar sayings of Jesus in these narratives in order to encourage or even force a particular doctrinal interpretation of the embedded sayings in support of the particular theme and point of view.

There were a number of such communities in the early Jesus tradition, reflected in different gospels with contrasting interpretations. The existence of different narratives having different doctrinal orientations led scholars to the conclusion that the various early communities already took different stances toward Jesus' life and teachings, perhaps on the basis of the teaching of different companions of Jesus who reflected Jesus' teaching differently. Perhaps different disciples who were with Jesus understood the same teaching differently. Another possibility is that Jesus imparted different teachings to different people, suitable to them. As a matter of fact, *The Gospel of Thomas* implies this latter possibility.

The sayings gospels do not contain any narrative; hence, they are not influenced by context. Moreover, some scholars conclude that at least some sayings in these gospels are more "primitive," in the sense of original and authentic, in comparison to the successively more developed literary versions that appear in the narrative gospels. Therefore, they may stem directly from Jesus' mouth, leaving their hearers to interpret them on the basis of their own level of discernment.

Because these teachings are extraordinarily rich, different people of different level of discernment would understand them in ways appropriate to each person individually. It is also a matter of widespread experience that as people's level of discernment changes as they grow in age and wisdom, their understanding and appreciation of scripture also matures. Indeed, in ancient cultures the same teaching stories were first appreciated literally as children's tales, then understood mythically in terms of their symbology, and finally grasped mystically in terms of higher cognition relating symbols to supramental experience.

INTEGRITY

Many scholars are wont to refer to other so-called Gnostic texts in their attempt to clarify "difficult" passages in *The Gospel of Thomas*. In the view of this undertaking, *The Gospel of Thomas* stands on its own legs without requiring external interpretation.

While some scholars interpret obscure saying of *Thomas* with reference to such texts, this is not only fraught with the danger of conflation but also it is unnecessary because *The Gospel of Thomas* can be read as an integral work that is also consistent with perennial wisdom. Indeed, the contention herein is that the sayings of *Thomas* can be read as consistent with canonical Christian scripture and

established teaching if that is interpreted mystically, as well as in accordance with the principles of perennial wisdom.

Appealing to Gnostic myths that are themselves obscure seems neither necessary nor helpful. The symbolism and mythology found in the various texts of the Nag Hammadi Library, for example, are neither homogenous nor derived from a single school of thought. While some of the language may be similar in appearance, often the contexts are varied enough to make the similar signs function as quite different symbols. Indeed, a common logical error is to presume that the similarity of signs implies their similarity as symbols, without taking their contextual use into account.

Many ideas and terms that appear in the early Jesus tradition can be interpreted in light of Jewish mysticism. The written Qabalah seems to be a relatively recent phenomenon in the view of scholars. However, Jewish teachers hold that this knowledge is part of the oral Torah dating back to God's revelation to Moses on Sinai.¹ In this view the written Qabalah is a subsequent record of an ancient oral teaching that was passed privately from master to disciple.

It would seem that if a plausible interpretation can be offered in terms of the Hebrew mystical tradition, to which Jesus and Paul would likely have been privy, then it is not necessary to appeal to other influences unless they can be shown on the basis of evidence to have played a part. This is not to claim that the author or authors of *The Gospel of Thomas* were unaware of the prevailing universe of discourse or not influenced by so-called Gnostic terminology. Rather, they may have selectively used symbols that fit their overall intent because they recognized the correspondence of existing views with traditional Judaic teaching.

Moreover, there are different ways to interpret the so-called Gnostic texts. Most scholars have offered interpretations of these myths along Hellenistic lines instead of interpreting their symbology in terms of perennial wisdom, although they can often be read this way. The scope of this undertaking does not permit investigating of this further, for our contention is that consulting such works is not required to ground an interpretation of *The Gospel of Thomas* in perennial wisdom because it stands alone in this regard. Accordingly, even though many so-called Gnostic texts

¹ According to rabbinical teaching, Moses received the oral Torah from God on Mount Sinai, and he wrote some of this down later. The rest of the teaching has been passed down orally from teacher to student. Later, more of this teaching was written down so it would not be lost. This is the Talmud and Mishnah, for example. However, all the teaching is not yet written down, and the Oral Torah is still preserved in the teaching of rabbis. For this reason it is necessary to study with a teacher in addition to studying the scriptures. Some claim that Qabalah is part of this oral teaching, of which only a portion has yet been recorded.

can be read from the viewpoint of perennial wisdom, they are passed over here, and their examination is postponed for a future work.¹

Most importantly for our purposes, *The Gospel of Thomas* can be read as a work consistent with perennial wisdom and also with the principal thrust of the Way of Jesus. To bring in other literature unnecessarily would obscure this fact, which is a central point of this work. A central thesis of this undertaking is that the Way of Jesus is an expression of perennial wisdom, and *The Gospel of Thomas* can be read as putting forward a nondualistic position.² While scholars recognize that other so-called Gnostic works espouse nondualism, these works are not “Christian” in any obvious sense to which contemporary Christians can relate. The contention here is that *The Gospel of Thomas* can be read as representative of the diversity the Jesus tradition in the early days and prior to the dominance of normative Christianity, which was not consolidated until much later.

ORIGIN

Challenging many traditional views of normative Christianity, *The Gospel of Thomas* asserts some of the key fundamentals of the Way of Jesus in terms characteristic of perennial wisdom. The subsequent investigation attempts to show that an interpretation of *The Gospel of Thomas* consistent with perennial wisdom is plausible. Moreover, if its consistency with perennial wisdom is admitted as a corroborating factor, such an interpretation seems probable.

Although the historical Jesus remains a matter of controversy, the mythic Jesus has been accepted as the norm. It is a fact of history that the mystical Christ not only continues to inspire many people as a spiritual ideal but also to guide people inwardly as Master, even to the extent of becoming the spiritual companion of ardent lovers who seek his presence within. While normative Christianity is riddled with controversy and even contradictions when subjected to scholarly investigation, the Way of Jesus is alive and well down to the present day as a way of practicing the presence of God in the heart, irrespective of sectarian affiliation or doctrine.

¹ The so-called Gnostic texts are quite abstruse in many places and most scholars do not interpret their symbolism in terms of perennialism. For example, sexual imagery that can be read as symbolic of divine union is often taken literally.

² Marvin Meyer. *The Gnostic Discoveries*, p. 117-141. In Chapter Five, “Valentinus the Christian Mystic,” Meyer shows how Valentinus, an early Christian and “Gnostic” who was once a strong contender to become the pope of Rome, embraced a form of “The Way of Jesus” characterized by the return to oneness and founded a school of thought based on this teaching. Passages in Valentinian works are compared to nondualist passages in *The Gospel of Thomas*. However, Meyer does not think that *The Gospel of Thomas* is Valentinian.

If it could be substantiated that *The Gospel of Thomas* originated with Jesus, either directly through Thomas as the prologue asserts, or even as a teaching more original than the canonical gospels, it would be an immensely important work. Even if it is a record of a community of Thomas Christians who were preserving what they had received orally, it would still be significant historically. The jury is still out on this, and lacking further evidence this point may remain moot. However, the fact that *The Gospel of Thomas* is increasingly being received as likely containing some words stemming from Jesus himself is itself a testimony to a possibility its value.

It is important to realize that speculation about authenticity on the basis of textual criticism presupposes the veracity of key elements of the normative Christian tradition, which serves as its basis. However, many of these key points are themselves in question. There is no good evidence or other guarantee that this tradition is either primary or exclusive. Given what we now know of the history it is not. Early Christianity was hardly uniform in its views. Original uniformity and orthodoxy were later myths.

It is becoming increasingly clear to scholars that the canonical works arose from particular communities with their own oral traditions. Their authors wrote from the perspective of these communities in terms of their particular biases and interests. Subsequently, redactions also crept into the text. Thus, there are no absolute criteria for judging text arising out of other traditions, especially when these traditions and texts reflect the viewpoint and interests of divergent communities.

It may well be that the community in which *The Gospel of Thomas* originated put its emphasis in a different direction from the communities from which normative Christianity arose. Subsequently, it would appear that these views were not only heterodox but also heretical. However, that would only come after the fact, when the victors had rewritten history on their terms and declared the now normative position orthodox and enforced its uniformity.

Normative religions place great emphasis on origins, to the point of creating myths and beliefs masquerading as fact when factual evidence is absent, murky, or does not support the orthodox position. Mystical traditions are less concerned about the putative facts of their origins. Many mystical traditions acknowledge that they are grounded in myths that are not advanced necessarily as historical fact but to be understood as symbolic and metaphorical. These metaphors point to the spiritual source, which is found within. Mystical traditions are more concerned with the spiritual source than the historical origins.

SPIRITUAL SOURCE

Most important to mystical traditions is the effectiveness of the teaching in transmitting knowledge that leads to the realization of truth or union with the

divine. The test of a mystical tradition lies in the mystics it produces. The proof is in the pudding, not the box in which it is packaged.

This is not to say that mystical traditions do not rest on truths. Their point is that the truths they contain can only be comprehended on the basis of higher cognition. The prologue of *The Gospel of Thomas* states this explicitly by saying that the one who comprehends its teaching will not taste death. Not tasting death means to have realized the immortality of soul by removing the veils. If one has not reached the goal of the teaching, one has not yet comprehended the teaching spiritually, regardless of understanding of the words intellectually. In spiritual matters, intellectual understanding is insufficient to capture what transcends concepts and reasoning. Spiritual “understanding” is required, that is, discernment, and this is a matter for the heart rather than chiefly the head.

Significantly for the Way of Jesus *The Gospel of Thomas* seems to pluck an intuitive chord with its mystical message, regardless of whether it is established as originating with Jesus or is actually the work of Thomas the Apostle. Its words contain a “fire” that ignites the reader’s soul in a way that cannot be explained by mere enthusiasm or imagination, seemingly in verification of Jesus’ assertion that he has set the world ablaze with the fire he has cast.¹

Even if it is not granted that Jesus is plausibly the source of the teaching contained in this gospel, if the message accords with perennial wisdom regarding core spirituality, it would still have practical merit as a spiritual teaching in its own right. Thus, another argument for using *The Gospel of Thomas* as a manual of the Way of Jesus is a practical one. Many people are asking poignant questions about their spirituality and coming to view spirituality as universal instead of anchored to any particular expression or tradition. They are more interested in the results of spiritual practice than in doctrine or belief that is empty of experience.

As a result, we are seeing a renewed interest in universal mystical spirituality, which is found at the core of religions and wisdom traditions, not as a matter of merely satisfying curiosity but rather as providing a set of tools for unfolding one’s inherent potential as a human being, which, according to perennial wisdom, is unlimited and unbounded. *The Gospel of Thomas*, whatever its actual source and irrespective of its historical pedigree, speaks to this need.

¹ Saying 10.

THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS AND THE JESUS TRADITION

SECRET TEACHING OR BOGUS?

Is *The Gospel of Thomas* a part of Jesus' "secret teaching," to which the other gospels say that Jesus imparted to the apostles? Is it to be accepted unconditionally and revered as holy scripture on a par with the other gospels, as some would argue? Or is it a fabrication of Gnostics or some other heretical group, therefore, an idiosyncrasy of history of no theological value although a temptation for the gullible? Or does it lie somewhere between these extremes?

The unbiased answer to questions such as this is that the scholarship is still out on many of them. Definitively the answers to many questions regarding *The Gospel of Thomas* are not available on the basis of compelling historical evidence, and none of the competing interpretations offered to date has carried the day. However, what many who are not familiar with scholarly controversies regarding the New Testament do not realize is that there are many such pressing questions regarding the long accepted canonical works also. The fact of the matter is that a long-standing tradition has canonized the accepted works in the minds of "the faithful," as well as traditional interpretations of them. While emphasis and interpretation differ according to denomination and sect, there is general agreement to accept faith over fact, tradition over reason regarding the canonical works.¹

Moreover, some of this "conventional wisdom" is actually untenable in the light of historical research. Bart Ehrman sets forth a case for how the gospel text was altered in places by scribes who sought to incorporate an orthodox doctrinal reading arising from theological disputes of their day.² This, of course, undermines the traditional teaching that the gospels were entirely inspired by the Holy Spirit, hence, are revealed wisdom preserved unerringly as "the word of God." This is important in the consideration of *The Gospel of Thomas* since many normative Christians would argue that apocryphal gospels do not enjoy the same status that the norm presumes for the canonical scriptures.

The upshot is that many key points remain controversial among experts. We do not know on the basis of solid historical evidence whether Jesus actually said the things attributed to him in *The Gospel of Thomas*. But neither do we know on the

¹ This questionable behavior has engendered the ethical issue of "the pious fraud" as many institutional authorities who are educated in biblical scholarship continue to misrepresent tradition as entirely factual when the evidence does not support this conclusion. See Rudolf Augstein. *Jesus, Son of Man*.

² Bart Ehrman. *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament*. (Oxford University Press, 1993).

basis of historical fact whether Jesus actually said or did many of the things that are attributed to him in the canonical gospels or by tradition, and we also suspect on good grounds that he very likely did not. However, the belief that he did say these things in precisely these words and perform the deeds exactly as reported is so ingrained culturally that “true believers” take it as historical fact and reject any suggestion to the contrary as out of bounds. This is quite simply a bias grounded on belief in an established narrative, a narrative that is without basis in historical evidence. On objective grounds, this is irrational.

To reject *The Gospel of Thomas* out of hand without adequate historical basis for doing so is similarly irrational. Typically, those with open views tend to adduce historical evidence supporting the use of *Thomas*, while those with closed views tend to adduce historical evidence precluding this. This question therefore remains polemical and issues are often hotly contested owing to the perceived consequences for “faith.” However, adequate evidence seems to exist supporting the early relevance of *Thomas* among followers of Jesus.¹

The question for us here is, could it be that *Thomas* has some things to tell us about Jesus’ teaching that we do not know from the New Testament, or which was not emphasized there? Is it time to rethink and possibly modify one’s presumed certainty regarding the tradition, and also to be open to the possibility of relevant input from non-traditional sources?

Whereas scholars are much more circumspect in their assessment of fact on the basis of textual analysis and historical evidence, normative Christians generally do not distinguish matters of belief from matters of fact. They take their beliefs about Jesus, which are based on modern translations of the New Testament and received tradition, as unquestionably factual. Scholarship both shows that the canonical, normative scriptures are often questionable historically and also allows for an appreciation of the so-called apocryphal gospels on the basis of historical evidence.

This quest for greater clarity on issues that are murky might be called “the Jesus puzzle.” Key pieces of this puzzle have gone missing, an inconvenient fact that some would prefer not to notice. But an honest assessment is that many key issues are ambiguous on the evidence. Moreover, reading almost all the various interpretations of scholars about Jesus, one finds virtually none that do not either ignore contradictory material or interpret questionable issues favorably to their position. The result is that no single position is compelling under rigorous scrutiny. The conclusion is that a person has to be duly diligent in informing oneself and then be guided by the heart in matters of practical application of the teaching.

Complicating the issue further, many conventional presumptions are now known to be erroneous. It is becoming a recognized historical fact that much of the

¹ Marvin Meyer. *The Gnostic Discoveries*. p. 63-64.

evidence was lost inadvertently, intentionally skewed, or even suppressed in favor of a particular point of view. Moreover, for centuries, many questions and considerations were taken off the table due to the secular power of religious authorities that were heavily invested in preserving the status quo by maintaining a uniform viewpoint among the faithful. As a result, much of normative Christianity was received without question because it was enforced, if it was not accepted as revealed wisdom.

When religion is inherited, so to speak, from one's culture and upbringing instead of through an actual conversion experience, belief and custom replace conversion of heart and the inner conviction based on it. Then an originally lively spiritual teaching passes first into a venerable tradition and later becomes further institutionalized as social convention.

While the Protestant Reformation challenged outdated institutional norms and authority, its own doctrine of *sola scriptura* or "scripture alone" effectively canonized scripture as the new norm. Scriptural interpretation was freed from hierarchical authority, but it was privileged from questioning as the revealed word of God. Moreover, scripture was to be construed literally, unless the context indicated that a symbolic meanings was intended. While people might interpret the text in terms of their own lives, the integrity of the text itself, including its literal meaning, was held sacrosanct since it was regarded as having been revealed by the Holy Spirit to its human authors, who recorded it faithfully.

There were some congregations that sought to regain the initial life of the spirit reported in the scriptures and apparently lived initially. George Fox (1624-1691) founded of the Society of Friends, now known as the Quakers in 1643. But they were persecuted at the time, and eventually adopted some rather eccentric norms that further isolated them from society. While they subsequently moderated these norms, they did not manage to create any substantial impact on the normative Christianity of the time.

Not until the nineteenth century was scholarship gradually unfettered from the chains of dogmatic restriction, so that it could proceed. Then, scholars began to find cracks and chinks in the thick walls of doctrine.¹ Some of these soon grew into gaping holes that normative authorities are still trying to dam up with dogma. In the later part of the nineteenth century many such questions were asked only in scholarly publications but in the twentieth century they came to the fore publicly, along with interpretations of the evidence running counter to the norms.

But it was not until the second half of the century that significant attention turned from conventional religion toward spirituality as a personal inner quest, and people

¹ Some of the initial scholars still paid dearly for their presumptions, since they lost their teaching positions.

began to look in earnest for guidance wherever it was available. Eastern spiritual teachers and traditions, for example, became prevalent in the West, and New Age spirituality also became popular. All this led to a renewed interest in returning to the roots of Christianity from a newly informed and inspired spiritual vantage.

Moreover, esoteric teachings began to flourish publicly, at first on a limited scale in the first half of the twentieth century. This included Christian adaptations of esoteric knowledge. Ralph Waldo Emerson based his American Transcendentalism on Eastern thought. New Thought Christianity followed on this trend and developed it. The works of Ernest Holmes, for example, became popular among those seeking more than institutional religions offered. The Church of Religious Science he founded never became large but it continues to attract people. Joel Goldsmith's works on the Infinite Way were also influential. Charles Fillmore's writings inspired The Unity School of Christianity, and there are many congregations gathered around these ideas, which are now known simply as Unity.

Western esotericism began to abound, as the New Age counter-culture renewed interest in older esoteric systems, many stemming from Renaissance occultism and alchemy, such as Hermeticism, Rosicrucianism, and Free Masonry. In addition, the perennial wisdom of the world's mystics and masters became readily available in translation. Not only were older works returned to print and new ones published at a speedy rate, the growth of the Internet and the development of powerful search engines put a massive amount of information instantaneously in the hands of anyone with access to the worldwide web.

As a result of an increasing interest in spirituality occurring independently of any particular religious tradition or setting, there is not only a greater popular openness to fresh viewpoints but also a growing sophistication in terms of expressions of perennial wisdom. *The Gospel of Thomas* has seemingly begun to feed this need, judging from the growing interest in it and the number of new translations and commentaries. In addition to the scholarly, esoteric interpretations are also being offered, side by side.

Indeed, a primary argument for admitting *The Gospel of Thomas* as a key work of the Way of Jesus and postulating that it may have its roots in Jesus' teaching, is that it accords so closely with perennial wisdom. If this is so, it would have significant implications for not only those who wish to know about a more universal "Christic" approach to core spirituality in contrast to the normative "Christian" view, but also for those who are interested in expressions of perennial wisdom in general.

At any rate, *The Gospel of Thomas* is now apparently speaking to an increasing number of people interested in spirituality. While many of these are Christians either associated with institutional Christianity or reacting to it, there are also many who do not regard themselves as "Christians" in the usual sense. They respect Jesus as a great spiritual teacher from whom they feel they can learn.

What we seem to be seeing is a growing interest in both the teaching and practice of a core spirituality, both within traditional religions and also independently of them. There does not seem to be any way to either categorize or organize such people, who are apparently inner-directed. As a result, we are witnessing the development of a new type of spiritual movement that is not connected with any clear boundary conditions that would limit or institutionalize it. So there does appear to be merit in asking what value for spiritual understanding and practice *The Gospel of Thomas* might have in such an environment, and what its teaching about core spirituality may be.

THE HIDDEN TEACHING

The Gospel of Thomas purports to contain a teaching that Jesus revealed secretly to Thomas the Apostle, not through words but rather through direct transmission as the grace of the Master. There is no historical evidence corroborating that Thomas was the author, and a majority of scholars think that its attribution to him is pseudepigraphous, as was much other literature in this period attributed to famous people of the past. While it may be an attempt to gain credibility, it may also be a citation of source rather than actual authorship. Although its origin is unknown and its source remains untraced, it may be part of an oral tradition stemming from Thomas the Apostle.

Whatever its origin may have been, the teaching *The Gospel of Thomas* can be interpreted as consistent with perennial wisdom, as well as the Way of Jesus as put forward elsewhere. Moreover, some scholars think that at least some of the sayings are from Jesus. Even though there is no proof that either Jesus or Thomas were directly involved as source or author, there is no good reason to doubt that the teachings could stem from them at least indirectly.

I would submit that it is plausible that the sayings of *Thomas* are closer to Jesus than many of the more involved theological discourses of other gospels, especially the gospel attributed to John. These discourses do not seem consistent with the aphoristic sayings of Jesus, which seem to indicate that he preferred pith. But whether *The Gospel of Thomas* contains at least some of the private teaching of Jesus, if indeed he gave one, is impossible to either prove or disprove conclusively.

Thomas is represented in the New Testament as “doubting Thomas,” where he remembered primarily for his refusal to accept the risen Jesus before testing his wounds with his with his own hands. Now, most normative Christians associate Thomas the Apostle with this incident, as well as the fact leading up to it, that Thomas was not with the other apostles and disciples when Jesus first appeared to them.

Detractors of *Thomas* advance this as evidence showing that it is unlikely that Jesus imparted his secret teaching to Thomas. Scholars now suspect that the New

Testament characterization of Thomas represents an early antipathy in the Jesus tradition between communities identifying with John against those identifying with Thomas. Although there is no mention of John in *The Gospel of Thomas*, and only Matthew and Peter by name are contrasted unfavorably with Thomas, it is the Johannine tradition that seems to have opposed the Thomasine, as reflected in the gospel attributed to John.¹ Indeed, *John* sets forth Jesus' teaching primarily as a way of faith understood as inner conviction while *Thomas*, the view of mystical realization.

In the mystical interpretation regarding this story involving Jesus and Thomas that appears in *John*, the New Testament account is taken as a *midrash*, which is a Hebrew term signifying a teaching story. The point of the gospel account on this reading is that Thomas was a person who cherished experience over belief. This story contrasts the way of faith as belief emphasized in normative Christianity with the way of knowledge by direct acquaintance emphasized in the gnostic gospels.

There is a difference between faith as belief in doctrine, which is outer-directed, and faith understood as a deep conviction, which is inner-directed. The latter stands at the threshold of the mystical, and so it may be that the teaching of the gospel of John and Thomas may be closer than many appreciate. In the course of this study of the Jesus tradition, it will become evident that they can be viewed as complementary instead of oppositional.

Recently, *The Gospel of Thomas* has come to the fore of public attention and excited a sort of spiritual voyeurism since it purports to contain a secret teaching of Jesus as well as a hidden life in which Mary Magdalene played a romantic role. Moreover, the bestselling *The Da Vinci Code* and its cinematic rendering, and the film, *Stigmata*, have exerted considerable influence on the contemporary mindset.

As a result of such exposure, exaggerated ideas about *The Gospel of Thomas* now abound, including conspiracy theories concerning a Vatican cover-up of a romance between Jesus and Magdalene. Even though the historical evidence concerning all this is virtually nonexistent, it has become something of *cause célèbre*. No less a scholar than Bart Ehrman has taken it upon himself to set the historical record straight, as he similarly corrects mistaken notions regarding the historical inerrancy of the New Testament.² In spite of this, it seems to be capturing the popular

¹ Saying 13, John 20:19-29.

² Bart Ehrman. *Truth and Fiction in the Da Vinci Code*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), and *Misquoting Jesus*. The underlying fascination is with the putative relationship of Jesus and Mary of Magdala. Could they have been married or have had a child? The claim that this is historical fact supported by evidence is based on pseudo-scholarship. It is like asking whether the moon was made of green cheese before the moon landing showed conclusively it wasn't. The view of the vast majority of scholars of the

imagination and is quickly passing from conspiracy theory into conventional wisdom, thereby undermining key elements of the traditional framework.

Historical questions regarding *The Gospel of Thomas* are of concern here only insofar as these relate to the purpose and scope of this undertaking, which is to assess the value of the text to the Way of Jesus and its possible place in perennial wisdom. It is not our purpose in a work of this scope to enter the scholarly fray over the status of *The Gospel of Thomas*, especially since the jury is still out on many important issues. Still less is our interest in popular conceptions based on fictional accounts that tend to titillate and exploit more than to consider seriously or investigate rigorously. Rather, the issue here will be whether *The Gospel of Thomas* has anything significant to say for the Way of Jesus and its contemporary practice, or makes any significant contribution to perennial wisdom from the perspective of the Jesus tradition.

My own view is that *The Gospel of Thomas* can be interpreted as a clear statement of nonduality. Its message is that the goal of life is to realize the nondual state. This is significant in that it links the Way of Jesus and perennial wisdom. There are many historical questions that may never be resolved on the basis of evidence and that stand in the way of concluding that *The Gospel of Thomas* contains the private teaching of Jesus to Thomas.

It seems to me more fruitful to ask whether it is plausible that Jesus could reasonably have said such things given the view of him as a spiritual master, rather than whether he did say them, which cannot be established definitively either way.

field is that there is nothing solid to speak for it and all the evidence points against it. It's the flip side of the "Left Behind" series, which has also racked up sales in the tens of millions, but is "faith-based fantasy." As in many other controversial matters, "follow the money." The Jesus-Magdalene "exposé" has all the features of a successful best-seller. Expect an explosion of such material until the market is saturated, and the gullible public shifts its interest to the next "latest and greatest."

Have you heard about Barbara Thiering's "Peshier" interpretation yet? It makes Jesus out to be not only married to Mary Magdalene, with three children, but also eventually divorced. Talk about upping the ante! Neither Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh, who wrote *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, the basis for Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, are scholars, but Barbara Thiering is. However, she has virtually no support from other scholars in the field regarding her evidence or conclusions. Other scholars see her work as lacking substance in relation to historical methodology and evidence, and regard it as wildly speculative to the point of being fantasy. See Dr. Chris Forbes reviews of Thiering's books: URL=<<http://www.anchist.mq.edu.au/251/Thierful.htm>>. Even to say that such matters are "controversial" conveys the mistaken impression that other scholars consider them seriously. Yet, the gullible public loves this sort of thing and sees scholarly opposition in terms of a conspiracy theory, another tried and true marketing "hook."

As we have seen, the historical evidence regarding everything that Jesus did and said is scant. What most people accept as “gospel truth” is not based on historical evidence but on venerable tradition that has canonized as the norm. Just because the normative frame rules out many of the sayings of *The Gospel of Thomas* and rejects the gospel as a whole, denying that it is inspired scripture, is not a good reason to hold that Jesus could not have given such a teaching, especially when a different frame can account for it in terms of the Way of Jesus as an expression of perennial wisdom.

Recently, Elaine Pagels followed up her initial exploration of *The Gospel of Thomas* in *The Gnostic Gospels* with a scholarly but confessional work, which explores how *Thomas* impacts one’s personal spirituality as a practicing Christian today.¹ Briefly stated, she argues that we should not confuse the unfamiliar and unconventional with the heretical.

It seems to me quite plausible that Jesus could have said the things attributed to him in *The Gospel of Thomas*, as I will attempt to show. I would further venture to say that *The Gospel of Thomas* specifically states that it does contain a hidden teaching, in the sense that teaching about nonduality is hidden in the hearts of all, to be discovered through the spiritual quest. Therefore, *The Gospel of Thomas* has contemporary relevance as a spiritual contribution, which is arguably on a par with other great spiritual literature, whose sources also are obscure.

THE QUEST FOR PRIMARY SOURCES

In their quest for the closest links to the historical Jesus, many scholars are now using *The Gospel of Thomas* in conjunction with the four canonical gospels to investigate the primitive Jesus tradition, before normative Christianity imposed its own highly partisan view on history. Many prominent scholars now hold that *Thomas* contains some of the most primitive formulations, which were later elaborated in the more narrative writings and set in putatively historical circumstances apparently for both dramatic effect and doctrinal messaging. Therefore, some sayings of *The Gospel of Thomas* may be more faithful records of Jesus’ own words and teaching than later texts that were influenced by “theologizing.” This view regards *Thomas* as a primary source instead of seeing it as a later derivation or Gnostic invention.

Events occur in an unstructured fashion. Later, they are reported dramatically, shaped by the story in which they play a part. Some things get emphasized over others for dramatic effect, for example. The different gospels use the events of Jesus’ life differently to convey different views of Jesus. Moreover, religious narratives also have a doctrinal purpose that is communicated through ideation.

¹ Elaine Pagels. *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*.

Ideas are used to explain what is supposedly taking place on a more intellectual level than the perceptual level at which events actually happen. This is accomplished both through the narrative, by arrangement different sayings and dialogues, and also by redacting discourse.

For example, the canonical gospels often do not agree on exactly what Jesus said and the circumstances under which he supposedly said it. Moreover, John's gospel presents Jesus as much more of a theologian than the other gospels, putting many words in his mouth that do not occur elsewhere. This leads to the suspicion that at least some of these words were embellished, or even invented after the fact, for doctrinal reasons.

Only the more conservative scholars still hold to the conventional view that the canonical gospels were firsthand accounts faithfully reported by eyewitnesses and recorded rather like contemporary historical biography. Other scholars ascribe them to different authors who shaped them for contemporary purposes in terms of the concerns and controversies of the day in the communities for whom these texts were composed.¹

Many prominent scholars do not see them as biographical accounts in the historical sense at all. For example, in *Rabbi Jesus* Bruce Chilton narrates a fictional account of the life of Jesus based on scholarship that attempts to restore the actual events and their context by deconstructing the dramatic liberties taken in the canonical gospels. It removes the compression and conflation of events that some scholars now see in the canonical gospels and provides details of the setting in which events likely took place, giving a historically informed picture of the circumstances surrounding Jesus' life and mission.²

INERRANCY VERSUS EVIDENCE

The historical view aims for objectivity based on evidence and the application of rigorous methodology instead of theology and apologetics by valuing historical documentation and factual evidence over faith-based norms and the bias of convention. It does not attempt to shape either evidence or interpretation on the basis of orthodox doctrine or the tradition that the Holy Spirit inspired authors of the New Testament in their writing, requiring everything to be accepted as presented.

Accepting the inerrancy of Holy Scripture is a matter of faith for believers, including believing scholars. Religious scholars who have challenged the norms in this regard have often found themselves at odds with institutional authorities. Consequently, scholars who are orthodox believers, especially when they are

¹ Bart D. Ehrman. *Misquoting Jesus*.

² Bruce Chilton. *Rabbi Jesus*. (New York: Bantam Dell Publishing Group, 2000).

members of fundamentalist sects and dogmatic institutions that hue to norms, attempt to defend their position on the basis of historical evidence, even where it is scant and even contradictory. In *Who Wrote the Bible?*, Richard E. Friedman shows convincingly that examination of the textual evidence leads to the conclusion that the composition of the Hebrew scriptures was much more complex than is commonly believed. Bart D. Ehrman's *Misquoting Jesus* makes a similar case for the New Testament. Both of these works are written for the layperson and make for a good read, while being grounded in solid scholarship.¹

Because some scholars accept the inerrancy of scripture on normative grounds and others do not, there is a divergence in the opinions of scholars with respect to belief and evidence, presumably on the basis of such personal orientation. Moreover, in religious studies it is often difficult to uncover hidden assumptions, so even some "liberal" scholars are affected by subliminal attitudes without realizing it. It is very difficult for many to identify bias in matters that they hold so close to the heart. Moreover, these biases are so deeply embedded in the culture through the power of established narrative and the influence of early religious education that it is almost impossible to overcome them. Hence, even liberal scholars have had difficulty adapting to this reality.

On the other hand, things do change, if only slowly. It is now becoming more widely recognized that many if not most early sects of the Jesus tradition were tossed into the dustbin and their teaching labeled heresy as a result of the victors rewriting history. For example, it is now becoming clear after centuries of normative teaching to the contrary that early Christianity was extremely different from the normative Christianity that became the orthodox teaching of the great Church.² The early Jesus tradition was extraordinarily diverse, and many who considered themselves being among the faithful in those times would not be recognized as even remotely so today. It might even be claimed that were Jesus to come again, he would not recognize the religion that is presently attributed to him.

THE Gnostic LABEL

For example, the "Gnostic" phenomenon is one of these conventions that many scholars continue to perpetuate, even though it was originally a pejorative designation that early heresiologists constructed in order to categorize a variety of their opponents. It was neither a historical movement, since it lacked both an external organization and an internal coherence, nor an ancient teaching, since it

¹ Richard E. Friedman. *Who Wrote the Bible?* (New York: Summit, 1987).

² Bart D. Ehrman. *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew*.

lacked any internal coherence. As a result, a number of works were lumped together on specious grounds and labeled in such a fashion as to marginalize them.

This was further complicated by the publication of the texts found at Nag Hammadi as a “Gnostic” library, even though the only known relationship of the texts is that some were bound in the same codex and all were found in the same container. Examination of the texts does not reveal a coherent Gnostic teaching or a uniform Gnostic religion, and some texts found in this collection are admittedly not Gnostic at all, such as works of Plato that predate Hellenistic times by centuries. Indeed, the term “Gnosticism” does not occur in ancient times as an appellation of a distinctive group that identified themselves with it. Pitting Gnosticism as a religion against nascent Christianity is simply an oversimplification that stretches the evidence and strains credulity. It is largely a construct of modern scholarship, following the lead of early normative Christian apologetics. This outdated view is beginning to spring so many leaks that it is now having some difficulty staying afloat, and it seems to be buoyed up largely by its momentum.¹

In the field of religion it is difficult even for many scholars to disentangle themselves from the unconscious influence of the tradition in which they were brought up, and which has become “second nature” for their thinking in many subliminal ways, even though they may not be aware of it or even recognize it when attention is called to it.

Add the obscurity of many ancient events, the ambiguity of documentary evidence and the momentum of millennia of convention, and all the makings of heated controversy are present in the face of change as scholars grapple with their own baggage as much as the material at hand. The scholarly world is still some distance from arriving at widespread agreement over the diversity of early Christianity.

Believing Christians are much further still from such an appreciation of the origins of their faith. It is likely true that most who consider themselves Christians still accept the notion that there is an obvious historical continuity of orthodox teaching that proceeded directly from Jesus and continued without any break or alteration through the apostles and early disciples to the formation of the early Church. This view also holds that the Christian tradition coalesced over time through the Fathers and Councils into the normative teaching of today, after winning a few skirmishes along the way with some pesky heretics here and there, and that it was essentially uniform throughout its history.

¹ Karen L. King. *What Is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 2003). Michael Allen Williams. *Rethinking “Gnosticism: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category.”* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

However, there was no inherent necessity for normative Christianity to become dominant. Things could have turned out otherwise but for a few quirks of circumstance. Normative Christianity points to these turns of fate as proving its divine mission as being elected by God and brought about through the inner workings of the Holy Spirit.

APOCRYPHAL PRIMARY SOURCES

The Jesus tradition is framed largely in terms of the scriptures and traditions accepted by normative Christianity. However, there is also a rather vast literature of the period that sheds light on the origins and development of the Jesus tradition, initially along side what would later become normative Christianity, and sometimes more in cooperation than opposition. For example, Valentinus, one of the most influential “Gnostic” Christian teachers, was a candidate to become the bishop of Rome. Had that happened, the history of the Jesus tradition would be quite different. Valentinus claimed that his teacher was Theudas, a student of Paul, and that he had received the secret inner teaching of Paul through Theudas. He also claimed that he had experienced a vision of the risen Christ.¹ His teaching spread widely and exerted significant influence for hundreds of years. Some considered him a saint.

Valentinus was plausibly the author of *The Gospel of Truth*, a copy of which was also found at Nag Hammadi. *The Gospel of Truth* emphasizes overcoming ignorance to achieve wisdom, which replaces fear with joy. Jesus figures in it prominently, so it is clearly a work of the Jesus tradition. This apocryphal gospel is therefore a primary source.

However, considering it and other such works, like *The Gospel of Philip*, lies beyond the scope of this work and must be postponed for another time. Introducing this material would likely complicate the argument more than bolster it, in that these gospels are presently much more obscure than *The Gospel of Thomas*. The difficulty is not with the teaching put forward. This teaching is representative of the early Jesus tradition, makes significant contributions to understanding the Way of Jesus, and can also be interpreted as being broadly consistent with perennial wisdom. Rather, the challenge lies in the expression, which is both highly symbolic and also unfamiliar to contemporary readers, accustomed to the traditional normative Christian framework.

It would take us too far astray attempting to get into this more deeply here. Bringing in the rest of the apocryphal literature would open a Pandora’s box by taking us off target, since examining other so-called Gnostic texts is not essential to

¹ Visions were a common claim during this period of history, although Paul’s reported experience came to be regarded as exceptional.

the thesis of this undertaking.¹ Therefore, it seems circumspect to restrict this inquiry to *The Gospel of Thomas* and the more widely appreciated mystics of the Jesus tradition in order to examine the framework of normative Christianity and investigate the relationship of the Jesus tradition to perennial wisdom.

While *The Gospel of Thomas* has already entered the mainstream, other texts similar to it in some ways have not, for good reason. They are far less obviously “Christian” in the contemporary sense, even though they may represent important aspects of early Christianity that were marginalized and have been forgotten. There is a good deal of interest among neo-Gnostics, however, and they are far from being forgotten, although it would be premature to say that they are making a comeback, at least on the order that *The Gospel of Thomas* has.

However, it is useful to know that there is a considerable apocryphal literature that put forward gnostic viewpoints at the outset of the Jesus tradition, and that some of them claimed to be a private teaching received from recognized apostles like Thomas and Paul. Consequently, it is more expedient to consider *The Gospel of Thomas* on its own merits in relation to both accepted Christian teaching and perennial wisdom.

The Gospel of Thomas frames the Jesus tradition very differently from the way most people have come to accept as traditional. This is probably enough of a stretch for many. For unlike the canonical New Testament as generally interpreted in normative Christian teaching, *Thomas* emphasizes liberation from ignorance through knowledge over salvation by faith. Even considering this view, let alone accepting it, radically shifts the received view of Jesus’ teaching.

It is enough to be aware that many other apocryphal works presented similar views in the early days of the Jesus tradition without investigating them specifically herein. Those who are interested in pursuing this, however, may wish to consult translations of these works.²

¹ To those who would rush into the enterprise of redefining Christianity on the basis of the emerging information, my advice is to bide one’s time. We are only at the beginning of a daunting historical process, and only so much can be accomplished in each step. The momentum of centuries of tradition is difficult to bend, let alone stem. The important thing to establish first, it seems to me, is that the distinction between the normative and mystical approaches in the Jesus tradition. Once this is done, *The Gospel of Thomas* is capable of being recognized as a seminal teaching of the Way of Jesus. Otherwise, it remains marginalized and is viewed as idiosyncratic instead of foundational.

² James M Robinson (Editor). *Nag Hammadi Library*. Marvin Meyer. *The Gnostic Gospels of Jesus: The Definitive Collection of Mystical Gospels and Secret Books about Jesus of Nazareth*. Bentley Layton. *The Gnostic Scriptures*.

FAITH AND WISDOM

Many scholars think that Jesus taught principally through pithy sayings and parables instead of giving lengthy discourses laden with doctrine, what we would call today “sermons.” As a result, it is now difficult to determine precisely what the thrust of Jesus’ teaching was and how he conceived his mission. There are almost as many versions of Jesus as there are books about him, and there are probably more books about Jesus than anyone else in history, with new ones appearing regularly. Most of what normative Christians believe has to do with doctrines that were developed later as theological explanations.

In contrast, the most cherished sayings of Jesus are pithy and can be interpreted differently. Indeed, there is ample evidence that initially they were. Early in the Jesus tradition, different communities had their own interpretations of Jesus’ words and deeds, and it was only after centuries of intense theological controversies that a normative Christian doctrine was fixed. Even that did not last long, since the Eastern and Western Churches split apart. The Great Schism is recorded as occurring in 1054, but a precise date cannot be set, since there was obviously much leading up to the division and a good deal occurred afterward also, especially when the Western Church had rival popes vying for supremacy. The Western Church was split again at the time of the Protestant Revolution. So to speak of a single “Christian faith” from the outset to the present is an oxymoron.

However, the arguments over doctrine and practice reveal that articles of faith were not only extremely important in normative Christianity but also so foundational that ecclesiastical authorities were willing to divide the congregation over theological disputes about them. Moreover, many so-called heretics had their lives ruined, or even lost their lives, over what they professed theologically.

On the other hand, Jesus himself seems to have said little in comparison with the tomes of doctrine that were derived from speculation about it. Many scholars think that the teaching of the early Jesus tradition consisted mostly of a compendia of sayings attributed to Jesus that was initially transmitted orally. This was the basis of the gospels, which were not recorded until much later and which set the sayings into dramatic narratives that often influenced their interpretation, apparently for doctrinal reasons.

Compendia of sayings are found in most ancient wisdom traditions. Such compendia have been given the name “wisdom literature,” for example. The sayings of Jesus may be considered as belonging to ancient “wisdom literature,” some examples of which are more practical and conventional while others are more metaphysical and supernatural. Some of the sayings of Jesus fall into both categories, but by far the most important sayings are the more metaphysical and supernatural ones, e.g., the sayings having to do with the kingdom of God and

spiritual liberation through wisdom — gnosis. *The Gospel of Thomas* contains many of these, some of which are not found in the canonical gospels.

The canonical gospels emphasize the way of faith, whereas *The Gospel of Thomas* emphasizes the way of knowledge. Therefore, Marvin Meyer proposes that while *Thomas* does not fall into the category of Gnostic literature *per se*, it is “gnosticizing” —the term he coins to categorize it.¹ Meyer is among scholars who recognize the deficiencies of Gnosticism as a category but who are not ready to abandon it completely and seeks to qualify it. My view is that to perpetuate loaded terminology is to perpetuate partisan framing and to skew the universe of discourse toward a particular viewpoint. I will argue that this is disingenuous in that it not only runs counter to objectivity, but also is untenable historically.

GNOSTICISM VERSUS GNOSTICISM

It is necessary to distinguish between “Gnosticism” as a catch-all term for a complex first-century historical phenomenon that includes many factors, some even mutually exclusive, and “gnosticism” as a term applying to all spiritual traditions that emphasize spiritual knowledge as a goal. For example, in his attempt to preserve Gnosticism as a category with respect to the Nag Hammadi find and similar texts, Meyer tends to conflate Gnosticism as a first century historical phenomenon with gnosticism, understood as spiritual knowledge leading to liberation from ignorance.² In this later sense of spiritual knowledge that liberates the soul from the bondage of ignorance, the term ‘gnostic’ applies to the full range of perennial wisdom, including Vedic, Buddhist, Taoist, Qabalistic, Sufi, Neoplatonic, Hermetic and a number of other sources in addition to the first century texts discovered at Nag Hammadi and elsewhere.

In his defense, Meyer seems to recognize this broad correspondence between first century Gnosticism and spiritual gnosticism, which many scholars either do not recognize or deny, for example, holding that Gnosticism was a type of Hellenistic magical lore concealed in myths. While that may be true to some extent, to lump a vast range of teaching into a single category hardly seems appropriate, especially when the teachings differ on key issues, as Karen L. King points out in great detail.³

Meyer’s analysis fails in that he does not clearly differentiate between Gnostic and gnostic in these different senses. Nor does he seem to recognize that his admission that some early Christian writing like *The Gospel of Thomas* are “gnostic” implies that early Christianity reflects perennial wisdom. As result, his

¹ Marvin Meyer. *The Gnostic Discoveries*. p. 38.

² Marvin Meyer. *The Gnostic Discoveries*. p. 163-166.

³ King. *What Is Gnosticism?*

analysis seems to me to be insufficient and even somewhat confused on this key point.

My conclusion is that such terms as “gnostic” and “Gnosticism” are more confusing than they are helpful and should be avoided. It would be better to describe carefully rather than label arbitrarily. Labeling, after all, is a chief instrument of polemicists, and scholars should avoid giving this impression, especially when dealing with material that has been rife with controversy and riddled with polemics.

BELIEF VERSUS KNOWLEDGE

It would be more helpful to look at the environment in which early Christianity developed in terms of the dialectic that took place between knowledge and belief. While the curious myths and symbols of the day no longer play a role in the contemporary Christian universe of discourse and are primarily of interest to specialists, controversy over the respective roles of knowledge and belief, faith and wisdom, persists to this day.

Belief in doctrine can mature into faith as the spiritual conviction, of which we will have much more to say subsequently. This is the inner meaning of faith as one of the theological virtues, for this conviction is a charism, or “gift of the spirit.” In addition, intellectual knowledge can mature into intuition, and intuition into spiritual wisdom, or gnosis. Wisdom is also a charism, represented symbolically in Acts as the descent of tongues of fire on the gathered apostles, for there is nothing one can do to force its descent, but rather one can only prepare oneself to become worthy to receive it.¹

Some scholars pit the “way of faith” against the “way of vision” and see a tension in early Christianity between the two.² While this may have been the case to a degree, there is no inherent opposition between faith and inner vision, and they are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they are complementary. Generally, one’s spiritual quest begins in earnest with faith as inner conviction and grows into inner vision. As we will see in the chapters on purgation, illumination and unification, for example, there is a characteristic progression on the path.³

¹ Acts 2:3.

² April D. De Conick. *Voices of the Mystics: Early Christian Discourse in the Gospels of John and Thomas and Other Ancient Christian Literature*. (London & New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2001).

³ Valentinus apparently held this. He claimed to be a disciple of a disciple of Paul, and there is some reason to think that Paul held this view also, especially since he experienced it himself. Later, Clement and Origen also adopted it. Rudolf Bultmann. *Gnosis*. Translated from the German by J. R. Croates. (London: A and C. Black, 1952), p. 52-53.

Perennial wisdom also holds that faith and wisdom are not in opposition but rather complement each other. Virtually every spiritual master teaches that faith in the possibility of wisdom is requisite to the pursuit of knowledge, and faith in a method that will produce results is also required before results can be acquired through regular practice. The master provides that faith. This is why it is very difficult to practice on the basis of intellectual understanding alone, out of a book, for instance. One has difficulty in mustering the faith necessary to press on, especially when difficulties arise. Similarly, having faith that there really is knowledge of truth awaiting one at the goal is necessary for beginning a pursuit of spiritual wisdom. Here again, it is the testimony of the wise that imparts that faith.

While it is helpful to distinguish matters of knowledge and belief, for example, what is known on the basis of evidence and what is believed on the basis of putative revelation, not all faith is belief in doctrine, nor is all knowledge of the same category. For example, doctrinal belief that is professed but not put into action is quite different from the deep conviction that converts the heart and transforms one's way of life from the merely pious to the sacred. Similarly, it is necessary to distinguish ordinary knowledge based on sense perception and reasoning from supernormal cognition as reported by mystics, as well as from the nondual state of the perfect.

Perennial wisdom also holds that knowledge of the heart begins with intuition of true values and faith begins with the conviction that enables a person to act in terms of these values. This is the beginning of wisdom. For it relieves one of dependence on received norms and sets one on the path of the heart.

Faith and belief are often confused in the minds of some people. But according to normative Christian teaching, true faith is vastly different from intellectual belief or emotional enthusiasm, because true faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit. The distinction between mere belief and real faith is set forth quite clearly in some of the "hard sayings" of Jesus. For example, Jesus admonishes his followers not to give heed to the morrow, following the example of the birds of the air that the Father feeds and the lilies of the field He clothes.¹ Here, Jesus may be read as establishing the criterion of faith as surrender to God's will expressed through Divine Providence, instead of belief in religious doctrine.

Jesus says elsewhere that one must believe in him in order to attain eternal life.² This does not mean believing in a mere doctrine intellectually or being swept up in merely emotional fervor, but rather receiving Jesus as Lord and Master. One demonstrates this conviction by following him faithfully and obeying him implicitly, including his so-called hard sayings.

¹ Matthew 6:24-34, Luke 12:15-34.

² John 3:15-18, 6:38-40, 10:28, 11:25-26. 1 John 1:7, 1 John 5:11-13.

Belief in doctrine is different from true faith as a “gift of the Spirit,” because it is based on the mind, that is, the intellect and the emotions, whereas faith as a gift of the Spirit is grounded in a conversion of the heart. A conversion of the heart is required to provide the strength to transcend one’s dependence of self in order to rely solely on God. This is the inner meaning of the saying, “You must become as little children to enter the kingdom.”¹ For “becoming as little children” means being totally dependent on one’s parents.

SALVATION BY FAITH VERSUS LIBERATION BY KNOWLEDGE

The so-called orthodox view that established itself as normative holds that Christianity is an eschatological religion of salvation by faith. Even sects and denominations that emphasize the need for works also hold that faith is primary.

The so-called Gnostic heresy is often represented as exalting liberation from ignorance through knowledge over salvation by faith. Examination shows that this involves misunderstanding and oversimplification. These distinctions are not black and white unless they are framed as such, and there is no necessity to do so other than for polemical and apologetic reasons. The perpetuation of this view is misleading.

Faith is different from belief, although they are frequently confused with each other. While belief in doctrine is function of mind, faith as inner conviction is a matter of the heart. Similarly, the intellectual knowledge of doctrine and theology is different from mystical experience as knowledge of the hearts.

Normative religions often represent that belief in orthodox doctrine is necessary and sufficient to establish the faith necessary for salvation. However, the scriptures, whether Jewish, Christian or Muslim, seem to make clear that faith as inner conviction exceeds belief as profession of doctrine.

For example, some theologians hold that correct belief is required for salvation, which thereby excludes heretics, apostates, unbelievers and those who adhere to other religions or doctrines. In normative Christianity this understanding is often justified on the basis of the writings of Paul that emphasize faith alone as necessary and sufficient for salvation. Yet, elsewhere Jesus says that it is not those who cry out “Lord, Lord,” who will be saved, but those who do the will of the Father. Faith is demonstrated by obedience, not simply by mouthing orthodox views or performing pious works for show. Jesus himself makes this quite clear in his denunciation of many teachers of his day as hypocrites.

Those who merely profess doctrinal beliefs have great difficulty living up to the codes of conduct that they contain. Without experiencing inner conviction as a

¹ Matthew 18:2-4.

conversion of heart, the temptations of worldly life are virtually insurmountable, and the rationales for avoiding them are many. Indeed, normative religion explained away most of Jesus' hard sayings long ago, like loving one's enemies and turning the other cheek.

Jesus set the criterion of true faith much higher when he said, symbolically, that one who has the faith even of a mustard seed is able to move mountains, meaning that nothing is impossible for the person of real faith.¹ This saying is reproduced in a different form in *The Gospel of Thomas*, relating it to knowledge as realization of nonduality: "Jesus said, 'If two make peace with each other in a single house, they will say to the mountain, "Move from here!" and it will move.'"²

"Two" can be interpreted to mean the duality of subject and object and "one house" as signifying the individual. "Make peace" is a way of saying to be at rest, and rest is a symbol of unification in the early Jesus tradition. "Move mountains" means being able to accomplish what seems impossible. The inner meaning of this is removing the obstacles to wisdom that have accumulated in the deep memory as heaps of latent impressions. These "mountains" must be moved in order for spiritual ignorance to disappear into knowledge, for they are the walls of the prison in which the apparently separate ego finds itself as long as it remains in duality.

Rather than being based on belief, the kind of faith that can "move mountains" depends on a conversion of the heart. Just as real faith transcends belief in correct doctrines, so too, mere knowledge of scripture does not result in the spiritual wisdom that is necessary for liberation. Spiritual ignorance is characterized by not realizing who one really is as a spiritual being through direct acquaintance with soul, and merely intellectual knowledge does not provide this. Instead, intellectual teachings can only inform about the nature of this gnosis and how it is only obtained through direct acquaintance, i.e., realization of absolute reality through identity.

This spiritual knowledge is not acquired simply through intellectual understanding, just as real faith is gained neither by learning nor piety without a conversion of the heart.

Real knowing is different from both believing that one knows and thinking that one knows. Rather, it is the perfect correspondence of knower and known. This is called gnosis in order to distinguish it from other types of knowledge that do not rise to this level, hence, are inferior.

True faith, understood as inner conviction instead of intellectual belief, and genuine spiritual wisdom are both "gifts of the Spirit," in the sense that they depend

¹ Matthew 17:20.

² Saying 48.

upon grace. Grace alone is capable of taking one beyond the profane to the domain of the sacred, where all is “holy,” that is, made whole. Works prepare one to receive this grace when one is ripened. The perennial wisdom concerning the ways of both faith and knowledge teaches that neither belief in orthodox doctrine nor initiation into esoteric knowledge is either necessary or sufficient.

Faith as a deep inner conviction based on the resonance of soul with ultimate truth is a preliminary stage in the growth of spiritual knowledge. Faith “saves” by extracting one from the delusory glamour of the world and puts one on the path. Faith also establishes the link with the Lord and Master that clears the channel of grace and guidance. To the degree that one manifests one’s faith in life, one is making daily life spiritual exercise by “being in the world but not of it.” It is faith as trust in divine providence that paves the way to self-surrenderance.

As the limited self is transcended, the nature of spirit shines forth in one’s life. For everyone is by nature a spiritual being. A person does not “have” a soul; the person as distinct from personality, mind and body *is* the soul. The essence of soul is spirit. To the degree limited self recedes, spiritual ignorance diminishes, and spiritual qualities are increasingly manifested in one’s life as decreasing selfishness and egoism, and increasing selflessness and altruisms.

Spiritual knowledge is a fruit of faith that has fully matured. Both faith and knowledge grow clearer and deeper as one pursues the way of faith by being in the world but not of it, by transcending attachments and entrusting oneself to divine providence instead of seeking security, fame, fortune, power or pleasure. As internal renunciation of the mundane becomes more deeply established, one’s view of life and the world is converted from the profane to the sacred. More and more, one comes to see all and everything as the manifestation of the undivided Self with which one increasingly identifies as one matures spiritually.

To miss these points is to miss the point of religion itself, whose foundation is spirituality. This is the teaching of the world’s greatest spiritual literature, such as the *Tao Te Ching*, *Bhagavad Gita*, the Buddhist *Heart Sutra*, the poetry of Kabir, Hafiz and Rumi, and also *The Gospel of Thomas*.

IS *THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS* Gnostic?

Whoever realizes the meaning of these words will not taste death.¹

HELLENISTIC SYNCRETISM

In introducing *The Gospel of Thomas* I suggested that it had initially been classified as Gnostic for polemical reasons that were as much political as theological. Unfortunately, this classification stuck and has not only become part of the framework of normative Christianity but also influenced considerable scholarship. Let us now examine the historical evidence more deeply to see whether this is tenable.

Jesus was born at the close of the Hellenistic period, which many historians date from the death of Alexander the Great in 323 B.C.E., and lasting until 31 B.C.E., when the Romans vanquished Ptolemaic Egypt.² While the Hellenistic period ended politically in 31 B.C.E., the Hellenistic Age lasted culturally until approximately 300 C.E., strongly influencing religion, philosophy and theology.

In the era of Hellenistic culture, the thought of Greece, the Near East, Persia, and Egypt came into close contact and produced new ways of thinking. This was the intellectual climate in which the early Jesus tradition developed. Hellenistic thought is characterized by a combination of these influences. Therefore it is said to be syncretistic.

One of these new ways of thinking in religion that appears in the Hellenistic Age, historians call “Gnosticism.” I will argue that the term “Gnosticism” does not accord with historical evidence as used in this manner and is prejudicial when applied as a blanket terms to certain early literature in the Jesus tradition, as the normative Christian apologists did polemically.

Within Hellenistic Gnostic literature, there was also a body of so-called Gnostic Christian texts, in which Jesus was typically involved as a character, usually a teacher of wisdom. Normative Christianity rejected these texts as being heretical. Normative Christian teaching would have it that if *The Gospel of Thomas* was

¹ *The Gospel of Thomas*. Prologue. Rendered by the author.

² Others date the Hellenistic period from Alexander’s campaigns (333/332 BCE.) to the end of Selucid rule and the ascendancy of Julius Caesar (63 BCE), marking the rise of the Roman Empire.

indeed the view of an early Christian community, then it was a Gnostic one, hence, declared anathema as heretical.¹

The principal thrust of research and writing initially took *Thomas* to be chiefly a Gnostic work, with some blend of Christian themes, likely worked in from the other gospels. While it may be the case that some of the imagery and symbolism in *The Gospel of Thomas* can be read as Gnostic in that its symbolism shares terminology with so-called Gnostic writings, this does not necessarily imply that it is chiefly Gnostic. For example, the Jesus tradition used the Hebrew derivatives “Messiah” (*mashiach*) and “Holy Spirit” (*ruach ha qodesh*) in quite a different sense and context than they were used in Hebrew teaching. In other words, adoption does not preclude adaption.²

While it is entirely possible that there is some “Gnostic” influence in *The Gospel of Thomas*, contemporary studies have argued convincingly that not only were there many Gnostic forms at that time, but also that they differed markedly to the point of contradicting each other.³ Moreover, scholars find Gnostic influences in canonical works attributed to both John and Paul.⁴ Early Christianity was not only pre-dogmatic but also rich in diversity. It adopted contemporary forms of discourse to adapt its mode of expression to the context of the times, just as Jesus spoke to a Jewish audience in that context, and Celtic Christianity took on some of the symbolism of the Old Religion where it was appropriate to its context.

“Gnosticism” designates a category as opposed to an actual phenomenon that went by that name. Christianity is called what it is because Christians adopted that designation. However, this is not the case with Gnosticism. There was no ancient religion that called itself Gnosticism. It is a catchall category that includes many groups and diverse influences.

¹ “*Anathema*” is a Greek term whose ecclesiastical meaning is accursed, banned, or condemned.

² In a different context, Couliano sees myths being transformed, so that Gnosticism can be accounted for not in terms of a building of specific bricks whose origin is known, but as a self-transforming process as myths are reinterpreted. Ioan P. Couliano. *The Tree of Gnosis: Gnostic Mythology from Early Christianity to Modern Nihilism*. Translated into English by H. S. Weisner and Ioan P. Couliano. (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), p. 62-63.

³ Michael Allen Williams. *Rethinking “Gnosticism”: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category*.

⁴ See, for example, Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Paul*, ; “The Johannine Gospel in Gnostic Exegesis: Heracleon's Commentary on John” (*Society of Biblical Literature*. Monograph Series). (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1973).

The phenomenon that historians call “Gnosticism” includes a variety of influences, some opposing each other in significant ways. For example, some types emphasize asceticism, including sexual abstention, whereas others are antinomian and were accused of being licentious. Moreover, this broad category is a synthesis of Hellenistic influences as diverse as the Magian, Hermetic, Orphic, Greek, and Jewish. Kurt Rudolph calls it “a product of Hellenistic syncretism.”¹

Hellenistic civilization did not arise out of nowhere. There was a long history leading up to it. Through Alexander’s conquest of lands extending from Greece and Egypt accord to central Asia to India, a great many ancient cultures came into contact and influenced each other. This remarkable combination of influences was cresting at the time of the development of the early Jesus tradition and obviously affected it deeply, in ways that scholars are still trying to puzzle out. In order to appreciate this we must back up a long way in time.

ANCIENT RELIGION

Time draws a curtain at the beginning of history, where evidence trails off and hindsight ends, concealing prehistoric events from view. Lacking evidence to corroborate it, all speculation about prehistoric religion remains speculative and hypothetical.

However, based on knowledge gained from surviving Stone Age peoples discovered living in deep forests and jungles in various places around the world in recent times, anthropologists surmise that prehistoric peoples were tribal nomads that survived by hunting and gathering, moving frequently in search of more abundant resources. Their religions were shamanistic. These religions are called “primitive” because they appear simple theoretically when judged by modern intellectual standards. But rather than being intellectually complex they were rich with symbol, meaning and experience, as expressed in highly developed lore, music, dance, and storytelling. Some of these ancient oral stories and songs were likely the basis for the early myths that survived in more developed forms. At any rate, mystical knowledge can be traced to shamanic religion and prehistory.

According to these myths, their source is not human but supernatural. They claim to be communicated through gifted people capable of receiving them, initially shamans. Later such people were called prophets, seers and sages. This traditional lore persists as the notion of revelation that is now beginning to be understood in terms of mystical experience. The ancients were saying from time immemorial that this knowledge constitutes the basis of perennial wisdom as the core spirituality of humankind.

¹ Kurt Rudolph. *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*. Translated by Robert McLachlan Wilson. (New York: HarperCollins, 1977), p. 54; 275-291.

Civilization began to develop when larger groups settled in fertile valley and began to supplement hunting and gathering with agriculture, eventually replacing it altogether. Thus, great civilizations developed in Mesopotamia in the "fertile crescent between the Tigris and Euphrates, the Harrapan valley cradled by the Indus in what is now India, as well as the Nile valley in Egypt, and the Yellow River and Yangtze valleys in what is now China. Judging from differences in language and culture, these civilizations developed largely independently. We are most interested here in the civilization that developed in Mesopotamia.

MESOPOTAMIA

Mesopotamian civilization seems to date to around 6000 B.C.E., the late Neolithic Age. Cuneiform writing was developed in Mesopotamia and also the sexagesimal (base 60) numerical system that is still used for temporal and circular measurement. This was the home of successively great civilizations: Sumerian, Akkadian, Elban, Chaldean, and Babylonian.

Mesopotamian religions were generally polytheistic, with a hierarchy of gods ruling over everything. But some religious mythologies were also henotheistic, that is, they were polytheistic but with a chief god that subsumed the lower deities, such that the deities were ordered hierarchically under the one supreme god.¹ For example, family and local tutelary deities were at the bottom of the scale, which culminated in a chief god as the overseer of all. These religions also contained a great deal of occult lore, such as astrological divination.

This was the culture in which Judaism emerged. According to Hebrew scripture, Abraham (*Avraham*) the Patriarch was from Ur of the Chaldees. Abraham had two sons, Ishmael (*Yishma*) and Isaac (*Yitzhak*). Ishmael is said to be the father of the Arab people and Isaac of the Hebrews. Isaac's son Jacob (*Yakov*) had twelve sons, who fathered the twelve tribes of Israel. When his brothers sold Joseph (*Yosef*) into slavery in Egypt, events worked out such that they rejoined him there. Moses (*Moshe*), the chief prophet of Judaism, was a prince of Egypt, well versed in Egyptian learning. After Moses led the Hebrews out of Egypt, ten of these tribes were lost in the Assyrian Captivity and apparently vanished from history, although there is speculation of there being a remnant in Kashmir that influenced Tantrism.

The two remaining tribes, the descendants of Judah (*Yudah*) and Benjamin (*Binyamin*) were subsequently conquered and brought to Babylon. During the Babylonian Captivity they were exposed to Babylonian culture. They were liberated

¹ A version of this still exists in the Roman Catholic hierarchy of angels under the one God, that extends from personal "guardian" angels through nine "choirs," each with its distinctive powers and duties, with all "reporting" to God.

by Cyrus the Persian and allowed to return home *circa* 538-537 B.C.E. However, this also established a connection with Iranian culture.

MAGIANISM

According to many scholars, the Gnostics apparently came under the influence of the late Zoroastrian or Magian religion that saw life as a struggle between the forces of light (spirit) and darkness (matter). Because of the apparent dichotomy between living spirit and dead matter, light and darkness, some saw *The Gospel of Thomas* as having been affected by this viewpoint. However, Couliano observes that the notion that the origin of Gnosticism was Magian (Iranian) is now discredited.¹ Defining spirit as that which is truly alive, hence immortal, and matter that which is dead, having no life of its own, is a far broader teaching.

Establishing a clear link to Iranian influence would be a victory for those arguing that *The Gospel of Thomas* is essentially Gnostic, hence heretical, rather than a genuine early gospel of the Jesus tradition, as some scholars have concluded. While a work of this scope and orientation is not the place to argue this point in depth, its importance for present purposes requires that it be addressed at least briefly.

It might also be argued that certain symbols and terminology were adopted not so much as a matter of external influence but because a deep internal correspondence was recognized. Hellenistic Gnostic texts seem to be concerned with the dualism of light and dark, spirit and matter, in terms of a dualistic metaphysics. While these oppositions are found in *The Gospel of Thomas*, they are typically related to spiritual orientation and practice, such as discernment and self-effacement. These are perennial themes that transcend Magian metaphysics and are not necessarily an indication of close association or undue influence. Such ideas were current in the region at the time of the development of the Jesus tradition, and they are found in the New Testament as well.

HERMETICISM

Alexandria exerted an important influence on Hellenistic thought. Since Alexandria is in Egypt, a connection to ancient Egyptian thought was also operative. The *Corpus Hermeticum*, which purports to be of ancient Egyptian origin, is more recent, at least as a text. Scholars first thought it to be perhaps a medieval work. Now, speculation dates it as far back as 500-200 B.C.E. and no later than 200 C.E. However, it likely contains at least the vestige of ancient Egyptian teachings that are much older.² Again, Western scholars dated *Rig Veda*,

¹ Couliano, p. 25-26.

² Garth Fowden. *The Egyptian Hermes: An Historical approach to the Late Pagan Mind*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

the earliest of the Vedas, to about 1500 B.C.E. Now, astronomical data contained therein suggests a date of 10,000 B.C.E.¹

ORPHISM AND MYSTERY RELIGION

Hellenistic religion also included Orphic cults and other mystery religions, whose teachings were secret, imparted only to initiates. A common notion seems to have been that the body is the prison of the soul and so the purpose of life is liberation. The means of liberation was apparently associated with the esoteric knowledge imparted through initiation, as well as asceticism. Apparently, their esoteric knowledge was formulated in terms of myths. Not much is known conclusively about these religions since they were secret societies, and there is no surviving literature directly stemming from them. Pythagoras may have been influenced by this strain, although this is not known conclusively. Similar themes and their treatment appear in both, suggesting a possible connection.

Pythagoras or Orphism apparently influenced Socrates and Plato. The dialogues *Phaedo* and *Cratylus*, for example, have Orphic overtones in that the body is represented as the prison of the soul. The Platonic influence remained strong throughout the Hellenistic Age and influence the development of Christian theology, culminating in Augustine. Some of Plato's works that fit into the broad Gnostic paradigm were included in the Nag Hammadi Library.

HEBREW MYSTICISM

Early Jewish mysticism also exhibits features suggesting that it influenced or was influenced by Hellenistic ideas. Gershom Scholem, a prominent historian of Jewish mysticism, believed early Jewish mysticism to be a type of Gnosticism. Couliano disputes this on the grounds that both early Jewish mysticism and what scholars call "Gnosticism" share a variety of similarities with other Hellenistic texts, ruling out the classification of early Jewish mysticism as chiefly Gnostic.²

The Hekhalot literature characterized Jewish mysticism in this period. The Hebrew terms *hekhalot*, also written *hekaloth* means heavenly halls, mansions, palaces, or castles. This literature is concerned with theurgical practices for gaining entrance to the inner "mansions" using magical formulae — incantations, seals, and angelic names — to bypass the rulers, who were the gatekeepers.

¹ B. G. Sidharth. *The Celestial Key to the Vedas: Discovering the Origins of the World's Oldest Civilization*. (Rutland, VT: Inner Traditions, 1999).

² Couliano. p. 42-43.

Timo Eskola argues that this form of Jewish mysticism influenced the early Jesus tradition.¹ Others, including Scholem, see it as the basis of the Christian Cabala.² What is now called the Practical Kabbalah or Magical Kabbalah began with the Hekhalot literature, manifested in the medieval and renaissance grimoires and contributed to the Western occult and alchemical traditions, eventually emerging publicly in the 19th and 20th centuries in the form of modern esotericism. Similar ideas of ascent are found in other Hellenistic literature that focuses on the “ruler” or “power,” called *archon* or *aeon* in Greek, that dominate the various inner levels in order to ascent to and through them. However, there is no evidence of such influence in *The Gospel of Thomas*, in which contains no mention of magical powers or hermetic practices to force ascent through the supernal worlds by influencing the gatekeepers thereof using special formulas that serve as keys. Neither are any rituals suggested or prescribed.

The influence of Jewish mysticism seems to come more from the traditional understanding of Qabalah as the inner teaching of the Torah given to Moses along with the written Torah at Mt. Sinai. This mysticism has to do with the inner meaning the Hebrew letters and their combination, indicating the “secret” or “hidden” (Hebrew *sod*) teaching. This is clearly related to *The Gospel of Thomas*, which declares that it embodies a hidden teaching embedded in the text such that understanding it in terms of spiritual experience is an objective criterion of having received the knowledge it contains about immortality.

In contrast to Hekhalot mysticism, Jewish Merkabah mysticism has to do with the process of spiritual “ascension.” The Hebrew term *merkabah* means chariot. It refers to the well-known scriptural passage describing the spiritual ascension of the prophet Ezekiel in a fiery chariot. This type of mysticism stands in contrast to both the magical practices characteristic of Hellenistic times and also to the temple worship characteristic of the Jewish orthodoxy of Jesus’ time, which was localized in Jerusalem and dependent on the priestly class. Merkabah mysticism emphasizes personal, interior spirituality instead of either occult practices like Hekhalot mysticism, or elaborate rituals and community worship like Jewish orthodoxy. Moreover, it is capable of being practiced by anyone anywhere, unlike the Jewish temple worship of that time, performed by a priesthood, distinguishing it from the traditional religious practices of scriptural study with a rabbi.

¹ Timo Eskola. *Messiah and the Throne: Jewish Merkabah Mysticism and Early Exaltation Discourse*. (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001).

² “Cabala” is often used refers to the Christian version and “Kabbalah,” to the Jewish, although “Kabbalah” is also used for the practical or magical version, too. “Qabalah” is a transliteration of the Hebrew letters.

There seem to be little doubt that Jewish Merkabah mysticism influenced the early Jesus tradition, perhaps through Jesus himself. By claiming to be “one with the Father,” Jesus would have been claiming to be a master of this tradition by having ascended to the very throne of God. Of course, if Jesus was God-realized, as he apparently claimed to be in saying this, then his knowledge of spirituality would have been on the basis of experience rather than study, and he would not have been merely mouthing words he learned, e.g., by studying Ezekiel. Nevertheless, every teacher must speak in the language of the time, using familiar terminology. Hence, it is not surprising to find Jesus using typical Jewish mystical terms such as “kingdom” prominently in his teaching in order to give expression to his own experience in terms that people could connect with their religious teaching.

Paul, who claimed to be a student of the great teacher of the time, Gamaliel, was likely familiar with Merkabah mysticism as well. Some prominent Gnostic Christians leaders like Valentinus claimed to be in Paul’s secret lineage, for example.¹ But the degree to which Paul had ascended is unclear. He himself mentions that he had ascended at least temporarily to “the third heaven.”² But Paul also makes clear in the same passage that he was not made perfect.

THE JESUS TRADITION

Simone Pétrement makes a case that the origin of the Gnosticism with which the heresiologists were concerned was the Jesus tradition itself.³ She sees gnosis as a doctrine of liberation found in many other traditions dating back to the Upanishads, and argues that Gnosticism cannot include all of these, it being a Hellenistic phenomenon. She argues that it can be understood in terms of Jesus’ role being seen chiefly as a teacher of the spiritual wisdom that gives liberation, without the need to search for other sources of the teaching. However, she interprets Gnosticism in terms of dualism, which would exclude *The Gospel of Thomas* from this category on the basis of sayings 3 and 22 alone. Pétrement does not make much use of *Thomas* in her extensive work, focusing instead on other texts.

OTHER INFLUENCES

It is possible that there were more distant influences in the Hellenistic mix as well. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan argues in *Eastern Religions and Western Thought* that the East introduced not only spiritual (gnostic) ideas but also spiritual

¹ Elaine Pagels. *The Gnostic Paul*. p. 1-10, 157-164.

² 2 Corinthians 12:1-10

³ Simone Pétrement. *A Separate God: The Christian Origins of Gnosticism*. Translated by Carol Harrison. (New York: HarperCollins, 1990).

(ascetical) practice to the West.¹ Others also points out the interchange between East and West not only through trade but also exchange of ideas.² Thomas McEvilley makes a strong case for there being a single “cradle of civilization” in ancient times.³ There is even the suggestion of a Chinese connection.⁴ It is emerging that cultures as far flung as India, China, Egypt, the Near East and Greece influenced each other more than merely through the exchange of goods through trade. The Hellenistic world seems to have been a veritable kitchen for this intermixing of exotic ingredients. So-called Gnosticism was not one of the pots but a collection of them, along with the developing Jesus tradition. in which the cooking took place. The fire was clearly a strong desire for knowledge on the part of many.

Does this imply that Jesus was affected by these multifarious influences? If one accepts his testimony that he was one with the Father, hence, a genuinely realized master, his own knowledge would have been more than sufficient. However, the language and context of the time, as well as the needs of those he was addressing, not only at the time but in the future as well, would have determined his mode of expressing this knowledge.

Subsequent expression in the Jesus tradition would have been influenced by prevailing contexts. Therefore, it is not surprising to find Jesus’ teaching expressed in a variety of ways by different groups and communities. These are not necessarily departures from the purity of Jesus’ teaching, as the normative apologists claimed, asserting that their views alone were orthodox. These views were also influenced by theology that elaborated on Jesus’ life and teaching in terms of other sources. The famous argument advanced by Irenaeus that there could be only four gospels because there were only four quarters and four winds certainly did not come from Jesus’ teaching:

It is not possible that the Gospels can be either more or fewer in number than they are. For, since there are four zones of the world in

¹ Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan. *Eastern Religions and Western Thought*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939).

² Kenneth Reagan Stunkel. *Relations of Indian, Greek, and Christian Thought in Antiquity*. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1979), and Vassilis Vitsaxis *Plato and the Upanishads*. (New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann, 1977).

³ Thomas McEvilley. *The Shape of Ancient Thought: Comparative Studies in Greek and Indian Philosophies*.

⁴ Steven Shankman. *Early China/Ancient Greece: Thinking Through Comparisons*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002). Steven Shankman and Stephen Durrant. *The Siren and the Sage: Knowledge and Wisdom in Ancient Greece and China*. (London: Cassell, 2000).

which we live, and four principal winds, while the Church is scattered throughout all the world, and the "pillar and ground"* of the Church is the Gospel and the spirit of life; it is fitting that she should have four pillars, breathing out immortality on every side, and vivifying men afresh. From which fact, it is evident that the Word, the Artificer of all, He that sits upon the cherubim, and contains all things, He who was manifested to men, has given us the Gospel under four aspects, but bound together by one Spirit."¹

UNITY IN DIVERSITY

The initial unity underlying the early diversity can be traced to Jesus, from whom the Jesus tradition stems. The diversity can be accounted for on the basis of the richness of his teaching, which can be interpreted variously and was likely given in forms suitable for the needs of different groups. Spiritual masters seldom give a uniform, monolithic teaching because it would not be suitable for the diversity of individuals and groups whom they serve. As a result, virtually no master has ever given a systematic teaching that can only be interpreted in one way. Systematization is imposed later and attributed to the master.

There were many influences and interpretations of Jesus' mission and message, and scholars are still doing their best to sort them out and identify them. Elaine Pagels observed in *The Gnostic Gospels* that when she went in search of original Christianity, she found that the early Church was diverse.² There were almost as many different viewpoints, schools of thought, and ways of following Jesus' teaching, as there were communities. This diversity of viewpoint, with its differences of emphasis, manner of expression, religious observance, and spiritual practice raised issues concerning the unity and integrity of Jesus' original teaching in light of the diversity that was found from the very beginnings of its spread.

Such differences are superficial rather than substantial, resulting from difference in interpretation rather than the original teaching: If Jesus was indeed God-realized, then his teaching was universal as an expression of perennial wisdom in the linguistic and cultural garb of that age. Virtually every teaching can be interpreted differently and usually is, even by its original audience, who appreciate it differently. In addition, the master handles different disciples differently, in a manner suitable for each. Therefore, the same teaching receives a different emphasis through different disciples.

¹ Irenaeus of Lyons. *Against Heresies (Adversus Haereses)* 3.11.8. *1 Timothy 3:15. URL=<<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103311.htm>>.

² Elaine Pagels. *The Gnostic Gospels*.

The Jesus tradition is further complicated by Paul, who was not a disciple of Jesus while he was in the physical body, but rather claimed to have received his teaching from Jesus inwardly as a personal revelation. Paul's interpretation of Jesus' mission was the first to be written down, and it was influential almost from the outset of the spread of the Jesus tradition. The difficulty here is that Paul's teaching is almost exclusively about the risen Christ, and the Jesus who physically walked with his disciples is absent from Paul's writings. Paul's letters are about Christology instead of reports of Jesus' words and deeds, therefore, already a step removed from the facts and events. That is to say, Paul is already deeply in the mode of framing Jesus' teaching.

Moreover, there is the question of whether there were two teachings of Paul, one public and another private. The former became a foundation of orthodoxy, while the latter was claimed by Gnostic Christians as their apostolic heritage, along with the secret teaching of Jesus to other apostles such as Thomas.¹

The Gospel of Thomas suggests, as scholars had suspected, that Jesus story was initially transmitted through collections of sayings and that the narrative gospels came later. The narrative gospels may have been introduced not so much to record the historical facts as much as to embed Jesus' sayings in stories that framed their interpretation doctrinally. Sayings alone can be interpreted in a variety of ways, and apparently were. In order to reduce this possibility and also to shape a particular interpretation, sayings were put in narrative form instead of being transmitted aphoristically. But all of the gospels do this somewhat differently, resulting in differences even within orthodox theology.

UNIVERSALITY VS. UNIFORMITY

The Greek term *catholicos* means universal. At one time, it was understood in this way as applied to Jesus teaching. Only later was "catholic" interpreted to mean uniform, in the sense that only one interpretation of doctrine is true, and that the Catholic Church as a normative institution is the final interpreter of it.

Uniformity of doctrine was established by the Council of Nicea (325 C.E.), which was presided over by Emperor Constantine. Interestingly, Constantine had not been baptized at the time. After the death of Constantine, who was reputedly baptized on his deathbed, Christianity was in the ascendant and subsequently decreed the religion of the state under Emperor Theodosius in 391 C.E. Just as the teaching of Jesus eventually became Christianity largely due to the influence of Paul; so too, Christianity diverged from its primarily spiritual orientation to become the religion of the state. When Christianity became Christendom as well, uniformity of teaching was enforced with state sanctions.

¹ Elaine Pagels. *The Gnostic Paul: Gnostic Exegesis of the Pauline Letters*.

Consequently, many presume that orthodox teaching was essentially homogenous from the beginning, occasionally to be assailed by various heresies that were fended off. However, scholars know that the early followers of Jesus were diverse. Given the early diversity of Jesus' followers, it is quite plausible that *The Gospel of Thomas* does contain some of Jesus' original teachings, albeit from the angle of particular communities, with their characteristic viewpoints and practices.

