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Center Voice

The Newsletter of the Center for Sacred Sciences

Special Focus:

Engaging Religious Diversity

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In This Issue . . .

When you hear the word “diversity,” what do you expect will follow? Conflict? Tolerance? Political correctness? In today’s world, this word has become more real as increasing numbers of people have migrated, densely populating the earth. The amount of exposure to different religious ideas and beliefs alone has grown dramatically, bringing new levels of vulnerability, issues of survival, and big questions. How many of us want to hide and protect ourselves? How many judge? At the Center, our primary focus is the Truth in all the great religions and how to access, experience, and dialogue about that Truth. We are interested in opening to and engaging this diversity—finding out what makes others tick and how better to live together.

In this issue, Joel addresses this dilemma directly, asking “**Can We Honor All Religions?**” He responds to the objections most frequently given by believers of specific religions, describing the view of the mystics, and showing how an ongoing interfaith dialogue can be of help both universally and individually. Next, because the primary purpose of the Center Library is to support us in learning about many traditions and their practices, we offer a greatly expanded “**Library Corner**” with many recommendations to help explore the question more fully through the literature. Finally, in “**Center Voices**,” members describe their own experiences of various religions and their suggestions for engaging diversity. We trust that this issue will offer understanding, guidance, and hope.

*All religion comes from God, even
if some of the rulings are diverse.*

—Ibn ‘Arabi (Muslim)

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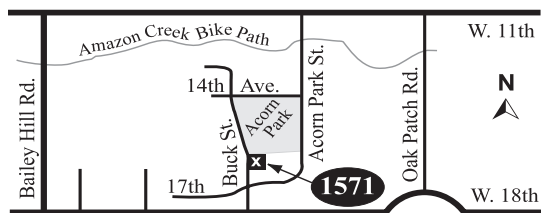
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The Center for Sacred Sciences is a non-profit, tax exempt church dedicated to the creation and dissemination of a new worldview based on the wisdom of humanity's great spiritual teachers, but presented in forms appropriate to our present scientific culture. Our programs draw on the teachings of the mystics of all traditions, informed by the Enlightenment or Gnosis of Joel, our Spiritual Director. Among the Center's current offerings are Sunday programs with meditation and talks by Joel, once-a-month Sunday video presentations, twice-yearly meditation retreats, and weekly Practitioners Groups for committed spiritual seekers. The Center also maintains an extensive lending library of books, tapes, and periodicals covering a broad spectrum of spiritual, psychological, and scientific subjects. Joel's teachings are offered freely as a labor of love, and he receives no financial support from the Center. We rely chiefly on volunteer labor to conduct our programs, and on donations and membership dues to meet our operating expenses.



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CENTER NEWS

Winter Holiday Party a Success

The Center's winter holiday party was held once again at the gracious home of Grace and Ray Mikesell on the 21st day of Ramadan (December 15, 2001). The fare was delectable as usual, although more varied than past years due to adherence to a sign-up sheet. Several folks were absent, home sick with the flu—most notably our fearless leader, whose presence was sorely missed (never more than when it came time to sing Christmas carols!).

The music was skillfully led by Wesley Lachman on guitar, Gene Gibbs, guitar, and Steve Zorba Frankel, violin, and celebrated by a host of somewhat angelic voices and percussion instruments. The joyful noise was punctuated by two beautiful madrigals performed in four-part harmony by Thomas Reinhart, Bruno Kamps, Lin Charpentier, and Shan Ambika. Our sincere gratitude to everyone who helped make the event a success. Thanks especially to Grace and Ray, whose hospitality outshone even the Christmas lights and Hanukkah candles.

Progress Report on Mystical Math

As stated in the Center's pamphlet, *Challenge and Response*, one of our goals is to "help foster a *New Worldview* in which both spiritual and scientific truths can be seen as different but complementary ways of describing a single, underlying Reality." It goes on to say that mathematics is a language capable of expressing the continuity between science and mysticism. For the past decade, Joel and Tom McFarlane have engaged in an exploration utilizing G. Spencer-Brown's *Laws of Form* and some other encouraging systems to see how this continuity might be expressed.

On Friday, Jan. 11, at 7:30 pm, approximately 15 people gathered at Maggie Free's home. They listened attentively as Tom described the process and the breakthrough they recently achieved. He concluded by translating various mystical statements of Ultimate Reality into mathematical formulations. This is, indeed, a mystifying development, as numbers aren't needed at all. But, take heart—what looks to many of us like a bunch of squiggles, is, according to Tom, a display of beauty and harmony to the mathematical mind.

Joel Speaks at Interfaith Gathering

Since Sept. 11, 2001, followers of various faiths have gathered on the 11th of each month at the First Christian Church in Eugene for interfaith prayer, remembrance, and reflection. At the March 11, 2002 service, Joel shared the mystics' view on the topic of compassion and justice. Because the fundamental nature of Reality is Selflessness, he explained, we suffer when we act selfishly simply because we are not acting in

Continued bottom of page 3 . . .

Spring Retreat Subtler than Ever

At beautiful Cloud Mountain Retreat Center, in Castle Rock, WA, from April 19 to 24, 29 retreatants joined our peerless teacher, Andrea Pucci, in “Discerning Subtle Grasping and Subtle Aversion in the Mind.” We practiced “touch and go” in meditation—the touch being the recognition of a thought arising, then before engaging in its content, going below the thought to deeper levels of awareness as ever more subtle attachments revealed themselves. In addition to “touch and go,” we used three other mantras to guide our meditation: “it’s okay, whatever it is, let me feel this;” “let it be, let whatever arises be known;” and “cling to nothing as ‘me’ or ‘mine.’” This practice bares the momentariness of conditioned phenomena, loosening the grip of grasping and aversion and deconditioning our mundane awareness. May it be our highway to freedom!



*RETREATANTS: (Bottom row from left) Vip Short, Clivonne Corbett, Jim Zajac, Diana Morris, *John Carmody, Robin Retherford, Rich Marlatt, Mike Craven, (middle row) *Ron Lister, Megan Greiner, Bruno Kamps, Mary Moffat, Tom McFarlane, Andrea Pucci, Todd Corbett, Merry Song, Niraja Lorenz, Deanna Cordes, (top row) Lewis Bogan, Agnieszka Alboszta, Ralph Retherford, Sharry Lachman, Dean Schlecht, Maggie Free, Fred Chambers, Camilla Bayliss, Jim Patterson, Damien Pierce, Sheila Craven, George Heaton, and Sita DeLeeuw.*

** Residents and staff of Cloud Mountain Retreat Center who joined the sessions.*

Continued from page 2

accordance with Reality. Similarly, we naturally discover happiness when we act out of selfless love and compassion. We initially need to work at cultivating compassion, though, by interrupting our self-centered conditioning. This is the value and purpose of precepts, moral laws, and justice: to check our habits of self-centered behavior so that our innate compassion has the space to spontaneously flow through us. Joel concluded his address by encouraging everyone to start with themselves, for, as Solzhenitsyn pointed out, the line between good and evil cuts through the whole universe, including the heart of every person.





CAN WE HONOR ALL RELIGIONS?

by Joel

Imagine an international flight having to make a crash landing on a deserted island. Everyone survives but there is little chance of being rescued because the pilot had no time to radio their position, and the island is uncharted. What's more, as it turns out, the island's resources are quite limited. Now the passengers, who hail from widely different countries, have a decision to make: they can either band together into their traditional ethnic groups and do battle for control of the island, or they can try to form a pluralistic society in which everyone is accepted as an equal. Although admittedly oversimplified, this is not a bad analogy for the situation we humans face today on this island Earth. Is our basic approach to each other going to be one of domination or cooperation?