Even if *Thomas* should include apparently extraneous influences along with the genuine, it is not alone in this. Indeed, scholars find putative Gnostic elements in John as well as Paul. Moreover, Paul claimed to be a student of the great teacher Gamaliel.¹ If this is true, Gamaliel would most likely have introduced Paul to Jewish mysticism as part of his studies. Indeed, such influence can be found in the letters. The notion that early Christianity as a whole was not subject to influence by "outside (non-Jewish) sources" cannot be sustained on the basis of the evidence.

Reading *The Gospel of Thomas* along side other more clearly Gnostic texts found at Nag Hammadi shows that *Thomas* differs from those that are metaphysical and mythological. Although initial scholarship after the discovery and release of the Nag Hammadi Library suggested that *The Gospel of Thomas*, too, was chiefly a Gnostic text, subsequent research has led many scholars to question this conclusion. Marvin Meyer suggests that the term "Gnosticism" needs to be redefined on the basis of the wide divergence of texts.² He observes that the so-called "gnostic library" discovered at Nag Hammadi is, broadly speaking, a collection of a particular type of wisdom literature rather than being pieces cut from the same cloth.

A "DUBIOUS CATEGORY"

Moreover, Gnosticism was not institutionalized. There was never a Gnostic church or even a cohesive movement. The so-called Gnostics did not use the term "Gnosticism" to designate their religion, although they did use *gnosis* and *gnostikos* were used to mean "knowledge" and "knower."

Initially, "Gnostic" was used by orthodox heresiologists in attacking a variety of positions it opposed that they represented as being similar to each other. Now "Gnosticism" is by and large a modern category that is largely a construct of contemporary scholarship. Michael Allen Williams argues in *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* that it is a catchall concept. There was no homogeneous Gnostic teaching, and the scholarly

¹ Acts 22:3.

² Marvin Meyer. *The Gnostic Discoveries*. , p. 38-43.

category is a conflation of a variety of influences often with oppositional principles.¹

In *What Is Gnosticism?* Karen L. King goes further in deconstructing the concept.² She points out that Gnosticism took form as a rhetorical concept employed pejoratively by orthodox heresiologists to marginalize and denigrate views with which they disagreed. King argues for the possible need to abandon the term because its origin was polemical and use, rhetorical rather than descriptive of a historical phenomenon.

Opposing Williams and King, Bart D. Ehrman, a premier American scholar of Early Christianity, argues that Gnosticism is still useful as a category, even though he admits that it has many of the shortcomings they mention.³ He points out that as broad categories, “Christianity” and “Judaism,” and even more so “Hinduism,” involve similar problems, but these categories are still useful. It may be objected, however, that Judaism, Christianity and Hinduism are not merely logical categories but apply to actual religions practiced by people who assign themselves to these categories.

On the other hand, there is no evidence of a historical Gnostic religion in the same sense. The first-century Gnostics called themselves *gnostikoi* or “knowers,” i.e., those possessing *gnosis* or “knowledge. However, the notions of Gnostic religion versus a Christian religion were not current at the time. Many of the so-called Gnostics thought of themselves as following the Way of Jesus, and doing this more in Jesus’ own way than the so-called orthodox believers, who made faith their criteria rather than knowledge.

Very little is known about the so-called Gnostics or the types of religious life they followed, other than through a few surviving texts and the testimony of opponents. Most of what has been put forward is speculative and remains highly debatable, especially since much of what is now known about them comes from their opponents. Those opponents were mostly Christian heresiologists, who, Ehrman admits, may have exaggerated their polemic for apologetic reasons.⁴

Furthermore, the categories “Christian,” “Jewish,” and “Hindu” are purely sectarian, whereas the term Gnostic is not a sectarian term in the same sense, but rather, it was usually used as a pejorative label in the hands of Christian

¹ Michael Allen Williams. *Rethinking “Gnosticism”: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category*.

² Karen L. King. *What Is Gnosticism?*

³ Bart D. Ehrman. *The Lost Gospel of Judas Iscariot: A New Look at Betrayer and Betrayed*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 101.

⁴ Bart D. Ehrman. *The Lost Gospel of Judas Iscariot*. p. 57-61.

heresiologists seeking to establish orthodoxy, long before modern scholars appropriated the term. Now it retains that sense, even though some scholars may claim that the term is technical one in its present use and does not hold such a connotation for them. An apt comparison might be the successful ultra-conservative demonizing of the term “liberal” in contemporary American political discourse.

From the contemporary perspective, a major problem with “Gnosticism” lies with its perpetuating the polemical apologetic of early heresiologists as a valid way to categorize a body of extra-canonical literature in a way that excludes them on normative grounds. Moreover, it also obscures the role that these texts and the people who used them played in the early Jesus tradition, tilting the playing field toward the normative interpretations of so-called orthodoxy. In short, its continued use by scholars, who thereby lend their weight to it, perpetuates the old framework imposed by the victorious party centuries ago in marginalizing and even demonizing the opposition. “Demonizing” is not extreme here, since Irenaeus held that the author was really Satan.¹

Owing to its pejorative connotation that persists in normative circles, this term “Gnosticism” hinders wider appreciation of the possible relevance of texts like *The Gospel of Thomas*. Many of the faithful will likely not even look at them, let alone consider them objectively. Others who may not reject them out of hand may nevertheless be influenced adversely by scholars’ negative categorization of them, since most people presume that scholars who have studied the matter are acting objectively. Unfortunately, if *The Gospel of Thomas* is classified as Gnostic, it falls under the Gnostic heresy and is automatically excluded from consideration by normative Christians.

Ehrman argues that texts like *The Gospel of Thomas* that are not overtly Gnostic in the sense of explicitly containing Gnostic myths should nevertheless be considered Gnostic because their teaching cannot be understood without reference to these myths.² Yet, in a note to this claim he admits that Richard Valantasis as well as others have provided interpretations not requiring the Gnostic myths, apparently undercutting his own claim.³ This would seem to sustain the claim that *The Gospel of Thomas* can be interpreted in a way that does not require allusion to

¹ Irenaeus. *Adversus haereses*. I.26.

² Bart D. Ehrman. *The Lost Gospel of Judas Iscariot: A New Look at Betrayer and Betrayed*. p. 102. Ehrman presents a fuller argument for the foundation of *The Gospel of Thomas* on Gnostic myths in *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scriptures and the Faiths We Never Knew*. p. 59-65.

³ Bart D. Ehrman. *The Lost Gospel of Judas Iscariot*. p. 185, note 4. Richard Valantasis. *The Gospel of Thomas*. (New York: Routledge, 1997).

Hellenistic Gnostic views and that it is compatible with a mystical approach to Christianity consistent with perennial wisdom.

Conversely, scholars do not consider all texts containing demiurgical myths Gnostic in the historical sense, for instance, Plato's *Timaeus*. Moreover, the antecedents of "Gnosticism" are not known specifically, and most of the ancient religions of the area and beyond had similar myths and many of them involved "mysteries" in the sense of secret knowledge, two of the criteria assigned to Gnosticism.

It might legitimately be asked what the criteria might be for drawing the line? How would these criteria be decided objectively? In the absence of criteria that can lay claim to objectivity, a wiser course would seem to be to prescind from judgment rather than bias the evidence with arbitrary categories. On the one hand, arbitrary categories look suspiciously like curve fitting. On the other hand, such criteria are possibly skewed unconsciously toward venerable norms that have passed over into widely-received convention and have become part of the conventional wisdom that subliminally influences an entire culture, even many of its "objective" scholars.

Complicating this matter of cultural influence is the widespread presumption in the West that there is only one kind of human awareness, although intelligence may be of different levels. This means that some people may be smarter than others, or better informed, but we are all operating on the same scale in that we experience essentially the same things. However, according to perennial wisdom, this is not the case. Some people operate at expanded levels of awareness and are therefore privy to knowledge that is not directly available to those not so endowed. This, if fact, is the presumption of most religions, whose adherents accept a revelation from on high, but this is thought of as the prerogative of the prophet, unattainable by others in this lifetime except partially through mystical experience perhaps.

Many scholars who are religious accept the scripture of their own faith as genuine revelation, but reject it of others, or at least doubt or question it. Many others regard the whole issue of privileged knowledge to be mere superstition, a carry-over from more primitive times. However, it can be argued that the message of many religions, at least in their mystical teachings, is that such knowledge is available. Since this knowledge cannot be communicated directly, it is communicated symbolically, for example, through myths. In ancient times, myth was an important teaching genre. Even Aristotle is said to have spent his old age working with the myths.

MYTH

The Greek term *mythos*, the root of English myth, simply means story, often teaching story. In this view, most religious myths are teaching stories that are symbolic of higher knowledge that cannot be communicated directly. The purpose

of the myth is not so much to give this knowledge as to hint at it, inspire to it, and perhaps provide instruction in attaining it. The so-called Gnostic myths can be approached in this light, and similarities can be found among them and other venerable myths and teachings. However, many scholars approach these myths as though they were originally meant literally instead of symbolically. This would be like taking the well-known Sufi metaphor of wine as a symbol of divine love to be about winebibbing (which is prohibited by Islam), as some of their orthodox critics have done.

When understood symbolically, the so-called Gnostic myths fit in with other teaching stories from perennial wisdom. The stories may be different with respect to the characters, setting and action, but the teaching is often remarkably similar when their respective symbols are compared and contrasted. But viewed literally, the Gnostic myths as well as many of the other ancient myths seem fantastical, absurd or outrageous, and it may seem remarkable that anyone with any intelligence could have taken them seriously. This also applies to the orthodox teachings. For example, the “pagans” of the day were horrified by their literal notion of the Eucharist as cannibalism, which was, of course, overly literal also.

The Christian *mythos* is itself a story of the sort that can easily be seen as fantastical if taken literally. There are many supernatural events, including intervention of angels, possession by demons, temptations by Satan, mystical appearances, and miracles, not to mention a virgin birth and a resurrection of the hero of the myth. Nor are these characteristics unique to this myth. Similar themes are found in other ancient myths of the region, as detractors have pointed out. Why, it can be asked, is the orthodox mythos privileged while other myths similar to it criticized on grounds that apply to it?

While the so-called Gnostic myths may seem bizarre to many today owing to the influence of the normative Christian myth on culture, an objective examination of the Gnostic myth reveals that it is similar to other religious mythology both in its construction and function not only to other myths of the regions but to the Christian myth itself. It is not accidental that Christ, for example, plays an important role in many of the Gnostic texts. He was a prototypical figure to those predisposed to such myths, although they made different use of him than did the normative myths, that is, as revealer instead of deliverer.

Of course, normative Christians will object to this view. However, scholars know that the contemporary normative Christian myth is a construct arrived at by conflating the New Testament accounts, each of which presents a different picture not only of events and teaching, but also of Jesus himself. This conflation, now a cultural artifact, is not very different from other religious myths in its construction. But for those astute enough to see it, the Christian mythos contains a similar

“supernatural” message at its mystical core, here, that the kingdom lies with you and that the purpose of life is to enter this kingdom.

“GNOSTICISM” AS A MEME

“Gnosticism” has become a cultural meme that frames the debate from the normative vantage, framing in the norms and framing out non-normative parties and views as heretical. This is not to accuse Prof. Ehrman and other Christian scholars, who admittedly make every effort to be objective and “to call them as they see them,” of intentional bias or of promoting an apologetic agenda in academic garb. Those who do this generally give themselves away through their normative rigidity, whereas Ehrman and others have sought to set the record straight at the risk of upsetting true believers. Nevertheless, “Gnosticism” is a normative meme when all is said and done, and its historical usage is related to normative Christian apologists whose polemic against “Gnosticism” was intended to frame it out by representing it as outside of the norms. In this process, truth suffered as supposed “evidence” was shaped for the occasion.

Rather, I am pointing this out as an admonition to be aware of hidden assumptions and presuppositions possibly creeping into scholarship that is intended to be objective. On the one hand, absolute objectivity is impossible, because every approach to a text is necessarily interpretive, especially when that text is in an ancient language whose context is no longer available to verify the actual use of terminology. On the other hand, to perpetuate prejudicial terminology after it has become conventional is not being objective.

In the interest of objectivity, scholars need first to examine their presuppositions and then acknowledge them explicitly, admitting also that some assumptions run so deep that they likely remain unrecognizable even on performing due diligence through sincere reflection and soul-searching. Lay readers should also realize that neither scholars nor normative authorities are infallible and that claims are not necessarily true because experts proclaim them so.

Moreover, there are always hidden assumptions at work in author and reader that bias the account in the minds of both. Authors need to take precautions that they are not misunderstood, and readers should be aware that this is especially true in highly charged areas such as religion. Therefore, taking all precautions to prevent prejudicial feelings and judgments is necessary in such undertakings.

In the view of many, avoiding the use of “Gnosticism” to designate a blanket category would be a useful step in that direction. Alternatively, tightly defined limits should be applied to its technical use that bring it in line with its historical context, taking into account its normative connotations existing from the beginning in the writings of heresiologists that were instrumental in establishing the prevailing norms.

That this hasn't been accomplished yet is an indication that it is a nebulous area and a precarious undertaking. Gnosticism is an area of study that Ehrman observes is hotly contested in nearly every aspect.

It may therefore be asked why some scholars still think it is fruitful to confuse the issue by choosing a term with a historical bias, especially in such an emotionally charged field as religion, rather than a neutral one. First, Christian apologists prejudiced it for normative reasons. Then long after, many modern scholars maligned it further by presenting its myths as fantastical, revealing their own ignorance of the symbolic structure and teaching function of these myths as evidenced by similar myths that recur in perennial wisdom. Indeed, early normative Christianity was similarly misunderstood and misrepresented by detractors who took descriptions of the Eucharistic sacrifice literally and accused Christians of cannibalism.

Compounding the issue of Gnosticism as a dubious historical category is its contemporary Neo-Gnostic use. Some claim that there is a Gnostic tradition constituting a secret teaching in the West, mostly hidden beneath the surface but emerging visibly from time to time.¹ This tradition was supposedly preserved by various secret societies. It has recently experienced a resurgence of not only interest but also practice in New Age spirituality.²

For example, science fiction writer Philip Dick popularized Gnosticism to a degree, and then Dan Brown's enormously successful *The Da Vinci Code* extended this interest widely. There has also been serious interest, however. The movement even had its own journal for a time in *Gnosis* magazine, the editors of which having produced several books on the Western esoteric tradition since its demise.³ All of this activity has resulted in a mystique around the notion of Gnosticism that far exceeds its historical impact as a Hellenistic phenomenon contemporaneous with the early Jesus tradition and Neoplatonism.

Furthermore, there is a similar term in use. While the historical phenomenon is called Gnosticism, "gnostic" with a small "g" signifies a person having "gnosis," that is, spiritual wisdom in the sense of direct acquaintance through experience with higher knowledge. For example, the Arabic term *marefat*, means recognition. It is used as a technical term in Sufism for mystical knowledge of a high order. It is often translated into English as "gnosis." Sufis who have attained to *marefat* are regularly referred to as "gnostics" in English.

¹ Richard Smoley. *Forbidden Faith*.

² Hoeller, Stephan A. *Gnosticism: New Light on the Ancient Tradition of Inner Knowing*.

³ Richard Smoley. *Forbidden Faith*. ; Richard Smoley and Jay Kinney. *Hidden Wisdom: A Guide to the Western Inner Traditions*.

“GNOSTIC” VERSUS “Gnostic”

The early Jesus tradition seems to have been surrounded by a spectrum of teachings and views that converged in Hellenistic syncretism. One position was late Zoroastrian or “Magian” thought emphasizing a duality of spirit and matter, and a cosmic conflict between the forces of light (good) and the forces of darkness (evil).¹ This view is associated with a complex metaphysics and mythology. Along with it are found some Hermetic texts, possibly representative of ancient Egyptian thought, as well as Jewish mysticism and Platonic literature. Representative texts are found in the material discovered at Nag Hammadi and so to call this a “gnostic library” seems to go beyond the facts.

While it seems excessive to lump these texts together under the single concept of Gnosticism instead of viewing them as different expressions of Hellenistic syncretism, there is a common concern with wisdom in contrast to faith, for example. For this reason they may be called “gnostic,” spelled with a small “g,” indicating their emphasis on overcoming spiritual ignorance through spiritual knowledge.

This view encourages adopting spiritual practice, following a genuine spiritual master, and living a spiritual life on the basis of true values in order to realize Truth. In this view, the true “good” for humans — the *summum bonum* — is supreme knowledge, or “Truth,” which results in abiding fulfillment. The real “evil” is ignorance of one’s true nature, for it condemns one to suffering as long as one remains in this impoverished state. This understanding of gnosis is found throughout the traditions of perennial wisdom.

Plato, who portrays Socrates declaring that virtue (Greek: *arête*) is knowledge, put this view forth in the West.² In this view, for instance, the ending of The Lord’s Prayer has an inner meaning: “Lead us not into temptation,” means not letting us mistake illumination or even union with God for realization of identity — Absolute Unity. “Deliver us from all evil,” means removing the final veil that prevents one from realizing this ultimate Truth.³

¹ Western scholars tend to read the texts literally, whereas they can also be read as symbolic and metaphorical. See Hoeller, *Gnosticism*. Consideration of the interpretation of the so-called Gnostic myths is beyond the present scope.

² “Virtue” translates Greek *arête*. Some have argued that English “virtue” the contemporary connotation of “virtue” is overly moralistic, so that “excellence” more closely approximates the Greek meaning.

³ Maharishi Mahesh Yogi commented on this absolutist interpretation in an unpublished lecture.

The Gospel of Thomas can be interpreted as a gnostic work in this broad sense of wisdom literature rather than as characteristically “Gnostic” in the sense of a now dubious first-century historical phenomenon. The entire corpus of perennial wisdom is gnostic in this sense, and so saying that *The Gospel of Thomas* is “gnostic” with a small “g” places it in the context of perennial wisdom.

Most significantly perhaps, is the widely accepted view that dualism was a principal feature of first century Gnosticism. It is very difficult to square this dualism with the clear assertion in *The Gospel of Thomas* — Sayings 3 and 22 in particular — that entering the kingdom requires making the two one. Nevertheless, in holding that *The Gospel of Thomas* may reasonably be interpreted as asserting *unification*, it is necessary to meet the specific objection that it seems clearly to be dualistic in the Gnostic sense, for example, since Sayings 56 and 80 emphasize a distinction between the spirit which is alive and matter which is dead.

However, this same dichotomy is found in the New Testament:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love world; for all that is in the world — the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, and the pride in riches — comes not from the Father but from the world. And the world and its desires pass away, but those who do the will of the Father live forever.¹

Moreover, we would counter that a dualistic interpretation of *The Gospel of Thomas* is neither the only possible one, nor is it even the best one when the gospel is considered in light of perennial wisdom. For example, “Jesus said, ‘All under the sun will pass away, and the sun and stars themselves will pass away. And the dead do not live, and the living will not die.’”² This is actually the assertion of a very profound truth found throughout perennial wisdom, namely, what changes has no real basis in being and is necessarily dependent on another, while that which does not change subsists *per se* — through itself alone — and *sui generis* — without dependence on any other for its existence. What changes is relative, while that which does not change is absolute. That which is relative is manifest, limited within the boundaries of form in space and time; that which is absolute is unmanifest, infinite, formless and eternal.

“Matter” includes all that is perishable; spirit, that which is imperishable. “Matter” is relative and has no real being on its own, “spirit” is absolute, existing in itself, by itself through itself, and for itself alone. Being mortal and perishable, matter is already dead. Being incorruptible, spirit has eternal life. In this sense, spirit is said to be “living.”

¹ John 1:15-17.

² Saying 11:

This distinction between absolute and relative, manifest and unmanifest, unity and diversity is grounded in an ancient teaching of philosophy that ultimate truth is absolute, and of theology that God is absolute. Moreover, the perennial wisdom attested to by the world's mystics and taught by the world's illumined saints, sages, seers, and God-realized Masters is that the formless, infinite, eternal existence is absolute. For example, Jesus reportedly said: "Heaven and earth [matter] shall pass away, but my words [encasing the Spirit of Truth] shall not pass away."¹

According to perennial wisdom, spirit is the true nature of the soul, and it is the ultimate mystery of life to be penetrated through personal, interior revelation. Perennial wisdom in the form of the testimony of the mystics and the teaching of the masters is there to guide one. However, one must tread the path oneself. This is the core teaching underlying *The Gospel of Thomas* based on this interpretation.

According to perennial wisdom, the purpose of life is to realize this ultimate truth about oneself through spiritual living. This may be read as the inner meaning of the New Testament admonitions:

What does it profit a person to gain the whole world but lose his own life?²

Those who love their life will lose it.³

This involves a play on words. The meaning of the initial "life" is bodily existence and the second, the eternal life of the soul. If one loves one's bodily existence over one's spiritual existence, then one must die the death. As *The Gospel of Thomas* states according to this reading, if one attains self-knowledge —gnosis of who one really is as a spiritual being — in the present lifetime, then one will have realized immortality and will not "taste death" at the time of dropping the physical body.

At the same time, even though the body is the prison of the soul, to use an Orphic analogy, the physical body and the material world are necessary in order to realize ultimate Truth. Even though that which is material does not have "real" being in the sense that what comes to be and passes away is not real in the deepest sense, it has a purpose to serve, albeit temporarily. Like a ladder, it can be discarded after it has served its purpose to enable one to climb the ladder of ascent and reach the summit of knowledge.

But when material life becomes an end in itself, then matter becomes an obstacle to be overcome, and material life is like a pit of darkness calling for light. This light comes through spiritual living in contrast to material pursuits characterized by the quest for fame, fortune, power and pleasure, at the expense of true values.

¹ Matthew 24:35, Mark 13:31, Luke 21:33.

² Matthew 16:26, Mark 8:36, Luke 9:25.

³ John 12:25

Spiritual living may be defined as living in accordance with true values. True values are written in the heart, but they can only be intuited in a heart unclouded by self-importance and self-interest.

GNOSTICISM VERSUS APOCALYPTICISM

Bart D. Ehrman makes the distinction between Gnosticism and apocalypticism.¹ He defines Gnosticism as a view holding that secret knowledge brings spiritual liberation from bondage to matter. Apocalypticism is the view that God will eventually banish the Adversary, right all wrongs, favor the just and punish the wicked in a new world order soon to come. According to Ehrman, Jewish apocalypticism arose in the second century before Jesus, when Jewish sages explained the plight of the Jewish people in terms of the work of the Devil in opposition to God rather than the former prophetic view that the suffering of the people was a punishment for sin. These sages held that soon God would conquer the Devil and send his messiah, ushering in a new period of peace and prosperity for the righteous.

Here it is necessary to distinguish between political apocalypticism and eschatological apocalypticism. Both were present in Judaism and were even sometimes conflated. Political apocalypticism held that eventually God would free his people from foreign domination and give them back rulership of their land. Contemporary Zionism is an aspect of that point of view, for instance. This view was, of course, to the fore during the Roman occupation of Palestine, in the centuries preceding Jesus and the century afterward, until the Bar Kochba rebellion that resulted in the Great Diaspora instead of victory for the rebels.

Eschatological apocalypticism holds that the dead shall rise bodily at the time of the last judgment, after which the wicked will be consigned to the pit and the just will enjoy an earthly paradise. This eschatological apocalypticism did not begin with Christianity, nor even Judaism. It is found even earlier in Zoroastrianism, from which it may have entered Judaism. Indeed, in normative Christianity many of the features of Zoroastrian and Judaic apocalyptic belief are still present, for example, the end times, when the good will be rewarded and the evil-doers punished in the world-to-come after the general resurrection and final judgment. Islam also subscribes to this view. The resurrection of the body, the last judgment, and the life of the world-to-come are still articles of faith in the normative Christian teaching of today, as those who recite the Apostles' Creed well know.

Political and eschatological apocalypticism are sometimes combined, so that the end time is expected as imminent, when the forces of evil will be turned back only

¹ Bart D. Ehrman. *The Lost Gospel of Judas: A New Look at Betrayer and Betrayed*. p. 115-120.

after a world cataclysm that will signal the advent of the messiah. At this time, the previously deceased will rise and the last judgment will take place, the evil will be consigned to the pit and the saved will inherit the earth. Apparently, a large number of people now think that this is so imminent that they will live to see it, or if not they, then their children.

Ehrman attributes the rise of Gnosticism to the delay in this predicted happening subsequent to the Jewish apocalypticism of the second century before Jesus. After several hundred years had passed and the expected Messianic Age did not dawn, others put forth a new solution. This solution was that matter itself is flawed and one must escape its bondage through secret knowledge leading to realization of the spirit within, which is independent of matter and not influenced by it. This secret knowledge was known as gnosis.

Some scholars think, however, that this gnosis was a secret teaching into which one was initiated, rather than experiential knowledge. If so those Gnostics were not gnostic in the sense of perennial wisdom. However, it is doubtful that Gnostics actually thought that understanding a myth would result in liberation from bondage to matter. It is much more likely that the myth was only the external manifestation through symbols of what was to be internalized in experience. Unlike the more mythological “Gnostic” texts, *The Gospel of Thomas* presents gnosis in terms of attaining ripeness through personal preparation so as to become deserving of the grace of the Master.

According to Ehrman, what we are calling normative Christianity was essentially apocalyptic at the outset. Normative authorities saw Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet bringing a revelation of the end times and their aftermath, rather than as a spiritual master teaching a way to liberation from bondage. Eventually, when the prophecy of deliverance did not manifest as expected, apocalypticism took a back seat to an eschatology emphasizing a heavenly reward in the afterlife for the faithful and eternal punishment for the evil-doers, who would fall into the pit. But apocalypticism was also retained along with otherworldly eschatology as a future prospect in the resurrected physical body.

In contrast, some Gnostics at least held that unless one fans the divine spark within into a blaze of illumination, one will remain condemned to live in the darkness of material existence, and one will have to die the death of the body instead of enjoying eternal life. According to most Gnostic teaching, being the recipient of secret knowledge or “gnosis” is the key to the door of liberation from the grip of matter. In many of the Gnostic sects, elaborate myths concealed this teaching behind the curtain of symbols, and almost nothing is known of the people who subscribed to these lost religions, at least some of whom apparently considered themselves to be following the teaching of Jesus. If we allow Ehrman’s distinction between apocalypticism and Gnosticism as a characteristic of early Christianity,

then the members of the community that used *The Gospel of Thomas* were Gnostic rather than apocalyptic.

Ehrman divides early Christianity into Gnostic and apocalyptic camps. For him, the New Testament is primarily apocalyptic, and Jesus is presented therein as an apocalyptic prophet of a new millennium. Most of the gospels that did not make it into the New Testament were excluded because they were chiefly Gnostic. Ehrman sees *The Gospel of Thomas* as Gnostic in this sense.

I believe that this is a good insight on Ehrman's part and it makes a valid distinction with respect to a principal controversy in the early Jesus tradition over the teaching of Jesus. We can see how the apocalyptic view prevailed, not only in the norms but also in the very construction of the canonical works, which are based firmly in it. On the other hand, the so-called Gnostic works not only do not exhibit apocalyptic features, they seem to oppose them by substituting privileged knowledge in the place of faith in a future deliverance, bodily resurrection, final judgment, and a new era (world-to-come) to be enjoyed by the saved.

This controversy was apparently key in the dialectic interplay of views that resulted in an eventual parting of the ways, similar to the dialectic between the Jewish view of Jesus as a fulfiller of the Law and the Pauline view of Jesus as the bringer of a New Covenant, in which the later prevailed. Neither of these partings was inevitable, for either the Gnostics could conceivably have won out, or there could have been some compromise that allowed parallel development. Should the former of those alternatives have materialized, we would now be looking at apocalyptic Christianity as the aberration, instead of the other way around.

While Ehrman's distinction is useful in examining the dialectic development of the early Jesus tradition, it has difficulties that limit it. One of the difficulties with any black and white categorization is that there are always exceptions to the rule that resist rigid categorization. One of the obvious problems is that this distinction was not hard and fast given what we know about the diversity of the early Jesus tradition, making it difficult to draw clear lines of demarcation.

For example, some texts that fall primarily into one of the camps also exhibit some characteristics of the other. Moreover, texts representing different views are found within a single overarching viewpoint. This suggests that some people were sitting on the fence, so to speak, holding aspects of both views. For example, some see Paul speaking to two audiences in this regard. Ironically, while Fundamentalists cite Paul's letters in support of their views, Paul was also one of the first mystics to appear in the Way of Jesus, by his own testimony.

Scholars are discovering that normative Christianity is itself a combination of diverse views that have tended in the past to be glossed over in order to present the

appearance of uniformity.¹ Now, however, the early dialectic that was submerged is rising to the surface as the light of scholarship is shining on it. Indeed, the dialectic between various camps has been ongoing, and the normative authorities have had to confront gnostic tendencies becoming too overt for their comfort on a number of occasions. One of these occasions is now in full swing as Christianity is confronted with so-called New Age ideas and it has also to deal with emerging interest in Eastern traditions that are primarily gnostic in orientation. As a result, *The Gospel of Thomas* is enjoying an increasing prominence. Not unexpectedly, it is being condemned by normative authority as Gnostic and therefore heretical.

Ironically, contemporary Christian apocalypticists also attack such ideas, for example, as in the hugely popular *Left Behind* series written by Tim LaHaye, whose volumes have sold in the tens of millions. While this version pretends to be biblical, it is actually rather original in its construction.²

Also ironically, this inventive conception of Christianity masquerading as a return to fundamentals is opposed by modern versions of its old enemy, Gnosticism, not only in the form of New Age spirituality, but also through a reemergence and reinterpretation of Gnostic literature. For example, the enormous success of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, which has also sold in the tens of millions, made *The Gospel of Thomas* almost a household word. But, like the *Left Behind* series, this popular notion of Gnosticism is also largely fictional.

In the period of the development of the early Jesus tradition, contemporary scholars identify different "brands" of Gnosticism, e.g., Sethian and Valentinian. It is now difficult to determine what their teachings were with any precision, since the extant texts only gave hints that are likely largely symbolic, and the knowledge they purported to have was after all "secret," so there are no commentaries.

Nor is there any record of initiates violating their commitment to privacy and exposing the secrets. Just what was involved in the different sects and schools seems to have perished with the last Gnostic of that period, as it did in the case of many other mystery religions, such as Mithraism and Orphism.

Lumping all these texts together under a single category does not seem to do justice to their richness and diversity, even though they may have shared some commonalities, such as a reverence for a hidden knowledge. But then this thread should be extended to include the texts of perennial wisdom. Calling them "gnostic" rather than "Gnostic" accomplishes this. Then the term "Gnostic" can either be jettisoned as vague and confusing, as some recommend, or be further

¹ Bart D. Ehrman. *The Lost Gospel of Judas*. p. 173-179.

² The "rapture" theory is based on an inventive reading of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17, coupled with the notion of the end times and final judgment found in The Book of Revelations.

delineated in terms of very specific historical criteria, for example, relating it to certain mythology characteristic of this period, if scholars do not wish to abandon it altogether. I would suggest replacing the broad category with something like “Hellenistic syncretism” and then more precisely defining subcategories.

While the term “Gnosticism” is both misleading and prejudicial, as well as not common usage at the time, the terms *gnosis* (wisdom) and *gnostikos* (knower) were often used not only by heresiologists but also the people whom they were criticizing, so they apparently applied these terms to themselves. Therefore, their use is fair. However, it is a presumption that all texts using them, intend them in the same way. Each text must therefore be carefully examined to determine the meaning in it, at least as far as is possible today. It is also fair to distinguish Hellenistic Gnostics from gnostics in general, which is a far broader category and much larger class, not limited to any historical period.

It is likely that among the Hellenistic Gnostics, there were some true gnostics, in the sense of people dedicated to pursuing deeper knowledge through spiritual experience. Some may also have had qualified teachers guiding them. Some seem to have been convinced that they were following the Way of Jesus. Otherwise, it would be difficult to explain the almost immediate emergence of a strong mystical vein in the early Jesus tradition.

The category of Hellenistic Gnostic Christians, or Hellenistic Gnostics of the early Jesus tradition, is much more problematical. In the early days of the Jesus tradition, there was no official canon and no single normative doctrine. Therefore, it is well nigh impossible to draw a clear line separating normative Christians from Gnostic followers of Jesus, or even in some cases, from each other.

The Gospel of Thomas mentions neither *gnosis* (“wisdom”) nor *gnostikoi* (“knowers”) specifically, and it contains apparently early versions of many sayings found more developed in the canonical gospels. It contains neither the typical Hellenistic mythology and angelology, nor magic and miracles. There are no obviously Gnostic connections as there were in the case of the Valentinian texts, for instance. Moreover, there are many sayings in the canonical gospels that can also be interpreted mystically, and it can be argued that some of them were set in narratives specifically to counteract this possibility. In addition, there is some evidence that Jesus gave other supposedly secret teachings that were known in early times in the normative tradition, as Clement may report. It is difficult to find a dividing line in the case of *Thomas* that puts it squarely in the Gnostic camp rather than at the periphery of what became normative Christianity. That is, this dividing line separating *Thomas* from genuine apostolic teaching seems rather arbitrary, based on emerging norms rather than on solid historical grounds.

Since the lines were not clearly drawn for several centuries after Jesus’ passing and the passing of the early disciples who were familiar with his teaching, it is

difficult if not impossible to tell at this late date just who the “true” followers of Jesus actually were, or weren’t, just as it is difficult to distinguish what Jesus actually said from what the early communities may have altered or added.¹ Moreover, it is likely that aspects of Jesus’ teaching allowed for difference in understanding and approach. In addition, differences in spiritual maturity would also account for such differences in the way the teaching was received. The history of perennial wisdom shows that religions and wisdom traditions have a mystical core at their center and then rings of less illumined appreciation and understanding extending successively out toward a periphery that is rigidly normative and almost the opposite of the core teaching. The extreme outer ring of a teaching can even become fanatical.

It is interesting in this regard that the Nag Hammadi find was in the neighborhood of the Pachomian monasteries spawned by the Desert Fathers. Scholars surmise that this collection was likely a library of one of these monasteries, which was hidden away from the monastery at the time of a virulent persecution of “heresy” by normative authorities, since possession of such texts was a capital offense. Prior to this, the monks who collected them perhaps found them useful in their own spiritual pursuits, for which purpose they had left the world for the silence and seclusion of the desert.

We see that such issues later often came to a head. The normative authorities, that is, the “orthodox” bishops, were in a position of strength after the Church fairly melded with the Empire, and so they got to set the norms that became the criteria for orthodoxy. In fact, at around this point, the normative Christians in charge could claim that Jesus’ earthly messianic role had been completed, and that the political apocalypse to which the Jewish people had looked forward, when the Romans would be defeated and the people of God would be restored under the rule of God’s messiah, had been accomplished. They would hold that the Jewish people forfeited their rule to “vicars of Christ” who were Gentiles on account of Jewish failure to recognize Jesus as the promised messiah of God. Instead of the Empire, they inherited the Great Diaspora.

While the presupposition of the normative authorities was that their victory was guaranteed by the Holy Spirit working in the world, to an objective eye observing historical events it often seems that the matter was decided mostly on the principle, “Might makes right.” Moreover, this hegemony came to a close as might declined, and the theocratic empire of Christendom began to fracture, first with the Roman Catholic and Byzantine Orthodox split, and then the Roman Catholic and Protestant division. Since that time, Christianity has divided into a plethora of sects holding

¹ John S. Kloppenborg, *et al. Q Thomas Reader*. (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1990), p. 116.

various views, all claiming to represent Jesus' true teaching and the way to follow it.

Although the might may be gone, at the same time, the pope still retains the trappings of the Roman emperor, including his being a head of state in addition to religious pontiff. The remnant of the emperor's Praetorian guard, now in the form of the papal Swiss guards, is reminder not only of past glory but also of previous power. From these vestiges, we can glean some inkling of the might that was aligned behind norms such as apocalypticism and against those views that normative authorities considered to be in opposition to the norms they established and enforced.¹

Whatever the situation may have been with the various Hellenistic Gnostic groups, it is impossible now to say with any precision, for those in power at the time swept them into the dustbin of history. Even their texts are now obscure because their terminology is symbolic, meant to conceal as much as reveal. Moreover, the context has been lost, so that even word-meaning is debatable. As a result, much of the investigation remains speculative.

What is now certain is that whatever the beliefs of the "heretics," the apocalyptic version of Jesus' teaching prevailed as the normative one. The "kingdom of God" came to be understood as Christendom, on the one hand, and the advent of the New Jerusalem after the end times, on the other. In the meantime, the Church held the keys to the gates of heaven. Mysticism would remain largely peripheral to normative Christianity, and normative authorities would tightly control its expression. It was not until their lock on power was broken that this situation began to change.

Subsequently, mysticism came out of the closet to become mainstream, in no small part in reaction to the Eastern "invasion." Many people, who considered themselves Christian at least by upbringing, no longer took apocalypticism seriously. Nor did they believe that the Church held the keys to heaven. They began to ask, "Where's the beef?" Some, especially the young, began to look elsewhere for satisfying answers. Many found what they were seeking in the perennial wisdom of the East, or some form of it, such as Vedanta or Buddhism, which they approached not for "religion" but for inner knowledge through experience.

¹ While the pope retains some of the former trappings of power and remains a head of state, the Dalai Lama, who traditionally held similar political power and religious authority in Tibet, is now in exile after being deposed by the Chinese. But as a result, Tibetan Buddhism is undergoing a worldwide renaissance, whereas Christianity often seems to be getting bogged down by its adherence to out-of-date institutions, conventions and norms. As a result, many people are leaving church to find Jesus.

When the mystical spirituality of the East began to threaten normative Christianity by drawing people away, normative Christianity reacted both defensively and offensively. Defensively, it erected the familiar wall of heresy, but that wall was severely weakened by the lack of enforcement power. Therefore, normative Christianity went on the offensive and began to rehabilitate its own mysticism in order to counter the threat from its Eastern flank that was driving toward the center. For example, the now popular Centering Prayer was a Catholic counter to the growing influence of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's Transcendental Meditation Program[®]. Thomas Keating and Basil Pennington, Trappist monks who had previously been initiated into and practiced TM[®], subsequently developed Centering Prayer along similar lines but more consonant with traditional Christian contemplative practice.

According to perennial wisdom there are always gnostics with a small “g,” that is, experiential knowers of ultimate truth. Their teachings reveal an interesting dimension in this regard that brings some clarity to the matter, if not to the history, at least to the deeper questions that are raised, with which humanity is still confronted in contemporary terms. For example, Meher Baba's teaching is illuminating here, because it clarifies how both the view that liberation from bondage to material life through spiritual knowledge and also the eventual dawning of a new era through the offices of a deliverer are not mutually exclusive but complementary. Interestingly, when we examine the teaching of other Masters, especially advents of the God-Man, we find a similar teaching as well.

According to Meher Baba, the purpose of life is to realize God. What prevents this is identification with a material form, for this results in one's taking mere fleeting appearance as changing form in time for reality, which is eternal and unchanging. When the Master removes the veil of ignorance when aspirants are ripe, knowledge of ultimate reality is immediately realized as Truth. This is, of course, “gnostic,” and it is essentially the teaching of the mystical core at the heart of the world's religions and wisdom traditions, including Zoroastrian mysticism, Qabalah, Christian mysticism, Western esotericism, Sufism, Sikhism, Jainism, Vedanta, Yoga, Tantra, Buddhism, and Taoism, as well as Hermeticism, Platonism, and Neoplatonism. Did I overlook any? If so, I apologize to them.

At the same time, it is a long-standing teaching that “when the wick of righteousness burns low,” the God-Man incarnates. He rekindles the fires of love and knowledge through his inner work and ushers in a new era of spiritual wisdom and peace in place of spiritual ignorance and discord, as, for example, Krishna declares in the *Bhagavad Gita*, although its teaching is chiefly gnostic.

This was also the belief of Zoroastrianism, which looks to the Saoshyant to bring a new age, the belief of messianic Judaism which still expects a messiah, and apocalyptic Christianity, which looks to the Second Coming of Christ. This is also

the belief of Islam, both the Sunni belief in the Second Coming that will precede the Final Judgment and also the Shi'ite expectation regarding the Mahdi, or the reappearance of the twelfth Imam, who is in a state of occultation. All look to an end time, bodily resurrection, final judgment, and new era.

Indeed, belief in the resurrection of the body, final judgment, and a new era of peace and justice likely sprang up in the West as a consequence of Zoroaster's teaching. It is possible that this teaching entered Judaism at the time of the Babylonian captivity and the liberation of the Jews from this captivity by the Persian Cyrus.¹ It then stood ready to be brought to the fore in the apocalyptic period just preceding the time of Jesus, in a form that strongly influenced the development of Christianity.

However, it should be admitted that a diffusion of ideas is not necessarily responsible for this view either. Prof. Ehrman observes that "apocalypticism" comes from the Greek term *apokalypsis*, which means an unveiling, a revelation.² The Jewish sages of the time claimed that they had received a revelation different from the revelation of the prophets that the suffering of the people was a result of unrighteousness and that, instead, it was the work of the Devil, which God would soon overcome and his messiah or "anointed one" would rule God's kingdom.

Be it as it may, the apocalyptic view was formative for early Christianity, and the normative Church represented it as a key feature of Jesus' teaching as well. It is not represented as original with Jesus, however, for it is presumed to be common knowledge at the time that the Jewish people were expecting their deliverer to be sent by God. Others had claimed this status previously, and yet others would subsequent to Jesus. Most recently, the followers of the late Lubavitcher Rebbe Schneerson revered him as the Jewish messiah, although like those previous, he died without ushering the expected world to come for the Jewish people, at least at this point in time.

Often, it is difficult to distinguish between diffusion and revelation, because prophets bring out their own revelations in terms that are understandable to their

¹ While this cannot be documented historically, it is known that Jewish doctrine changed at this time, and one of the accretions was something very similar to Zoroastrian apocalypticism. Among the Jewish factions, the Pharisees, who were the teachers, held this belief, while the Sadducees, who were the temple priests, did not. "Pharisee" seems to be related to Farsi, the Indo-Iranian root of "Persian." There is no similar root in Hebrew. Some take this as circumstantial evidence of diffusion of this belief from Persia to Palestine and thence into Christianity and Islam. See, for example, Hannah M. G. Shapero, "Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity," URL=<<http://www.pyracantha.com/zjc3.html>>.

² Bart D. Ehrman. *The Lost Gospel of Judas Iscariot*. p. 116.

audience on the basis of familiar ideas and narratives. That is say, some background is often presumed to understand the revelation. Therefore, at times there is no hard and fast line between diffusion and revelation.

We find a similar situation in the case of contemporary spiritual masters such as Meher Baba, who often reaffirm previous revelation, sometimes either updating them for the present age or amplifying on them. According to Meher Baba, the God-Man comes for two purposes. The first is to grant spiritual liberation to those souls who are ripe for it. This he does not only during his earthly mission, but also after dropping the body, since he is not limited in any way. As a consequence, a mystical tradition gets associated with him.

Secondly, the God-Man manifests at the trough of a cycle of time and through his universal work that unfolds over many centuries, he brings about a crest by giving the entire creation a push and setting humanity on a fresh course. As a result a normative religion also grows up around him, although he himself does not necessarily intend to found one.¹ This combines apocalypticism and gnosticism, and reconciles them in a single overarching view.

Meher Baba also confirmed the eschatological teaching that one enjoys the fruits of his earthly actions – thoughts, words and deeds — in the afterlife. In the interim between lifetimes, the spirit of the deceased reap the fruits of their actions in the previous life in either the heaven or hell states, which, according to Meher Baba are not “places,” before reincarnating in another body to continue the journey toward realization, that is, gnosis.

In this picture that Meher Baba paints, eschatological, apocalyptic and gnostic elements are all present, although in somewhat different form than generally believed in the West. According to him, this is on account of a general misunderstanding of the teachings of the previous masters, which begins with the inability of even their disciples to understand these teachings. Over time, the errors get compounded and only the outer husk is seen, not the kernel of truth at the inner core.

In spite of these misunderstandings people advance on their journey because the process is guided inwardly, without anyone’s being aware of it but those whose inner eye is opened. It is not the external teaching that matters, but the universal work of the God-Man that necessarily manifests regardless of whether people

¹ Meher Baba emphasized that he did not intend to found a religion or cult, and that his work would awaken people within. It was this awakening on a grand scale that would lead to the New Humanity, not any institution, organization, or even his own teaching, which he minimized in comparison to this awakening and the spirit of love and truth it would bring into hearts. See Meher Baba, “The Universal Message” and “My Call.”
URL=<http://www.ambpct.org/meherbaba/meher-baba-messages_intro.php>.

consciously follow his teaching or even know about his advent. Indeed, in many advents the temper of the times does not call for the God-Man to reveal himself as such, and he may even conceal it.

The numerous mystics who arose throughout the Jesus tradition are evidence that many people received illumination due to the advent of Jesus by following his Way. In addition, virtually the entire Western world was transformed by his teaching and example of love, justice, and peace. The West, for example, ceased to be dominated by barbaric tribes in conflict with a ruthless empire. Not only the barbarians, but even the mighty Roman Empire itself was converted to his cause. Still it can be argued that it is improbable that this could have happened on the basis of a teaching alone, so that this is itself testimony to the work of the Spirit of Truth that Jesus promised to send. In addition, it is debatable whether Jesus himself intended to found any new religion at all, let alone the normative religion that grew up around his putative *mythos* and *ethos*.

Some might even say that Jesus accomplished his work often in spite of normative Christianity. For this unfolding over the centuries, and even millennia, did not take place without its share of difficulties and disappointments, as people's self-interest eclipsed their interest in following the teaching that they had supposedly espoused. Yet, even today, the Jesus tradition is a vibrant religion with its share of mystics. It continues to spread Jesus' teaching of peace, love, and justice worldwide in his name through the work of literally thousands of different sects, as well as individuals and groups not affiliated with "Christian" sects but who work in Jesus' name, too.

A similar case can be made for Zoroaster's influence, Abraham and Moses' influence, Rama and Krishna's influence, Buddha's influence, and Muhammad's influence, for example, each of whom had a profound influence on civilization in their respective regions, and even far beyond it, long after their passing from the scene. It can be argued that as world-historical figures irrespective of their spiritual status, these individuals had a greater impact on world history than any others. Rulers come and go but inspiration and ideas are deep and long-lasting.

Of course, similar qualifications need to be appended here also, since self-interest arising from ignorance is always a limiting factor in the relative sphere, as different people work out their destinies in their own way based on their degree of spiritual maturity. Everyone receives a push in accordance with their state of spiritual development, but not all are yet spiritually mature enough to function always from a level of spiritual understanding of true values, let alone ready for liberation at any one period. So various levels of ignorance resulting in degrees of unrighteousness still persist among those on the lower rungs of the ladder of ascent that all must climb to realize Truth, even during the best of times.

According to perennial wisdom, the cycles of time are endless, during which innumerable individuals make their way through history to realize the truth of who they really are. While there are individuals realizing Truth throughout the cycles, an ages of spiritual enlightenment occurs at the crest of these cycles. In the Vedic tradition, such a Golden Age is called *sat yuga* in Sanskrit, meaning “age of reality” or “age of truth,” since enlightenment prevails over ignorance.¹

We would conclude, therefore, that there is no essential conflict between gnosis and apocalypticism in this sense. Accordingly, there is no conflict between, say, the Book of Revelation as an apocalyptic work emphasizing the new world to come, and *The Gospel of Thomas* as a gnostic one emphasizing spiritual liberation through experiential knowledge of who one really is as a spiritual being.² However, gnostics would interpret apocalyptical prophecies somewhat differently than do the normative believers, taking them to be symbolic rather than literal.

ORTHODOXY VERSUS HERESY

While there may be no essential conflict between gnostic and apocalyptic views in this sense, and in fact, the early Jesus tradition seems to have been diverse enough to allow not only for differences among groups, but also within groups and even within some of the texts they produced. Later, however, “orthodoxy” was increasingly presented as a uniform and exclusive teaching purportedly stemming directly from Jesus, through the apostles and the successors they appointed. The normative authorities based their authority of this “apostolic succession” of right teaching, a concept that they subsequently transferred to the apostolic succession of orders and office. They claimed that only those in this lineage were divinely authorized to say what was “orthodox,” i.e., to determine the norms, and they

¹ According to many spiritual luminaries, the world is now approaching the end of the present cycle, an age of ignorance, and is going into the next cycle, a golden age. Kirpal Singh inaugurated *Sat Yuga* in 1974, at New Delhi, in the presence of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi inaugurated the dawn of the Age of Enlightenment in January, 1975. Meher Baba revealed publicly that he is the Avatar or God-Man of this age in August, 1954. He also revealed that his advent would bring an end to the present cycle of cycles and usher in a new cycle of cycles, which would begin with a golden age. This age will be characterized by what he called “the New Humanity,” inspired and guided by divine love. See Meher Baba. *Discourses*, 7th revised edition, p. 3-9.

² “The world to come” is *Olam HaBa* in Hebrew. According to apocalyptic Jewish thought, the world to come will be ushered in by the messiah (Hebrew *mashiach*) who will rule his people when the world has been repaired (Hebrew *tikkun*) through a return to righteousness.

condemned anything they perceived to be in conflict with the norms they set as heterodox, hence, heretical.¹

By the time that Eusebius wrote his history of Church in the fourth century, the fiction that the apostles had received the true teaching from Jesus and taught it to their successors, who in turn past it on to theirs in an unbroken line, was established as truth.² According to this view that became predominant, false teachings occasionally sprung up, but they were quickly put down. It wasn't until the twentieth century that Walter Bauer showed this to be a distortion of the facts, and a majority of scholars subsequently embraced similar views.³

It is now evident that there were initially many forms of the Jesus tradition and that there was often competition among them, especially with the increasingly powerful Roman faction and other communities. In some cases, this competition resulted in dissension and later in actual conflict and suppression.

Normative uniformity was not imposed until later by the well-organized and increasingly powerful Roman faction that eventually carried the day and in effect replaced the Roman Empire after it fell. When the normative faction gained power, those who had been persecuted by the imperial Romans became the persecutors of those with whom they disagreed. Normative Christianity became the basis for a uniform Christendom as a quasi-theocratic hierarchical institution under the bishop of Rome, who eventually gained the power to appoint all other bishops instead of local bishops naming their successors or congregations choosing them.

By the Middle Ages, it must have seemed to the faithful that the political aspect of the apocalyptic prophecies had come to pass, although differently than expected. The destruction of Jerusalem and the temple had taken place in the lifetime of many who heard Jesus' prophecy of its destruction with their own ears. Political hegemony was longer coming, but by the Middle Ages, Christendom had held sway in the Western world going on a millennium. This likely encouraged conviction that since the political apocalypse had taken place, the eschatological apocalyptic prophecies will eventually follow, perhaps shortly. In fact, from time to time, there have been different periods when such expectations ran high, especially at the turn of millennia.

After many centuries of normative control, Christianity has become a religion of salvation and deliverance rather than liberation from the spiritual ignorance of its

¹ Bart D. Ehrman. *The Lost Gospel of Judas*. , p. 173-179.

² G. A. Williamson. *Eusebius: The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*. Revised and edited by Andrew Louth. (London: Penguin, 1989).

³ Robert Kraft et al. *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Early Christianity*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971).

true nature that binds the soul to matter. As a result, there was not only a struggle in the early Jesus tradition for dominance but also an ongoing battle against mystical “excesses” that pitted normative Christianity against most expressions of perennial wisdom, both within and without. Normative authorities taught that there was no salvation outside accepting the norms and living up to them, and they also did their best to keep the mystics in the Church on a tight leash.

Moreover, the normative authorities embraced philosophical realism as key in order to enforce the normative doctrine of creation as a real event, original sin as a real separation of the soul from God, and the incarnation of Jesus as a real man in addition to being true God. Normative Christianity rejected the notion that since God is indivisibly one, reality is indivisibly one, hence, true knowledge, also. It regarded all nondualist philosophies and theologies as heretical.

This normative stance contradicted not only abundant mystical testimony, but also many mystery religions and spiritual teachings apparently founded on such experience. Many of the so-called Gnostic texts suggest that the groups using these texts strongly opposed the views held by the apocalyptic faction, perhaps on the basis of mystical experience, at least in some cases. Furthermore, they ridiculed many normative views rather transparently in their myths by disparaging normative Christianity’s notion of God, which so-called Gnostics held to be hopelessly inadequate. Similarly, the normative authorities read the Gnostic texts literally, ignoring that they were more likely myths that they were most likely intended as symbolic. As a result, they excoriated the so-called Gnostics for excesses that may have been merely imagined. In some cases it seems that the criticism may have been exaggerated for rhetorical effect or even made up. At any rate, the development of the Jesus tradition became rife with controversy, recrimination, and even conflict.

Even though *The Gospel of Thomas* is not one of the extremely “Gnostic” texts, Ehrman’s distinction between Gnostic and apocalyptic is well taken. There is no doubt that those who used *The Gospel of Thomas* not only did not agree completely with what emerged as normative Christianity, but there is also evidence that it stood in opposition to some of the emerging norms. For example, it took James the brother of Jesus to succeed Jesus as the leader of the community, rather than Peter. Indeed, Acts indicates that this was in fact the case. The normative authorities later ignored or glossed over such inconveniences, and where they couldn’t, they attempted to explain them away.

Perhaps most importantly, however, there is no reference to apocalypticism in *Thomas*. Moreover, the claim that the kingdom is already here seems to oppose the normative apocalyptic view.¹ Furthermore, the nondualistic stance of *The Gospel*

¹ Saying 113.

of *Thomas* also confronts philosophical and theological realism, arguing against the reality of both Creation and the Incarnation, therefore, denying them as norms at least by implication. In this sense, *The Gospel of Thomas* was definitely on the Gnostic side of the controversy.

Yet, while *The Gospel of Thomas* does confront normative Christianity on many issues, historical research reveals that the norms that were put in place cannot be shown historically to have been the exclusive or even predominant teaching of Jesus. Moreover, scholars now know that these norms evolved. Therefore, for historians to continue labeling *The Gospel of Thomas* “Gnostic” seems misleading and excessive, because applying the terminology of the early apologists doing can be taken to imply that it is contrary to the teaching of Jesus. Moreover, it perpetuates erroneous notions about the early Jesus tradition by reinforcing the labels assigned initially by normative apologists.

Prof. Ehrman admits that the “orthodox” versus “heretical” distinction was based on a value judgment grounded in normative theology, and he acknowledges that such value judgments are theological rather than neutral, hence have no place in objective history.¹ However, he then attempts to justify the continued use of such terminology by historians, arguing that these can become neutral and objective descriptive categories through redefinition as technical terms. However, this seems hardly satisfactory. Once a meaning is charged, redefinition is likely to result in confusion, without correcting the original problem.

In many other cases scholars have adopted neutral terminology to replace value-laden categories and emotionally charged labels. In other contexts, most scholars regard using a descriptive term such as “normative” to be more appropriate than a theological term like “orthodox,” unless a value judgment is actually stated or implied, as it was historically when wielded by apologists against their opponents.

Therefore, it would be more objective to stipulate that *The Gospel of Thomas* is “mystical,” or “gnostic” in the perennial sense, in contrast to the predominantly eschatological and apocalyptic orientation of normative Christianity. This can easily be done while at the same time stating the historical fact that normative authorities ruled such texts out as “Gnostic” on normative theological grounds. Then, it can be more properly appreciated as potentially an important contribution to the Way of Jesus, as well as to perennial wisdom, rather than being dismissed as peripheral or eccentric, as its contemporary opponents would like to see happen.

THE GNOSTIC IMPULSE

It is also important to recognize that even with all its might, the institutional Church could not entirely control or suppress the gnostic impulse in the human

¹ Bart D. Ehrman. *The Lost Gospel of Judas*. p. 174-175.

heart as an inherent urge to transcend one's present state. This is the basis of religion as spirituality, which stands in contrast to religion as response to a psychological urge to circumvent the certainty of death through belief in an afterlife, as well as to right the obvious injustices of the world.

Just as modern atheistic totalitarian regimes could not stamp out religion, so too, throughout the history of Christianity not only are reports of mystical experience common but gnostic literature abounds. From the outset, for example, Platonism was popular with the educated class and Plato's philosophy is decidedly not only gnostic, but it contains myths that are similar to the Gnostic myths as well, especially in the dialogue, *Timaeus*.

Alfred North Whitehead observed that subsequent Western philosophy is but a footnote to Plato, for Plato broached virtually all the enduring questions. Therefore, Western thought could be seen as a lengthy dialectic between Plato's idealism and Aristotle's realism.

Indeed, Hegel could argue that this dialectic reached its logical and metaphysical conclusion in his own Absolute Idealism, which was the culmination of the journey of the Holy Spirit in human history, to the point at which humanity — through Hegel — had finally completed the divine quest for consciousness to know itself as Spirit logically, metaphysically and phenomenologically.¹ It was a grandiose claim, perhaps, but it was Hegel's view of the import of himself and his work. For him, the mystical alone was incomplete because it was only experiential and not conceptual. (Mystics would counter that Hegel's account was deficient in being merely conceptual rather than experiential.)

Additionally, gnostic themes continually crop up in poetry and literature from the earliest times. These included some of the greatest poets of virtually every era and region, for example, Dante, Goethe, Blake, and Whitman, to mention but a few. Indeed, Mozart's *The Magic Flute* can be seen as an attempt to elucidate the gnostic significance of music as an awakener of the heart. Kandinsky made similar claims about the art of painting, and not only the aesthetics of Oriental art contributes to this understanding, but of Christian art also, as Ananda Coomaraswamy observed.²

Therefore, it can be argued, *The Gospel of Thomas* and similar literature of the first centuries after Jesus' time was representative of this inherent urge of the

¹ Hegel held that he had accomplished this ultimate feat logically and metaphysically in his *Logic* and historically in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, also known as *The Phenomenology of Mind*. The German word *Geist* can be translated as either "mind" or "spirit."

² Wassily Kandinsky. *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy. *The Christian and Oriental, or true, philosophy of art; a lecture given at Boston College, Newton, Massachusetts, in March, 1939*. (Newport, RI: John Stevens, 1939).

human heart seeking to break through its confines, and it did so in the predominant literary form of the time, namely religious. We would submit that one of the principal appeals of Jesus' teaching across time lies in his answering this call. *The Gospel of Thomas* appears to have been one of its early expressions.

On the other hand, eschatological doctrines of salvation in an afterlife have been taken as evidence of a subconscious psychological urge to assuage anxiety that arises from awareness of death's inevitability. Human beings are the only animals who are conscious of their own impending doom, and the result is a deep form of subconscious anxiety that does not let one really rest by finding inner peace. The promise of a heavenly reward in the afterlife assuages this anxiety over death's inevitability.

On the one hand, many religious accounts seem to offer an eschatological answer to this powerful need arising from the human condition. This is the core message of normative Christian eschatology, with its promises of the Beatific Vision in heaven and, and apocalypticism, with its promise of bodily resurrection.

On the other hand, perennialist solutions involve knowing oneself, not psychologically but spirituality. The central message of mystical Christianity is, "The kingdom of God lies within you."¹ It is epitomized in *The Gospel of Thomas* as "entering the kingdom," which is a symbol of unification through knowing one's true nature as living spirit. Those who do not know this truth dwell in the poverty of ignorance, for what greater ignorance can there be than not to know who one really is?

As a result, religions often exhibit these two features, one of which might be called spiritual or mystical and the other, psychological. The pursuit of spirituality in quest of an experiential answer is one form of religious response, while belief in an eschatological solution through following religious norms regarding doctrine, ritual and observance is another.

Henri Bergson argues that religion arises, on the one hand, from a psychological need for comfort in the face of uncertainty, and on the other, from the conviction produced by mystical experience, which is intuitive, and reports, i.e., revelations, based on it.² Against this view, Freud analyzes the subconscious psychological urge to circumvent death through eschatology, and attributes the religious urge to this more primitive urge. At the outset of his investigation, Freud dismisses out of hand his friend Roland Romain's insistence on the relevance of "the oceanic experience" of nonduality.³ The fact is that the people Freud studied in coming to his

¹ Luke 17:20-21.

² Henri Bergson. *The Two Sources of Religion and Morality*.

³ Sigmund Freud. *The Future of an Illusion*. Translated by W. D. Robson-Scott. (New York: Horace Liveright and The Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1928).

conclusions are in the vast majority, and he likely dismissed the views of Romain as a mere blip on the statistical screen in numerical comparison. As a result, he overlooked the dual source explanation provided by Bergson. But in the spiritual dimension, it is quality and not quantity that counts.

Ironically, normative Christianity takes a similar tack in attacking the Gnostics. A principal normative objection against historical Gnosticism as well as the gnosis characteristic of perennial wisdom is that it is essentially escapist. According to the normative criticism, both hold that matter is either not real or else deficient, and that body is the prison of the soul. As a result, the aim is to escape this bondage to matter, including the body. The normative view is that since God created the body and world, they are both real and essentially good. Moreover, since Christ came as true man as well as true God, he thereby sanctified the body and blessed the world itself with his blood.

Conversely, both those labeled as Gnostics historically and also gnostics in the broad sense might counter that they are being unfairly criticized on the basis of a literal reading of what is intended as symbolic. Their myths represent the spiritual urge implanted in the human breast that eventually drives spiritually mature people to undertake the spiritual quest in order to realize their divine birthright by coming to know who they really are.

Moreover, both Gnostics and gnostics would object that normative Christianity is itself escapist, with its teaching of salvation in a heavenly afterlife. For its principal beliefs are designed to avoid the human predicament. Everyone knows that they are going to die someday. Those who identify with the physical body fear death as annihilation. Religious eschatologies involving survival in the afterlife assuage that fear. However, this is not enough for those who strongly identify with the body. For them, eschatology must include not only the survival of the soul after death but also a subsequent resurrection of the physical body and a worldly heaven on earth enjoyed in that body. They might point out that this normative apocalyptic myth, as set forth chiefly in The Book of Revelations, is as extreme as the Gnostic myths and gnostic teachings that normative authorities criticize as literal even though they are largely symbolic. Contemporary “Gnostics” might even point to Freud’s *The Future of an Illusion*, where he makes this case psychologically.¹

The normative faction is misled in this by their literal interpretation of the apocalyptic revelations in their own scriptures, when these myths were also

URL=< <http://www.questia.com/read/93928903#> >. Romain was himself a mystic as well as a famous *litterateur*. He was a follower of Sri Ramakrishna, whom Meher Baba had identified a Perfect Master (Sanskrit: *sadguru*).

¹ Sigmund Freud. *The Future of an Illusion*.

intended to be symbolic, as are the Genesis creation myths, aswell.¹ Only the most fanatical still believe that the world is only six thousand years old in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Yet, others do not seem to be able to grasp that they are doing something similar by taking eschatological myths literally.

The fundamental difficulty here is that the normative faction identifies so strongly with the body that they cannot imagine survival of the soul after death without eventual physical expression and enjoyment through their own bodily resurrection and enjoyments in an earthly paradise. As a result they are the real dualists, and they project their dualism on others, like the so-called Gnostics.

The work of Carl Jung can be read as the rebuttal from a higher level of Freud's view that religion is essentially the result of a subconscious psychological ploy to assuage anxiety over conscious realization of death's inevitability. It also rebuts normative criticism of gnosticism as being a form of other-worldly escapism. Jung attempted to show how humanity is striving not to escape but rather to bring the unconscious dimensions of self to conscious awareness in order to achieve psychological "enlightenment."² Jung was himself very interested in expressions of perennial wisdom from the perspective of its testimony to this psychological urge toward complete self-unfolding, as well as its reports of its experiential realization by mystics that testify to this unfolding. It is not known whether he ever dealt with *The Gospel of Thomas*, since the Nag Hammadi material appeared when he was advanced in age.³

GNOSIS IN THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS

A good case can be made that texts such as *The Gospel of Thomas* are about spiritual knowledge grounded in non-ordinary cognition. The present undertaking

¹ There are two distinct creation myths set side by side in Genesis. For the differences of the two strands of thought in Genesis, see Harold Bloom and David Rosenberg, *The Book of J*. (New York: Grove Press, 1990).

² Whether Jung's thought is gnostic in the perennialist sense is a matter of controversy. Jung did go on record as opposing Eastern views of spiritual enlightenment and their methods of supposedly achieving the enlightened state, at least as he understood some of their key concepts, even though his own position was influenced by them. Harold Coward. *Jung and Eastern Thought*. Lucinda Frances Mooney. *Storming Eastern Temples: A Psychological Exploration of Yoga*. (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1976).

³ Herbert Christian Merillat, *The Gnostic Apostle Thomas*, ch. 26. Of the thirteen codices found at Nag Hammadi, Codex I was taken to USA by a Belgian antiquities dealer, Albert Eid in 1949. In May, 1952 it was purchased from his widow by the Jung Institute in Zurich because of Jung's work in Gnosticism, and then it was returned to the Coptic Museum in Cairo bit by bit. Much of the work of the Institute was undertaken without Jung's personal oversight. Codex I has been named The Jung Codex to honor the psychologist.

suggests that *Thomas* can be interpreted as being directed toward attaining knowledge of the nondual state through identity with it. While the principal of the justification for this reading rests with explicit statements, especially sayings 3 and 22, other saying depends more on interpretation. Sayings 3 and 22 about entering the kingdom by making the two, one substantiate this categorically. Given the explicit assertion of nonduality in Sayings 3 and 22, it seems most reasonable to interpret other sayings of *Thomas* in this light, to the degree they are amenable.

Jesus' expression, "entering the kingdom," can also be interpreted as realizing union with God by seeing God "face to face," which implies duality. According to perennial wisdom, this occurs initially in seeing God "face to face" and then ultimately in realizing the identity absolute existence in absolute knowledge, which constitutes God's knowledge of Himself. Perennial wisdom is very clear that only God knows God. Therefore, in order to know God truly one must become identical with God by realizing the nondual state, where separate selfhood disappears in the realization of the indivisible simplicity of infinite consciousness. It seems most likely that *The Gospel of Thomas* is referring to realization of identity when it speaks of making the two, one.

MONACHOS

Monachos is a key term in *The Gospel of Thomas*. It means the single one, or the unified one. Like the term *yogi* in Sanskrit it may be used to signify both one who is already unified and also those pursuing this goal onepointedly.

The Greek term *monachos* comes from the root *monos*, meaning "one." Mystically, it means one who has either realized spiritual union, or one whose principal intention is to do so, even at the cost of everything else. Those who are not yet unified but are one-pointed may be said to be *monachos*.

The Sanskrit term *yogi* has the same meaning. It comes from the root *yuj*, meaning to join, which is also the source of the English word "yoke." Thus, *yogi* means one who is unified. A genuine *yogi* is one who has either realized union or is committed to this realization as the goal of life, although nowadays it is often used for anyone who practices *hatha yoga* postures seriously and perhaps is also a vegetarian. These meanings should not be confused. Both *monachos* and *yogi* in their deepest sense are bound up with experiential realization of nonduality. Ironically, the word "yogi" has been adopted into English to signify someone who is adept at assuming pretzel-like postures, and "monk" merely signifies someone sequestered in a monastery. The true significance of these terms has largely been lost to view, and they have been reduced to clichés.

Monochos comes from the same root as the English word, "monk." At the time of Jesus, there were monasteries such as the Essene community at Qumran, with which John the Baptist is speculatively connected. The Essenes were a strict Jewish

sect who lived apart, in the Judean desert, in accordance with a monastic rule focused on purity of life.¹ They chose to live in the wilderness in order to avoid exposure to undesirable influences. They also seem to have been at odds with the Sadducees, the priestly class in charge of temple worship, so they did not go to the temple, even though most Jews did, especially for important festivals.

The term *monachos* could also be applied to John the Baptist and Jesus, and their committed followers. John was an ascetic who lived in the wilderness, while Jesus' life was in the world but certainly not of the world. His instruction to his close ones was to leave all and follow him. Hence, it would seem that *monachos* could well refer to followers of Jesus practicing the self-emptying that leads to internal renunciation.

Quite early, followers of Jesus wishing to dedicate their lives completely to spiritual pursuits went into the desert to live as hermits. Eventually, the wise among them decided that it was safer and more conducive to join in groups. These wise ones were called "father." Aramaic was the *lingua franca* of the time, in common use in the region. The Aramaic word for "father" is *abba*. Similarly, to the East, sages are called *baba*, also meaning father, which sounds like "papa" in the West, where and priests are also addressed as "Father."

Aramaic *abba* is also the derivation of the term "abbot" as the head or "father" of a monastic community. Subsequently, Benedict composed a rule for the monks to follow that set the standard for monastic communities. Benedict's rule was based on the motto, "work and pray" (Latin: *ora et labora*). The monks worked communally to support the monastery and spent the rest of their time either in contemplative prayer or chanting the divine office. The Christian monastic movement arose from this. By the fourth century, the term *monachos* was used in Greek-speaking monastic communities to mean essentially what we now mean by "monk."

There is no necessity to reserve the term *monachos* solely to those who are "monks" in the sense of members of monastic communities who have renounced the world externally. Therefore, to avoid this confusion it is not usually translated "monk." There is however no corresponding term in English. So it is usually translated as either "a single one" or "solitary," neither of which satisfactorily

¹ The rule of the Essene community was found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered between 1947 and 1956, beginning shortly after the Nag Hammadi find. The discovery did not come to scholar's attention until 1948. Prior to this there was speculation that Jesus was an Essene, perhaps even their Righteous Teacher. However, the scrolls did not support this, since the scroll material showed that Jesus lived quite differently from the Essenes.

convey the spiritual significance of *monachos*. “Unified,” “undivided,” and “integrated” more accurately convey the inner, spiritual meaning.¹

It is important to note here that the unified one is not necessarily solitary in the sense of having quit the world. It is quite possible to be in the world but not of it by practicing internal renunciation alone, not by leaving the world but by quitting self-interest and practicing self-effacement. In the worlds of Meher Baba, “The only Real Renunciation is that which abandons, even in the midst of worldly duties, all selfish thoughts and desires.”²

This seems consistent with the rest of *The Gospel of Thomas*, which does not seem to recommend external renunciation in the sense of actually leaving the world. Rather, it emphasizes recognizing that the worldly things have no spiritual substance and, having no “life,” can never be ultimately satisfying by providing “life.” Recognizing this, one will focus on entering the kingdom as one’s chief priority in life and will thus abandon the worldly pursuit of fame, fortune, power and pleasure for what is truly important spirituality. This is the meaning of the parable of “the pearl of great price,” for example, as well as Saying 8:

Those who seek wisdom should be like the fisherman who cast his net into the sea and drew it up filled with small fish. Among the small fish, he found a good big one. Without thinking twice about it, this wise fisherman threw all the little fish back and kept only the big one. Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.

¹ Dr. Neale Lundgren suggested this expression to me on the basis of what he had learned from his mentor during his training as a Benedictine monk.

² Meher Baba. *Discourses*. , 7th ed., p. 2.

GNOSIS

*I will give you what no eye has seen,
what no ear has heard, what no hand has touched,
and what no mind has ever conceived.¹*

HIGHER COGNITION AND SPIRITUAL WISDOM

While we are primarily concerned with the meaning of “Gnostic” and “gnostic” as they apply to the Jesus tradition and perennial wisdom, we should not overlook the fact that the Greek term *gnosis* has a variety of other meanings and was used differently in religious and philosophical literature. *Gnosis* is the noun form of the Greek verb *ginoskein*, which simply means to know in the broadest sense. This term can signify all types of knowledge. Rudolf Bultmann set forth the use of *gnosis* in Greek, Hellenistic Gnostic, Septuagint (Hebrew Scripture translated in to Greek), Jewish (including Philo Judaeus), and early Christian literature, as well as its later theological development.² It is also used in translating similar concepts from other traditions. Although we need not be concerned with the variety of meanings here, it is necessary to be aware that *gnosis* has a rich history that cannot be restricted to a particular or exclusive sense.

The Greek word *gnosis* has been imported into English in a special sense. In spiritual literature, “gnosis” is often used as a technical term to refer to spiritual knowledge, comparable to the technical meaning of Sanskrit *vidya* and *jnana* (also transliterated *gyana* and *dnyana*) in the Vedic tradition, and Arabic *marefat* (“recognition”) in Sufism. While *gnosis*, *jnana*, *vidya* signify knowledge in the ordinary sense, they have often been appropriated in spiritual discourse to signify spiritual wisdom, or “enlightenment.” However, like the term “enlightenment,” “gnosis” is not always used in the same sense throughout spiritual literature. It may mean virtually any state that transcends ordinary experience. The context has to be examined closely to determine how the term is being use there.

But “gnosis” also has the more technical meaning of ultimate truth. In this sense it is applied to both divine union in which the lover and Beloved are united but remain distinct, or it can signify as realization of the identity of absolute existence and absolute knowledge in the nondual state. Again, use in context must be inspected carefully, and even then, it is not always possible to distinguish the

¹ Saying 17.

² Rudolf Bultmann. *Gnosis*.

intention. To the degree that “gnosis” is cognate with the technical sense of Sanskrit *jnana*, it signifies nonduality.

Gnosis is neither based on an idea or concept, nor grounded in acquaintance with any object, such as God or Self, for neither God nor Self are capable of being known as objects. Knowledge of ultimate truth is neither by comprehending or experiencing but by becoming in the sense of realizing one’s identity with. Ultimate truth is the nondual state, or realization of the absolute identity of being and knowing in infinite consciousness. Of course, this cannot be explained; it must be realized. All accounts are therefore only pointers.

The transcendental attributes of being are said to be “the one, the true, the good and the beautiful.” Realization of the identity of being and knowing is clearly *one* and indivisible since it is absolutely simple — reported by seers as “one without a second.” Realization of the identity of being and knowledge is also clearly *true* because the definition of truth is the correspondence of what is known with what actually is.

Realization of the identity of being and knowing is also *good*, in that “good” denotes that which is “appetible,” as philosophers say, meaning desirable. Realization of the identity of being and knowing is completely fulfilling because it is eternally “complete.” The English word “perfect” comes from the Latin *perfacere*, which means to finish or complete, the prefix *per* meaning through and the infinitive *facere*, to make.

That which is most desirable for rational beings is the abiding satisfaction of complete or perfect fulfillment, which occurs only beyond time and change in the realization of infinite consciousness. For those whose nature is rational, hence, capable of knowing universally, perfection entails knowing universally, i.e., absolute knowledge. Realization of one’s essence as absolutely universal, i.e., as being infinite consciousness, is therefore the final end of human nature, hence, its greatest good. Would this not be possible, then the human being, whose greatest desire is abiding happiness, which is only available through achieving that universality, would be “a useless passion.”¹

Realization of the identity of being and knowing and fulfillment is also identity with the *beautiful* because beauty is that which is ultimately attractive and pleasing. The seers report that realization of the identity not only of being and knowing but also fulfillment as bliss or peace. In Sanskrit this is called *sacchidananda*, where *sat* is being, *chit* is consciousness and *ananda* is bliss.

¹ In *Being and Nothing*, atheist Jean Paul Sartre observes that the ultimate human desire is to be God, which is impossible in Sartre’s view. Therefore, he concludes pessimistically that “man is a useless passion” (*L’homme est une passion inutile*).

In the early Jesus tradition, this gnosis was called the state of “rest.” It is a state of rest because one has arrived at the goal of life and there is no further to go. This is the true, spiritual significance of the Sabbath, *shabbat* meaning rest in Hebrew. God completes his work in creation through our God-realization. This is the true meaning of making the Sabbath as a day of physical rest from work into a real Sabbath of true, spiritual “rest.”¹ Life is complete, that is, “filled with,” *com* meaning with in Latin and *pletus* meaning filled. This is also the sense of “perfect,” from *factus*, which means made in Latin and *per*, which means through. It is why *Thomas* can say that someone old in chronological time can ask an infant of seven days about life, i.e., the spirit.² “Infant” signifies someone newborn in the spirit after attaining “rest.” This is also the inner meaning of the gospel saying that one must turn and become as a small child in order to enter the kingdom.³

Gnosis is “the peace that the world cannot give.” The Vedic seers also call realization of identity, *shivam*, *shantam*, *advaitam*, or “God’s auspiciousness, peace, nonduality,” since *shivam* means auspicious and also signifies the identity of soul and God. The soul that has realized its essence in identity is called *shivatma*, or God-Self, whereas the soul that remains identified with limited individuality through spiritual ignorance is called *jivatma*, or individual self.

“Rest” is also used to denote the nondual state because in this state a person is completely conscious in the sense of never losing infinite awareness, even in deep sleep. Thus, the perfect are always at rest, for they are fully conscious even in the state of deep sleep. Being infinitely conscious, they are also eternally conscious of the manifest “creation.” As a result, theirs is a paradoxical state of “activity along with rest.”⁴

¹ Saying 27.

² Saying 4.

³ Matthew 18:3. See also Mark 10:15 and Luke 18:17. The narrative setting of this saying in the synoptic gospels relates it to humbling one’s self; whereas a similar saying in John relates to being born again of the spirit. Compare John 3:3 (KJV): “Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

⁴ Saying 50. Meher Baba. *The Everything and the Nothing*, 30-39, 56-57. , p. 35-42, 57-59. The state of infinite consciousness in which awareness is never lost is called *nirvikalpa samadhi* (transcendence without mental activity) in the Sanskrit of Vedanta and *fana fillah* (annihilation in God) in the Arabic of Sufism. The state in which an embodied individual maintains infinite consciousness while also retaining creation-consciousness is known as *sahaj samadhi* (natural transcendence) in Vedanta and *baqa billa* (abiding in God) in Sufism. Since these are technical terms for which there is no corresponding English terminology, they are usually left untranslated.

Gnosis must be distinguished from other types of higher knowledge. The world's spiritual literature is replete with reports of mystics in which they testify to having visions of the upper worlds and their beings, such as angels, seeing God, and even realizing unity with God.¹ Knowledge of the upper worlds encountered on the ladder of ascent, visions of heavenly beings, meeting with the saints of the past, and even seeing the Lord and Master are clearly quite different in degree than knowledge gained from ordinary sense perception, reasoning or even ordinary intuition, but they are not the supreme wisdom of nonduality.

While it seems clear from the reports of mystics that spiritual knowledge is different from ordinary knowledge, it is not always clear what constitutes spiritual knowledge and differentiates it from other types of non-ordinary knowing. For not all non-ordinary knowledge is spiritual. For example, even many scholars fail to distinguish between the spiritual, the magical, the esoteric and the occult. Because there is a great deal of ambiguity involved in the use of such terms, I will define these terms technically for use herein.

These distinctions are needed for several reasons. In the first place, scholars of early Christianity and Gnosticism have sometimes confused them. In addition, we live in an age in which experience is paramount. Consequently, in the marketplace of spirituality various experiences are often advertised as spiritual when they are simply non-ordinary. Non-ordinary experiences represented as spiritual are bogus, and they serve to distract from the real objective, which is knowledge of one's true nature as a spiritual being.