If we are to take the road of cooperation, the first thing we must do is to try to understand and honor each other's cultures. Unfortunately, however, this is not as easy as many of our modern "multiculturalists" think. It involves a lot more than learning to eat sushi, or bashing piñatas on Cinco de Mayo, or listening to Buddhist monks perform exotic chants. What it requires is that we come to grips with the fact that people from different cultures hold very different views about the fundamental nature of reality. And since these views are, for the vast majority of us, religious in nature,¹ this means we must come to understand and honor each others' religions.

*"...although different traditions
...have different ideas about the
nature of Ultimate Reality, in the
final analysis, this Reality is a Mys-
tery which lies beyond the reach of
any thoughts, ideas, words, or con-
cepts whatsoever."*

Now, the only way to accomplish this is to engage in an open and honest interfaith dialogue carried out among

peers. And the only way to do that is to begin by acknowledging that the teachings of other religions may turn out to be just as valid as our own. But is this really possible? Many religious people (ordinary believers as well as fundamentalists) have grave doubts that it is. The problem as they see it is that, while all religions claim to be founded on Absolute Truth, different religions teach different and often contradictory truths. In such cases, to admit the truth of another religion would seem to call into question the truth of one's own.

And yet, as a matter of historical fact, mystics of different religions have been conducting (albeit "behind the scenes") just this kind of dialogue for centuries. To give but a few examples, throughout the Middle Ages Jewish Kabbalists, Muslim Sufis, and Christian mystics shared esoteric doctrines and practices in places like Spain, Egypt, and the Mideast where their religions overlapped. Sufis also learned techniques of ecstasy from the shamans of North Africa and exchanged contemplative skills with Hindus in India. Similarly, in the Himalayas, Buddhist and Hindu tantrikas drew from the same indigenous meditative systems, while in China, Zen masters and Taoist sages borrowed from each other so freely that their teachings and methods often seem indistinguishable.

So let us look at some of the main objections ordinary contemporary believers have to the possibility of a genuine inter-religious dialogue and see how these mystics of the past might have answered them today.

- 1. How can we honor all religions when they hold such different ideas about the nature of Ultimate Reality? For instance, Jews and Muslims believe in a personal God whose unity is unqualified, but Christians insist that God has a triune nature. Hindus worship many gods, all of whom they regard as manifestations of an impersonal Brahman. Taoists call the Ultimate Reality the "Way," while Buddhists insist that It is "Empty" of any characteristics whatsoever. How can all these apparently contradictory views be reconciled?**

To this the mystics answer that, although different traditions do, indeed, have different ideas about the nature of Ultimate Reality, in the final analysis, this Reality is a Mystery which lies beyond the reach of any thoughts, ideas, words, or concepts whatsoever. Thus, Lao Tzu, the founder of Taoism, opened his *The Tao Te Ching* with these famous lines:

*The Way which can be verbalized
Is not the true Way.*²

Similarly, the 6th century Christian mystic Dionysius the Areopagite wrote:

*That One which is beyond all thought is
inconceivable by all thought.*³

The 10th century Sufi Al-Junayd put it this way:

*Whatever may be imagined in thy heart,
God is the opposite of it.*⁴

And the ancient *Upanishads* declared:

*The Spirit supreme is immeasurable,
inapprehensible, beyond concep-
tion, never-born, beyond rea-
soning, beyond thought. His
vastness is the vastness of
space.*⁵

Finally, the 2nd cen-
tury Buddhist sage Na-
garjuna insisted:

*The ultimate truth
which is indeterminate
is the unutterable
dharma. There the sphere
of the speakable ceases,
the activities of the mind
come to an end.*⁶

According to the mystics, then,
while descriptions of Ultimate Reality can
certainly be useful, if we seize on any of them as *being*
the Ultimate Reality, Itself, we mistake what is relative for
what is Absolute, and so fall into a kind of intellectual
idolatry.

**2. Our descriptions of Ultimate Reality are not
just products of human imagination. They are
contained in our Holy Scriptures which are
derived from the Ultimate Reality, Itself.
Therefore, we must take what they say at face
value, without any alteration or interpretation.**

Mystics agree that Holy Scriptures are not strictly
human inventions. They have their source in the Ultimate
Reality—whether they come through the revelations of a
Prophet, or the teachings of an Enlightened One. Neverthe-
less, precisely because Ultimate Reality transcends all
words, even Scriptural descriptions of this Mystery are not

meant to be taken literally. Rather, they are composed of
symbols and metaphors which, while they need not be
altered, can and, in fact, *must* be interpreted. To insist
otherwise is to make a mockery of the Divine and render
religion absurd to all but the most immature minds. This is
why the 9th-century mystic John Scotus Eriugena wrote
about the Christian Bible:

*It is not to be believed as a book which always uses verbs
and nouns in their proper sense when it teaches us about
the Divine Nature, but it employs certain allegories and
transfers in various ways the meanings of the verbs and
nouns in condescension towards our weakness and to
encourage by uncomplicated doctrine our senses which
are still untrained and childish . . . For instance: when we
hear that God wills and loves or desires, sees, hears, and
other verbs which can be predicated of Him, we should
simply understand that we are being told of His ineffable
Essence and Power in terms which are adapted to our
nature.*⁷

So, too, the 10th-century Sufi Abu
Bakr al-Kalabadhi maintained:

*The fact that we describe God as
having all these attributes in
no way bestows any at-
tribute on Him: our de-
scription is merely our
own attribution, an ac-
count we give of an at-
tribute which exists
through Him.*⁸

And the Buddha said
of his own teachings:

*These teachings are only a
finger pointing toward Noble
Wisdom . . . They are intended for
the consideration and guidance of
the discriminating minds of all people,
but they are not the Truth itself, which can
only be self-realized within one's own deepest conscious-
ness.*⁹

Not only must descriptions of Ultimate Reality be inter-
preted, they require different *levels* of interpretation. This is
because members of any religious community are always
moving through different levels of spiritual development,
and what is appropriate for one level may not be appropriate
for another. Here, for instance, is how the 19th-century
Tibetan master Jamgon Kongtrul explains why apparently
contradictory descriptions of the cosmos are found within
Buddhist texts:

*One may wonder why this description of the universe [Wheel
of Time Cosmology] does not accord with that of . . . other
systems. The omniscient Victorious One [Buddha's] . . .
teaching is not one that, based on a belief in a single view,
sets forth a particular system as the only valid one. Instead,*

“...because Ultimate Re-
ality transcends all words, even
Scriptural descriptions of this Mys-
tery are not meant to be taken literally.
Rather, they are composed of sym-
bols and metaphors which...must
be interpreted.”

*the Buddha spoke in response to the various levels and capabilities, interests, and dispositions of those to be guided.*¹⁰

Moreover, the fact that Scriptures speak to us in symbols and metaphors is by no means a defect. On the contrary, this is what gives them their infinite power, richness, and depth. For, unlike literal descriptions, symbols and metaphors are open to multiple interpretations, each of which can be ‘true’ from its own perspective. Thus, the 18th-century Hasidic master Menahem Nahum wrote of the diverse teachings of the Jewish sages:

*Each person’s opinion follows the root of his soul. That is why he understands Torah in a particular way. Another who says the very opposite, may be acting just as faithfully according with the root of his own soul. In their source, both are the words of the living God, since all is one . . . All the sages really mean the same thing, however, since all of them are drawing from the same well, from the same mind.*¹¹

And this applies not only to different interpretations within a particular tradition but across traditions, as well—which is why the great 13th-century Sufi shaykh Ibn ‘Arabi warned:

*Beware lest you restrict yourself to a particular tenet [concerning the Reality] and so deny any other tenet [equally reflecting Him], for you would forfeit much good, indeed you would forfeit the true knowledge of what is [the Reality]. Therefore, be completely and utterly receptive to all doctrinal forms, for God Most High is too All-embracing and Great to be confined within one creed rather than another.*¹²

“Whatever differences exist in their specific formulations, all moral laws reflect a Cosmic Law that is Absolute. This is the Law of Selflessness...”