This is not to claim that all such non-ordinary experiences have no importance in life. Many are salutary in certain respects but they do not of themselves necessarily advance one on the spiritual journey, as many believe. For example, harnessing life energy (Sanskrit: *prana*, Chinese: *chi* or *qi*, Japanese: *ki*) for health is salutary but not necessarily spiritual. A good many, however, are not savory, and they can detract as well as distract. Many masters have cautioned that the use of drugs to stimulate non-ordinary experience is deleterious physically, psychologically and also spiritually.²

Admittedly, these distinctions are presented categorically, perhaps overly so, in order to make a point. As a consequence, it must be further asserted that these

¹ For example, in the Judeo-Christian mystical tradition, Moses purportedly "saw" God on Mount Sinai, Paul encountered the spiritual Christ on the road to Damascus, St. Teresa of Avila reported on the mansions of the higher worlds on the ladder of ascent, Swedenborg described heaven and the angels, and Meister Eckhart even seems to suggest that he realized the Godhead itself.

² See Meher Baba, "God in a Pill?" reprinted in Laurent Weichberger, *A Mirage Will Never Quench Your Thirst*, (Myrtle Beach, SC: Sheriar Foundation, 2003).

categories are not hard and fast in the range of their application, and that their meaning would need to be examined on a case by case basis in light of their use in specific contexts. However, even though the definitions provided below may be sketched in broad brushstrokes, they do serve to show that the single category of “Gnosticism” is drawn with an even broader brush that ignores many key distinctions, thereby risking distortion of the complex historical phenomena it aims to clarify, through oversimplification and conflation.

SPIRITUAL KNOWLEDGE

According to perennial wisdom the *spiritual knowledge* that ultimately results in liberation of the soul from the veils of ignorance is identity with absolute reality. This knowledge is also variously called wisdom, realization, and, yes, gnosis, harkening back to the Sanskrit term *jnana*, meaning “spiritual knowledge” when used in its technical sense. Mystics report that this non-ordinary or “transcendental” knowledge can be gained only through higher cognition.

However, spiritual knowledge is sometimes also used to include inner vision, even through this “knowledge through seeing” is acknowledged as inferior to knowledge by realization of identity, which is “knowledge by being.” To clarify, spiritual knowledge sometimes is presumed to include knowledge gained both by seeing God with the spiritual “eye” and also by “being” God through realization of identity in Absolute Truth. These are not always clearly distinguished and so there is confusion about this in some quarters. Complicating the matter, texts do not always make clear which is meant.

Wisdom (Sanskrit: *vidya*, *jnana*, *prajna*, Greek: *gnosis*, Hebrew: *hochmah*, Arabic: *marefat*) in the technical sense of spiritual knowledge gained through higher cognition is of a different type than knowledge gained through the ordinary means of sense perception and logical reasoning. Nor can imagination claim to provide higher knowledge since it is not grounded in direct acquaintance with the realities in question on the basis of higher cognition. Even intuition as ordinarily understood does not qualify as spiritual wisdom in this sense either.

Moreover, testimony putatively based on the higher cognition of others but without direct acquaintance on the part of the one receiving the knowledge through scripture or testimony does not become non-ordinary for the person receiving it without direct acquaintance, no matter how strong the belief in it may be. As Paul writes, “for now we see through a mirror, obscurely, but then we shall see face to face,” that is directly. Seeing “face to face” is symbolic of realizing identity (Hebrew: *yechidah*) in Qabalah, as Paul would have known as someone who had studied in the school of Gamaliel.

For example, even if scripture is admitted to be inspired, the one reading it may not be inspired in the same way or to the same degree, and different readers read the

same words in different ways. Therefore, when Jesus proclaims in *The Gospel of Thomas* that one who comprehends the meaning of his words therein will not taste death, he is not talking about understanding the sayings intellectually, no matter how long one might pore over them with the mind.¹ For until the spiritual eye is opened, one cannot “see.” Hence, teachers who do not have this eye opened are “the blind leading the blind.”²

OCCULT KNOWLEDGE

Occult knowledge is grounded in non-ordinary experiences. One aspect is more expanded knowledge of the physical world, such as clairvoyance, clairaudience, seeing auras, out of the body experiences, communicating with the spirits of the dead. Another aspect is knowledge of the subtle world, such as the angelic realm, through refined perception or supramental cognition. Most visions would fall into this category of knowledge, for example. The occult includes the ability to use supernormal powers directly, without the use of magical formulae to summon aid from and even compel subtle helpers such as angelic powers (Sanskrit: *deva*, Arabic: *djinn*).³

Mystical experience may be said to include both the spiritual and the occult since they genuinely exceed normal experience. To the degree that magical knowledge and esoteric knowledge, understood in the technical sense employed here, are limited to knowledge gleaned through ordinary channels such as sense perception, reasoning, imagination, and testimony, they do not qualify as mystical.

In addition, there is a knowledge “bridge” over the abyss separating the normal, that is, knowledge grounded in sense experience and reasoning, from the supernormal or mystical. This bridge begins with “ordinary” intuitions, premonitions, and the like, and it exists even at the seemingly mundane level. Most people experience something of this type at least occasionally, even though some may not recognize it owing to a bias against the “irrational.” Of course, it is also

¹ *The Gospel of Thomas*, Saying 1.

² *The Gospel of Thomas*, Saying 34.

³ “A number of numinous creatures subordinate to God appear through the Hebrew Bible; the *Malach* (messenger/angel) is only one variety. Others, distinguished from angels proper, include *Irinim* (Watchers/High Angels), *Cherubim* (Mighty Ones), *Sarim* (Princes), *Seraphim* (Fiery Ones), *Chayyot* ([Holy] Creatures), and *Ofanim* (Wheels). Collective terms for the full array of *numina* serving God include: *Tzeva*, (Host), *B'nei ha-Elohim* or *B'nai Elim* (Sons of God), and *Kedoshim* (Holy Ones). They are constituted in an *Adat El*, a divine assembly (Ps. 82; Job 1). A select number of angels in the [Hebrew] Bible (three to be precise) have names. They are Michael, Gabriel, and Satan.” Rabbi Geoffrey W. Dennis. “Angels.” *Encyclopedia Mythica* from Encyclopedia Mythica Online. <<http://www.pantheon.org/articles/a/angels.html>>.

possible to make more of this than it actually is. Some people who are somewhat intuition-prone consider themselves to be psychic, even though they are just getting their feet wet in the ocean of knowledge.

This knowledge bridge leads to the deepening of intuition and insight to the degree that these higher levels of knowing begin to supplant the primacy of sense experience and reasoning as sources of knowledge. This shifting of priorities among knowledge sources develops into knowledge of the inner planes of the subtle and causal worlds. Knowledge of the causal world qualifies as genuine spiritual knowledge because it involves direct cognition of eternal verities. This is the knowledge of real saints and it is a preliminary form of gnosis, or spiritual wisdom. True saints can raise others as far as their own level, should they choose to do so.

Those who cross this knowledge bridge to identity reach the goal of life by realizing the Absolute — God. These are the Perfect Ones, who can say with Jesus, “I and the Father are One,” or, what amounts to the same thing, “God is One,” in the sense of being the only reality. To realize identity is to know this unity of being by identifying with it consciously. The ability to raise others to spiritual perfection belongs exclusively to those who have realized this state.

On the other hand, esoteric and magical knowledge as these terms are used here, are limited to ordinary means of knowing. Therefore, they are categorically different from spiritual and occult knowledge, and even the bridge knowledge that begins with intuition, which are all based on non-ordinary means of knowing.

MAGICAL KNOWLEDGE

What we are calling *magical knowledge* is typically related to such things as passing through gates by producing the proper formulae for satisfying the gatekeepers and wielding supernormal powers by performing the appropriate measures, generally formulae or rituals. This type of knowledge was not limited to Gnosticism at this time but was a common feature in Hellenistic times. It persists today largely through the influence of what is called the practical Kabbalah in Western magical systems.

ESOTERIC KNOWLEDGE

Esoteric knowledge is secret knowledge. While esoteric knowledge can include mystical knowledge, this is not necessarily or even regularly the case. It is often communicated through understanding or performance in the absence of higher cognition. In this sense magical knowledge is a type of esoteric knowledge, but all esoteric knowledge is not magical knowledge. Many secret societies today still exhibit a combination of esoteric and magical teachings and practices.

GNOSIS

A good deal of first century Gnosticism is concerned with magical and esoteric knowledge, although it is also possible to confuse highly symbolic mythology that points toward spiritual wisdom with magical and esoteric knowledge. However, to the degree that this knowledge is not based on direct acquaintance through non-ordinary cognition, it does not qualify as *gnosis* in the sense of “spiritual wisdom” as understood by the perennial tradition.

Scholars might counter that they only examine texts and the texts themselves do not make such distinctions. While that may be, but without drawing such distinctions a questionable impression of the texts is created by the very constructs that are supposed to clarify.

Further complicating the matter is the fact that many so-called Gnostic texts are riddled with abstruse symbolism and mythology. Some have read these texts literally and come to the conclusion that the people who used these texts had strange beliefs. Others recognize them as symbolic but attempt to interpret the symbolism largely on the basis of conjecture. However, much of this symbolism rings familiar to those who are acquainted with perennial wisdom. However, few scholars of this period are perennialists. Therefore, such interpretations are scarce.

Scholars operate as a community of letters in terms of a conventional universe of discourse whose norms favor certain views and either marginalize or exclude others. Hence, scholars who are attempting to cultivate and preserve a reputation do not stray far from the accepted norms of the day that typify scholarly discourse in their field of study. Perennialism is not a feature of this universe of discourse, and such interpretations are not advanced.

Drawing distinctions is a principal tool of scholars. It is also one that they are expected to keep sharp and wield appropriately. Judging from the failure to draw such distinctions, the conclusion seems to be that many scholars are apparently unaware of the cognitive differences distinguishing these categories, since they tend to lump them together under the single rubric of Gnosticism. Even scholars such as Meyer who have moved away from this categorical error by questioning the appropriateness of “Gnosticism” seem to miss the distinction between knowledge gained through ordinary and non-ordinary means in their use of “gnosis,” “gnostic,” and “gnosticizing” in relation to apparently quite different textual types.

These are important distinctions because it is easy to misunderstand a teaching and think that it is aimed at ordinary understanding when it is not. Hence, to use the same term *gnosis* with reference to knowledge gained through both ordinary and non-ordinary means is to conflate categories and cause confusion. For example, Saying 1 of *The Gospel of Thomas* states that one who understands these sayings will not taste death, i.e., will realize the immortal nature of the soul experientially prior to dropping the body. Lacking appreciation for the above distinctions, one

might conclude that intellectual study of the gospel is being recommended. However, a reading of the gospel indicates that this is not the intention.

Rather, what is required is attaining the state in which the inner meaning of the sayings is known directly, on the basis not of intellectual understanding of the sayings, but of spiritual knowledge of their inner meaning. This can only come about by transcending duality — the duality of subject and object, knower and known, limited self and world. Thereby, one realizes one's true nature through identity with absolute reality as indivisible unity.

This knowledge of nonduality greatly exceeds the bounds of intellectual understanding, which is confined to concepts that can never capture the infinite experientially. Hence, intellectual understanding by itself cannot lead to realizing the state of nonduality. On the other hand, could these sayings be used as contemplative devices similar to the use of koans in Zen meditation to achieve a transcendental state by confounding ordinary mind so that it surpasses itself? Some might find the similarities so striking as hardly to be coincidental.

INDEPENDENT DISCOVERY VERSUS DIFFUSION OF IDEAS

An objection might be raised that similarity to other traditions and teachings can be explained more simply by geographical diffusion of ideas than by positing a core spirituality as the source of perennial wisdom that has been discovered independently in the world across time. Indeed, the initial view of scholars that *The Gospel of Thomas* was chiefly a “Gnostic” work was based on such a presumption. The appellation “Gnostic” was understood as a first century historical phenomenon that was dismissed as heretical by influential Church Fathers. According to this position, the strong currents of Gnosticism prevailing at the time influenced *The Gospel of Thomas*. The fact that *The Gospel of Thomas* and other purportedly Christian noncanonical gospels were found intermixed with patently Gnostic works in the Nag Hammadi material buttressed this view that the origin of *The Gospel of Thomas* was derivative.

For example, historians of the era are aware that many influences were at work in the Hellenistic environment in which the mission and message of Jesus developed into Christianity, and that these shaped both ideas and practice. The term “Gnosticism” was invented by scholars to summarize a variety of these influences, which included Greek philosophy, Egyptian Hermeticism, Jewish mysticism, Zoroastrian influences remaining from the Persian Empire, and remnants of the ancient religions of Chaldea and Mesopotamia. It is even possible that Hindu and Buddhist influences were there as well, since the trade routes linking the East and West passed through this area. There is little evidence of organized or even consistent expression in first century Gnosticism as such. Rather, there were a number of historical manifestations bearing a family resemblance, but sharing no

single trait or predominant characteristic that would define its essence other than gnosis as non-normal knowledge.

No doubt these influences existed and affected the prevailing universe of discourse. Hence, it would be surprising not to find such literary and linguistic influences in the texts of those times. Similar influences can also be found in the New Testament, for example, in imagery of light and darkness, and even the appearance of Jesus in the spiritual body, both at the time of the transfiguration and also after the resurrection.

Admittedly, *The Gospel of Thomas* is not traceable directly to Jesus or Thomas on the basis of historical evidence. Textual criticism indicates that at least some of the sayings are likely Jesus' own. What ever its origin and authorship may be, it is almost certainly in the line of oral transmission, at least in part.

If this gospel did not stem from Jesus or Thomas directly, those who contributed to it were possibly mystics of a high order, personally acquainted with the realms of spiritual experience of which they spoke. For this gospel is a key expression of core elements of mystical spirituality, and its message must have come either from the experience of those ultimately responsible for it or from the diffusion of such ideas from elsewhere.

The fact that it reflects the testimony of mystics and teachings of masters worldwide across time indicates that it could hardly have had either purely conceptual or imaginary roots, although the possibility of ideas proliferating in the Hellenistic world ideas cannot be ruled out in the case of *Thomas*.

Some historical diffusion of ideas may be admitted, especially with regard to the expressions employed, since the Hellenistic world was a melting pot of ancient Greek, Semitic, Persian and Egyptian lore. In addition, the area was also on the hyperborean route called "the silk road," where caravans of traders brought goods eastward from the Orient. Amazingly an axe head found in the ruins of Troy was fashioned from white jade, a mineral exclusive to China in this form, suggesting the possibility of trade no later than Homeric times.¹ It was found at the lowest level of the dig, dated approximately 2500 B.C.E. The Hellenistic world, the environment in which Christianity developed was also influenced by Alexandria, a key center of learning where ideas from East and West met and mingled in Hellenistic Egypt, in whose sands the Coptic version of *The Gospel of Thomas* was uncovered. Goods apparently reached here from India.

However, there is a huge difference between physical goods and ideas. Travel in the ancient world was difficult and dangerous, and the distance of journeys was

¹ Donald A. Mackenzie. *Myths of Crete and Pre-Hellenic Europe*. (London: Gresham Publishing Company, 1917). Chapter IX.

limited by rough terrain by land and coastal navigation by sea. Typically, goods were brought to trading centers, where they were exchanged. There was almost no direct contact of civilizations. The transporting of goods involved many separate steps in which goods were traded before they began their next leg of the journey in a different vehicle.

Many believe that this system of trade did not favor the spread of complex ideas such as spiritual teachings; however, this is controversial, as noted in a previous investigation of diffusion. For example, Professor McEvilley argues persuasively that there was a great deal of intellectual and cultural interaction linking the regions we now know as India, Egypt, Persia, Mesopotamia and Greece.¹

It very well may have been the case that diffusion of teachings was a factor, but there is no evidence that diffusion alone is responsible for mystical terminology. In fact, we may surmise that if there was diffusion of such ideas, it would likely have occurred in the context of a teaching, and at least some of those who follow such teachings characteristically develop something of the corresponding experience. Writing mystical terminology off to mere copying seems to be unwarranted. Moreover, the persistence of mystical teachings over time and across great distances requires explanation. Would not experience be a much more powerful motivator than mere interest or credulity? It would seem so.

Be it as it may with respect to ultimate historical origins, what is not controversial is that the Hellenistic milieu, including its ideas and teachings, did affect the development of the early Jesus tradition. While it is possible that Hellenistic ideas and terminology affected *The Gospel of Thomas*, they certainly affected the canonical scriptures, which were not composed until decades after Jesus' passing. Moreover, it occurred in a Hellenistic environment where Gentiles converts were outnumbering Jews who acknowledged Yeshua (Jesus) to be the Messiah of Israel. By then, they were adapted to a Gentile audience. The only Messianic Jewish gospel of which we are aware is *The Gospel of the Hebrews*, which is no longer extant.

However, there is no pressing reason to attribute the unconventional elements of *The Gospel of Thomas* to the spread of ideas rather than to independent experience, even though similar expressions are found in other Hellenistic spiritual and philosophical literature, whatever their origin may have been. The view that the mystical expressions found in *The Gospel of Thomas* were merely hollow regurgitations resulting from a geographical spread of ideas, hence, empty of experience, is not logically compelling. It can be argued just as cogently that

¹ In *The Shaping of Ancient Thought*, Thomas McEvilley argues persuasively that considerable diffusion of ideas took place in ancient times, and that Eastern ideas did indeed significantly influence Western thought, and vice versa.

Thomas used terminology at hand to express mystical concepts that were based on experience. However, at this point we have no evidence on the basis of which to decide this.

The fact that mystics of the Jesus tradition implicitly corroborated many teachings of *The Gospel of Thomas* centuries after it had disappeared from view and Gnostic influences had long been suppressed also argues against diffusion as the sole source of mystical concepts in this literature. It seems much more plausible to accept that mysticism arises from the structure of consciousness instead of being an invented concept that somehow got diffused throughout the world, even though the routes it purportedly took are not identifiable on the basis of evidence and the odds against it seem high. Historically, mysticism seems to pop up in pockets hither and thither rather than following a linear track from point to point.

MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE IN THE EARLY JESUS TRADITION

Mystical experience is present in the other literature of the New Testament, where it is epitomized in Jesus' words: "I and the Father are one."¹ This is as clear a claim to God-realization as appears in world's spiritual literature.

Mystical experience is a relatively common feature of the Jesus tradition from the earliest reports — Paul's illumination on the road to Damascus, for example, is a full-blown mystical experience characteristic of the way of vision, and Paul's testifies of his experience, "no longer me, but Christ in me." Curiously, however, Paul's letters emphasize the way of faith over the way of vision, perhaps because as mystic he realized that the way of faith is more available to most people, hence, the exoteric teaching is stressed in contrast to the esoteric. Nevertheless, it is possible to see the way of vision present in Paul's writings. Indeed, without this Paul would be reduced to the doctrinaire, as he sometimes has been.

Acts describes the descent of the Holy Spirit on the apostles.² This is surely a metaphorical account of a deep spiritual experience, after which the disciples were at first thought by the people to be intoxicated, so filled were they with the spirit.³ Testimony to the inner working of the spirit is rife in the early Jesus tradition. Many converts were gained primarily on the basis of this exemplar instead of by hearing the good news alone. In addition to New Testament references to mystical experience, the reports of the mystics of the Christian tradition over the centuries also accord with the testimony of mystics from time immemorial, who agree that the inner way lies through plumbing the depths of the heart.

¹ John 10:30

² Acts 2:3.

³ Acts 2:1-4,13-21.

The Gospel of Thomas also shares a common foundation with several expressions of perennial wisdom. According to the prologue to *The Gospel of Thomas* and Saying 13, Jesus imparted his hidden teaching to Thomas, presumably Thomas the Apostle from the context.¹ Furthermore, the one who comprehends the inner significance of the words of the gospel will not taste death, i.e., will experience the soul's immortality in this life.²

Similarly, Sufis hold that Muhammad transmitted an inner teaching to his son-in-law Ali. In Sufism, this inner teaching is for the most part a closet teaching imparted only to initiates. Similarly, Plato's *Dialogues* were reputedly the outer husk of an inner teaching imparted only to members of the Academy. Both Sufism and Neoplatonism strongly suggest that this teaching involves the transmission of interior revelation of truth as one and absolute.

In the Vedic tradition Krishna is reported to have given his innermost teaching to his favored disciple, Arjuna. The essence of Krishna's teaching is preserved in the *Bhagavad Gita*. There it is clear that the inner teaching culminates in an inner revelation, in which the disciple realizes truth as one and absolute. In his first sermon, Buddha is understood as having transmitted the inner revelation to only one of the hearers of the sermon, his closest disciple, Mahakashyapa.

The prologue to *The Gospel of Thomas* specifies Judas Didymos Thomas as the person to whom Jesus gave a hidden teaching. While Judas or alternatively Jude — *Judah* in Hebrew — is a proper name, the name Thomas — *Tauma* in Aramaic — is a nickname meaning "twin." *Didymos* also means "twin" in Greek, so it is merely a repetition added as clarification. While it is reported in the New Testament that Jesus had a brother named Judas (Jude), along with siblings James, Joseph and Simon, there is no indication that he was the biological twin of Jesus.³

According to the Thomas tradition Jesus made this Judas or Jude his spiritual "twin" by granting him realization of truth by transmitting the mystical experience of "the Living One." Indeed, this is suggested in *The Gospel of Thomas*, Saying 13, for example, where Jesus says to Thomas that he has drunk of the bubbling spring of knowledge that Jesus gushes forth. As a result, Thomas and the gospel attributed to him took on a special status for the Thomas community. A good presentation of what is known about Thomas, along with the traditional lore associated with him, is found in Herbert Christian Merillat's *The Gnostic Apostle Thomas: "Twin" of Jesus?*⁴

¹ *The Gospel of Thomas*, Prologue, speaks specifically of a "secret" or "hidden" teaching.

² Saying 1.

³ Matthew 13:55, Mark 6:3.

⁴ Herbert Christian Merillat. *The Gnostic Apostle Thomas: "Twin" of Jesus?*

KNOWLEDGE VERSUS IGNORANCE

At the outset of *The Gospel of Thomas* Jesus emphasizes that his teaching about the kingdom is meant *not solely for the afterlife* but can be experienced in the *here and now*.

Jesus said: "If your leaders say to you, 'See, the kingdom is above,' then the birds will precede you into it. If they say to you, 'It is below,' the fish will precede you. But the kingdom is inside you and it is outside you too. You will discover this if you come to know yourselves, and you will realize that you are children of the living Father. But if you do not know who you are, you live in poverty and you are that poverty."¹

This saying makes clear that if one does not have the experience of who one really is as a child of the "living" Father, then one is "in poverty and *is* that poverty." What does it mean to be not only in poverty but to *be* that poverty? How can one's being be poverty?

Poverty is lack of essentials for living. That which is most essential for truly living is that which makes one alive, namely, the soul or spirit as life-principle. The Greek term for "spirit" is *pneuma*, literally breath. By extension it signifies the life-principle. Not to know one's essence as a child of the living Father, hence, spirit, is to live in ignorance of the very life-principle by which one lives. Jesus is saying that this is not only to live in the "poverty" of such ignorance, but to take oneself for that ignorance of who one really is, which condemns one to undergo the death of the physical body as apparent annihilation instead of realizing one's inherent immortality.

This is a very poignant statement, indeed. This poverty is the lack of self-knowledge. This is the characteristic of spiritual ignorance. For what greater ignorance could there be than not knowing who one really is?

The spiritual treasure within is "life," i.e., realization of the soul's immortality. The poverty of ignorance is "death," the necessity to undergo physical death as long as one identifies oneself with the body. When one identifies with what is essentially false, i.e., limited and perishable, then one fails to appreciate the treasure that one has and, indeed, *is*. When this knowledge is experiential, it is Self-realization.

This gnosis is salvation from the poverty of ignorance. The wages of sin (separation from God) is death (identification with the physical body, which comes to be and passes away). Salvation is the soul's union with God in the Beatific Vision. This vision, seeing face to face," is eternal because both God and the soul are living spirit, where "living" means immortal.

¹ Saying 3.

In the Vedic tradition, spiritual ignorance is called *avidya* in Sanskrit. The spiritual antidote for *avidya* is *vidya* or *jnana*, meaning knowledge in the sense of realizing the ultimate truth that only One is, and I AM is that One. *Vidya* is the etymological root of English “video,” “vision,” and also “idea.” *Jnana* is the etymological root of the Greek term *gnosis*, the root of English “to know.” The Greek term *gnosis* has been imported into English to designate spiritual wisdom and enlightenment. *Vidya* is found in the concept of mystical experience as inner vision, signifying that this higher cognition is a type of “seeing.” Indeed, Sufis call it “seeing with the eye of the heart.”

A key fundamental of the core spirituality underlying perennial wisdom holds that the purpose of life is to realize one’s true nature by knowing oneself as one really is. Inscribed on the lintel of the Delphic oracle were the words, “Know Thyself.” Plato wrote, quoting Socrates: “I must first know myself, as the Delphian inscription says; to be that which is not my concern while I am still in ignorance of myself would be ridiculous.”¹ Emperor Marcus Aurelius similarly wrote: “Dig within. Within is the wellspring of the Good, and it is always ready to bubble up if you just dig.”²

Knowing oneself in this sense involves neither a psychological investigation of the contents of one’s mind nor a psychoanalytic exploration of the unconscious. Rather, it is a penetration to the source of all mental activity, consciousness, grounded in pure awareness. According to Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras*, mental activity obscures consciousness, but when mental activity ceases, the nature of the seer — pure consciousness — shines forth. This is the Universal Self (Sanskrit *atman*), identical with the Supreme Self or God (*paramatman*) as Absolute Reality (*parabrahman*).

Consciousness may be compared to an ocean without shores. When the ocean rises in waves the silent deep is lost to view. When the waves settle, the silence of the deep can be seen. In this analogy, the waves are mental activity, thoughts, feelings, percepts, and so forth. This surface activity draws the attention, concealing the substrate or ground, awareness itself. When thoughts settle down, then the source of thought — pure consciousness — becomes self-evident.

In the Western mystical tradition, the Psalms attest to inner knowledge as the basis of ancient Hebrew spirituality: “Be still and know I am God.”³ In the Way of Jesus, Meister Eckhart avers: “Origen says the quest of God comes by self-observation. If she [the soul] knew herself, she would know God also.”⁴ Hazrat

¹ Plato. *Phaedrus*. 229 E.

² Marcus Aurelius. *Meditations*. 5.5

³ Psalms. 46:10.

⁴ Pfeiffer. I, p. 366.

‘Ali, the son-in-law of Muhammad, reportedly said that whoever knows himself well, knows his Maker.¹ Ibn ‘Arabi ascribed a similar saying to Muhammad.²

According to Sri Ramana Maharishi, a principal exponent of Advaita Vedanta in the twentieth century, “The enquiry, ‘Who am I?’ is the only method of putting an end to all misery and ushering in supreme Beatitude.”³ Buddha’s parting message is reported to have been: “Be a lamp unto yourself.” One of the greatest Buddhist sages, Padmasambhava, taught:

When one’s mind is known in its nakedness [emptiness of self], this Doctrine of Seeing the Mind Naked, this Self-Liberation, is seen to be exceedingly profound. Seek, therefore, thine own wisdom within thee.⁴

In Taoism the same instruction to inquire into self is also prominent: “Return to the Well,” the well signifying the source.⁵ According to the *Tao Te Ching*, one who knows others is wise, while one who knows himself is enlightened.⁶ According to another work attributed to Lao Tzu: “True realization comes from the direct integration of one’s individual being with the divine Being of Tao.”⁷

Similar statements about self-knowledge are found in the Way of Jesus. St. Augustine wrote in Soliloquies: “O unchanging God, let me know myself; let me know you.”⁸ According to Meister Eckhart:

Whosoever would attain to the summit of his noble nature and to the vision of the sovereign good, which is God Himself, must have a

¹ Maxims of ‘Ali, I, in Mehdi Nakosteen (Translator). *Maxims of Ali, Known as the Commander of the Faithful (Amir-al-Mu'menin), the Son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammad: (Selections)* (Boulder: Este Es Press, University of Colorado Libraries, 1973). Also ‘Ali, Hazrat. *Nahjul-Balagha: Sermons, Letters and Sayings of Hazrat ‘Ali*. Translated by Syed Mohammed Askari Jafery. (Elmhurst, NY: Tahrike Tarsile Quran, n.d.).

² Ibn Arabi. “Who Knoweth Himself...”

³ Ramana Maharshi. *Self-Enquiry*. (Tiruvannamalai, 1952), 20.

⁴ Padmasambhava. *The Seeing of Reality*. Translated. by Lama Karma Sumdhon Paul and Lama Lobzang Mingyur Dorje, in W. Y. Evans-Wentz. *The Tibetan Book of Great Liberation*. (London, Oxford University Press, 1954), 238.

⁵ *I Ching* 48. See Walker, Brian Browne (Translator). *The I Ching or Book of Changes: A Guide to Life’s Turning Points*. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992).

⁶ *Tao Te Ching* 33.

⁷ Brian Browne Walker, *Hua Hu Ching: The Unknown Teachings of Lao Tzu*, 71, (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 91; also see, *Tao Te Ching of Lao Tzu*. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995).

⁸ Augustine, *Soliloquies* 2.1.1.

profound knowledge of himself and things above himself. Thus he reaches the supreme. Beloved, learn to know thyself, it shall profit thee more than any craft of creatures.¹

THE KINGDOM IS WITHIN YOU

Self-inquiry in the Way of Jesus, like other wisdom traditions, is not by addition — filling the mind with new information — but by subtraction — emptying the heart of its dross. This is called the *via negativa*, a Latin phrase meaning “the way of negation,” implying that knowledge of God transcends the mind by surpassing all conceptual understanding, logical reasoning, and flights of imagination. Hence, one knows truly oneself by emptying oneself of all that is not of one’s true nature, leaving only the “emptiness” of spirit that is simultaneously “fullness.” Abiding in supreme fulfillment of self-knowledge, the soul realizes “the peace the world cannot give,” and lacks nothing.

Only deep feeling that is devoid of the extraneous is capable of appreciating God’s presence in the heart. Thus this knowledge comes only through the heart as one’s spiritual center and the “temple of God” within oneself. This dawns only through self-effacement and self-emptying, for God is veiled from a heart entertaining a multitude of desires other than the longing for God alone. This self-emptying takes place by ceasing to identify oneself with anything other than God as unknowable through conception, imagination or predication. Ultimately, identification of the soul with God as love takes place through perfect love, in which there is no room for another. In Sufi parlance, having anything in the heart other than Him alone is idolatry, the principal “sin” in the sense of that which separates one from God.

Perhaps the most important teaching of the Way of Jesus, attributed to Jesus himself, is that the kingdom of God is within oneself as well as at the core of all. While there are many references to the kingdom in the canonical gospels, the primary evidence for the kingdom’s being within is found in Luke 17:21. The Greek can be translated as either, “The kingdom of God is within you,” or “The kingdom of God is among you” (“in your midst”). The implication of Saying 3 of *The Gospel of Thomas* is that both are correct: “Jesus said, ‘... the kingdom is within you and it is outside you.’”

The Gospel of Thomas is more explicit in depicting Jesus as a teacher of primordial wisdom, whose mission is to impart mystical knowledge of God’s immanent presence.

Jesus is understood [in *Thomas*] as the embodiment of primordial divine Wisdom rather than as the end-time judge of the righteous. The

¹ Pfeiffer. I, p. 279.

kingdom is a dynamic presence that the disciple must discover as he or she recovers the divine image within.¹

Thus, the kingdom is symbolic of that wisdom instead of being apocalyptic, reserved for the end time, or eschatological, available only in the afterlife, as it came to be interpreted in normative Christianity.

Rather [in *Thomas*] the kingdom is a primordial reality that also becomes present when individuals discover their true identity.²

Indeed, in his own day Jesus' teaching about the kingdom was generally misunderstood, because people were expecting a messiah who would deliver them from foreign oppression. This never materialized historically. Instead, the Romans first destroyed temple and later dispersed the populace, beginning the Diaspora that lasted two millennia, effectively destroying the Jerusalem community led by James the brother of Jesus as a Jewish sect. This left the Gentile communities predominant. Eventually, they absorbed Messianic Jews or excluded them, and the Jewish roots of the Jesus tradition died out with the development of normative Christianity, which eventually became anti-Semitic.

The early Jesus tradition was also apocalyptic, interpreting Jesus' promise that he would return in the clouds victorious to lead the elect to their reward. This, of course, did not happen in the expected timeframe either, and so this promise took on an eschatological meaning that placed the kingdom in the afterlife. This strain developed in the direction of normative Christianity. Subsequently, adherents of esoteric interpretations of Christianity would argue that expecting the kingdom in a heavenly afterlife is also misplaced.

The New Testament places a great deal of emphasis on the kingdom of God. For example, in Matthew, Jesus tells his followers to seek the kingdom first.³ Indeed, when Christians say the Lord's Prayer, they pray, "Thy kingdom come."

What do people understand by "the kingdom," and what may Jesus himself have meant by it, for example, when he reportedly said to Pilate: "My kingdom is not of this world."⁴

There is still variance among Christians over the nature of the kingdom they are praying will come. Many normative Christians have concluded that if the kingdom is not of this world, it must be a feature of the afterlife. But according to perennial wisdom and some interpretations of the Way of Jesus this potential is available

¹ Pheme Perkins. *Gnosticism and the New Testament*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), p. 72.

² *Ibid.* p. 66.

³ Matthew 6:33.

⁴ John 18:36.

even in the here and now rather than having to wait until the afterlife. In this view, entering the kingdom means experiencing the presence of God here in the body, with the possibility of realizing divine union in the eternal now.

The “kingdom” as metaphor did not originate with Jesus. Judaic mystical teaching relates the term “kingdom” (Hebrew: *malkhuth*) to God’s presence (*shekhinah*) here in the world, where it resides “in exile”. The spiritual task is to repair (*tikkun*) God’s “face” by realizing union with Him. This is the inner, Qabalistic meaning of “seeing face to face” which was likely known to Paul.¹ When one turns one’s face away from God, then God’s face, which signifies wholeness, is ruptured. When one sees God “face to face,” then wholeness is restored. The two “faces” (duality) become one “face” (nonduality), in which consciousness sees only itself and all in itself. Then, God is known as the One, in whom we live, move and have our being.²

This divine presence in exile is the immanent aspect of God, called *shekhinah* in Hebrew. Thus, the notion that the kingdom of God is within points to God’s presence within the heart and discovering it there rescues this presence from exile. Enlivening awareness of divine immanence both within and as the ground of all is Wisdom, *hochmah* in Hebrew, and *sophia* in Greek.

According to Saying 113, the kingdom is spread out across the earth but no one sees it. Saying 77 connects the kingdom to Jesus himself as the both transcendent source and immanent ground of being, lying concealed beneath the appearances:

Jesus said, “... I am the all in all. All things came from me, and to me all things go. Split a stick of wood and I am there. Raise a stone and you will find me there.”

Why is it that people do not see this omnipresent realm? Jesus’ answer in *The Gospel of Thomas* is that our spiritual blindness is due to ignorance. According to Saying 3: “.... When you come to know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will comprehend that you are the children of the living Father. But if you do not know yourselves, then you live in poverty and you are that poverty [of ignorance]”.

The answer of the Way of Jesus is that the goal of spiritual life is to be found by appreciating the kingdom as a spiritual reality available in the here and now through a *shift in awareness*, rather than looking for it either as an earthly domain or even a heavenly place. Seeking the kingdom requires going within: “.... The kingdom is inside you and outside you also. You will discover this if you come to know yourselves....”³

¹ 1 Corinthians 13:12.

² Acts 17:28.

³ Saying 22.

According to perennial wisdom, there are fundamentally two ways of overcoming the limited self and realizing one's true nature. One is by negating the limited self through self-effacement, and the other is by losing oneself in the Beloved. These ways are not mutually exclusive and most wisdom traditions counsel their complementary practice. The Way of Jesus is no exception.

A central thrust of *The Gospel of Thomas* is that we are to realize the unlimited by removing the limited.¹ The limited mind is characterized by egoism and self-interest, and it is to be removed through self-effacement. Meister Eckhart would later call this "naughting" oneself. Rabbi Nachman, grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, founder of Hasidism, would similarly call it "naughting," *bittul* in Hebrew. In Sufism, it is known as the annihilation of the limited self, *fana* in Arabic. In the Vedic tradition, it is known as the extinguishing of mental activity, *chitta vritti nirodhah* in Sanskrit. In both Buddhism and Taoism, it is realizing the empty state, *shunyata* in Sanskrit, *wu-ji* in Chinese. This emptying out involves employing the *via negativa* as the way of self-effacement.

VIA NEGATIVA AND VIA POSITIVA

There are two ways of thinking and speaking about the transcendent source and immanent ground, which the religious call "God" and philosophers, "the Absolute." These are the ways of negation and affirmation. They correspond to the two principal spiritual methodologies, the *via negativa* and the *via positiva* or *affirmativa*.

The *way of negation* denies everything that can be perceived with the sense, imagined or conceived by the mind, or reasoned by the intellect to that which is beyond the ability of human knowing to comprehend, thereby asserting that univocal predication is impossible. That is to say, God cannot be denoted or referred to using descriptive expressions. The term "God" is a token or place marker for what remains a mystery in its essence.

The *way of affirmation* employs symbols and analogy. That which is ineffable in its essence can only be pointed to and hinted at through inadequate symbols, such as similes, metaphors and analogies. For example, one way to speak affirmatively about God is by way of supereminent attribution, attributing to God all of the highest qualities, such as truth, goodness and beauty, that human beings are capable of understanding from their level of knowing, and adding that God vastly exceeds this limitation on knowledge. Often, however, people naively conclude that this type of attribution actually refers to God's essence univocally, when it is only analogy.

¹ At the same time Jesus as spiritual Master looms large.

All analogies pushed far enough break down. Thus, if one claims that God is all-good as denoting God's nature, even though God is beyond the categories of good and evil, the so-called problem of evil arises. Indeed, in the myth of the Fall, Adam's eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil symbolizes the "fall" into duality, hence, spiritual ignorance, the antidote to which is the restoration of knowledge, which is only gained through the spiritual quest of the soul for reintegration.

Failure to comprehend this logic results in philosophical problems and theological absurdities that can be corrected logically but that can only be finally overcome by returning to unity through realization of the nondual state. Realization of the identity of existence and knowledge is called "the nondual state" because dualistic knowledge is incapable of grasping it, therefore, incapable of expressing it descriptively other than by negation. Affirmative predication regarding it, such as "enlightenment" is by way of analogy, "light" being used as a simile, that is, a likeness but not an identical image.

The way of negation is said to be "apophatic," that is, speaking "without," and the way of affirmation, "cataphatic," or speaking "with." These different ways of expression, the affirmative and negative, correspond to different ways of approaching the spiritual quest, called in Latin the *via negativa* and the *via positiva*, or the *via affirmativa*. The *via negativa* is set forth in apophatic theology, while the *via positiva* or *affirmativa*, through cataphatic theology. *The Gospel of Thomas* uses both affirmation and negation. Entering the kingdom by making the two one is an affirmative expression, whereas Jesus' promise that he will give what no mind has ever conceived is a negative expression.¹

SELF-EMPTYING

The *via negativa* is the way of knowledge through self-emptying. In the Vedic tradition it is called Jnana Yoga, the essence of which is given in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad: "The Self is neither this, nor this" (Sanskrit: *neti neti*).²

This is also called the doctrine of *neti neti*, signifying that the Universal Self (*atma*) is neither this thing nor that, i.e., is formless and changeless. This teaching states that the naked spirit cannot be identified with anything that can be conceived or imagined, since it is empty of form. Therefore, the way to discover the state of "pure spirit" is by denying all forms and attributes of form to it. Hence, the saying that the soul is "not this or that."

¹ Saying 3, 17, 22.

² *The Brihadâranyaka-Upanishad* 2.3.6, 4.4.22. *The Upanishads*. Translated by Max Müller. Part II. (*Sacred Books of the East*, Volume 15, 1884).

To be neither this nor that means to be formless. As long as one associates oneself with a form and identifies one's being with that form, one is not only limited by that form but also ignorant of one's true nature as unlimited and formless. One reduces oneself to some-thing instead of realizing that the soul or spirit is no-thing.

The *via negativa* is a means of realizing, "I Am," by disabusing oneself of identification with limited form, expressed as "I am this," e.g., this body, or "I am that," e.g., a specific gender, age, and so forth.

This teaching is reflected in the testimony of the mystics around the world. Sufi sage Abu Sa'id ibn Abi-'l-Khayr said: "Almighty God revealed to me that I was neither that nor this."¹ In Taoism, Chuang Tzu speaks of "a motionless center... wherefrom is seen naught but an infinity, which is neither this nor that, yea nor nay."² Zen Master Huang Po says: "In this total abstraction does the Way of the Buddhas flourish, while from discrimination between this and that a host of demons blazes forth."³ In the words of Meister Eckhart:

From time to time I tell of the one power in the soul which alone is free. Sometimes I have called it the tabernacle of the soul, sometimes a spiritual light, anon I say it is a spark. But now I say it is not this nor that.⁴

SELF-EFFACEMENT

The way of self-emptying does not lie through mechanically repeating the formula, "I am not this or that." Rather, it is by taking the purgative of self-effacement in order to progressively cure oneself of the dis-ease of egoism and its child, self-interest. In the Way of Jesus, self-effacement is often equated with humility. Here, humility must be distinguished from false modesty. Humility is a state which one regards one's limited self as nothing before God, the Real Self, and as dust at the feet the Master, who has realized the Real Self.

Self-effacement is not self-abasement. In Confucian terms, it is "the rectification of names," or calling a spade a spade.⁵ Humility is the result of absolute honesty about oneself as a limited being before the Infinite.

When egoism is extinguished, the formerly limited ego realizes its true nature as Universal Self, "I AM." The ego is constantly in a state of dis-ease because its

¹ Reynold A. Nicholson. *Studies in Islamic Mysticism*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1921), p. 49-50.

² *Chuang Tzu*, ch. 2.

³ John Blofeld (Translator). *The Zen Teaching of Huang Po* (London, Rider, 1958). p. 69.

⁴ Pfeiffer. 1, p. 37.

⁵ Confucius. *Analects*, Book 13, Verse 3.

desire for abiding fulfillment can never be satisfied. As long as one is limited the unlimited is out of reach. Abiding fulfillment is only found in the state of beatitude, which is boundless and does not change. This is the state of transcendental bliss, called *ananda* in Sanskrit. Existence, knowledge and bliss (*sacchidananda*) are attributes of the Absolute.¹

This process of self-emptying leading to complete self-effacement involves many means. Any means one finds suitable for the purpose may be used to overcome the power of egoism over the soul and the grip of self-interest on it. Almost all spiritual practices are related to self-effacement in one way or another, at least indirectly. Love of the Beloved, which focuses entirely on the Beloved, is the most powerful and effective means for effacing the limited self and its concerns with self-interest. Love for truth is similar. The ways of love and knowledge are thus parallel.

One means is that of discriminating between the real and the unreal by distinguishing that which changes from that which does not change, for that which comes to be and passes away cannot be truly real in the deepest sense. For example, in their meditation, Vedantists and Buddhists seek to discern the distinction between the changing contents of the mind and the source of thought in the pure awareness that underlies and sustains mental activity.

Another means is renunciation. While external renunciation can be an aid to some at the appropriate time, it is not necessary. What is required is *internal renunciation*. Internal renunciation is the renunciation of self-importance and self-interest while one meets one's responsibilities in life. It is the inner meaning of being "in the world but not of it."

A powerful way to establish internal renunciation while remaining active in the world is to recognize that the phenomenal world is empty of abiding reality since it is ever-changing, its shifting forms coming to be and passing away. Hence, it is dead as a means for providing what one is really seeking in one's heart of hearts, namely, abiding satisfaction, "the peace that the world cannot give."

The Gospel of Thomas asserts this need for self-emptying in Saying 6: "I say, whoever is emptied out will be filled, but whoever is divided will be filled with darkness." Self-emptying is set forth in the metaphor of nakedness in Saying 37:

His disciples said, "When will you appear to us and when will we see you?"

Jesus said, "When you strip yourselves and are not ashamed, and when you take off your clothing and put it under your feet and trample on it like innocent children, then you will see the son of the living one, and you will not be afraid."

¹ *Sacchidananda* is a euphonic elision (*sandhi*) of *sat* (being or existence), *chit* (consciousness or knowledge) and *ananda* (bliss or fulfillment).

On one level, clothing symbolizes one's mental and emotional baggage, as well as all artifice, while nakedness signifies innocence on the way. On another level, clothing symbolizes the accumulated impressions of the deep unconscious that veil the soul from itself. Nakedness represents the extinguishing of the energy of these impressions and the consequent removal of the veils, revealing the emptiness of form that characterizes the goal. This also recalls the contemporary colloquial expression, "the naked truth."

Self-emptying is also referred to in Saying 49: "Jesus said, 'Happy are the unified one and the chosen one, because you shall find the kingdom. For you come from it, and to it you will return.'" Regarding the meaning of "chosen," Meher Baba explained that a Master's disciples are of two types. The first are those with whom the Master has special connection and they receive the Master's grace because of this alone. This could be the meaning of "chosen" here. Such disciples are "elected" owing to a longstanding connection to the Master that was developed previously to the present lifetime.

The other type of disciple is still developing this connection and is required to exert self-effort in the ripening process, and this self-effort is largely to remain one-pointed in one's focus on the Master, in comparison with which all other matters become trivial. The unified, undivided or integrated one, called *monachos* in Greek and Coptic, signifies the one who has fixed the eye of the heart on the goal instead of casting one's glance outside oneself in search of worldly attractions based on self-interest — fame, fortune, power and pleasure. The unified one is *one-pointed* on the goal until duality is fully transcended and the nondual state is permanently realized.

NONATTACHMENT

Jesus reveals that renunciation of attachment to the worldly — a spiritual pruning or "cutting off" as it were — is also the metaphorical meaning of physical circumcision, sometimes called by mystics "the circumcision of the heart." According to Saying 53:

His disciples said, "Is circumcision advantageous or not?"

He said to them, "If it were advantageous, fathers would beget their children circumcised from their mothers. But the true spiritual circumcision has become advantageous in all ways."

Saying 50 elaborates: "Jesus said, 'Joyous are those who transcend attachment, for yours is the kingdom of heaven.'" Saying 56 uses the metaphor of death in this

regard: “Jesus said, ‘Whoever comes to know the cosmos has found a corpse, and the cosmos is worthless compared to anyone that has found [it] a corpse.’”¹

Saying 57 reverses the metaphor to life rather than death: “Jesus said, ‘Turn to what is alive, lest you die and seek to see what you will be unable to.’” Saying 60 returns to the metaphor of death for self-emptying.

[Jesus and his disciples] saw a Samaritan going to Judea, carrying a lamb.

He said to his disciples, ‘[Why do you suppose] that man [is carrying] a lamb around.’

They said to him, ‘To kill it and eat it.’

He said to them, ‘While it is alive, he will not eat it, but only when he has killed it and it has become a carcass.’

They said to him, ‘He cannot eat it otherwise.’

He said to them, ‘Look for a place of rest for yourselves, lest you too become a carcass and be eaten.’

The idea here is that in the pursuit of the mundane, one seeks life from what is dead. While the body, being “dead” (matter), can nourish itself on what is also dead, the soul, being living (spirit), cannot. The soul must “feed” itself on what is spiritual.

To be consumed in divine love as “the fire of the heart,” the limited self must efface itself by overcoming self-interest and self-importance. If the egoism of the limited self is not effaced and consumed, then one will have to experience physical death instead of realizing the soul’s immortality.

The “death” of the limited self, not the death of the body, ushers one into the place of rest, the abiding peace of the “living” spirit. “Rest” is a common metaphor in spiritual literature. It signifies the state of transcendence in which mental activity ceases and the self-effulgent light of pure consciousness shines forth. This “place” of rest is a state not only of peace but also illumination, which is very different from the rest of deep sleep in which the light of awareness goes dark and peace is not experienced consciously. This is one probable meaning of Saying 1: “And he [Jesus] said, ‘Whoever finds the inner meaning of these sayings will not experience death.’”

Saying 59 adds: “Jesus said, ‘Turn toward what is alive while you are alive, lest you die and seek to see what you will be unable to.’” Saying 70 is similar: “Jesus said, ‘What you have within you will save you if you will enliven it within

¹ Saying 56 is a variant of Saying 80. Instead of corpse (56), one discovers that the cosmos is a body (80). However, from the vantage of the use of “living” and “dead” in *Thomas*, even a living body is dead spiritually. Only that which is immortal is truly alive.

yourselves. If you do not enliven it within yourselves, what you do not have within will kill you.” Both of these sayings may seem paradoxical. What is this we have within that will either save us if we enliven it or kill us if we don’t?

This is the “light of life,” the self-effulgent “light” of the soul as higher cognition. If we are able to “see” with it in this life, we will not be subject to the darkness of ignorance of our own nature. The shade of physical death will not diminish it either, for it is of neither the physical body nor the limited mind.

Since spiritual progress toward the light is only possible while in a physical body, after death a soul that did not “see the light” during the physical life of the body must wait for another incarnation to advance. In the meanwhile the soul processes the lessons of the previous lifetime. If these lessons were primarily positive the soul experiences the heaven state, and if chiefly negative, the hell state. So one could say that a physical body is necessary for spiritual progress, and the time in the “afterlife” between taking bodies, provides for spiritual consolidation through distillation of lessons learned.

The necessity of the body for spiritual progress shows that an integrated person does not “hate” the body, as it sometimes thought necessary for spirituality. The integrated person appreciates the body for the opportunities it provides as a vehicle. However, the integrated person learns to master the body and its passions instead of being controlled by them. In the words of Meher Baba, “The only Real Control is the discipline of the senses to abstain from indulgence in low desires, which alone ensures absolute purity of character.”¹

In all of these sayings, the implication is that this realization is to dawn not in the hereafter but in the here and now through self-effacement. Self-effacement involves effacement of the limited self which identifies itself with the body, mind and personality of this worldly life, and which serves itself rather than serving God or following the God-realized Master.

Saying 97 puts forward another metaphor of self-emptying through spiritual living as a gradual but progressive process of transformation:

Jesus said, “The kingdom of heaven is like a woman who was carrying a [jar] filled with meal. While she was walking down a road still away, the handle broke and the meal began to spill out behind her onto the street. She did not realize it, for she had not noticed anything wrong. When she arrived at her house, she put the container down and found it empty.”

Self-emptying and spiritual non-attachment are brought about by surrender to Divine Providence. Saying 36 is correlative with a similar pronouncement in Matthew:

¹ Meher Baba. *Discourses*, 7th revised edition, p. 2.

Jesus said, “Do not fret from dawn to dusk and from dusk till dawn about your food, what you will eat, or your clothing, what you will wear. You are much more valuable than the lilies, which neither spin nor sew. When you have no clothing, [i.e., become naked spiritually], what will you wear? Who can add to your height; that one will give you your clothing.”¹

In the words of Meher Baba, “The only Real Surrender is that in which the poise is undisturbed by any adverse circumstance and the individual, amidst every kind of hardship, is resigned with perfect calm to the will of God.”²

The *sine qua non* of spiritual living is not so much the self-effort of spiritual practice as the surrender of self to Divine Providence through faith as trust based on inner conviction. Everything has its shadow. Self-effort can mask self-reliance. But faith understood as doctrinal belief cannot successfully masquerade as the faith as conviction which inspires total trust in Providence, without which one cannot surrender completely to God’s will in all circumstances. Thus, the way of faith understood as conviction and trust complements the way of vision as knowledge of the heart, which is grounded in divine love.

¹ Matthew 6:25-34.

² Meher Baba. *Discourses*, 7th revised edition, p. 2.

THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS AND THE WAY OF JESUS

Come to me, for my yoke is right and I am a gentle master, and you will come to rest.¹

THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS AND OTHER SOURCES

The Gospel of Thomas cannot be viewed as the definitive statement of the Way of Jesus. No single work can. The Way of Jesus is too rich, and the literature too broad for any single work, or even all the works yet written, to contain it exhaustively.

Like most other spiritual luminaries, Jesus never systematized his teaching, and any attempt to fashion a systematic presentation of this teaching after the fact lacks both historical warrant and spiritual pedigree, in spite of subsequent claims to the contrary. Claims based on constructed notions, such as an “apostolic succession” of an original uniform teaching, are historical fiction.

At best, there are lineages of teaching authority traceable to various apostles, but there is no firm evidence that the different apostles and disciples all heard the same thing from Jesus or understood what they heard in the same way. Different apostles and disciples not only heard different things but also may have taught their disciples differently, based on their spiritual ripeness.

The lineage of Thomas would constitute such a lineage, for example, and also the lineage of Paul, which inspired the Gentile Church. Nor was Thomas’s teaching the only one claimed as secret. For instance, Valentinus, the presumed author of *The Gospel of Truth* and other so-called Gnostic Christian works of the Valentinian tradition, claimed that he had been a student of Theodas (also Theudas), who was supposedly a member of Paul’s inner circle, and that Theodas had imparted Paul’s “closet” esoteric teaching to him.² However, the authenticity of this is disputed.

Subsequent controversies, such as those that emerged immediately, for instance, in the disputes between Paul and the Jerusalem Church and the hostile response of James’s letter to teachings of Paul, argue against the claim that a universal

¹ Saying 90. Compare Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras*, 2: “Yoga is the cessation of mental activity.” The terms *yoga* and “yoke” come from the Sanskrit root *yuj*, meaning to join together. The Coptic of Saying 90 literally reads “My yoke is a just one.,” even though this is often translated “easy” or “light,” apparently influenced by the familiar saying of the New Testament, “My yoke is easy and my burden is light.” (Mathew 11:30).

² Clement. *Strom.* vii.17, in Bruce M. Metzger. *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 80.

“apostolic” teaching was in place from the outset.¹ Rather, there were major controversies that have since been either airbrushed out or papered over.

The intention here is sketch an outline of some of the main points Jesus emphasized rather than to give a comprehensive or systematic account of the Way of Jesus, a task that could never be justified by evidence as Jesus’ original intent. The projects of subsequent theologians and ecclesiastical authorities to make up for this perceived lack reveals both their hubris and their ignorance.

Themes, principles, precepts and practices can be gleaned from many aspects of Jesus’ teaching, both canonical and apocryphal. Some of Jesus’ teaching is found in both, although not always in quite the same way. Even in the so-called orthodox works there are sometimes differences. Did Jesus intend to present his teaching clearly and comprehensively but failed, or did he intend to make it ambiguous?

I often call my interest in the conundrum of separating the mythical Jesus from the historical Yeshua “the Jesus puzzle.” I realize that this puzzle is unsolvable unless much more documentary evidence is discovered because major pieces are missing and many existing pieces are either broken, partial or distorted.

My conclusion about the essence of Jesus’ teaching after pondering it for many years is that his message essentially that the kingdom of God lies within oneself and can only be found there. Moreover, Jesus is the spiritual master of this tradition named after him. Hence, it is through him and in him that his teaching is revealed. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that the teaching is ambiguous from the intellectual standpoint. The very ambiguity of Jesus’ teaching points beyond the teaching to the master — and ultimately within oneself where the real answers lie and must be found through the master’s grace.

Spirituality is primarily a matter of the heart rather than the mind. Spiritual masters characteristically use ambiguity to emphasize that intellect alone is insufficient spiritually. Ambiguity in a teaching forces one to plumb oneself by going within, as well as to surrender to the grace of the Master. Trying to puzzle it all out for oneself intellectually is impossible for the limited mind, which cannot capture the limitless.

On the other hand, spiritual masters have traditionally given principles and precepts, which are general and meant for broad consumption, and they also instruct

¹ Paul claimed that justification was on the basis of *faith alone*. James countered in his letter that salvation was a matter of *faith and works*. This is a huge difference, and its ramifications still reverberate through normative Christianity. Many Protestant sects side with Paul, and Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches side principally with James. Different sayings of Jesus are offered in support of the two positions. Those who hold to faith alone cite, e.g., John 5:23-25, 11:24-26; 12:43-47. Those who hold to faith and works cite, e.g., Matthew 19:16-18; John 13:33-35; 14:14-31; 15:11-13.

individuals and small groups on a personal basis rather than in general terms. Many of these instructions regard specific practices and are given privately, since they are suitable particularly for the individuals involved. Like other masters, Jesus taught using both principles and precepts, and he likely gave personal instructions as well.

In addition, spiritual teachers also often give two teachings, one public and the other restricted to committed disciples. The former is often called “open door” and the latter “closed door.” The public teaching is generally exoteric, and the private teaching is esoteric. The canonical gospels say that Jesus taught the people in parables, explaining the inner meaning to the disciples privately, and early leaders like Clement may have testified to the existence to a secret teaching of Jesus as well, although the putative evidence remains controversial. The prologue, or “incipit” as scholars call it, claims that *The Gospel of Thomas* is a “hidden” teaching of Jesus.

We are principally concerned with *The Gospel of Thomas*, which includes both unique and shared material. In addition, we will also consider key teachings of Jesus that are not mentioned in *Thomas* but need to be included in order to represent the Way of Jesus accurately, for there is no indication in *The Gospel of Thomas* that it was intended as a comprehensive account of Jesus’ teaching.

INNOCENCE

Saying 3 is explicit about the need for self-knowledge, and Saying 67 reaffirms this: “Jesus said, ‘Anyone who gains knowledge of all things but fails to know oneself does not know all.’” Saying 62 reveals the necessity for innocence in order to ripen oneself for this knowledge: “Jesus said, ‘I impart my inner teaching to those [worthy of] this inner teaching. Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.’”

It is not always clear from the text what was intended to be grouped together, because there was no internal punctuation, and scholars numbered the sayings somewhat arbitrarily, more for convenience of reference than to divide the text in accordance with the author’s intention. For example, it is not clear that the sentences of Saying 62 go together. The second sentence is also possibly due to a scribal addition. At any rate, the idiomatic expression, “not letting the left hand know what the right hand is doing,” is given sufficient prominence to support the conclusion that it is an important means of spiritual practice, having to do with reception of Jesus’ inner teaching.

The idiomatic meaning of “not letting your left hand know what your right hand is doing.” relates to spiritual innocence. The idea is similar to the admonition that one must become as a little child to enter the kingdom. Principal characteristics of egoism are guile and artifice.

In Native American mythology, ego is symbolized as “the trickster.” Even in spiritual pursuits egoism resorts to guile and artifice to assert itself. It also seeks to fool itself about its true motivations, e.g., by rationalizing, denial, and other such stratagems. One must be constantly vigilant to nip these tendencies in the bud. But on the spiritual quest, the ego plays the same tricks on itself. Just as it seeks to fool others, the ego is also quite adept at fooling itself. For example, trying to be innocent is self-defeating, for it is in itself an artifice. This is the difficulty with most spiritual practices involving individual inception or self-effort.

For this reason a competent guide is necessary. A competent guide is one who has the spiritual acumen to see the tricks of the ego and either to counteract them with appropriate teaching or to act directly through grace. Saying 71 emphasizes that it is the grace of the Master that ultimately tears away the “walls” of separation that conceal the limited self from its own nature: “Jesus said, ‘I will tear down these walls and nothing will be able to rebuild them.’” The walls are the walls of separation in the mind. In the final analysis, a great wall separates subject from object, which is responsible for the persistence of dualism.

These walls of separation are the “veils” concealing reality under the guise of appearance. While these veils are thinned by one’s spiritual practice, they are ultimately removed by the grace of the Master; hence, they can never be raised again.

INTEGRATION

Saying 75 reveals the necessity for spiritual “aloneness,” integration, not aloofness: “Jesus said, ‘Many are standing at the door, but it is the unified one who will enter the bridal chamber.’”

Here the bridal chamber symbolizes the “sacred marriage,” divine union, uniting of the soul and God. There is scant specific mention of divine love as a force in *The Gospel of Thomas*; yet, it can be deduced from such characteristic metaphors such as “fire.” The bridal chamber, alluding to the sacred marriage of the soul and God in divine union, is a clear reference to the consummation of divine love in the soul.

“The unified one” (*monochos*) who enters the bridal chamber to become unified or whole is not a “bachelor,” but a person who is spiritually integrated and concentrated in oneself. One who is spiritually integrated is non-attached, truly poor in spirit, although not necessarily of pocket. Conversely, one who is attached is dispersed, caught in the grip of desire and aversion, distracted from the way and far from the goal, regardless of whether one is rich or poor in worldly terms.

The unified one (*monachos*) does not renounce the world as “evil,” but recognizes that the world is a corpse, a lifeless body, hence worthless.¹ Seeing with the eye of

¹ Saying 56, 80.

discernment that the allurements of the world distract one from the goal of life, the unified one chooses the good of the soul as being the highest good.¹

The world of appearances has no real being in the spiritual sense; for what comes into being in this world of shadows eventually passes out of existence here. Only that which neither comes into being nor passes away is truly real and substantial. Forms that appear and disappear in time are insubstantial, regardless of whether they are ephemeral like snowflakes or enduring as mountains. A person of discernment rises above such paltry things when they vie to attract one's attention through their superficial glamour. The discriminating person penetrates to the underlying hollowness at the core of such attractions, which promise much at the beginning but disappoint in the end.

It is those who are unified in themselves, being dead to the world even while yet in it, who come to know their real nature as living spirit, immortal soul. They can say with Paul that they are crucified with Christ, so that they no longer live but Christ lives in them. Instead of confusing their real being with the body, mind or personality, they have sought their true nature in effacement of the limited self and found it through union with God.

THE DARK NIGHT

One must die to self in the flesh to be born again in the spirit. Then, one will rule over the world instead of being ruled by it, but only after having been "troubled."² A more poetic rendering of "troubled" might be "roiled." St. John of the Cross reported this experience as being "the dark night of the soul."³

Mystics report that the process of dying to self is no "bed of roses," unless one is talking about the thorns, too. In dying to self, the "demons" of fear and desire get stirred up, and one must face the fury of one's passions on the way to transforming lust for the lower into love for the higher. Moreover, should one enter the spiritual path and develop supernormal powers, the strength of temptation is compounded but so is one's own inner strength. This is the inner meaning of Satan's tempting Jesus after his forty day fast, reported in the New Testament.

¹ *Summum bonum* is Latin for "the highest good."

² Saying 2.

³ St. John of the Cross. *The Dark Night of the Soul*. Translated and edited, with an Introduction, by E. Allison Peers. Third Revised Edition. Public Domain.
URL=<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/john_cross/dark_night.html>.

THE INNER STRUGGLE

Saying 7 alludes to the inner struggle: “Happy is the lion which the man eats, for the lion becomes a man. Cursed is the man whom the lion devours, for the lion becomes a man.” In the first sentence of Saying 7, the lion symbolizes the passions of the rational soul, e.g., love. Thus, when the passions are mastered, the lion (passions) become human./ In the second sentence of Saying 7, the lion symbolizes the animal passions, e.g., lust, anger and greed. When these passions are not bridled, the man becomes as a ferocious beast.

The idea is that when a person internalizes one’s passions by sublimating them rather than suppressing them, one becomes passionate about what is truly human, e.g., love, instead of merely bestial, e.g., lust. But when passions devour the person instead, then the beast in one becomes the person and one pursues one’s base inclinations.

This means that it is good when the passions, symbolized by the lion, are integrated, for then they are at the service of their rightful master, the heart as spiritual center. But it is bad when the passions take over a person, for then one becomes beast-like and one’s heart, hardened. This is a poetic way of saying that those who sublimate and transform their passions acquire the strength and nobility symbolized by the lion as king. But when passion gains control over a person, then the animal nature becomes master, and one becomes a ravaging beast, driven by lust, anger and greed.

The assumption that the passions are entirely bad and need to be done away with by banishing passion from life is erroneous. This is neither the perennial teaching nor that of *The Gospel of Thomas*. The teaching of the wise is not to destroy the passions but to master them and refine them so that they may be of service in human life, including spiritual life.

A person without passion is dry and brittle, the heart being shriveled up and dead. A spiritual person is extremely passionate yet refined, being driven by intense love for God and love for all as God’s manifestation. The message is to sublimate and transform the passions, not attempt to eradicate them.

Self-mastery, in part through mastery of the passionate nature and redirecting it to spiritual ends, is a spiritual struggle in which all are enjoined until lust is transformed into love. This struggle, first for self-control and then self-mastery, is played out both within oneself and also with others on the “battlefield” of life, in which all are called upon to become heroes by slaying their own dragons internally.¹

¹ In the great Indian spiritual epic, the *Mahabharata*, the war in the *Bhagavad Gita* is taken as symbolic of the battlefield of life on which we confront our own internal enemies.

When we project our own demons on others, then the battle seems real, and we become involved in useless conflicts over competing self-importance and self-interests, instead of cooperating with each other in slaying our demons. Even ashrams and monasteries are not safe havens then.

Virtually every spiritual tradition admonishes aspirants about this struggle, and they emphasize the necessity to see it through to the end, no matter what the difficulties and trouble. In Sufism, this is the inner meaning of “holy war,” *jihad* in Arabic.¹ It is a struggle to which all are called, for the enemy is within in the form of our separation from God. This is the inner meaning of Satan (Arabic: *Shaitan*) and *Iblis*. Krishna tells Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita* that one who has conquered himself by his Self is his own friend; one who has not conquered himself is his own enemy, just like an external enemy.² Similarly, *the Tao Te Ching* admonishes that the one who conquers others is powerful, but the one who subdues his own self is most powerful.³ Meister Eckhart summarizes the inner conflict: “There is no greater valor, nor no sterner fight than that for self-effacement and self-oblivion.”⁴

DISCRIMINATION, DISCIPLINE AND DEVOTION

From the spiritual vantage, this inner struggle is the hidden agenda, underlying everything that happens in the world. For every event presents a challenge for discernment, discipline and devotion.⁵

Through discrimination one distinguishes between the true and false, the important and trivial, the practical and impractical, and what is worthy of affection and what is not. Through discipline one stays centered. Through devotion to one’s

¹ Qur’an 2.216. “War is ordained for you, though you may hate it. But it may be that you dislike something that is good for you and like something that is bad for you. God knows this; you do not.”

² *Bhagavad Gita* 6.6.

³ *Tao Te Ching* 33.

⁴ Franz Pfeiffer. 1, p. 422. “Self-oblivion” means the final annihilation of egoism in God, similar to the annihilation (*fana*) of the self in Sufism, and the attainment of the not-self (*anatma, anatta*) in Buddhism. Using a term from Vedanta, Meher Baba calls this “extinction of the limited mind” (*manonash*). Divine union entails self-effacement.

⁵ According to the Shivapuri Baba, discipline, discrimination and devotion are the foundation of spiritual practice. Discipline and discrimination should be applied to meeting our responsibilities in life, and the rest of life should be spent in devotion to our chosen Ideal, be it God or Truth. John Godolphin Bennett. *Long Pilgrimage: the Life and Teaching of Sri Govindanda Bharati, Known as the Shivapuri Baba*. (Middletown, CA: Dawn Horse Press, 1983); Renu Lal Singh. *Right Life : Teachings of Shivapuri Baba*. (Yorkshire, UK: Coombe Springs Press, 1984. Revised and enlarged edition.).

chosen ideal, God, Truth or Master, one attaches oneself through true love to what is real and abiding. In this way, daily life becomes constant spiritual practice.

Through discernment one recognizes true values in the heart. Saying 91 emphasizes the need for spiritual discernment:

They said, "Reveal to us who you are so we can believe in you."

He said to them, "You are able to discern the face of the heavens and the earth, but you have not discerned the one who is in your presence, nor do you know how to discern the present moment."

Discernment in the spiritual sense may be said to be different from intellectual discrimination, which distinguishes truth and falsity, and even moral discernment, which distinguishes good and bad, right and wrong. Spiritual discernment is the ability to distinguish true values on the basis of differentiating the real and the unreal. This involves distinguishing that which does not change from that which changes, the mortal from the immortal, the temporal from the eternal, reality from appearance, and Self from not-self. For those lacking in discernment, life remains opaque and essentially materialistic. To those without spiritual discernment, subtler dimensions are invisible.

ONE-POINTEDNESS

In Saying 8, Jesus also counsels one-pointedness with respect to the truly important, along with rejection of the trivial. The wise fisherman throws the little fishes back and keeps only the biggest fish of the days catch. The little fishes symbolize worldly desires and self-interest as all that is trivial on the spiritual quest. The big fish is that which is all-important to the spiritual quest, namely spiritual wisdom and divine love. Wisdom and love are apparently different at the beginning of the quest but found to be identical at the end, when the goal is reached and spiritual wisdom is realized as: "God is love."¹ The wise, setting the correct priorities and staying one-pointedly focused on them, forsake trivial, apparent goods for the all-important, real good.

Those who persist with one-pointed devotion to the ideal represented by the Master, the Master will eventually favor with realization of the ideal for which they yearn. This ideal is indescribable: "Jesus said, 'I will give you what no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, what no hand has touched and what no mind has ever conceived.'"²

¹ 1 John 4:8, 16.

² Saying 17.

That which is beyond perception, conception, imagination and reasoning is spirit — formless, eternal, infinite and unchanging. According to Christian theology, both God and the soul are pure spirit.

This is alluded to paradoxically: “Jesus said, ‘When you see the one not born of woman, prostrate yourselves and worship. That is your Father.’”¹ The one not born of woman is the living spirit, the nature of both God and soul. Their existence as spirit is self-evident to those who realize God. Zen-like, this cryptic saying is a promise of God-realization.

This saying may be read along with the beginning of Saying 19: “Jesus said, ‘Happy is the one who is from the beginning before he is [born].’” Zen might say instead, Happy is the one who sees his ‘face’ before he was born, that is, knows his original nature.² “Original Face” is a Buddhist term equivalent to “Emptiness” (Sanskrit: *shunyata*), “Wisdom” (*prajna*), “Suchness” (*tathata*), and other such terms for the enlightened state. A focus for meditation (Japanese: *koan*) used by Buddhists is, “What was your original face before your father and mother were born?”

Does this suggest that perhaps the paradoxical sayings of *The Gospel of Thomas* were used as a contemplative focus similar to koans? Given that the statement in the prologue that one who realizes the inner meaning of these sayings will not “taste death” is a metaphor for enlightenment, the answer is likely affirmative.³

Saying 84 expresses this idea in words attributed to Jesus:

When you see a likeness of yourself, you are greatly pleased. But when you come to see the reflection of yourself which came into being before you were born and which neither dies nor becomes manifest in the world, how will you be able to stand it?

DIVINE DISCONTENT

The state of the unified one (*monachos*) is one of inner fulfillment, while the state of those who identify themselves with the body is the lack of fulfillment. The wise call this false identification of the soul, pure spirit, with a bodily form not only spiritual ignorance but also suffering: “Jesus said, “Wretched is a body that depends upon a body, and wretched is the soul that hangs upon this duality.”⁴ “The

¹ Saying 15.

² J. C. Cleary. *Pure Land, Pure Mind: The Buddhism of Masters Chu-hung and Tsung-pen*. (New York, Sutra Translation Committee of the US and Canada, 1994), “Introduction.” Cleary’s introduction is available online at: URL-<<http://www.sinc.sunysb.edu/Clubs/buddhism/pureland/inropl.html>>.

³ Saying 1. “Not tasting death” is a metaphor for the enlightened state.

⁴ Saying 87.

body that depends on a body” signifies those in gross consciousness, who identify their own existence with that of the body. Therefore, they serve the body rather than the soul.

When the body alone is served, the soul hangs on this duality, and the heart is sore. There is an inner discontent along with the greatest joys and beneath even life’s successes. As Heidegger observed, human beings are constantly aware of the mortality of the body and suffer anxiety, *Angst*, on account of it.¹ The soul longs for the peace that the world cannot give. As Augustine observes at the outset of the *Confessions*, “Our hearts are ever restless until they find their rest in Thee.” But as long as one identifies with the body and serves it, that peace is not found.

The sayings of a master are rich and have many interpretations. Another one that fits here involves the journey of the soul. “The soul that hangs upon this duality” refers also to the spiritually advanced. While the spiritually advanced no longer identify themselves with the physical body, they do identify with either the subtle body or the mental body, also called the causal body. These are not bodies made of gross matter. The subtle body is constituted of subtle energy and the mental body, of spiritual light. This “created light” is the reflection in the mind of the uncreated, self-effulgent divine light. Thus, in a widely used spiritual metaphor, the mind is as the moon and God, the sun.

According to Saying 3, all who have not found their true nature dwell in the poverty of spiritual ignorance. This includes even the “glorified ignorance” of saints who see all in God’s light but have not yet realized the ultimate truth by being united with it.² Consequently, they remain in ignorance of who they really are.

Even the spiritually advanced still identify somewhat with a body, albeit it a refined one, until final realization. The “body” with which one identifies limits one, whether it is the gross body in the case of those in ordinary consciousness, the

¹ Heidegger’s concept of *Angst*, derived from Kierkegaard, may be translated as either “dread” or “anxiety.” It differs from fear in that fear is aversion directed at something specific, whereas “dread” and “anxiety” are non-specific. *Angst* is a global aversion affecting the psyche as existential anxiety. Heidegger’s concept of *Angst* mirrors the Hindu, Buddhist and Jain concepts of spiritual suffering (*dukha*). In Judaism, Christianity and Islam this is the spiritual suffering caused separation from God, stemming initially from Adam’s original sin. The mystics of these traditions interpret the myth of the Fall as the apparent separation of the soul from God. *Angst*, *dukha* and the effects of sin all force us into thinking about the human condition. Hence, they are the seed of a “divine discontent” that eventually leads one to seek a way out, and when one finds it, to persist in it, regardless of the obstacles and difficulties.

² The term “glorified ignorance” applied to the state of those on the fifth plane of consciousness, or Cosmic Consciousness, and the sixth plane, or God Consciousness, comes from unpublished lectures of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi.

subtle body in the case of subtle-conscious adepts, or the causal body in the case of saints. Hence, one is not yet completely fulfilled. All who identify with a body, be it gross, subtle or casual, must travel further on the spiritual path, and even the advanced experience the divine discontent¹ of separation from God. Indeed, even the saints who see God in everyone and everything all the time have not yet reached the goal; for one's spiritual journey is not complete until one realizes Oneness as the true nature of spirit.

The agony of longing that accompanies the ecstasy of seeing God that is experienced even by the greatest saints who are not yet God-realized has been set forth by Meher Baba: "In love there can never be satisfaction, for longing increases till it becomes an agony which ceases only in Union. Nothing but union with the Beloved can satisfy the lover."

While the saints are fulfilled by seeing God everywhere all the time and do not experience the internal *Angst* of ordinary people fretting over the impending death of the body, they still feel the spiritual agony of separation from God, which they long to overcome.¹ Seeing God but not yet being united with Him just increases this yearning until it, with the Master's grace, breaks out of the bondage to limited self. Thus, "wretched is the soul that hangs upon this duality," may be said even of the saints at the threshold of Unity.

Ironically, this wretchedness is not a bad thing at all, even though it is experienced as *Angst*, divine discontent and suffering. Properly appreciated, this is but the nature of the internal dynamic that goads one from the depths of spiritual ignorance, all along the way, until the goal of union is finally reached. Hence, it is salutary, like the bitter medicine one may be forced to take in order to cure an otherwise terminal illness. Until the final goal of Oneness is realized, divine discontent continues to impel us forward, as we seek the means to dispel the darkness of spiritual ignorance. It also provides the drive to implement these means in a focused, one-pointed fashion until the end is secured.

This "wretchedness" is then part of the inner mechanics of the soul motivating one to seek out the way and tread it to the goal. Fortunately, divine discontent is not the whole story of this dynamic. Some of the medicine is sweet and some of the therapy is heart-warming, especially on the path of love.

A WAY OF KNOWLEDGE

The Gospel of Thomas is more explicitly focused on the way of knowledge, and it has relatively little to say explicitly about either the way of love or the way of action. Rather, love and action play a prominent role in the canonical gospels, and Christian mystics also emphasize them. The emphasis on knowledge does not

¹ Meher Baba. *The Everything and the Nothing*, 3. p. 10.

necessarily indicate an opposition between the spirituality of *The Gospel of Thomas* and other aspects of Christic spirituality, or argue that it is heterogeneous. There is also a strong current of the *via negativa* present in the Way of Jesus in general. Moreover, the way of many early Christian mystics, was much more ascetic than the way set forth in *Thomas*, for example, the way of the Desert Fathers, who were initially hermits and later gathered in monasteries.

Different teachings have different emphases, and they may be seen as complementing each other instead of contradicting or opposing one another. Rather than debating over the merits of various means, they can all be seen as tools, available for use as required for the task at hand. Moreover, while these ways can be considered separately, they overlap and reinforce each other.

The Prologue and Saying 1 assert that Jesus imparted a hidden teaching to Thomas and that the one who realizes this inner teaching “will not taste death,” that is, will be enlightened while in the body. This seems to clearly indicate that *The Gospel of Thomas* is concerned primarily with inner vision as “seeing with the eye of the heart” rather than faith or works. This inner vision seeks to see the soul as it really is. This is called spiritual wisdom or gnosis, in contrast to the state of spiritual ignorance, not knowing who one really is as a child of the living One and an heir to the kingdom of the Father.

This vision does not come easily. One must exert oneself to receive it, and it also depends on the grace of the Master, here, Jesus. Therefore, while knowledge is emphasized in *Thomas*, the means set forth in this gospel often involve factors other than knowledge alone.

CLEANSING THE HEART

The Gospel of Thomas emphasizes self-emptying, which is generally associated with the *via negativa*, which is characteristically set forth in terms of self-knowledge. But self-emptying is an aspect of self-effacement, which has implications for love and action also. In addition to being necessary for universal knowledge that transcends limitations, emptying the self of its dross is also a requirement for selfless love that is unconditional and right action that is performed without attachment to the fruits. The heart must be cleansed for true love to dawn, and desires based on self-interest must be rooted out if action is to be unattached.

However, selfless love, in contrast to love influenced by self-interest, is itself the single most powerful spiritual force for breaking down the barriers of egoism. As such, love itself is a means of self-emptying. For where selfless love is, selfishness isn't. As long as self-interest remains dominant, true love is denied. To the degree one's attraction of anyone or anything is infected with self-interest it involves lust and greed, in the terminology of Buddhism, “grasping and clinging.”

There is a danger to practicing self-emptying, for example, through meditation on the formless, without counterbalancing one's practice with a positive force such as is provided by love. Those who rely on practices based on negation of form alone risk becoming disintegrated rather than more integrated. For this reason, it is considered unwise to do this without the supervision of a competent guide. This was another reason for the gathering of early Christian hermits in communities under the supervision of a spiritual father or abbot. Moreover, success in the practice of self-emptying often results in spiritual experiences that can lead to self-inflation if not counterbalanced.

Just as a mind filled with many thoughts is dispersed and distracted rather than concentrated, so to a heart filled with desire and aversion is dominated by separation and cannot feel unity. Indeed, self-emptying leads to the cleansing of the heart. Therefore, it is requisite for true love to dawn as one's natural state of being. Of this state, St. Augustine said, "Love and do what you will.... Let the root of love be within. From such a root nothing but good can come."¹ For he knew that one who truly loves God, and God in everyone and everything, will act universally rather than out of self-interest.