- 3. The moral codes of different religions often conflict with each other. For example, it is permissible for Christians to drink alcohol, but a man can have only one wife. Muslims are forbidden alcohol, but men can have up to four wives. If we accept that all moral codes are equally valid, then making judgments about what’s “right” and “wrong” boils down to a matter of pure subjective opinion, as secularists maintain. One of religion’s most important functions, however, is precisely to protect us against the chaos of this kind of moral relativism into which these secularists have fallen.**

The mystics’ reply follows: Moral laws are given to a particular community at a particular time in a particular place, so they are not absolutes in themselves. For example, being a Muslim, Ibn ‘Arabi followed the moral laws revealed to the prophet Muhammad in the Qur’an. But, growing up in 13th-century Andalusia, he also lived among Christians and Jews who followed different laws, brought by different prophets.

For Ibn ‘Arabi, however, these discrepancies posed no problem, because as he explains:

*The knowledge with which they {the prophets} have been sent is according to the needs of their communities, no more nor less, since communities vary, some needing more than others . . . Thus, what is forbidden in one Law is permitted in another, from the formal standpoint. This does not mean that it is always permitted, since the divine Command—that is, God’s continuing self-disclosure—is a new creation that is never repeated: so be alert.*¹³

In other words, moral laws are to a certain extent relative, but this does not mean that mystics like Ibn ‘Arabi hold they are *completely* relative, as secularists do. Whatever differences exist in their specific formulations, all moral laws reflect a Cosmic Law that *is* Absolute. This is the *Law of Selflessness*, according to which selfish actions lead to suffering, while actions motivated by selfless love and compassion lead to happiness. Why? Because, as all traditions attest, the Ultimate Reality, Itself, always “acts” out of pure Selfless Love and Compassion. The real purpose of moral laws, then, is to teach us how to conform to Reality by curbing our selfish tendencies and cultivating selfless love and compassion, instead.

Here is how the Jewish *Midrash* puts it:

*As the All-present is called compassionate and gracious, so be you also compassionate and gracious and offer thy gifts freely to all.*¹⁴

Likewise, the Christian Apostle John teaches:

*He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love . . . and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him.*¹⁵

And Rumi, the 13th-century Sufi poet, writes:

*Whether love is from this side or from that side, in the end it leads us to that side.*¹⁶

So, too, the 20th century Hindu saint Anandamayi Ma says:

*One of God’s Names is Love . . . [Therefore] the more kindly and friendly you can feel and behave towards everybody, the more will the way to the One who is goodness itself open out.*¹⁷

Even Buddhists, who shun all concepts of a ‘Creator God,’ recognize that selfless love and compassion are not just human emotions, but inherent in the nature of Ultimate Reality, Itself. Contemporary Tibetan master, Bokar Rinpoche, explains:

*Love and compassion are not qualities added to the mind. These qualities are part of the awakened state even if, for the moment, this state exists only as a potential for us . . . [Therefore] without love and compassion, every other practice, no matter how deep it may appear, is not a path to awakening.*¹⁸

The Law of Selflessness, then, constitutes a universal moral standard by which we *can* judge actions to be right or wrong, good or bad. Selfish actions are “bad” and “wrong,” because they are unrealistic and so cause us suffering. Actions based on selfless love and compassion, on the other hand, are “good” and “right,” because they accord with Reality and so bring us happiness.

Notice that this is *not* a matter of individual, “subjective” opinion. Choosing to obey or disobey the Law of Selflessness has definite consequences which cannot be avoided whether we want to or not. In this sense, it is every bit as “objective” as, say, the laws of physics.¹⁹ And yet at the same time, the specific precepts which embody and articulate this Law are, as Ibn ‘Arabi recognized, relative and flexible. Why? Because an action that is selfish for one person, in one culture, at one time, may be selfless for another person, in another culture, at another time.

This is true even when it comes to applying a precept within a particular culture to a particular situation. Take, for example, the precept “not to lie.” If we examine our motives, we find that in most cases we lie for selfish reasons, so the precept “not to lie” is generally applicable. But there will always be some cases where it is not. In Nazi Germany, those who lied to the Gestapo about the whereabouts of Jews behaved more morally than those who told the truth, because compassion prompted them to risk their own lives in order to save the lives of innocent people. In situations like this, then, we must allow love and compassion to override a particular precept and, as Jesus said, obey the *spirit* of the law rather than its letter.

4. You say we should honor all religions, but what about Jim Jones-style sects, Satanic cults, and fanatics who preach hatred and violence? Are we to honor them as well? How can we tell authentic religions from spurious ones?

Granted, there are no generally agreed upon criteria for making such judgments at the present time. But this is no reason to refrain from interfaith dialogue. Quite the contrary, it is one of the most compelling reasons to deepen and intensify it. In this era of globalization, when traditional societies are being disrupted on an unprecedented scale,

leaving masses of people spiritually adrift and hungry for Truth, establishing such criteria is becoming an increasingly urgent task. And the only way to reach consensus on this is through dialogue. The real question, then, is not whether we should talk to each other, but how we can proceed without immediately getting bogged down in sectarian disputes.

A good way to begin would be to look first at those religions which have served most of humanity for the last several millennia—Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism/Confucianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. If we sift through these time-tested traditions for common denominators, a set of tentative criteria should start to emerge. In fact, in our discussion so far we have already glimpsed at least three points of convergence: 1) all the Great Traditions recognize an Ultimate Reality that transcends our ordinary thoughts and perceptions; 2) all teach that true happiness is attained by conforming ourselves to this Reality; 3) all teach that the way to conform ourselves to this Reality is to exercise self-restraint and cultivate selfless love and compassion in our relationships with others.

Once agreement has been reached on what the Great Traditions have in common, we can broaden our dialogue to include lesser known religions to see how their teachings might enhance or alter our criteria. Next, we can take up the more difficult task of examining those doctrines, practices, and moral codes which do differ from one religion to another, asking questions such as: To what extent do these reflect core convictions and values, and to what extent do they stem from local customs and historical contingencies? Are they really meant to be applied

universally or only to members of a particular community? And, if they are held to be universal, are they subject to more ecumenical explanations or interpretations?

Finally, regarding those points on which no consensus can be reached, it should still be possible to agree to disagree without succumbing to acrimony and recriminations. Drawing a comparison between reli-

gions and marriage, the renowned religious scholar, Huston Smith, once remarked that just because I love my own wife above all other women doesn’t mean I have to criticize your wife. In fact, it is precisely because I *do* love my wife so much that I can appreciate how deeply you feel about yours!

Needless to say, if a significant number of the world’s religious leaders arrived at this degree of mutual understanding and respect—and were willing to preach it in their temples, churches, and mosques (as some already do)—it would go a long way to fostering a more harmonious spiritual climate on our ever-shrinking planet. But improved social

“...studying other traditions can uncover heretofore hidden truths buried within one’s own...”

and political relations is not the only nor perhaps even the most important benefit to be gained from engaging in interfaith dialogue. On a more personal level, studying other traditions can uncover heretofore hidden truths buried within one's own, because as the 20th-century Christian mystic Simone Weil noted:

*Each religion is an original combination of explicit and implicit truth; what is explicit in one is implicit in another.*²⁰

This, in turn, can greatly speed the progress of anyone who wishes to attain for him or herself a direct Realization, Enlightenment, or Gnosis of that Ultimate Reality from which, mystics claim, all true religions derive and to which all true religions lead. Here, for example, is how the 7th-century Zen master Sengstan expressed his Realization of this Truth:

*There is one Dharma, not many;
distinctions arise
from the clinging needs of the ignorant.*²¹

This is why the great 19th-century Hindu mystic Ramakrishna insisted:

*God has made different religions to suit different aspirants, times and countries . . . Indeed, one can reach God if one follows any of the paths with wholehearted devotion.*²²

And why Ibn 'Arabi wrote so beautifully after his own Gnosis:

*My heart is capable of every form;
A cloister for the monk, a temple for idols,
A pasture for gazelles, the worshiper's Ka'ba,
The Tables of the Torah, the Qur'an.
Love is the creed I hold; wherever turn
His camels, Love is still my creed and faith.*²³

May all our hearts become this capable!

1. In 1985, 79.7% of the world's population belonged to some religion, according to *The World Christian Encyclopedia: A comparative study of churches and religions in the modern world A.D. 1900-2000*, ed David B. Barrett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982). Cited in Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations: Remaking of the world order* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 65. Note: This figure is undoubtedly larger today, because most of the people who were categorized as "nonreligious" (16.9%) were Chinese living under a communist regime and, therefore, assumed to be without religion. However, the advent of the Falon Gong movement, which numbers in the millions, has shown this assumption to be false.

2. *Tao Te Ching* I:1—my rendition.

3. Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Divine Names*, trans. eds. of The Shrine of Wisdom (Surrey, England: The Shrine of Wisdom, 1957), 10.

4. A.J. Arberry, *The Doctrine of The Sufis* (reprinted, Lahore, Pakistan: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1983), 146.
5. *The Upanishads*, Juan Mascaro, trans. (New York: Penguin Books, 1965), 101.
6. K. Venkata Ramanan, *Nagarjuna's Philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal, 1978), 141.
7. Eriugena, *Periphyseon (Division of Nature)*, trans. John J. O'Meara (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1987), 10, 116.
8. *The Doctrine of the Sufis*, 18.
9. *A Buddhist Bible*, ed. Dwight Goddard, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 293.
10. Jamgön Kongtrul Lödro Tayé, *Myriad Worlds: Buddhist cosmology in the Abhidharma, Kalacakra and Dzog-chen*, trans. and ed. the International Translation Committee founded by the V.V. Kalu Rinpoché (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1995), 166.
11. *Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl: Upright Practices, The Light of the Eyes*, trans. Arthus Green (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 208.
12. Ibn Al 'Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, trans. R.W.J. Austin (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 137.
13. *The Bezels of Wisdom*, 165, 255.
14. *The Talmud: Selected Writings*, trans. Ben Zion Bokser (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 44.
15. *I Jn* 4:8, 16.
16. William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1983), 205.
17. Sri Anandamayi Ma, *Matri Vani: Vol 2*, 2nd ed., trans Atmananda (Calcutta: Shree Shree Anandamayee Charitable Society, 1982), 85, 162.
18. Bokar Rinpoche, *Chenrezig Lord of Love: Principles and Methods of Deity Meditation*, French trans. Francois Jacquemart, English trans. Christiane Buchet, ed. Dan Jorgensen (San Francisco: ClearPoint Press, 1991), 14, 24.
19. The Law of Selflessness can be stated more formally as: *Happiness is inversely proportional to selfishness* or $H = 1/s$.
20. Simone Weil, *Waiting For God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (1951; reprint, New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1973), 185.
21. Sengtsan, Third Zen Patriarch, *Hsin Hsin Ming*, trans. Richard B. Clarke (Buffalo, NY: White Pine Press, 1973), no page numbers.
22. Cited in Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology* (1959; reprint, New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 463.
23. Moulvi S.A.Q. Husaini, *Ibn Al-'Arabi: The Great Muslim Mystic and Thinker* (1949; reprint, Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1977), 99—I have altered a few words for the sake of clarity.

❖ Joel, Spring 2002

In the Words of the Mystics

Love's creed is separate from all religions: The creed and denomination of lovers is God.

—Rumi (Muslim)

The real meaning of the nature, the Mind, is freedom from concepts and expressions. So it won't be understood by conceptual tenets and expressions.

—Longchen-pa (Buddhist)

For You are not at all something such that it can be spoken of or conceived but are absolutely and infinitely exalted above all such things.

—Nicholas of Cusa (Christian)

I say, the Perfect Man has no self.

—Chuang Tzu (Taoist)

How can one who remains attached to his own self go beyond time to the world where all is one?

—Hasidic masters (Jewish)

He who supposes that he possesses knowledge of a positive attribute of God has supposed wrongly, for such attributes would limit Him, while His Essence has no limits.

—Ibn 'Arabi (Muslim)

The whole world is nothing but God's sport or lila, born of this spontaneous JOY or LOVE which is an inexhaustible energy. This can be compared to a loving couple, who, upon producing a child far, from experiencing a decrease of love (because it must be shared over more objects) experience an increase!

—Jagdish Chandra Chatterji (Hindu)

He [God] did not put Himself in motion for any other reason than His pure love alone.

—Catherine of Genoa (Christian)

Some recognize me as...The Self-Existent one, some as Gautama the Ascetic, some as Buddha. Then there are others who recognize me as Brahma, as Vishnu, as Ishvara....Still there are others who speak of me as The Un-born, as Emptiness, as 'Suchness,' as Truth, as Reality, as Ultimate Principle;...Though they all honor and praise and esteem me, they do not fully understand the meaning and significance of the words they use; not having their own self-realisation of Truth they cling to the words of their canonical books, or to what has been told them, or to what they have imagined.

—Lankavatara Sutra (Buddhist)

You can't discuss the Way with a cramped scholar—he's shackled by his doctrines.

—Chuang Tzu (Taoist)

All doctrines are only so many paths; but a path is by no means God himself . . . You have no doubt heard the story of the chameleon. A man entered the wood and saw a chameleon on a tree. He reported to his friends, "I have seen a red lizard." He was firmly convinced that it was nothing but red. Another person, after visiting the tree said, "I have seen a green lizard." He was firmly convinced that it was nothing but green. But the man who lived under the tree said, "What both of you have said is true. But the fact is that the creature is sometimes red, sometimes green, sometimes yellow, and sometimes has no color at all."

—Ramakrishna (Hindu)

Man in his heartache resembles a target for arrows—he has no armor but selflessness.

—Rumi (Muslim)

The manifestation of [the deity] Chenrezig on earth does not, however, limit himself to Tibet, to the Buddhist world, or to lamas. Names and forms are not signs of his manifestation at all. His emanations can be Buddhist or non-Buddhist, ordained or lay people, men or women, Easterners or Westerners, kings or beggars . . . Love and compassion are the true signs revealing the presence of Chenrezig.

—Bokar Rinpoche (Buddhist)

God's true being cannot be described, for when speaking of "being" there is the opposite of "non-being". When trying to express Him by language, He becomes imperfect.

—Anandamayi Ma (Hindu)

The myriad creatures rise from it yet it claims no authority;

It gives them life yet claims no possessions;

It benefits them yet exacts no gratitude;

It accomplishes its tasks yet lays claim to no merit...

Therefore the sage benefits them yet extracts no gratitude,

Accomplishes his task yet lays claim to no merit.

—Lao Tzu (Taoist)





Library Hours: Tuesday evenings 6:00 - 8:30 p.m.

Two great ways to gain familiarity with the world's great religious traditions are to read a book about a practitioner whose life is permeated with the tradition, and to try some practices of the tradition. Each of the books reviewed below by library staffers and friends falls into one of these two categories.

Book Reviews

Buddhist

Fragrant Palm Leaves: Journals 1962-1966

by Thich Nhat Hanh. Parallax Press, 1998.