Guarding the heart from passion by emptying it of low desires is also a spiritual requirement: "Jesus said, 'You cannot enter the house of the strong and take it by force without tying up their hands. Then, you can clean the place out.'"² The strong one is the ego, driven by self-interest and self-aggrandizement. The idea in both of these sayings is that one should be the master of oneself instead of being mastered by one's desires and passions. Saying 45 recalls similar New Testament passages:³

Jesus said, "Grapes are not gathered from thorns, nor figs from thistles, for these do not bear fruit. Those who are good bring forth good things from their store, while those who are evil bring forth evil things from the store of evil in their hearts, and they say evil things; for what their hearts are full of, they bring forth."⁴

Saying 14 also repeats the well-known canonical saying: "For what goes into your mouth will not defile you. Rather, it is what comes out of your mouth that will defile you".⁵

One must clean the inside of the vessel, not only the outside: "Why do you clean the outside of the cup?"¹ That is to say, ritual purification of the body is no

¹ Augustine. *Sermon on 1 John* 7,8.

² Saying 35.

³ Luke 6:43-45, Matt 7:15-20, Matt 12:33-37.

⁴ Matthew 7:15-20, 12:33-37, Luke 6:43-45.

⁵ Matthew 5:11, Mark 7:15.

replacement for cleansing the “inside” of the cup, the heart. This also recalls Jesus condemnation of the hypocrites as “whitened sepulchers,” beautiful on the outside but full of decay inside.²

Cleansing the heart is a necessary prerequisite for making room in the heart for selfless love. As long as selfish desires dominate, love cannot dawn. For selfish desires “steal” the heart: “Jesus said, ‘Happy are those who know that thieves are coming, so they can rise up, summon their strength, and arm themselves before the robbers break in.’”³ The task of discernment (knowledge) and discipline (volition) is to prepare the ground for devotion (affection).

LOVE

The only explicit mention of the word “love” in *The Gospel of Thomas* occurs in Sayings 25, 43 and 101. According to Saying 25: “Jesus said, ‘Love your brother as your soul; watch out for them like the pupil of your eye.’”⁴ This sounds warmer and most intimate than the more familiar rendering of Exodus 19:18, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” which is reiterated by Jesus in the New Testament.⁵

Reiterating a familiar teaching of the canonical gospels, the next saying makes clear that one must first cleanse oneself before attempting to set others straight: “Jesus said, ‘You see the speck of dust in your friend’s eye, but you do not see the cinder in your own. When you take the cinder out of your own eye, then you will be able to see clearly and can take the speck out of your friend’s eye.’”⁶ Saying 34 continues in this vein, extending it to false or half-baked teachers: “Jesus said, ‘If someone who is blind leads someone else who cannot see, both of them will fall into a ditch.’”

¹ Saying 89.

² Matthew 23:27.

³ Saying 103.

⁴ The word used is literally “brother” in Coptic. There is a precedent for this replacement of the familiar “neighbor” of Leviticus 19:18, because the previous verse uses “brother.” Clearly, “brother” does not mean blood sibling here, but means something like “others.” Whether this extended beyond the community of the gospel itself, or perhaps of the faithful, is unclear. The expression, “as your soul,” instead of “as yourself,” is typically Semitic rather than Hellenistic Greek. This could suggest that the saying was originally Aramaic, the language Jesus presumably spoke colloquially.

⁵ Leviticus 19:18.

⁶ Saying 26.

We see from these admonitions that real love does not include what has come to be called “rescuing,” by inappropriately assuming responsibility for others and acting beyond one’s own abilities without recognition of one’s own limitations.

Saying 43 also contains the word, “love.” However, it is used in a somewhat different way, having to do with the Master:

His followers said to him, “Who are you who say these things to us?

[Jesus answered,] You do not realize who I am from what I speak to you. You are becoming like the Judeans who love the tree but not the fruit, or love the fruit but not the tree.”

“Love the tree but not the fruit,” means loving the teacher but resisting the teaching. “Love the fruit but not the tree,” means embracing the teaching but rejecting the teacher from which it came.

Jesus’ disciples were apparently astonished and perhaps disturbed at some of the things Jesus was saying, perhaps privately. This is typical of the situation when a person becomes realized and begins acting in that role. At first, even those close to the Master cannot fathom the depth of his teachings, which may seem to run counter to the prevailing normative religion in important ways, perhaps even appearing blasphemous. At the same time, they are strongly attracted to the charismatic presence that the Master radiates. Others are attracted to the teaching but resist the messenger, often in an attempt to assert their own ego as arbiter of truth.

Jesus admonishes his disciples to love him as a man and also to embrace his teaching that he is not a normal person. Some followers are able to see who the Master is right away. Meher Baba said that this is only because the Master lifts the veil for them. Others cannot penetrate the veil at first and their way involves overcoming doubt on the way to getting conviction in the Master and fully accepting both the Master and the teaching.

This may seem archaic now, since Jesus and his teaching are widely accepted as genuine. But this is a continuing feature of the spiritual quest. Almost everyone has to pass through these stages, unless or until the Master’s grace lifts the veil.

The final mention of love is in Saying 101. The text of this saying is corrupt and a key word or phrase is missing. Therefore, it is not possible to construe it with any certainty, and any rendering is necessarily based on some bias. Nevertheless, what remains of the text is so significant that it bears consideration.

The first part of the text is incomplete, but it can be reconstructed as: “Whoever does not hate his father and his mother in my way cannot become my disciple.” This is the reiteration of the well-known New Testament verses to this effect.¹ In

¹ Matthew 10: 37-39; Luke 14: 25-25; also Saying 55.

the New Testament, Jesus is even more explicit in requiring that love for the Master be superior to all earthly love, even the love for family.

The second part of the text is corrupt. The words in brackets are added on the basis of the surrounding context. What remains reads: “And whoever loves [not his father and his] mother in my way he cannot become my [disciple]. For my mother [only brought me forth]; however, my true mother gave me life.”

It seems that Jesus is likely drawing a distinction between his earthly parents and his true parents, the real Father and Mother. Raphael Patai shows that there is a rich Hebrew tradition relating to the feminine aspect of deity.¹ The immanent presence of God “in exile” is called *shekhinah* in Hebrew, and *shekhinah* is equated by both the Hebrew and Christian traditions with the Holy Spirit, *ruach ha qodesh* in Hebrew, as well as Wisdom personified, *hochmah* in Hebrew and *sophia* in Greek.

God as Mother has largely disappeared from use in contemporary normative Christianity, so this idea seems shocking to many now.² Yet, the Holy Spirit was a

¹ Raphael Patai. *The Hebrew Goddess*. (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1990, Third Enlarged Edition.). *Shekhinah* is a feminine noun whose root is the verb *shakhan*, meaning “to dwell.” See also Rabbi Justin Lewis. “The Jewish Goddess(es).” (Torah Study, Congregation Iyr HaMelech, Rosh Chodesh Adar 5764/2004). URL =<<http://post.queensu.ca/%7Ejll/jewishgoddess.htm>>.

² Perhaps sensing this lack, Roman Catholicism filled Her place with the *cultus* of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Mary the mother of Jesus is likely God-realized, as her continuing and even increasing influence would indicate. If so, then this devotion is not misplaced. However, the Holy Spirit as Mother is somewhat different in conception and function.

Jack Graham elaborates: The Council of Ephesus in 431 declared the Virgin Mary *Theotokos*, a Greek term literally meaning “God-bearer” but usually translated “Mother of God.” In November, 1950 Pope Pius XII declared the Doctrine of the Assumption of Mary, based on Revelations 12:1 and following, containing an allusion to the marriage of the Lamb in John’s vision at the end of time. This repeats the pattern of Sophia. Carl Jung found this most interesting. Jung saw the Assumption of Mary as the restoration of the divine Quaternity rather than Trinity.

It is odd that there was so much resistance by the Church Fathers to a quaternity since the basic symbol, the cross, was itself a quaternity. However, medieval iconography represented the coronation of the Virgin. The Assumption of Mary — the taking of her soul into heaven with her body — was a doctrine but not a dogma. It was never a matter of explicit revelation, but it became clear from the meaning of the Book of Revelation. Jung says, however, from the psychological point of view, it is the necessary and logical restoration of the archetypal situation. (CW, XI, 171). Elijah and Enoch were also taken to heaven bodily, implying that their bodies didn’t die physically in the normal way. And Christ rose with his body, but this has a different meaning, because he was divine in the first place, and Mary was not.

lively idea in ancient times, not only in Judaism and Christianity, although in other traditions the name is different. The Holy Spirit in Judaism and Christianity stems from the Genesis creation myth in which God as Father breathes life into Adam's nostrils. This breath of life is the Holy Spirit, the "life" or "spirit" as the immanent aspect of God in humanity. It is the source of wisdom in the soul, as its very nature.

In the Vedic Tantric tradition, the Divine Mother (*Shakti*) is the energy or power (*shakti*) of God (*Shiva*). God the Father manifests the three worlds, gross, subtle and causal through "His" own Power, which is depicted as His feminine "counterpart." Followers of the Shakti sect worship the Divine Mother, although worship of the Divine Mother is not limited to them.¹

THE MIDDLE WAY

Buddha is famous for teaching a middle way between indulgence and excessive austerity. Similarly, *The Gospel of Thomas* focuses on self-emptying and non-attachment, and does seem to deprecate the world in many sayings. Yet, it does not require or even recommend austere practices. Saying 6 states:

Mary was seen to have a more material body than Christ. This doctrine really means that Mary is divine. The Theotokos is divine, and thus Mary is recognized as a goddess. All this paves the way for the quaternity. (CW, XI,171). This also opens up the possibility that matter is not necessarily corruptible and sinful, but that it is capable of being originally pure. This makes individuation possible, i.e., consciousness of universal Self. Mary's Assumption is the psychological prototype of bodily resurrection for us all, the implication being of a union of heaven and earth, of matter and spirit.

¹ Paradoxically, even though Shankara (Adi Shankaracharya) was a celibate monk known primarily as the principal exponent of Advaita Vedanta and the founder of the Shankaracharya order of renunciates (*sanyasins*), he also wrote some of the most revered Sanskrit hymns to the Divine Mother, of which *Soundarya Lahari* is perhaps the most famous.

Shankara also revitalized the *Smarta* sect for householders. *Smarta* means one who follows the traditional scriptures regulating life in the world (*smriti*). Followers of *Smarta* have an altar with six aspects of divinity, Shiva, the transcendental source, Shakti, the Divine Mother, Vishnu, the immanent ground, Ganesh the divine son, and Surya, the spiritual sun, representing the Master. To these five, Shankara added Subramanya, brother of Ganesha, depicted as the general in charge of the heavenly host. Followers of *Smarta* are free to choose which aspect of God appeals to them most. This becomes their favorite or chosen form of God (*ishta devata*), whom they worship. However, they do not claim that this particular name and form is exclusive or privileged above others because they have chosen it.

His disciples asked him, saying, “Do you want us to fast? How should we pray? Are we to give alms? What dietary prescriptions should we follow?”

Jesus said, “Do not lie and do not do [to others] what you yourselves dislike, because all things are laid bare in the face of truth. For there is nothing which is hidden that will not be made manifest and nothing concealed that will not be revealed.”

Rather than confirm the prevailing practices among those emphasizing ritual purity and strict adherence to the letter of the Law and rabbinical injunctions, Jesus emphasizes instead the importance of committing oneself to truth, as well as seeing oneself in others and treating them as one would wish to be treated oneself. The idea here is that religious observances and austere practices considered individually are far less significant than spiritual living, which is holistic and integrated.

Like Rabbi Hillel a century before, Jesus summarizes the Law while “standing on one foot.”¹ Rabbi Shammai, on the other hand, required conformity with every “jot and tittle.”² This was an ongoing controversy among Jewish teachers and Jesus was clearly siding with the liberal faction against the excessive purists of his day.³

Saying 6 emphasizes that the foundation of spiritual living is absolute honesty, in addition to universal empathy. For no one can hide anything from God, who is omniscient and knows the hearts of all. Moreover, non-injuriousness is also a requirement, for every offense is an offense to God, who is omnipresent. Perhaps not coincidentally the first two of the five injunctions, *yama* in Sanskrit, of Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras* are non-injuriousness (*ahimsa*) and truthfulness (*satya*). They are also among the five Buddhist precepts, *shila* in Sanskrit and Pali. Wisdom,

¹ According to the Talmud, when Rabbi Hillel the Elder was asked by a prospective convert to teach him the essence of the Law while “standing on one foot,” Hillel said: “That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the entire Torah; the rest is commentary. Go and learn.” (*Shabbat* 31a). In Matthew 7:12, Jesus says: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you, for his is the Law and the Prophets.” A similar saying appears in *The Gospel of Thomas*, Saying 6.

² Yet, Jesus is also reported to have said: ‘Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets ... Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law’. (Matthew 5:17-18). However, there is also a Jewish teaching to the effect that completely fulfilling any one requirement of the law is sufficient to fulfill all of them. Therefore, to love God and all as one in God in the way that God ought to be loved is sufficient to fulfill the whole of the law.

³ It would not be historically correct to call Rabbi Shammai an excessive purist. Hillel and Shammai were friends who had great respect for each other, and they led the two most influential schools of their time.

mandating truthfulness, and compassion based on universal empathy are fundamental to Buddha's middle way, as well.

HYPOCRISY

Saying 14 picks up this thread: "Jesus said to them, 'If you fast, you risk begetting sin for yourselves. If you pray, you are liable to be adjudged, and if you give alms, you may do harm to your spirits....'" If one performs austerities without purity of intention and non-attachment to the fruits, one is liable to become a holier than thou hypocrite, condemned in Saying 102: "Jesus said, 'Woe to the holier than thou hypocrites for they are like a dog sleeping in a manger, who neither eats nor [lets] the cattle eat.'"¹ In the time of Jesus, apparently many religious leaders interpreted the Jewish law very rigidly and they strictly observed the injunctions regarding ritual purity, requiring the same of those whom they led. However, they made a show of their pity, which was external, and not from the heart. As a result they made the teaching with which they were entrusted a wall separating the people from God, instead of a bridge to be crossed.

Saying 39 elaborates on this harsh criticism:

Jesus said, "The keys of wisdom have been entrusted to the learned and the teachers, and they have hidden them. They have not entered themselves, nor have they let those enter who desire to. For your part, be wise as serpents and innocent as doves."²

¹ "Neither eats nor lets the cattle eat" can be interpreted as a reference to the teachers whose show of piety through strict interpretation and rigid approach to ritual and observance was not only hollow but it also created obstacle for those whom they were supposed to lead, who wished to follow the teaching themselves.

² "The keys of wisdom" likely refers to Hebrew scripture and tradition as the external repository of an inner teaching. Many leaders of Jesus' day apparently worshipped this external religious edifice instead of loving God in their hearts. But for lovers of God, the temple symbolizes the individual as a lover of God. Its sanctuary is the mind, in which one meditates on God and contemplates God's glory. The holy of holies, is the heart of hearts, in which God is adored. Without inner adoration, external worship is hollow and empty of life.

"The keys of wisdom" may also refer to the oral, explaining and elaborating the written Torah. Some of this is written down as the Talmud and Mishnah. The secret parts of this teaching remain a "closed-door" oral tradition whose innermost secrets and passed on only to those deemed prepared to receive them. Thus, it might be argued that teachers of Jesus' day knowingly concealed the inner teaching from the masses, for whom they did not deem it suitable.

Ironically, there seems to have been an appreciation of Jesus' inner teaching among some in the early Jesus tradition also, and its concealment from the public for the same reasons.

To be wise (cunning) as snakes and innocent (harmless) as doves means to avoid the wiles of false teachers while being transparent to people of good will.

Indeed, any sense of spiritual advancement as being special or separate from others leads to self-importance and self-inflation rather than self-effacement. Spiritual practice, especially austerities such as fasting, can lead to a sense of being special or “preciousness,” a symptom of the self-satisfaction and self-importance for which Jesus castigated many of the religious teachers of his time.

PERSECUTION

The history of the Jesus tradition shows that one’s journey may involve persecution. This has also been the fate of many mystics and free thinkers, even within their own normative religion. Nor did this happen only in Christianity, which began with the Sanhedrin’s condemnation of Jesus for blasphemy. In Islam, Mansur al-Hallaj was executed as a blasphemer, and the Amsterdam synagogue excommunicated Spinoza for being a pantheist.

Nowadays, however, this no longer means being subjected to violence, excommunication, shunning or the like in the West. However, as one begins to adopt a spiritual way of life more and more, one may be regarded as becoming more and more of a fool, and not a wise one either. The wise person is a fool in the eyes of the world, hence, the expression, “the wise fool.” But only the wise are aware of this.

Even those who become established in knowledge will not necessarily be recognized for this accomplishment. Neither was Jesus. Nor was he alone in being persecuted and martyred. This would have been in the forefront of the minds of the faithful in the early days, when persecution was rife.

Indeed, people of knowledge may be vilified and even persecuted instead of being recognized by others: “Jesus said, ‘Whoever knows the Father and Mother will be called the offspring of a whore.’”¹ *YHVH* is the Father, and the Holy Spirit (Hebrew: *ruach ha qodesh*), or God’s presence (*shekhinah*) in the world, is the Mother. The Father is the transcendent aspect of God, the Creator, and the Mother is the immanent aspect, identified with the breath of God, or Holy Spirit, that God

However, some normative authorities in early Christianity suppressed the inner teaching chiefly because it conflicted with the letter they sought to impose as doctrine, thereby missing the spirit. Apparently, the secret teaching was largely lost to view, owing to its suppression. See Margaret Baker’s article, “The Secret Tradition, Part 1,”

¹ Saying 105.

breathed into Adam, giving life to what was lifeless matter, clay.¹ The Mother and Father are one, because God is indivisible Oneness.²

In the Vedic tradition, the indivisible unity of Absolute Reality is represented as male and female also. The male pole is Shiva and the female pole is Shakti. In Sanskrit *shiva* means the auspicious one, i.e., God, and *shakti* means energy. The female pole or Divine Mother is God's creative energy or "creative intelligence," since "creative" implies energy. God's energy is not really separate from God. In the Sankhya (also Samkhya) system of Indian philosophy (Sanskrit: *darshana*), this is expressed as the dichotomy between *purusha* and *prakriti* or Person and Nature, where Nature is the nature of the Person, which only appears to be separate through spiritual ignorance.

In this sense, to know the Father and the Mother is to make the two one by realizing that inner and the outer are identical.³ This is to know spirit as one, although appearing to be transcendent and immanent, unmanifest and manifest.

This assault may not be only verbal: "Jesus said, 'Joyous are you when they revile you and pursue you malevolently, for you shall find a place where no one can persecute you.'"⁴ We cannot forget that many people are still dying in this world because of what they profess or do not profess.

The place of refuge is the state of internal renunciation of self-interest or spiritual non-attachment, where unattached to the world, one "rests" in God. Here, one experiences an inner peace and contentment the world cannot give. The true "place of rest," however, is the state of nonduality, beyond the noise (incessant activity) of worldly affairs and also underlying it as its silent ground of being. But before that, one may find only trouble and turmoil⁵.

Despite the sacrifices necessary to attain it, the goal is worth the inevitable struggle to transform oneself: "Jesus said, 'The heavens and the earth will roll up in your presence, and the one who lives from the Living One will not see death.'"⁶ The

¹ Raphael Patai. *The Hebrew Goddess*.

² This unity of masculine and feminine pole in God, creative and receptive, is reflected in the gross world in marriage, in which the two become as one and are said to "know" each other experientially. Sexual union is a traditional symbol for divine union. Not only do mystics of many traditions use the metaphor of sexual union for the union of soul and God, but also in the Tantric tradition, both Vedic and Buddhist the deity itself is represented graphically this way.

³ Saying 22.

⁴ Saying 68.

⁵ Saying 2.

⁶ Saying 111.

phrase, “living from the Living One,” signifies experiencing God’s presence within. One who is aware of God’s presence within one will not experience physical death as other than as the passing away of something nonessential. For those who realize immortality know that quitting the body is of no concern. Meher Baba observes: “If you had divine sight, you would be fully convinced, and see for yourself that after the dropping of the physical body, the soul, which is always immortal, is always there. And death does not make the slightest difference in this as you believe.”¹

¹ Meher Baba, quoted in Bhau Kalchuri. *Lord Meher*. Vol. 3, p. 780.

THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS AND DEIFICATION

*When you make the two one,
and the inner as the outer
and the outer as the inner,
... then you will enter the kingdom.¹*

DEIFICATION

From the vantage of perennial wisdom, the sayings of *The Gospel of Thomas* about unification are some of the most significant for the Way of Jesus. These sayings are in agreement with the perennial teaching that only One *is*, and that unification is the purpose of life.

Shankara's unqualified non-dualism (*Advaita Vedanta*), Ibn 'Arabi's identityism (*Wujudiyyah*), the Taoism of Chuang Tzu, and Asanga's *Yogachara* or *Vijnanavada* Buddhism are some of the most forceful expressions of nondualism.² Even though brief and pithy, these sayings of *The Gospel of Thomas* are no less forceful in asserting that only One *is*, and that the goal of life is to realize this unity of being consciously. This is tantamount to realizing the soul's identity with God.³

In Orthodox Christianity there is a comparable teaching called "deification," *theosis* in Greek.⁴ However, in its normative expression it is generally qualified to mean that God's essence remains unknowable by other than God in order to avoid normative heresy. Some Sufi and Qabalistic mystics also use the same tactic to avoid normative heresy. Then, it becomes a question as to how complete unification can be in this life, and this is left ambiguous.

This was addressed in the early Jesus tradition both on the basis of mystical experience and also scriptural interpretation. It has been a subject of theological debate throughout the history of Christianity. It is also controversial in Islam, and many normative Muslims consider Sufi identityism to be heresy.

The chief issues are the degree to which it can be said that a human being partakes of the divine nature through grace, and as well as the degree to which this

¹ Saying 22.

² Meher Baba reiterated this teaching, especially in *God Speaks* and *Discourses*.

³ Meher Baba. *God Speaks*. Part 1, p. 1-8; Part 6, p. 59-71.

⁴ Dumitru Staniloae. *Orthodox Spirituality: A Practical Guide for the Faithful and a Definitive Manual for the Scholar*. Translated by Archimandrite Jerome (Newell) and Otilia Kloos. (South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, 2003).

is possible while one is still in an earthly body. Many normative Christians would regard the very notion of realizing God in the body through divine union as impossible and heretical.

The accepted view has generally been that man partakes in the divine nature to a degree through grace by “seeing God” only obscurely while in the body, although after death, the “Beatific Vision” is seeing “face to face.”¹ At least this is the usual interpretation of Paul’s statement.

On the other hand, this is not the only interpretation of Paul’s statement:

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face.
Now I know only in part, then I will know fully, even as I have been
fully known.²

A close reading of the passage reveals no specific reference to the afterlife. Rather, this is generally assumed to be evident according to the norm. Yet, Paul’s assertion is taken as a norm in this regard. This is circular reasoning.

Paul also writes: “...but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.”³ This is entirely consistent with the perennial teaching that completeness or perfection is only possible when limitation comes to an end. The grace of one who has realized perfection is capable of imparting perfection to others while they are in the body. This teaching is buttressed by mystics’ testimony to it, often in some of the world’s most highly regarded literature and poetry. Jesus’ assertions of this are not unique, and they can be regarded as exclusive only on the basis of presumed norms, whose only basis is doctrinal belief in a normative interpretation.

Similarly, the sayings of *The Gospel of Thomas* can be interpreted to mean that realization is possible through grace while one is in the body. Indeed, Paul’s testimony may be read as just such a mystical testimony: “I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.”⁴

Faith and works, and even grace, add nothing that is not already in the soul. Since God is immanent as well as transcendent, they serve to lift the veils obscuring awareness of God within and at the core of all: “Jesus said, ‘Know what is [already] present before your face and what was concealed from you will become plain to you.’”⁵ God’s kingdom is already present before one’s face.

His disciples said to him, “When will the kingdom come?”

¹ 1 Corinthians 13:12.

² 1 Corinthians 13: 11-13.

³ 1 Corinthians 13: 9.

⁴ Galatians 2:19-20.

⁵ Saying 5.

[Jesus said,] “It won’t come by looking outwardly. No one is going to say, ‘Look over there,’ or, ‘Look at that!’ Rather, the kingdom of the Father is spread over the earth, and people don’t see it.”¹

In terms of Hebrew mysticism, God’s immanent Presence (Hebrew *shekhinah*), or the Holy Spirit (*ruach ha qodesh*).² *Shekhinah* is said to be in exile in the Kingdom (*malkhuth*). The purpose of spiritual living is to return *Shekhinah* to her home by experiencing God’s presence. When we see “face to face,” then God’s “face” is repaired. Spirituality consists in this reparation (Hebrew: *tikkun*) of God’s face.

A number of sayings in *The Gospel of Thomas* emphasize that matter lacks intrinsic life and in itself is “dead.” This calls for disabusing oneself of identification with the body and attachment to the world. *The Gospel of Thomas* also holds that the “living” spirit can be found at the basis of both oneself and the world.³ For the kingdom that is equated with realization of God’s presence is both within oneself and outside oneself at the core of all. While finding God within oneself is emphasized in *Thomas*, Jesus also says: “Split a stick and I am there, lift a stone and you will find me there.”⁴ Mystics of all traditions, including Christian mystics, report that illumination involves seeing God in all and everything.

Immanence and transcendence were considered previously in examining the foundations of both perennial wisdom and the Way of Jesus. *The Gospel of Thomas* uses similar literary constructs and symbolic devices to communicate its mystical message. It employs the language of both affirmation and negation. For example, on the one hand, the world must be discovered to be dead and one must become dead to the world. On the other hand, the language can also be celebratory. For example, the kingdom is already present, and the successful aspirant is compared to a bridegroom entering the bridal chamber. While these may seem contradictory, the contradiction is only apparent. In this paradox, the positive and negative approaches complement each other.

On the one hand, matter is dead while spirit is living:

Jesus said, “Whoever comes to know the cosmos [for what it really is] has found a corpse, and the cosmos [itself] is worthless in comparison with anyone who has found it to be a corpse.”⁵

¹ Saying 113.

² *Shekhinah* is feminine. The Holy Spirit is often equated with Wisdom (Greek *sophia*, also feminine).

³ Saying 3, 22.

⁴ Saying 77. See also Saying 30. “Split a piece of wood” appears in an incomplete Greek Oxyrhynchus fragment similar to Saying 30, but also significantly different.

⁵ Saying 56.

When one realizes the living spirit, then one also realizes that the material world is “dead” in contrast, for it is ephemeral, being subject to change and decay. In comparison to “dead” matter, even the entire universe, the “living” spirit is incomparably more valuable. Here we are reminded of the New Testament passage where Jesus asks rhetorically what it profits a person to gain the whole world if one lose one’s own soul by doing this.¹

On the other hand, the kingdom is ubiquitous, “spread over the earth.”² The kingdom is not a political realm that will be established at some future date, a spiritual renewal that will happen at some future time, or a heavenly reward in the afterlife:

His disciples said to him, “When will the dead find rest?’ And when will the new order be established?’

He said to them, “What you are awaiting has already arrived, but you do not recognize it.”³

Scholars have observed by way of contrast with the canonical scriptures that *Thomas* does not reflect the normative Incarnational Christology that emphasizes Jesus as the Son of God. However, it does state unequivocally that Jesus is not only the Master who bestows true knowledge but also that he is both within creation as its ground and also beyond creation as the “light” or intelligence informing it.⁴ “Jesus said, “I am the light above all things, and I am the all. Everything comes from me [as source] and everything splits open to [reveal] me [as ground].”⁵ This saying asserts that real existence, identified with Jesus, is both transcendent and also immanent.

This view of God as both transcendent and immanent is called *panentheism* in order to distinguish it from *pantheism*. Pantheism is the view that the universe is God, holding the God is immanent but not transcendent, whereas panentheism holds that God is one, hence omnipresent — transcendent as the source of everything and also immanent as the ground of all.

¹ Matthew 16:26, Mark 8:36

² , Saying 113.

³ Saying 51.

⁴ In John’s gospel, Jesus is called “the light of the world.” According to Islam, Jesus (Arabic: *Isa*) is called the breath of Allah (*ruh Allah*) and Muhammad is called the light of God (*nur Allah*). Sufis take both of these appellations to signify immanence. Islam does not permit calling one of the acknowledged Prophets greater than another, although in normative Islam Muhammad is held to be the “seal” of the prophets on the basis of a literal reading of the Holy Qur’an, Surah 33:40.

⁵ Saying 77.

This is a particularly important distinction in that historically normative religions have attacked mystical teaching as being pantheistic, which implies denying God's transcendence. However, this is the logical fallacy of attacking a straw man, since the principal mystical traditions are panentheistic, affirming God's transcendence along with immanence. According to panentheism, it is the normative position that is heretical because it denies God's absolute unity of being in taking creation to be separate. According to panentheism, God is the One, in whom creatures live, move and have their being, and God's being is not limited to that of creatures or even all of creation.

Creatures being "in" God can be compared to the thoughts of our minds. Neither does mind become many by entertaining many thoughts, nor do thoughts exist separate from mind. Similarly, neither does God become many by creating, nor do creatures exist separate from God. For creation is "in" God rather than being a separate reality.

Indeed, even some of the most revered and "orthodox" of theologians according to normative Christianity, Augustine and Aquinas, for example, agree that God is not in any way relative to creation, even though human thought is constrained to think of God as separate and human speech is incapable of stating this apparent relationship other than paradoxically.

Aquinas resolved this issue on the basis of the principle that knowledge is in accordance with the mode of the knower. The finite mind is constrained to think of God as separate, hence, relative, but for God, who is infinite, all is within His indivisible unity. Aquinas even agrees with the Eastern sages that attributing absolute simplicity to God is really denying difference and relation to God, for the human mind cannot know anything of God in an affirmative way.

God is entirely beyond conception, understanding, reason, and imagination; therefore, God's nature is ineffable. While normative theologians agree that God is ineffable, they differ over the degree that God can be known through mystical experience. According to perennial wisdom, since God is absolute, God is only known completely through absolute knowledge. Therefore, the only way to know God in this way is to be identical with God. To know the Absolute, one may be the Absolute.

Normative Judaism, Christianity and Islam correctly hold that only God can know God, but incorrectly deny that this is possible for any creature, especially one still in the body, not realizing that a human being can transcend its human limitations while retaining the outward semblance of being human. While Jews and Muslims deny this of any human person, Christianity limits it to Jesus as the second person of the Blessed Trinity. As a result the mystics of these traditions have tended to qualify their claims about unification, admitting that human beings can know God's presence but not God's essence.

On the other hand, *The Gospel of Thomas* states that unification with God is possible in the body by making the two one, and, moreover, that is to be sought as the very goal of life. In the mystical theology of *Thomas*, the task at hand is to realize God as beyond the dualism of limited self and world.

Jesus, as an advent of the God-Man, is presented mystically in *The Gospel of Thomas* as the totality of immanence and transcendence, especially in Saying 77. This is also the mystical meaning of, “I am the way, the truth and the life,” as well as the prologue to John’s gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.”¹ Moreover, Jesus promises that what was concealed by spiritual ignorance will be revealed through spiritual knowledge and that anyone who drinks from his mouth, that is, imbibes his teaching, will be made like him, and he will become that person.²

Perhaps the essence of the Way of Jesus as the path of following him — “Come, follow me” — lies his own declaration: “I am the way, the truth, and the life.”³ The “Way” is the spiritual link between the “Truth” as the transcendent aspect of God and the “Life” as the immanent aspect of God. The “Way” involves following the “Life” as the Holy Spirit or Spirit of Truth — God’s breath in creation — back to its transcendental source, the “Truth.”

The God-Man as master is the totality of the way, truth and life, of which he is the conscious embodiment. This applies not only while the God-Man is in the body but also after dropping the body, as Jesus’ resurrection in a spiritual body can be interpreted to mean. To follow Jesus as God-Man is following the way of immortality — spirit — to realize Truth, instead of following the way of morality — the way of the world, itself dead, which leads to one’s own physical death without having realized what is truly alive within oneself.

COMPLEMENTARY WAYS

The way of love characteristic of Christian mysticism is a combination of the *via negativa* and the *via positiva*. Self-emptying and self-effacement is for the purpose of losing oneself in the Beloved, who becomes the sole focus of one’s attention, intention and affection. The *via positiva* also employs self-effacement when one surrenders in full conviction to God or to the Master as God-realized as the Highest of the High. This is clearly quite different from the Advaitic and Buddhist objective of culturing self-emptiness in order to realize freedom and truth (*nirvana*).

¹ John 1:1.

² Saying 5, 108.

³ Luke 18:22 (see also Matthew 16:24; Mark 1:17; Luke 9:23). John 14:6.

The *via negativa* aims at discovering experientially the kingdom within by transcending the limitations of perceiving, conceptualizing, understanding, reasoning, imagining, and feeling by entering “the cloud of unknowing” through complete self-effacement. Generally, this is thought of in terms of going within in search of formless God. However, the way of surrenderance of limited selfhood through love for the Master is also a way of negation, in that it is the negation of self-interest and self-importance, which are the walls of the prison in which the soul finds itself confined. In complete self-surrenderance one uses one’s free will to become the willing slave of the Master.

The *via positiva* is the opposite pole of the *via negativa*, affirming life over death, unity over duality, and so forth. Unlike the *via negativa*, the *via positiva* does not view the world as something to be transcended as much as penetrated. The *via negativa* seeks to transcend the world and find God immanent in the soul. The *via positiva* seeks to roll back the veil of matter and find God as immanent in creation.

The *via positiva* also becomes experiential if one penetrates to the beauty and glory of creation. According to *The Gospel of Thomas*, Jesus said: “Split a log and I am there, lift a stone and you will find me there.”

In Plato’s account, the beauty of transient objects is a reflection in the physical world of transcendental beauty, of which these objects “partake.” In the renowned “ladder of love” passage setting forth the ladder of ascent, Socrates tells how his teacher, the priestess Diotima led him from love of the physical to love of the mental, from love of the mental to love of the universal, and finally to love of beauty as it is in itself.¹ In *The Gospel of Thomas*, Jesus takes a more direct route in Saying 77, indicating that he himself is immanent everywhere and can be found anywhere. Saying 5 asserts that what is hidden is in plain sight. Its revelation only requires that the veil be removed.

Sayings asserting the kingdom is in the here and now, available to be known and enjoyed, emphasize immanence and the *via positiva*. Saying 5, for example, states that what seems to be concealed is actual ever-present right before one’s face. Saying 113 asserts that the kingdom is spread out over the earth and people don’t see it. Moreover, the sayings in which light and fire are symbols used in a spiritual sense suggest that the immanent ground can be appreciated as well.² The *via positiva* is therefore also a way of vision, which looks deeply within creation as well as oneself with the eye of the heart, in order to find the living spirit underlying dead matter.

¹ Plato. *Symposium* 210a-212b.

² Saying 77, 82.

Although the *via negativa* and the *via positiva* are both found in *The Gospel of Thomas*, its emphasis seems to be on realizing nonduality by going within oneself. This emphasis seems stronger than on uniting with the Beloved or finding the kingdom immanent in the world. As a result, *Thomas* appears to emphasize the *via negativa* over the *via positiva*. At least, this is the way it is usually read, and why it has been often seen as Gnostic rather than Christian. However, to ignore the *via positiva* in *Thomas* would be blind-sided, for this influence is certainly there along with the *via negativa*.

Nondual traditions see only the eternal formless unchanging Absolute as real and the temporal, changing, and limited world of form as relative and phenomenal. The relative and phenomenal is “illusory appearance” in Shankara’s unqualified nondualism (Sanskrit: *advaita vedanta*) and merely “imagination” in Ibn ‘Arabi’s Sufic identityism (Arabic: *wujudiyyah*), in contrast to the ultimate indivisible reality as absolute and ultimately real. In *The Gospel of Thomas*, spirit is living; matter is dead. That is to say, that which comes to be and passes away has no real existence. Real existence belongs only to that which does not change — spirit. Matter and spirit are really one, not two: Matter is appearance and spirit is reality, matter is manifest and spirit is unmanifest, matter is relative and spirit is absolute.

Such monistic views consider individuals and objects to be a finite manifestation of the infinite, like fleeting thoughts in the stream of consciousness, present one moment and gone the next. This is the attitude of the *via negativa*. Yet, another analogy is the ocean. Every drop of the ocean is water and in no way separate from the ocean, the drop being “in” the ocean and the ocean also “in” the drop. Paul himself seems to put forward a similar view when he quotes an unnamed Greek poet: “... Indeed he is not far from each one of us, for in Him we live, move and have our being.”¹ This is the *via positiva*, where the world itself is sacred and everything is holy. It aims not at emptiness of form, as does the *via negativa*. Rather, the *via positiva* aims at the primary qualities and attributes of being, such as peace, love, bliss and illumination. This is not *neti, neti*, but God’s immanence experienced.

According to Sufism, God has two aspects: One is sweet and beautiful, *jamal* in Arabic. The other is fiery and glorious, *jadal*. In Qabalah, this is God’s compassion and mercy (Hebrew: *chesed*) that inspires love of God and God’s justice and strength (*gevurah*) that inspires awe, the pair of “wings” that carry the soul heavenward as a “heavenly bird” flying home to its nest at the crown of the Tree of

¹ Acts 17:27-28.

Life (*etz chaim*).¹ This corresponds to Kant's distinction between the sublime and the beautiful in his writings on aesthetics.²

We generally think of God in terms of sweetness and light, but God's presence also inspires fear and awe, as William Blake observes: "The roaring of lions, the howling of wolves, the raging of the stormy sea, and the destructive sword are portions of eternity too great for the eye of man."³ Blake also saw that these positive and negative manifestations of God are paradoxical. They may seem like opposites but are actually complementary: "Joys impregnate. Sorrows bring forth."⁴

The true master is one who has realized God as one, and knows the immanent and transcendent as an indivisible whole. This implies that the spiritual knowledge the master imparts when one has ripened oneself is not an addition but a subtraction. Truth is eternal and omnipresent, and it only waits unveiling. The sun shines above the clouds, even when clouds obscure it from view, and it becomes visible again once the cloud cover lifts. But some light penetrates the clouds even when the sun is obscured, revealing that the sun is still there.

This potential for spiritual realization is within everyone: "Jesus said, 'That which you have within you will save you if you enliven it within yourselves. If you do not have it within, what you do not have within you will kill you.'"⁵ The living spirit must be enlivened in awareness through spiritual cultivation if one is to identify with the soul instead of the body. Otherwise, when the hour of death arrives, those who identify with the body will taste death as their own, while those who identify the soul as the presence of God within will gladly leave the body behind, having realized it as the waste product of a successful spiritual life, which is no longer needed.

This realization of the soul is realization of the presence of God within: "Jesus said, 'When you see the one not born of woman [the immortal soul], prostrate yourselves and worship. That is your Father.'"⁶ Here, Jesus seems to be asserting

¹ The bird's nest is said to be symbolic of "the chamber of the Messiah." Rabbi Yisrael Baal Shem Tov. "Encounter with Mashiach." Translation and commentary by Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky.

URL=<http://www.kabbalaonline.org/Chasidism/bescht/Encounter_with_Mashiach.asp>.

² Emmanuel Kant. *The Critique of Judgment*. Translated by James Creed Meredith. Public Domain, 1790.

URL=<<http://www.class.uidaho.edu/mickelsen/texts/Kant%20Crit%20Judgment.txt>>.

³ William Blake. "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, Proverbs of Hell."

⁴ *Ibid.* The complementarity of opposites is Blake's thesis in "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell."

⁵ Saying 70.

⁶ Saying 15.

that his own statement, “I and the Father are one,” is true of all who realize the spirit within. It seems that this can be taken as an assertion that it is possible to realize God while on earth in the body, because this is one’s essential nature as a spiritual being.

NONDUALITY

The Gospel of Thomas stands solidly along side the great expressions of nonduality in perennial wisdom, for example, in the works of Shankara in Vedanta, Buddha in Buddhism, Chuang Tzu in Taoism, Plotinus in Neoplatonism, Meister Eckhart in the Way of Jesus, and Ibn ‘Arabi in Sufism, to mention a few of the most prominent from representative wisdom traditions. Eastern spirituality is grounded in the tenet that only One is and the purpose of life is to realize this unity oneself in the nondual state. Judaism, Christianity and Islam are in agreement that God is one. However, in the normative religions, this is interpreted to mean that there is only one God. On the other hand, the mystical traditions at the core of these religions interpret, “God is one,” to mean that only One is. According to these mystical traditions, we are called to realize this oneness in the hearts of hearts through divine union.

That One is called *El* or *Elohim* in Hebrew, *Theos* in Greek, *Deus* in Latin, “God” in English, and *Allah* in Arabic. In addition, in the Hebrew scripture that underlies the religions of the People of the Book, God revealed his name to Moses as YHVH and *Eyehel Asher Eyehel*.¹ The Hebrew *eyehel asher eyehel* means “I will be that I will be.” The future tense is apparently idiomatic, indicating that which persists as the everlasting. It is usually rendered, “I am who am.” Subsequently, this was understood to mean that God’s essence is to exist.

Pronunciation of God’s name, which the four Hebrew letters YHVH represent, was eventually forbidden out of piety, other than once a year by the High Priest, who entered the Holy of Holies to do so. Consequently, the ancient pronunciation has been lost to view.² The origin of YHVH is also shrouded in the mists of prehistory. Some scholars think that it may be connected with the root signifying existence, but that is speculative. Some versions of the Bible translate YHVH, “I am,” which is strongly suggested by the context. It functions as a proper name rather than a common noun meaning God.

There seems to be little doubt, however, that from the mystical vantage, “God is one,” means that existence (reality) is one. To the degree that we exist, we

¹ Exodus 3: 13-15.

² There was no “v” sound in ancient Hebrew. The Romanized Jehovah is certainly incorrect. Some scholars conjecture that YHVH may have been pronounced something akin to yah-hoo-wah.

participate in that indivisible unity of Absolute Reality. Therefore, our sense of being separate is not the truth of our being. Many philosophers and theologians also agree that separation cannot be real or something would exist other than God. If this were the case, then God would be relative rather than absolute, finite rather than infinite.

The Gospel of Thomas explicitly asserts the perennial teaching of nonduality.¹ First the one becomes two, that is, the indivisible unity of existence “falls” into the duality of subject and object — the apparent difference of knower and known — in finite experience. This is the meaning of the myth of the Fall in Genesis, where Adam eats of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, symbolizing duality: “Jesus says, “When you were one, you made two.”² Then, he asks, “But having become two, what will you do?” The implication here is to reunite what is divided in order to realize the original oneness of being from which duality arose.

In the Genesis story, the tree of life stands near the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. According to Qabalah, this tree of life is the ladder of ascent the soul must mount in order to realize the nondual state, called *yechidah* in Hebrew, the essence the soul identical with God. The Hebrew term *yechidah* is from the root *echad* meaning “one,” as in *YHVH echad*, “God is one.” The Hebrew term *yachid* is from the same root and means only in the sense of being a single one. It therefore corresponds literally with Greek *monachos*. Meher Baba’s account of union illumines this level of the soul’s unity: “Union is nothing other than the knowledge of yourself as the Only One.”³

On the way of ascent there are four levels of soul, each with its corresponding level of good and evil (duality). There is neither good nor evil at the highest level. Neither are there any other opposites, at the level of *yechidah*; for God (YHVH) is indivisible Oneness. This is the mystical meaning of *YVHV echad*. The goal of mystical spirituality is to realize the unity underlying apparent duality. This is only possible by transcending duality by realizing nonduality.

Both the way of negation and the way of affirmation are found in the sayings of *The Gospel of Thomas*, where they complement each other instead of being contradictory or mutually exclusive. The way of negation (*via negativa*) denies all attributes and qualities to God whatsoever and approaching the *mysterium tremendum* through self-emptying. The way of affirmation (*via positiva*) attributes all positive values to God through analogy and supereminence.

¹ Saying 22.

² Saying 11.

³ Meher Baba. *The Everything and the Nothing*, 1. p. 9

On one hand, according to *The Gospel of Thomas* the *via negativa* is used in order to discover that all matter, including the body and entire cosmos, is “dead,” that is, has no real being outside of God. This is the way of dying to limited self in order to be born again in one’s true nature as immortal soul. On the other hand, the analogy of the kingdom points to a positive goal to be realized through one’s questing. Moreover, the kingdom is “spread out over the earth,” which seemingly contradicts the notion that the cosmos is dead.¹

Saying 56 compares the cosmos to a corpse, and Saying 80 compares it to a body. Such sayings encourage one to reject the material world as limited and wanting, and they are often taken as recommending asceticism. However, *The Gospel of Thomas* does not explicitly encourage leaving the world. The requirement for non-attachment would seemingly be met by *being in the world but not of it*. From the spiritual perspective, the important point is to detach oneself from preoccupation with worldly concerns and to transcend the world by focusing on the spiritual instead of the material, and on the unlimited instead of on the limited. It is not necessary to leave the world to do this. To the degree that one is successful in doing this, one finds the kingdom spread over the earth.

Spirit or soul is an indivisible unity, not localized by either time or space. Being formless, spirit is also not subject to change. Hence, spirit or soul is infinite, timeless, and immortal, and can be discovered as such by transcending all form. The *via negativa* seeks to transcend not only things, which change, but also concepts, which are limited by form, to discover spirit as unchanging, formless, unlimited and immortal. The *via positiva* uses symbols such as the kingdom to affirm the positive character of the goal.

Concepts are universals, in contrast to particular objects. They delineate common properties of things. Concepts also have boundaries, albeit not physical ones. The mind grasps the “intelligible form” of an object using concepts. Concepts are the universal aspects of objects known by the mind, not objects themselves. Thus, concepts “inform.”

By using concepts, the mind is able to know the intelligibility of particular things on the basis of universals, independently of their individuality. As universals rather than things, concepts do not change in themselves, although they come and go as thoughts in the mind. But, being limited by form, concepts, too, must be abandoned on the *via negativa*, which seeks the unchanging and formless spirit beyond thoughts and things, body and mind, self and world.

This is particularly important in scripture-based traditions, since it may seem that understanding the scriptures is a conceptual activity leading to theology. Moreover, it also might seem that *The Gospel of Thomas* also says that one must understand

¹ Saying 113.

the hidden teaching. However, this would be a mistake. Understanding concepts mentally can never take one beyond the mind to spirit, because concepts delineate boundaries. Even understanding concepts that point beyond boundaries, such as infinity, does not result in one's realizing infinite consciousness.

Nevertheless, understanding is necessary to appreciate any scripture, even though understanding is not the final step in comprehending its inner meaning, which requires realization of the reality behind the concept. Understanding the key concepts is necessary not only for appreciating scripture properly, as it was intended at its deepest level, but also for applying it in practice, which is required for spiritual understanding. One cannot profitably use the sayings of *The Gospel of Thomas* unless one recognizes them as signposts pointing the way.

IMAGE AND LIKENESS

The Gospel of Thomas contains a number of seemingly obscure sayings because the context of key concepts is no longer known. One of these is: "Jesus said, 'During the days you look upon *likenesses* of yourselves, you rejoice [in this sight]. But when you come to see the *image* of yourselves which preceded your birth and which neither appears nor perishes, how will you stand it?'"¹ All people are greatly attached to their phenomenal existence, which comes to be at the time of birth and passes away at the time of death, and they love to see reflections of themselves in the mirror. "During the days" indicates that this phenomenon is temporal, hence, perishable. However, if one realizes what one really *is*, beneath the appearances, how much greater will their joy be at knowing oneself as Eternal Reality.

A reflection in a mirror is a symbol of both duality and appearance, which characterizes the duality of subject and object of ordinary awareness. The contrasting "image" of oneself as unborn, immortal and unmanifest is the self-knowledge of the unitary, undivided Self in which existence and knowledge are identical. The "mirror" is the reflexive nature of consciousness, through which self-knowledge is possible. In full self-knowingness, reflexive knowledge is a "mirror image" of existence, knowledge and existence being identical in pure consciousness.

The Coptic *eine* in Saying 84, meaning "likeness," is based on a root that appears many times in the sayings of *Thomas* with the meaning "like." The term *eikon* signifies "exactly like." In its technical use it implies an identical image. Paul calls Christ an "image (*eikon*) of God."² The English word "icon," imported from Greek *eikon*, has acquired different connotations, so it would not be an accurate rendering in this context.

¹ Saying 84.

² 2 Corinthians 4:4.

The idea here is that the image is identical with the original, whereas a likeness is not. For example, God's knowledge is identical with God. In this sense God the Son as God's self-knowledge is the "image" of God the Father as God's self-existence. The image is spiritual, the likeness material. Art can imitate but not completely capture the nature of its object. The measure of the artist is how much of the nature of the object he can capture in the work. The Creator, the supreme artist, captures nature completely in the image, which is spiritual, but not in the likeness, which is material. This is not due to any limitation on the artist's part. Rather, it is due entirely to the limitations of the medium.

Some scholars have located the distinction between temporal likeness and eternal image infiltrating due to Gnostic or Platonic influence.¹ Other scholars observe that it is more likely based on the Genesis saying that God created Adam in His own "image and likeness."² Owing to the importance of this saying, it is germane to this investigation to consider these alternatives in some detail, while recognizing that they are not mutually exclusive and both may play a role.

Those holding that *The Gospel of Thomas* evinces Gnostic influences with Platonic overtones argue that it is a later work, perhaps second century, rather than an initial contribution to the early Jesus tradition. Therefore, they see it as peppered with such Hellenistic influences, even though it may not be a Gnostic text *per se*.

Consequently, they see the notions of likeness and image more in terms of the Platonic concept that the things of this visible world are likenesses, appearances of shadows of the eternal forms (Greek: *idea*) of a higher realm, instead of relating it chiefly to Genesis 1:26.

Plato's account of creation through the divine "reflecting" on itself in *Timaeus* developed this notion.³ Subsequently, Philo of Alexandria, a Hellenistic Jew, adopted this view and connected it with the image of God in which man is created, according to the Book of Genesis. Philo held that this accounts for man's potential to know God, setting the stage for Neoplatonism.⁴

Augustine, who had been a Neo-Platonist, further developed this notion of the divine ideas as invariant patterns in terms of which God creates. These divine ideas

¹ Robert Funk. *The Five Gospels*. , p. 518.

² Genesis 1: 26. The Hebrew term *adam* means man. Robert McLachan Wilson., *Studies in the Gospel of Thomas*. (London: A. & R. Mowbray, 1960).

³ Plato. *Timaeus*. 28a-29a.

⁴ Philo of Alexandria, is also called Philo Judeus (also Judaeus). See Masanobu Endo, "Abstract: Philo's Logos." For references to Philo's works and the Platonic and Hebrew sources on which Philo commented, see: URL=<http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/~www_sd/med_logos.html?>.

are only discrete in our way of thinking, since God is indivisibly one. We cannot comprehend how the divine mind actually functions, so we model it intellectually in terms of our way of thinking. However, this is only a weak analogy. But to say that man is created in the “image” of God means that humanity is essentially linked to divinity, since there is no division in God or His ideas. To say that man is a child of God is a way of asserting that humans are spiritual beings. As such, instead of being creatures inherently separate from their Creator they are heirs to all that is the Father’s.¹

In the early Jesus tradition, both Paul’s speech to the Athenians and the prologue to John’s gospel reflect these notions.² Therefore, it is hardly surprising to see them in *The Gospel of Thomas* also. Their existence in *Thomas* does not show that *Thomas* is therefore a later work.

Most interesting, however, is the fact that this notion is widespread in ancient times. The Greek word *idea*, meaning form, invariant pattern, or eternal archetype, comes from the Sanskrit root, *vid*, which can mean both to see and to know. *Vid* is the root of *vidya* and *veda*, both meaning knowledge in the supreme degree. In the Vedic tradition they are technical terms for supreme knowledge as knowledge of the One, realized in the nondual state.

In knowledge of the One, differences arise only when this indivisible Oneness apparently breaks its unity by knowing itself as finite. Then Absolute Knowledge, in which name and form are identical, bifurcates into the duality of subject and object, mind and world, meaning and reference.

Mind is the subjective pole. The world of facts is the objective pole. Name is the subjective element. Form is its objective counterpart. According to the ancient “Idealistic” accounts, forms can be known only because of the correspondence of subjective and objective in the “ground state” of pure consciousness, where existence and knowledge are identical. Idea and reality are one and indivisible. While there is no historical evidence of the diffusion of the Vedic notion of the ultimate identity of name and form, called *namarupa* in Sanskrit, its notions are comparable with those of ancient Greece, elaborated by Plato and further articulated

¹ Ronald H. Nash. *The Light of the Mind: St. Augustine's Theory of Knowledge*. (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1969). Objecting to Vero in *On the City of God*, XIX, Augustine denies that man can attain his ultimate purpose in this life, the Beatific Vision. However, his theory of knowledge does suggest that direct acquaintance with God is possible while in the body, and scholars find Augustine’s work ambiguous on this point. Nevertheless, Augustine was aware of the work of Neoplatonic philosophers like Plotinus and presented a Christian understanding that would avoid Pagan errors, including full mystical knowledge of God here.

² Acts 17: 22-28; John 1: 1-5.

by the Neoplatonists. Augustine later brought this view into Christian theology, although the ground had already been prepared for this.

Even if some geographical diffusion of ideas were to be shown, *namarupa* remains a theoretical concept until it is realized. Since it is of the very structure of consciousness according to the Vedic tradition, could it be that others realized this independently of the diffusion of ideas? Given the ubiquity of mystical reports involving nonduality, it would seem quite plausible.

Whatever its origin among the ancient Hebrews, a similar notion is found in Genesis. This concept has been developed in detail in Jewish mysticism. While the written texts are fairly recent in comparison, they claim to be based on ancient wisdom. If this is tenable, then there is no need to look beyond the existing tradition of Jewish mysticism to account for “image and likeness” as it was used in *The Gospel of Thomas*. Thus, it may be objected that there is no need to posit Hellenistic influences in *Thomas* when existing ideas in the prevailing Jewish mysticism would account for the saying as well or better.

The *Gospel of Thomas* shows unmistakable signs of familiarity of deep knowledge of the Hebrew tradition, as well as Jewish practice. Adam is mentioned several times, John the Baptist, reputed to be the Master of Jesus, is given a prominent place, and James the Just (*Yakov haTzadik*), “the brother of the Lord,” is exalted as the leader of the community of Jesus’ followers, suggesting that the Jerusalem Church was still the primary sea.¹ Moreover, the twenty-four prophets of Israel are also mentioned.² Additionally, circumcision is an issue, which was of concern to Jews because of the covenant God made with Abraham.³ But it was not an issue with Hellenistic Gentiles after even James agreed with Paul that it did not apply to them.⁴

While it cannot be shown conclusively that either the author of *The Gospel of Thomas* or the community for which it was written was acquainted with the details of the Hebrew tradition and its mystical interpretation, it seems as likely that this was the antecedent for allusions such as the contrasting of “image” and “likeness” as Hellenistic influences. Or, it could have been both, since both were current.

Whatever the historical case may have been, the Hebrew mystical tradition illumines Saying 84, and it does so in terms of perennial wisdom. Let us see how.

The Hebrew mystical tradition is similar to other ancient wisdom traditions in its view that the ancient scriptures were indeed “revelations,” that is, the expression of

¹ Saying 12, 46, 85, 106.

² Saying 52.

³ Saying 53. Genesis 17: 10-14.

⁴ Acts 15: 1-30.

prophets and seers. The Greek root of “prophet” literally means “one who speaks for.” In ancient times, prophets were regarded as speaking for the deity. In the Vedic tradition, these sages, called *rishis* in Sanskrit, were taken to be “seers” of the invisible reality.¹ Hence, it was held that every verse, every word and every syllable is charged with not only supramental significance but also spiritual power.

To many reading Genesis today, the repetition of “image” and “likeness” in the phrase “in the image and likeness of God” may seem to be redundant, perhaps a poetic flourish. However, prophets and seers choose their words carefully, in the sense, that each syllable is reflective of eternal Truth. In the worlds of a verse of *Rig Veda*:

The verses (expressing pure knowledge) are of that which does not change, in the Transcendent, where the universal forces reside. What can these verses do for one who has not realized this [level]? Those who have realized it are established in its wholeness.²

The term that is rendered as “universal forces” is *deva*, usually translated as “gods.” This misses the point, however. These *devas* are impulses of creative intelligence and as such are powers of the Absolute, which is an indivisible unity. They can be compared to the waves arising in a force field or in the ocean, and they do not exist independently of their ground.

The comparable Hebrew term is *elohim*. *Elohim* is a plural form of *El*, meaning God. Genesis reads, “In the beginning, *Elohim* (plural) created (singular) the heavens and the earth”³ Hebrew mysticism interprets the plural *Elohim* as God’s powers, which are not different from Him; hence, the verb “created” is singular.

Qabalah interprets these powers in terms of the ten Sefiroth of the Tree of Life. The ten Sefiroth are “names” of God, revealing aspects of God’s intelligibility and power as creative intelligence. These “names” are aspects of the creative “word” which God “speaks” to manifest this intelligibility. From the viewpoint of creation, the Sefiroth epitomize the inherent intelligibility of infinite intelligence.

¹ The Sanskrit term *rishi* means “seer.”

² *richo akshare parame vyoman
yasmin deva adhi vishve nisheduh,
yastanna veda kim richa karishyati
ya ittad vidus ta ime samasate.*

(*Rig Veda*, 1.164.39). Rendered by the author.

³ Genesis 1:1.

LEVELS

Ancient mystical traditions such as the Hebrew and the Vedic held that the prophets and seers are directly acquainted with this level and speak from it. Since their speech is structured in the Transcendent, it must be stepped down so that it can be appreciated at grosser levels. Therefore, there is a level of meaning corresponding to the various levels. The speech of the seers and prophets is literally “the word of God” at the level of the Transcendent. But it appears through grosser and grosser shadows at lower levels, when known by grosser levels of awareness. At the gross level of ordinary awareness the kernel is still there, but the husk encasing it is thick.

In the Vedic tradition, there are four levels of “word” or intelligibility (Sanskrit: *nama*) with corresponding levels of form (*rupa*) and world (*loka*):

- *Vaikhari*, or the written and spoken level of gross intelligibility, corresponds to the gross world (*sthula loka*).
- *Madhyama*, or the middle level of subtle intelligibility, corresponds to subtle world (*sukshma loka*)
- *Pashyanti*, or the celestial level of intelligibility, corresponds to causal world (*karana loka*).
- *Para*, or the transcendental level of pure intelligibility in which name is identical with form (*namarupa*), corresponds to Pure Knowledge (*veda*) as identical with Ultimate Reality (*brahman*).¹

The Kabbalistic equivalences of these are:

- *Peshat* corresponds to the world of action (*olam ha asiyah*).
- *Remez* corresponds to the world of formation (*olam ha yetzirah*).
- *Derash* corresponds to the world of creation (*olam ha buriyah*).
- *Sod*, corresponding to the world of emanation (*olam ha atziluth*).²

According to Chaim Vital the literal or contextual meaning of Hebrew Scripture is the level of *peshat*. Mishnah gives the sages’ interpretation from the level of

¹ Ananda Wood. Bhartrhari’s *Vakyapadiya* — some excerpts, 1.142. Pune, n.d.
URL=< <http://www.advaitin.net/Ananda/VakyapadiyaExcerpts.pdf>>.

² Elliot R. Wolfson. “Responses to Shaul Magid’s ‘From Theosophy to Midrash, Lurianic Exegesis on Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden’” (published in Network 4.2). Kabbalah and Postmodern Jewish Philosophy. The Postmodern Jewish Philosophy Network. Volume 4, Number 3, September, 1995. Published in *The Journal of Textual Reasoning*. Vol. 5, September, 1995.
URL=<http://etext.virginia.edu/journals/tr/archive/pmjp/pmjp4_3.html>.

remez. Talmud gives the sages' interpretation from the level of *derash*, and Qabalah is the mystical viewpoint from the level of *sod*.¹

This is reflected in Augustine's fourfold division that became the standard for scriptural exegesis, which was followed by Medieval Scholastics including the influential Thomas Aquinas:

- literal/historical,
- moral/tropological,
- allegorical/analogical,
- etiological/anagogical.²

There are three levels of appearance, or manifest "worlds," that comprise the finite dimension of the relative "creation." What dualists call "creation" is really manifestation from the vantage of unity. Creation implies something separate from

¹ Wolfson. "Responses." Prof. Wolfson observes, "Elsewhere Vital explicitly correlates the four worlds of Emanation ('atzilut), Creation (beri'ah), Formation (yetzirah), and Making ('asiyyah), with the four subjects of Kabbalah, Talmud, Mishnah, and Scripture. The correspondence between the worlds and these texts is not merely theoretical. On the contrary, by reciting the appropriate text the soul is said to be bound to the corresponding world.[2] According to another tradition of Vital, the four levels of meaning, *peshat*, *remez*, *derash*, and *sod*, alluded to in the acronym *pardes*,[3] correspond to the four worlds. Hence, the masters of Scripture correspond to the world of 'asiyyah, the masters of *Mishnah* to the world of *yetzirah*, the masters of Talmud to the world of *beri'ah*, and the masters of *kabbalah* to the world of 'atzilut.[4] In slightly different terms this tradition is reported in the name of Vital by Soliman ibn Ohana, the Torah in the world of Making is disseminated[5] by way of *peshat*, in the world of Formation by way of *remez*, in the world of Creation by way of *derash*, and in the world of Emanation by way of *sod*. [6] Just as the four worlds are occasionally described by Vital (reflecting earlier sources) in a Neoplatonic fashion as the progressive concealment or garbing of the divine light, so the different layers of meaning in the text may be seen in this manner.[7] In the sphere of emanation the Torah is called *kabbalah* for there is nothing but pure interiority, the esoteric meaning related exclusively to the dynamic processes of the Godhead. If I understand Magid correctly, it is to this phenomenon that he refers to redeeming Scripture from its own symbolic garb. The "symbolic garb," which is the external garment of the *peshat*, consists of the historical narratives and the cultic rituals from which Scripture is liberated." Chaim Vital was a student of Rabbi Yitzhak Luria, called "the Lion," or *Ha Ari* in Hebrew. Luria, one of the most influential Qabalists, taught privately and wrote nothing, so his teaching is only known through Vital.

² Saint Augustine. *On Genesis: Two Books on Genesis against the Manichees; And, on the Literal Interpretation of Genesis, an Unfinished Book* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1990) p. 147.
 Questia, URL=<<http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=101602910>>. 17 March 2007.

the Creator, but if the creation is actually separate from God, then God is relative to the creation and not absolute. This cannot be. Creation appears to be separate only from the vantage of the manifest, the finite. In terms of the infinite, the creation is never separate, just as the sun's rays are never separate from the sun, no matter how far they travel. It only seems separate when Absolute Knowledge of Infinite Consciousness is reflected in a finite mind. Then, Absolute Reality appears as limited.

When Infinite Consciousness knows itself, it knows the full range, infinite and finite, eternal and temporal, formless and informed, boundless and bounded, absolute and relative, unchanging and changing, and so forth. Knowing itself as infinite, Infinite Consciousness is one and indivisible, "absolute." This is the knowledge, "I am." When Infinite Consciousness knows itself as finite, it says: "I don't know who I am." This prompts the question, "Who am I?"¹ This is the birth of the soul as apparently separate from God. The spiritual journey of the soul is an ongoing search for the ultimate answer to the original question. As long as the soul does not know its true nature, it remains in spiritual ignorance.

In this state of searching, the soul identifies itself with a form and explores the possibilities of that form until it is satisfied, "I am not this." Then it moves on to another form, until the soul finally comprehends that no form is capable of containing the infinite that it really is. Along the way, however, the soul explores the possibilities of innumerable forms of many different levels.

Corresponding to these levels of experience and knowledge are different "worlds," as well as different levels of meaning. These levels of meaning bridge the gap between subject and object, providing for knowledge at each level in which name and form are linked. They can be so linked in truth, not merely nominally, because name and form are identical at the level of wholeness. The accounts of the Vedic tradition, Qabalah, Western esotericism, and Sufism are comparable to each other in striking ways.

According to all these mystical traditions, because Absolute Reality is one and indivisible the manifest "manyness" is but the expression of unmanifest unity, and diversity is an illusion arising from ignorance. Ignorance is engendered in a finite mind, which sees only partially and takes this partial vision for reality itself. Although there appear to be many minds, there is in reality only one Soul, or Self, illuminating them. In the words of Meher Baba, "The only Real Existence is that of the one and only God who is the Self in every finite self."²

¹ Meher Baba. *The Everything and the Nothing*, 47. , p. 49

² Meher Baba. *Discourses*. 7th revised edition, p. 1

When the veils of limitation are removed, then the soul sees with the infinite eye of spirit. There are seven veils on the soul, the veil of gross consciousness, and the six veils of the ascending inner planes. At the moment of realization, the soul is unveiled and sees itself as it really is.¹

The gross level corresponds to gross consciousness, knowing the gross world through the gross body. Meaning at this level is also through gross speech. The first three inner planes comprise the subtle level. The subtle level corresponds to subtle consciousness, knowing the subtle world through the subtle body. Meaning at this level is also subtle. The fourth plane is at the threshold between the subtle and mental/causal levels. The mental/causal level corresponds to mental consciousness, knowing the causal world through the mental/causal body. Meaning at this level is also mental/causal.

Finally, the seventh plane is the level of realization of wholeness, the Absolute. The Soul or Self knows itself as the sole reality. Meaning at this level is an indivisible unity of name and form in Absolute Knowledge. Since the Soul or Self is the only reality, there is no separation of existence and knowledge. The Soul or Self knows all there is to know by being all there is.

According to Qabalah, the inner meaning of “image and likeness” in Genesis reflects this mystical wisdom. The “image” is the reality of the soul, identical with God. Qabalah calls this *yechidah*, which, as we have seen, is the same as *monachos*. Both mean unified, undivided, singular. In the Vedic tradition, this is the Self, *atma* in Sanskrit, which is identical with God, literally the Supreme Self, *paramatma*. When the individualized, limited self, called *jivatma* in Sanskrit, realizes its true nature as universal, unlimited self, this is called the God-Self, or *shivatma*. In Sufism, soul is *nafs* in Arabic, *jan* in Persian. When the limited self is annihilated in God, *fana fillah* in Arabic, one is said to be a *majzoob*. At this level, soul is unified and undivided, a singularity whose intrinsic symmetry is unbroken eternally.

Soul and Self imply individuality. The nondual Self is the universal individual, the Supreme Person who knows, “*I alone am.*” When manifestation takes place in the expression of the absolute knowledge of infinite consciousness as knowledge of the finite, the nondual Self appears as a limited self, knowing a correspondingly limited world. Thus, the nondual Self appears as the limited, embodied individual in a world constituted of diverse phenomena.

The embodied soul manifesting as a limited individual identifies itself with a phenomenal form and thinks, “*I am this,*” and “*I have such and such attributes and properties.*” However, throughout this period of innumerable finite experiences over the full range of opposites, the individual remains Universal Self in reality, only

¹ This is the mystical meaning of “the dance of seven veils” and “the naked truth.” Ironically, this dance is traditionally associated with Herod and Salome. Matthew 14: 6

taking itself as limited for the grand purpose of expressing absolute knowledge in the finite under the guise of duality. For if the infinite did not comprehend the finite, infinite consciousness would not be all-inclusive.

In the course of the soul's expression across the full range of the finite through dualistic experiences, there are three levels of embodied soul, corresponding to the gross, subtle and causal dimensions of manifestation. These have been called the "shadows" of the Real Soul in the three worlds, as well as its "reflections" in a finite mind. This is also the "likeness of Gods" in Genesis.

First, the embodied soul as the "likeness" of God sets about exploring the full range of the finite by identifying itself with various forms, "descending" through the causal and then through the subtle to the gross. After identifying with innumerable forms in the mineral, vegetable and animal kingdoms, the soul finally identifies with a human form. In the first human form, the embodied soul has fully evolved in that it has fully developed gross, subtle and mental "bodies."

Because the process of evolution has resulted in full consciousness, evolution is complete and no further evolution of consciousness is possible. In the first human form, consciousness is fully developed, hence, is capable of realizing Oneness. However, the soul does not immediately *realize* full consciousness, because its inner vision remains obscured by the myriad impressions accumulated during the long process of evolution to the human form. While full consciousness has developed over the course of evolution to the human form, the awareness of full consciousness has not yet dawned in the first human form, and it will take many more lifetimes to unfold. This begins with the cycle of reincarnation that prepares the way for eventual involution and realization.

Although the process of evolution of consciousness is now complete, the soul embodied in human form remains veiled by the impressions gathered in the course of its evolution to the human form. These impressions stored in the mental body act as a curtain concealing the nature of the soul from itself. Further development is therefore concerned with attenuating the effects of the accumulated impressions. The veil they draw across the inner vision must be drawn back for the soul to know its own nature.¹

Thus, with the culmination of the process of evolution, the dynamic shifts to removing the veil of impressions. According to Saying 5, "There is nothing concealed that will not be revealed." This unveiling is the work of the spiritual quest that begins with the first human life, although initially it is an unconscious process that will take many reincarnations to make conscious. Finally, the soul awakens from its unconscious slumber and consciously undertakes its spiritual

¹ Meher Baba. *Discourses*, 7th revised edition, p. 32-60, 301-338.

questing. This is the cycle of involution, through which the accumulated impressions binding the soul get unwound.

Through the process of spiritual living stretching across many human lifetimes, the soul finally enters the spiritual path and begins to unwind these accumulated impressions. As the impressions are unwound, the soul ceases to identify itself with a gross body and identifies itself, first, with a subtle body and then with a causal body. Each of these steps is an expansion of awareness of the full consciousness the soul already has available in the human form. Each of these levels preceding realization is a likeness of God rather than an image. Even the level of soul that sees God but has not yet realized God is still not completely unified. It is also a likeness, albeit a highly refined one.

All of us who are not fully enlightened — and it is the very rare one who is — are somewhere on the journey where Jesus' assertion applies: 'During the days you look upon likenesses of yourselves, you rejoice [in this sight].'¹ All who are not truly humble love themselves in terms of body, mind and individual personality, instead of loving themselves for what they really are — spirit.

This identification with a likeness rather than an identical image is called "the mistake of the intellect," or *prajna parad* in Sanskrit. This error is characteristic of spiritual ignorance, or *avidya* — not knowing who and what one really *is*. When that ignorance is removed, then knowledge — gnosis, *jnana*, or *vidya* — shines forth. This is to identify with the "image" rather than the "likeness," the reality instead of the appearance.

When the drop realizes that it is actually the entire ocean, it is a momentous event, concerning which Jesus observes: "But when you come to see the image of yourselves which preceded your birth and which neither appears nor perishes, how will you stand it?"²

PAUPER OR KING

According to Saying 3, one who has not yet realized the absolute unity of the nondual state is not only incomplete by being divided within oneself, but one is also caught in the poverty of spiritual ignorance. Moreover, one takes oneself to *be* that poverty. These are obviously strong words, designed to get attention.

According to Saying 22, the spiritual quest seeks the unity underlying apparent diversity of opposites:

Jesus saw some infants being nursed. He said to his disciples, 'These little children nursing are like unto the kingdom of heaven.' They said to

¹ Saying 84.

² Saying 84.

him, ‘Will we enter the kingdom by being as little children?’ Jesus said to them, ‘When you make the two one, and the inner as the outer and the outer as the inner, and the above as the below, and when you make the male and the female the same, so the male be not male nor the female, ... then you will enter [the kingdom].’

In the world’s spiritual literature, the soul’s plight is compared with a king who dreams he is wandering as a pauper. But when he wakes up he realizes that it was just a dream. The moral of the story is that the soul in ignorance is “dreaming” that it is limited, whereas in reality it is Absolute Reality.

Here the kingdom is identified with realization of the unitary, nondual state, in which what had been perceived as divided is unified. The embodied soul, which had taken itself to be two, divided within, with subject and object seemingly separate, is now unified in the realization of ultimate Truth. The apparent poverty has become the greatest treasure.

Entering the kingdom requires transcending all duality: “When you make the two one, and the inner as the outer and the outer as the inner, and the above as the below,” signifies the overcoming of the duality of apparent opposites, which are seemingly separate from each other, spiritual-material, subject-object, experience-world, mind-contents, knowledge-reality, self-other, God-soul, and so on.

“When you make the male and the female the same, so the male be not male nor the female,” refers to the divine union of the soul and God. This is a common metaphor in perennial wisdom, and it is a favorite of Christian mystics as well. It is an allusion to the sacred marriage suggested by the *monachos* entering bridal chamber.¹ In the consummation of the sacred marriage, there is no longer lover and Beloved, soul and God, or any distinction whatsoever. Pure spirit is neither male nor female. Muhyiddin ibn ‘Arabi sets this forth most poignant in *The Alchemical Marriage of Intellect and Soul*.²

SON OF MAN

Only when the dichotomy of subject and object is transcended will one emerge perfected as a human being. Then, one will become a “son of man,” the phrase that Jesus characteristically applied to himself.³ Through this, one will also gain

¹ Saying 75.

² Muhyiddin ibn ‘Arabi. *The Alchemical Marriage of Intellect and Soul*. Translated by Gerald Ellmore. URL=<<http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/ellmore.html>>.

³ In Saying 3, Jesus asserted that when one comes to know oneself, one will know that one is the son of the living Father.

omnipotence: “Jesus said, ‘When you make the two one, you will become sons of man, and when you say, “Mountain, move away,” it will move away.’”¹

There is no agreement among scholars on the meaning of the biblical expression, “the son of man.” However, in the canonical gospels Jesus frequently applies this phrase to himself. Here the same term seem to be extended to those who realize the nondual state by unifying the two and becoming undivided.

Perhaps Jesus used the term because of its ambiguity. It seems clear that he did not wish to state publicly that he was the expected Messiah, at least until the circumstances were right. “Son of man” was an expression used colloquially in Jesus’ time to mean something like “a guy.” It would have been a way of designating himself instead of using a personal pronoun like “I” or “me.” Its use would give emphasis, as today one might say “this guy” instead of “I” in order to reinforce a point. At the same time, Daniel the prophet also used it to refer to the one to come who would deliver Israel from its plight. It is possible Jesus played on this ambiguity to conceal his identity, while also hinting at it.

The prophet Daniel used the expression, “son of man,” in reporting his vision, which was widely understood to be about the immanent advent of the Messiah who would deliver his people from their oppression and exalt them over nations.² The Jewish people who were Jesus’ audience would have been quite familiar with the expression “son of man” in the context of Daniel’s prophecy. Yet, Jesus could reasonably be understood to use the expression simply as a matter of emphasis. This interpretation seems all the more likely in light of Jesus’ public ambiguity about his status and mission as messiah.

In Saying 106, “sons of man” is connected directly with transcending duality, and the power that arises therefrom. This seems to indicate that it is to be taken in the sense of Daniel’s prophecy, and it implies that one will accede to Jesus’ own state. Other statements attributed to Jesus in *The Gospel of Thomas* on unification corroborate this interpretation that he would make others like himself.³

When the limited self is extinguished through self-effacement and grace, then the Universal Self is realized while in the body, perfection is gained, and one’s full potential as a human being is reached. According to perennial wisdom, the “perfect human” is one who has realized the God-Self in this life. In the Vedic tradition, this is the one liberated in this life, *jivan mukta* in Sanskrit, also called God-Self, *shivatma*. In Sufism, it is “the Perfect Man,” *insan-e-kamil* or *al insan al kamil* in

¹ Saying 106.

² Daniel 7: 14.

³ Sayings 17, 23, 49, 62, 108.

Arabic.¹ In Hasidic Qabalah the Baal Shem Tov is reputed to have said that the soul has “a spark of the Messiah” placed in it.² Jesus said, “If you would be perfect, ... come follow me.”³ Saying 106 can be read as also stating this.

Saying 106, “When you make the two one, you will become sons of man, and when you say, “Mountain, move away,” it will move away,” is replicated in slightly different words in Saying 48: “Jesus said, ‘If two make peace with each other in a single house, they will say to the mountain, “Move from here!” and it will move.’” Moving mountains does not seem to be intended literally or limited to this feat alone. Rather, it seems to be symbolic of supernormal powers in general.

MOVING MOUNTAINS

So-called miracles have been attributed to spiritually advanced souls of all traditions. Indeed, the third section of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* is devoted to supernormal powers. The term for such powers is *siddhi* in Sanskrit. *Siddhi* literally means accomplishment or perfection. But according to perennial wisdom, those who acquire such powers on the path must also face the challenges that they present to one's progress. For those who have not yet transcended attachment, nonattachment to powers is a necessity.⁴ Those who seriously misuse them risk spiritual ruin.⁵ If one desires the powers, one has a problem. Should they come unbidden, they must be used only for good, or not at all.

The acquisition of spiritual powers may also be implied in Saying 2, where it is said that one who truly “realizes” the import of the sayings of *The Gospel of Thomas* in the spiritual sense will “rule” over all. It is a fact of history that saints and sages are reported to have had various supernormal powers, and this includes many Christian saints as well.

¹ ‘Abd al-Karim al-Jili. *Universal Man: Extracts Translated with Commentary by Titus Burckhart*. Translated by Angela Culme-Seymour. (Roxburgh, Scotland: Beshara Publications, 1983).

² *Baal Shem Tov* means master of the good name in Hebrew. It is an honorific title given to Rabbi Yisrael Ben Eliezer, founder Hasidism (also transliterated “Chasidism”). “Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov, founder of the chassidic movement, taught that at the core of each and every individual soul lies a spark of the soul of Moshiach [the Messiah]: when a person develops the Divine goodness that is the quintessence of his own being, he realizes his individual “Moshiach” and brings about a state of redemption in his personal universe.” Quoted in *Meor Einayim*, end of *Parshat Pinchas*. Yanki Tauber. “The Gold behind the Stove: A Story with a Lesson.” [URL=<http://moshiach.com/discover/index.php>](http://moshiach.com/discover/index.php).

³ Matthew 19:21.

⁴ Patanjali, *Yoga Sutras* 3.50.

⁵ Meher Baba. *God Speaks*. p. 64.

According to perennial wisdom, spiritual adepts traversing the subtle world consciously acquire extraordinary powers. At the apex are those who have reached perfection by realizing God while in the body, maintaining full consciousness of creation. Since these perfect ones embody God, they possess the divine attributes, omnipresence, omniscient and omnipotence.

The question naturally arises as to why these spiritual giants, wielding such extraordinary knowledge and power, do not in their compassion right all wrongs and remove all sufferings. The answer given is that if God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good, then everything must already be perfect the way it is. We who stand on this side cannot see this owing to our limited vision, further blinded by our limited concept of self-interest. We often do not like the doctor's prescription because we see the pain, suffering, and other "negative" experiences associated with it. Like children, we fail to see that bitter medicine, and sometimes even the surgeon's knife, is needed to reverse a serious condition.

From the broadest perspective, this entire universe exists for only one purpose, the realization of God by the beings in it. Therefore, everything is always perfectly organized by infinite intelligence to promote this in the best possible way. Every being is always being presented with exactly what it needs to take the next step forward. This is the inner meaning of "Divine Providence" in the Way of Jesus, and Jesus alludes to it in the well-known passage on the birds of the air and the lilies of the field.¹

The theme of creation is the expression of Absolute Knowledge, whose full range encompasses the finite as included in the Infinite. Thus, the Infinite apparently "breaks its symmetry" in order to express itself as finite. However, limitation is foreign to Truth, and within all is the seed of Infinity, called in the Way of Jesus, the Holy Spirit or the Spirit of Truth. This seed must sprout and grow as the ladder of ascent that leads the embodied soul to discover its true nature as unlimited. On the way to this realization, the full range of the finite is explored, only to be rejected when found wanting.