Thich Nhat Hanh is well known and revered for his public work with mindfulness, peace, and compassion. This rich journal from the sixties is intriguing for its glimpse of the personal process behind this work—the human playfulness and struggles along with scenarios of illumination and insight. Using vivid imagery, he eloquently describes illness, political and social events, friendships, and his growing belief and participation in “engaged Buddhism,” which emphasizes compassionate action and relationship coupled with meditation practice. Just one example is found in a poignant entry made during an extended teaching assignment in New York: he acknowledges the war approaching Vietnam and, while honoring his commitment to remain, writes that he hopes he will be home in time to face it with his friends. If you wish to taste the unfolding expression of pure love through Buddhism, you need look no further.

DAWN KURZKA

Start Where You Are:

A Guide to Compassionate Living

by Pema Chodron. Shambhala Publications, 1994.

An American Buddhist nun, and director of Gampo Abbey, the first Tibetan monastery established for westerners, Pema draws on her long association with Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, and the ancient but ever-relevant practice of tonglen meditation and accompanying lojong slogans to teach us how to open our hearts. Geared especially to those “living in times of darkness,” this book is indispensable to anyone on a spiritual path. Readers are gently invited to connect with their own suffering, embrace the “messy” parts of their lives, drop the story-lines, and lighten up!

MEGAN GREINER

Christian

Confessions

By Saint Augustine of Hippo. Penguin, 1961.

Augustine converted to Christianity at age 32, dying to a life centered in sexual pleasure, wealth, and fame, and awakening to a life of love and compassion. With grace and skill he tells the whole story in his Confessions—a book of thirteen smaller books—to the God whom he finally came to worship. Some have suggested that he overstated his lust and sinfulness in the first six books in order to counter those who were, at the time of his writing, too impressed with his sanctity.

For those who would like to read portions of this work that relate most directly to our path, especially recommended are Books VII and VIII. In Book VII, Augustine wrestles with the origin of evil. And in Book VIII, he relates the story of his conversion, including the pleading of his attachments: “They plucked at my garment of flesh and whispered, ‘Are you going to dismiss us? From this moment we shall never be with you again, for ever and ever. From this moment you will never again be allowed to do this thing or that, for evermore.’”

WESLEY LACHMAN

Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer

by Brother David Steindl-Rast. Paulist Press, 1984.

In his friendly, conversational style, Brother David Steindl-Rast takes everyday experiences such as surprise, restlessness, and leisure, and makes them transparent to a spiritual path. True to his title, he demonstrates that gratefulness is the heart not only of prayer but, indeed, of the entire path: “To bless whatever there is, and for no other reason but simply because it is—that is our *raison d’être*, that is what we are made for as human beings.” “Gratefulness says it all . . . Can the spiritual life be that simple? Yes . . .”

Simply, but profoundly, Steindl-Rast uses the remainder of the book to uncover the gratefulness implicit in three of the central concepts of Christianity: faith, hope, and love. Here is an illustration from the chapter on love: "... Contemplation *in Action*, a way of coming to know God's love from within by acting it out." Those who are drawn to find the deeper meanings of words that we use, perhaps too easily and unknowingly, will find this a rich book indeed.

WESLEY LACHMAN

Hindu

Ramana Maharshi and the Path of Self-Knowledge

by Arthur Osborne. *Rider Books*, 1987.

Written by a devotee who knew Ramana personally, this sensitive book tells the story of Ramana's early life and enlightenment. It illustrates Ramana's teachings of non-duality and compassion for all beings, such as the following example: "Once, during the hot months," Osborne writes, "an electric fan was put on the window-sill beside him. He ordered the attendant to switch it off, and when the latter persisted he himself reached up and pulled out the plug. The devotees were just as hot; why should he alone have a fan? Later, ceiling fans were installed and all benefited alike."

JENNIFER W. KNIGHT

Matri Vani: From the Wisdom of Sri Anandamayi Ma, Volume II

trans. by Atmananda. *Shree Shree Anandamayee Charitable Society*, 1982.

This is the type of book that is difficult to read in just one sitting. So profound are these sayings, you could read one each day and use it as a practice of meditation for that entire day. When read from a place of stillness and devotion, the depths of each saying can take one right to the door of the Beloved. Ma or Mother, as she was so fondly called, was one of the more beloved Hindu saints of the last century. A great bhakti and incarnation of the Divine Mother, Sri Anandamayi Ma left all those she touched forever changed. Her magnetism shines throughout this book. Consider this: "Do not squander invaluable time. Beware of becoming a 'Self-murderer;' realize that you are none other than the immortal Self." If you have any inclination toward the path of love and devotion, check this book out now and immerse yourself in its ray of light.

TOM KURZKA

Jewish

They Called Her Rebbe: The Maiden of Ludomir

by Gershon Winkler. *Judacia Press*, 1991.

Here we have a quasi-historical biography of a Jewish woman named Chana Rochel (1815-1892), known as the holy maiden of Ludomir. She acted as a Chasidic rebbe (spiritual

teacher) in Eastern Europe. Her humble origins and female gender notwithstanding, she became a legend in her own time, as her wise and compassionate teachings, counseling, and healing attracted Jews and even non-Jews from far and wide to her small abode. She was a true mystic and—I dare say—also a saint. Late in life—about to be excommunicated by Jewish leaders for daring to step beyond "a woman's role"—she fled to Jerusalem. This book, which reads like a novel, is a most inspiring, lovingly-crafted, true-life story about an extraordinary woman. It is full of deep Truth and provides the history and flavor of its time and place. Highly recommended!

KAREN FIERMAN

An Open Heart: The Mystic Path of Loving People

by Yitzhak Buxbaum. *The Jewish Spirit Booklet Series*, 1997.

In this little jewel of a book, Buxbaum describes practices and illuminates, with stories of famous rabbis, the Jewish path of love and compassion. To give but one example, Rabbi Simha Zissel Ziv taught: "...even doing good to others as a mitzvah [good deed, commandment] is not the highest motive. One should not do acts of goodness and compassion from calculated motives of doing a mitzvah, but from a natural affection that is accompanied by generosity and joy...The Torah tells us to seek the other person's good and to love him, not because it is a mitzvah, which would not be real love... but to love him as you love yourself. No one loves himself because 'one should love people because God created them,' but naturally, without calculations." Buxbaum's book is accessible and filled with practical suggestions which seekers of any faith could use to enrich their path.

JENNIFER W. KNIGHT

Sufi

Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources

by Martin Lings. *Inner Traditions*, 1983.

Though Lings is a trained scholar and has thoroughly researched early Islamic sources for this book, it is much more than just another academic biography. In a style both direct and sympathetic, Lings tells the story of the birth of Islam through the life of the Prophet Muhammad. Another interesting aspect of this book is that not only can a seeker gain an appreciation of Muhammad, but of the Qur'an as well. By placing its revelations in historical context, Lings sheds much light on many passages that are otherwise obscure to those outside the Islamic tradition.

JENNIFER W. KNIGHT

The Illuminated Prayer: the Five-Times Prayer of the Sufis

by Coleman Barks and Michael Green. *Ballentine*, 2000.

Michael Green and Coleman Barks, who collaborated on the *Illustrated Rumi*, are together again to create an artful, inspiring book of Sufi prayer. Drawn from traditional Islamic

teachings on salat (prayer practice), the book covers both ritual prayer and dhikr, or continuous prayer. The book contains photos of the postures, and inspiring artwork by Green. Barks has sprinkled wonderful quotes from his teachers Bawa Muhaiyaddeen and Jellaludin Rumi that give further insight into the practice. Here is an example from Rumi: “Lo, I am with you always means when you look for God, God is in the look of your eyes, in the thought of looking, nearer to you than your self, or things that have happened to you. There’s no need to go outside. Be melting snow. Wash yourself of yourself.”

JENNIFER W. KNIGHT

Taoism

Tao Te Ching

by Lao Tzu.

The Tao Te Ching is *the* classic work of Taoism and one of the most widely translated books in the world. The Penguin translation is still my favorite, probably because I read it first. Many other fine translations are available and the books range from pocket size to oversize, with or without illustrations, with or without commentary, and it’s even available as an audio book. What more can be said, pick one and enjoy the read!

JENNIFER W. KNIGHT

Other resources

Here is a brief selection of books found in other sections of our library that can provide a reader with a global religious education. Section topics include: comparative religion, religion and modern culture, mystics in dialogue, interfaith, history, spiritual commentaries, and interdisciplinary.

Why Religion Matters:

The Fate of the Human Spirit in an Age of Disbelief

by Huston Smith. HarperCollins, 2001.

With his inspired and lucid style, the modern master of world religions exposes the cause of our contemporary global crisis: the worldview of scientism which marginalizes the religious dimensions of reality. Smith then makes a passionate plea for the revival of the religious dimension of life—in individuals, in societies, and in civilizations. With engaging personal experiences and insights drawn from a lifetime of interaction with leading religious, philosophical, and scientific thinkers, Smith illustrates how the tunnel vision of scientism pervades scientific, political, educational, and media sectors of our society to the point that we do not even see our blindness. Smith sees light at the end of the tunnel, however. His vision for the third millennium is to combine the best of modernism (science) and postmodernism (social justice) with the traditional worldview shared by the world’s religions. Like the Center’s “Challenge and Response”, Smith’s book pro-

vides us with a clear guide for responding to the challenges of our times based on a deep understanding of why religion matters.

THOMAS J. MCFARLANE

The Transcendent Unity of Religions

by Frithjof Schuon. Quest Books, 1984.

In this authoritative exposition of the Traditionalist view of religion, Schuon explains and defends its premise that an identical transcendent Truth lies within the esoteric core of all the religious traditions of the world. This Traditionalist view is grounded in two transcendental principles: First, there is an ineffable, Absolute Reality, and second, it is possible to directly Know or Realize this Reality. Schuon emphasizes that, because the unity among religions is esoteric, it transcends any formulation or expression. Thus, no explicit doctrine can be identified with the Absolute Truth, and each religion’s unique form of expression has its own particular value. Written with his characteristic seriousness and sense of authority, Schuon aims to inspire and clarify rather than entertain.

THOMAS J. MCFARLANE

The Sermon on the Mount according to Vedanta

by Swami Prabhavananda. Penguin., 1972.

In this gem of a book, Swami Prabhavananda shows in simple and direct language that what Jesus preached in the Sermon on the Mount is the same as what a Vedantist follows. As in Vedanta, Christ taught that “man’s real nature is divine.” All we have to do is follow Christ’s teachings and, lo and behold, we also will recognize that divinity. For anyone who is attracted to mystical Christianity this book is a must read. It takes the often complex and symbolic language of the Gospel and translates it into simple terms. The way Prabhavananda draws parallels between Vedanta and Christianity is simply amazing—so amazing that not only does this book help Christians better understand their tradition, it also clarifies the teachings of Vedanta and Hinduism as well. Short and to the point, this book is not just a one-time read, but later can be used as a pocket reference for when the going gets rough.

TOM KURZKA

Reading the Bible Again for the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously But Not Literally

by Marcus J. Borg. HarperCollins, 2001.

This fantastic book is a lucid, fascinating, sagely teaching on how to read the “Good Book” in a fresh and edifying way. The section in the Introduction on religious (not just Christian) fundamentalism is, in my opinion, mandatory reading for anyone sincerely interested in this often problematic phenomenon so prevalent in these troubled times.

KAREN FIERMAN

A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation

by Diana L. Eck. HarperCollins, 2001.

This book by Diana Eck is an outgrowth of her work as a professor at Harvard University and Director of The Pluralism Project. [See the web-site listing below.]

Here’s a compelling snip from the book to contemplate: “When Siraj Wahaj, imam of Masjid al-Taqwa in Brooklyn, stood in the U.S. House of Representatives on June 25, 1991, and offered the first-ever Muslim invocation, he wove into his prayer one of the most oft-cited verses of the Qur’an: ‘Do you not know, O people, that I have made you into tribes and nations that you may know of each other.’ The moment was historic, and the Islamic prayer for life in a pluralist society was arresting. Our religious and cultural differences should not be the occasion for division but, on the contrary, the occasion for the biggest challenge of all: that ‘we may know each other.’”

JENNIFER W. KNIGHT

Einstein & Buddha: The Parallel Sayings

edited by Thomas J. McFarlane. Ulysses Press, 2002.

Over the past several centuries, it has been commonly thought that science and religion represent uncompromising antagonistic points of view related to the nature of reality. This book dissolves the illusion that the two disciplines are fundamentally locked in opposition by presenting hundreds of examples to the contrary. From the sayings of modern physicists and mystics of diverse traditions through the ages, Thomas McFarlane has woven a beautiful tapestry displaying a stunning cohesiveness of thought—to the point that one is often unable to distinguish the source discipline of the quote without reading the credit.

MIKE CRAVEN

Web Resources for further study of religious diversity and mystical unity:

The home page of Diana Eck’s **The Pluralism Project** (see the review of *A New Religious America* above):

<http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~pluralsm/>

A beautiful site by Deb Platt called “**Mysticism in World Religions**” contains a good variety of quality quotes from mystics of different traditions arranged by tradition or topic:

<http://www.digiserve.com/mystic/>

*Whatever I read that was useful
I put into practice.
Whatever was useless knowledge
slipped out of my mind. . .
I practiced what I preached,
and knowledge arose within me.
I attained my goal,
and my life was filled with bliss.*

—Lalleschwari (Hindu)



Visit Our Web Site!

<http://www.integralscience.org/css>

The Center’s web site includes:

- General information about the purpose, activities, and philosophy of the Center
- Details about Joel’s books and other Center publications
- Previous newsletters

What Does Religious Diversity Mean to You?

In February, we interviewed four Center members regarding engaging diversity. We asked them about: their individual religious background and experiences, their encounters with religious diversity and fundamentalism, the impact on their lives and spirituality of these encounters and of doing practices from different traditions, whether they find all paths point to the same goal, and how we can respect and learn from each others' traditions globally and locally. The following are their edited spoken responses.



Sharry Lachman was part of an experimental family ministry and since then has been working with energy psychology. She lives in Eugene with her husband, Wesley, and delights in the company of their children and grandchildren. She belongs to a Presbyterian Church and has been a member of the Center for three years.

My Presbyterian Sunday School was not a very satisfying experience for me. I had lots of questions the teachers couldn't seem to answer. Then, in high school, I attended a non-denominational, fundamentalist Christian camp for teenagers, where they taught a lot of Bible verses and basic doctrine. Later, I had a Catholic boyfriend and went to Catechism classes with him. The priest used to call me "our little Protestant scholar," probably to say my questions were too far out for him to be bothered with them.

I went to San Francisco Theological Seminary, where I met Wesley, and we were married. We entered the Presbyterian Church pastorate and four years later we began an internship with the Institute of Cultural Affairs (then The Ecumenical Institute), founded by the World Council of Churches. It was a family order and all time was assigned time. It was kind of rough on family life because our covenant said, "the mission comes first." We were with that organization for 21 years and lived in various places in the U.S. and spent four years each in Africa and India.