The full range of the finite includes all types of opposite qualities, which are explored through opposite categories of experience. So sometimes the soul identifies with a male body and at other times with a female one, sometimes with a strong and healthy body and sometimes with a deformed or afflicted one, and so forth. Even in a single lifetime, experiences shift as the wheel turns, alternating between wealth and poverty, health and sickness, pleasure and pain, happiness and suffering, joy and grief, and so on.

This is all due the soul's dominant desire for abiding fulfillment, drawing it toward the only state that can fully and finally satisfy its primary motivation, God-

¹ Matthew 6: 27-29.

Realization. Impelled by this desire, the soul seeks out the next appropriate experience as determined by its previous impressions. However, this is not as much a reaction to the past as a requirement for the future. While the law of action and consequence (Sanskrit: *karma*) is inexorable unless changed by grace, the pull of the goal is the determining factor for the soul.

Knowing this internal dynamic of creation, the Perfect do not interfere with it themselves, even when they perform miracles which change the course of events. Moreover, others with powers are not authorized to use them indiscriminately.¹

In Absolute Reality there are no miracles, for there is no real change. The tree remains the same but its shadow changes with the angle of the sun as it moves through the sky. From the vantage of the manifest, the two “miracles” are those of creation and realization, the “birth” of limited individuality and its “death” in the realization of Truth. Limited minds project the gross, subtle and causal worlds, seeing only partially, “through a glass darkly,” in the reflected light of the self-effulgent Sun.² This is the inner meaning of knowing one’s true nature prior to one’s birth and after one’s death.³

PURIFICATION, ILLUMINATION, UNIFICATION

The question naturally arises: How? According to the *Mystical Theology* of Pseudo-Dionysius, this involves a three-fold process: 1) purification (Latin: *purgatio*), 2) illumination (*illuminatio*), and 3) unification (*unitio*) — also called perfection (*perfectio*) and or consummation (*consummatio*).⁴

This tripartite unfolding begins with self-effort, although one discovers that one is also guided by the Holy Spirit, matures in finding the divine immanence through peace, light and love, and culminates in the grace of divine union. This teaching is quite different from the faith-alone school that minimizes the need for works. Here, one must work out one’s own salvation. In order to realize one’s unlimited potential as a spiritual being, one must do one’s best to remove the veils (purification) in order to be able see the light (illumination) and realize Truth (divine union). Buddha, too, is reported to have said at the time of his passing, “Be lamps unto

¹ Meher Baba sets forth this theme of creation and its internal dynamics in *God Speaks*. See Appendix Two: Meher Baba on the ten States of God.

² I Corinthians 13: 11-13. King James Version.

³ Sayings 11, 15, 17-19, 29, 49, 59-61, 70, 84, 87, 106, and 112 are all elaborations of this point.

⁴ Pseudo-Dionysius. The works attribute to Dionysius the Aeropagite, associated with Paul (Acts 17: 34), are pseudepigraphia, apparently the work of three anonymous contributors, now called “Pseudo-Dionysius,” who are still not positively identified.

yourselves,” and emphasized the need to exert oneself.¹ Yet, even when masters depart this earthly life, they leave their teaching behind. They also watch over all who take up these teachings, ready to impart their grace at the appropriate moment. Jesus is no exception, as the continuing stream of Christian mystics and saints goes to show.

The desert monks developed this “mystical theology,” as it came to be called, on the basis of their experience. “Mystical theology” is now archaic, and no longer retains its original sense, which was descriptive of practice not what we now call “theology.” Today, we would simply say “the spiritual life,” or “mystical spirituality.”

St. John Cassian (360-435) is one of the early Fathers who formulated these concepts for teaching and guidance. The mystical theology of Pseudo-Dionysius spread them. In the 13th century Bernard of Clairvaux and Bonaventure reinforced them in their writings and now they are pillars of both Catholic and Orthodox spirituality, although interpreted somewhat differently.

¹ Paul Carus. "The Buddha's Farewell." *Buddha, The Gospel*. (Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1894).

URL=<<http://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/btg/btg94.htm>>. Public Domain.

There is some controversy over what Buddha actually meant. Here is the full context of Buddha's statement: "Therefore, O Ananda, be ye lamps unto yourselves. Rely on yourselves, and do not rely on external help. Hold fast to the truth as a lamp. Seek salvation alone in the truth. Look not for assistance to any one besides yourselves.

"And how, Ananda, can a brother be a lamp unto himself, rely on himself only and not on any external help, holding fast to the truth as his lamp and seeking salvation in the truth alone, looking not for assistance to any one besides himself? Herein, O Ananda, let a brother, as he dwells in the body, so regard the body that he, being strenuous, thoughtful, and mindful, may, whilst in the world, overcome the grief which arises from the body's cravings. While subject to sensations let him continue so to regard the sensations that he, being strenuous, thoughtful, and mindful, may, whilst in the world, overcome the grief which arises from the sensations. And so, also, when he thinks or reasons, or feels, let him so regard his thoughts that being strenuous, thoughtful and mindful he may, whilst in the world, overcome the grief which arises from the craving due to ideas, or to reasoning, or to feeling.

"Those who, either now or after I am dead, shall be lamps unto themselves, relying upon themselves only and not relying upon any external help, but holding fast to the truth as their lamp, and seeking their salvation in the truth alone, and shall not look for assistance to any one besides themselves, it is they, Ananda, among my bhikkhus, who shall reach the very topmost height! But they must be anxious to learn."

Will Graham suggests also seeing *Dhammapada* 20 (276).

Martin Luther also read Pseudo-Dionysius, but his interpretation diverged from traditional apophatic mysticism, shunting Protestantism in different direction. That, together with the *sola scriptura* doctrine, deflected Protestant interest in mysticism and made it suspect, since the mystical path is based on tradition instead of scripture. Moreover, Protestantism rejected monasticism, and it has been largely within monasticism that Christian mystics have flourished. Nevertheless, Luther is reported to have said that *Theologica Germanica*, deeply mystical work, influenced him more deeply than anything except the Bible and Augustine.¹ The anonymous *Theologica Germanica* follows Dionysius, and Luther read Dionysius also.

¹ Martin Luther translated the *Theologica* (also *Theologia*) *Germanica* from ecclesiastical Latin into vernacular German, so that the common people could read it. *Theologia Germanica* has this to say of divine union in Chapter VII: How the Soul of Man, while it is yet in the Body, may obtain a Foretaste of eternal Blessedness.

“It hath been asked whether it be possible for the soul, while it is yet in the body, to reach so high as to cast a glance into eternity, and receive a foretaste of eternal life and eternal blessedness. This is commonly denied; and truly so in a sense. For it indeed cannot be so long as the soul is taking heed to the body, and the things which minister and appertain thereto, and to time and the creature, and is disturbed and troubled and distracted thereby. For if the soul shall rise to such a state, she must be quite pure, wholly stripped and bare of all images, and be entirely separate from all creatures, and above all from herself. Now many think this is not to be done and is impossible in this present time. But St. Dionysius maintains that it is possible, as we find from his words in his Epistle to Timothy, where he saith: ‘For the beholding of the hidden things of God, shalt thou forsake sense and the things of the flesh, and all that the senses can apprehend, and that reason of her own powers can bring forth, and all things created and uncreated that reason is able to comprehend and know, and shalt take thy stand upon an utter abandonment of thyself, and as knowing none of the aforesaid things, and enter into union with Him who is, and who is above all existence and all knowledge.’ Now if he did not hold this to be possible in this present time, why should he teach it and enjoin it on us in this present time? But it behoveth you to know that a master hath said on this passage of St. Dionysius, that it is possible, and may happen to a man often, till he become so accustomed to it, as to be able to look into eternity whenever he will. For when a thing is at first very hard to a man and strange, and seemingly quite impossible, if he put all his strength and energy into it, and persevere therein, that will afterward grow quite light and easy, which he at first thought quite out of reach, seeing that it is of no use to begin any work, unless it may be brought to a good end.

“And a single one of these excellent glances is better, worthier, higher and more pleasing to God, than all that the creature can perform as a creature. And as soon as a man turneth himself in spirit, and with his whole heart and mind entereth into the mind of God which is above time, all that ever he hath lost is restored in a moment. And if a man were to do thus a thousand times in a day, each time a fresh and real union would take place; and in this sweet and divine work standeth the truest and fullest union that may be in this present time. For he who hath attained thereto, asketh nothing further, for he hath found the Kingdom of

While there have been great Protestant mystics, such as Jacob Boehme and William Law, they generally have not followed a traditional path, such as laid out by the Desert Fathers, and which was recorded and preserved in the mystical theology of Pseudo-Dionysius.

Mysticism is a highly individual and deeply intimate matter. Mystics do not follow a recipe, but are led by the Spirit. Yet, key fundamentals can be extracted from mystical testimony and teachings, and many of these principles and precepts have a precedent in *The Gospel of Thomas*.

The three stages of purification, illumination and union can be located in *The Gospel of Thomas*, and their roots can be gleaned from the canonical works also, although they are not singled out or listed as such. However, in the Torah the so-called Ten Commandments are neither labeled as such nor listed numerically either. There are three separate places in the Pentateuch containing material from which the Ten Commandments are drawn differently.¹ Further complicating the issue, Orthodox and Protestants profess one set, which is the same one as that of the ancient Jews. Modern Jews profess another, and Catholics, yet another.

So it goes with mystical theology. The Orthodox and Catholic versions are tradition and quite similar, but there are significant differences also. Protestantism established no mystical doctrine, but it does have sects that were inspired by mystics. For example, George Fox (1624-1691), urging a turn from the letter to the spirit. Fox founded the Society of Friends as a congregation emphasizing the charismatic nature of Christianity. Other charismatic Protestant sects also admonish turning to the Holy Spirit within. This teaching does have a biblical basis, for instance, in the beatitude: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”² While some may find it presumptuous to suggest that Paul’s experiences are replicable, there is precedent in the Letters also:

I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) such a one caught up to the third heaven. And I knew such a man, (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;)

Heaven and Eternal Life on earth.”

Anon. *Theologia Germanica*. Translated from the German by Susan Winkworth. (London: 1901). Public Domain.

URL=<http://altreligion.about.com/library/texts/bl_germanica6.htm>.

¹ Exodus 20:2-17, Exodus 34:12-26, and Deuteronomy 5:6-21. Exodus 20 is cited most commonly.

URL=<http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr_10c4.htm>.

² Matthew 5:8 (King James Version). “Blessed” is often used to translate Greek *makarios*. A more literal meaning is “happy” or “joyous.”

How that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words,
which it is not lawful for a man to utter.¹

Similarly, *The Gospel of Thomas* can be interpreted many ways, both with respect to its meaning as a teaching and also its application in spiritual practice. The reading proposed herein is one way of viewing the text and reflecting on its possible adaptation to contemporary spiritual practice.

¹ 2 Corinthians 12:2-4 (King James Version).

PURIFICATION

*Jesus said: I have thrown fire into the world,
and, see, I tend it until it is ablaze.¹*

BUDDHA'S WHEEL

Buddha's wheel of karma is based on the law of action and consequence: As ye sow, so shall ye reap.² The Sanskrit term *karma* means action, but in the technical sense it means the cycle of impressions leading to desires that impel a person to action, with the consequences of deepening the impressions, thus, continuing the vicious circle of impression, desire, action. This keeps one bound to the "wheel" of action and consequence, which keeps turning as long as this cycle driving it continues.

The cycle goes on as long as desire and aversion arise from impressions in the unconscious, impelling a person to action. Thinking, speaking and doing in order to fulfill one's wants and needs, as well as resisting or avoiding the unwanted, result in deepening the impressions that were the initial impetus. Actions motivated by self-interest reinforce the impressions from which the desires impelling one to action arose, and they also engender new kinds of impressions, too.

Because new kinds of impressions can be engendered, the store of impressions can be upgraded by replacing lower impressions with higher, so that higher type desires arise instead of lower desires. Sublimation of desire is an example of upgrading existing impressions. One can also create new impressions by doing good works instead of only avoiding or sublimating bad ones.

However, even higher desires that a person acts on out of self-interest, even the desire for liberation from the wheel, binds one to the wheel, although they produce better fruit and more happiness accrues than suffering. The way to break this vicious circle — impressions leading to desires, and desires to actions, with the consequence of reinforcing impressions — is to perform action free from attachment to the fruits by acting without self-interest.³

Acting without self-interest requires internal renunciation, "being in the world but not of it." Actions performed without self-interest do not result in greater binding. Rather, they attenuate the psychic energy of previously accumulated impressions,

¹ Saying 10.

² Galatians 6:7. (King James Version)

³ *Bhagavad Gita* 2.45-53, 3:19, 5:12, 18:57.

so that these impressions become less binding. When the psychic energy of an impression is exhausted, it can no longer arise as in the mind as a desire impelling one to action. This is called “roasting the seeds of karma” so that they can no longer sprout.

The most straightforward way of doing this is to dedicate all one’s action — thoughts, words and deeds — to God, whether good or bad, and to surrender to God by accepting the outcome as God’s will. While dedicating all action, good or bad to God, one must also do one’s best to perform right action.

According to perennial wisdom, “good thoughts, good words and good deeds” give rise to good impressions, whose fruit is happiness, while bad thoughts, words and deeds give rise to bad impressions, whose fruits involve suffering.¹ Some are neutral, such as those arising from bodily processes, but they still have their effect in creating and perpetuating impressions. These impressions are the cause of the soul’s bondage through its identification with a bodily form. Because of impressions, the soul identifies with a bodily form suitable for working out the impressions of a particular lifetime.

All impressions create bonds which bind one to the wheel of action. The turning of this wheel is the cycle of impressions arising as desires, desires impelling actions, and actions reinforcing the impressions. There is a saying in the Vedic tradition that thoughts are like in lines traced in air; speech, in lines drawn in water, and deeds, in lines inscribed in stone.

Impressions resulting in desires and action have other consequences than deepening them if one acts on them. The quality of the impression determines the “fruit” of action, happiness or suffering, joy or sorrow, gladness or grief. This cycle of impressions leading to desire and action results in alternating states of happiness and unhappiness as a consequence of accumulating good and bad impressions. For the fruit of good action is good impressions, which result in future happiness, and the fruit of bad actions is bad impressions, which result in future unhappiness.

Moreover, groups of individuals are bound together by collective impressions. These collective impressions are transmitted across generations in a society through enculturation, by exposure to social norms in early upbringing, education and the context of life in that society and its subgroups. These impressions engender connections among individuals that persist across lifetimes. Such groups are like pilgrims traveling in caravans, inching their way together toward the goal of life, realization of truth.

¹ The phrase “good thoughts, good words, good deeds” (Farsi: *humata, hukhta, hvarshta*) is attributed to Zoroaster.

The spending of impressions in action — thought, word or deed — does not exhaust them, however. For if one acts on impressions with attachment, then the impression gets deepened, and new, related impressions may be added. Spent impressions are simply exchanged for similar ones, which get more engraved in the process.

According to perennial wisdom, even good thoughts, words and deeds leave impressions that bind the soul. There is a saying among Sufis that the “sins” of the saints are their good deeds. For even good thoughts, words and deeds bind with golden bracelets instead of steel chains.

There is a saying in the Vedic tradition that the saints admire these bracelets of gold, taking them for adornments. The “bracelets of gold” represent purity and illumination (*sattva*), which are the consequence of good action. That is to say, as long as any trace of egoism remains, so does bondage to duality, and God cannot be realized as long as this persists, even though one is an illumined saint who sees God in everything.

This binding effect is true of both good and bad impressions. Both bind by perpetuating the veil of impressions that obscures the nature of the soul. Thus, both result in spiritual suffering. For the greatest human happiness, even seeing God, is said by the Perfect to be as nothing compared to the unbounded bliss of divine union. The soul longs for this right up to the moment of realization. This intense longing due to separation is the agony saints experience along with the ecstasy seeing God in all and everything, until they finally realize God.

The binding effect of these latent impressions give rises to “sheaths” veiling the Self from itself. Impressions cause the soul to associate itself with a particular bodily form and to identify with this impermanent form. Then, the infinite consciousness of the Universal Self mistakes itself for an individual ego with a limited mind confined to a physical body. This results in the state of spiritual ignorance, not knowing one’s true nature, until the veils are removed. The process of thinning and final removal of the veils is the journey though the inner planes toward realization of Truth.¹

The way to short-circuit the cycle of impressions leading to desires, desires to actions, and actions to deepened impressions is to transcend action motivated by self-interest arising from egoism. However, this is impossible to do fully in the absence of grace. For natural impressions, e.g., related to breathing, cannot be overcome otherwise. For example, as long as one desires the next breath in the interest of self-preservation, one is performing action out of self-interest, which leads to further binding.

¹ Meher Baba sets this process forth in *God Speaks*. See Appendix Two: Meher Baba on the Ten States of God.

Impressions resulting from voluntary action are largely under one's control through the exertion of willpower. Thus, one can substitute good impressions for bad through self-cultivation. This is the twofold consequence of replacing suffering with happiness and also accumulating merit that makes one deserving of grace. While grace is a gift that cannot be gotten by creating obligation or even truly deserved through works, ameliorating one's impressions ripens one for grace. As one replaces negative impressions with positive ones, the "dust" obscuring one's inner light is removed, causing the ever-vigilant Master to take note of this transformation, even if the Master is not yet known to one.

Acting on low desires generates negative impressions, whose fruit is suffering in this world and also in the next. By not acting on low desires, the energy of the impressions from which they arise into the mind gets attenuated and is finally exhausted. Acting on higher desires generates positive impressions, whose fruit is happiness both in this world and in the afterlife. However, even positive impressions bind the soul and prevent it from realizing its true nature as spirit. Thus, the best course is to cease accumulating impressions altogether and to exhaust the energy of the impressions already gathered.

In order to stop gathering impressions and begin to unwind them, one must transcend even good actions that are motivated by self-interest. One must replace good action motivated by self-interest with internal renunciation, so that all action is performed free from attachment to the fruits. This clearly requires an expanded viewpoint. While one does not completely transcend *egoism* before realization of Truth, it is possible to transcend *egotism*. This expanded viewpoint is made possible by the illumination (Sanskrit *sattva*) one gains as a result of performing good action — good thoughts, good words and good deeds. Actions are "good" to the degree that they are universal instead of egoistic. Therefore, performing action that is "right" on the basis of universal principles is *altruistic* instead of *egotistical*.¹

For example, when one realizes that the physical body and the entire cosmos are "dead" matter, one gains conviction that God is the only real doer. Then one can act without acting by aligning oneself with the flow of universal life, like floating downstream carried along by the river current. In Taoism, this is called non-action (*wu wei*). Non-action is not inaction. It is identifying with the silent witness to the almighty power of God that gets everything done, even what one apparently does oneself. Experienced runners feel something akin to this when they catch their second wind and feel as though the body is moving itself, and the mind is just "along for the ride," watching the world go by.

This requires being desireless. However, being without desires means being without individual desires prompted by self-interest. Even the greatest sages still eat

¹ Saying 6.

and perform ordinary bodily functions, but they do it automatically, guided by Nature rather than impelled by egoism. A sage eats to live instead of living to eat. Aspirants can gauge their progress by the ratio of selfish wants to real needs.

Meher Baba explains that it is possible to achieve non-action in action even before attaining complete internal renunciation. One does this by constructing a provisional ego subservient to the Master:

To avoid inaction on the one hand and pride of action on the other, it is necessary for the aspirant to construct in the following manner a provisional and working ego which will be entirely subservient to the Master. Before beginning anything, the aspirant thinks that it is not *he* who is doing it, but the *Master* who is getting it done through him. After doing it he does not tarry to claim the results of action or enjoy them, but becomes free of them by offering them to the Master. By training his mind in this spirit he succeeds in creating a new ego which, though provisional and working, is amply able to become a source of that confidence, feeling, enthusiasm and “go” which true action must express. This new ego is spiritually harmless, since it derives its life and being from the Master who represents Infinity, and since, when the time comes, it can be thrown away like a garment. There are thus two types of ego—one which can only add to the limitations of the soul, and the other which helps towards emancipation. The passage through the limiting ego of the worldly man to the egolessness of the infinite life lies through the construction of the provisional ego generated through wholehearted allegiance to the Master. *The construction of a new ego which is entirely subservient to the Master is indispensable to the dynamics of spiritual advancement.*¹

One way of culturing internal renunciation is to leave the world altogether, or otherwise to isolate oneself from intimate contact with the world’s “glamour.” This is extreme and not suitable for many people.

Another way to develop internal renunciation lies in meeting one’s responsibilities in life and doing one’s duty and meeting one’s responsibilities in life (*dharma*), while eschewing self-interest and self-importance. Then, one performs action chiefly on the basis of what is right or out of love rather than from individual desire.² One does one’s best, dedicating one’s actions to God or one’s Master, then one leaves the results to God’s will, taking whatever comes as God’s

¹ Meher Baba. *Discourses*. 6th ed. Vol. 2, p. 179-180. See also *Bhagavad Gita* 18:57.

² *Bhagavad Gita* 3:8, 19.

gift.¹ The sages say that by doing this, one's actions neither accumulate more impressions, nor do they deepen existing impressions.

When their energy is not replenished, existing impressions exhaust their energy by being spent. As their energy is spent, then the intensity and frequency of desire and aversion arising gets more and more diminished until they finally disappear altogether. Since new impressions are not formed during this process, the energy of the storehouse of accumulated impressions is exhausted and individual desires cease to arise. This is the apex of internal renunciation. Sages say that freedom is the result.

REPENTANCE

Repentance is essential in the process of purification. Repentance requires searching one's conscience, having remorse over wrongs of thought, word or deed by either commission or omission, admitting of one's faults and asking forgiveness, along with a making firm resolve not to repeat any wrongs.

Many Christian mystics placed a great deal of emphasis on repentance, including self-deprecation for one's transgressions, both thoughtless and intentional. This penitential attitude may seem out of place in our contemporary world, and many people are put off by the prominent role Christian mystics assign to guilt and repentance, as well as suffering and sacrifice.

Nevertheless, repentance need not be equated with either asceticism or austerities. There is little precedent for it in Jesus' own life or the life he asked of his followers, although John the Baptist, who Meher Baba revealed was Jesus' spiritual Master, was an ascetic who reportedly lived in the wilderness on honey and locusts.² While it is true that the early followers of Jesus were abstemious, eschewing luxury and show, leaving the world for the desert came later. Initially, the followers of Jesus had to deal with adversity and even persecution, so they had no need for self-imposed austerity.

Self-imposed austerities have another purpose, however, which is gaining control of the lower passions by strengthening the will. This, however, does not pertain to repentance as guilt of sorrow for sin.

If we read them closely, we find saints saying that everything separating one from God may be termed "sin." This applied even to so-called good actions if they are

¹ *Bhagavad Gita* 3:9, 18:57. This is the inner meaning of ancient rituals involving sacrifice. The sacrifice is not offering something material to God as a burnt offering but rather offering God one's selfish desires and "burning" them in the fire of surrenderance and acceptance.

² Matthew 3:4; Mark 1:6.

not performed selflessly, out of love for God, but instead, out of conformity to convention or for spiritual recognition. Then, such “good” actions are actually hypocrisy, pretending to be pious when one is not at heart. So it is possible that action that is good in principle may turn out to be “wrong” on the basis of intention and circumstance, as Jesus’ criticism of pious hypocrisy shows.

Moreover, even good actions performed with attachment to their fruits result in further binding. Hence, it is sometimes said that the sins of the saints are their good works. Only action performed without attachment to the fruit of action is non-binding, despite whether it is good or bad. Thus, the wise recommend dedicating all one’s actions, good and bad, to God, who, being the sole reality, is also the only doer.

The real repentance is turning away from that which separates one from God. God is the only reality. Worldliness is the “worship” of what is separate and diverse. This worship of the world through identification with the body, along with pursuing desires and aversions motivated by self-interest is a form of idolatry. Through worldly pursuits based on pleasing oneself, one is making offerings to the body and mind, instead of to God. One cannot serve two masters, God and self.¹ One must choose between serving oneself and serving God.

Similarly in Sufism, identifying oneself with a bodily form that one takes to be inherently separate from God is putting something other than God beside God. Separation denies absolute unity by “attributing a partner to God.” The most serious sin in Islam is called *shirk* in Arabic.² As long as one takes oneself to be separate from God, one is guilty of idolatry of self and world consequent on dualism. All but the greatest are in this state.

This is the inner meaning of “original sin” in the Way of Jesus. Everyone under the influence of “original sin” remains (apparently) separate from God. This continues until one is redeemed through becoming united with the Master. This delivers one from spiritual ignorance as a consequence of duality and thereby from sin as separation from God.

Those who deny the truth of their own being, sin against the spirit of truth. To deny this spirit as the presence of God within oneself and at the core of all is the sin that is not forgiven: “Jesus said, ‘Whoever scoffs at the Father will be forgiven, and whoever scoffs at the Son will be forgiven, but whoever scoffs at the Spirit will not be forgiven, neither on earth nor in heaven.’”³

¹ Matthew 6:24, Luke 16:13.

² Holy Qur’an 31:14. According to the Holy Qu’ran 4:49, this is the sin that Allah does not forgive.

³ Saying 44. Also Mark 3:28-29.

This may be interpreted to mean that those who either reject the Spirit of Truth, the Holy Spirit within, as God's immanent presence, or else pretend to it hypocritically, thereby separate themselves from God on their own volition. This is not forgiven, because God does not contravene free will. There is a great difference between being in spiritual ignorance and choosing ignorance, hence, continued separation from God.

SEPARATION

In the Jesus tradition, "sin" is defined as that which separates one from God. This conception of "sin" as separation from God has an inner meaning. Separation from God, the One, manifests as duality of subject and object, self and world. Moreover, the mind contains thoughts and feelings that are often opposites, e.g., truth and falsity, beautiful and ugly, right and wrong, good and bad, and so forth. The world also exhibits a diversity of objects with opposite qualities. All of these things overshadow unity of being. When one takes this duality and diversity to be real existent, one is separated from God as indivisibly and absolutely One. But if reality is essentially one, how does this separation happen, along with the diversity it entails?

According to Meher Baba, we can imagine that in the Beyond Beyond state of God, which is the state of God's essence, beyond all attributes, beyond existence and nonexistence, and beyond consciousness and unconsciousness, a "whim" arises to know.¹ This "original whim" arises as the question, "Who am I?" This question has two answers, "I am God," and "I don't know who I am." The answer, "I don't know who I am," is the original impression, constituting spiritual ignorance. This impression is the original question — Who am I? — a question that reverberates across eons of time through innumerable forms. This process continues inexorably until the final answer is reached, "I am God," which constitutes the ultimate realization of spiritual knowledge. All of other impressions are articulations of this original impression along the way to the final answer.²

According to the ancient view, all thoughts, words and deeds leave a residue in the unconscious in the form of latent impressions that influence future thought, feeling and action. For example, in the Vedic tradition and Buddhism, these latent impressions are called *sanskaras* in Sanskrit. "Heaps" of similar or related impressions are called *vasanas*. Sufis call them "impressions of action," *nuqush-e-amal* in Arabic. Qabalah calls them "shells," *qlifoth* in Hebrew. The closest concept

¹ Meher Baba. *Beams from Meher Baba on the Spiritual Panorama*. p. 7-11. The function of this whim in Meher Baba's account is to indicate that the essence of God is absolute freedom.

² Meher Baba. *The Nothing and the Everything*, 47. p. 49.

in Christianity is perhaps that of sin being a “stain” on the soul, concealing the soul’s intrinsic beauty and effulgence.¹

In traditions espousing reincarnation as a cycle of rebirth, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, these impressions accumulate and carry over from lifetime to lifetime. It is not clear what the role of reincarnation in the early Jesus tradition may have been or how widespread the belief. But the early controversies over it prove that it was present, and no less a theologian than Origen (c. 185-253/254) espoused it. Controversy swirled around Origen until the Fifth Ecumenical Council (553), when his writings were condemned at the instigation of Emperor Justinus. Although reincarnation was not specifically mentioned, it was banned in normative Christianity. Normative Judaism and Islam also do not subscribe to reincarnation other than in the mystical “underground.” For example, Qabalists also teach reincarnation of souls (Hebrew: *gilgul neshamoth*).²

Meher Baba clarifies:

There is one real birth and one real death. You are born once and you really die only once.

What is the real birth?

It is the birth of a “drop” in the Ocean of Reality. What is meant by the birth of a “drop” in the Ocean of Reality? It is the advent of individuality, born of indivisibility through a glimmer of the first most-finite consciousness, which transfixed cognizance of limitation into the Unlimited.

What is meant by the real death?

It is consciousness getting free of all limitations. Freedom from all limitations is real death: it is really the death of all limitations: it is liberation. In between the real birth and the real death, there is no such reality as the so-called births and deaths.

What really happens in the intermediate stage known as births and deaths is that the limitations of consciousness gradually wear off till it (consciousness) is free of all limitations. Ultimately, consciousness, totally free of all limitations, experiences the unlimited Reality eternally.

¹ St. Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica*. II.1.86. *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*. Second and Revised Edition, 1920. Literally translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. URL=<<http://www.newadvent.org/summa/>>. Online Edition © 2003.

² Rav Avraham Brandwein, “Gilgul Neshamot - Reincarnation of Souls” (Jerusalem: Yeshiva Kol Yehuda Zvi, 5756). URL=<<http://www.projectmind.org/exoteric/souls.html>>.

Real dying is equal to real living. Therefore I stress: Die for God and you will live as God.¹

Meher Baba relates this account to the various religions:

In the East, Vedantists believe in reincarnation, and in a number of births and deaths until one attains Godhood. The Muslims believe in one birth only and one death only. The Christians and the Zoroastrians hold the same belief. All are right. But Jesus, Buddha, Muhammad, Zoroaster, all meant what I mean by real birth and real death. I say you are born once and die once.

All the so-called births and deaths are only sleeps and wakings. The difference between sleep and death is that after you sleep you awake and find yourself in the same body; but after death you awake in a different body. You never die. Only the blessed ones die and become one with God.²

Meher Baba goes on to explain the key role that the accumulation of latent impressions (*sanskaras*) plays in this process:

The real goal of life is not the death of the ego but the death of the mind [as the storehouse of impressions]. So when Mohammed or Zoroaster or Jesus talked of being born once, or dying once, they meant the death of the mind. Mind is born from the very beginning — even before the stone age. This birth takes place only once and the death of the mind also takes place only once.

When the mind dies, the false ego is transformed into Reality. Real ego is never born and it never dies. Ego is always real, but due to the mind, the ego feels and acts as the limited and false "I."

Now mind goes on taking bodies according to its good or bad impressions. This taking and shedding bodies is not the death of either the mind or the ego. After physical death, the mind remains, with all its accumulated impressions. It is the impressions which make the mind take bodies so that the impressions might be experienced in the process of being wiped out, while the ego remains a witness.

Even when you are fast asleep, the ego and the mind are still there. The impressions wake you up so that they might be experienced and in the process get wiped out. This phenomenon is also in a way the daily birth of the body. When one body is dropped, another comes up; although there is a certain time lag between the giving up of one body and the taking on of another.

¹ Meher Baba. *The Path of Love*. (Myrtle Beach, SC: Sheriar Press, 2000 reprint, originally published 1963), p. 76-77.

² Meher Baba. *God Speaks*. 2nd ed. 1973, p. 253-254.

In between, there are the mind-states of heaven, hell, etc. The mind has to die in this body; thus the Masters have chalked out different ways to attain this *Man-O-Nash* or annihilation of the mind during life.... The world and its activities are really worthless. Actions continue whether they are good or bad, and therefore the Masters have said, "Act in such a way that the actions do not bind you and impressions are not created."¹

Meher Baba summarizes the entire story of the soul's journey:

You are sitting here before me, each one asserting his separate existence from the other. You come from different levels of society. You possess varied physical and mental aptitudes and abilities. Through the ego-mind you have become individualized, and the One Indivisible Soul is infinitely divided. But the Soul never becomes divided, it ever remains One and the Same.

You are really the Infinite Soul but you identify yourself with a finite mind and so have to suffer. You have your moments of happiness and sorrow. Whether your pains outweigh your pleasures or your pleasures outweigh your pains, you worry all day about something or the other until your finite existence retreats at night into sound sleep. There you unconsciously merge in the Infinite.

In sound sleep you completely forget yourself and your surroundings, your thoughts and emotions around which are ranged your ideas of imagined happiness and sufferings. But this respite is short-lived.

From the sound-sleep state you come down to the normal awake state, and as you come you have necessarily to pass through a dream state even though it be for only the fraction of a second.

Now, at one time you have a very happy and sweet dream in which your ideal of happiness is fulfilled. But being a dream it lasts only a little while, and waking pains you so much that you sigh, What a pity it was only a dream.

At some other time you have a horrible dream in which you experience great suffering. Time seems an eternity. As you wake you feel such relief that you say, Thank God it was only a dream after all.

In the dream state you enjoy and suffer. When you wake you realize that your enjoyment and suffering was nothing but a dream — an illusion. But know that your present state of consciousness which you call being awake, when compared to the Real Awake State, is nothing but a dream state. Your life is a dream within the mighty Dream of God which is the Universe.

¹ Meher Baba. *The Path of Love*. p. 49-51.

From your present awake dream state you have to go through many sleeps of death before you get established in the Real Awake State. After ordinary sleep you awake in the same surroundings; after death you arise in a new environment. But this does not bring the end of your suffering, for the Thread of Action (Karma) continues unbroken and unfailingly keeps on determining your life. The humour of it is new settings create new worries. The grip of illusion is so tight and deceitful that you cannot help worrying. So your life in your awake dream state becomes an endless chain of suffering.

You, as gross body, are born again and again till you realize your Real Self. You, as mind, are born only once and die only once; in this sense you do not re-incarnate. The gross body keeps changing, but mind (mental body) remains the same throughout. All impressions (sanskaras) are stored in the mind. The impressions are either to be spent or counteracted through fresh karma in successive incarnations. Buddha's wheel denotes the cycle of births and deaths. The wheel goes on in its ceaseless round. It lifts you to the heights; it brings you down to the depths.¹

¹ Meher Baba. *The Everything and the Nothing*, 30. p. 35-37. The above is excerpted from a longer piece. Here is more of the piece that also pertains:

“The First Song of the Infinite is the beginning of Creation. It brings about the apparent descent of the Infinite into the domain of multiple duality. Duality implies unending sufferings.

“I am eternally happy for I know that I am the Infinite One. I alone exist; there is nothing besides me; all else is Illusion. Simultaneously, I suffer eternally.

“I, as myself, am free. But in you, as you, I get myself bound. I knowingly suffer through you, to make you free from bindings. This is my crucifixion. Your experience of suffering is because of sheer ignorance; and your ignorance is my suffering.....

“By the divine law you are shielded from remembrance of past lives, for it would not help you in living your present life but would make it infinitely more complicated and confusing.

“For me "past" does not exist. I live in the Eternal Present. I clearly see your former lives, with all your intimate and intricate relationships with so many individuals. Your various reactions to others seen in the context of your mutual connections in previous lives serves as a mighty joke to me and helps to ease my burden of suffering.....

“The wheel of births and deaths ceaselessly turns. You are born as a male, as a female; rich, poor; brilliant, dull; healthy, weak; black, white; of different nationalities and of different creeds, in accordance with your inherent and imperative need to have that richness of experience which helps transcend all forms of duality. Side by side with the experience, the paying and receiving of payment of karmic debts go on ad infinitum. How can you

Thus, the latent impressions at the unconscious level of the mind as mental “body” or causal “sheath” are responsible for the appearance of separation. It is they alone that constitute the veil of spiritual ignorance resulting in duality. When this veil is removed the nondual state is realized. Since ignorance simply disappears when knowledge comes, separation vanishes along with it.

We can now see in the light of this account how the biblical creation story is a metaphor for the separation of the drop from the ocean. Qabalah calls this the work of creation. The return is symbolized, for example, by the Elijah’s ride to heaven in a fiery chariot. Qabalah calls the return of the soul to God, “the work of the chariot.”

Even though science has not penetrated to the levels revealed by the spiritual masters, from the contemporary scientific viewpoint the human condition is largely determined biologically. On the one hand, human development in the womb replicates phylogenetic evolution, and, on the other hand, early childhood experiences are imprinted in the subconscious mind.¹ Moreover, throughout life one accumulates impressions from all one’s thoughts, words and actions, and these impressions lead, for example, to habitual patterns of thought and behavior.

Perhaps the scientists to come closest to discovering the secrets of the unconscious were the psychiatrists Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung. On the basis of his research Freud theorized that life is determined not only by conscious knowledge and choice, the locus of which he called the *ego*, but also by the impressions stored unconsciously, which he called the *id*, as well as early impressions from authority figures, which he called the *superego*. Jung went further to speculate that human life is a process of “individuation,” in which the unconscious is gradually integrated into the conscious.

According to perennial wisdom, human consciousness has three dimensions or layers: conscious, subconscious, and unconscious. During deep sleep a person is unconscious. When one is dreaming one is subconscious and when one is awake,

clear the account? The Avatar, or the Sadguru, having universal Mind, literally embodies universal life. It is through Him that you become free from this business of karma.

“The life of everything and everyone is an open book to me. It is like a film show that I enjoy at my own cost. I am the sole Producer of this ever-changing and never-ending film called the universe, wherein I become you in your awake dream state in order to awaken you to the Real Awake State. When you experience this state you will realize the nothingness of what was your awake dream state which you experience now. This needs my Grace. When my Grace descends it makes you Me.”

¹ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. *The Phenomenon of Man*. (London: Collins, Revised Edition, 1965).

one is conscious. Waking, dreaming and sleep are familiar states, but few realize their spiritual significance.

Being conscious in the ordinary waking state always implies being conscious of something. Human beings are conscious of thoughts, feelings, perception and so forth, but they are generally not directly conscious of the mind that entertains them. Gross conscious human beings do not know the mind as it is in itself, but only in terms of its contents. That is to say, most people are only aware of the “mind” as the background or substrate of mental activity instead of being directly acquainted with the nature of the mind itself as a field of pure awareness. In this sense, even the mind is itself subconscious for most people.

The subconscious is made up of both the mind as the container of conscious objects and affects and the subconscious mind as the container of stored impressions. These impressions are stored in both surface memory and also deep memory. Impressions of previous experiences that can be recalled volitionally are stored in what we ordinarily call “memory.” The deep memory is the storehouse of impressions that are beyond the reach of volitional recall. At the deepest level are the “latent impressions” from which desires arise.

The nature of the state of deep sleep is unknown to ordinary human beings, who are not aware in it and remain unconscious of it. According to the wise, the purpose of life is to make this ordinarily unconscious state conscious by removing the veil that covers it, because this unconscious dimension is pure consciousness or consciousness without an object, which is the nature of spirit.

This veil is the subconscious, and it is removed by counteracting and exhausting the energy of the impressions stored in the deep memory that carries across lifetimes. When these impressions are counteracted, then the mind is known as it is, as the reflection of pure consciousness. When the energy of the latent impressions is exhausted, then what was formerly unconscious becomes conscious.

This is pure consciousness, which is realized in the nondual state. The first stage of this realization is pure consciousness as “nothing,” being empty of all content. The second stage is the realization of pure consciousness as everything, in absolute knowledge of absolute existence.

As long as consciousness is absorbed in the outer, it is beset with desires arising from one’s latent impressions and one finds oneself impelled to act on these desires by the strength of the energy they get from the impressions that underlie them. When one acts on these desires, then one deepens the impressions and further strengthens its energy by feeding it. The way to counter these impressions is to turn attention within instead of directing it outward.

TURNING

The Way of Jesus sees repentance not as giving up or renouncing as much as “turning” from the world to face God. One does this by turning away from the outer, superficial “husk” and directing one’s attention to the inner kernel, God’s immanent presence. Both subject and object, self and world, are manifestations of God as the One “in whom we live, move and have our being.”

One turns oneself away from superficiality by renouncing self-interest and serving God instead of serving oneself. One turns away from the superficiality of the world by putting the search for God’s presence as the immanent ground. One must put this intention before the pursuit of fame, fortune, power and pleasure, in order to discover the world as sacred and all things as holy.

’Tis the gift to be simple
 ’Tis the gift to be free
 ’Tis the gift to come down
 Where we ought to be
 And when we find ourselves
 In that place just right
 We will be in the valley
 Of love and delight.
 When true simplicity is gained
 To bow and to bend
 We shall not be ashamed
 To turn and to turn it will
 Be our delight
 ’Till by turning and turning we
 Come ’round right.¹

This turning is the inner meaning of “repentance,” and it is that to which the prophets of Israel called their people.

Therefore say thou unto them,
 Thus saith the Lord of hosts [YHVH Sabaoth];
 Turn ye unto me, saith the Lord of hosts,
 And I will turn unto you, saith the Lord of hosts.”²

The Hebrew word translated as “repentance” is *teshuvah*, which comes from the root shin-vav-bet, meaning to turn or return. In the Greek of the early Jesus tradition, this was called *metanoia*, meaning literally beyond thought, and it signified a “change of heart” as a conversion experience. This involved an

¹ Joseph Brackett, Jr. “Simple Gifts.” 1848.

² Zechariah 1:3 (King James Version). Compare the Holy Qur’an 2, 152: “Remember Me. I will remember you.”

awakening to spirituality as the pursuit of true values and ideals, the highest spiritual ideal being the Lord and Master.

CIRCUMCISION OF THE HEART

This turning is a “conversion,” a change of heart. It is called the “circumcision of the heart,” wherein the stubbornness of self-interest is removed:

His disciples said to him [Jesus], “Is circumcision advantageous or not?”

He said to them, “If it were advantageous [in its nature], fathers would beget their children circumcised from their mothers. But the true spiritual circumcision has become advantageous in all ways.”¹

Those who knew Hebrew scripture would recognize the true spiritual circumcision as the “circumcision of the heart,” alluded to in Hebrew scripture.² It is expressed in the New Testament as well, where it is asserted that the true Jew is the one whose heart is circumcised, rather than the one who merely submits to the Law outwardly.³

Circumcision of the flesh in the Hebrew tradition is the mark of Abraham’s covenant with God. Circumcision of the flesh places one under God’s Law, Torah. Stubbornness is replaced by obedience. One is then to follow the injunctions (*mitzvot*) of this law. However, precepts and injunctions can tell one the right things to do, but one must change one’s own heart, or following them will be due to fear, hypocrisy, convention, or something else motivated by self-interest.

Circumcision of the heart differs from circumcision of the flesh, for it is the removal of the sheath that covers the heart with self-interest, stubbornness and pride. But it is possible to submit to circumcision of the flesh and keep the commandments of the Law, while being obedient out of fear rather than either righteousness or love, or else feigning piety but harboring self-interest secretly. This is clearly not the true circumcision as coming under the covenant, for God cannot be fooled by outward observances when one’s heart is not pure.

When the heart is truly circumcised by turning, the heart’s covering begins to be seared off by the fire of purification. Circumcision is used not only to indicate the removal of the covering of the heart, the curtain of self-interest separating one from God. Adult circumcision was painful in ancient times before anesthesia, and this pain lasted until the incision healed. So too, the fire of purification that sears the heart often brings much turmoil, but this suffering is well worth it. When

¹ Saying 53. See also Saying 2.

² Deuteronomy 10:16, 30:8; Jeremiah 4:4.

³ Romans 2:28-29.

purification is complete, illumination follows, for the heart has been cleansed. William Law reportedly said on his deathbed:

I feel within me a consuming fire of heavenly love which has burned up in my soul everything that was contrary to itself and transformed me inwardly into its own nature.¹

CLEANSING THE HEART

But this purification takes dedication, self-discipline and effort. For the spirit is only enlivened and revealed to the degree that one transcends the superficial attachments that distract the mind and heart. These attachments manifest as various desires and passions, such as pride, lust, anger, greed, and so forth, about which sages caution and admonish aspirants to transcend.

As long as one allows oneself to be dominated by self-interest, then the “lion” of egoism continues to prevail and eventually devours the “man.”² That is to say, one’s animal passions or desire-nature, which stems from the body, eclipses one’s spiritual nature, which is seated in the soul. Therefore, Saying 35 admonishes that one must tie up the hands of the strong man, that is, the ego driven by self-interest, especially manifesting in lower desires, before one can clean the place out. “The place” to be cleansed is the heart, where personal revelation is received to the degree that it is emptied of mundane desires and superficial attachments. This includes aversion also, as the negative pole of desire. Desire and aversion arise from egoism and limited self-interest. The bout with them is fundamental to perennial wisdom. Buddhism states this forcefully in the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path.

The first noble truth is that there is suffering (Sanskrit: *dukkha*, from *dus-stha*). Actually, the meaning of the original Sanskrit is more complex than “suffering” conveys. The Sanskrit root sound is *du* or *dus*, which signifies the opposite of good or easy. Thus, it can mean bad, or hard. It functions similar to the prefix “un” in English, hence, means unpleasant and uneasy.

The similarities between Buddha’s first noble truth, that life in duality is essentially suffering and Heidegger’s pervasive *Angst* have been noticed³. Indeed,

¹ Alexander Whyte. *Characters and Characteristics of William Law*. (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1893), xlvii.

² Saying 7.

³ Takeshi Umehara. “Heidegger and Buddhism.” *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. xx, 1970. Honolulu, University Press of Hawaii.

Heidegger reportedly said on reading a Zen work of D.T. Suzuki, “If I understand this man correctly, this is what I have been trying to say in all my writings.”¹

The second noble truth is that suffering has a cause (*dukkha-samudayah*). The cause of suffering is life in duality, which is brought about through impressions arising as desire, with action from self-interest deepening the existing impressions. This is the wheel of karma. This is the meaning of the wheel that is often used as a symbol of Buddhism.

The third noble truth is that suffering can be extinguished (*dukkha-nirodhah*). The fourth noble truth is that the way to remove suffering is through the Eightfold path (*marga*):

1. right view or understanding (*samyag-drishti*),
2. right intention (*samyak sankalpa*),
3. right speech (*samyak vach*),
4. right action or conduct (*samyak kamanta*),
5. right living or livelihood (*samyag-ajiva*),
6. right effort or endeavor (*samyag-vyayama*)
7. right mindfulness or memory (*samyak smriti*),
8. right absorption, enstasis, or transcendence (*samyak samadhi*).

The Sanskrit term *samyak* is not easily translated into English using a single word, although it is usually rendered as “right.” “Right” includes the notions of proper, correct, and suitable, as well as morally good. *Samyak* can also mean perfect.

These eight factors comprising the “right” path, like the Patanjali’s eight limbs (Sanskrit: *ashtanga*), are not steps to be taken sequentially. They are aspects of one body of knowledge whose integrated practice constitutes spiritual living.

Buddha’s Eight-fold Path is also called “the Middle Way” because it moderates between asceticism and indulgence. But it is also about achieving balance by integrating apparent opposites, which is included in the meaning of *samyak*. These

¹ William Barrett. "Zen for the West," in *Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of D.T. Suzuki*, W. Barrett, ed. (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956), xi. It would not be correct, however, to suggest that Heidegger was saying “the same thing” as Buddha, for example, any more than he was reiterating the same thing as was said previously in Western thought. Heidegger’s point is that technological transformation has transformed in the human condition as well. This challenge cannot be resolved by looking to the past alone. New conditions require a fresh approach to age-old questions. See *Martin Heidegger and National Socialism: Questions and Answers*, G. Neske and E. Kettering, eds., L. Harries, trans. (New York: Paragon House, 1990), p. 62-63. This would also apply to *The Gospel of Thomas*. It must be approached in light of contemporary circumstances and needs if it is to speak to us about the spiritual challenges we face today.

apparent opposites become integrated in awareness to the degree that one is in contact with the ground state from which all phenomenal differences and mental distinctions arise, and in which they are unified.

The first two limbs, right view and right intention, relate to applying discrimination practically. Limbs three through six involve self-discipline through right speech, right conduct, right work, and right effort. The final two limbs, right mindfulness and right absorption, have to do with devotion to the Ideal. In short, one is to meet one's responsibilities in life, but as a human being in accordance with one's station, while simultaneously directing the mind beyond the affairs of the world to the source and ground through the experience of presence. What distracts from this is self-interest manifesting as superficial desire and aversion — grasping for what we want and clinging to it, and resisting what we don't want or avoiding it.

Desire and aversion are expressions of self-interest that arise from duality. The way to transcend self-interest, which keeps one attached to the wheel of alternating opposites such as joy and sorrow, is to roast the seeds of desire and aversion. These seeds are the accumulated impressions of previous action in the form of thought, word and deed that are stored in the deep memory of the causal body. These seeds are watered when one pursue self-satisfaction, which gives them energy. On the other hand, they get roasted in the fire of spiritual living, which deprives them of energy. When these seeds sprout as desires in the mind and are neither encouraged nor acted upon, they lose energy and over time exhaust their limited energy supply. Moreover, performance of right action sows good seed that culture spiritual living, hastening the cycle. Best, though is to perform action just because it is right, without attachment to the fruits of action. This creates no consequences at all, and eventually the energy of accumulated impressions is weakened and gets dispersed.

For this, it is necessary to get control of self-interest, for example, as expressed in the desire for fame, fortune, power, and pleasure. In addition, the tendency toward self-inflation must also be mastered, including the desire for spiritual advancement or recognition as expressions of self-importance.

Bridling desire and overcoming self-interest requires discipline in action, discrimination of mind and devotion of the heart to one's ideas, making the process difficult to the degree that one remains worldly-minded. But the process of purification is worth all that it takes to accomplish: "Jesus said, 'Joyous is the one who has labored and suffered, for that one will find life.'"¹

Bridling self-interest and bringing it under control requires effort: Jesus said, "Joyous are those who have been put to the test within. It is they who truly know the Father. Joyous are those who hunger [for the higher], for they who desire [it]

¹ Saying 58.

will have their bellies filled.”¹ This saying indicates that the real enemy is within oneself, and it must be confronted on the battlefield of one’s own heart as the field of desire. It is necessary therefore to cleanse the heart.

Meher Baba gave a discourse on cleansing the heart that also enunciates key fundamentals of spiritual living:

The best way to cleanse the heart and prepare for the stilling of the mind is to lead a normal, worldly life. Living in the midst of your day-to-day duties, responsibilities, likes, dislikes, etc., will help you. All these become the very means for the purification of your heart. This natural, normal method depends for its success upon a clear idea of the force behind your thoughts, and the facts underlying your actions.

The force behind your thoughts is the force of the impressions [sanskaras] in your mind. The impressions are there due to your own previous actions [karma]. Actions are the cause of impressions and thoughts are but the expression of the impressions. This being true, the more you try to check your thoughts, the more you interfere with the natural process of their expression. Sooner or later, with the added force produced by suppression, the impressions are bound to express themselves completely.

The truth of action is that every action, significant or insignificant, voluntary or involuntary, is at once impressed in turn upon your mind. Like a non-greasy stain, a light impression can be easily wiped out but impressions caused by actions conceived in anger, lust or greed are hard to remove. In short, actions produce impressions, and impressions produce thoughts. Thoughts in turn tend to precipitate further action.

For the purification of your heart, leave your thoughts alone, but maintain a constant vigil over your actions. When you have thoughts of anger, lust or greed, do not worry about them, and do not try to check them. Let all such thoughts come and go without putting them into action. Try to think counter-thoughts in order to discern, to discriminate, to learn, and above all to unlearn the actions which are prompted by your own impressions.

It is better to feel angry sometimes than merely to suppress anger. You then have an opportunity to think about anger, its causes and its consequences. Although your mind may be angry, do not let your heart know it. Remain unaffected.

If you never feel angry you will be like stone, in which form the mind is least developed. Similarly, if you never have lusty thoughts you cannot achieve the merit of having avoided lustful actions.

¹ Saying 69.

Let the thoughts of anger, lust and greed come and go freely and unasked without putting them into words and deeds. Then the related impressions in your mind begin to wear out and become less and less harmful. But when you put such thoughts into action—whether overtly or secretly—you develop new impressions worse than those which are spent in the act. These new impressions root even more firmly in your mind.¹

Meher Baba then goes on to say that taking his name is like getting under a mosquito net. The mosquitoes may still be there but the net keeps them from stinging. Similarly, by remembering the name of the Master, thought and desires will still be there but their sting will be gone.

This account reveals, for example, the wisdom of the Eastern Orthodox Hesychasts' emphasis on the prayer of the heart, or Jesus prayer, for focusing attention and affection on the Lord and Master. The constant remembrance of God's name is a feature of Sufism also, as well as devotional streams in other traditions, such as Bhakti Yoga and Pure Land Buddhism. However, it is important to note also that this repetition of the Name must be from the heart, not merely the mind or mouth.

God does not listen to the language of the tongue which constitutes *Japs* (mental repetitions), *Mantras* (verbal repetitions), *Zikra* (either kind of repetition), and devotional songs. He does not listen to the language of the mind which constitutes meditation, concentration and thoughts about God. He listens only to the language of the heart, which constitutes love.²

Purification is aimed at transcending self-interest. Pursuit of self-interest “attaches” one to the world so that one cannot be in the world but not of it. The first work of self-cultivation is eradicating the weeds of desire and aversion that are rooted in serving self instead of God. In the final analysis, one is either serving God or serving self.

Self-interest must be brought under control and redirected toward what is truly important, the spiritual. In the words of Joshua, “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”³ This results in transcending attachment to the body and the world, which lack real being since they are subject to change. Instead, one becomes attached to what has real being in that it is unchanging and imperishable, i.e., “living.” One no longer identifies oneself with what is “dead,” i.e., matter, body and world, but rather with that which is “living,” i.e., spirit, or soul.

¹ Meher Baba. *Listen, Humanity*. Narrated and Edited by Don E. Stevens. (Channel Islands Companion Books, 1982), p. 43-45.

² Meher Baba. *The Path of Love*. , p. 70. Italics added. *Jap* is Hindi for Sanskrit *japa*.

³ Joshua 24:15.

This transcending of attachment is signified in *The Gospel of Thomas* by one's coming to realize that the world is "dead" matter in contrast to "living" spirit embodied in matter. God's immanence in the body is the soul (spirit). God is also immanent in the world as its ground of being. The Divine Presence is both within us and also in the world around us. We do not see it because our spiritual eye is veiled from its sight. This veil needs to be removed, and this is the work of purification.

THE LIVING AND THE DEAD

According to Saying 56, the world is a "corpse," that is, the material world is lifeless and "dead." This epitomizes the profane view of the world common to most people. To them matter appears inert, even though quantum physics now knows that mass is dense energy, oscillating at different wave lengths. In fact, because the world is "dead" matter, human beings can do as they please with it. We are now reaping the consequences of that thinking.

It is only true that the world is dead matter if one takes the world to be separately existent. However, if one knows the ground of being as immanent, then one knows the world as the manifestation of God. Both Saying 3 and 22 make clear that the view of *The Gospel of Thomas* is nondualistic. *The Gospel of Thomas* neither deprecates matter, nor involves a duality of matter and spirit. Rather, *Thomas* emphasizes transcending duality. By transcending attachment is required for transcending duality, for attachments maintain the illusion of separation of self and world.

In spiritual parlance, desires leading on the one hand to grasping and clinging and on the other to resisting and avoiding are the enemy. This is the meaning of the phrase, "the world, the flesh and the devil." "The world" in this sense symbolizes greed and its consequences. "The flesh" symbolizes lust and its consequences. "The devil" symbolizes the tendency of the ego toward self-interest and self-importance as the basis of "temptation" to lust and greed. When self-interest is blocked or self-importance is challenged, then anger flares up. Such is the life of the worldly.

The sacred view of the world stands in contrast to the profane view. The sacred view sees God's presence in the world as the immanent ground of being. In this view of the world as the manifestation of God all things are holy.

According to Saying 80, the world is "a body." This signifies that the world of matter is as the body in relation to the soul. The soul of the world is the immanence of God. Again, not to realize this is to take the world for an end in itself. If one judges one's success in life on the basis of worldly accomplishments or possession, one thereby makes it impossible to be "in the world and not of it." Anchored to the world through the physical body with which one identifies, one has nothing but the material, which one must inevitably give up at death. Such a person is already dead in the spiritual sense.

Saying 59 advises us to turn to what is alive while we are alive, that is, to the indwelling Spirit as “the breath of God,” which God breathed into Adam’s nostrils to impart life the body He fashioned from the dirt of the earth, according to the biblical creation story. This is the real life, existing within us as soul (spirit). It is also at the core of the world as immanent ground, the “soul” of the world, of which the material, phenomenal aspect is merely the perishable body.

What is alive within us is “living spirit” as God’s presence or immanence. This presence is in the soul as spirit and in all beings as their immanent ground. As “living,” that is, immortal, this immanence stands in contrast to animal bodies that perish and physical objects that constantly change, coming to be for a time only to pass away, for even oceans dry up and mountains crumble. While this presence ceases to exist in the bodies that pass away and objects that change, it is eternal, since it is the spirit of God.

According to Saying 87, “wretched is a [human] body that depends on a body [the world],” that is, the life in which one takes oneself to be the physical body in the material world. This is the state of materialists, who know they face the inevitable death of the body and live constantly in dread of death. In order to assuage this dread, they occupy themselves with stimulation in order to avoid the terrible experience of boredom, a state of malaise affected with this underlying anxiety.

ANGST

Heidegger named this existential fear, “Angst,” German for “dread.”¹ *Angst* expresses itself in the underlying anxiety one feels as a result of being bound up in time as a human being, and realizing the certainty of one’s mortality as one’s end in time.

Kierkegaard had seen this anxiety resulting from fear of death as positive in that it propels a person toward the “leap of faith.” Heidegger reinterpreted this impetus as the thrust toward “freedom.” This Heidegger saw in terms of the Greek conception of truth as unveiling or “unconcealment,” whereas it is usually thought of as the correspondence of thoughts with things. Yet, the Greek word for “truth” is *aletheia*, literally “unveiling.” The human being is a “possibility for freedom” through the realization of existence as sheer presence. Because being is ambiguous, the authentic state of being human is to question.

Questioning existence opens one to transcendence and frees one from becoming crystallized in one’s views. Those who become crystallized are not only doomed to certain death but are also already “dead” before they die. For Heidegger, the act of

¹ Søren Kierkegaard’s *The Concept of Dread* (1844) influenced Heidegger in this. Søren Kierkegaard. *The Concept of Dread*. Translated by Walter Lowrie. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957).

questioning is itself the answer, for it brings one in touch with the ambiguity of the human condition, whose only certainty is death. Yet, through open, honest and penetrating questioning one is able to touch existence as sheer presence. In sheer presence, existence is revealed in the present moment. The now is the existential basis of being in time and sequential experience of worldly events.¹ Indeed, in Saying 91, Jesus rebukes his questioners for not knowing how to discern the present moment.

Saying 87 continues by contrasting the body dependent on body with the soul dependent on duality: "... and wretched is the soul that depends on these two [subject and object, self and world]." Even one who believes in the afterlife but is still overshadowed by identification with the body undergoes the consequence of all the attachments to the world that this identification entails, in accordance with the divine law, "As you sow, so shall you reap."² Thus the believer, in contrast to the materialist is oppressed with guilt.³

It is not fashionable today to emphasize the morbidity inherent in relative existence, which occurs when one identifies with the body and pursues the worldly, chasing after fame, fortune, power and pleasure. Nevertheless, perennial wisdom has consistently admonished against such pursuits as shortsighted and foolish. Identifying oneself with a changing, perishable form instead of realizing that the soul is unchangeable and immortal in nature results in the spiritual ignorance that veils the eye of the heart. This conceals one's true nature as spiritual (soul) rather than material (body). It is the poverty in which those who do not know themselves abide, according to Saying 3.

INDWELLING SPIRIT

Many scholars initially argued that *The Gospel of Thomas* was chiefly Gnostic because it embraced the notion of the dichotomy between matter and spirit, with matter being the prison of spirit. Some have also argued that Thomas is a later document reflecting the intrusion of Platonic Orphism into Christian theology. But

¹ This interpretation draws from many of Heidegger's writings. Heidegger's manner of expression is dense. To claim that Heidegger "said" anything other than what he wrote in his turgid prose implies a controversial interpretation, since there is little agreement among scholars. This is my understanding of what Heidegger was driving at, influenced by my own perspective. Whether Heidegger would agree with this reading remains questionable. Like Buddha and Wittgenstein, Heidegger was uninterested in interpretations of his thought in the interest of understanding. Instead, he wanted others to "see" what he saw and was attempting to elucidate.

² Galatians 6: 7.

³ In *The Concept of Dread*, Kierkegaard focuses on guilt as the basis of dread.

it could also be asserted that the influence might have been Hindu or Buddhist, if it were plausible that such diffusion was credible.

However, the teaching that identification with bodily form prevents one from realizing one's true nature as unlimited is a key fundamental of perennial wisdom. This notion is gnostic rather than only Gnostic.

The form with which one identifies need not be gross, e.g., the physical body, limited mind or psychological personality with most people associate themselves. Identification with bodily form lasts as long as duality persists, regardless of whether the bodily form is gross, subtle or causal.

These traditions also teach that the veil of identification with a form is removed by realizing one's true nature as a spiritual being, that is, as the immortal soul. According to perennial wisdom, this veil is constituted of latent impressions in the mind, which were accumulated previously and stored in deep memory. According to esoteric teaching, this deep memory (Sanskrit *chit*) constitutes the mental or causal "body." Spiritual practice is ordered to cleanse the system of the dross that conceals this underlying reality that is waiting to be discovered within. This is the inner meaning of the saying, "What you have within you will save you if you enliven it."¹

The Indwelling Spirit is within everyone, guiding the process intuitively, even though the aspirant often must struggle in the "holy war" against self-interest owing to egoism. Spiritual unfolding is the progressive realization of the Holy Spirit or the Spirit of Truth. This personal interior revelation is a key element of both the Way of Jesus and perennial wisdom in general.

MANONASH

According to perennial wisdom, the real death is the annihilation of limited individuality that underlies separation from God as the only reality. This limited individuality is the "original sin" that separates one from God, not through any personal fault but owing to the latent impressions accumulated over the course of evolution to the human form. The initial impression is the original question, Who am I?

The ensuing attempts to answer this question produce a succession of failed answers, such as "I am stone," "I am vegetable," "I am worm," "I am fish," "I am fowl," and "I am animal," culminating in "I am human." However, although a human being has developed full consciousness capable of realizing God, the impressions accumulated during evolution to the human form prevent this.

¹ Saying 70.

Therefore, a human being has to continue asking, “Who am I?” for many more lifetimes during which even more impressions are gathered as old ones are spent up.

These impressions are stored in the causal body, creating a veil over the soul, thereby giving rise to a limited mind. When the soul identifies with this limited mind and the body it enlivens, it takes itself to be a limited individual in the state of spiritual ignorance. Not realizing one’s true nature as “living” spirit, one consequently fears the death of the body as personal annihilation. This engenders a pervasive subconscious anxiety that sometimes rises to the surface as the fear of death.

Spirituality, or involution, is concerned with annihilating these impressions. Annihilation of the impressions of the causal or mental body results in extinguishing the limited mind. According to Patanjali’s *Yoga Sūtras*, union is gained by extinguishing the mind’s activity (Sanskrit: *chitta-vritti nirodhah*).¹ In Vedānta and Buddhism, this takes place at the point of “blowing out” (Sanskrit: *nirvana*, Pali: *nibbana*), and in Sufism at the moment of “annihilation” (Arabic: *fana*). Meher Baba calls this *manonash*, literally the extinction (Sanskrit: *nash*) of the limited mind (*manas*).

The process of purification is concerned with countering and then annihilating the accumulated impressions by exhausting their energy. In the Vedic tradition this is called roasting the seeds of karma so that they cannot sprout as desires.

Masters caution, however, that one’s own effort is only preparatory. Grace is necessary for the final stroke of realization, in which the last vestiges of separation are removed. In Qabalah, the soul’s union with God (*Hebrew: yechidah*) takes place when God’s “face” is “repaired,” that is, self and world are returned to their original unity. This happens simultaneous with the coming of the messiah. This is implied, for example, in Jesus’ saying, “No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”² “The Son (Messiah) chooses those to whom to reveal the Father (Truth): “Jesus said, ‘I disclose my mysteries to those [worthy] of my mysteries,’ and ‘I will choose you, one from a thousand and two from ten thousand and these will be established as one alone.’”³ The meaning of *yechidah* is “one alone.” In the Qabalistic teaching *yechidah* is the supreme level of soul, “one alone” or “the single one,” in the sense of being identical with God as absolute unity.

¹ Patanjali. Sūtra 2.

² Matthew 11:27, Luke 10:22.

³ Saying 62, 23.

ILLUMINATION

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.¹

ILLUMINATION

There are many stages of purification through which the soul must pass before reaching the lofty stages called “enlightenment.” The preliminary state of enlightenment is *illumination* and the more advanced states are the two stages of unification, namely *divine union* of the lover and Beloved, in which some distinction persists, and *realization of identity in the nondual state*, where only One exists as Absolute.

Purification is necessary to ameliorate the lower impressions that one has gathered. These lower impressions are the consequence of selfish actions performed through thought, word or deed, which are called “sins” in theological parlance. Lower impressions are ameliorated as the effects of one’s sins are purged both through repentance and also by performing good works. When the lower impressions are sufficiently ameliorated, then illumination dawns.

Not everyone traverses the inner planes consciously, thereby experiencing these enlightened stages of involution while in the body. Masters take most people through the planes veiled because conscious experience is unnecessary for realization and can also prove an obstacle to arriving at the goal as swiftly as possible. Those who do not have these experiences in the body enjoy them in the afterlife before reincarnation to continue the journey toward realization.

The sages say that most people go at least partially veiled. So, it is not a misinterpretation that one sees the Beatific Vision after quitting this body, for this is the case with many people. The misinterpretation lies in “only.” Some do traverse the spiritual path consciously as mystics, and they have left testimonies reporting about their journey of ascent. The testimony of mystics to the contrary shows that it is possible to see God in this life, unless the mystics are either mistaken or dissembling. It seems rather farfetched to think that all who are considered the most spiritual and moral are dissembling.

For example, one of the best-known Christian mystics is St. Teresa of Avila, and one of the most loved mystical works is *The Interior Castle or The Mansions*.² Even

¹ Matthew 5:8.

² St. Teresa of Avila. *The Interior Castle or The Mansions*. Translated from the Autograph of St. Teresa of Jesus by The Benedictines of Stanbrook. Revised, with Notes and an Introduction, by the Very Rev. Fr. Benedict Zimmerman, O.C.D. Third Edition with

the title, *The Mansions*, indicates that Teresa appreciated the inner meaning of Jesus' assertion, "In my Father's house, there are many mansions."¹ Teresa lists seven "mansions," corresponding to different types of mystical experience that occur on the mystic's journey through the inner planes of consciousness.

Few would claim that spiritual luminaries like St. Teresa were consciously dissembling, or even intentionally exaggerating. Could mystics be mistaken then in thinking that their mystical experiences correspond to higher realms on the spiritual ladder?

One cannot be mistaken about one's experience, but one can be mistaken about its interpretation. Clearly, mystics have experiences that seem to them to be awareness of spiritual realities rather than states of mind induced, for example, sense deprivation or auto-suggestion, hence, merely imagination, fantasies, or hallucinations.

But are the mystics mistaken about interpreting these experiences in terms of the existence of angels, heavens, powers, ecstasies, visions, and the various state of the soul and even God? The mystics' answer is: First, have such experience for yourself and then decide on this basis.

Their claim is that such experiences are self-validating in that they are indubitable owing to their very character. Mystics have complete conviction that what they experience is more real than ordinary experience and that what they report is true. Others can choose whether to believe them.

LIGHT

When mystics speak of "light," they are referring to the spiritual "light" or effulgence that is seen with the spiritual eye, also called "the eye of the heart," although those with refined perception can also see it with the physical eyes.

There are different levels of this light. In the Vedic tradition, they are carefully distinguished by separate words. The light that associated with the state of illumination is called *tejas* in Sanskrit. The illumination of this light is a property of *sattva* (purity, illumination), one of the three *gunas* or primordial constituents of creation, along with *rajas* (energy) and *tamas* (inertia). These do not have corresponding equivalents in English, so they are often not translated. This light is visible to the spiritual eye in the state of knowing the light of the mind directly. Just as ordinary eyes see but cannot see themselves, ordinary eyes see by using the light

Additional Notes (London: Thomas Baker, 1921). Public Domain.

URL=<<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/teresa/castle2.i.html>>.

¹ John 14:2.

of the mind but they cannot see that light itself. However, when the spiritual eye is open, the light of the mind becomes spiritually visible.

This is the inner light or effulgence, called *prakaasha* in Sanskrit. *Praakasha* is the effulgence or “light” of pure consciousness. When reflected in limited awareness (*buddhi*), it is the light of the mind and the light of life. It is the basis of creation. This is the light the saints see reflected in creation when they see God in the state of God-Consciousness (*bhagavan chaitanya*).

There are several other terms for “light” in Sanskrit. *Jyotih* is the light of the heavenly bodies. These are considered deities on the subtle level, and by extension *jyotii* signifies the inner light. *Deepa* is the light of a flame, such as lamplight. The gross manifestation of the heavenly light and earthly light are the only light visible to the ordinary eye. *Tejas* is the spiritual effulgence, corresponding to *nur/noor* in Arabic and Hebrew *or/aur*, as in “God’s light.” According to the testimony of mystics worldwide from immemorial, spiritual illumination is “seeing the light,” in the deeper meaning of this idiom.

God himself is described in terms of light, for example, in the Qabalistic phrase, “infinite light” (Hebrew: *ayn sof aur*). God has three aspects that can be distinguished intellectually, although God ever remains indivisibly one. *Ayn* means “nothing.” God’s essence is formless, unconceivable and unimaginable, beyond even the concept of unity. God’s existence is infinite. *Ayn sof* means “no end.” God is also the Creator. God creates through his creative powers, the Ten Sefiroth, equated in Qabalah with Elohim.¹ These are said to be “lights.” The light of which these ten are “refractions is God’s infinite light (Hebrew: *ayn sof aur*). As such, the Sefiroth are God’s primary intelligibilities, or “names” in the ancient sense as names of divine attributes and powers not separate from God.

There is a spiritual light immanent in creation that is a reflection of God’s self-effulgence. This is the inner meaning of God’s saying, “Let there be light,” which is expressed more explicitly in the prologue of John’s gospel.² This light can be seen with the spiritual eye. Sometimes its reflection is even visible with the outer eye, as after being with God Moses face reportedly shone, as did Jesus’ at the transfiguration.³ The Aaronic blessing attributes this light to God’s presence also: “The Lord make his face shine upon you...”⁴ Those with refined perception report

¹ Genesis 1:1.

² Genesis 1:3-5, John 1:9.

³ Exodus 34:29-35, Matthew 17:2.

⁴ Numbers 6:25, also Psalms 4:6.

seeing this kind of effulgence in humans, as well as other life forms from angels to plant life.¹

Qabalah describes the ascension through the inner worlds as a process of illumination. In *The Book of Psalms*, we read: “For with Thee is the fountain of life: in Thy light shall we see light.”² *The Book of Illumination* (Hebrew: *Sepher Ha-Bahir*) is a key text of Qabalah that equates the Divine Presence in the world with divine light:

What is this Divine Presence? We have said that it is the light that was derived from the first Light, which is Wisdom. It also surrounds all things, as it is written (Isaiah 6:3), “The whole earth is filled with His glory.”³

The Way of Jesus also uses the symbolism of light. For example, Jesus calls himself “the light of the world.”⁴ Light is also identified with life, “the light of men.”⁵ Paul says that God’s light gives us the light of knowledge and that this light is in earthen pots (physical bodies) that we may know it is from God and not from us.⁶

The Gospel of Thomas also uses light as a symbol for knowledge:

Jesus said, “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear. There is light within one who is enlightened and it lights up the whole world. If it does not shine, it is dark.”⁷

Jesus also says that his followers come from the light:

Jesus said, ‘If they say to you, “Where do you come from?” say to them, “We came from the light: the place where the light is of its own, is established, and manifested in their image.”’ “If they say to you, “Who are you?” say, “We are its children, and we are set apart by the living father.” If they say to you, “What evidence of the Father is in you?” say to them, “It is activity along with rest.”⁸

¹ Meher Baba. “The Aura and Halo.” *The Path of Love*. p. 71-76.

² Psalm 36: 9. King James Version.

³ Pseudonymous. *Sepher Ha-Bahir* or “*The Book of Illumination*.” Attributed to Rabbi Nehunia ben haKana. Translated by Aryeh Kaplan. 171, p. 44.
URL=<<http://mysticalkeys.com/library/KBLH/bahir.pdf>>.

⁴ John 8:12, 9:5.

⁵ John 1:4, 8:12.

⁶ 2 Corinthians 4:5-7.

⁷ Saying 24. See also John 12:46.

⁸ Saying 50.

“Came from the light, the place where light is of its own” signifies the self-effulgence light of God. “Is established,” or “established itself,” literally “stood,” signifies the creative act in which *Elohyim*, literally “gods,” created the heavens and the earth. According to Qabalah, *Elohyim* signifies the Ten Sefiroth as Divine Powers, which are not separate from God.¹ “The heavens and the earth” signifies not only earth and sky but also the higher worlds, the subtle world or “World of Formation” (*olam ha yetzirah*) and the causal world or “the World of Creation” (*olam ha buhriyah*). The highest world is the World of Emanation, also the Supernal World (*olam ha atziluth*). Creation is the manifestation of this supernal world, manifested as the image of its light. “Manifesting as the image of its light” signifies the reflection of the Divine Intelligibility in creation.

The phrase “children of light” appears several times in the canonical gospels, once being attributed to Jesus himself.² Paul also calls Jesus’ followers “children of light,” in contrast to those of darkness.³ It has essentially the same meaning as “children of the living Father,” since life (immortality) and light (knowledge) are attributes of God.⁴

“Set apart” can be rendered as “elect” or “chosen.” It means that these people have been chosen on account of their being ripe.⁵

“Activity along with rest” means deep inner peace along with daily life. In a deeper sense it also signifies the Unmanifest Absolute, whose unmanifest aspect is the eternal silence of pure spirit, the real place of rest, and whose manifest aspect is the incessant activity of creation. At the most profound level of realization, this is the co-existence of the eternal silence of the Unmanifest along with the unmanifest dynamism of Self-Knowledge in which everything in all the three worlds is known in the eternal Now, yet where knower, known and knowing are identical. The one who witnesses the activity of creation is at rest, while also appearing involved in the world. Thus, the “evidence of the Father” is being in the world (activity) but not of it (rest). One is in the world as the body-mind, but one is not of the world insofar as one is the silent witness to activity, identifying not with body or mind but with pure consciousness at rest in itself.

¹ God’s powers can be conceived on the analogy of human abilities. Our abilities are not separate from ourselves. Nor do our abilities exist independently of each other. All these functions are intertwined in an integral human being. For example, humans do not “have” an intellect or will like they have tools, even though we may speak of them similarly. These are mental functions characteristic of the human form of life.

² Luke 16:8, John 12:36.

³ 1 Thessalonians 5:5, also Ephesians 5:8.

⁴ Saying 3.

⁵ Saying 23, 49.

Nevertheless, the illuminated are called to be active also. To the degree that one has received the light, one should not hide it under a basket:

Jesus said, "What you hear in your [inner] ear, shout from the rooftops. No one lights a lamp and puts it under a basket, nor do they put it in a hidden place. Rather they put it on a lamp stand so that everyone who comes in and goes out can see its light."¹

Moreover, according to Saying 32 a truly enlightened person is like a mountain-top fortress which cannot be concealed: "Jesus said, "A city built on a high mountain and with a strong foundation cannot fall, but neither can it be hidden." An elaboration is found in the New Testament, where Jesus says to his disciples:

You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to the whole house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.²

In the New Testament, emphasis falls on the external. In *The Gospel of Thomas*, focus is on the internal. In Matthew, light is used as a symbol of good works. In *The Gospel of Thomas* it is generally on the light of the pure heart from which good works flow. These are not opposing ideas. The light of a pure heart and good works are complementary ways of expressing similar results. The emphasis is different. However, in this saying Jesus says in both the New Testament and *Thomas* to "shout it from the rooftops." Those with light have a responsibility to shine this light in the world irrespective of consequences to them, as Jesus himself accepted.

LOGOS AND LIGHT

In the mystical interpretation of the Jesus tradition the *logos* or Word of God is God's infinite self-knowledge. John's prologue identifies the Word with light, a symbol of knowledge.³ Jesus also identifies himself with the Truth.⁴

In the Vedic tradition absolute knowledge is called *veda*, and the self-effulgent light is called *prakaasha*. In Qabalah transcendental knowledge is a characteristic of the world of emanation (Hebrew: *olam ha atziluth*) and God's infinite light is known as *ayn sof aur*. In Sufism absolute knowledge is called Truth (Arabic: *al Haqq*), and God's infinite light is called *nur Allah*, which is the status of the Messenger of God. In Islam Muhammad is called God's Light, *Nur Allah*.

¹ Saying 33.

² Matthew 5:14-16.

³ John 1:3-9.

⁴ John 14:6.

The “place of rest” is comparable to *samadhi* in the Vedic tradition, which is the “empty” state of pure awareness devoid of specific content. Buddhists call this “void” or “emptiness” (Sanskrit: *shunyata*) and Taoists call it the “empty state” (Chinese: *wu ji*). In Qabalah, this is called “nothing” (Hebrew: *ayin*) and “not” (*lo*). In Sufism it is called “annihilation” (Arabic: *fana*) and “not” (*la*). The Way of Jesus calls this state “rest,” in the sense of both “unchanging” and “eternal,” and also as being “the peace the world cannot give.”¹

Jesus’ use of light as a symbol of spiritual knowledge, and well as his saying that we come from the light, are entirely consistent with a mysticism grounded in Hebrew scripture. According to Qabalah, God is infinite (Hebrew *ayn sof*). *Ayn sof* literally means without end. God’s own light is also infinite. God’s infinite light (*ayn sof aur*) is God’s infinite consciousness as omniscient.

God’s self-knowledge or “infinite light” is transcendent; the “light” with which creation began is a reflection, as it were, of that infinite light. Creation has no light of its own. Rather, it reflects God’s light as the moon reflects the light of the sun.

Indeed, in perennial wisdom, the moon is often used as a symbol of the limited mind “reflecting” the light of Infinite Consciousness, the source and ground of the mind. The God-realized embody Truth, the Absolute Knowledge of Infinite Consciousness. This knowledge is the self-effulgent light of pure consciousness, beyond reflection. The illumined see God’s light in its most refined reflection and they also are acquainted with the mind that reflects it. Those who are still at the purification stage apprehend a dimmer reflection of God’s light and they do not recognize it as the light of God, or even of the mind. However, their inner vision becomes clearer and clearer as purification progresses.