In Africa, we lived in a little village of 1000 people. One of the things that impacted me deeply was that when anyone died, everything stopped for an entire day and we had a real celebration. It began early in the morning with the burial ritual and lots of mourning, then a kind of a wake through the different parts of the village, and at night dancing and lots of beer. Everything just stopped and focused on this mystery. At the same time, our African staff seemed very amenable to

incorporating our understanding of human freedom in the Christian context, and they didn't seem to have personal rites and rituals apart from these big communal things like birth and death.

I was fascinated in Calcutta with how yoga seemed to fit into the Hindu belief system and the way of life. Yoga for the people on our staff, especially one young man, was definitely not just for exercise. It was a spiritual practice about life and survival and death, all wrapped into how you honored your body and took in the breath of life. We started meditation when we were in India. When we left the Institute, I was compelled to continue doing it. Most of my Christian beliefs had been sort of wiped away, and so the meditation became a kind of direct link with Source. One year I took a huge consulting contract in Tacoma, and class often started at 7:00 in the morning. I had to travel sixty-some miles to get there, but I promised myself before I took the contract that I wouldn't go out the door without doing meditation. I didn't understand the compulsion at the time, but it makes more sense to me now after three years at the Center.

In the beginning, when we were just The Ecumenical Institute, we had a lot of religious practices and a very rich study life. When we became the Institute of Cultural Affairs and began to expand globally and take Muslims, Hindus, and Jews on our staff, our Christian practices got kind of undermined. At first, we tried to fit everybody in under the Christian umbrella, and when that didn't work, we tried to come to some middle ground, and things got pretty watered down. I think we missed a whole level of richness by not studying their traditions more deeply. But at that point, we were primarily concerned with building communities, and not with proselytizing or converting anyone.

So, when we came back to the States and joined a Presbyterian Church in Seattle, I was pretty upset to find that Christians there were going out to proselytize Muslims and Hindus. In the Institute, one of our favorite stories had been about a Muslim, a Hindu, and a Christian, three sages who were arguing about the Truth. As they parted, they each fell down a well and were astounded to discover they had fallen into the same river of Truth through their different holes or

perspectives. I like that story. I think it points to a deep truth about the many traditions and the one Truth. So when we came to the Center and found that approach at the core of everything, it just made sense to me.

I really think the Center is doing an incredible job of helping us learn from each other's traditions. I've been particularly attracted to the Buddhist and the Advaita, but I'm really at a place where it doesn't matter to me whether the learning comes from Hindu or Muslim or Advaita or what. If it speaks to my experience, then it's true. I don't see one as more valid than the other. If we could have that same kind of understanding, in all our traditions, of respect for each other's faith and traditions, I think it would make community a joyful place.



Miriam Reinhart lives with her husband, Thomas, on two acres on the outskirts of Eugene. They have two grown sons, one still in college. She works as a massage therapist and has been coming to the Center since 1990, where she has been a member for six years and volunteers both in the Library and in supplying tea.

My parents were Jewish, but I never saw Judaism as a religion, so much. My mother's father was very religious. She was very close to him and felt pretty religious. My father was a total secular Jew. He was basically an atheist [laughing]. But, he felt more comfortable with Jews because these were the people he grew up with in Toronto.

When I was about 22, I lived in a Western Sufi community for six years—that's where I met my husband, Thomas. In 1987, I became involved with Sai Baba. I started to go to the Center with Thomas about 1990 and really liked it; and eventually the whole Sai Baba thing fell apart, and I'm still here at the Center.

To learn from practices and see that they're pointing to the same underlying reality—that's what drew me to the Center, because that's always been my thing. And that's what drew me to Sai Baba, because he said the underlying thing in all religions is love. So that's a theme at the Center that I really can resonate with. I never could get into the Jewish religious tradition. So in a way, these other traditions, whether Hinduism, Sufism, or Buddhism, have all given me a spiritual tradition that I found lacking in Judaism. The meditative part of those traditions has been *really* enriching, whether it was dhikr [also spelled zikr] (the first Sufi meditation I ever did), or mantra practice from Hinduism, or vipassana from Buddhism. And the musical part—with Hinduism, devotional

singing was very enriching, and we also did a lot of music in the Sufi community, as well. I get very touched by music and to use that as a meditation has been really powerful for me.

Growing up as a Jew—I was born in 1948 just after the Holocaust—I was brought up with a great sense that since Jews had been persecuted like that it could happen to everyone; and it was incredibly important for people to be tolerant of one another, both in terms of their religion and their nationalism. My parents were involved in the United Nations when it first began and that was very strongly emphasized in my family. I believe tolerating diversity is not some warm, fuzzy mush, but being willing to see clearly what the differences are.

I think there's a lot of misunderstanding. What I call a misunderstanding of the right is simple intolerance of what is different from you. But there's also a misunderstanding of the left (which I think is equally problematic), which I see happening a lot now since September 11th—being naïve. I think it's real important, let's say with Islam, to see clearly what's happening—that the overwhelming majority of Muslims are peace-loving and compassionate, and practice that way; but there is a certain number who are not, who are very violent. We're not doing a service to other Muslims by tolerating extremism. I think it's important to be really clear about that and not make excuses for religion. If we were living in 16th-Century Spain right now, and you came up to me and quoted Teresa of Avila and Jesus and Francis of Assisi and told me what a peace-loving religion Christianity was—but there was the Inquisition going on and pogroms and the Huguenots and the Roman Catholics fighting each other—I'd say, "Wait a minute, there's something not meshing here." And that's a razor's edge to walk with tolerance—on one hand to be tolerant and, the other hand, not be an apologist.

Marshall Rosenberg has been a large influence in my life. He's involved in mediation in all parts of the world and has started something called nonviolent, or compassionate, communication. It is a way of working with diversity and having people from very different viewpoints be able to really hear and understand and communicate with one another. It's not just about being nice, it's about being really honest; so it walks that razor's edge of being really tolerant but being totally honest. [laughing] So that's my bottom line. For me, engaging diversity is really about walking that razor's edge.

I think this is a pretty incredible country that we live in. As a Jewish person, I have never actually experienced any prejudice here. There are Jews and Christians and Buddhists, there're huge Hindu temples, there're mosques all over—I really wonder whether this many people with this much diversity of religion have ever been thrown together before. I think that's a really wonderful thing and we're very lucky [laughing].



Elizabeth Baldner moved to Eugene about five years ago from the Midwest for an interesting supervisory job in Oncology. She has always been a nurse and is a mother of two grown daughters. She belongs to the Catholic Church and has been a part of the Center for four years.

I am a cradle Catholic. My religion, my spirituality has always been a very important part of my life. As a child raised in the Midwest, I don't remember any other tradition than Christianity. I remember the bickering between the two different Christian traditions in our small town. I grew up with the thought that we were the only true religion and had been told that we tolerated other religions. As a child in Catechism, when I once voiced my opinion in class, it was not accepted by the priest and I learned that I kept my thoughts to myself. As I grew and had more involvement with other Christian faiths and priests, I realized I'd been seeing my faith through the eyes of others (especially religious leaders and teachers). And I somehow always had the sense that there was more.

Then there were the "Aha" moments—conversations with people from other religions who helped me see things. A fellow nurse who was Lutheran showed me the beauty of faith that is then manifested through "works" of love and compassion. Also, one evening after attending a Charismatic group, I discovered that a member of the group that I had worshipped with and shared discussions and beliefs with for months wasn't Catholic. *We were the same!* A lifetime of walls melted in that one moment. They seem like such small steps, yet somehow gigantic. I saw this small spiritual world I grew up in become larger and larger, and it made me want to continue to seek.