SOULS, BODIES AND WORLDS

According to Qabalah, the first reflection of the infinite light in the relative, manifest creation is the level of the World of Creation (Hebrew *olam ha buriyah*). In the Vedic tradition this is called the causal or mental world (Sanskrit: *karana loka* or *mano bhuvan*). In Sufism it is called the mental sphere (Arabic: *alam-e-jabrut*). In Plato’s cave analogy, this corresponds to the world of forms or ideas seen in the light of the sun by those who escape the cave.²

The next lower world in Qabalah is the World of Formation (*olam ha yetzirah*). In the Vedic tradition it is the subtle world (*sukshma loka*) or world of energy (*pran bhuvan*), and in Sufism the angelic world (*alam-e-malakut*). It is at this level of energy and life that reflections of the “patterns” in the mind of God, as it were,

¹ Exodus 33:14, Psalm 116:7, Mathew 11:28-29.

² Plato, *The Republic*, 514A-521B.

begin to take shape in the process of creation. In Plato's cave analogy, this is the level at which the prison guards use a fire to cast shadows of patterns of the forms on a wall.

The lowest reflection of the infinite light is in the gross, physical world, called the world of action in Qabalah (*olam ha asiyah*). In the Vedic tradition it is called the gross world (*sthula loka*) or food world (*anna bhuvan*), and in Sufism, the world of humanity (*alam-e-nasut*) and the world of physical bodies (*alam-e-ajsam*). In Plato's cave analogy, the prisoners, chained so they can only see the wall, not the patterns or fire, see only shadows cast on the wall of their cave and they take them for real.

In the view of perennial wisdom the light of the mind is also a reflection of the infinite light of God's knowledge.¹ This light gets progressively dimmer in the descending worlds, as it gets more and more obscured by layers of impressions covering the mind. This is reflected in the mind's projection of grosser stages of the finite.

Human beings reflect the infinite light in their minds differently depending on their levels of spiritual advancement. This is determined by the degree to which purification has decreased the accumulation of impressions covering the mind and limiting it.

The causal world is known through the causal body (Sanskrit: *karana sharira* and Arabic *jism-e-altaf*) by the mental-conscious soul (Hebrew: *Chayah, Neshamah*). Only the illumined identify with this body and are aware of its light. The subtle world is known through the subtle body (*sukshma sharira, jism-e-latif*) by the subtle-conscious soul (*Ruach*). Those in subtle consciousness are those who have embarked on the spiritual path through the inner planes but have not yet become sufficiently purified to be illumined. The gross, physical world is known through the gross, physical body (*sthula sharira, jism-e-kasif*) by the gross-conscious soul (*Nefesh*).

These "bodies" are not to be thought of as separate entities but rather as multi-dimensional, "nested" within each other, so to speak. The higher level is a more refined dimension, and the lower a less refined expression of the higher. These "bodies" are the successive "sheaths," "shells," or "folds" in the veils of impressions that obscure Infinite Consciousness as Universal Self, which Vedanta calls *atma*, Sufis *jan*, and Qabalah *yechidah*. These folds of impressions determine whether the soul is in gross, subtle or mental consciousness by dimming the light of

¹ "And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." Genesis 1:26 (King James Version). The "image" is God's own knowledge of Himself and of all in Him, which humans are capable of realizing. The "likeness" is the level of a person's knowledge depending on his state of spiritual advancement.

pure consciousness. As the veils are removed the light or knowledge shines brighter and one “ascends,” although this “ascension” or “expansion of awareness” is simply due to the thinning of the accumulated impressions, revealing more of the light that is already present. For this light is the self-effulgence of God’s immanent presence.

Parenthetically, the “dance of the seven veils” is a metaphor for the drawing back of these veils as one climbs the “rungs” of the ladder of ascent through the seven inner planes constituting the spiritual path. Infinite consciousness does not require any body because it is the self-effulgence light of knowledge itself, knowing directly without reflection in the mirror of limited mind.

Spiritual advancement is the progressive ascension of the aspirant through the three worlds — gross, subtle and causal — toward unification, initially as the divine union of lover and Beloved and finally as realization of the identity of absolute being and infinite consciousness in the nondual state. The aspirant makes primary use of the different “bodies” — gross, subtle and mental — in ascending through the three worlds toward realization of Truth. Through the different bodies, the gross, subtle and then mental-conscious soul respectively garners the needed gross, subtle and causal experiences to unwind its bonds.

Aquinas observed that knowledge is in accordance with the mode of the knower. As the mode of knowing becomes more refined, so does the knowledge. The various visions reported by mystics testify to observations made while on this journey of ascent. One of the best known in the Way of Jesus is Teresa of Avila’s *The Interior Castle*, her visionary report of the ladder of ascent.¹ The *Divan-i-Hafiz* is the poetic rendition of the spiritual path by Hafiz, a Sufi Perfect Master (*qutub*).² In *God Speaks*, Meher Baba provides a prose description of the path and goal, which is summarized in Appendix Two: Meher Baba on the Ten States of God.

In spite of the manner of expression, the model is essentially the same. Even within one tradition, different manners of expression are used to describe essentially the same model. In Christianity Teresa is visionary, Dante poetic, and Eckhart philosophical. Similarly, in Sufism, Hafiz uses love poetry; Rumi, a combination of poetry and teaching stories, and ibn ‘Arabi, mostly conceptual prose, although he sometimes also waxes poetic.

IMAGE AND LIKENESS

The seeming repetition of similar terms like “image and likeness” may appear to be redundant or added as a matter of emphasis. However, in the ancient way of speaking they are not redundant, as may appear. Scripture does use repetition for

¹ St. Teresa of Avila. *The Interior Castle or The Mansions*.

² Hafiz. *The Divan: The Divan-I-Hafiz*. Translated by Lieut. Col. H. Wilbeforce Clarke. (Calcutta Government of India Central Printing Office 1891).

emphasis. Rather, these terms were carefully chosen for a reason. When different terms are used instead of repeating the same term, a subtle distinction is often implied. Such a distinction exists in this case.

According to the Genesis account, man is made in the image (*tselem*) and likeness (*demut*) of God.¹ As in English “image” and “likeness,” *tselem* signifies “identical,” whereas *demut* implies only “like” or “resembling.”

Some biblical scholars argue that the soul, which is God’s very “breath” breathed into the nostrils of Adam and passed to his descendents, is God’s “image,” (*tselem*) that is, formless and boundless spirit. The body, on the other hand is fashioned from clay; hence, it is only a faint shadow of God’s reality. Therefore, it called a likeness (*demut*) rather than an image (*tselem*). Through this physical likeness the image as spirit is projected into the material world as a living being endowed with intelligence. Through procreation this image and likeness is transmitted across generations.²

In Judaic mysticism, the image (*tselem*) is the soul as “the unified one” or “the single one” (Hebrew: *yechidah*), which is identical in being with God as one (*echad*).³ The mental, subtle and physical bodies are merely likenesses (*demuth*) appearing in the relative, manifest creation through which the soul is projected as mental conscious, subtle conscious or gross conscious, knowing respectively the causal, subtle, and gross worlds.

It is a cardinal teaching of normative Judaism, Christianity and Islam prohibiting the making of a “graven image” of God, that is, an artificial representation, using the likeness of anything in order to worship God.⁴ Normative Judaism and Islam interpret this to mean that no representation of God shall be made at all. Normative Christianity permits artistic representations, such as Michelangelo’s anthropomorphic depiction of God the Father imparting the spark of life to Adam, provided that they are taken as symbolic and are not worshipped as idols.

Zoroastrians use fire in their temples to represent God, as does Exodus, where God appears to Moses in the burning bush and leads the Israelites through the desert by night in the form of a pillar of fire. Moreover, most ancient peoples, including the Hebrews, used a sacrificial fire as “God’s mouth.” Like breath, fire is a symbol for spirit in terms of light, power, and awesome quality. However, neither Zoroastrians nor Hebrews worshipped fire as such.

¹ Genesis 1:26.

² Genesis 5:3.

³ *Yechidah* is related to *echad*, meaning “one,” as in *YHVH Echad*, “God is One.”

⁴ Exodus 20:4, Deuteronomy 4:16.

Fire is an apt symbol for another reason, heat. One can feel the heat of a fire at some distance. For the ancients who did not understand physics this must have suggested a presence. Thus, fire is also a symbol of God's presence or immanence in the world. Indeed, if one is spiritually sensitive it is possible to feel this presence associated with holy places or in the presence of holy people, or even from their relics or at their tombs. Arduous pilgrimages are often undertaken to such places or to meet such people.

THE IMAGE OF GOD

The "image" of God signifies that which is identical with God, namely, the breath or "spirit" God breathed into Adam's clay nostrils, bringing Adam to life in God's image as a spiritual being endowed with an immortal soul, of which the body is but a faint likeness. Therefore, no artificial image employing any likeness can be made that befits God's image. God's image is life (spirit) and light (knowledge), and his likeness is the human being as a physical being, endowed with life and intelligence and embodying the immortal soul as God's image.

Even deeper than this, perennial wisdom reveals that when the first human form is attained in the process of evolution through less developed forms of life, one has full consciousness, capable of realizing its nature as spirit, which is identical with God.¹ This is the true image of God in the human being. Qabalah calls this true nature of the soul, *yechidah*, "the unified one" or "the single one."

Before God breathed life into him, Adam was just a lifeless form made of clay. This form is the "likeness" of God's image in the manifest creation. The manifest is the expression of the "patterns" of God's "ideas." These likenesses partake of or participate in those divine "ideas" as God's image, as St. Augustine observed, Christianizing the Platonic account.²

Augustine did not posit that there are ideas *in* God's mind, as in ours, since this would introduce multiplicity into God. Rather, the divine ideas *are* the Divine Mind, which Augustine identified with Christ as Word (*logos*) as set forth in John 1. The divine ideas are the intelligibility (*logoi*) of the Divine Mind. They only

¹ Meher Baba. *God Speaks*. 2nd ed. p. 29. (1997 printing, p. 26-27).

² Augustine. *On Different Questions*, 46, 1-2; *De Trinitates* IV, 1, 3 and XV, 7, 13. Augustine Aurelius. *On the Trinity (De Trinitates)*. Translated by the Rev. Arthur West Haddam, B.D. Revised and annotated by the Rev. Professor W.G.T. Shed, D.D. Excerpted from Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series One, Volume 3 Edited by Philip Schiff, D.D., LL.D. American Edition, 1887 (Public Domain). Online Edition Copyright © 2004 by K. Knight.
URL=<<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1301.htm>>.

appear multiple through their myriad likenesses in creation. God is indivisible, while creation appears multiple, owing to the limitations of human knowledge.

Human beings who are not illumined are in lower levels of awareness, veiled by a thick accumulation of impressions. Hence they are capable of seeing only the “likenesses,” that is reflections or shadows, of Divine Reality. In gross consciousness, one sees only the physical by means of reflected light, and knows only by the reflected light of the mind. While they see in the light of both intelligence and physical light, they see only physical light. They do not see the light of intelligence directly, as in the state of illumination, let alone the light of God’s Self-knowledge, as in the nondual state in which the identity of absolute being and infinite consciousness is realized.

Human beings come from God’s light (knowledge). All minds are illuminated by God’s light. However, neither is the reflected light of the mind known directly, let alone God’s light itself, until one is illumined or realized. That is to say, while those in gross consciousness are aware that their eyes see with the light of the sun, neither are they directly aware of the life energy by which their bodies alive, nor are they aware of light of the mind by which they know. They merely *use* these, for their inner eye is not yet opened and able to see them. Similarly, those in subtle consciousness know the life energy directly, but not the light of the mind. Those in mental consciousness know the light of the mind, but have not yet realized God’s Self-knowledge.

Some have presumed that this view must be derived from Plato’s allegory of the cave.¹ However, the epistemological model of knowledge in different states of awareness put forward in Plato’s allegory is replicated widely in perennial wisdom. Should this be the shared experience of mystics, as the widespread testimony to it would suggest, there is no necessity to account for it on the basis of diffusion of influence or dissemination of ideas. Plato’s allegory can be interpreted in terms of the states of knowledge in the three worlds, gross, subtle and causal, a view found in the Vedic, Sufi, and Qabalistic traditions. The same model is found cross-culturally.

Similarly, Saying 83 admonishes that spiritual light must be discerned spiritually. This requires cleansing of “the eye of the heart,” as Sufis say poetically of the inner sight. Hence, the worldly people cannot see it, and they remain unaware of it even when it is shining brightly:

Jesus said, ‘Likenesses are visible to people, but the light which illumines them remains hidden. The light of the Father will become manifest in the reflection of His light. But His image will remain hidden by His light.’”

¹ Plato, *The Republic*, 514A-521B.

“Likenesses are visible to people, but the light which illumines them remains hidden,” means that people only see likenesses, things, bodies, and not the reality underlying them, God as immanent ground, the image of God in the world. This image can be seen in its reflection in the light (presence) of the enlightened and also inferred through the evidence of their works. Sainly people emit an aura of bliss and peace in their presence. Moreover, their works are larger than life. However, God’s image (spirit) cannot be seen working in them by ordinary eyes because only the spiritual eye is able to see God’s self-effulgent light. Artists depict saints with halos of light around their heads, and this is taken to be symbolic. But those with eyes that can see, see this visually.¹

Only true saints actually see the truth of the saying, “The light of the Father ... becomes manifest in the reflection of His light,” through their knowing the light of the mind.² Jesus often said, “Let those who have (inner) ears to hear, hear.” He might also have said, “Let those who have (inner) eyes to see, see.”

This spiritual sight is reflected in the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are the pure in heart; for they will see God.”³ “Pure in heart” means having no selfish desires and only the desire for God, either personal (the Beloved) or impersonal (Truth). This is the spiritual meaning of asceticism, rather than austere practices or external renunciation.

According to perennial wisdom, only those who are “pure in heart” can enter the spiritual path that leads inexorably to seeing God and then to realizing God. “One must be pure in heart to enter into the life of the spirit and follow the yogas.”⁴

Prerequisite to seeing God is divesting oneself of worldly desires and aversions motivated by self-interest in order to attain one-pointed focus on God. Only those so purified “in heart” will have the vision of God’s light and see “face to face” in union. This spiritual principle is a key to my interpretation of *The Gospel of Thomas* based on perennial wisdom.⁵

But even the light of the mind is only a reflection of the self-effulgence of God’s Self-knowledge, God’s “image.” The reflected light of the mind seen directly in illumination still obscures God’s self-effulgence, in itself. The reflected light is still a likeness. This is the meaning of, “But His image will remain hidden by His light.”

¹ Meher Baba. *The Path of Love*, p. 71-76.

² Saying 83.

³ Matthew 5:8.

⁴ *Srimad Bhagavatam*, 11.14. Translated by Swami Prabhavananda, *The Wisdom of God*. Hollywood, CA: Vedanta Press, 1943, as cited in Whitall N. Perry, p. 484.

⁵ See, in particular, Saying 2, 27, 47, 49, 53-56, 58, 69, 75, 80-81, 89, 101.

Only those who are realized and have transcended duality know the image through identity.

KNOWING, SEEING AND BEING

There is a huge difference among knowing in the light of God's light, seeing God, and realizing union with God. The saints see the light of God in this life. The greatest saints know that God is the only reality, but they do not yet know that the soul is identical with God. Only those who realize God are directly acquainted with this ultimate truth of absolutely indivisible existence.

We have seen previously that there are four levels, gross, subtle, causal or mental, and unified, with corresponding levels of awareness, bodies through which these levels of awareness are projected, and four "worlds." These levels are nested within each other in ascending order, the one indivisible reality in its different degrees of expression.

Ordinary human beings are in gross consciousness. Those on the intermediate stages of the spiritual path are in subtle consciousness. Those who have reached enlightenment but not yet realization are in mental or causal consciousness. Those who have realized God are Infinite Consciousness. If they retain the body then they are Infinite Consciousness embodied.

Thus there are three levels of "enlightenment." Moreover, different teachers use it in different ways. Some use it to mean illumination and others God-realization. "Enlightenment" is therefore a confusing term, because its application is not always clear.

The first level of enlightenment is that of the saint of the fifth inner plane at the first level of the mental or causal. This person sees everything *in the light of* God, but neither sees God nor has realized God. This is sometimes called Cosmic Consciousness, e.g., in Sanskrit *turiyatita*, literally beyond "the fourth state," called Transcendental Consciousness, *turiya*. This person is directly acquainted with mind, whereas those at lower levels of awareness merely use mind without knowing it directly. This person sees everything in terms of the one mind and experiences unity in terms of this holistic experience of the mental or causal realm. This state is also called *illumination*.

The second level of enlightenment is that of the saint of the sixth inner plane at the second level of the mental or causal. This person sees God directly everywhere and as everything, as supernal light, but has not yet realized God. According to Meher Baba, "On the sixth plane, he sees God everywhere as glorious Effulgence."¹ Regarding this state, Meher Baba explained:

¹ Meher Baba, quoted in Bhau Kalchuri. *Lord Meher*. Vol. 18, p. 6157.

"One may intellectually believe that one is God and One with all. But one has to remove six 'veils' before one actually sees God everywhere. That seeing is more clear than your seeing this world with your eyes. To say 'I am God' is easy; but to experience it is extremely difficult."

This is sometimes called God Consciousness, e.g., in *bhagavan chaitanya*. This person sees everything *as* God and experiences unity in terms of God's effulgence or "light" as the being of all. In this state one experiences God as one, but one is not yet identified with God. This state is referred to variously as *seeing God face to face*, or *the Beatific Vision*. However, it is not yet the state of God-realization in the nondual state.

The aspirant at this stage is in the sixth plane of consciousness and sees God face to face in all His Glory. This aspirant experiences God's effulgence consciously and continually without a break. He experiences this without any fears of fluctuation in his continual and never-ending experiencing of 'seeing' the Glory of God. Even this most sublime experience of 'seeing' God face to face falls short of the only true experience — Union with God the Reality.¹

Why is this so difficult to achieve?

God can only be realized by loving Him with all the love at one's command — pure, simple and unadulterated love. When his love for God, and God alone, is at its zenith, true longing for Union with God is greatest, and the aspirant's ego assertion is then at its lowest point.²

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." Being pure in heart means having no selfish desires. This only happens when the impressions accumulated over ages are ameliorated, although not yet completely resolved, since all the impressions are completely resolved only after their inherent energy is exhausted. While amelioration of the impressions is necessary for illumination, the exhausting of the energy of the impressions is necessary for realization of identity in the nondual state. Unification is the next step on the spiritual path after illumination, just as illumination follows purification. Traversing these stages of the spiritual path, or "spiritual ladder," to realization is called variously "involution," "ascension," and climbing "the ladder of ascent."

The different planes, sometimes called "heavens," are the "rungs" of the spiritual ladder, although the planes are the actual spiritual stages while the heavens are the visionary experiences associated with them. In the stage of illumination, "seeing God" is a state of being rather than seeing a vision of God with a particular form,

¹ Adi K. Irani, Meher Baba's secretary in a letter written under Meher Baba's direction. Quoted in Bhau Kalchuri, *Lord Meher*, Vol. 19, p. 6283

² *Lord Meher*, Vol. 19, p. 6282.

although this may also occur, as some mystics report. According to a Sufi mystic, “When the gnostic’s eye is opened, his bodily eye is shut: they see nothing but Him.”¹

In this state, the illumined know that only God is real, in that all form is God’s manifestation. Illumined mystics know experientially by “seeing with the eye of the heart” that all form is superimposed on the one eternal, unchanging existence, which is the only reality. According to Meister Eckhart, “There is a power of sight which is superior to the eyes set in the head and more far-reaching than the heavens and the earth.”²

On one hand, normative Christianity interprets Jesus’ phrase “shall see God” to mean the Beatific Vision after death. According to a foundational norm this is possible only after the death of the body.

On the other hand, this is only one interpretation, which apparently does not fit the facts other than by denying the testimony of many mystics. According to the mystical interpretation a person who sufficiently purifies the heart will see God in this life by dying to self and being born again in spirit. Many mystics, including many that have arisen in the Jesus tradition, testify to this.

Many Christian mystics have testified to seeing God in this life. Moreover, many masters set forth the stages of the path, one of them being seeing God’s light reflected in pure mind, and another seeing God in all things.

These stages precede the final stage of the spiritual path, realizing God through complete identity in unqualified nondualism, the supreme stage of unification.

The third and supreme level of enlightenment is that of the God-realized. The God-realized have transcended duality completely and realize that the soul, *atma* in Sanskrit, is one with the Oversoul, *paramatma*, that is, God. In the Sanskrit of Vedanta, this is called *atma-brahm*, literally the Universal Self (*atma*) identical with Absolute Reality (*parabrahman*). This ultimate state is known as *Truth*, *identity*, *God-realization* or *realization*.

The God-realized realize Infinite Consciousness as the sole reality. If they retain the body and regain creation consciousness, they experience unity in terms of being one with everything, in that everything is included in Infinite Consciousness as the sole reality. In this state one *is* God, the uncreated light of Absolute Knowledge, and one also *knows* this as the truth of one’s own existence.

¹ Abu Sulayman al-Darani, quoted in Attar’s *Tadhkirat al-Awiya*. Translated by R. A. Nicholson. *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, April, 1906, p. 308.

² Pfeiffer. I. p. 277.

GOD-REALIZATION

According to perennial wisdom, there are many saints in comparison to those who realize God while in the body. Most who attain this realization do so either upon the death of the body or drop the body very soon thereafter, within a matter of days, for their work is completed. A few, however, realize God and retain consciousness of creation for some time while in the physical body, for they have further duty to creation. Among these are the Perfect Masters, *sadguru* in Sanskrit and *qutub* in Arabic. They are the teachers of humankind who guide the three worlds in accordance with the Divine Plan.

The Perfect Masters are those who have trod the path to the goal and realized God as Infinite Consciousness while retaining both human form and creation consciousness. Meher Baba calls them Man-God, although this is not gender specific, and either a man or a woman may occupy the office. There are always five Perfect Masters on earth guiding humanity in accordance with God's will "behind the scenes," although they may also publicly teach when the need arises.

Above them is the God-Man, "the Highest of the High." This aspect of God manifests directly in human form without needing to traverse the spiritual path. According to Meher Baba, the God-Man is the only perfect one who takes human form again and again, appearing in every age according to the needs of the time. The God-Man is the totality. When the God-Man takes human form, He experiences Himself as everything and as the source of everything, both immanent and transcendent. As such, He is the unmanifest self-knowledge of God as Infinite Consciousness. He is also Infinite Light, which expresses itself as the manifest aspect of God through finite minds as reflected lights.

John's gospel calls Jesus both the "word of God," identical to God, and "the light of all people."¹ Jesus speaks of himself as "the light of the world" and says that he has come as light in the world that the people should not be in darkness.² Jesus also tells his disciples, "You are the light of the world."³

The terms "word" and "light" clearly are references to the Genesis creation account. The Greek term *logos* means "word." Hence, it includes the notion of intelligibility, or the capacity to be known. Intelligence is the subjective pole of knowledge and intelligibility is the objective pole. The ancient Greek philosophers used *logos* as a technical term signifying cosmic order, which allows for rational comprehension. *Nous* is the intelligence that comprehends this intelligibility. *Nous* is the root of English "noetic," and *logos* the root of English "logical." For

¹ John 1:1-18

² John 9:5, 12:46.

³ Matthew 5:14.

Aristotle, God (*theos*) is self-knowing knowledge, the identity of *nous* and *logos*.¹ Early Christianity developed in a first and second century Hellenistic environment, where these ideas and terms were integral to the philosophical and theological context.

In the Septuagint, the first Greek translation of Hebrew scripture, the Greek term *logos* was used to translate Hebrew term *dabar*. Both these terms are translated into English as “word.” However, their etymologies are different, coming from different language groups and cultures, the Indo-European and the Semitic. *Logos* signifies intelligibility, rationality. *Dabar* signifies creativity, the ability to produce an effect. Both intelligibility and creativity are aspects of God’s nature, hence, inherent in God’s word. Jewish mystics interpret *dabar* in the sense of divine creativity. Fathers and Doctors of the Church, many of them mystics also, read the Greek translation, *logos*, in terms of intelligibility and rationality.

The Jewish Hellenistic philosopher Philo combined these senses of cosmic order, intelligibility, and creativity. The early Jesus tradition followed him in this. But being Greek in language and culture, especially after the destruction of Jerusalem and the parting of the ways with Judaism, The emphasis fell on intelligibility and rationality.

Yet, God’s intelligibility includes creativity, and vice versa. For God’s knowledge of Himself is infinite, therefore inclusive of the finite. As infinite knowing itself as infinite, God remains eternally unmanifest and transcendent. As infinite knowing

¹ Aristotle. *Metaphysics*. XII, 7. Translated by W. D. Ross. Public Domain.
URL=<<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/metaphysics.html>>.

"On such a [first] principle, then, depend the heavens and the world of nature. And it is a life such as the best which we enjoy, and enjoy for but a short time (for it is ever in this state, which we cannot be), since its actuality is also pleasure. (And for this reason are waking, perception, and thinking most pleasant, and hopes and memories are so on account of these.) And thinking in itself deals with that which is best in itself, and that which is thinking in the fullest sense with that which is best in the fullest sense. And thought thinks on itself because it shares the nature of the object of thought; for it becomes an object of thought in coming into contact with and thinking its objects, so that thought and object of thought are the same. For that which is capable of receiving the object of thought, i.e. the essence, is thought. But it is active when it possesses this object. Therefore the possession rather than the receptivity is the divine element which thought seems to contain, and the act of contemplation is what is most pleasant and best. If, then, God is always in that good state in which we sometimes are, this compels our wonder; and if in a better this compels it yet more. And God is in a better state. And life also belongs to God; for the actuality of thought is life, and God is that actuality; and God's self-dependent actuality is life most good and eternal. We say therefore that God is a living being, eternal, most good, so that life and duration continuous and eternal belong to God; for this is God."

itself as finite, God manifests Himself as apparently finite. Being the only reality, God is immanent as the ground of being of the manifest. The manifest is simply an aspect of God's infinite knowledge, therefore, has its being solely *in* God's knowledge, which is identical with God's existence. In the Absolute Knowledge of Infinite Consciousness, God is perfectly intelligible and boundlessly creative.

As Infinite Intelligence, God knows everything. Since God is the only reality, there is nothing other to know. Because God is indivisibly one, God's knowledge is identical with His being. This is the meaning of there being no darkness in God, only Infinite Light.¹ This is the "light" of God's Self-Knowledge, in which there is no darkness of ignorance.²

Human beings are self-conscious and have self-knowledge. Their existence is self-evident to them, but this existence and its nature is not fully transparent. Human beings know their existence only opaquely. Thus, they are said to be "in the dark," in ignorance.³ The "clouds" of ignorance obscure the "sun" of knowledge.

God's self-knowledge is God's "image." This absolute truth is Infinite Consciousness of absolute being as absolute knowledge.

Since God is one indivisible reality, God's being and knowledge are identical. Hence, God's being and God's knowledge of His own being are identical. God's knowledge *is* the "image" of God. Through His being, God exists *in* Himself and *through* Himself alone. Through His image God exists *for* Himself alone, the Infinite Consciousness whose reciprocal being and knowledge are aspects of the one Absolute Reality, identical with Absolute Knowledge. The God-Man in all advents and the Perfect Masters of every age embody this state of "Truth."

John writes in the first letter, "This then is the message which we have heard of him [Jesus], and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all."⁴ "Light" is taken here as symbolic of knowledge. Applied to God, "infinite light" is not only self-knowledge but also self-effulgence. The self-effulgence of the infinite self-knowledge of God is the creative force whence creation "emanates" or

¹ 1 John 1:5.

² 1 John 1:5. Mystics do say that there is "darkness" in the Godhead to symbolize the Void as a state of absolute vacuum, emptiness, or nothing, as a field in which all possibilities are latent. But this is a different meaning of "darkness." Moreover, the Hebrew Scripture speaks in many places of God in terms of darkness, e.g., Exodus 14:20, 20:21, Deuteronomy 5:22-24, 1 Kings 18:11, and 2 Chronicles 6:1. Here "darkness" signifies God's invisibility to man, so that, paradoxically, God's presence is by way of His absence.

³ Saying 3.

⁴ 1 John 1:5 (King James Version).

manifests. Poetically, it is said that God creates by speaking (expressing) his word (knowledge).

“Creation” is the “manifestation” or the “expression” of God, symbolized as God’s “word.”¹ However, this word is not spoken in such a way as to leave God, for there is only God. This word is like a thought in our minds, contained within the mind as knowledge. God manifests creation to Himself, within Himself, “in whom we live, move and have our being.”² Creation appears different from God in a finite mind owing to duality. When duality is transcended, then the soul “returns” to God, and “creation,” the separate world projected in duality, “returns” along with the soul that projected it.

The Gospel of Thomas does not contain any specific reference either to the Incarnation narrative or to the doctrine of Jesus as “the Son of God.” This does not mean that *The Gospel of Thomas* does not contain an Incarnational Christology implying that Jesus is God-Man. Jesus does apply this meaning of light to himself, seemingly as God-Man, when he says: “I am the light above all things. I am the all in all. All things came from me and to me all things return.”³

“The light above all things” may be read as referring to God’s Self-effulgence, Infinite Consciousness as Absolute Knowledge. “I am the all in all” may be interpreted to signify the manifestation of God’s infinity. “All things came from me” may be understood to refer to the “word” of God as the creative intelligible principle, sometimes called “creative intelligence.”

THE JOURNEY FROM HERE TO HERE

“To me all things return” may be read as referring to the light of the soul that shines progressively brighter in aspirants on the spiritual quest, especially those treading the spiritual path through the inner planes. According to the theme of creation elaborated by Meher Baba especially in *God Speaks*, the entire creation is God’s manifestation in consciousness. Creation appears to be separate from God so that God can realize God in every “particle” of creation through the process of evolution, reincarnation and involution, which leads to each apparently separate “drop” ultimately realizing unity in “the ocean without shores” as “one without a second.” This is seeing the source, course and goal of manifestation as a journey “from here to here.”

¹ The word as creative force appears in the creation myths of the Vedic and Judeo-Christian traditions to express both manifestation and intelligibility.

² Acts 17:28.

³ Saying 77.

On this “journey” that seemingly extends over aeons of time, the individualized, embodied soul passes through the process of manifestation under the illusion of separateness in order to realize its true nature as consciously God. Through this process, God’s Essence in the Beyond Beyond state, which is Nothing (“no-thing”, void, or absolute vacuum), and in which consciousness is latent, becomes fully conscious through each individual. This “awake” state of God is the Beyond state of God as Infinite Consciousness, to which God awakens after passing through the dream state of “creation.” “Creation” is really illusion rising in a finite mind. An individual realizes this when the finite mind ceases to exist and the underlying spirit is revealed to itself as universal Self — I Am (God).

You, as gross body, are born again and again till you realize your Real Self [God]. You, as mind, are born only once and die only once; in this sense you do not re-incarnate. The gross body keeps changing, but mind (mental body) remains the same throughout.¹

The drop-soul begins its journey unconscious in the stone form and becomes progressively conscious, achieving the capacity for full consciousness in the first human form. Ordinarily, the individualized soul does not become aware of this full consciousness in the first human form, owing to the veil of impressions accumulated in the process of evolving to the human form.

These impressions must be progressively unwound for the individualized soul to realize the full consciousness that it has developed through the process of evolution. This happens gradually, taking many human lifetimes in the process of reincarnation. When the accumulated impressions are sufficiently thinned out and refined, one enters the spiritual path and begins climbing the ladder of ascent through the inner planes.

First one enters the planes associated with the subtle world and experiences the subtle world with the subtle body. The subtle world is a realm of life “energy,” called *prana* in Sanskrit, *chi (qi)* in Chinese and *ki* in Japanese.

After passing through the planes of the subtle world, pilgrims arrive at the mental or causal world and experience this world using the mental body. In the state of illumination, the saints know the mind as the reflection of God’s light and they know all *in the light of God*. This is the fifth plane on the ladder of ascent.

In the divine union of the lover and Beloved that takes place on the sixth plane of ascent, saints see God directly with the fully opened “eye of the heart,” and they see everything *as the self-effulgent light of God*, that is, as God’s immanent presence seen directly, “face to face.” Then, in the state of identity, God-realization, they see no longer a reflection in the mirror of mind, but rather soul knows its true nature as identical with God’s self-knowledge. They know that the soul and the creation it

¹ Meher Baba, *The Everything and the Nothing*, p. 53.

projected as separate in the state of duality was always God's own Self-knowledge, created by and in that self-knowledge, never separate from God. Finally, in the state of nonduality in which identity of absolute knowledge and infinite consciousness is realized, the individualized soul *realizes* the self-effulgent light of God as God's self-knowledge — infinite consciousness of absolute reality. The "I" of the individualized soul awakens to itself as really the Universal Self of "I alone am," or "I am God."

SEEING GOD WHILE LIVING

Normative Christianity is dualistic, holding that God is not only separate from creatures but also unknowable by them in this life. Moreover, it sees the Beatific Vision promised the just in the afterlife as something added to the soul by grace, rather than inherent in the soul as its divine birthright. This dualistic stance was imposed dogmatically, especially after Christianity digressed into Christendom, and the normative religion became not only closely entwined with popular culture but also became the state religion.

The conventional view is that God created out of nothing and remains ever separate from His creation, which exists apart from Him. This dualistic view of Christianity takes God to be exclusively transcendent. It is opposed to views that see God either as immanent only (pantheism), or as both transcendent and immanent (panentheism).

As a result, Christian mystics and teachers have had to be very careful of how they couched their testimony and teaching in order to avoid the charge of heresy — along with its attendant consequences, religious condemnation and also legal sanction, including torture and execution. Consequently, testimony and teaching about unification with God, especially while yet in the body, is rarely to be found in Christian mysticism, other than in rather dense philosophical or theological texts that take precautions against this charge. Remarkably, even the works of the great philosopher, theologian and mystic, Thomas Aquinas were condemned for a period after his death, though he was later rehabilitated. Meister Eckhart, who is arguably the greatest exponent of the Way of Jesus in the West, never was exonerated officially, even though scholars now recognize that his persecution was motivated politically.

On the other hand, Paul asserts that those who follow Jesus faithfully will see God "face to face" and the soul will know itself fully, even as known by God.¹ Such sayings can be interpreted to signify the realization of a state comparable to the state of enlightenment reported by mystics and masters in Eastern traditions.

¹ 1 Corinthians 13:12.

Normative Christianity holds that the beatific vision, or seeing God face to face, is not possible while still living, citing the text, “No one shall see Me and live.”¹ Therefore, St. Gregory the Great explains in some detail with common normative objections to knowing God while living, in order to show that unification is not only possible but within the norms:

If by certain ones still living in this corruptible flesh, yet growing in incalculable power by a certain piercingness of contemplation, the Eternal Brightness of God is able to be seen, this is not at variance with the words of Job: ‘Wisdom is hidden from the eyes of all the living’ (Job 28:21): because he that sees Wisdom, which is God, wholly dies to this life, that henceforth he should not be held by the love thereof. He who sees God dies by the mere circumstance alone, that either by the bent of the interior, or by the carrying out of practice, he is separated with all his mind from the gratifications of this life. Hence, yet further it is said in Moses: ‘No man shall see Me and live’ (Exodus 23:20): as though it were plainly expressed, ‘No man ever at any time sees God spiritually and lives to the world carnally.’²

Even though no less than Pope St. Gregory wrote approvingly of what came to be known as the doctrine of deification or *theosis* in Greek, normative Christianity continued to resist the notion that it is possible to transcend self and see God, or be in any way united with God in this life. The issue came to a head in the Eastern Orthodox Church over the mystical reports of Hesychast monks, who practiced the Jesus Prayer, or the Prayer the Heart, as it came to be known.

Barlaam of Cambria had claimed that God is not knowable while one is in the body. St. Gregory Palmas argued against him that while God’s essence is unknowable by other than God, God does communicate real knowledge of Himself to human beings through their vision of His “uncreated light” in contemplation.³ This became the basis of the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of deification or *theosis*, set forth in the *Philokalia*, a collection of writings of holy people.⁴ Thus, although

¹ Exodus 33:20.

² Gregory the Great, St. (Pope Gregory I, Doctor of the Church, ca. 540-604). “Morals on Job, X.13,” cited in Dom Cuthbert Butler. *Western Mysticism: Augustine, Gregory and Bernard on Contemplation and the Contemplative Life*. (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1924), p. 131

³ URL=<<http://gregory-palamas.ask.dyndns.dk/>>. St. Gregory Palmas (ca. 1296-1359) was archbishop of Thessalonica. He is a highly regarded mystical theologian in Orthodox Christianity although not well known in the West.

⁴ G.E.H. Palmer (Translator), Philip Sherrard (Translator), Kallistos Ware (Translator). *The Philokalia: The Complete Text; Compiled by St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain & St.*

normative Christianity makes room for deification in this sense, “seeing God face to face” while one is yet alive in the physical body, i.e., having knowledge of his essence, is ruled out as heretical. A fortiori, realizing the soul as identical with God is not only ruled out but also condemned as blasphemy.

The Gospel of Thomas seems to go beyond this limit set by Gregory. *Thomas* can be read as putting this higher knowledge forward explicitly, establishing it as a key document of not only the Way of Jesus but also perennial wisdom. For this reason, normative Christianity excludes it on normative grounds.

UNIFICATION

The soul is not like God: she is identical with Him.¹
Meister Eckhart

UNIFICATION

Just as purification leads to illumination, so too, illumination precedes unification. Unification is also called “perfection” and “consummation.” Although unification is termed the soul’s perfection, nothing actually happens to the soul itself in the process; only the veil of ignorance is lifted. When spiritual ignorance is removed, the soul’s eternal perfection is realized.

According to the Hebrew scripture, God himself says, “Be ye holy, for I am holy.”² Jesus reiterates this substituting “perfect” for “holy: “Be ye perfect, even as your Father in Heaven is perfect.”³ The meaning is essentially the same. From such assertions St. Basil the Great, elder brother of St. Gregory of Nyssa and the founder of Christian monasticism, concluded: “Man is a creature who has received the order to become God.”⁴

Unification is the experience known in Christian mystical theology as “divine union.” It is represented in terms of sacred marriage of soul as lover and God as Divine Beloved. The Latin term *consummatio* meaning “consummation” is used interchangeably with *initio*, meaning “unification,” and *perfectio*, signifying “perfection.”

In addition to the *divine union* of the soul and lover and God as Beloved, unification also includes the *nondual* state, in which the soul realizes its identity with God. Although it is not made clear in Christian mystical theology because it falls outside of the doctrinal norm, the nondual state is found in the early Jesus tradition. For example, *The Gospel of Thomas* does include the nondual state specifically, as do some of the other so-called Gnostic works of the period, at least by implication.⁵

¹ Pfeiffer. I, p. 52.

² Leviticus 11.44

³ Matthew 5:48

⁴ Frithjof Schuon. *L'Oeil du Coeur*, p. 88.

⁵ Saying 3, 22. The first and second century Hermetic literature is also explicit. In *Poimandres*, Hermes Trismegistus says, "What you need to know is 'That' within you, which sees and hears, and comes from God's Word. Your Self is the Father; they are not separate, their union is life." Alan Jacobs. *The Essential Gnostic Gospels*. (London:

STAGES OF UNIFICATION

According to perennial wisdom, there are two separate and distinct stages of unification, divine union of lover and Beloved, sometime spoken of as sacred marriage or the sacrament of the bridal chamber, and realization of identity in the nondual state, in which mystics report the separate self is “naughted.” Some mystics in the Jesus tradition also use language that suggests both of these states of unification.

The first state is divine union, in which one sees or feels God in all and all in God, but one does not identify the divine nature with oneself. Christian mystical theology admits this state, and usually it is not heretical to assert this as long as one does not claim to be identical with God. François Louis de Blois (1506-1566), a Flemish Benedictine abbot, describes this state using the analogy of red-hot iron.

In this secret union the loving soul flows forth and escapes from itself, and is swallowed up and as it were annihilated in the abyss of eternal love, dead to itself and living in God, knowing naught and feeling naught except the love that it savors. For it loses itself in the immense desert and darkness of Godhead. But to lose oneself thus is find oneself.¹

Yet, the relationship of the soul with God is one of love rather than complete identity. The soul as the lover and God as the Beloved are united as one but are not yet identical.

In truth, that which puts off the human and puts on the divine is transformed into God, the same as iron in the fire takes on the appearance of the fire and is changed into it. But the essence of the soul thus deified subsists, just as the red iron does not cease to be iron.²

Divine union, in which the soul as lover is united with God as Beloved is a state of unification, but it is not complete in that the lover and Beloved are distinct. Love unites, but love is also essentially a relationship, that is, dualistic. The state of union with God prior to realizing identity in the nondual state is a state of seeing through the illusion of form to the formless ground of being, where a subtle distinction between seer and seen persists. Again, seeing is a relationship between the seer and the seen, where as realization of identity is absolute rather than relative. Therefore,

Watkins, 2006, p. 91). In the early Jesus tradition, *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene*, *The Gospel of Truth*, and *The Gospel of Philip* are at least implicit if not explicit in this regard. The scope of this undertaking does not allow consideration of other so-called Gnostic literature.

¹ François Louis de Blois . *Insitutio Spiritualis*, XII, in Henri Plard. *Angelus Silesius, Pelerin chérubique*. (Paris: Aubier, 1946), p. 53.

² Ibid.

in the state of unification, there are two states — the highest relative and the absolute.

The first stage of unification is that of divine union, in which the last traces of dualism and relativity remain. The second is that of realization of identity, in which only God as indivisible Absolute exists as the sole reality, whose self-knowledge is Infinite Consciousness. Then the soul knows that all apparently diverse souls are really one and indivisible.

The second stage of unification is the realization of complete identity in the nondual state. This is the realization that one's own nature is identical with God's own nature, so that one can say, "I am God."

However, it is often difficult to determine whether a particular mystic is reporting about union qualified with distinction or realization of identity in the nondual state. Especially when quotations are taken out of context, confusion can easily occur.

Moreover, many of those established in the highest state never reported it at all, at least publicly, and their state was only discovered when other advanced souls testified to it. This is especially true of the God-Man, or God manifesting in human form, for the God-man often emphasizes humanity over divinity, sometimes even purposefully concealing divinity for reasons that remain undisclosed. Nor do Perfect Masters and other men and women who realize God always reveal this publicly, again for their own reasons.

Being established in the nondual state is more widely reported in Eastern nondual mystical traditions, such as Advaita Vedanta. But mystics of Western normative religions would be likely to qualify it or conceal it, since it is considered heretical. Therefore, such claims are generally not found in Western mystical literature, at least, stated as directly as in the East. For example, the Sufi Perfect Master, Mansur al-Hallaj, was executed for crying out ecstatically, "I am Truth (God)."

In Eastern traditions, reporting unification through realization of identity in the nondual state is not disallowed. In fact, just the opposite is true. On the other hand, in the West, normative Judaism and Islam absolutely forbid claiming unity with God, while normative Christianity allows only Jesus to make this claim. Mystics of all traditions have asserted otherwise, although often in the West in a veiled way or symbolically.

Finally, it must be noted that not everyone who is spiritually advanced is a mystic that traverses the planes consciously. Spiritual advancement is the progressive drawing back of the veils for those who go through the inner planes with their spiritual eye open. However, consciously traversing the planes is neither necessary nor desirable in all cases. In order to minimize difficulties, the Master often takes the disciple blindfolded, as it were, through the inner planes, so vision is not a necessary component of advancement. Nevertheless, one does grow in wisdom and

learns progressively to discern in the heart Being as One, True, Good and Beautiful behind the appearances. For love is the great unifier that progressively unveils God's unicity in the world. Truth unveils God's oneness to the soul that has realized its own nature as spirit.¹

DIVINE UNION AND REALIZATION OF IDENTITY IN THE JESUS TRADITION

We have already seen how "enlightenment" is a slippery term, since it is often used indiscriminately. For example, often it is used in a general sense, but it is also employed to signify knowing the nature of mind, seeing God in all, divine union of soul as lover and God as Beloved, and the soul's realization of its identity with God, even though these are quite different stages of the path. It is sometimes also applied to anyone considered spiritually advanced, even on the flimsiest evidence. Complicating this matter are several factors.

In the first place, mystics themselves often do not distinguish these meanings in their reports, especially in normative environments that exclude such matters. So it is not always clear from the report precisely what state is being put forward. Secondly, even those experiencing preliminary stages can genuinely confuse them with established states, e.g., by taking illumination or union to be identity. Thirdly, even those with far less refined experiences may also genuinely believe that they are experiencing a more advanced state than they actually are. Fourthly, charlatans may take advantage of the credulity of the gullible.

In Christian mysticism especially, there are a variety of reports that are difficult to assess and categorize, because mystics have to conform to the norms in order to remain in the flock. For example, many mystics sought to understate their experience in order to fit it into the norms. Others, especially Meister Eckhart, seem to indicate realization of identity with God. Realization of the soul's identity with God is the ultimate outcome of self-effacement, in which one dies to limited self to be "born again" in spirit. One must lose one's life as an individual ego separate from God in order to gain it as spirit, whose nature is universal and absolute.² As Paul puts it: "I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I that live, but Christ living in me."³ However, whether Paul was asserting that he had realized identity is unclear.

¹ "Unicity" has a different meaning than unity. Unity implies being united. Unicity implies uniqueness, absolute oneness. God, being infinite, is absolutely unique, "one without a second." Through love, one can catch a glimpse of God's unicity, for in love separate individuality is lost.

² Matthew 10:39, 16:25; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24, 17:33; John 12:25.

³ Galatians 2:19-20.

Meher Baba revealed that St. Francis of Assisi was the only Perfect Master to appear in the West.¹ He said that this took place when Francis received the stigmata. Francis of Assisi wrote little and recorded virtually nothing about his inner life or mystical experiences. However, in light of Meher Baba's revelation about him, it seems to be no accident that Francis is the most loved of all Christian saints other than Mary the mother of Jesus. The Franciscan Order that he founded still flourishes, including a lay chapter, or "third order," that continues to attract many people to the practice of simplicity and love in the midst of daily affairs.

Most Christian saints apparently did not experience identity *as* God while in the physical body, but rather divine union of the soul *with* God. On the other hand, there are fewer Perfect Masters than realized ones. It is therefore possible that some other Christian mystics were realized in the body but did not occupy the office of perfect master. Meister Eckhart was plausibly one of these, and Paul was possibly another.

Meister Eckhart was perhaps the most outspoken Christian mystic. He was a cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church and also a great theologian. But he ran afoul of the normative authorities and his works were condemned. It is unfortunate that this condemnation was never rescinded, even when the political motives behind it were understood, because it continues to reinforce the divergence of the normative from the mystical in the institutional Church.

Eckhart's statement of union as consummation is remarkably explicit:

The soul is a creature receptive to everything named, but the nameless she cannot receive until she is gotten so deep into God that she is nameless herself. And then none can tell if it is she that has gotten God or God has gotten her.²

Elsewhere, Eckhart continues the analogy of consummation:

The bride [soul] says in the Book of Love: 'I have crossed all the mountains, aye, even my own powers, and have reached the dark power of the Father. There I heard without sound, there I saw without light, there breathed without motion: there did I taste what I savored not, there did I touch what touched not back. Then my heart was bottomless, my soul loveless, my mind formless, and my nature natureless.'³

¹ Don Stevens, a close disciple of Meher Baba while the latter was alive, told me he received this directly from Baba. This incident is also reported in the biography of Meher Baba. Bhau Kalchuri. *Lord Meher: The Biography of Avatar of the Age Meher Baba*. Vol. 14, p. 5011.

² Pfeiffer. I, p. 336.

³ Pfeiffer. I, 143.

Another great mystic testifying to unification was Madame Guyon. Her works were also condemned by the normative authorities and remain so today, but her testimony is also a classic:

69. The Transformation is recognized by the want of distinction between God and the Soul, it not being able any longer to separate itself from God; everything is equally God, because it has passed into its Original Source, is reunited to its ALL, and changed into Him. But it is enough for me to sketch the general outlines of what you desire to know; experience will teach you the rest, and having shown you what I ought to be to you, you may judge of what I am in our Lord.

70. In proportion as its Transformation is perfected, the Soul finds a more extended quality in itself. Everything is expanded and dilated, God making it a partaker of His infinity; so that it often finds itself immense, and the whole earth appears but as a point in comparison with this wonderful breadth and extension. Whatever is in the order and will of God expands it; everything else contracts it; and this contraction restrains it from passing out. As the Will is the means of effecting the transformation, and the Center is nothing else but all the faculties united in the will, the more the Soul is transformed, the more its will is changed and passed into that of God, and the more God Himself wills for the Soul. The Soul acts and works in this Divine Will, which is thus substituted for its own, so naturally, that it cannot tell whether the will of the Soul is become the Will of God, or the Will of God become the will of the Soul.¹

Are these reports of union *with* God in which lover and Beloved are identified in experience but remain separate in being, or identity *as* God in the indivisible unity of being and knowledge that is a characteristic of self-knowingness? Who but God can say?

Mystics who wish to remain faithful to normative teaching must qualify their claims of unification in light of biblical passages that seem to deny the possibility of complete unification in the body. For example, Jesus tells Nichodemus, "... no one hath gone up to the heaven, except he who out of the heaven came down — the Son

¹ Madame Guyon. *Concise View of the Way to God and or the State of Union*. Part II, 69-70. This English translation originally appeared in "Spiritual Progress or Instructions in the Divine Life of the Soul from the French of Fenélon and Madame Guyon"; Printed in 1853; Edited by James W. Metcalf. (Public Domain).
URL=<<http://www.passtheword.org/DIALOGS-FROM-THE-PAST/waytogod.htm>>.

of Man who is in the heaven.”¹ However, this is not necessarily a problem in light of contemporary scholarship.

Some copies read “the son of Man” and others, “Man, who is in heaven.” On the principle of textual criticism that the more difficult reading is to be preferred since it is least likely to be redacted, “son of Man” is rejected in favor of “Man, who is in heaven.” It is plausible that scribes later changed the phrase to read “son of Man” in order to force interpretation of text in the direction of the emerging norm. However, the so-called Gnostic Christian literature reveals that there was disagreement over this. Gnostics interpreted Jesus’ sayings of this sort in terms of personal realization, where as the normative new was that Jesus alone was God-realized and that no one else ever could be, especially while yet in the body.

“Man who is in heaven” is not a characteristic phrase used by Jesus, but it is a key feature of Hebraic mysticism if it is interpreted to mean primordial or original man (Hebrew: *adam kadmon*) as the identical image of God. This is the highest level of the soul as “the only one” or “the single one” (*yechidah*). Those who realize themselves as “the single one” have realized living spirit as eternal. This is realizing the one who “came down from heaven” into gross form, thereby “ascending” back to heaven.

Of interest in this regard, former Catholic nun and contemporary mystic Bernadette Roberts reports on her meeting with a Catholic spiritual director about her own experience of “pure subjectivity,” which she calls “the experience of no-self” and identifies with unification in the latter sense of identity. According to Roberts, at the outset of the discussion the spiritual director rejected outright the possibility of realizing identity, objecting that “from beginning to end, life is series of subject-object, or I-Thou relationships.” Moreover, he claimed that asserting identity with another itself disproves identity.² According to his reasoning, reporting an experience as identity would be analogical and not univocal, that is, suggestive of an inner experience but irrelevant to establishing its reality. That is to say, such talk is psychological rather than metaphysical and poetically evocative instead of factually descriptive.

Roberts admits the logical problems inherent in talking about pure subjectivity, since logic presumes predication, which involves subject-object duality, and communication presupposes communicator, communication, and those to whom the communication is addressed. Nevertheless, she maintains, that empirical reality is a

¹ John 3:13. Robert Young. *Young's Literal Translation of the Holy Bible*. Revised Edition. Edinburgh, 1998. Public Domain
URL=<<http://www.ccel.org/bible/ylt/John/3.html>>.

² Bernadette Roberts. *The Experience of No-Self*. , p. 142. Franklin Merrell-Wolff. *The Philosophy of Consciousness Without an Object*. p. 61-76.

barrier only for those who have not yet passed through it. For the unitive mystic, the logical difficulties involving duality and truth criteria involving correspondence of knowledge with its object no longer apply as they do in duality.¹

This conversation between Roberts, a unitive mystic, and a normative spiritual director is a replay of the controversy about mysticism and nonduality in contemporary philosophy.² The debate is undecidable on the basis of reasoning because unitive state of experience as realization of metaphysical nonduality is ineffable; hence, it can only be hinted at. However, just because something is not describable does not imply that it does not exist. No mystic would argue that anyone can be intellectually convinced of nonduality on purely logical grounds, without realizing this state, because it is a paradox of duality. The spiritual quest is about resolving this paradox as the great riddle, so to speak of the one and the many.

THE PHASES OF THE UNITIVE LIFE

Bernadette Roberts makes an extremely important contribution to understanding the Way of Jesus in her second book, which is devoted entirely to what she calls "the unitive life."³ She observes that mystical theology in the Jesus tradition has traditionally been set forth in terms of the stages of purification, illumination and unification, and states that her purpose in writing this volume is to examine the unitive stage in detail.

In normative Christian mystical theology, unification is usually considered as the divine union of lover and Beloved, soul and God, in which the two are united in experience but not as identical in being. Roberts explicitly draws the distinction between divine union as the union of lover and Beloved in spiritual "marriage," and the experience of no-self as realization of the identity of knowledge and existence in pure subjectivity as the nondual state. In divine union the soul and God are united on the analogy of marriage of two separate individuals, in which their individual self-awareness remains separate even though they experience no barrier between them. In the experience of no-self, separative self-awareness ceases to exist; hence, no distinction is possible.

Roberts sets forth the phases of unitive life on the basis of her spiritual unfolding.⁴

¹ Bernadette Roberts. *The Experience of No Self*. p. 143-144.

² Stephen T. Katz. *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*. W. T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*.

³ Bernadette Roberts. *The Path to No-Self: Life at the Center*. (Boston: Shambhala, 1985), p. 3

⁴ Bernadette Roberts. *The Path to No-Self*. p. 9-14.

- Entrance into the Dark Night of the Spirit
- Transition from pain to peace.
- Habitual prayer-of-quiet.
- The way of Calvary and crucifixion leading toward the final death of limited self as one is progressively stripped of the attributes and accouterments of limited selfhood.
- Dawn of “charity,” or compassion and loving-kindness, in active life.
- Death of limited self in the cessation of separative self-awareness and realization of no-self.

Roberts sets forth her investigation of the unitive life in terms of the mystical theology of the Jesus tradition, which is oriented primarily toward the way of love. This does not preclude other ways. For example, philosopher Franklin Merrell-Wolff sets forth similar but different phases that he experienced in his “mystical unfoldment” through the pursuit of ultimate truth on the way of knowledge.¹

Roberts and Merrell-Wolff make important contributions to contemporary understanding of unification in terms of pure subjectivity and nonduality from different viewpoints. Our contention is that unification is set forth from a similar vantage in *The Gospel of Thomas*.

There are many ways to views such phases. I would say that there are four principal phases of transcendence with identifiable landmarks. The first phase is called “transcending.” It generally unfolds gradually over time, often without being noticed, because there is no great contrast. However, some transitions sometimes come on suddenly. Then, the contrast is pronounced.

The experience may be smoky, hazy, clear or crystal clear. When it is sudden, profound and crystal clear, the boundaries of limited self expand to infinity, and limited I-sense, mental activity and awareness of the world disappear into nonduality. The sense of separative selfhood ceases to exist, and one experiences unbounded pure consciousness as the sole reality. This is the state of pure subjectivity devoid of any experience of diversity.

The Gospel of Thomas calls this state that of “the Living One” (literally, “he who lives”).² In *Thomas* “the Living One” signifies God and also that which is divine in oneself. That which is divine in oneself is identical with God, the only Reality,

¹ Franklin Merrell-Wolff. *The Philosophy of Consciousness Without an Object*. p. 19-76.

² Saying 59. The Coptic text does not use capital letters to distinguish terms referring to transcendental reality. They are added here in order to call attention to the transcendental use. God is customarily called “the Living One,” for example.

whose essence is, “I am,” according to scripture.¹ “I am” as God’s essence is to exist (“am”) as self-aware subject (“I”) — universal Self knowing universal Self. Those who realize their own essence as a spiritual being realize this ultimate truth.

The second phase is called “nonattachment.” It is the state of internal renunciation. It no longer involves intentional renunciation, because nonattachment is established. While this unfolds through a gradual process, it may also be sudden. It is characterized by the cessation of attachment. The experience can be likened to the uncoupling of two railroad cars. Then, attachment is clearly seen to result from desire and aversion, which fasten individual to the world. When this attachment is broken, one feels free. Until this landmark point gets stabilized, one is outer-directed, attached to objects by desire and aversion, instead of inner-directed and free. *Thomas* sets it forth as transcending attachment and seeing the mundane for what it is — dead matter in contrast to living spirit.² But because the self is still separate, this remains a state of duality.

The third phase is called “witnessing.” This the loosening and finally breaking of one’s identification with form — body, mind, and personality. This too occurs gradually, unnoticed because of the absence of contrast. But when it occurs suddenly, the contrast is great, and it may seem that enlightenment has dawned. This state may be fleeting, temporary and even persistent for a lengthy period without being permanently established.

The fourth phase is the first stage of “unity.” It develops when the background of perception becomes the foreground, and one sees primarily the one, indivisible existence, either as formless or as effulgence. Then, one knows by sight that all is really one, and that diversity of form is superimposed on this underlying unity of being.

The fifth phase is the second stage of “unity.” It is the realization that all appearances of diversity are experience, and as such, are a manifestation of conscious, by consciousness, for consciousness, within consciousness. Consciousness is known to be the only reality, and manifestation takes place within the indivisible unity of consciousness as the sole existent. There is no “other.” In *Thomas* this is called “making the two one, the inner as the outer and the outer as the inner.”³

The previously mentioned phases are all stages of experience, therefore mystics report on them subjectively. On the basis of these reports, the phases may seem to be different. Since the reports are given in a context, typically that of a specific

¹ Hebrew: *ehieh esher ehieh*. Exodus 3:14.

² Saying 27, 54-55, 101, 110.

³ Saying 22.

tradition, they are colored by that context. However, in *God Speaks*, Meher Baba provides a comprehensive objective account of the stages of the path, and the different states that may unfold in the stage of unification.¹ Appendix Three summarizes them.

It must be remembered that these phases can occur in different stages and degrees. They may be continuous or fleeting as either permanent states or temporary stages. Initially, they may only provide a scent or a taste as preliminary experiences, later becoming half-baked, and finally fully cooked. This can be deceptive in that one may mistake even a preliminary stage for a fully established state. Therefore, it is often difficult or impossible to determine conclusively the status of a particular report on the basis of the report itself, which may exaggerate the experience or the claims based on it.

It must be also emphasized that no amount of intellectualizing, analyzing or otherwise using the limited mind can amount to realization that is truly transcendental. Nor can practices that are dependent on concepts, because concepts confine the mind to the mental, whereas transcending is going beyond limited mind, that is, to the supramental. However, it is possible to “psych” oneself into a bogus state and mistake it for the genuine article. Of course, this is not to assert that philosophical contemplation is not a valid spiritual means. Plotinus is a well-known mystic who followed this path and set it forth in his writings.²

Moreover, “self-remembrance” understood as the limited mind’s self-observation cannot lead to transcendental realization either, since all this can produce is a sense of greater self-awareness, which is inherently separative. Such practices often lead to confusing psychological detachment with spiritual nonattachment. This type of self-remembering as self-observation is different from the spiritual practice called “self-inquiry,” or *atma vichara* in Sanskrit, as set forth by Sri Ramana Maharshi, for example, which is explored in the chapter on means, below.

Nor do the ingestion of psychotropic substances lead to genuine spiritual states, however much reports of them may appear to be the same or similar. For states induced by such agents are not continuous, whereas genuine realization is permanent. In addition, results of so-called spiritual practice are not genuinely spiritual states either, unless they are stabilized and become permanent.

UNIFICATION IN THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS

Jesus’ teaching underlying the mystical tradition we are calling “the Way of Jesus” is summarized in these texts from the New Testament:

¹ Meher Baba. *God Speaks*. Part 5: “The Planes” and Part 6: “Summary of States of Divine Consciousness.”

² Plotinus. *Enneads*.

The kingdom of God is within you.¹

Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all things will be added to you.²

These sayings reveal that the goal, the “kingdom,” is within and that by obtaining this, one simultaneously obtains all. This is reiterated in *The Gospel of Thomas*, where Saying 1 states that comprehension of the inner meaning of the teaching results in realization of spiritual immortality. Saying 2 adds that after going through the necessary purification, one will come to this realization and then “rule over all.”

Saying 3 asserts that the kingdom is both inside oneself and outside also, at the core of all. According to Saying 22, one realizes this by “making the two one.” The “two” may be interpreted as the various pairs of opposites, one and many, truth and falsity, good and evil, beautiful and ugly, happiness and suffering, and so forth. All of these oppositions find their unity in God as a *coincidentia oppositorum* or “coincidence of opposites,” according to the mystic Nicholas of Cusa³.

The “two may also be interpreted in terms of the duality of subject and object. “Making the two, one,” means uniting knower and known in the divine union symbolized by the sacred marriage, in the sense that the ego is lost in the uniting of lover and Beloved: “Many are standing at the door, but only the one who is unified [*monochos*] will enter the bridal chamber.”⁴

However, it can also signify realization of identity. According to perennial wisdom, the state of nonduality is realization of the indivisible unity of Infinite Consciousness knowing itself fully, as it is *in* itself, *by* itself, *through* itself and *for* itself alone.⁵ According to Saying 22, spiritual realization is the outcome of uniting the inner and the outer, spirit and matter, as well as uniting the male and female in the realization of spirit as transcending gender and sexuality. It is possible that *The Gospel of Thomas* refers to identity *as* God as well as union *with* God. Although this is not specifically delineated, it is not ruled out either.

¹ Luke 17:21.

² Matthew 6:33.

³ Nicholas of Cusa was a cardinal of the Church and also a mystical theologian of considerable standing. He is best known for his teaching of the coincidence of opposites in God, a view comparable to the unity of opposites (*yin* and *yang*) in the Absolute (*Tao*), a characteristic of Chinese thought that predates Nicholas by many centuries, if not millennia.

⁴ Saying 75.

⁵ “In itself” signifies that Infinite Consciousness is the sole reality. “Through itself” indicates that Infinite Consciousness is self-existent. “For itself” indicates that in Infinite Consciousness self-existence is identical with self-knowledge.

There seems to be little room for doubt that Jesus is asserting identity *as* God in Saying 77, although perhaps not as explicitly as the canonical statement, “I and my Father are one.”¹ Whether this state is meant in Jesus’ promises of knowledge is not explicitly stated. However, there is no doubt that Jesus’ transmission of knowledge involves union *with* God, as the bridal chamber analogy implies.

UNIFICATION AS NONDUALITY IN *THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS*

The Gospel of Thomas taken as a whole, and Saying 3 and 22 in particular, assert that the purpose of life is to realize who one really is by making the two, one. This can be read as a clear and unequivocal assertion that unification is not only possible but also to be aimed at as a spiritual goal of the Way of Jesus.

The Gospel of Thomas is at the center of the nondual tradition instead of at the periphery, hence the Way of Jesus also. The sayings in *Thomas* about nonduality stand with the very explicit statements regarding the realization of identity in the nondual state that are found in Yoga, Tantra, Vedanta, Buddhism, Sikhism, Jainism, Taoism, Neoplatonism, Qabalah and Sufism, as well as universal teachers such as Kabir, Shirdi Sai Baba and Meher Baba, who were not associated with any particular tradition. This places the Jesus tradition squarely within the tradition of perennial wisdom.

According to both perennial wisdom in general and *The Gospel of Thomas* in particular, the true nature of the soul is unitary and simple, formless and incorruptible, absolute and unchanging, immortal and eternal. Moreover, it is possible to realize this nondual state while still alive in the physical body. Indeed, according to perennial wisdom realization of God through unification is the purpose of life. In the words of Vedanta, the goal of life is to realize that the Self or Soul (*atma*) is God or Oversoul (*paramatma*) — Absolute Reality (*parabrahman*).

The way to this supreme knowledge is through realizing that the subject and its object are not separate, as they appear to common sense, but two sides of the same coin, so to speak. The dross of accumulated impressions veils the soul as it traverses the spiritual path before realization. Unification and realization are not something added to the soul. Rather, what is already present becomes evident, whereas previously it was obscure. Reality does not change, only one’s experience of it.

See what is right before you and what is hidden from you will be opened to you. For there is nothing concealed that will not be revealed and nothing covered that will not be uncovered.²

¹ John 10:30. (King James Version).

² Saying 5.

BEGINNING AND END

Saying 18 adds that this spiritual rebirth is about realization of the eternal now:

The disciples said to Jesus, "What will the end be like?"

Jesus said, "What have you found the beginning that you ask to see the end? For where the beginning is, so also is the end. Joyous is the one who is established at the beginning. That one has already attained the end and shall not experience death."

The end of the spiritual quest lies at its beginning, that is, at the point of emergence of the soul from the breath or spirit of God, signified in the Hebrew creation myth as God's breathing the breath of life into Adam, *adam* signifying man in Hebrew.

According to the Book of Revelations, "I am the alpha and the omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the almighty."¹ On a gnostic reading, it is presumed in Revelations that Jesus is the archetype of the soul who has realized this truth through identity and is therefore entitled to say truthfully: "I am the alpha and the omega, the first and last, the beginning and the end."²

On a mystical or gnostic interpretation, these two sayings could be considered to be similar in meaning and to illuminate each other. It is also possible that this figures in the meaning of Jesus' enigmatic saying that the first shall be last and the last, first. The normative interpretation on the basis of apocalyptic view is that those in power will be cast down and those who were oppressed by them will accede to power.

However, it could also be that Jesus meant that the end was in the beginning and vice versa, as a reference to the essence of spirit as eternal. Scholars now realize that the gospels were not eyewitness biographical accounts or anything close to it. They were later narratives composed on the basis of collections of Jesus' sayings and stories of his life that were constructed considerably after the fact to make theological points. For example, sayings may have been given a narrative context suitable to making the desired point. This accounts for disagreements, discrepancies and elaborations among the various gospel accounts.³

Interestingly in this regard, *The Gospel of Thomas* simply cites the sayings it imputes to Jesus without adding a narrative. It also contains the saying, "Many of the first will be last [and the last, first]." Since *The Gospel of Thomas* is not apocalyptic, this suggests that another meaning was presumed. Indeed, Saying 4,

¹ Revelations 1:8.

² Revelations 22:13. Revelations 21:6 has: "I am the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end.

³ See for example, the many instances cited by Bart D. Ehrman in *Misquoting Jesus*,

where this occurs, relates it instead to becoming “one alone.” The meaning here seems to be experiential and unitive, that is, mystical and gnostic.

TRANSMISSION

Perennial wisdom teaches that gnosis can be transmitted by grace. The Gospel of Thomas can be interpreted as holding a similar position regarding the transmittal of wisdom through enlightened ones, as it Saying 4:

Jesus said, ‘A person mature [in worldly experience] can ask one new born [in spiritual experience] where life is to be found and gain life.’”

The Gospel of Thomas can be understood as saying here that one may gain life through someone who is truly born again in the life of the spirit, although grace is not mentioned specifically. However, according to many masters of perennial wisdom spiritual knowledge can be transmitted through the grace of one who is a true teacher, having the authority of personal experience. Saying 4 seems to suggest this.

In many sayings Jesus promises to impart spiritual knowledge in the role of Master.¹ These sayings make clear that Jesus is not speaking of revealing esoteric secrets orally or even initiating disciples into a tradition. He promises to impart a state of awareness in which one realizes the immortal nature of the soul in contrast to the temporary life of the body.

While it cannot be claimed that *The Gospel of Thomas* necessarily goes beyond divine union, Meister Eckhart seems to testify to realization of identity, saying “the soul is not like God: she is identical with Him.”² He goes on to report:

In this breaking through I find that God and I are both the same. Then I am what I was. I neither wax nor wane, for I am the motionless cause that is moving all things.³

Eckhart also seems to suggest that Jesus does indeed transmit the identical knowledge of the Father:

According to the scriptures, ‘No man knoweth the Father but the Son,’ and hence, if ye desire to know God, ye have to be not merely like the Son, ye have to be the very Son himself.⁴

¹ Saying 10, 17, 23, 62, 82, 108, 114.

² Pfeiffer. I, p. 73.

³ Pfeiffer. I, p. 221.

⁴ Pfeiffer. I, p. 52.

WAYS AND MEANS

*Love for God alone can annihilate the falsity of the limited ego,
the basis of life ephemeral.
It alone can make one realize the Reality of one's Unlimited Ego,
the basis of Eternal Existence.¹*

KNOWLEDGE OF THE HEART

One may ask how one is to realize unification. The difficulty seems especially acute when nondualism seems so counter-intuitive from the perspective of dualism, in which the knowing subject is separate from the object. Moreover, the principle of non-contradiction, that a thing cannot be and not at the same time in the same respect, is the key fundamental of everyday logic. How, then, can the obvious interplay of differences in an ever-changing world ever be considered as an unchanging, indivisible unity?

The mind has struggled with such questions for millennia in philosophy and theology. A variety of resolutions have been proposed, but they are all intellectual constructs that do not deliver the experience of unification. The experience of mystics worldwide across time shows that one must tread the way to the goal and realize nonduality for oneself.

In reading the lives of the saints and sages, mystics and masters of the world, one is struck by the fact that all of them appear to be unique individuals who courageously followed the path appropriate to them. While one is well advised to follow the example of those who have gone before, no one can walk in another's footsteps along the spiritual path. All must find their own way.

Every person's spiritual quest is determined by one's accumulated impressions. In this sense, the way each person takes is individual and unique. While common features in the lives of saints and teaching of masters suggest that fundamental principles and precepts are operative for everyone, following principles and precepts by rote is not sufficient because of the individual requirements imposed by one's unique set of impressions. The teachings of others about the path are guidelines rather than formulas or recipes to be applied independently of other conditions. These teachings must be adapted to individual requirements and circumstances.

¹ Meher Baba. "Meher Baba's Call." Naosherwan Anzar. *The Beloved: The Life and Work of Meher Baba*. (Myrtle Beach, SC: Sheriar Press, 1983), p. 109-111.
URL=<<http://www.ambppct.org/meherbaba/meher-babas-call.php>>.

There is no general rule or method applicable to all who aspire to realize God. Every man must work out his own salvation, and must choose his own method, although his choice is mostly determined by the total effect of the mind impressions (sanskaras) acquired in previous lives. He should be guided by the creed of his conscience, and follow the method that best suits his spiritual tendency, his physical aptitude and his external circumstances. Truth is One, but the approach to it is essentially individual. The Sufis say, "There are as many ways to God as there are souls of men."¹

While it is said that human beings do not come with an operating manual, actually they do. There is such a "manual" written within. The book of the heart can only be read with the eye of the heart, by using intuition and discernment.

Here, the "heart" signifies a particular means of gaining knowledge in addition to sense perception, intellectual understanding and logical reasoning. For knowledge of the heart (Greek: *gnosis cardias*) transcends ordinary means of knowing.²

Nor is the heart as a spiritual faculty merely emotional or sentimental. The heart symbolizes a higher cognitive and affective faculty inherent to the human being. In this sense the heart is the faculty of intuition, sensibility, and refined feeling. The heart is also the faculty of intention and choice, corresponding to the will. In Eastern traditions, the heart is even said to be the seat of the soul.

The heart is also the seat of emotion and preference, so it is home to desire and aversion. Until the heart is purified, base emotions such as fear and anger, and animal passions like lust and greed predominate, along with mundane interests impelling one to the pursuit of fame, fortune, power and pleasure. These influences must be diminished if the higher functioning of the heart is to manifest.

While perennial wisdom is objectified historically in the lives, stories and teaching of those who have preceded us on the Way, it is also ever present in the heart, waiting to be revealed subjectively to those who seek it out. This knowledge is communicated within through intuition and refined feeling.

Mystics emphasize, for example, that love is a type of knowledge, for divine love unites lover and Beloved in divine union, and in the realization of identity the lover experiences the nature of the Beloved as one's own. In divine union one "sees" God "face to face." This is knowledge by direct acquaintance. In identity, the soul realizes its true nature itself as Universal Self, which is identical with God as Oversoul and Absolute Reality. This is ultimate Truth or Absolute Knowledge.

¹ Meher Baba. *God Speaks*. 2nd ed. 1973, p. 206 (1997 printing, p. 193-194).

² The Greek phrase *gnosis cardias* was used in the early Jesus tradition, and it is still in use in Eastern Orthodoxy.

In the Way of Jesus, illumination unification and identity are aspects of “knowledge of the heart,” which unfolds subsequent to sufficient purification. Sufis speak of “seeing with the eye of the heart (*qalbi*).” In the Vedic tradition, the “heart” (*hridaya*) as spiritual center is the seat of the Self (*atma, purusha*). Herein the presence of God lies hidden, waiting to be discovered as the identity Universal Self (*atma*), God or Oversoul (*paramatma*), Supreme Person (*purushottama*), Supreme Lord (*parameshwara*) and Absolute Reality (*parabrahman*).

Knowledge of the heart begins to the degree that one’s love transcends narrow self-interest. It increases through purification. The natural state of a human being is to love all as oneself, for the heart intuitively recognizes all beings as expressions of being as such, and one with itself. As one is purified of self-interest, naturally the heart expands correspondingly. Therefore, it is always reasonable to go beyond reason to love.

Love is also a grace or gift (Greek: *charisma*). A grace or charism is a gift of the Spirit, which we do not earn by our own efforts. According to Christian teaching, spiritual love or “charity” (*agape, caritas*) is one the three “theological virtues,” along with faith as inner conviction) and hope as trust in Providence.¹ Paul’s laudation of love is well known.² In it he emphasizes that without love, piety is hollow and spirituality, empty. Paul admonishes, therefore, to follow the way of love.³

In addition to love, there is also a cognitive type of knowledge of the heart that is affective in addition to cognitive. The first stage of its unfolding is *intellectual conviction*. This is called “faith,” in the sense of indubitable conviction, and it plays a principal role in most spiritual traditions, along with love.⁴ Faith as indubitable conviction is a type of knowledge based on intuition. It stands in contrast to faith as belief in doctrine, for belief is not knowledge.⁵

Normative Christianity recognizes the difference between faith as inner conviction and as mere intellectual belief by numbering the former among the three “theological virtues” as gifts of the Holy Spirit. The “faithful,” i.e., believers, often confuse these two meanings of faith, however.

¹ 1 Corinthians 13:13.

² 1 Corinthians 13.

³ 1 Corinthians 14:1.

⁴ Hebrew *emunah* (Strong #530), Greek *pistis*, Latin *fides*, Sanskrit *shraddha*. Islam has three key fundamentals, “surrender” (Arabic *islam*), “faith” (*iman*) and “virtue” (*ihsan*).

⁵ Meher Baba. *God Speaks*, Supplement 16: “The Types of Conviction and Knowledge.” 2nd ed. 1973, p. 249-251 (1997 printing, p. 234-236).

Meher Baba lists seven types of understanding through which the individualized soul passes in the process of evolution, reincarnation, involution and realization:

- Instinct
- Intellect
- Inspiration
- Intuition
- Insight
- Illumination
- Realization

Meher Baba then describes the role of each in the process of evolution, reincarnation, involution and realization:

Instinct governs the animal world; intellect, humans; inspiration for those humans whose feelings are developed — like poets and artists. Intuition is for those advanced souls who have conscious visions and understanding true to the point. What you understand by intuition is always true. What you understand by intellect is sometimes true and sometimes not.

Souls on the fourth and fifth planes have insight; their understanding is direct, without thinking with the mind. Illumination means seeing God as He is. The understanding is divine. Realization is understanding oneself as God.¹

The first stage is *instinct*. Animals operate primarily in terms of instinct, although scientific research into animal cognition is now suggesting that animals also are developing intelligence as they evolve toward higher stages. There is even growing evidence that some animals may be capable of self-awareness, as shown by their ability to recognize their image in a mirror.²

The second level is that in which *intellect* predominates. Most people function at the level of instinct and intellect. Functions that humans share with animals remain partly instinctual. For example, humans must learn to use reason to bridle unrestrained “passions” that are holdovers from our animal past. Higher human functions are rational rather than instinctual. For example, being rational, humans have much more freedom of choice than animals that are guided primarily by

¹ Meher Baba. *Lord Meher*. Vol. 7, p. 2618.

² Joshua M. Plotnik, Frans B. M. de Waal, and Diana Reiss. "Self-recognition in an Asian elephant." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States*. Published online Oct 30, 2006.
URL=<<http://www.pnas.org/cgi/content/abstract/0608062103v1>>.

instinct and have little choice when presented with stimuli. Because reason guides passion and the will as the “rational appetite” controls action, human freedom entails moral responsibility for one’s choices and deeds.

Humans also can use the heart in addition to the mind. For example, lust can be sublimated into love. Humans also have an aesthetic sensibility and a love for higher values, such as wisdom. In such cases the heart is in play along with intellect.

One of these higher types of knowledge is faith in the sense of deep conviction. “Faith” in the sense of deep conviction rather than mere belief arises from intuition. For this type of faith engages the heart rather than being exclusively of the mind, as is “faith” in the conventional sense of doctrinal belief.

True faith is grounded in the deeper experiences of the spirit and the unerring deliverances of purified intuition. It is not to be regarded as the antithesis of critical reason but as the unfailing guide of critical reason. When critical reason is implemented by a deep and living faith based on pure intuition, its functioning becomes creative, fruitful, and significant instead of barren, ineffective, and meaningless. On the other hand, many forms of naive credulity cannot be broken through except by the fearless and free working of critical reason.

However, it remains true that critical reason can touch and inform only those kinds of faith that are not based upon pure intuition. True faith grounded in pure intuition always remains an imperative that cannot be ultimately reduced to the conclusions of rational intellect. It is not derived from the limited intellect but is more fundamental and primary, with the result that it cannot be silenced by any intellectual acrobatics. This does not mean, however, that faith need at any stage be blind, in the sense that it is not allowed to be examined by critical intellect. True faith is a form of sight and not of blindness. It need not be afraid of the free functioning of critical reason.¹

The third stage is the unfolding of *inspiration*. Inspiration is refined feeling. Therefore, it is of the heart more than the head. Those who live more on the basis of inspiration live in a different mental world than those who function primarily on the basis of intellect. Those who rely chiefly on intellect rely on perception and reasoning. Their view of the world is said to be “profane” in contrast to sacred. The world of those who rely on inspiration is sacred. “Sacred” in this sense must be distinguished from the conventional meaning of “religious.” The sacred view of the world is better understood as aesthetic instead of religious in the conventional sense. The artist and poet experiences in terms of the sublime, inspiring awe, and

¹ Meher Baba. *Discourses*. 7th Edition. p. 366-367.

the beautiful, inspiring love. These are the two ways that divinity is revealed in the world.

The fourth stage is the unfolding of *intuition* as a primary means of knowing. This is characteristic of entering the inner planes. This type of intuition differs from ordinary intuition in that at this stage intuitive cognition is never mistaken. To the degree one goes consciously through the subtle world one sees celestial sights, hears celestial sounds and smells celestial perfume. One also experiences inner peace, contentment and bliss, along with having access to supernormal powers.

The fifth stage is called *insight*. It is more developed than intuition in that it is more comprehensive. Saints of the fifth plane have serial omniscience and can know anything they wish, but not everything at once. In the Vedic tradition, it is called *ritambhara prajna* in Sanskrit, or “truth-bearing cognition.”¹

The sixth stage is *illumination*, in which God is continuously seen face to face. In this state of knowledge the spiritual eye is open and one sees God and only God in all and as all. This state is not the supreme state, however.

The seventh and final stage is *realization* of the soul’s identity with God. This reveals the identity of absolute reality and infinite consciousness. This is the state of Truth. If the soul has further duty to creation and regains consciousness of creation while maintaining infinite consciousness, then this “individualized ocean” knows with the universal mind and knows everything in all three worlds — gross, subtle and causal — in the eternal now.

Thus, it is possible to see the path from gross consciousness to realization as a process of culturing the heart as the non-physical organ of inner vision, refined feeling and spiritual direction. In the Vedic tradition this organ is called *antaryami*, meaning inner controller and *antahkarana* in Sanskrit, meaning inner cause. It is very similar to what we in the West call the will as the rational appetite, whose object is the good and whose job description is to make informed choices after due deliberation. When the rational appetite allows itself to be dominated by the sensual appetite then reason is dominated by passion. This is mistaking pleasure for true happiness. But, since pleasure is temporary, following the passions can never result in abiding satisfaction.

Moreover, when under the intoxicating influence of unbridled passion, the rational appetite mistakes fame, fortune, power, or pleasure for true good, one is impelled to rush down a blind alley. For none of these can yield abiding happiness

¹ Patanjali. *Yoga Sutras*, 1.48. *Prajna* is also transliterated *pragya*. The Sanskrit term *ritam* closely resembles the sense of Greek *logos* as the rationality of cosmic order. It is not propositional truth, but rather what is called in Latin *ratio*, or “reason.” This is not reasoning but the basis of reasoning in underlying truth. Here, one penetrates directly to underlying truth.

either. Hence, their goodness is merely apparent rather than real. It is only by pursuing the true good that the passions eventually are brought under control and eventually mastered, and one finally finds peace. When one is focused on the highest good (Latin: *summum bonum*), apparent goods are put aside in favor of living true values intuited in the heart.

Spiritual understanding is living in terms of the true values intuited in the heart. Values are true when they uphold the unity of existence and the universality of life. Spiritual understanding is called “spiritual” because it is holistic, integrating heart, mind, body, sentient beings, and environment through right action, that is, feelings, thoughts, words, and deeds that are life-supporting and not life-damaging.

The highest value is love because love is the great unifier. Love alone can unite what appears to be separate and reveal the unity underlying apparent diversity. Hence, love is counseled as the primary spiritual means. According to the mystical aspect of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition, the fundamental teaching is that God is one, not in number but in being, as the sole reality. To realize this, all are advised to, “Love the Lord our God with your whole, heart, mind, soul and strength (body), and to love your fellows as your self.”¹

LOVE AS UNIFIER

Knowledge of the heart is direct rather than dependent on the mediation of sense data, concepts or reasoning. Hence, this knowledge is chiefly non-linear and non-discursive, synthetic instead of analytic, and unifying rather than discriminating.

Love is the great unifier, and love, of course, is of the heart. Love is the manifestation of God’s unity in the world, and it is through love that we first begin to feel intuitively the unity of God-Self within. There is a saying in the Vedic tradition, “All love is of the Self for the Self by the Self in the Self.” Love is the attractive power of God, hence, the driving force on the path to realization.

How does one open the eye of the heart? According to Christianity as well as Judaism and Islam, the answer to this is found in the passages of the Torah cited by Jesus as the essence of God’s law:

Hear, O Israel, YHVH is our God, YHVH is One. Love the Lord your God with your whole heart, your whole soul, and your whole mind. And love your fellow as yourself.²

The way to unification is by loving God “heart and soul.” If YHVH is one, that is, unitary, this implies that everything is the manifestation of God. Hence, loving God

¹ Deuteronomy 6:4-5; Leviticus 19:18.

² Deuteronomy, 6:4-5, Leviticus 19:18, Matthew 22:36-40, Mark 12:28-34, Luke 10:25-28.

necessitates loving all his manifestations. As a result of this underlying unity, Jesus could say that what one does to others, one does also to him as one who has realized God.¹

Love is purifying as well as illuminating. For it is only to the degree that one is “pure in heart,” that is, has replaced love for what is passing with love for the eternal, that one is able to open the eye of the heart and eventually see God in all. Other primarily devotional paths, such as Sufism, the Bhakti Yoga of the Vedic tradition, and Mahayana Buddhism, attest to this as well.

In all of these traditions, the way lies through remembering God, prayer being defined as lifting up the heart and mind to God, and serving God in all his manifestations. Jesus observed that love of one’s fellows is easy for anyone.² Real love is unconditional love, including even one’s enemies.

Meher Baba also emphasized this perennial truth:

The only Real Existence is that of the one and only God, who is the Self in every finite Self.”

The only Real Love is love for this Infinity (God), which arouses an intense longing to see, know and become one with its Truth (God)....

The only Real Knowledge is the knowledge that God is the inner dweller in good people and in so-called bad, in saint and so-called sinner. This knowledge requires you to help all equally as circumstances demand without expectation of reward; when compelled to take part in a dispute, to act without the slightest trace of enmity or hatred; to try to make others happy with brotherly or sisterly feeling for each one; and to harm no one in thought, word, or deed — not even those who harm you.³

In addition to acting lovingly, most traditions recommend meditatively repeating a divine name as a practice of remembrance. Various forms of this meditative practice are found in Qabalah (Hebrew: *zachor*), Sufism (Arabic: *zikr*), the Vedic tradition (Sanskrit: *japa*), and in the repetition of the name of Amitabha Buddha (Japanese: *nembutsu*) of the Pure Land sect. It is also central to the Way of Jesus, for example, in the Jesus Prayer of Hesychasm, from Greek *hesychia* meaning “silence,” a profound stillness.

A principal spiritual practice in Christianity from the earliest times was remembrance of Jesus through repetition of his name with loving devotion. Of course, the name “Jesus” is a Latin version of Greek *Iesu*, which is a transliteration of Aramaic *Yeshua*. The Eastern Orthodox Hesychasts use *Iesu*. Messianic Jews

¹ Matthew 25: 31-46.

² Matthew 5:46, Luke 6:32.

³ Meher Baba, *Discourses*, 7th Edition, p. 1.

who take Jesus to be *mashiach* use *Yeshua*. It is the intention that counts, not the spelling or pronunciation of the name.

This repetition of the Holy Name came to be called “the prayer of the heart.” The earliest form of the prayer was simply repeating the name of Jesus in the stillness of the heart, expecting that the Master should “come” (Greek *maranatha*) to take his seat there. Over time, the formulation of the prayer of the heart became more complex.

The prayer of the heart is characteristic of Eastern Orthodox monastic spirituality, which teaches that one should be initiated into its practice and be guided in it by an expert, called in Russian a *staretz*, meaning “elder.” Hesychasm and its use of the Jesus Prayer is set forth in the *Philokalia*, a compilation of Eastern Orthodox mystical teaching, as well as *The Way of a Pilgrim*, an anonymous story of a Russian pilgrim practicing the prayer of the heart.¹

The saints emphasized that as long as worldly desires dominated the heart, the Lord would *seem* to be absent, even though omnipresent. For the Lord to be present in the heart consciously, one must be fully present there, instead of occupied with personal preferences based on self-interest. Therefore, part of the prayer of the heart involves overcoming one’s self-interest and attachment to what is passing and not enduring. One does this by accepting everything that comes one’s way as the will of God, and surrendering willingly to whatever happens to one. One must also be devoted to God and prove one’s devotion through obedience to God’s injunctions in scripture, as well as the dictates of one’s conscience.

The necessity to empty oneself of self-interest as a prerequisite for love, obedience and surrender compels us to revisit the *via negativa* in order to consider it as an essential spiritual practice, not only in the Way of Jesus but in all traditions that emphasize love of God.

The *via negativa* is the basis of *apophatic* theology, which emphasizes negation in contrast to the *via positiva*, the basis of *kataphatic* theology, which emphasizes affirmation. While the *via negativa* and its apophatic theology is found earlier, the Mystical Theology of Pseudo-Dionysius was a foundational work of the Way of Jesus, which heavily influenced subsequent writings.² This teaching asserted oneness (Greek: *henosis*) of the soul and God, and the realization of this oneness through the process of self-emptying (*kenosis*). This leads to deification (*theosis*).

¹ G.E.H. Palmer (Translator) et al. *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*. E. Kadloubovsky (Translator), G.E.H. Palmer (Translator). *Writings from the Philokalia : On Prayer of the Heart*. (London: Faber & Faber, reprint edition, 1992); R. M. French. *The Way of a Pilgrim: And the Pilgrim Continues His Way*. (New York: HarperCollins/HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).

² Pseudo-Dionysius.

This process unfolds through the three stages of purification (*purgatio*), illumination (*illuminatio*) and unification (*unitio*). Subsequently, this threefold progression was widely embraced by both Eastern Orthodox and Western theologians.

Gregory of Nyssa (c. 330-c. 395) is also known for his contributions to *the via negativa*, although he is known today primarily in Eastern Orthodoxy. Later mystics for whom self-emptying was key include such great names as Meister Eckhart (1260-1329), Jan Van Ruysbroeck (1293-1381), John of the Cross (1542-1591), and the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* (fourteenth century English).¹ These mystics show that self-emptying is not incompatible with the way of love, but rather is complementary to it.

The *via negativa* emphasizes the soul's merging into God, losing itself in God, while the *via positiva* emphasizes the soul's uniting with God, also losing itself in God. In both cases self-centeredness is an obstacle to be overcome. The *via negativa* does this by "naughting" oneself in nonduality; the *via positiva*, by effacing oneself in unity. Both involve transcending limited, separate self.

It has not escaped notice in comparative studies that this teaching of self-emptying (*kenosis*) in order to attain oneness (*henosis*) is comparable to:

- Qabalistic and Hasidic self-nullification (Hebrew *bittul*),
- Sufi self-annihilation (Arabic *fana*),
- Vedantic discrimination of the real from the unreal by denying that Self is this or that (*neti neti*),
- Buddhist emptiness (Sanskrit *shunyata*) and not-self (*anatma* in Sanskrit, *anatta* in Pali),
- Taoist "not-doing" (Chinese *wu wei*) and "sitting forgetting."²

SELF-INQUIRY

Another way of looking at self-emptying is in terms of self-inquiry, the practice of asking "Who am I?" This is the way taught, for example, by Ramana Maharshi as the best means for removing ignorance of one's true nature. In this view self-emptying is for the purpose of clearing the way to the source of thought, which is

¹ Anon. *A Book Of Contemplation The Which Is Called The Cloud Of Unknowing, In The Which A Soul Is Oned With God*. Edited from the British Museum MS. Harl. 674. With an Introduction by Evelyn Underhill. Second Edition. (London: John M. Watkins, 1922). (Public Domain).

URL=<<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/anonymous2/cloud.titlepage.html>>.

² *Tao Te Ching*, 47. Chuang Tzu. *The Book of Chuang Tzu*. Translated by Martin Palmer with Elizabeth Breuilly. (New York: Penguin Arkana, 1996), p. 57-58

ultimately found to be the Universal Self, the attributes of whose nature are pure existence (*sat*), pure consciousness (*chit*), and transcendental bliss (*ananda*), in Sanskrit elision *sacchidananda*.

Ramana Maharshi's view of self-inquiry (Sanskrit: *vichara*) is not simply denying the individual self (*jiva*) in order to realize the Universal Self (*atma*) as Absolute Reality (*brahman*). Rather it involves sincerely and persistently probing within to discover the source of the I-thought that underlies all of one's experience, thought and feeling:

The only inquiry leading to Self-realization is seeking the source of the 'I' with in-turned mind and without uttering the word 'I.' Meditation on 'I am not this [individual self], I am That [universal Self]' may be an aid to the enquiry but it cannot be the enquiry [itself]. If one enquires 'Who am I?' within the mind, the individual 'I' falls down abashed as soon as one reaches the Heart and immediately Reality manifests itself as 'I-I.' Although it reveals itself as 'I,' it is not the ego but the Perfect Being, the Absolute Self.... To seek and abide in the Reality that is always attained is the only Attainment."¹

The practice of self-enquiry clearly does not involve repeating the question, Who am I? Rather, it is *one-pointedly directing one's attention "behind" itself to its being and ground*. This, Maharshi explains, is "meditation," *dhyana* in Sanskrit. Because the Universal Self (*atma*) is identical with the God as Supreme Self (*paramatma*) and Absolute Reality (*parabrahman*), meditation as self-enquiry is simultaneously a way of knowing oneself, a path of devotion to God, and an investigation of ultimate reality. Since this requires letting one's attention go to the source of thought lying beyond all manifestation in a natural, effortless and spontaneous fashion, it is also a way of surrendering oneself to the will of God responsible for and directing all action. As such, it involves practicing internal renunciation of attachment to mundane self-interest.

It is also a renunciation of the ordinary mind, which cannot penetrate to its own source using its accustomed tools — perception, conception, understanding, reasoning, or even imagination. Therefore, the mind is driven toward its higher nature in the heart as direct knowing through intuition, unmediated by sense data, concepts or images. For when the mind searches itself for its source, it finds only the apprehension of its existence as "no-thing," formless and unbounded. When the mind is emptied of even the sense of duration it dwells in the eternal now, its real source and ground.

¹ Ramana Maharshi. "Forty Verses," 29, 30, 35 in *The Collected Works of Ramana Maharshi*. Edited by Arthur Osborne. (London: Rider, 1959), p. 75.

The disciples said to Jesus, “What will the end be like?” Jesus said, “What, have you found the beginning that you [now] seek the end? For where the beginning is, so also is the end. Joyous is the one who is established at the beginning [in the eternal now]. That one has already attained the end and shall not experience death.”¹

The Gospel of Thomas can be read as indicating to a similar type of self-inquiry in Saying 3, where Jesus says that those who know themselves will realize that they are children of the living Father, and those who do not realize this live in the poverty of ignorance instead. However, just what such inquiry may have involved is unknown, since historical evidence is lacking.

MEDITATION ON THAT WHICH IS INFINITE

According to many masters, self-emptying is principally a matter of allowing the mind to rest on an object of attention that is holistic, infinite, and eternal. This practice will exert a pull on the mind, drawing it into its depths, naturally, effortlessly and spontaneously. As the dross of the mind is reduced and removed, the veils are drawn back and the inner light begins to shine forth. Eventually, this practice will result in experience of the reality of that focus in which the mind is resting, be it, for example, the One, the Good, the True, the Beautiful, Self, God or Master.

Owing to the infinite nature of the object of meditation, limitation is progressively eliminated from the mind as the subject of meditation. The focus of meditation may be the formless and limitless, or that which has a form but is capable of being realized as transcendental. Consciousness itself is formless and limitless, so it is a suitable focus, as in self-inquiry. For instance, the Vedic tradition advises directing one’s loving attention to one’s favorite name or form of God (*ishta devata*), or a Perfect Master (*sadguru*), or an advent of the God-Man (*avatara*). In the Jesus tradition, Jesus plays such a role, as does formless God.

This natural attraction of the mind for a suitable object for meditation demonstrates that meditation is grounded in love as the fundamental force of involution. This type of meditation is grounded in the natural tendency of the mind to go in the direction of greater attraction. It is therefore effortless and does not involve forcing the mind on its object or forcefully trying to empty the mind of thoughts that may arise unwanted and unbidden. They are simply relegated to the background and ignored.²

¹ Saying 18.

² Meher Baba. *God Speaks*. Supplement 13. 2nd edition, 1973, p. 232 (1997 printing p. 218).

One must realize that the inward direction of the mind must be cultivated so that it becomes “practice-natural” or “second-nature.” Owing to years of habituation, the mind is accustomed to be outer-directed. With persistent practice, however, this tendency is gradually reversed. As one begins to appreciate the finer levels of awareness, which are naturally blissful, then the mind becomes less and less apt to seek stimulation in the outer but readily rests more and more in its own ground state of bare awareness. This spiritual “nakedness” is the empty state. While empty of content, it is filled with self-effulgence, or the “light” of supreme intelligence. Ultimately, one will realize the nondual state.

The Gospel of Thomas may be viewed as an early text in the Way of Jesus that emphasizes self-emptying through non-attachment as a primary means of practice. Sayings 3 and 22, in particular, call attention to the necessity for self-discovery. This requires remembering who one really is as a spiritual being by transcending duality in order to realize nonduality.

The thrust of the teaching of *The Gospel of Thomas* is that the kingdom of heaven is ever-present. But it is concealed from the view of those who are not present to themselves in the now owing to their attachment to self-interest and self-importance. Only after one removes the veils of ignorance can gnosis shine forth, just as the sun is revealed as ever-present when the clouds blow away. Then soul, being a “child of God,” realizes the immanence of the Father as the ground of being.

DISCERNMENT

True spirituality is not merely an ideal or a particular practice. Spirituality is not genuine unless it is expressed in life as a whole. Spiritual living involves using *intention* to direct *attention* toward true values and ideals intuited in the heart, as well as toward *action* to live these values and ideals, instead of allowing awareness to be dominated by self-interest and self-importance.

Proper valuation requires discernment, for example, discriminating the essential from the nonessential, the important from the trivial, deep from the superficial and the relevant from the irrelevant. Taking the higher for the lower or the lower for the higher is not the whole of the matter. It is also necessary to properly prioritize on the basis of proportional worth. Not all things that are good are equally good, for example.

Discernment is spiritual understanding. This understanding is not intellectual, but combines heart (intuition, moral and aesthetic sensibility), intellect (reasoning, judgment, understanding), and will (choice, intention, direction of attention and action). The heart intuits values, the mind establishes a plan of action adapting

values to facts, and the will chooses the appropriate course of action and directs the body in implementing it.¹

Discernment presents a choice that sometimes involves demanding consequences. Those who choose to follow Jesus must be aware that in choosing the higher one may find oneself at war with the lower and be seared by the “fire” of purification.

Jesus said, “People think that I have come to bring peace to the world. And they do not realize that I have come to bring division — fire, the sword, and war. For in a house of five people, three will be against two and two against three, parent will be against child and child against parent. And [those who chose my way] will become established in themselves.”²

One will find oneself at war not only within oneself as high ideals inspired by spirit do battle with low desires spawned by self-interest. But one will also find oneself at odds with the world. For the worldly naturally oppose what they perceive as being in opposition to their agenda and call into question their way of life. This is true of worldly-minded people even if they consider themselves religious or pious on normative grounds, but have not yet confronted their egoism, nor their unbridled self-interest. Going to church or believing in normative doctrine not only does not bring spiritual understanding but may actually work against this by crystallizing one’s biases.

PRACTICAL SPIRITUALITY

Practical spirituality requires the integration of feeling, thought and action. Reading, studying, thinking, and intellectualizing, no matter how deep, is insufficient to take one very far on one’s spiritual quest. One has to take the plunge.

In the spiritual life it is not necessary to have a complete map of the path in order to begin traveling. On the contrary, insistence upon having such complete knowledge may actually hinder rather than help the onward march. The deeper secrets of spiritual life are unraveled to those who take risks and who make bold experiments with it. They are not meant for the idler who seeks guarantees for every step. Those who speculate from the shore about the ocean shall know only its surface, but those who would know the depths of the ocean must be willing to plunge into it.³

¹ Meher Baba. “The Avenues of Understanding.” *Discourses*. 6th edition, vol. 1, p. 135-141.

² Saying 16. See also Saying 10: “Jesus said, ‘I have cast fire on the world.’”

³ Meher Baba *Discourses*. 7th revised edition, p. 263.

Leading a full life requires integrating the inner and outer. Indeed, a test of one's wisdom and love is the degree to which one naturally demonstrates in one's daily affairs that one has transcended attachment and overcome self-interest by acting selflessly. The test of nonattachment is living a life of love by dedicating oneself to serving God in others.

Doing this does not require leaving one's home and traveling to faraway places like Mother Teresa and Albert Schweitzer, or leading a great movement like Mahatma Gandhi or Martin Luther King. Daily life presents ample opportunities if one is wise enough to recognize them and resolute enough to seize them.

An essential aspect of the Way is the management of action by internally renouncing self-importance and self-interest, surrendering to God's will, and accepting with poise and cheerfulness everything that comes one's way by receiving it as God's gift. Then, one is able to render selfless service to others on the basis of unconditional love, without expectation of recognition or reward. The essence of the way of action is acting free from attachment to the fruits of action and doing what one feels inwardly to be right just because it is inwardly the right thing to do, regardless of other considerations.

Love of God is central to the Way of Jesus, and one cannot be said truly to love God if one does not love God's manifestation in all others. Acting lovingly toward others and rendering them service is both an expression of one's love of God and testimony to it. It is also a way to increase and perfect this love. There is perhaps no clearer statement of this than Meher Baba's short discourse on how to love God.

To love God in the most practical way is to love our fellow beings. If we feel for others in the same way as we feel for our own dear ones, we love God.

If, instead of seeing faults in others, we look within ourselves, we are loving God.

If, instead of robbing others to help ourselves, we rob ourselves to help others, we are loving God.

If we suffer in the sufferings of others and feel happy in the happiness of others, we are loving God.

If, instead of worrying over our own misfortunes, we think ourselves more fortunate than many, many others, we are loving God.

If we endure our lot with patience and contentment, accepting it as His Will, we are loving God.

If we understand and feel that the greatest act of devotion and worship to God is not to hurt or harm any of His beings, we are loving God.

To love God as He ought to be loved, we must live for God and die for God, knowing that the goal of life is to love God, and find Him as our own self.¹

While *The Gospel of Thomas* does not emphasize love, as does the Johannine corpus, Saying 25 pithily summarizes Jesus' more extensive teaching in other places: "Jesus said, 'Love the children of your Father as yourself; watch out for them like the pupil of your eye.'"

The teaching of love characteristic of the Johannine works may be seen as complementary to the knowledge-oriented teaching emphasized in *The Gospel of Thomas*, not as antithetical. This teaching is epitomized in the well-known saying: "God is love; and those who abide in this love abide in God, and God abides in them."² Furthermore, John asserts: "We love because He loved us first."³ Therefore, he exhorts: "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love."⁴

The entire history of the Way of Jesus attests to the experiential truth of love, holding that divine love is the epitome of knowledge, God being love. The Way of Jesus has ever been and is chiefly a way of love. Nevertheless, Christian mysticism is nuanced and contains many complementary teachings. *The Gospel of Thomas* can be read as one of these.

Love for God includes (1) love of God the Father as the transcendent source and ultimate reality, (2) love for God the Son manifested in the human form as a manifestation of God, and (3) love for God as the very breath God breathed into Adam, that is, the Holy Spirit or the Spirit of Truth immanent in all, necessitating love for all. Love is proved through surrender of self-will in obedience to God's commandments and self-sacrifice through service of God in others: "Anything you did for even the least of my people here, you also did for me."⁵

¹ Meher Baba. *The Path of Love*. p. 109.

² 1 John 4:16.

³ 1 John 4:19.

⁴ 1 John 4:4-8.

⁵ Matthew 25: 33-46.

GRACE AND THE MASTER

Come, follow me.¹

GRACE AND THE HEART

The mystics testify that we love God with God's own love. Since only God is ultimately real, all love is in essence love of the Universal Self. This divine love overflows into the world and especially into ripened hearts as grace. Grace seeds the ripened heart with divine love, which grows into a fire which eventually burns away all else but God. All that remains is God. Although God already dwells perpetually therein, experience of this Presence is obscured by mundane desires. Hence, purification is required in order for personal revelation. The fire of love provides this purification.

While self-discipline, discernment and one-pointed dedication are also required on the part of the individual, self-effort is limited in what it can accomplish. Grace is necessary, both to plant the seed and to culture it: "A vine planted anywhere without the Father, not being established, will be uprooted and will perish."²

Spiritual awakening is the result of "faith" taken as an indubitable conviction of the heart in higher things rather than conceptual belief in received doctrines. It also requires "hope" as complete trust in the testimony of the wise that self-transcendence is not only possible but also promised to those who seek it out within themselves.

But most of all, it requires that the seed of love be planted in a fertile heart. According to the Way of Jesus, faith, hope and love are all gifts of "the Holy Spirit," that is, the presence of God within. Conversion as a change of heart involves turning, from being outer-directed to being inner-directed, from serving self to serving God, and from the glamour of the world to the pursuit of Truth.

Once planted, the seeds of faith, hope and love sprout in the sunshine of good thoughts, are watered by good words and fertilized with good deeds. One weeds the garden of one's life by both effacing self-importance and also renouncing self-interest internally, so that one's mind is concentrated in itself and attention remains centered, even while one is still actively engaged in meeting one's responsibilities.

The roots of this growing "tree of life" are in the Godhead; its trunk extends down through the inner worlds, and its fruits are visible in the world through the medium

¹ Matthew 19:21; Luke 18:22.

² Saying 40.

of one's behavior and actions. Its roots above are watered by spiritual practices such as remembrance, meditation and contemplative prayer, and they are cultured by repentance of sin as separation from God, unconditional love for all as the manifestation of God, internal renunciation of self-importance and self-interest, and non-attachment to the fruits of action by doing one's best and then leaving the rest to God's will. This is called "spiritual cultivation."

The grace and guidance of the Master are of primary importance, however. According to Saying 90: "Jesus said, 'Come to me for I am a gentle master and my yoke is just. And you will find rest for yourselves.'"

The word used to describe the discipline required is "just," in the sense of "right," "correct," or "suitable." It is likely correlative with the Sanskrit term *samyak* as applied to each of the limbs of Buddha's Eightfold Path, the middle way between indulgence and austerity. Note that this differs considerably from the similar New Testament version: "My yoke is easy and my burden light."¹

According to the teaching of Sufism, when we take one step toward God, God takes a hundred steps toward us. If we align ourselves with the wish of the Master and attune ourselves to his will by accepting what happens as both a gift and a lesson, rather than resisting or avoiding, then we will receive the Master's assistance in meeting life's challenges through grace. This does not necessarily mean that the path will suddenly become smooth and obstacles will disappear. Rather, this grace will manifest in the virtues — "prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude." Prudence is practical wisdom. It is the virtue of the intellect. Fortitude is strength of will. It is the virtue of the heart. Temperance is self-control. It is the virtue of the passions. Justice is balance. It is the virtue of the whole. It integrates the other virtues.

THE GRACE OF THE MASTER

In addition to one's own efforts, perennial wisdom holds that the guidance and grace of a spiritual master is essential. A primary teaching of perennial wisdom is that the Master imparts the final stroke of knowledge that reveals the ultimate truth of realization to the disciple when the time is ripe. This realization that a master imparts is bestowed through grace. That is to say, it is a gift freely given, even if it is richly deserved, rather than the result of an obligation on the master's part.

Perennial wisdom often emphasizes that unification is not in the hands of the aspirant but depends on grace as a free gift, albeit a deserved one: "Jesus said, 'I will choose you one out of a thousand and two out of ten thousand, and they will be stationed in rest and be one and the same.'"²

¹ Matthew 11:30.

² Saying 23.

“Rest” is a state usually applied to God, in whom the soul’s finds its only real repose. Saying that those chosen will be one and the same is tantamount to saying that in the state of realization of identity *as* God, only the indivisible unity of God remains. It may also be understood to mean union *with* God. “Chosen” emphasizes that it is not the aspirant’s efforts that are ultimately responsible for realization. Rather, the grace of the Master is required for realization of identity *as* God.

Normative Christianity emphasizes the mythic Christ, characterized by the virgin birth, the transfiguration, and the bodily resurrection and ascension. *The Gospel of Thomas* contains no mention of these doctrines. Nor does it make reference to the biographical narratives on which this *mythos* is based.¹

In contrast, Jesus appears primarily as a spiritual master in *The Gospel of Thomas*, indicating that early on at least some saw him in terms of this role. However, the fact that Thomas presumes knowledge of the stature of Jesus does suggest that the community that used this gospel considered Jesus to be a supernatural figure. For only someone with comprehensive knowledge and power could say that he is the light above all, clearly a reference to the light or intelligence of God, and that all comes from him and returns to him.²

A principal difference between *The Gospel of Thomas* and the canonical gospels in this regard seems to be that *Thomas* does not deem it necessary to include specifically mythic elements in order to ground the supernatural status of Jesus in history, which is presupposed from the outset and also directly asserted in the text. From its brevity, we can conclude that the community using this gospel was already acquainted with many things about Jesus. They did not need repetition in this text because it was taken for granted that these matters were familiar to all. Jesus is simply presumed to be the acknowledged spiritual master of this community.

Sayings throughout *The Gospel of Thomas* emphasize Jesus’ role as spiritual master and transmitter of realization. According to Saying 10: “Jesus said, ‘Behold, I have lit a fire in the world and I am tending it until it is ablaze.’”

“Fire” is a traditional symbol of spiritual knowledge or illumination, and Jesus says that he is kindling that fire in the world and will tend it until it is ablaze in people’s hearts. Saying 82 elaborates: “Jesus said, ‘Whoever is near me is near the fire and whoever is removed from me is removed from the kingdom.’” Here, Jesus

¹ *Mythos* means teaching story in Greek. It is similar to *midrash* in Hebrew. The term *mythos* is value-neutral and does not imply that a story is untrue, either in whole or in part. It simply calls attention to the style and function of the biographical narratives about Jesus, which have a counterpart in the teaching stories of many traditions, some of which closely resemble the mythic life of Jesus. Virgin birth, miracles, death and resurrection, and glorification are recurrent themes in ancient religions.

² Saying 77.

identifies himself with the “fire” of knowledge, as he also does in Saying 77 in terms of light: “Jesus said, ‘I am the light that is above all....’”

Saying 17 asserts the promise of gnosis: “Jesus said, ‘I will give you what no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, what no hand has touched, and what no mind has ever conceived of.’”¹ This gift is the realization of one’s true nature as spirit. Saying 19 continues: “If you come to be my disciples and discern the inner meaning of my words, even these stones will serve you.” Matter must serve spirit and obey its bidding. One who realizes spirit knows firsthand that matter is the manifestation of spirit, hence, dependent on it.

If one “discerns,” that is, not merely understands but realizes the inner meaning of Jesus’ teaching, then one will have found one’s true nature as spirit and will enjoy the attributes of spirit.² Then one will come to rule over all (even these stones will serve you).³

Even though this discernment requires culturing on the disciple’s part, its coming to fruition in genuine spiritual knowledge is a matter of grace. Jesus promises this grace: “Jesus said, ‘Whoever drinks from my mouth becomes like me, and I become this person, and to this one what is concealed will be revealed.’”⁴

“Drinks from my mouth” can be read as a metaphor signifying the imbibing of knowledge from Jesus. Jesus tells Thomas: “You drank for the bubbling spring I gush forth, and have become intoxicated.”⁵ Here fresh spring water is a symbol of life, and intoxication a metaphor for mystical experience. Jesus’ “water of life” turns in the “wine” of spiritual intoxication. Sufism uses the term God-intoxication (Persian: *masti*). Drinking alcohol is forbidden in Islam. Wine is used as a symbol of divine love, and intoxication as a symbol of divine ecstasy, losing oneself in God.

GRACE AND WORKS

While the Master pulls, the disciple must cooperate by pushing himself, too. Self-effort is required both as preparation to received grace and also to culture the seed of awakening which grace plants when the time is ripe.

¹ Compare 1 Corinthians 2:9, referring to Isaiah 64.4, “But as it is written, ‘Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him.’”

² Saying 1.

³ Saying 2.

⁴ Saying 108.

⁵ Saying 13.

A disciple “pushes” through spiritual practice in order to become deserving of the gift of love. True love is the great unifier, and this love pulls one toward the Beloved. Since God is omnipresent and all pervading, true love of God eventually entails love for all. When love becomes unconditional and universal, then one’s limited self-love and the lusts based on it are annihilated in this greater love.

Yet, aspirants must do their part in cutting the ties that bind:

If you do not overcome your attachment to the world, you will not find the kingdom. If you do not make the day of [physical] rest into a day of [spiritual] rest, you will not see the Father.

Making the day of rest into a day of rest involves a play on the term “rest,” which means both physical rest and spiritual “rest” as the inner peace and tranquility that gnosis affords. According St. Gregory of Nyssa, detachment results in a state of inner tranquility (Greek: *apatheia*).¹ The Greek term *apatheia* should not be confused with apathy, which has the connotation of being inert. Evagrius and Cassian understand *apatheia* as purity of heart. The focus of the heart is on love for God instead of lusting after objects. Rather than being inert, inner tranquility results from remembering God and “forgetting” self.

William Law explains the inner meaning of making the day of rest a day of rest. Here the play is on the term rest, which means both physical rest and spiritual “rest” as the inner tranquility of gnosis.

In this secret union the loving soul flows forth and escapes from itself, and is swallowed up and as it were annihilated in the abyss of eternal love, dead to itself and living in God, knowing naught and feeling naught except the love that it savors. For it loses itself in the immense desert and darkness of Godhead. But to lose oneself thus is to find oneself.... In truth, that which puts off the human and puts on the divine is transformed into God, the same as iron in the fire takes on the appearance of the fire and is changed into it. But the essence of the soul thus deified subsists, just as the red iron does not cease to be iron.²

Law’s observation also links the first sentence of the saying with the second. Transcending attachment to the world is a prerequisite for making the Sabbath holy.

We must not seek to put down roots in the world, but be pilgrims with full intent on the goal, the inner meaning also of, “Be passers-by.”³ We are called to pilgrimage in this life as the essence of living fully, with full attention on the way

¹ St. Gregory of Nyssa. *Treatise on 1 Corinthians* 15:26.

² William Law. *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*. (London: Everyman’s Library, 1906-1940), p. 49. Public Domain.
URL=< www.ccel.org/ccel/law/serious_call.i.html >.

³ Saying 42.

and goal. A pilgrim must keep complete focus on the goal and not even be distracted by the path. For the path is a means and not an end in itself. As Buddha admonished, when the shore is reached the boat is no longer needed.

The spiritual goal in the metaphor of the Way of Jesus and *The Gospel of Thomas* is the kingdom of God. Even though Jesus came and continues to come personally for us as Master, we must be ripe to recognize him and receive his teaching:

His disciples said, “Who are you that you say these things to us?”

[Jesus said,] “Do you not know who I am from the things I say to you? Instead, you are like those who either love the tree and not the fruit, or love the fruit and not the tree.”¹

The “tree” symbolizes the master and “fruit” represents his teaching. Those who love the tree are those who are attracted to Jesus for what they can receive from him without actually putting his teaching into practice through internal renunciation of self-interest. Those who love the fruit but not the tree are those who love either their religion or their spiritual practices more than the Master.

These are common mistakes. The first mistake is that of those who seek grace without undertaking the necessary in order to become worthy of receiving it, forgetting Jesus’ admonition: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”²

The second is that of confusing the path with the goal, reducing the path to the level of something material in nature by objectifying it, for which Jesus roundly criticized the overtly pious of the day, calling them hypocrites, as both the canonical gospels and *The Gospel of Thomas* attest.

There is a need for developing spiritual discernment in order to be able to recognize the Master and his teaching:

They said to him, “Reveal to us who you are so we can believe in you.”

He said to them, “You are able to discern the face of the heavens and the earth, but you have not discerned the one who is in your presence, nor do you know how to discern the present moment.”³

In those times it was necessary to be able to discern the weather, since both farmers and fishermen depended on this ability for their livelihood. However, even more necessary to be able to discern spiritual realities and values, especially the spiritual presence of the spiritual master and the immanent presence of God.

¹ Saying 43

² John 14:15.

³ Saying 91.

When one lives in the present, one is unclouded by associations from the past and anticipation of the future. Then, the next right step becomes evident. But one can only live in the present to the degree that one has transcended self-interest and its manifestation as desire and aversion. Thus, to the degree that one has discovered that the world is as a lifeless corpse, so to speak, without enduring substance, to that degree one has moved beyond self-interest, and one lives in the present.

To be present is to be mindful and consciously aware. Then, one can see what is directly before one, unclouded by past associations and future expectations, and no longer buffeted by the cross winds of fear and desire blowing one hither and thither. But this is not a state into which one can either wish or will oneself without doing the necessary work of self-cultivation. Doing this necessitates making God the priority of life: “Jesus said, ‘A vine planted anywhere without the Father, not being established, will be uprooted and will perish.’”¹

In order to be able to receive the Master’s teaching one must till the soil to ripen oneself:

Give heed: A sower went and filled his hand with seed and cast it about. Some seeds fell on the road and the birds gathered them. Others fell on rocky soil and not taking good root, didn’t bear fruit. Others fell among weeds that choked the seeds and insects ate them up. Others fell on a fertile plot and bore good fruit. It yielded sixty an acre and on one twenty an acre.” In order to make one’s plot [heart] fertile, one must first cultivate it.²

This involves the setting of proper priorities as taught in several:

And he [Jesus] said, “Those who seek wisdom should be like the fisherman who cast his net into the sea and drew it up full of little fish. Among them, he found a good big fish. This wise fisherman threw all the little fish back and kept only the big fish without thinking twice about it. Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.”³

That is to say, by pursuing fame, fortune, power, pleasure, one blinds oneself to opportunities for attaining the abiding satisfaction that one truly seeks in the heart of hearts, which neither the transient things of the world nor external conformity to social convention or normative religion can provide.

According to Aristotle, everyone seeks happiness, but there is great disagreement over what happiness is and what will yield it.⁴ Seeking does not lead immediately to

¹ Saying 40.

² Saying 9.

³ Saying 8 is representative

⁴ Aristotle. *Nichomachean Ethics*. Book I.

finding. First, one must learn from disappointments in life that abiding happiness is not found in fame, fortune, power or pleasure, or even spiritual advancement short of the goal. On the quest one must first learn to discriminate between the important and trivial, and discern what one's highest good actually is. Then one must exert the discipline to pursue this end one-pointedly.

Jesus emphasized the need to seek in order to find. He promised that any who seek sincerely and persistently will eventually find what it is they seek:

“Jesus said, “Let those who seek not stop searching until they have found. When they have found, they will be shaken to their roots, and when they have been shaken to their roots, they will stand in awe and will gain dominion over all things.”¹

Being shaken to the roots and then standing in awe means passing through the “fire” of purification. One gains dominion over all things when one becomes non-attached, so that one is not ruled by one's passions or overshadowed by the glamour of the world. This ultimately results from transcending the duality of subject and object, and realizing nonduality.²

The way lies through integration: “Jesus said, ‘Where three are, they are without God. Where they are one, I am with that one.’”³ The three may be understood as body, mind and spirit as separate from each other. When body, mind and spirit are integrated, one is united within oneself. Only those who are unified can enter the bridal chamber of the heart where union *with* God takes place.⁴

An even deeper meaning of the three in one is realization of identity *as* God — 1) God as impersonal formless Absolute, 2) God personified in the God realized Master, and 3) God as Self, immanent in all as God's “breath,” the life in every soul. A corresponding teaching in perennial wisdom is found in the Vedic saying, “Guru, God and Self are one.”

As in ordinary cultivation, the gardener must cultivate the field and tend the plants. However, the gardener cannot give the seed life or cause it to grow to fruition. Similarly, seekers must cultivate themselves, relying on grace to provide what the seekers cannot. This is the ongoing dialectic of grace and works until unification dawns.

Regarding grace and effort, Hafiz, the great Persian poet and Sufi Perfect Master (*qutub*), said: “Even though union with Him is never given as a reward of one's

¹ Saying 2, also Sayings 92 and 94.

² Sayings 3 and 22.

³ Saying 30.

⁴ Saying 75.

efforts, nevertheless, O Heart, strive as much as you can.”¹ Bayzid Bastami, a Sufi qutub or Perfect Master, admonished: “The thing we tell of can never be found by seeking, yet only seekers find it.”²

JESUS AS MASTER

The Jesus tradition is about Jesus as Lord and Master. Jesus says in the New Testament, “I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except through Me.”³ He also announces his call, “Come, follow Me.”⁴

The Way of Jesus is primarily a way of love, specifically, love of God as embodied in the God-Man. The goal is to love Jesus as he should be loved, and the way is to leave all self-interest and self-importance behind and follow him instead of oneself.

Loving God as God ought to be loved entails transcending separation of the soul and God by uniting the soul as lover and God as the Beloved. The God-Man as God in human form puts a human face on this love.

The ardent lover woos the beloved by anticipating the beloved’s every wish, in the spirit of “your wish is my command.” Following the Master as master entails obeying the Master. But following the Master as the Divine Beloved means pleasing the Master by anticipating the Master’s wishes. This entails the converse; one is to do all in one’s power not to displease the Master.

The Gospel of Thomas makes a significant contribution to the Jesus tradition in this regard by emphasizing Jesus’ role as realized spiritual master over eschatological redeemer. One obeys in order that one might be saved; one serves in order to please. The former is motivated by self-interest flying with the wings of fear and desire, while the latter is not. It is a surrenderance of self-interest, freely proffered out of love.

For example, the New Testament story in which Jesus says, “Render to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s,” is well known. *The Gospel of Thomas* adds Jesus to this:

They showed Jesus a gold coin and said to him, “Caesar’s agents extort taxes from us.”

¹ Dr. Javad Nurbakhsh. *In the Tavern of Ruin: Seven Essays on Sufism*. London & New York: Khaniqahi-Nimatullahi Publications, 1978), 18.

² James Fadiman & Robert Frager (Editors). *Essential Sufism*. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 37.

³ John 14:6.

⁴ Matthew 19:21; also John 10:27, 12:26.

He said to them, “Give to the world what is the world’s, give to God what is God’s, and give to me what is mine.”¹

This means, first, that one should “be in the world but not of it” by meeting one’s responsibilities in the world with non-attachment, while being mindful of the immanent aspect of God pervading all. This requires that one undertake stewardship instead of pursuing ownership, and being concerned with needs and responsibilities rather than needless wants, which are never permanently satisfying and only distract from the spiritual quest.

Shivapuri Baba taught that only three things are necessary to realize God. They are discipline, discrimination, and devotion. Discrimination is for determining one’s responsibilities and meeting them effectively and artfully, as well as distinguishing real responsibilities from needless wants and aversions. Discipline is for meeting one’s responsibilities alone, instead of wasting time, energy and resources on needless wants. Then one should use the remaining time exclusively for devotion instead of pursuing self-interest.²

Secondly, it means that one should seek to experience God’s presence not only by non-attachment to the world but also through self-emptying, in order to make room for the infinite by cleansing one’s heart of obstacles to love.

Thirdly, it means that one should follow Jesus faithfully as spiritual master, obeying his instructions implicitly, and loving him unreservedly as the manifestation of God in human form. We give to Jesus what is his by loving him as he should be loved.

Jesus as Master is ready to assist with this purification: “Jesus said, ‘Whoever is near me is near the fire, and whoever is away from me is away from the kingdom.’”³

But not many are ready to hear the call. Jesus laments:

I established myself in the midst of the world, and I appeared to them in the flesh. I found them all drunk, and I found none of them thirsty. I was sorry of soul for the people because they are blind in their hearts and they do not see that they come into the world with nothing and that they will leave it with nothing. For the time being they are drunk. But when they sober up, they will experience a change of heart.⁴

The way of the Master is also the way of grace. In the Vedic tradition it is called “the way of the Master’s grace.” This is *guru kripa yoga* in Sanskrit. It is the way of

¹ Matthew 22:20-22; Mark 12:15-18; Luke 20:23-26; Saying 100.

² Renu Lal Singh. *Right Life: Teachings of Shivapuri Baba*.

³ Saying 82.

⁴ Saying 28.

total surrenderance to the Master, asking for nothing. This takes place in the state in which one recognizes one's complete dependence on the Master's grace when one finally realizes that one's own efforts can never extricate one from the morass of ignorance. This realization dawns when one becomes convinced that no amount of finite works can take one across the infinite gap that separates the finite and the infinite. Then the only recourse is surrenderance to a higher power that is infinite.

One also begins to suspect that the ego is too much of a trickster to permit its annihilating itself. For example, Augustine reports becoming conscious of this when he prayed for the Lord to take away his lust but added, just not yet.

While the Master's grace is necessary for the final stroke of realization, it is also indispensable at every stage of the path for most people, who are not capable of the almost superhuman efforts of spiritual heroes. Moreover, the Master's grace often prevents one from making stupid mistakes or rescues one from their inevitable consequences, if one does stumble on the way.

In the final analysis, the way of the Master is through maintaining contact with the Master through loving attention and intention. This is practicing the presence of the Master in one's heart.¹ One establishes contact by one's intention to do so, and one maintains this contact through one's constant attention. It is possible to do this at all times, even when sleeping after awhile.

The secret to constant remembrance is love. It is common knowledge that true lovers never forget their beloved even for an instant and, when separated, cannot wait to be united again. If this is true of earthly love, how much more does it apply to divine love?

Prayer is defined as the lifting of the mind (intention and attention) and heart (love) up to God. This is the essence of the contemplative prayer of establishing and maintaining contact with the God-Man. In the words of Meher Baba, which Jesus might also have said, "Make me your constant companion."²

¹ Brother Lawrence (Nicholas Herman c. 1605-1691). *The Practice of the Presence of God: The Best Rule of Holy Life*. (London: The Epworth Press, n.d.).
URL=<<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/lawrence/practice.html>>.

² Bal Natu. *Glimpses Of The God-Man or Meher Baba*. (Myrtle Beach, SC: Sheriar Press, 1984). Vol. IV, p. 181.

CONCLUSION

Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you.¹

I have presented an extended argument with evidence to show that mysticism is both central to the Jesus tradition and defining with respect to the Way of Jesus as an expression of perennial wisdom. The argument rests on the evidence of spiritual experience, both of mystics of the Jesus tradition and those of perennial wisdom. The evidence also includes the testimony of scripture, tradition and ecclesiastical authorities, including Church Fathers and Doctors.

I believe that the argument is not only a plausible one but also probable, although no argument can be compelling that is not based on confirmable evidence. The evidence of spiritual experience is only confirmable personally, in one's own experience. Otherwise, one is merely substituting one set of norms for another. Therefore, for the argument to be truly compelling, one must seek that experience within oneself by leading a spiritual life and praying for the grace of it.

In addition, in the course of this investigation I have attempted to show the intimate relationship of the Jesus tradition to perennial wisdom, as well that of the Way of Jesus with Qabalah, Sufism, Yoga, Vedanta, Buddhism, Taoism and the mystical paths of other traditions. It would indeed be surprising if there were not a common thread running through the world's spiritual traditions that lies at their core, namely, spiritual experience and how it is acquired.

However, such a relationship flies in the face of a huge body of doctrine, ritual, and observance that has encrusted the pristine teaching of Jesus to his few disciples about following his way. Therefore, I had to consider how the Jesus tradition might be reframed. Therefore, the logic of framing had to be considered initially, in order to show how norms function to structure a universe of discourse from a specific viewpoint and in terms of a particular interpretation.

Moreover, a great deal of the controversy in the Jesus tradition hinges on Jesus. Here, normative Christianity is guilty of confusing the Christ of faith with the historical Jesus. Normative Christianity is convinced of the historicity of the mythic Jesus. It considers the words and acts of Jesus as reported in scripture, not only as articles of faith but also as matters of fact, as if these were beyond questioning in terms of evidence. In addition, it interprets doctrines such as the virgin birth, miracles, resurrection, and ascension literally instead of symbolically.

¹ John 14:27.

But, as we have seen, scholars argue over the evidence concerning the historical Jesus, as well as what he may actually have said, and conclude that it is mostly speculative. Moreover, there are different views about how to interpret this evidence. The search for the historical Jesus is akin to a puzzle in which a number of key pieces are missing. As a result, the results are somewhat controversial, and it is unlikely that any view will carry the day on the basis of compelling historical evidence.

Therefore, in answering Jesus' question, "Who do you say I am?" for oneself, it seems most reasonable that a supremely intelligent being would create a world in which all people had access to the truth, not just those who happen to have been born not only into a particular tradition but also a particular interpretation of it. In contrast to this, many normative Christian sects hold that other Christian sects in disagreement with them are heretical and damned, their adherents hopelessly lost. Eastern and Western Christianity split, ostensibly over theological disagreements that still keep them apart. Similarly, six hundred years ago Catholics and Protestants began to fight over which of them has the ocean in its own bucket.

Interestingly in this regard, *The Gospel of Thomas* adds little to the picture of the mythic Jesus, and it contains virtually nothing about the key doctrines. Its contribution to the search for the historical Jesus is also unclear. Scholars disagree over the dating of the text, as well as whether it contains words or teachings attributable to the historical Jesus.

However, it does seem to add a great deal to what we know of the Way of Jesus. Whether it is a Gnostic text, hence aberrant, cannot be shown conclusively. But a good case can be made that it is neither heretical nor spurious. Instead, it may be a key document of the early Jesus tradition, providing insight into the Way of Jesus as some approached it initially, or at least very early. Surely the last word on this hasn't been spoken, but hopefully a good start has been made herein on reframing the debate.

What is most interesting from the point of view of the present undertaking is that the Way of Jesus can be interpreted as an integral aspect of perennial wisdom, and that *The Gospel of Thomas* can be interpreted as putting forth key fundamentals of the Way of Jesus as it relates to perennial wisdom. While there is no way to prove conclusively that this or any other interpretation is correct, neither is there good reason to think that this one is not plausible. I have offered a rationale for its plausibility in terms of both spiritual experience and also scripture, tradition and the testimony of saints whose authority is recognized in normative Christianity. Another key argument is that an interpretation that accords with perennial wisdom is more plausible than one that contradicts perennial wisdom, pitting the Jesus tradition against it.

Objections that can be made, of course, but attacking a straw man is beside the point. What some see as the strength of the argument, others view as its weakness. This is mystical experience.

Mystical experience is difficult to set forth with any degree of logical precision because it is ineffable. These logical difficulties and lack of empirical corroboration seem to create an opening through which arguments based on mysticism can be attacked and dismissed as irrational, imprecise, or just superstitious.

My answer is to repeat a standard retort, namely, that one must first gain some experience before entering the lists. For example, no one attempts to study physics, let alone critique it, without mastering the requisite mathematics. No physicist would take seriously the criticism that quantum mechanics must be in error because it apparently contradicts common sense. No one can adequately understand chemistry without spending time in the laboratory. The laboratory of mysticism is one's own consciousness, and the microscope is reflexivity. It is by going within by diving into the ocean of consciousness and exploring the cave of the heart that we begin to discover who we really are as spiritual beings.

This work is not so much about the Jesus puzzle as it is about the spiritual person that each of us really is. The Jesus puzzle isn't going to be solved conclusively without the discovery of more data. The question is whether the interpretation is plausibly close enough to what Jesus may have taught to be of use today in following his way. However, every human being is capable of discovering his or her own nature as a "child" of God and therefore God's "heir," whose birthright is divine.

While it is possible to argue over just what this means, the testimony of many mystics indicates that one can experience this birthright in some way while still in the physical body, both within oneself as a presence and in the world as "the numinous." First comes the experience, then the interpretation. Arguing about interpretations without any experience is futile.

Just because the Way of Jesus in general and *The Gospel of Thomas* in particular do not enjoy the same degree of conventional acceptance of the canonical gospels does not argue against their importance to sincere followers of Jesus. Long-standing belief in the established narrative often gets canonized as fact in the absence of evidence, and even in the face of contrary evidence. Scholarship is showing how the canonical gospels are not what conventional wisdom takes them to be, namely, eyewitness accounts to facts faithfully reported and preserved unaltered. When one examines the facts, *The Gospel of Thomas* has as much historical credibility as the canonical gospels, even though it does not enjoy the same status in the Christian mythos.

The doctrine of the mythic Jesus is so deeply entrenched in conventional thinking that it is unlikely to be revised quickly, even when the facts seem to demand this.

Those expecting that *The Gospel of Thomas* will revolutionize normative Christianity will likely be disappointed. The historical controversies are not likely to be resolved in the absence of fresh evidence that is overwhelmingly compelling.

On the other hand, judging from things I am hearing from friends and associates not acquainted with the scholarship, a new myth is forming around Jesus based on fiction and fantasy, in which Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene, was a father, taught “secrets” and established a dynasty, the whole of which has been covered up by a Vatican plot. A new narrative is being established on the basis of its popular appeal, rather than the historicity to which it pretends.

This is an ironic turn of poetic justice that has outraged normative believers, who cling to their equally non-historical beliefs as factual because they believe them to be. As Marshall McLuhan famously observed, “the medium is the message.” In the audio-visual age, we seem to be living in what political commentator David Sirota recently dubbed “the Post-Factual Society,” where a good story counts more than dull data, talking points are news, framing is objectivity, and reality is presentation. It is no surprise that in this environment normative Christianity is seen more and more in terms of a conspiracy theory.

On the other hand, the contribution of the Way of Jesus stands on a different level altogether, rising above both history and story. It’s principal teaching asserts the possibility — *in this life* — of both experiencing God’s presence and following Jesus as a living, personal Master who dwells within the hearts of all. Mystics have flourished in the Christian tradition and continue to flourish, as they have done and continue to do in virtually every mystical tradition. The Way of Jesus remains a viable option today, and *The Gospel of Thomas* can be read as putting forward a still vibrant teaching concerning it.

This teaching purports to be at least part of the “secret teaching” of Jesus himself bequeathed through Thomas the Apostle. Saying 14 seems to assert that it was given to Thomas while Jesus was still in the body. Whether this is actually the case is far less important than the continuing usefulness of the teaching it contains, which doesn’t need a marketing hook like “secret.” This teaching can be read as a story putting forward key fundamentals of perennial wisdom in a form that Jesus himself may have taught in similar terms, if not these exact words. At the very least, *The Gospel of Thomas* read in terms of perennial wisdom validates the view that Jesus’ teaching is consistent with universal spirituality.

It is true that key points in *The Gospel of Thomas* remain undecidable on the available evidence and that the sayings are subject to different interpretations, none of which can claim to compel exclusive acceptance. But that is generally the case with ancient texts. However, if like other great scripture the teaching contained in *Thomas* is useful to a person’s spiritual development, it can be argued that historical controversies matter little. Theological controversies don’t seem to have gotten in

the way of previous mystics having had the experiences they did. Perhaps some of them left the world for the desert or monastery so they would not be encumbered by such disputes.

The most significant contribution of *The Gospel of Thomas* may turn out to be the use to which it is put by contemporary followers of Jesus in their personal, interior spiritual practice. Hopefully, it will aid in the reframing of the Jesus tradition, so that people can feel that they are actually following Jesus' way when departing from the norms that inhibit interior spirituality.

The Way of Jesus is not a doctrine or theory. It is a teaching about a practice as a way of life. This teaching must be put into practice in order to be spiritually understood. However, this is unlikely to take place as Jesus apparently intended as long as people are under the illusion of traditions and interpretations that erect obstacles instead of building bridges.

This interpretation is notable for the role it plays in establishing a new framework relating the Way of Jesus to perennial wisdom. Hopefully, it will play some part in the process of reframing that is now taking place as a result of a multitude of factors, not the least of which is globalization, as East meets West and different frames interact.

This interaction is now stirring the pot, as traditional views rise up to oppose change. However, change is clearly inevitable and we are now moving in the direction of "one people, one planet." The challenge is to live unity, while celebrating diversity. To the degree that spiritual people can see the unity underlying all religions and wisdom traditions at their mystical core, then pursuing this through any of them need not be divisive or threaten any of the other.

I leave you with a thought from Meher Baba:

I am equally approachable to one and all, big and small,
To saints who rise and sinners who fall,
Through all the various paths that give the divine call.
I am approachable alike to saint whom I adore
And to sinner whom I am for,
And equally through Sufism, Vedantism, Christianity,
Or Zoroastrianism and Buddhism and other isms
Of any kind and also directly through no medium of 'isms' at all.¹

Addressing a Sufi group, he said similarly:

If you take Baba to be perfect and one with God, Baba is then the Ocean — and these different paths, Sufism, Vedantism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Jainism and Christianity are as rivers to the ocean. But now

¹ Meher Baba. 20 July 1952, New York.

URL=<<http://www.ambppct.org/meherbaba/equally-approachable.php>>.

the time has arrived and a period has arrived when these rivers have more or less become dry. Those who follow these different paths do it only in form. More importance is given to ceremonies and practices, but the real purpose is lost sight of.

Vedantism, which is based on unity and assertion, finds its goal in the *Aham Brahmasmi*, "I am God," state. Buddhism, which is based on good living, finds its goal in *nirvana*. Zoroastrianism, which is based on pure thoughts, pure words and pure deeds, has its goal in *Ahuramazda*. Christianity, which is based especially on Christian mysticism, has its goal in becoming one with the Father. And Sufism, which is based on love, ends in *fana* and *baqa*, the annihilation and the becoming. And the different yogas, *bhakti* yoga, *dnyan* yoga, *karma* yoga and *raja* yoga, have their endings in *nirvikalpa samadhi*.

All these ends mean becoming One with God, and living the life of God — in short, deification.

But, as I say, time is such that these rivers have gone dry and so the Ocean itself has to go out and flood these rivers. So it is now time for me to reorient these different "isms" which end in One God.¹

Hopefully, this endeavor will play some part, however small, in assisting to reorient the Jesus tradition. Perhaps it will also contribute to re-enlivening, universal mystical spirituality as the eternal way and the ancient religion of humankind.

The Vedic and Sikh traditions picture a tree with its roots in the heavens and its trunk and branches growing downward.² The upturned roots symbolize mystical knowledge of the Absolute, to which mystics of all times and climes testify. The tree represents the manifestation of this ancient religion in the perennial wisdom that masters, sages, saints and seers teach. The branches are the various wisdom traditions, the twigs the various teachers, and the leaves the multitude of seekers clustered around them. The Qabalistic Tree of Life can be interpreted in the same way, thus uniting the mystical wisdom of East and West. The fruit of this tree is the enlightenment that it produces. All of us have eaten of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of God and Evil. Now it is time to taste the fruit of the Tree of Life.

A NEW ERA OF FREEDOM, TRUTH, AND LOVE

According to Avatar Meher Baba, humanity is now going through a transition from an epoch characterized by religious norms and embarking on a new era, one based on freedom, truth, and love.

¹ Meher Baba. Ivy O. Duce. *How A Master Works*. p. 125.

² *Bhagavad Gita*, 15:1. URL=<<http://www.gitasupersite.iitk.ac.in/>>. *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, 503. URL=<<http://www.sikhs.org/english/frame.html>>.

The organized religions of the world often fail to express the real vision of those who have been the fountainhead of inspiration for their very coming into existence. Dogmas and beliefs, rituals and ceremonies, can never be the essence of true spiritual life. When religion has become merely a matter of external rituals and ceremonies, it has become a cage for the soul. Nor does it help very far to change one religion for another. It is like going from one cage to another. If religion does not help man to emancipate the soul from spiritual bondage and realize God, it has no useful purpose to serve. Then it is time that religion should go to make room for God!

I am, therefore, not interested in founding a new religion. The world is already divided by numberless sects, based upon dogmas and beliefs. I have not come to give another cage for man, but to impart to the world the illimitable Truth. The world needs awakening and not mere verbal instruction; it needs the freedom and the amplitude of divine life, and not the superficiality of mechanized and pompous forms; it needs love, and not the displays of power.

The world task ahead of me is particularly creative. Really speaking, none of you have to receive divinity from me; but what I have to give is the knowledge and experience of the Oneness of us all.

Man will be weaned away from the allurements of the ego-life. He shall come into full inheritance of his own divinity and know himself to be none other than the supreme God Himself; and his heart shall be unlocked so as to release the dynamic love divine. Divine love knows no decay, fear or corruption, because it is illumined by the understanding that all life is One. Let those who are alive to the real values hearken to this call of mine; they will have an ample share in bringing into existence the New Era of Truth and Love.¹

¹ Meher Baba in Bhau Kalchuri, *Lord Meher*, v. 8, p. 2985.
URL=<<http://www.lordmeher.org/index.jsp?pageBase=page.jsp&nextPage=2985>>.

APPENDIX ONE: *THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS*

This is a free rendering of *The Gospel of Thomas* based on a mystical interpretation that I composed some time ago for liturgical use, I also wished to make the text more generally available in a readable form consistent with perennial wisdom. The present version has been modified somewhat from the original edition.

A free rendering attempts to capture the spirit of the text instead of presenting the literal meaning of its terms, as scholarly translations are expected to do, often at the expense of being easy to comprehend. *The Gospel of Thomas* is difficult for many people to approach at all in literal translation, let alone to appreciate the nuances. Moreover, literal translations are often somewhat biased by the translator's own ideas of what the text means, and the explanations they provide are often based on a "Gnostic" reading. Although such interpretations are not necessarily deficient, they are often one-sided, and often deter people who might otherwise profit from a different, yet valid interpretation. Therefore, I thought it useful to provide an alternative based on perennial wisdom and offer it again here.

The sayings of this rendering often differ from the translation of the sayings in the rest of this study, where I have attempted to conform more closely to the actual words of the text. Moreover, I am now engaged in writing a commentary on *The Gospel of Thomas* that will contain a new translation as well. As is the case with many texts in ancient languages, as well as non-Indo-Iranian languages, the text can be translated in a variety of ways, and it is helpful to consult a number of different approaches to enter the richness of the meaning. This is also true of *The Gospel of Thomas*. In composing the commentary on *The Gospel of Thomas*, I sometimes find it necessary to present alternative readings of the sayings in order to bring out the richness of meaning.

So it should not be presumed that there is one definitive translation that either precludes others or is superior to them, although, obviously, the text should not be slanted in translation to make it signify something that the original words do not contain in their meaning. At the same time, there is often latitude in the meaning of these terms, and their understanding is also influenced by the way in which such terms were used contemporaneously. Here, scholars of the period can be of great assistance.

Many different translations have been made, a good number of which are available online. Prof. Marvin Meyer, for instance, has offered several translations, showing how even the same person sees different levels of richness in the text.

Those interested are advised to consult The Gospel of Thomas Homepage, administered by Prof. Stevan Davies.¹ A literal, word for word interlinear translation in Coptic and English is available at Michael Grondin's web site.² Since I am not well acquainted either with Coptic or the context of this historical period, I have used scholarly resources extensively in preparing my rendering of the text.

My own contribution is largely from my field of specialization, comparative spirituality and perennial wisdom. It provides the perspective of a mystical interpretation based on perennial wisdom. Explanatory material inserted in the text is in parentheses.

A FREE RENDERING BASED ON A MYSTICAL INTERPRETATION

Prologue: "These are the secret³ sayings that the living Jesus spoke and Jude Didymos Thomas, (called his spiritual twin),⁴ wrote down."

¹ Stefan Davies. The Gospel of Thomas Homepage.
URL=<<http://home.epix.net/~miser17/Thomas.html>>.

² Michael Grondin's Interlinear *Gospel of Thomas*, Coptic and English.
URL=<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/9068/z_index.htm>

³ Literally "hidden."

⁴ Greek *didymos* and the corresponding Aramaic *thomas* both signify a twin. These are qualifiers applied to the name Judas, also written as Jude, likely to distinguish others so named from Judas Iscariot. Judas Didymos Thomas would therefore mean Judas or Jude, whose nickname was Twin. There is considerable debate concerning the identity of this Jude, but tradition identifies him with the apostle known as Thomas. The important point here is that he is called "Twin," and this was considered important enough to repeat the Aramaic along with the Greek.

There is no indication that Jesus had a physical twin, but tradition holds that Thomas was the spiritual "twin" of Jesus. From the mystical standpoint this means that Jesus had given him spiritual realization, raising Thomas to his own level, similarly to the way that this internal and experiential transmission of the completeness or perfection of the master's teaching is recorded in other mystical wisdom traditions, where a realized master imparts realization to others who are ripe for it. This important point would likely not have been lost on an audience of this period, who would be familiar with this manner of speaking.

If it were not true that Thomas was a recipient of this gnosis, then Thomas would have been simply a scribe of Jesus' words rather than the receiver of their essence, as the gospel intimates. Moreover, the tradition of Thomas Christianity has long held this position, in a similar way that Hazrat 'Ali is considered by Sufis to have been the recipient of Muhammad's inner teaching as the essence of Sufism. The Thomasine tradition interprets even the "doubting Thomas" episode of the New Testament as evidence of the primacy of experience for Thomas, in contrast to the other disciples, who were satisfied with less direct, hence less complete, knowledge.

1. And he¹ said: “Whoever finds the (inner) meaning of these sayings (by experiencing what is alive within themselves, that is, the immortal soul) will not experience death (of the body as death).”
2. Jesus said: “Let those who seek not stop searching until they have found. When they have found, they will be shaken to their roots. And when they have been shaken to their roots, they will stand in awe and will gain dominion over all things. And when they have gained dominion over all things (instead of being dominated by them), they will find peace.”²
3. Jesus said: “If your leaders say to you, ‘See, the kingdom is above,’ then the birds will precede you into it. If they say to you, ‘It is below,’ the fish will precede you. But the kingdom is inside you, and it is outside you too. You will discover this if you come to know yourselves, and (then) you will realize that you are children of the living Father. But if you do not know who you are, you live in poverty, and you are that poverty.”
4. Jesus said: “A person mature (in worldly experience) can ask one new born (in spiritual experience) where life is to be found and gain life. Many of the first (born) will be last (to be enlightened) and the last (born), first (to be enlightened), and they will be as a single one.”³
5. Jesus said: “See what is right before your eyes,⁴ and what is hidden from you will be opened unto you. For there is nothing concealed that is not revealed, and nothing covered that is not uncovered.”
6. His disciples asked him, saying, “Do you want us to fast? How should we pray? Are we to give alms? What dietary prescriptions should we follow?”⁵ Jesus said: “Do not lie and do not do (to others) what you (yourselves) dislike, because all things are laid bare in the face of

¹ Presumably “he” refers to Jesus, but possibly Thomas is meant.

² This saying contains the warning that the spiritual path is not a bed of roses and that one will be shaken to the roots in its course.

³ “Single one” signifies the nondual state, which is indivisible unity. Those who realize “I Am,” realize the identical indivisible unity, hence, are as “a single one.”

⁴ The contemporary English idiom would be to see “what is right under your nose.” The spiritual is eternally omnipresent as the sole reality. Nothing needs to be added. It is only necessary to remove the veils covering this.

⁵ These questions show that the disciples have a conventional view of what spirituality entails. Jesus alerts them here and subsequently that such views are not part of his way.

truth. For there is nothing which is hidden that is not made manifest and nothing concealed that is not revealed.”

7. Jesus said: “Joyous are those who consume the lion (within themselves), for assimilating the leonine will make them noble. But sorry are those whom the lion (within) devours, for those whom the leonine dominates are consumed by their pride and their passions.”¹
8. And he said: “Those who seek wisdom should be like the fisherman who cast his net into the sea and drew it up filled with small fish. Among the small fish, he found a good big one. Without thinking twice about it, this wise fisherman threw all the little fish back and kept only the big one. Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.”
9. Jesus said: “Give heed: A farmer went and filled his hand with seed and cast it about. Some of the seeds fell in the road and the birds got them. Others fell on rocky soil and, not taking good root, didn’t bear fruit. Other seeds fell among weeds that choked them and insects ate them up. Other (seeds) fell on a fertile plot and bore good fruit; it yielded sixty bushels an acre and [even] one twenty an acre.”
10. Jesus said: “Behold, I have lit a fire in the world, and I am tending it until it is ablaze.”
11. Jesus said: “Everything under the sun will pass away, and the sun and stars themselves will pass away. And the dead do not live, and the living will not die. In the days when you ate what was dead, you turned it into life. But when you enter into the light, what will you do? When you were one, you made two. But having become two, what will you do?”
12. The disciples said to Jesus: “We know you are going to leave us. Who, then, will become our leader?” Jesus said to them: “Wherever you are, you are to turn to James the Righteous, for whose sake heaven and earth came into being.”
13. Jesus said to his disciples: “Compare me to something and tell me what I am like.” Simon Peter said to him, “You are like a righteous angel.” Matthew said to him, “You are like a wise sage.” Thomas said

¹ The play on “lion” makes use of its positive and negative connotations. The lion connotes nobility on the one hand. King David, for example, is called “the lion of Judah.” On the other hand, the lion as king of beasts also connotes pride and passion, the animal qualities in the human being that must be mastered if one is to rise to one’s full humanity. Those who do this become noble. The inner meaning of “noble” is to be self-sacrificing: “*Noblesse oblige*.”

to him, “Teacher, my mouth absolutely refuses to compare you with anything.” Jesus said, “I am not your teacher (any longer, since you have now become my spiritual twin). For you drank from the bubbling spring (of knowledge) I gush forth, and you have gotten intoxicated (by the spirit).” And he took him and withdrew and spoke three things to him. When Thomas returned, the others asked him, “What did Jesus say to you?” Thomas said to them, “If I tell you even one of the things he said to me, you will pick up stones to hurl at me. And fire will shoot from the stones and burn you up.”

14. Jesus said to them, “If you fast, you risk begetting sin for yourselves. If you pray, you are liable to be judged, and if you give alms, you may do harm to your spirit, (for if you do these things without purity of intention, then you will share the lot of the ‘holier than thou’ hypocrites). Rather, when you go into any land and wander through their country, should the people offer you hospitality, eat what they set before you and heal the sick among them. For what goes into your mouth will not defile you. Rather, it is what comes out of your mouth that will defile you.”
15. Jesus said, “When you see the one not born of woman, prostrate yourselves and worship.¹ That is your father.”
16. Jesus said, “People think, perhaps, that I have come to bring peace to the world. And they do not realize that I have come to bring discord—fire, the sword, and war. For in a house of five people, three will be against two, and two against three, parent will be against child and child against parent. (Once the truth is declared, a choice must be made,) and (those who choose the Way) will become established in themselves.”
17. Jesus said, “I will give you what no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, what no hand has touched, and what no mind has ever conceived of.”
18. The disciples said to Jesus, “What will the end be like?” Jesus said, “What, have you (already) found the beginning that you (now) seek the end? For where the beginning is, so also is the end. Joyous is anyone who is established at the beginning, (in the eternal now). That one has already attained the end and shall not experience death.”

¹ The one not born of woman is the immortal soul, the spiritual essence of a person, which is independent of the psychological personality, the limited mind, physical body and material world, all of which are perishable. Matter is not only physical but includes everything that is perishable. The spiritual is that which is imperishable.

19. Jesus said, “Joyous is the one who exists before coming into the world. If you come to be my disciples and discern in your experience the inner meaning of my words, even these stones will serve you. There are five trees in Paradise for you—the spiritual faculties of a realized one). They do not change, winter or summer, and their leaves never fall. Whoever knows them will not have to experience death.”
20. The disciples said to Jesus, “Tell us what the kingdom of heaven is like.” He said to them, “It is like a mustard seed, (which is) the smallest of seeds; but when it falls on fertile soil, it sends out great branches and gives shelter to the birds of the air.”
21. Mary (Magdalene) said to Jesus, “What are your disciples like?” He said, “They are like children living in a field that is not theirs. When the owners of the field (come and) find them there, they say, ‘Give us back our field.’ Stripping off the clothing (of this world), they give them back their field. Therefore, I say that if the owner of an estate (i.e., the spirit) knows that bandits (i.e., worldly desires, temptations) are approaching, he will keep watch before the thieves come and not let the bandits break into the mansion to steal its contents. Be on your guard, then, against the world. Arm yourselves with great power lest the bandits find a way to get at you, for the danger that can be expected will (inevitably) approach. Let there be a person of prudence among you.... When the grain ripened, one came hastily with sickle in hand and harvested it. Those who have ears to hear, let them hear.”
22. Jesus saw some infants being nursed. He said to his disciples, “These little children nursing are like unto the kingdom of heaven.” They said to him, “(Then) will we enter the kingdom by being as little children?” Jesus said to them, “When you make the two one, and the inner as the outer and the outer as the inner, and the above as the below, and when you make the male and the female to be one and the same, so the male be not male nor the female, female. And when you make eyes (that can see into higher things) in place of an (ordinary) eye, and a hand (that can accomplish great works) in place of an (ordinary) hand, and a foot (that can mount to heaven) in place of an (ordinary) foot, and a (true) image in place of a (worldly) likeness, then you will enter (the kingdom).”
23. Jesus said, “I will choose you one out of a thousand and two out of ten thousand, and then those chosen will be established in oneness.”
24. His disciples said, “Show us the place where you abide, for we must seek it out (ourselves).” Jesus said, “Whoever has ears to hear, let

- them hear. There is light within one who is enlightened and it lights up the whole world. If (this light) does not shine, (the world) is dark.”
25. Jesus said, “Love the children of the father as your self; watch out for them like the pupil of your eye.”
 26. Jesus said, “You see the speck of dust in your friend’s eye, but you do not see the cinder in your own. When you take the cinder out of your own eye, then you will be able to see clearly and can take the speck out of your friend’s eye.”
 27. (Jesus said,) “If you do not overcome your attachment to the world, you will not find the kingdom. If you do not make the day of rest into a day of true rest (in spiritual quietude), you will not see the father.”
 28. Jesus said, “I set myself in the midst of the world, and I appeared to them in the flesh. (But) I discovered them all drunk (on the glamour of the world), and I found none of them thirsty (for things spiritual). I was sorry of soul for the people because they are blind in their hearts and they do not see that they came into the world with nothing and that they will leave the world with nothing. For the time being, they are drunk (on the world’s glamour). But when they sober up, they will experience a change of heart.”
 29. Jesus said, “If flesh and bones came into existence for the spirit, it would be amazing enough, but if the spirit came into existence for the sake of the body, it would be even more amazing. For my part, I am amazed that this great treasure (the imperishable spirit) has taken up abode in this poverty (the perishable).”
 30. Jesus said, “Where (body, soul and spirit) are three (that is, apparently separate), they are without God. Where they are one (united through realization), I Am (is) with that one. {Split a piece of wood and I Am (is) there. Pick up a stone and you will find Me there.}”¹
 31. Jesus said, “No prophet is listened to in their own town; no healer cures anyone who knows them (well).”
 32. Jesus said, “A city built on a high mountain and with a strong foundation cannot fall, but neither can it be hidden.”
 33. Jesus said, “What you hear in your (inner) ear, shout from the roof tops. Nobody lights a lamp and puts it under a basket; nor do they put

¹ This gloss enclosed in parens {...} also occurs in Saying 77 and the Greek Oxyrhynchus fragments. While it is almost certainly original rather than a scribal interpolation, how it occurred initially in the text is uncertain.

- it in a hidden place. Instead, they put it on a lamp stand so that everyone coming and going can see its light.”
34. Jesus said, “If blind person (tries to) lead someone else who cannot see, both of them will fall into a ditch.”
35. Jesus said, “You cannot enter the house of the strong (i.e., the ego and its predilection for pursuing self-interest) and take it by force without tying up their hands (through nonattachment). Then, you can clean the place out” (of worldly desires that distract the heart from its proper object, the eternal).
36. Jesus said, “Do not fret from dawn to dusk and from dusk till dawn about your food, what you will eat, or your clothing, what you will wear. You are much more valuable than the lilies, which neither spin nor sew. When you no (longer) have any (worldly) garment, what will you wear? (Tell me) who can add to your height; that one will give you your clothing (and everything else you will need).”
37. His disciples said, “When will you appear to us and when will we see you?” Jesus said, “When you strip yourselves (of your vanity) and are not ashamed, and when you take off your worldly garments (psychological personality, limited mind, senses, and physical body) and put them under your feet and trample on them like little children, then you will see the offspring of the living one, and you will not be afraid.”¹
38. Jesus said, “Many times you have wanted to hear these things that I am saying to you, and you have no one else to hear them from. (Listen well, for) days will come when you will seek me and you will not find me, (but you will have my words to remember).”
39. Jesus said, “The keys of wisdom have been entrusted to the learned and the teachers, but they have hidden them. They have not entered (the kingdom) themselves, nor have they let those enter who desire to (because they have not only failed to appreciate the teaching of the prophets and have also perverted it for their own gain). As for you, be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.”
40. Jesus said, “A vine planted anywhere without the Father, not being (firmly) rooted, will be uprooted and will perish.”²

¹ This means that one must efface all aspects of the limited self or ego that feeds on separate individuality.

² “A vine” signifies a shoot of life and symbolizes the soul being “planted” in the body so that it can come to realize its true nature as “living,” that is, immortal. If the soul identifies

41. Jesus said, “Those who have (realized something of the spirit), will be given more, and those who lack (this realization owing to their pursuit of self-interest and material gain) will lose even the little they have.”
42. Jesus said, “Be wayfarers.¹ (That is, be pilgrims in this world, with your attention fixed on reaching the place of pilgrimage—the kingdom. Be passers-by rather than tourists gawking at the sights, or settlers struggling to put down roots. Attain to wholeness of life by transcending your limited individuality through being in the world but not of it.)”
43. His disciples said, “Who are you that you say these things to us?” (Jesus said,) “Do you not know who I am from the things I say to you? Instead, you are like those who either love the tree and not the fruit, or love the fruit and not the tree.”²
44. Jesus said, “Whoever scoffs at the Father (the Transcendent Source) will be forgiven, and whoever scoffs at the Son (the Immanent Ground) will be forgiven, but whoever scoffs at the Spirit (of wholeness within themselves) will not be forgiven, neither on earth nor in heaven, (until they awaken to their folly and honor this spirit).”
45. Jesus said, “Grapes are not gathered from thorns, nor figs from thistles, for these do not bear fruit. Those who are good bring forth good from their storehouse, while those who are evil bring forth evil from the store of evil in their hearts and they say evil things; for everyone brings forth what their hearts are filled with.”
46. Jesus said, “From Adam until John the Baptist, among those born of women no one is exalted enough not to bow before John’s person. Yet I say to you that whoever among you becomes a child will see the kingdom and become more exalted than he (is as a mere human personage by attaining to the same divine state as is his in reality).”
47. Jesus said, “It is not possible for anyone to straddle two horses or to bend two bows. And it is impossible for a servant to serve two

with the body instead, it must experience the physical death that the body necessarily undergoes.

¹ The precise meaning of the Coptic term here seems to be somewhat debatable. “Passers-by” conveys the idea. The inner meaning is to establish internal renunciation by being in the world but not of it.

² The tree is Jesus as a person, the fruit is Jesus’ teaching.

masters, otherwise he will please one and offend the other.¹ No one drinks mature wine of good vintage and straight away desires to drink unseasoned wine, new from the vine. And new wine is not put into old wineskins lest they burst, nor old wine into new wineskins lest it spoil. An old patch is not sewn on a new garment lest it tear.”