When I came to Eugene, I found a priest that seemed to see, or express, things differently from other priests. I attended classes that the church had for people joining the Catholic Faith. It was like seeing my faith for the first time, and I liked what I saw. Like other exoteric traditions, it has evolved through the years—changed by the philosophy of its leaders. I see my church striving at looking for and teaching commonalities of other traditions. I think it really has a big role in our lives. It gives a sense of belonging and provides support for so many. I see the goodness in it every time I go to Mass. I guess what I see is God. I feel really blessed to be able to see.

I discovered the Center after watching Joel's video from the public library. Shortly after, when I first started coming to the center, I would listen to Joel, and there would be a sense of Truth. But I had this fear that I would need to give up my Catholicism, which is home. It has brought me through many difficult times, and influenced many of my decisions. How could I give that up? Encountering Huston Smith's teaching is

helping me resolve this issue. He is able to study and live all the traditions and still appreciate being a Methodist. He also says he doesn't feel that exoteric or esoteric is better than the other, that they each serve their purpose. That has given me the freedom to be who I am. I still enjoy my Catholicism and know it will always be a big part of who I am. I can start with the Christian mystics and learn from what is most comfortable to me.

And, it gave me permission to open, listen, and let other teachings come in and see how they could mesh with my Catholicism. It has helped me see things a little more esoterically. For instance, when I'm a Eucharistic Minister at church and offer the Eucharist to my fellow parishioners and say the words, "The Body of Christ," I really look in their eyes and see God in each of them and feel a oneness with each of them. One particular Sunday I looked out at the congregation and really saw "The Body of Christ." I saw these separate little beings in a oneness, a coming together of themselves for that which they "believed." It just brought tears to my eyes to truly see this perfection within imperfection.

When we took the Foundation class with Tom (Kurzka), *The Path of Blessing* by Rabbi Marcia Prager provided a bridge to different religions. It resonated with me. It was a tool that became much more than I expected. The author explained that this wonderful energy of the blessings that we receive was able to go back to God in the form of thanksgiving—completing the cycle. It also states that to take all these gifts and blessings without giving thanksgiving was like shoplifting. I think it's beautiful that appreciation itself is thanksgiving. Enjoying nature, a piece of music, or a beautiful painting—the beauty that God gives, and in taking the time to enjoy them, we are giving thanks to Him. That was my first real connection to the Jewish tradition and I felt so close to it—it is a part of my Catholic heritage, Judaism.

How can we engage diversity? First of all, openness—I think you have to want to experience and be open to the other traditions. Next, exposure—if we somehow give people the opportunity to learn about traditions, they will see that there's nothing to fear. And acceptance—to share, to see each other as people on their own journey, and be willing to see the background beauty that each tradition brings. If we care for each other then we're going to be able to exchange that. My involvement with the Center has given me a freedom and resources to seek and feel comfortable in doing so. Experiences and knowledge of other traditions has helped me to see God differently, which changes the way I see life and my purpose. I see my world as my teacher, hearing the same lessons in different classrooms. I find myself less fearful with things I don't understand nor have control over.

I guess I will always have a need to seek more, and sometimes I think it's probably a curse [laughing], but it's just something inside me. I wouldn't know how to begin to tell someone what my real "faith" is because it's more of a feeling than I could put into words. I mean, I can read something and say, "Yeah, that's part of what I believe, and that is too." But

to kind of crunch it all together—that’s what the exoteric religion gives you, a definition of what you believe—and I’m kind of spread out. The taste of all the other traditions is just like going to a candy store [laughing]. It feels so good to see that thread that flows through all of them. I think each one of us has our own spirituality, our own religion, because of where we are on our own path with our God. And how we see our God makes a real difference. We’re very blessed, aren’t we?



Jennifer Knight works as an Administrative Assistant. She lives with her husband, Joel, and their cats. In her spare time, she likes to garden, and hike. She has been a member of the Center for 15 years and is the librarian, bookkeeper, and a member of the Board.

When I was little, we used to go a lot to Episcopal Church. By high school I was a bit of a wild child, with priorities that differed from attending class, so I ended up in Catholic School for a year. In religion class, I remembered the nun saying what was so profound about Jesus was not the miracles he performed but that he came to earth and ate food and drank water and had normal human experiences. That always stuck.

My first experiences with fundamentalism were with some friends in high school (not Catholic school) that were from a very conservative Protestant denomination, and they were always bent on converting you. Just being Christian wasn’t enough, you had to believe in their brand of fire-and-brimstone Christianity. It’s a delicate thing to learn to share and witness your tradition in appropriate ways, yet not make people feel like you’re pushing it on them. For me, this spurred a loss of faith, in that if the Christian God is true and the only way to God is through Jesus, how could other traditions say that their thing was vast, infinite, merciful, transcendent, undying? How could you have more than one Being like that? It was a big conflict that I couldn’t reconcile in my mind.

Later, this loss of faith was the thing that led me to the Center. The perspective that all mystics are saying the same thing gave me a way to find a new approach to spirituality that could incorporate multiple views. So the perspective of mystical unity was the thing that first intrigued me about the Center and what I find compelling still. If God were so limited that he manifests in just one tradition and then manifests other powerful beings to mislead people in other traditions, it doesn’t interest me. And I feel that if God’s really compassionate and merciful and loving, S/He would manifest for everybody.

My exposure to other traditions has included Buddhist meditation and reading from other traditions. I’ve been doing dhikr off and on for seven years. Dhikr is a Sufi practice that is like mantra—it’s a repetition of a prayer phrase and it can be said out loud or in the mind. Eventually, it’s supposed to completely internalize and reside within the heart. I’ve always felt this strong internal aversion and attraction to prayer, which has led to an attraction to salat practice. It’s a formal ritualized prayer, and is one of the five duties of being a Muslim. The Sufis use salat not just as part of the daily practice, but as a launchpad into dhikr. (You’re already in a more concentrated, devoted state of mind.) The last year or so, I’ve been doing that off and on. In the beginning, I was really intimidated by it because I’m not a Muslim.

You start with a prayer called the Fatiha, which is the first chapter of the Koran. Mohammed said the whole Koran is encapsulated within the Fatiha. And it starts, as almost every chapter of the Koran starts, “in the name of God the Merciful and the Compassionate.” Then it says some things about God, and then it says “in the Merciful and the Compassionate, the Owner of the Day of Judgment, to Thee we turn in worship.” And I hated it [laughing]. In Sufism, as in Islam, the mercy and compassion of God are a big theme that run all through that tradition, and I find that really profound. So you have these qualities of God sandwiched by mercy and compassion, and then you have what seems to me to be the wrath quality of God—“the Owner of the Day of Judgment”—and I *hated* that. Every day I’d do it, and it’d bring up my high school images of the wrath of God.

But Joel always teaches if you’re going to do a practice from a tradition you should continue and do what that practice is and honor that practice, because there’s something to be learned about the structure that people have preserved in a practice. So I’ve stuck with it and done it the way that it is; and one day I was doing it and I thought “Oh, that’s it. God owns judgment. God owns the Day of Judgment. I don’t have to judge. I don’t have to own these judgments. I can just give that up to God.” And it opened up a whole new dimension in practice. So it wasn’t so much that Sufism enriched my prior tradition, but my prior tradition was a block until that door unlocked.

I think we can learn from and respect others’ traditions. I find reading’s a really valuable bridge when you talk to somebody involved in a tradition that’s not your own. Talking to people, being involved with interfaith groups, there’re lots of ways people could become more literate. In a personal way, I’ve done Buddhist meditation, Hindu chanting, and Islamic Sufi practices. I’ve gone to various services. I think it’s really important. The more that people can understand and respect each other’s traditions, the less those traditions can be manipulated and used in things that are really political battles.

❖ All interviews conducted Spring, 2002



"...studying other traditions can uncover heretofore hidden truths buried within one's own..."

— Joel

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