48. Jesus said, “If the two — (the duality of matter and spirit in us) — are in harmony with each other under one roof, (that is, in one person who has realized unity), and they (the unified body and soul) say to the mountain, ‘Move away,’ it will move away.”
49. Jesus said, “Joyous are you who remain unattached and set apart (from the worldly by being in the world but not of it), because you shall find the kingdom. For you come from it, and to it you will return.”
50. Jesus said, “If they say to you, ‘Where did you come from?’, say to them, ‘We came from the light: the place where the light proceeded from itself, established itself, and manifested itself in the image of its source and being.’ If they say to you, ‘Who are you?’, say, ‘We are its offspring, and we are set apart by the living father.’ If they say to you, ‘What evidence of the father is in you?’, say to them, ‘It is activity along with rest.’”²
51. His disciples said to him, “When will the dead find rest, and when will the new order be established?” He said to them, “What you are awaiting has already come, but you do not see it.”
52. His disciples said to him, “Twenty four prophets spoke in Israel and all of them spoke in you.” He said to them, “You have neglected (to mention) the (living) one who is (ever) present and have referred (instead) to (what is) dead.”
53. His disciples said to him, “Is circumcision advantageous or not?” He said to them, “If it were advantageous (in its nature), fathers would beget their children circumcised from their mothers. But the true

¹ Here the two are the spiritual and the material. The idea is that one is either serving God, and thereby the unlimited soul, or else one is serving one’s own limited self, identified with the physical body.

² “Activity along with rest” is the state of those who have realized the state of nonduality (rest) and still function in the body (activity).

spiritual circumcision—(“circumcision of the heart”)—is advantageous in all ways.”¹

54. Jesus said, “Joyous are those who transcend attachment, for yours is the kingdom of heaven.”²
55. Jesus said, “Those who do not transcend their attachment to their father and mother cannot be my disciples. And those who do not transcend their attachment to their brothers and sisters and take up their cross like me will not become like unto me.”
56. Jesus said, “Whoever comes to know the cosmos (for what it is, dead matter, perishable through and through) has found a corpse, and the cosmos (itself) is worthless compared to anyone that has found (it to be) a corpse” (by becoming directly acquainted with the immortal soul through spiritual experience).
57. Jesus said, “The kingdom of the father is like man who planted good seed. His enemy came by night and sowed weeds among the good seed. (But) the man told the field hands not to pull up the weeds lest they go thinking, ‘We will pull up the weeds,’ and they pull up the wheat along with it. For on the day of the harvest the weeds will be obvious, and they will pull them out and burn them.”
58. Jesus said, “Joyous is one who has labored (at spiritual things) and suffered (the purgation of soul), for that one will find life.”
59. Jesus said, “Turn to what is alive (i.e., the immortal soul or spirit within) while you are alive, lest you die and seek to see what you will be unable to (then).”
60. (Jesus and his disciples) saw a Samaritan going to Judea, carrying a lamb. He said to his disciples, (“Why do you suppose) that man (is carrying) a lamb around.” They said to him, “To kill it and eat it.” He said to them, “He won’t eat it while it is still alive, but only after he has killed it and it has become a carcass.” They said to him, “He cannot eat it otherwise.” He said to them, “Look for a place of rest for yourselves, lest you, too, become a carcass and be eaten (by the worms).”³

¹ “Circumcision of the heart” signifies turning one’s intention and attention from preoccupation with the things of this world, fame, fortune, pleasure and power, to the spiritual.

² This is essentially an alternative statement of the familiar beatitude, “Joyous are those who are poor, in spirit, ...”

³ “Rest” means spiritual enlightenment.

61. Jesus said, “Two will rest upon a bed; one will die and one will live, (for one will merely sleep and the other will truly rest).” Salome said, “Who are you, sir, that you have come up on my couch and eaten from my table as if you were somebody?” Jesus said to her, “I am he who is from the one that is whole. I have been given of the things of my father.” (Salome said,) “I am your disciple.” (Jesus replied,) “I say, whoever is emptied out will be filled, but whoever is divided will be filled with darkness.”
62. Jesus said, “I impart my inner teaching to those (who are ready to receive this) inner teaching. Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing” (by being in the world, but not of it).¹
63. Jesus said, “(Once) there was a rich man who had a great deal of wealth. (One day) he said (to himself), ‘I will invest my money in planting that I may sow and reap and fill my storehouses with grain, so that I will lack nothing.’ This is what he thought in his heart (that day), and that night he died. Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.”
64. Jesus said, “A man had invited guests, and when dinner was prepared, he sent his servant to call them. The servant went to the first and said to him, ‘My master invites you to come.’ He said, ‘I have accounts to settle with some merchants. They are coming to see me this evening, and I have to go and give them my instructions. I beg to be excused from the dinner.’ He went to another and said to him, ‘My master invites you to come.’ He said to him, ‘I just bought a house and they request my presence for a day. I will not have any time to come.’ He went to another and said to him, ‘My master invites you to come.’ He said to him, ‘My friend is getting married, and I am to arrange a feast. I will not be able to come, and I beg to be excused from the dinner.’ He went to yet another and said to him, ‘My master invites you to come.’ He said to him, ‘I have just bought a property, and I am on my way to collect the rent. I will not be able to come. I beg to be excused.’ The servant returned and said to his master, ‘Those whom you have invited to dinner have (all) asked to be excused.’ The master said to his servant, ‘Go out and bring back those you happen to meet into the street, so that they may eat.’ Those (who are) too busy with worldly affairs to recline at my table shall not enter the precincts of my father.”
65. He said, “The owner of a vineyard let it to some tenants to work so he could have the produce. (But when) he sent his servant to get the

¹ That is, meet your worldly obligations in life through physical activity, but secretly in your heart, pursue spirituality as your life mission.

harvest of the vineyard, they set upon the servant and beat him, all but killing him. The servant returned and reported to his master (what had happened to him). The owner said, 'Perhaps there was a mistake.' He sent another servant, but the tenants beat this one too. Then the owner sent his son, saying, 'Maybe they will show my son respect!' Because the tenants knew that he was heir to the vineyard, they took him and killed him. Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear."

66. Jesus said, "Show me the stone the builders rejected. It is the cornerstone."
67. Jesus said, "Anyone who gains knowledge of all things but fails to know oneself does not know all."
68. Jesus said, "Joyous are you when they revile you and persecute you, for you will find a place where no one can pursue you."
69. Jesus said, "Joyous are those who have been put to the test within. It is they who truly know the father. Joyous are those who hunger (after spiritual food), for they who desire (it) will have their bellies filled."
70. Jesus said, "What you have within you will save you if you will enliven it within yourselves. If you do not have it within yourselves, what you do not have within you will kill you, (for not having enlivened awareness of the immortal soul during life in the world is the reason you will experience the death of the physical body with which you identify yourself as death)."
71. Jesus said, "I will tear down these walls (of separation between the material and spiritual, leaving indivisible unity) and nothing will be able to rebuild them."
72. Someone said to him, "Tell my relatives to share my father's possessions with me." He answered, "Friend, who has made me the one to whom it is given to divide (things)?" He turned to his disciples and said to them, "I am not a divider, am I?"¹
73. Jesus said, "The harvest is great, but the gatherers are few, so call upon the Lord to send out gatherers to the harvest."
74. He said, "O, Lord, many are around the well, but no one is in the well."²

¹ The idea here is that Jesus is a uniter rather than a divider, since his teaching is based on nonduality.

² Many wish to pursue spirituality, but few are willing to do what it takes, that is, efface the limited self with which they identify themselves by transcending worldly attachments.

75. Jesus said, “Many are standing at the door, but it is the one who is alone (within) who will enter the bridal chamber.”
76. Jesus said, “The kingdom of the father is like a merchant with goods who discovered a pearl (for sale). That merchant was shrewd. He sold his store of goods and bought for himself that single pearl. You, too, seek the treasure of the father, which is never found wanting and which ever endures, and where no moth comes to devour and no worm to destroy.”
77. Jesus said, “I AM (is) the light that is above all things. I AM (is) the all in all. All things came from me, and to me all things go. Split a stick of wood and I AM (is) there. Raise a stone and you will find me there.”
78. Jesus said, “Why have you come out into the desert? To see a reed shaken by the wind?¹ Or to see a person clothed in finery like your rulers and officials? Fine clothes may be set upon them, but they are unable to discern the truth.”
79. A woman in the crowd said to him, “Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breast that nursed you.” He said to her, “Blessed are they who have heard the word of the father and have truly kept it, for the time is coming when you will say, ‘Blessed are the womb that has not conceived and the breasts that have not nursed.’”
80. Jesus said, “Whoever comes to know the cosmos (for what it is) has found a corpse—and the cosmos (itself) is worthless compared to the one who has discovered (it) to be (only) a corpse.”
81. Jesus said, “Let the one who has become (spiritually) rich reign (over all things), and let that one who has gained (spiritual) power renounce (attachment to) all things.”
82. Jesus said, “Whoever is near me is near the fire and whoever is removed from me is removed from the kingdom.”
83. Jesus said, “Likenesses are visible to people, but the light (of intelligence) which illumines (these likenesses) remains hidden (from them). The light of the father—pure intelligence—becomes manifest in the image of his light—the light of the enlightened. But his (own)

¹ “A reed shaken in the wind” signifies a person who has not attained inner stability by being established in ultimate truth. Reeds grow where there is much water. They are not desert plants. This means that those living in the “desert,” away from the world are not like worldly people, for they must be desireless to live there.

image—their state of spiritual illumination—will remain hidden by his light.”¹

84. Jesus said, “When you see a likeness of yourself, you are greatly pleased. But when you come to see the image of yourself which came into being before you were born and which neither dies nor becomes manifest in the world, how will you be able to bear it?”
85. Jesus said, “Adam came from great power and great abundance, but he did not measure up to your worth. For had he measured up to it, he would not have tasted death.”
86. Jesus said, “Foxes have their holes and birds have their nests, but what place do human beings have to lay down their heads and rest?”²
87. Jesus said, “Wretched is a body that depends upon a body, and wretched is the soul that hangs upon this duality.”
88. Jesus said, “The angels and the prophets come and give you what is yours (that is, realization of the spirit). For your part, give them what you have (that is, your attachments to the material) and say to yourselves, “When will they come and take what is (now) theirs (that I have given them).”
89. Jesus said, “Why do you ritually purify the outside of the vessel (i.e., the body)? Don’t you realize that the one who made the inside is the same as the one who made the outside?”
90. Jesus said, “Come to me (as disciples), for I am a gentle master and my discipline is effortless, and you will find rest for yourselves.”
91. They said to him, “Reveal to us who you are so we can believe in you.” He said to them, “You are able to discern the face of the heavens and the earth, but you have not discerned the (living) one who is (ever) in your presence, nor do you know how to discern the present moment—the eternal now.”
92. Jesus said, “Seek and you will find. Before, you asked me things I did not reveal to you then. Now, I want to reveal (them to you), but you do not ask (me) to.”

¹ Just as we know by means of the “light” of the mind but do not know the mind’s light directly; so too, people can sense the radiance of a spiritual luminary through words, actions and demeanor, but they do not know the illumination within.

² Here again, “rest” signifies enlightenment.

93. (Jesus said,) “Do not give what is holy to dogs, lest they drop it in filth. Do not cast pearls before swine, lest they (trample) them (in the dust).”
94. Jesus (said), “Any one who seeks will find. It will be opened to anyone who knocks.”
95. Jesus said, “If you have wealth, do not put it out at interest. Instead, give it to someone from whom you will not get it back.”
96. Jesus said, “The kingdom of heaven is like a woman who put some leaven in a bit of dough and (when it rose) made large loaves from it. Those who have ears to hear, let them hear.”
97. Jesus said, “The kingdom of heaven is like a woman who was carrying a (jar) filled with meal. While she was walking down the road still some way (from home), a piece broke (off the jar) and the meal began to spill out behind her onto the street. She did not realize it, for she had not noticed anything wrong. When she arrived at her house, she put the container down and found it empty.”
98. Jesus said, “The kingdom of heaven (the spirit within) is like someone who wanted to kill a powerful person (the worldly ego). He brandished his sword (of spiritual discernment) in his own house (by raising spiritual power through internal spiritual practice) and plunged it into the wall (of inner experience) in order to test his hand. Then he (went and) dispatched the powerful one” (through spiritual living based on his inner development).¹
99. The disciples said to him. “Your brothers and your mother are standing outside.” He said to them, “It is these here who do what my father wishes who are my brothers and my mother. It is they who will enter the kingdom of my father.”
100. They showed Jesus a gold coin and said to him, “Caesar’s agents extort taxes from us.” He said to them, “Give the world what is the world’s, give God what is God’s, and give me what is mine.”
101. (Jesus said,) “Whosoever does not transcend attachment to their (worldly father and) mother as I do cannot become my (disciple). And whosoever does (not) cleave to their (spiritual father and) mother as I

¹ The idea here is that the inner is more powerful than the outer. One must do one’s inner work first, if one is to be successful in mastering the outer expression.

- do, cannot become (a disciple) of mine. For my mother (gave birth to my body), but my true (mother) gave me life.”¹
102. Jesus said, “Woe to the ‘holier than thou’ hypocrites for they are like a dog sleeping in a manger who neither eats nor lets the cattle eat.”
103. Jesus said, “Happy are those who know that thieves (that is, worldly desires and temptations) are coming, so they can rise up, summon their strength, and arm themselves before the robbers break in.”
104. They said to Jesus, “Come, let us pray today and let us (also) fast.” Jesus said, “What sin have I committed, or how have I been cast down? But when the bridegroom quits the bridal chamber, then let them fast and pray.”
105. Jesus said, “Whoever knows the father and mother will be called the offspring of a whore.”²
106. Jesus said, “When you make the two one, you will become truly human, and when you say, ‘Mountain, move away,’ it will move away.”
107. Jesus said, “The kingdom is like a shepherd who had a hundred sheep. The biggest one of them happened to go astray. The shepherd abandoned the other ninety-nine and searched for the one (which was lost) until he found it. After going to such lengths, the shepherd said to the one (that was found), ‘I value you more than the ninety nine (others).’”
108. Jesus said, “Whoever drinks from my mouth becomes like me, and I become this person, and to this one what is concealed will be revealed.”³
109. Jesus said, “The kingdom is like someone who had a treasure hidden in his field, but (because he did not plow), he did not know about it. Upon his death, this person left the field to his son, who did not know about the treasure either. After the son inherited the field, he sold it (to

¹ The Father is familiar from the Christian *mythos*. The Mother in traditional Jewish mysticism is the Holy Spirit (Hebrew *Ruach HaQodesh*, or Wisdom as God’s presence in exile in the world (*Shekhinah*), equated with Greek *Sophia*.

² In previous times, those who did not know who their father was, were illegitimate, a severe stigma. Here, Jesus is saying playfully that those who know their spiritual parentage will be similarly castigated. For “father and mother,” see note to Saying 101.

³ “Drinks from my mouth” means to imbibe Jesus’ teaching and live it.

someone else). The person who bought it plowed (the land and found) the treasure, and then put money out at interest to anyone he wished.”¹

110. Jesus said, “Let whoever gains the world and becomes rich transcend attachment to the world.”

111. Jesus said, “The heavens and the earth will roll up in your presence. And the one who lives from the living one will not see death.”
[Doesn’t Jesus say that in comparison to those who have found themselves, the world has no worth?]

112. Jesus said, “Woe to the body that depends upon a soul. Woe to the soul that depends upon a body.”

113. His disciples said to him, “When will the kingdom come?” (Jesus said,) “It will not arrive through your expecting it. No one is going to say, ‘See, here it is,’ or ‘Look, it is over there.’ Rather, the kingdom of the father is spread over the earth, and people do not see it.”

114. Simon Peter said to them, “Shouldn’t Mary leave us? For women, (being dependent upon others for their sustenance and protection,) are not meant for (spiritual) life, (which, as you have told us, involves becoming completely independent).” Jesus said, “Watch, I am going to lead her like you males and make her (spiritually) independent, so that she too may become a living spirit. For (everyone, male or female, comes into the world dependent, and only those who become spiritually independent) will enter the kingdom of heaven.”²

¹ This can be read as an affirmation of reincarnation. People are unaware of the treasure within during some lifetimes, so they do not exert themselves to find it. But eventually, they begin to do the work and consequently discover the treasure.

² The idea current in ancient times was that women as the weaker sex were not fit for the rigors of spiritual life. Jesus is saying that the real strength is spiritual, hence interior rather than exterior. This strength, being of the soul, is irrespective of gender. His grace will give Mary this strength also, just as he will impart it to the men.

APPENDIX TWO: MEHER BABA ON THE TEN STATES OF GOD

BEING AND CONSCIOUSNESS; EXISTENCE AND EXPERIENCE

Meher Baba's *God Speaks* is as yet a relatively undiscovered work, but it is destined to take its place among the greatest works of perennial wisdom. In this book and other discourses Avatar Meher Baba delineates how ultimate reality is absolute (infinite and eternal, formless and unchanging) and noumenal (real rather than apparent). The Absolute manifests "creation" as relative and phenomenal, not through any real difference in being but through differences that only appear to be "real" in finite experience.

We can conceive of this by using the analogy of our own minds: While the contents of the mind change constantly, and the state of consciousness also alternates among waking, dreaming and deep sleep, each of us remains the same individual throughout life. The mistake we make lies in taking who we are to be determined by the physical body, mind, or personality. But all of these change drastically over a lifetime, while who *are* does not.

The essence of the "person" each of us is — the "I" lying beyond body, mind and personality— remains indeterminate for us, even though we are that. This "I" is the "I" of "I am," or "I am I," in contrast to "I am this body," "I am this mind," or "I am this personality."¹

The essence of *God Speaks* is that while being is one and indivisible, consciousness is infinite. Therefore, the one indivisible God can be conscious of indivisible being in innumerable ways without actually becoming divided. The remainder of the book is an elaboration of the ten principal states through which God can be conscious of His indivisible being. Within these states myriad experiences are possible, all of which are apparently different and distinct from each other, like dreaming and waking, happiness and suffering, pleasure and pain, and so forth.

These states are not arbitrary, however. They result from God's urge to know Himself. Meher Baba calls this urge a "whim," in order to emphasize that divine

¹ Sri Ramana Maharshi speaks of this spiritual aspect of I-ness as "I-I," signifying "I" as "I" alone, not as anything other than pure I-ness. This is important to note that is I-ness is not the individual "I," however, which is always associated with personality (Sanskrit: *jiva*). It is the universal "I" of "personhood" (Sanskrit: *purusha*). This is the "I" that can truthfully say, "I just am," Hebrew: *ehieh esher ehieh* of Exodus 3:14, in contrast to "I am this one," or "I am that one."

knowledge arises from a state of absolute freedom, rather than from any internal necessity or compulsion, as some religious teachings and metaphysical systems hold.

According to Meher Baba, only God is real as the sole existence: infinite and eternal, unchanging and formless, unmanifest and absolute. God is capable of self-knowledge, and God as infinite knower is capable of knowing the full extent of his infinite nature through unlimited experience. When God knows the infinite extreme of his range of consciousness, God knows Himself as absolute. But when God knows Himself at the finite extreme of the range of His knowledge, then God knows Himself as relative, where His knowing is constrained by time, limited by space, bound by form and subject to change. "Creation" is this experience by God of His finite range, in which God experiences finitude through the limited experience of creatures. We as creatures are expressions of God's finite knowledge, in which God experiences some of His finite range through each of us. Our knowing is bound up in God's knowing, unbeknownst to us although evident to God as infinite consciousness.

Spiritual ignorance exists in a limited mind since infinite consciousness is not present along with experience of the finite. Indeed, to say "limited mind" means limited mind is ignorant of its true nature as unlimited. As ordinary human beings with limited minds, our being and knowledge appear to be different. At the level of the absolute, the sole reality, being and knowledge are one and indivisible. Because ultimate reality is indivisibly one, differences only appear through the infinite knowing itself as finite.

Where do these apparent differences appear? They appear in the experience of a finite mind, not in terms of the indivisible existence of absolute being. Indeed, although human beings have many thoughts, feelings, perceptions and experience differently in different states of awareness, waking, dreaming and sleep, as well as in the different stages of their life, they do not lose their sense of individuality. This sense of individuality is characterized by a continuity of being that runs through changing experience. This continuity of our existence through changing experiences provides us with a clue as to the absolute nature of the soul. This clue is the basis for the divine discontent that motivates us to dig ever deeper into what we really are.

Spiritual perfection is realized as the full range of experience, when infinite consciousness is present along with awareness of the finite. In the full range of experience, absolute knowledge and absolute reality correspond uniformly. God and ultimate truth are said to be one and indivisible. An ordinary human being knows only in terms of time, space, form and change. However, God, whose nature is infinite consciousness, knows himself not only as the infinite, eternal, formless

and unchanging absolute, but also as in terms of the finite. Absolute knowledge includes everything.

INFINITE AND FINITE

Infinite implies being all-inclusive. For the infinite, or limitless, to be all-inclusive, it must include everything. That means the infinite must include the finite. So God's knowledge includes all types and levels of experience, from infinite to finite as well as from finite to infinite.¹ In this process the ocean (God) appears as a drop (soul), and the story of the drop culminates in its return to the ocean. This involves the apparent separation of the soul from God, evolution to the human form, reincarnation in the human form, and then involution through the inner planes to realization of ultimate truth.

In knowing Himself as finite, God appears to become finite as a limited being. That is to say, God appears in the garb of the relative under the veil of a finite mind projecting a finite world as a temporal series of spatially determined sense experiences, thoughts, and feelings. In this fashion God manifests finite creation, which expresses itself in terms of time, space, form and change, as apparently separate from the infinite, but not really so.

If the infinite is infinite in the sense of all-inclusive, then the finite cannot really be separate other than in appearance. This seemingly finite appearance occurs in a limited mind, which results from God's knowing himself as finite. Hence, should the finite mind be effaced, then the veil is drawn back and the soul comes to realize itself as it really is, infinite and eternal. This is the basis of the religious notion of the immortality of the soul and of the mystical teachings about spiritual realization of ultimate truth through "ascent." In reality, however, there is neither descent (fall) nor ascent (spiritual quest), for the soul is absolute in its very nature. All that takes place happens only in appearance (experience), not reality (being), which is absolute, i.e., eternally unchanging.

THE TEN STATES OF GOD

According to *God Speaks*, the experiences God has in knowing the full range of His infinity fall under ten types or "states of God" as facets of the one indivisible existence. While it is not possible for limited minds to grasp the unlimited, it is possible to gain some insight through analogy. The limited mind, with which we are

¹ In the mystical interpretation of the Christian mythos, "creation" is the story of the "fall" into limited individuality and the evolution of that individuality through "redemption." "Deliverance" is the expansion of limited awareness through the process involution toward realization. Realization of infinite consciousness — "seeing face to face" in the beatific vision — constitutes "salvation."

all intimately familiar, is the closest approximation to infinite consciousness available to us. The existential integrity of a human individual is not broken by different types of experience or changed by the alternating states of consciousness, waking, dreaming and deep sleep. Even when we awaken from deep sleep, in which we were unconscious of both ourselves and also the world, we do not think or feel that we ceased to exist during this period, or that the world did either.

God's being is not affected by the manifestation of apparent differences that appear in His experience. For these "differences" are not in God as infinite consciousness, but appear and disappear in us through the process of God's knowing Himself as finite. Existence and experience are one and indivisible in infinite consciousness, because God abides in the eternal now, as a wholeness in which there are no real distinctions. The myriad experiences of the universal mind of God, even involving spiritual ignorance through creatures, do not affect the indivisible oneness of God's eternally unchanging being. For, unlike creatures whose experiences are temporal and spatial and differ from their being, God's being includes His knowledge, which is identical with His being. This knowledge is not bound by either time or space. It is eternal and infinite—or in our terms, simultaneous, all at once, as an integral wholeness.

While eternally one, indivisible and unchanging as absolute reality, God as infinite consciousness is capable of infinite experience of His the indivisible oneness. This infinite potential for experience can be categorized logically into ten types or "states," as Meher Baba calls them in *God Speaks*. Through manifestation they can seemingly be experienced as separate and diverse by embodied creatures. But for infinite consciousness they do not exist apart from the integral wholeness of absolute knowledge as God's knowledge of Himself.

THE BEYOND BEYOND STATE OF GOD

The first, primordial, state is the Beyond Beyond state of God, which is beyond all conception, imagination or predication. Being beyond predication, it is ineffable. Nothing can be said of it. To speak of it in terms of anything at all is by definition to be speaking of a state other than the Beyond Beyond state.

The Beyond Beyond state of God has its parallel in our deep sleep state, in which we are unaware and are as nothing, even though we continue to exist. In this divine state, however, God is not unconscious, as we are, but beyond consciousness and unconsciousness.

The latency of the Beyond Beyond state has a parallel in memory and imagination. Memory contains a huge database of previous impressions upon which we can draw at will without being specifically aware of the database itself other than in terms of what we draw out of it. Imagination is an even larger resource, since it allows us to creatively combine everything we know in innumerable ways,

limited only by our own creativity. We could say that this database of memory is latent in us, and imagination is a latent faculty of the mind.

The Beyond Beyond state might be likened to a state of pure latency or unlimited potentiality. It could be said that the Beyond Beyond state of God is a state of total freedom, the absolute indeterminacy whence everything emerges.

By way of analogy, the Beyond Beyond state can be compared to the ground state or vacuum state of quantum mechanics. This is the state of least excitation of energy from which the entire physical universe emerges in terms of stages of greater excitation. Similarly, our deep sleep state is the ground state of our consciousness, from which all our waking and dreaming experience emerge as states of greater mental excitation.

THE BEYOND STATE OF GOD

The second state is the Beyond state of God. The Beyond state of God is Infinite Consciousness. This is the state of God's infinite Self-Knowledge and may be called "ultimate truth" or "Truth."¹

The Beyond state is the "all and everything" that emerges from the Beyond Beyond state in which everything is latent.² It has its parallel in our waking state, in which we are self-aware. The difference is that God in the Beyond state is eternally Self-aware as infinite consciousness, which is ever unmanifest and absolute.

GOD AS CREATOR, PRESERVER AND DISSOLVER

The third state of God is God as lord of the universe, whose functions are creation, preservation and dissolution. Here, God uses "universal mind" to entertain all the finite experiences that are possible on the basis of the boundless latency of the Beyond Beyond state.

In this state God is called "Lord of the Universe" or "Lord of Creation." God as Lord of the Universe stands in relation to His creation and its creatures, drawing them to perfection through love. Love implies a lover and beloved. In this state, God is Love.

The parallel in us of God's state as Creator, Preserver and Dissolver is our dream state, in which we create worlds in imagination, experience them as being real through the dream, and then dissolve them on waking up, when we realize that the apparent reality we experienced was "just a dream." In the divine dream, God's "creative imagination" gives rise to the apparent reality of creation, even though it

¹ In the Vedic tradition, *veda* means pure knowledge or complete knowledge. In Islam "Truth" (Arabic: *al-Haqq*) is a name of God (*Allah*).

² This seems to be the meaning of the "all" or "everything," depending on how the Coptic is rendered, in Saying 77 of *The Gospel of Thomas*.

is phenomenal through and through, like our own dreams. This is discovered when God wakes up to the dream through a saint's realizing God. The saint experiences this as awakening from the divine dream of creation to infinite consciousness upon final realization, but it is actually God awakening from His own dream.

Every separate being in creation eventually realizes ultimate truth at the moment of its full ripening. For this is the purpose and theme of creation. The process of this ripening accounts for the states in which the apparently separate soul passes through evolution, reincarnation and involution on the way to final realization of ultimate truth. While from the creature's vantage this is about him or her, it is really the divine play in which God plays hide and seek with Himself.

GOD AS DROP SOUL

The fourth state of God is God appearing as an embodied soul in creation. In this state God conceals Himself from Himself.

The embodied soul is compared with a drop seemingly separate from the ocean without shores. This is the state of transition of the unbounded ocean of existence to experiencing itself as merely a drop. This drop feels itself to be separate from the ocean and other drops. Yet, it is really a "bubble" which remains always in the ocean, and is never separate from it. The "bubble" is created by the form with which the drop-soul associates itself and identifies its being. But every form is actually a figment of God's creative imagination.

GOD AS EMBODIED SOUL IN THE STAGES OF EVOLUTION

The fifth state of God is the state of the drop-soul in the process of evolution from most finite form to the human form. It passes through seven chief stages of development, stone, metal, vegetable, worm, fish, bird, and animal. In each successive state, the drop-soul further develops gross, subtle and mental bodies. When the drop-soul has developed fully functioning gross, subtle and mental bodies capable of supporting full consciousness, the drop-soul then takes a human form.

GOD AS HUMAN IN THE STAGES OF REINCARNATION

The sixth state of God is the human. In the human form, the drop-soul has developed the full potential of consciousness but has not yet actualized this potential by realizing its true nature. But the process of development of consciousness is now complete, and no further development of consciousness takes place. What remains is to extend awareness to the fullness of this potential by realizing God. All that remains is to remove the veils that have been acquired through the process of development.

These veils are constituted of impressions that have been accumulated in evolving from stone to human being. These impressions are so numerous and deep-seated

that many human lifetimes are needed to resolve them. This requires that the drop-soul reincarnate repeatedly as a human being. This first task in reincarnation is to upgrade these impressions to a higher type so as to be capable of entering the spiritual path, and eventually to realize infinite consciousness.

This upgrading of impressions is accomplished through moral discipline, captured for example, in Zoroaster's teaching, "Good thoughts, good words, and good deeds." To the degree that the drop-soul acts on low desires, however, the old impressions from which those desires arose get reinforced and deepened.

The wise therefore teach that acting on low desires is "sinful" and committing "sins" results in "punishment." What they mean is that when we deepen impressions that arise as low desires we hamper our growth, which results in suffering. Suffering in this sense is different from physical pain. It is the deep discontent that one feels when one is off track and constricted. Suffering is therefore a corrective device to put us back on the right track.

Over the course of many lifetimes, the drop-soul experiences the opposites, birth and death, male and female, rich and poor, strong and weak, beautiful and ugly, and so forth. During reincarnations the soul not only undergoes experience of the opposites but also processes previously acquired impressions.

A person learns for example, to "transmute lead into gold," to use a metaphor of spiritual alchemy, by sublimating lust into love, as well as to rise above anger, greed, and the other "sins" which are essentially the expressions of egoism and self-interest. Hence, the way of the Higher Self is that of self-effacement, self-discipline, discernment, and love of high ideals. When love for the God or realized master replaces desires based on self-interest, the soul can quickly realize union with the Divine Beloved.

GOD AS HUMAN IN THE STAGES OF INVOLUTION

The seventh state of God is the state of the drop-soul in the process of involution through the inner planes on the way to realization of ultimate truth. This is the drop-soul on the spiritual path as the seven-rung ladder of ascent to God, which leads from the gross, through the subtle and causal worlds, to realization of ultimate truth. During evolution and reincarnation, impressions are gathered in a winding process that binds the soul. During the period of involution, after the soul enters the spiritual path, it unwinds the impressions that bind it, causing it to identify itself with a form. The state of spiritual "bondage" or ignorance lasts until the final knot of impressions is cut, which requires the grace of one who is perfect, a Perfect Master or God-Man. When no impressions remain, the soul ceases to be bound. At that point, it no longer takes itself for other than what it really is and was all along, God.

GOD AS DIVINELY ABSORBED IN HIMSELF

The eighth state of God is God as divinely absorbed. This is the state in which the drop soul realizes its true nature as infinitely conscious in the Beyond State of God. This is called “Truth.”¹ It is God’s knowledge of Himself as the sole existence, that is, absolute knowledge of absolute reality. Since absolute knowledge of absolute being is complete, it is absolutely fulfilling.² While this is attainment of the goal of creation, it is not the last possible state of experience, for in this state there is no consciousness of creation. Nevertheless, being the goal, it is a final state, and none realizing this state need return to creation consciousness unless they have further duty toward creation.

GOD AS LIBERATED INCARNATE SOUL

The ninth state of God is God as liberated incarnate soul. In this state the drop-soul recovers its consciousness of creation, including the entirety of the gross, subtle and mental spheres, while retaining infinite consciousness. In this state, God-realized ones have no duty to perform toward creation, and they simply enjoy the experience of infinite consciousness along with the attributes of omniscience, omniscience, and omnipotence. Their sole duty is simply to bless and uphold creation by their presence in the body.

GOD AS PERFECT INCARNATE SOUL

In the tenth state of God, perfection is reached. Here the God-realized individual lives the life of God while still in the body, acting as the embodiment of Divine Will. The Perfect Ones are the realized masters who administer the divine plan for creation and guide all beings inwardly toward God-realization. In addition, they take disciples and transmit God-realization to those ripe for it.

This tenth state of God is the state not only of the Perfect Masters who have trod the spiritual path to God-realization, but is also the state of the God-Man. The God-Man is the direct manifestation of God in human form, without going through the process of evolution, reincarnation, and involution, as do the Perfect Masters.

As God-realized, the Perfect Master and the God-Man are the same, and they differ only with respect to creation. A principal difference between the Perfect Master and the God-Man is in the domain of authority regarding creation. The Perfect Masters’ authority ends when they drop the body, while the God-Man’s is continuous, uninterrupted by absence on earth in a physical body. The God-Man

¹ In Islam, “Truth” (Arabic: *al Haqq*) is a name of God (Allah).

² In the Vedic tradition, this is called “being-knowledge-bliss” (Sanskrit: *sacchidananda*, also written *sat-chit-ananda* without elision (*sandhi*)).

remains the same eternally, taking numerous human forms over the aeons. After dropping the body, Perfect Masters never reincarnate.

These ten states encompass all possible experience of the one indivisible reality. These experiences are available to God separately, e.g., through one of the different levels of finite mind, or in their totality, through absolute knowledge. The key to appreciating this apparent conundrum is that from the point of view of the finite mind undergoing experience, the experience appears to be private. However, from the vantage of absolute knowledge, the universal mind is the repository of all experiences simultaneously and God knows all. Owing to God's omnipresence and omniscience, all experience is God's own experience of His unitary and indivisible reality. That is to say, "my" experience appears to be unique to "me," whereas for God it is an expression of the infinite potential of the divine nature as the sole reality.

In addition, because my experience is God's experience and vice versa, I am receiving the benefit without knowing it. In the worlds of Meher Baba: "As infinite Life, I experience myself as everyone and everything; I enjoy and suffer through you to make you aware that you are Infinite."¹

THE ORIGINAL QUESTION: WHO AM I?

According to Meher Baba, the force driving evolution and involution toward realization is the original question which arises spontaneously, whim-like, in the Beyond Beyond state of God as pure latency. This original question is: Who am I? The various experiences of evolution and involution are successive answers to this question, all unsatisfactory until realization, when the answer is experienced as, "I am God, the only reality." This is the way of gnosis through which all beings pass on their journey to realization of their true nature.

Meher Baba explained that the operant term in the original question is "I." The purpose of the question which gives rise to the drop-soul as a bubble in the ocean of being lies in the answer, "I am God." In the Beyond Beyond state in which the question arises and surges forth, God's nature is so transcendent that nothing at all can be conceived, imagined or predicated of it. The surging forth in order to answer the question requires that the drop-soul develop a sense of individuality in order to be capable of knowing that "I" am God as infinite consciousness.

The purpose of all the pre-human stages of evolution is to develop this requisite sense of individuality. When it is developed, one then takes the first human body. As soon as the drop soul associates itself with a human form and identifies itself with it, the drop soul is capable of realizing God. No further development of consciousness is required. When drawn through the process of reincarnation and

¹ Meher Baba. *The Everything and the Nothing*, 29. p. 33

then involution are completed and the veils have been drawn back, one instantly realizes that the “I” of limited mind is a false self. In its true nature, it is unlimited, the Real Self, the Self of all selves. Then the Real Self knows itself as the sole Reality, infinitely conscious as Universal Self.

THE QUESTION AND ITS ANSWER

There is only one question. And once you know the answer to that question there are no more to ask. That one question is the Original Question. And to that Original Question there is only one Final Answer. But between that Question and its Answer there are innumerable false answers.

Out of the depths of unbroken infinity arose the Question, Who am I? and to that Question there is only one Answer — I am God!

God is Infinite; and His shadow, too, is infinite. Reality is Infinite in its Oneness; Illusion is infinite in its manyness. The one Question arising from the Oneness of the Infinite wanders through an infinite maze of answers which are distorted echoes of Itself resounding from the hollow forms of infinite nothingness.

There is only one Original Question and one Original Answer to it. Between the Original Question and the Original Answer there are innumerable false answers.

These false answers — such as, I am stone, I am bird, I am animal, I am man, I am woman, I am great, I am small — are in turn, received, tested and discarded until the Question arrives at the right and Final Answer, I AM GOD.¹

¹ Meher Baba. *The Everything and the Nothing*. 47, p. 49.

APPENDIX THREE:

THE AUTHOR'S PERSONAL JOURNEY

I was born in Boston in 1939, and was introspective from early childhood. Educated in Roman Catholic schools for the most part, I was encouraged in this otherworldly orientation in grammar school, since the nuns viewed “promising” young men as material for the priesthood. My high school years were spent in the diocesan seminary. In my senior year, my literature teacher inspired me, and I still recall with fascination his lecture on the one, true, good and beautiful as the attributes of being. It made an especially deep and lasting impression on me, and hooked me on philosophy although I didn’t yet know it.

When it came time for college, I chose to go to Georgetown University. As a Jesuit institution, it was organized on the basis of the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas, and I learned to feel at home in the Scholastic world view adapted for contemporary times. Everyone was required to minor in philosophy, which was presented from this perspective, in the junior and senior years.

When I entered college, I didn’t even know that philosophy existed, let alone anything about it. In my freshman year, I was attracted to literature and did well in it, but I wasn’t all that taken with the study of fiction or poetry as a major. My literature professor as a freshman suggested that I talk to a philosophy professor who was a friend of his. I did so, and he recommended that I take a look at Plato’s *Republic*. As a result, I ended up majoring in philosophy as an undergraduate and found myself loving it.

The study of philosophy fascinated me, but not enough to make a career of it. I was much more fascinated by cinema at the time and intended making it my profession, relegating philosophy to an avocation. After graduating from college, I went on to a master’s degree in fine arts from Columbia University and was one of the early participants in the Program in the Arts. After I graduated, however, the emerging situation in Vietnam prompted me to apply for admission to Naval Reserve Officer Candidate School before I got drafted. After completing three years of active duty service, I qualified for veteran’s benefits and decided to take full advantage by pursuing a doctorate in philosophy instead of returning to filmmaking, as I had originally planned.

I chose to return to Georgetown University, where I had done my undergraduate philosophy work, because of the departmental emphasis on the history of philosophy. In the course of my graduate studies, I had to read several philosophers at once, often from different periods and different schools of thought. In order to understand a philosopher, one has to learn to see the world from that point of view.

When one is studying several philosophies at the same time, one has to learn to shift back and forth among quite different points of view. Consequently, one comes to realize that the world can be structured differently, depending on the framework, methodology, presuppositions, and technical terminology.

Through this study, I came to experience “the world” as a logical construct that one uses to view reality. The underlying reality is opaque to us without such a framework.

If one naively adopts the prevailing cultural frame as influenced by various subcultural frames depending on one’s situation, one is considered to be well adjusted. If one reacts to the predominant frame on the basis of one’s subcultural frames, one is said to be alienated. If one can’t fit oneself into a frame successfully, one is regarded as mentally unstable.

On the other hand, others — intellectuals, free thinkers, artists and others at the periphery of the dominant social structure — recognize how framing works to shape reality. This gives them the freedom to comment on an existing frame, criticize it, modify it, or even construct new frames. Such people are the avant-garde, intelligentsia and bohemians of society — the creative class who are often ahead of their time. They sense the rising *Zeitgeist* and contribute to birthing it.

In the Sixties and early Seventies, there was a great deal of social and intellectual ferment, and the cultural worldview of the country was in flux. In high school I had already become familiar with the bohemian lifestyle and worldview of artists and writers through my study of the writers of the “lost generation,” who became expatriates after World War I. When I was in college, I was fascinated with the bohemian writers and artists of the Beat Generation. Therefore, I was already primed for the countercultural revolution that began in the Sixties.

After leaving the service and returning to graduate school in the late Sixties, I became involved in the alternative lifestyle movement. The title of my master’s thesis was “Revolution or Evolution: Toward a Philosophy of Social Change.” submitted in 1972. In it, I attempted to organize and clarify my ideas about a fresh framework for a new worldview more suitable for emerging conditions.

Through my graduate studies in philosophy, I came to realize that meaning and truth-value are fundamental. Without a critical study of meaning and truth, a logical undertaking, one is liable to be entangled in pseudo-problems arising from lack of logical clarity. Ludwig Wittgenstein had specialized in the logical approach to philosophy, and I chose to write my doctoral dissertation on his views about logic of meaning and justification in ordinary language. This led to further discoveries about the logic of framing and its role in shaping worldviews. Through this study, it became clear to me that various philosophies are outlines of different frames that can be imposed on data in order to structure a worldview.

The obvious question in philosophy as framing is whether any worldview is superior to others and if so, on the basis of what criteria. In attempting to answer this question, it became apparent that such criteria are only possible if one's worldview stands above all others by incorporating them. Therefore, this overarching worldview would have to be integral. It would therefore have to account for how many worldviews are possible. If all human beings stand on the same level with respect to intelligence, then worldviews are relative. But if it can be shown that there are different levels of intelligence, then some worldviews would be superior to others with respect to difference in level.

Eastern thought holds just such a position, and it is reinforced by the mystics of the West and set forth by some Western philosophers as well. Pursuing my studies informally after graduation from college, I had fortuitously come across Aldous Huxley's *Perennial Philosophy*, which advances the idea that a core teaching underlies all religions and wisdom traditions as the primordial wisdom of humankind.¹ Subsequently, I discovered that Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa testified that after realizing ultimate Truth through the Vedic path, he put other traditions to the test and discovered that the other major religions led to the same experience.²

When many seekers initially embark on their quest, they think that discovering the truth is a matter of understanding, and that all one needs to do is find the right book. I was one of these. This was the reason I studied philosophy in the first place. It was never my intention to teach philosophy. I was primarily interested in figuring it all out, and I thought I could do it through intellectual investigation. I suppose you could say that I was desperately in search of the right author, the one who would reveal the secret of life.

Of course, this was a naïve notion, but it took me awhile to disabuse myself of it. When I began reading about Eastern and Western mystics and studying the writings of spiritual masters, it became clear to me that they were talking about experience preceding understanding rather than understanding preceding experience. Therefore, it would be impossible to understand what they were saying if one lacked the experience they were talking about. Hence, the question became one of how to acquire that non-ordinary experience.

My curiosity was also piqued by the possibility of mystical experience, and I began to undertake various spiritual practices. However, it soon became clear to me that just as it was extremely difficult to learn philosophy without the direction of trained teachers, it was even more difficult to approach spirituality successfully

¹ Aldous Huxley. *The Perennial Philosophy*.

² "M." (Mahendranath Gupta). *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*.

without qualified guidance. Therefore, I undertook a search for spiritual teachers with whom to study.

While I was fortunate to find several who were influential in many ways, it was also clear that meditation was a necessity. After looking for a teacher for several years, listening to many of the gurus who were then coming to the West, I decided on Transcendental Meditation, largely on the basis of recommendations of friends.

After hearing an introductory lecture by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst in the spring of 1971, I was initiated into the Transcendental Meditation ProgramTM.¹ After receiving my doctorate in 1975, I decided to become a teacher of meditation and Maharishi initiated me as a teacher of Transcendental Meditation in 1976.²

Immediately thereafter, I had the good fortune to be admitted to the initial course of the TM-Sidhi Program®, Maharishi's adaptation of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* to contemporary life in the world. I was involved in intensive meditation for a total of fifteen straight months in a retreat setting in the Alps under the direction of Maharishi. This was quite an experience, to say the least. I left with all my questions answered in the sense that questions no longer arose, rather surprising for someone trained in philosophy.

After returning from these intensive courses, I balanced the needs of life with the take-home program. This program was not as intensive as it had been on the courses, but it still occupied a significant portion of the day, lasting for several hours, morning and afternoon. It combined physical postures (*hatha yoga asana*), breathing exercises (*pranayama*), meditation (*dhyana*), and the TM-Sidhis (*sanyama*), as well as reading and listening to Vedic literature, and other Vedic study as Maharishi directed. This continued for years on end.

Subsequently, I not only taught meditation at various centers but also joined the faculty of Maharishi International University, where I taught philosophy. Maharishi had founded an innovative university where all classes are related to personal experience in meditation and viewed in the light of the framework of Maharishi's Science of Creative Intelligence®, an integration of ancient Vedic wisdom and modern scientific knowledge. Students learned how to view the whole of life in

¹ Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. *The Science of Being and the Art of Living*, New revised edition, 1966. (Livingston Manor, NY: Maharishi International University Press, 1975).

² At the time (1976), the TM Teacher Training program was a nine-month course of study, six in residence and three in field application, roughly equivalent to a master's program in the United States. The program was designed to qualify candidates both theoretically and practically as surrogate teachers of Vedic wisdom and "exponents of pure knowledge."

terms of the key fundamentals of universal mystical spirituality articulated in terms of both ancient and contemporary technology.

During this meditation I was introduced to a non-ordinary level of experience that Maharishi called “transcendental” in the sense of being beyond the accustomed states of waking, dreaming and deep sleep. This involves direct acquaintance with a type of knowing that lies beyond the mediation of senses, imagination, conceptual understanding, and logical reasoning. It may be characterized as direct and immediate apprehension of awareness as “pure consciousness,” which Maharishi also terms “Transcendental Consciousness.” Unbounded and empty of cognitive content, it is a state of freedom, the affect of which is blissful.

I realized that the experience of pure consciousness had to be the basis of a spirituality that could be called “universal,” because there is nothing to differentiate it. It is the ground from which all diverse experiences arise. As such, it constitutes the mystical core of all wisdom traditions and religions as the perennial wisdom that finds expression in the testimony of the mystics and the teaching of the masters. This, then, is the criterion in experience of an integral knowledge that could in principle be articulated as a “theory of everything.” As such, it would be the confluence of a unified field theory as the culmination of science and spirituality as the ancient religion of humankind, completing the dialectic between science and religion. This was, in fact, Maharishi’s teaching, and he assembled a group of scholars, theoreticians and researchers from virtually all fields to articulate it.

Maharishi Mahesh Yogi’s master was the Shankaracharya of Jyotir Math, and so I tasted this experience of pure consciousness initially through the Vedic teaching of Advaita Vedanta as preserved in the line of Adi Shankaracharya. Inspired by the idea that there could be a higher knowledge and satisfied by my growing experience that indeed there was through the practice of Transcendental Meditation, I undertook to locate it at the core of wisdom teachings around the world across time. I sought it also in Buddhism, Taoism, Qabalah, the Way of Jesus, and Sufism, and I had the good fortune to encounter excellent teachers in all of these traditions.

I was also drawn back toward my roots in Christianity. There, the pursuit of universal mystical spirituality led me to a close study of *The Gospel of Thomas* both as a foundational teaching of the Way of Jesus and also an explicit expression of perennial wisdom. In fact, *The Gospel of Thomas* is so explicit in this regard that scholars initially believed it to be a Gnostic work rather than being associated with an early Christian community, as is now thought. I was struck in particular by the seemingly clear references to the unitive experience, which is typically expressed in terms of nonduality in *Thomas*. This appears to be quite in tune with similar

expressions in Vedanta, Buddhism, Taoism, Sufism, Sikhism, Jainism, and Qabalah, as well as Hermeticism, Neoplatonism, and other wisdom traditions.¹

Finally, my spiritual search led me to Avatar Meher Baba, who emphasized the universal spirituality at the core of all religions and wisdom traditions.² Moreover, he said that part of his mission was to revitalize the various religions, which had lost sight of their connection to the unitary source, and to unite them by linking them together “like beads on one string.” The string that runs through the various religions and wisdom traditions linking them together is knowledge of the One.

In light of Meher Baba’s revitalizing perennial wisdom, it was clear to me that *The Gospel of Thomas* is about attaining to knowledge of the One. As a result, I decided to engage in this endeavor to show how this is so. To the degree that this endeavor is successful, it will be evident that the teaching of *The Gospel of Thomas* is central to the Way of Jesus as one of the beads on this string, along with the other religions and wisdom traditions whose core is universal mystical spirituality.

I submit that this core spirituality is the perennial teaching and primordial wisdom of humankind, constituting the ancient religion. Being the soul’s religion, it is the religion of everyone, regardless of whether they realize it consciously yet. The purpose of life to realize this knowledge of the One is written in the human breast by the finger of God, so to speak. The original question is: Who am I? The soul does not cease its search for the answer to this question until it has realized this ultimate truth about itself. For it is in this truth alone the soul finds rest on its age-old quest. This Truth is, “One is, and I am this One.”

To attain union is impossibly difficult because it is impossible to become what you already are! Union is nothing other than knowledge of oneself as the Only One.”³

For this reason, it is often said that enlightenment is impossible to “reach,” “attain” or “arrive at.” All that is needed is to *realize* what eternally *is*. When the curtains are pulled back, the veils lifted, Eternal Truth shines forth as self-evident. For the very nature of the soul is “living spirit.”

Perennial wisdom teaches, “Thou art That.”⁴ The spiritual task of the soul is to turn *that* into *this* by realizing timeless truth for oneself. However, as seekers soon discover, this is much easier said than done on account of the thick veils of

¹ Daniel Hale Feldman. *Qabalah*.

² Meher Baba. *God Speaks*. xxxvi.

³ Meher Baba. *The Everything and the Nothing*, 1. p. 9.

⁴ *Chandogya Upanishad* 6.8.7. Translated by Max Müller. Part I. (*Sacred Books of the East*, Volume 1, 1879).

URL=< <http://hinduism.about.com/library/weekly/extra/bl-maxupanishads.htm>>.

impressions that first must be removed. For this, self-effort and companionship with others are necessary but not sufficient. Grace is also required. May we all be blest by the grace of the Compassionate One on this quest to realize who we really are.

APPENDIX FOUR: UNIFICATION IN THE JESUS TRADITION

UNION AND IDENTIFICATION

Commenting the manuscript, Dr. Neale Lundgren observed that in his view there should be a fourfold division of mystical theology in the reframed Way of Jesus into purification, illumination, unification and identification, which would be consistent with perennial wisdom. He noted that perennial wisdom makes clear that union and identification are different states, the former being a state of unification of lover and Beloved and the later being identification as God. He added that the same distinction is found in the Jesus tradition, at least implicitly, although the explicit assertion of it seems to have been suppressed, beginning in early times.

After taking this critique into consideration, I decided to preserve the traditional division of Pseudo-Dionysian mystical theology into purification, illumination, and unification, and draw a distinction between union and identification in the category of unification. Since the history of mystical theology in the Jesus tradition is explicitly threefold and does not explicitly make fourfold distinction, it seemed to me that this distinction is more a matter of interpretation.

Claiming otherwise opens one to the charge of historical revisionism. For it can be argued that there is no clearly definitive, unqualified and compelling evidence of identification in the Jesus tradition, other than in some rather isolated instances. This may be because of suppression, or perhaps mystics in the Jesus tradition did not realize identity with God in the nondual state as often as it is reported in other traditions.

In fact, Meher Baba's revelation that St. Francis of Assisi was the only Perfect Master to appear in the West bolsters this view.¹ Further complicating the matter, Meher Baba further revealed that divine union in which the soul as lover is united with the Beloved can be mistaken for identity in the nondual state, just as any lower state can be mistaken for a higher one. Only a fully realized master can confirm spiritual status.²

So rather than open a Pandora's box, I decided to add a qualification to unification, while maintaining the three traditional mystical categories and providing an interpretation on the basis of perennial wisdom. This leaves the question of suppression of evidence open, although evidence of historical revisionism on the part of normative Christianity suggests that such suppression was more likely than not, if such evidence came to the attention of normative authorities. But admittedly, it is difficult to discover the facts now, after much early literature has been either lost or destroyed, and traditionally, works of so-called heretics were burned.

¹ Bhau Kalchuri, *Lord Meher*, v. 14, p. 5011.

² How does the Perfect One confirm his or her own status? By being omnipresent, omniscient and omnipotent, these being the divine attributes. See Meher Baba, *The Everything and the Nothing*, 33-36, p. 38-40.

NONDUALITY AND IDENTITY IN *THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS*

I argue in this undertaking that it is the nondual sayings of *The Gospel of Thomas* that are the most unequivocal statements on this subject in the Jesus tradition. But these assertions are not without their own problems, especially owing to lack of clarity about their provenance. For example, while many scholars accept some of the sayings attributed to Jesus in *The Gospel of Thomas* as being authentic, few if any scholars accept all of them as such. The nondual sayings are quite possibly imported from elsewhere, since they do not appear anywhere else in collections of sayings attributed to Jesus. While evidence of identification may exist in *The Gospel of Truth* and *The Gospel of Philip*, for instance, these works are themselves controversial.

A principal point of this undertaking is that *The Gospel of Thomas* offers unequivocal evidence of the possibility of realizing identity of the soul and God in the nondual state while in the human body. It also makes realizing the nondual state the primary purpose of the Way of Jesus and of life itself. Therefore, *The Gospel of Thomas* is particularly important because it places the Way of Jesus squarely in the tradition of perennial wisdom if it can be maintained that this gospel is in fact a work of the early Jesus tradition instead of being spurious.

However, the unclear provenance of *The Gospel of Thomas* presents a major problem, the circumstances of its authorship and origins being unknown. The original version, perhaps in Syriac or Greek, is no longer extant. How this gospel made its way to Egypt, and when the Coptic translation was made, by whom, and for what purpose remain unclear.

The Gospel of Thomas puts words apparently regarding nonduality into the mouth of Jesus, and nowhere does anyone else claim to have achieved that state, although Jesus suggests it of Thomas. Moreover, these words are not otherwise corroborated in early literature that indisputably arose within the Jesus tradition. It is possible, therefore, that they were interpolations gleaned from Hellenistic teachings. In other words, there is no compelling evidence that *The Gospel of Thomas* is genuine in this regard, and there are good reasons to doubt the authenticity of some of sayings attributed to Jesus therein, including the sayings relating to nonduality. To claim otherwise is to go beyond the data.

IDENTITY IN THE JESUS TRADITION

Moreover, historical evidence does not establish that identification was a feature of the mystical tradition that grew up around Jesus, nor was a specific distinction drawn between union and identification, unlike the distinction between the sixth plane of union and the seventh plane of identification that are characteristic of other traditions and teachings. Therefore, I only assert that this distinction can be seen as a plausible interpretation in light of perennial wisdom, and do not claim that it can be established definitively on the basis of compelling evidence.

This is not necessarily a weakness, however. For example, only the gospel attributed to John, whose origin scholars generally recognize as relatively late, asserts explicitly that Jesus claimed to be one with God. It would not be an exaggeration to say that normative Christian theology in this regard is based primarily on the picture of Jesus derived from the Johannine and Pauline material, and Paul was never with Jesus in the flesh, hence, was unaware himself of Jesus'

teaching. Nevertheless, Paul is called “the Apostle.” In contrast, the other gospels present somewhat different views of Jesus, and they are less theological with respect to his divinity than John and Paul.

One of the problems regarding identification is that identification has two aspects, namely, in the body and in the afterlife. There is a theological controversy about the relation of the soul to God in the afterlife, some arguing for union with distinction and others for union without distinction. However, this is a matter of speculative theology rather than mystical theology, and it is not a principal focus of this undertaking, which is concerned with mystical experience while one is still living rather than in the afterlife.

In the West, there are virtually no claims of the realization of unqualified nonduality while alive in the physical body, as there are in the East. Even Sufism generally qualifies this issue or leaves it open, apparently because it is excluded in normative Islam. While it is true that Al Hallaj cried out, “I am Truth (Arabic: *anal haqq*), Truth (*haqq*) being a name of God), this is hardly the unequivocal disquisition on realizing nonduality that Shankara or Ibn ‘Arabi give in their writings. However, Shankara and Ibn ‘Arabi speak mostly in philosophical terms rather than mystical testimony, even though they are generally acknowledged to be mystics of the highest order and wrote from experience.

Although Meher Baba revealed that St. Francis of Assisi alone among Christian saints was a perfect master identified with God, Francis himself said nothing about this, and his writings actually give the opposite impression in many instances.¹ Moreover, most Christian mystics who speak in terms suggesting identification, or even appearing to claim it, generally qualify this elsewhere in their work, e.g., subjecting it to grace rather than nature and limiting it to the afterlife.

For example, Eckhart is often cited as testifying to having experienced nonduality. However, Meher Baba's observation that of Christian saints Francis alone was a Perfect Master seems to call into question the claim that Eckhart's experience was actually of God-realization, especially when Baba says that sixth plane saints experience a degree of union that they may mistake for identity. Moreover, a temporary experience of nonduality or a partial one does not qualify. One difficulty in citing Eckhart is that many of the best quotes about nonduality have been taken out of context, or translated liberally, and there are numerous places where Eckhart qualifies this apparent claim. My own suspicion is that Eckhart may have experienced nonduality temporarily, but it was not stabilized in the state of perfection. The same might be said of others in the Jesus tradition that purportedly testified to experiencing nonduality. Various states called samadhi in the Vedic tradition are nondual, but they are tastes rather than stabilization of full realization of nonduality in identity with God.

It can be argued that even Jesus qualifies his claim, which is pretty much dependent on a few quotes found in John. It can be argued that much of the controversy early in the Jesus tradition, including several of the most important heresies, involved the nature and status of Jesus. Hence,

¹ Bhau Kalchuri, *Lord Meher*, v. 14, p. 5011.

it seems that Jesus did not make this as completely clear as normative Christianity claimed he had. So it is not surprising that realization of identity in the nondual state is not well documented in the Jesus tradition and is denied by normative Christianity, at least in the present life, other than in the case of Jesus.

In my view, explicit assertion of nonduality in the Jesus tradition is principally a contribution of *The Gospel of Thomas* — a point that is fundamental to this undertaking. Of course, whether this was a secret in the sense of being passed privately from Jesus to Thomas remains controversial. At this point, it is undecidable on available evidence. The major argument in favor of it is the correspondence with perennial wisdom, which admittedly lies outside the Jesus tradition.

NONDUALITY AND IDENTITY IN PERENNIAL WISDOM

In many traditions there is a distinction between “open door” and “closed door,” or “closet” teaching. There is mention made in the New Testament that Jesus taught his close ones privately things he mentioned publicly only through parables, if at all. Moreover, Meher Baba revealed that even when the Avatar does not disclose his identity publicly, he does reveal himself to at least some of his close ones.¹ Significantly, the only apostles present at the Transfiguration were Peter, and James and John, the sons of Zebedee,² where a voice from heaven called Jesus “son.”

Outside the Jesus tradition, however, many others have clearly stated that identification with God is possible while alive in the physical body and have testified to this state. The corpus of Meher Baba’s teaching gives a clear and comprehensive intellectual description of realizing identity in the state of nonduality, and boldly makes the claim, clearly and unambiguously, that he has realized that state, so that he himself can say on the basis of his own experience that he is God. Moreover, he names many others who achieved that state while in the body and states that all are destined to realize it, either while alive in the physical body or after the death of the body in their final lifetime.

Of the previous major Avatars in human memory that Meher Baba identified, neither Zoroaster, nor Rama, nor Muhammad made that claim publicly. Neither did Buddha directly, since he stopped at Nirvana and did not speak of God or God-realization. But Buddha unequivocally taught that supreme knowledge is available to all by awakening to it as he had. Jesus did not claim to be God the Father, but rather “the son of God,” who knows the Father” and is “one with the Father.” Previous to Meher Baba only Krishna revealed publicly that he was God in human form, as recorded in the *Bhagavad Gita*, for instance.³ However, Krishna is now a

¹ According to some Sufis, there is a *hadith* (saying attributed to Prophet Muhammad) that reads: “I am *Ahmad* without the *mim* [that is, *ahad* meaning Unity]; I am *Arab* without the *‘ain* [that is *rabb* meaning Lord]. Who hath seen me hath seen the Truth [*Haqq*].” Normative Islam regards this as being blasphemous, hence spurious, but many Sufis accept it as authentic.

² Matthew 17:1-9, Mark 9:1-8, Luke 9:28-36.

³ *Bhagavad Gita*, ch. 9, 12.

mythological figure rather than a historical one. Again, of the perfect masters none explained in detail that they knew experientially they were identical with God. Therefore, Meher Baba's contribution to the understanding of perennial wisdom, including the Jesus tradition, is unmatched in its clarity, contemporaneousness and poignancy.¹ For this reason it is central to this undertaking.

Significantly, Meher Baba went far beyond asserting identification with God, revealing that God is Infinite Consciousness and that the Perfect Man (or woman), as God, knows everything both in and beyond the three worlds, gross, subtle and mental, past, present and future, manifest and unmanifest, visible and invisible, in the Eternal Now.² Even more significantly, Meher Baba also asserted that the Perfect Masters and the Avatar are superior from the viewpoint of creation to the formless God who remains separate:

Were someone to ask me who is greater, personal or impersonal God, Tukaram or Bhagwan, Zarathustra or Ahuramazd, Jesus or God the Father, I would definitely answer that Tukaram, Zarathustra and Jesus are greater.

In fact, they are the greatest of the great, because by being a Sadguru or the Avatar they render infinite service to the universe, and suffer infinitely by taking upon themselves the burden of the world's infinite amount of sanskaras. Undoubtedly a conscious divine person such as Tukaram or Zarathustra, compared to the unconscious Bhagwan or Ahuramazd (formless God) is definitely greater.

Zarathustra was actually God in human form, an Avatar. In order to work in creation, he had to come down as man among illiterate, fanatical and hot-tempered humanity. Had Zarathustra told them to worship him, they would have denounced, harassed and murdered him. They would have thought him an enormous egotist and absolutely crazy.

So he taught them to pray to formless God. But in reality, by worshiping formless God, they were worshiping him. And consequently they gained the impression that Ahuramazd was greater than Zarathustra, which was wrong.³

¹ See, for example, "Meher Baba's Call," reproduced in Anzar, *The Beloved*, p. 109-111. URL=<<http://www.avatarmeherbaba.org/erics/mbscall.html>>.

² Meher Baba. *The Everything and the Nothing*, 33-36, p. 38-40.

³ Meher Baba, 27 May 1926, Meherabad, in Bhau Kalchuri, *Lord Meher*, Volume 3, p. 802.

APPENDIX FIVE: NORMS AND VALUES — SUBJECTIVE OR OBJECTIVE?

NORMS VERSUS VALUES

Norms are standards or rules that carry *authority*. Norms are often used to prescribe correct behavior.

A primary function of norms is to *prescribe* rather than to *describe*. Norms are associated with “ought,” “must,” “should,” or “have to” being expressed or implied. For example, Creeds and religious doctrines are expressed as articles of faith, profession of which is required for good standing in a community. Codes of conduct specify observances enjoined by percepts, commands, and injunctions that regulate behavior and which must be followed in the performance of action.

Norms range from implicit and unformulated folkways, customs, and mores to explicitly formulated and promulgated laws invested with the sanction of institutional authority. Norms arise from tradition and convention, on one hand, and also from fiat and command. Norms do not have equal force or range. Guidelines are less binding than laws, for example, and their range of tolerance is wider.

Values are measures of *worth* or desirability. Values are also applied to behavior as measures of right action. Values are often expressed in terms of norms. For example, “traditional family values” as normative Christians currently used it implies a set of norms purportedly based on biblical principles.

Thus, the terms “norm” and “value” overlap. Religious people customarily think of standards and rules as values, while social scientists studying the practice of religion would be more likely to use the term “norm” instead. The reason is that science seeks to be objective in the sense of value-free, and “value” is a value-laden term. For example, in the above example, “traditional family values” implies that their justification and worth is determined by their connection with holy writ and that their authority is divine. In order to avoid such connotations and associations, implicit and explicit, social scientists tend to avoid using “value” and prefer “norm” in its place.

This does not imply that religious people consider values to be subjective. On the contrary, most religious people take their values to be absolutes that are divinely mandated. However, social scientists would point out that this is a belief, and belief is inherently subjective. Moreover, they would note, such beliefs are culturally relative. All cultures have such beliefs, but they differ from culture to culture and even within a culture over time.

Some hold that values are primarily preferences or attitude-based. American philosopher Ralph Barton Perry held that value is any object of any interest.¹ At the other end of the spectrum, the pious hold that values are divinely ordained.

Others hold that values are intrinsic to human nature. Perennial wisdom holds such a view of values on the basis of the nature and structure of consciousness as identical with reality. Comprehensive knowledge of what is includes comprehensive knowledge of what ought to be. These are not distinguished in the Eternal Now, but only through the expression of knowledge in time. Since values are written in consciousness, they are available to human intuition. While animals follow the appropriate norms through instinct, human beings must combine intuition and reason and volition skillfully until they rise above the influence of low desires arising from their accumulated impressions.

Similarly, Western natural law theorists argue rationally that values are objective in the sense that they are part of human nature. Antecedents of this theory are found in Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, although it was the Stoics who first developed a concept of natural law in the West. Early Church Fathers like Augustine incorporated natural law into normative Christianity. Perhaps the best known Christian natural law theorist was St. Thomas Aquinas, who sought to ground faith in reason to the degree that this is possible.

Hugo Grotius extended natural law theory to international law. John Locke also used natural law in his realistic philosophy that came to dominate English political thinking and influence the development of liberal democracy. This sentiment is found in the American Declaration of Independence. Kant grounded his ethical theory in “practical reason,” holding that natural law is written in the hearts of all. “New Natural Law” theories originated with my own professor of ethics, Germain Grisez. His position is called “the Finnis-Grisez theory,” but others have used it as a jumping off point.²

Social scientists and psychologists argue that values are determined culturally, either as an unconscious result of evolutionary success or being consciously stipulated in order to regulate cultural life. While scientists agree that norms are universal, at least where anarchy does not prevail, they find that such norms differ widely from culture to culture and even within a culture over time. Therefore, they conclude that “natural law” is itself a cultural construct that justifies a particular framework for organizing social life.

¹ Ralph Barton Perry. *General Theory of Value: Its Meaning and Basic Principles Construed in terms of Interest*. (New York, Longmans, Green and Company, 1926).

² John Finnis. *Natural Law and Natural Rights*. (New York: Oxford University Press), 1980

This controversy over norms and values dates to the dawn of speculative philosophy, continues today, and yet remains unresolved. In order to sidestep this controversy over the status of values, I have chosen to focus on norms instead. This is also consistent with the distinction between normative religion and mystical spirituality upon which the argument hinges.

Accordingly, this examination of normative religion is based on the logical role that norms play as rules in a universe of discourse and its context. Such universes of discourse and contexts are matters of historical record. Hence, another focus is the historical role of these norms in the development of a religious tradition, as well as the relation of the religion to the society in which it is embedded as a cultural phenomenon.

This perhaps still leaves some wondering about the relationship of norms and values, as well as how the customary notion of values fits in. This short appendix can do no more than present the issues without attempting to resolve them. But understanding what is at stake may clarify how norms and values relate to each other.

SUBJECTIVE VERSUS OBJECTIVE

Subjectivity and objectivity can be approached from a variety of angles, such as mind versus body, psychological versus physical, and spiritual versus material. However, of principal concern in this undertaking is the logical relationship between subjectivity and objectivity.

The subjective domain is said to be “private” and the objective “public.” This means that the criteria by which the objective is evaluated are publicly available, while that which is purely subjective is not. For example, thoughts, feelings, intentions and the like are private to the individual, whereas what a person says and does are publicly available in that they can be heard and observed by others.

While it is true on one level that the subjective and objective are separate and distinct, viewed differently it is not. Looking at the subjective-objective dichotomy from the vantage of an individual, life is a continuum. One’s thoughts, feeling, intentions, etc., are not divorced from what one says and does, but intimately connected. “Inner” and “outer” are a continuum of life’s activities. For example, every individual knows why one says and does what one does, although this may not be obvious to others, as the possibility of lying about one’s motivations goes to show. Nor does one have to “will” oneself to speak and act. The transition from “inner” to “outer” is seamless.

Reality being one, there is no *real* disconnection between the subjective and objective, even though there is a difference between the private and public. But even the public and private are intimately connected. For example, it is difficult to live a lie consistently and convincingly. People who try almost inevitably give

themselves away in their speech and behavior. Moreover, lie detectors can reveal on the basis of physiological changes what one's subjective state most likely is. Similarly, physiological measurements have been correlated with reports of mystical experience in meditative states of awareness, e.g., in terms of electromagnetic signatures and biochemical changes.

This implies that the subjective is not completely private but influences the public and can be detected by examining that which is publicly available. For example, "good" and "bad" people are known on the basis of what they say and do. In the words of Jesus, "By their fruits you shall know them."¹

This is the attitude I have adopted with respect to norms and values. It is not necessary to enter the realm of the subjective in order to tap into the private. It is shown through people's speech and action.

This is an important argument in favor of mystical experience as a criterion. While mystical experience is entirely subjective, hence private, those who report mystical experiences are inevitably recognized as saintly people, whose lives serve as a model for others. If this were not the case, mystical experience would be a somewhat dubious standard in that it is based on claims that are private and also not verifiable in any way.

The verifiable fact that mystics have generally led exemplary lives as evaluated in terms of widely recognized norms of behavior is all the more significant in that leaders of normative religious institutions, who establish and administer norms from their positions of ecclesiastical authority, have not always been as exemplary in their conduct. For example, the history of normative Judaism, Christianity and Islam is strewn with violence, often internecine, which the leadership at least condoned or inspired, if not preached or commanded.²

MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE VERSUS NORMATIVE AUTHORITY

Generally speaking, mystical experience reinforces universality in one approach to life, whereas following norms established by custom, convention and tradition often imply difference and result in building walls instead of bridges. For this reason perennial wisdom appears as unified and homogenous amidst the often striking differences among normative religions, whose doctrines, rituals and observances are quite diverse and often conflict with each other.

¹ Matthew 15-20.

² There are, of course, notable cases where mystics and recognized saints and prophets either went to war themselves or instigated their followers to so. Violence in itself cannot be considered a criterion. Holy people are not necessarily pacifists in all circumstances.

For this reason, I make the claim in this undertaking that the mystical core of a religion is central to it, and its norms are peripheral to this core. This implies that the further one gets from the mystical core, the further one is removed from the essence of the teaching.

This stands in contrast to religious norms, especially of Western normative religions, which claim to be central and overriding. Mysticism is not one of these norms, and mystics are often looked upon as exceptions to the rule, when they are accepted or embraced. Always they must take care not to step over the line, however, and even stepping on the line can be dangerous.

Normative Judaism, Christianity and Islam often marginalize mysticism. They have even persecuted mystics and condemned mystical teachings and teachers that ventured beyond the boundaries established by the norms. In addition to mystics who generally led saintly lives, alleged “witches” were also caught up in this frenzy of zeal, and some were even burned alive when they were merely suspected of “the evil eye,” for instance, without any material evidence.

In contrast to normative religions, teachings based on mystical experience have generally been universal in the sense of preaching that one do unto others, as one would have others do unto oneself. In contrast, normative religions have often succumbed to partisan or sectarian interests, sometime allying themselves with political power and authority at the expense of their spiritual mission. Moreover, those in positions of normative authority have more than occasionally fallen victim to self-interest and promoted their own narrow advantage.

This became especially evident as religious institutions became increasingly invested with wealth and power, and where religion was entwined with politics. At this point behavior often came into conflict with widely recognized standards of ethics that prohibit diversion of public goods for private or partisan advantage. For example, the Protestant Reformation was due at least in part to such excesses on the part of the institutional Church in taking advantage of the faithful, after the hierarchy had become a quasi-aristocracy in which the clergy were shadow nobility, ruling over their fiefs like lords of the manor. Today, some of the more corrupt practices would be considered to be forms of racketeering that are illegal.

NORMATIVE SYSTEMS

There are other normative systems than those of normative religion. While perennial wisdom is anti-normative, taking “normative” in the pejorative sense of arbitrary and controlling, it is neither antinomian nor anarchistic. Perennial wisdom holds that norms are needed to guide those who are not yet spiritually mature enough to act universally without them. Consequently, normative religion has a part to play in human development before a person is prepared to embark on the spiritual quest individually. Moreover, most mystics and masters continue to

conform to the rules of their respective religions in order to affirm this, even as they pointed out that one must rise above following rules by rote.

According to perennial wisdom, what is right is written in the heart and available to reason and intuition. General precepts can be given, but every circumstance is different. Moreover, many apparently conflicting rules may seem to apply in any given situation. Therefore, the burden is thrust on the individual to decide as best one can under the circumstances. In order to do this optimally, one must be pure in heart. That is, one must rise above low desires and narrow self-interest, and act universally on the basis of fellow feeling, which enables one to apprehend oneself in others.

Perennial wisdom teaches that intuition is the unfailing guide, and that everyone knows (feels) in one's heart of hearts what is right in any situation. The way to tap this intuition is to be in the present. When one is living in the present, the next right step becomes sequentially evident.

All the religions provide guidelines left by the masters, prophets and saints of that religion, which are enshrined in the various codes of conduct. Moreover, reason is also a competent guide, even though it is not superior to the dictates of the heart.

Reason can be used to arrive at guidelines for behavior in terms of fundamental principles. In the West, several normative systems have been proposed on a rational basis.

Emmanuel Kant argued in *The Critique of Practical Reason* that the Golden Rule — “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” — is a rational normative rule to universalize behavior by acting in such a way that one's action embodies a universally applicable moral principle. This rule of reciprocity is found in all religious traditions in one form or another.¹

Utilitarianism is another rational normative system, which was enunciated by John Stuart Mill in a work by that name. Utilitarianism holds that the norm for action is the principle of the greatest good for the greatest number, which is another version of acting universally.

Other rational normative systems are based on distributive justice, which is concerned with the fair allocation of rights, resources, benefits, and opportunities throughout a community — another version of universalizing behavior.

¹ “Shared Belief in the ‘Golden Rule.’

”URL=<<http://www.religioustolerance.org/reciproc.htm>>.

Andrew Wilson. *World Scripture*. Pt. 1, Ch.2.

URL=<<http://www.unification.net/ws/theme015.htm>>.

PRINCIPLE VERSUS PRACTICE

Jesus roundly criticized the religious teachers of his day for not practicing what they preached. Norms are one thing, following them another.

In the course of investigating the development of the Jesus tradition, it is clear that normative authorities did not always act in accordance with the norms they established and administered. Moreover, not all the norms they set met the requirement for universality. Many times, norms were partisan and sectarian, and often those in authority used norms to their personal advantage at others' expense.

The discrepancy between principle and practice is regarded as a subjective deficiency, either deliberative or volitional, or both. Failure to conform to recognized norms is a deficiency of choice, resulting from misinformation or error, a failure to adequately deliberate, bad intention, negligence, or mental instability. Failure to deliberate properly, negligence, and bad intention are culpable, whereas acting from misinformation, error beyond one's control, or mental instability are not, or are at least excusatory to some degree.

Examining the lives of mystics and masters, saints and sages, and prophets and holy ones, what emerges is a pattern of speech and action that is often unconventional, yet not unstable and always exemplary. Their words and deeds set the standard for others, and they are role models, along with heroes and heroines.

This is not to say that mystics are never abnormal in any way. Based on their frank accounts, many mystics were seemingly beset with moral temptations, and it can be argued that some of these accounts suggest psychological abnormality. For example, St. Augustine provides a detailed account of his weaknesses in the *Confessions*. He admits to having been addicted to sex, around which he seems to have been obsessive-compulsive. This seems to have made him somewhat manic-depressive. While compulsive sexuality does not appear in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (D.S.M.), some mental health professionals consider it a psychological disorder since it disrupts normal functioning and vitiates intimacy. Moreover, given what he says about his inner confliction, Augustine could possibly be diagnosed as suffering from borderline personality disorder on today's standards.¹ Whatever his mental state may have been clinically, the young Augustine was clearly a tormented person.

¹ "Borderline personality disorder (BPD) is a serious mental illness characterized by pervasive instability in moods, interpersonal relationships, self-image, and behavior...." "Borderline Personality Disorder." U. S. National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). Washington, D.C.
URL=<<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/borderline-personality-disorder.shtml>>.

Eventually, Augustine was able to overcome this affliction. It can even be argued that it was his successful sublimation of inherently strong animal passion that enabled him to become such a great lover of God, a bishop, and a Church Father. Meher Baba numbered Augustine among his favorite Western saints, along with Francis of Assisi, whom Baba said was the only Perfect Master to appear in the West, and Teresa of Avila and Catherine of Siena, who were both named Doctors of the Church in addition to being mystics of the first order.¹

Saints are not born but made. They often had to deal with significant inner challenges. The many reports of “dark nights of the soul,” “temptations,” and even reports of tussling with Satan (possibly symbolic), are indications of this inner conflict. Even the Avatar is often reported as having to overcome this, as in Buddha’s fight with Mara, depicted in Buddhist iconography, and Jesus’ encounter with the devil, when he reportedly said, “Get thee behind me, Satan.”²

Saints rose to the level they did by confronting their problems and overcoming their afflictions. If this is true of saints, what of others? All must confront their own demons, and everyone fails to measure up to this standard on occasion.

This is also true of ordinary normative authorities not yet spiritually ripe. History shows that ordination works no magic transformation, nor does appointment to office. Thus, the record shows ethical lapses where those in authority used the authority and privilege of their office for private advantage. Moreover, many were also guilty of moral lapses, such as intentional lying, stealing, sexual impropriety and committing violence.

It is possible that some were even mentally unstable, since they seem to have believed that what they did was right and actually good, even though it amounted to torture and genocide. For example, the Spanish Inquisition, the Albigensian Crusade, the Hundred Years War, the Jewish pogroms, and crusades against the Muslims were characterized by man’s inhumanity to man. Perhaps the followers of authority who committed these crimes also were caught up in the mass hysteria of the time.

What history records as fact is clear. However, the subjective motivations behind what happened are not. Therefore, I have not attempted to delve into such matters, but only to examine what transpired in relation to norms as logical criteria and their application in historical contexts. However, since this involved human beings, their nobility of spirit often come in conflict with their animal passions on the

¹ Bhau Kalchuri. *Lord Meher*, v. 11, p. 3818. (“Siena” is sometimes given as “Sienna.”)

² Mathew 16:23. Jesus also speaks these same words to Peter in Mark 8:33 Luke 4:5-8. It is likely that Jesus spoke these words, but the context is not completely clear. There is some question as to whether the surrounding narrative meant to impose a particular interpretation on them.

“battlefield” of the life, like angels and demons confronting each other in the myths that are symbolic of the human mind.

The theme of the forces of darkness contending with the forces of light was characteristic of the Hellenistic period in which the Jesus tradition arose, so it is not surprising to find this reflected in the literature of that time. This spiritual “warfare” that goes on within everyone on the journey to God is the subject of a great deal of spiritual teaching, certainly of *The Gospel of Thomas*, which counsels spiritual non-attachment and rising above fray of the world.

Norms may be a dry way of speaking about this drama in which all of us are actors plying the role of our personalities on the stage of history. Our task is not to confuse who we are with the character we are playing, but to realize that each of us is the actor (person) playing that role, rather than the character (personality). Our job is to play the role as best we can without becoming overshadowed by it. We do this by being in the world but not of it. When one can rise above the world by being in it but not of it, then one has risen above norms and becomes a living norm oneself.

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