

Hidden Treasure

Jesus's Message of Transformation

F. Aster Barnwell



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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	ix
Preface	xi
Introduction	1
1. Updating Our Understanding of Jesus's Role in Our Salvation	15
2. Why Transformation of Consciousness Is the Only True Salvation	32
3. An Esoteric Approach to the Gospels	57
4. The Transformational Psychology Embedded in the New Testament	79
5. Kundalini and the Psychology of Self-Transformation	100
6. Laying the Foundation for the Transformation of Consciousness	118
7. Viewing the Beatitudes as a System of Objective Values	127
8. Spiritual Practices for Releasing Blocked Energy at the Chakras	143

9. Stoking the Fires of Transformation through Spiritual Exercises	155
10. Parables of the Kingdom I: Initial Fruits of Transformation	176
11. Parables of the Kingdom II: Advanced Stages of Transformation	194
12. Kundalini Symbolism in the Miracles—As Recorded in John and Matthew	210
13. The Destiny of the Saved	228
Afterword	244
Appendices	249
I A Meditation on the Unforgivable Sin	250
II A Meditation Workshop on the Beatitudes	257
III Working with the Parables of the Kingdom as Spiritual Exercises	270
IV The Lord's Prayer and the Chakras	278
V Astrological Symbolism in the Relationship between Jesus and His Twelve Disciples	286
Endnotes	292
Bibliography	298

ONE

UPDATING OUR UNDERSTANDING OF JESUS'S ROLE IN OUR SALVATION

In the forthcoming chapters of this book I will work to substantiate the claim that the Gospels contain a well-developed psychology of transformation, designed to take one to a higher level of consciousness. But before that point, I'd like to deal with just three of the number of questions you might develop in response to those chapters. Indeed, I pondered these questions for a number of years.

The first question is: Is this psychology a deliberate construction, or is it an artifact—a coincidence or an accident? Because of my training as an economist, I was accustomed to treating every result of a statistical correlation between two sets of data with skepticism until more thorough analyses could be performed. Such a practice was standard in my line of work to eliminate what is called a *spurious correlation*, which is when an apparent statistical relationship between phenomena turns out to be a fluke. In this instance, although I was not dealing with quantifiable data, I figured the same cautious approach was called for.

The second question follows on the heels of the first: If it turns out the psychology is a deliberate construction, what does that imply for our understanding of Jesus?

Finally, the third question: What are the implications for Christianity, if the main message of the Gospels turns out to be not about Jesus, but about transformation?

Before delving into these questions, however, I'd like to give you an idea of where I'm coming from personally.

MY RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND

I haven't been a member of a Christian church for several decades, yet I feel more of a Christian today than when I dutifully attended services. For some, this might seem a contradiction to how things ought to be, but it's true for me because I've always associated Christianity with a set of principles to live by, and as such, the outer trappings of religion just never had a pull on me. I've also always felt free to engage in my own inquiry into the big questions—such as those regarding the nature and existence of God, what happens after we die, and so on. Needless to say, I've never opted for prepackaged answers to these questions.

I was fortunate to have been born into a religious family. My father, though he earned his income as a farmer, was by vocation the pastor and leader of an independent Baptist Church. He never went to a seminary and was self-taught, not an unusual practice in those times* and in that part of the world. Apart from the Methodist hymnal the members used in worship, the church had no formal relationship with any church organization. Worshippers had no other creed book besides the Bible, which, of course, they interpreted literally.

During my childhood, my mother attended the Methodist Church and took us children along, my father's position notwithstanding. We were all christened as Methodists. Eventually, she joined my father in his church, while we children continued to regard ourselves as Methodists, occasionally attending services in the Methodist Church.

At the age of eighteen, I became a member of the Church of Christ. I was baptized by an American minister who had come to my native St. Vincent as a "missionary" to set up congregations there. Several months

* My father was born in 1917.

earlier, I had signed up for a Bible correspondence course offered by that minister while still living in the United States. I didn't know it at the time, but the correspondence course had been his way of making advance contact with prospective candidates for the new church congregation he was planning to start in St. Vincent. The Church of Christ perceived itself not as a denomination of Christianity, but as "the one true church" itself. It saw its role as the restoration of New Testament Christianity. Even though I was a member, I never bought into these pretentious claims, as my common sense and observations told me otherwise.

Two years after I was baptized, I left St. Vincent for Canada, where I continued to be a member of a Church of Christ congregation almost to the end of my second year of university. I eventually drifted away. Since then, I have had no affiliation, formal or informal, with any religious group or organization.

However, two church practices left an indelible imprint on me. The first was the requirement for male lay members (yes, males only) to take turns at delivering the Sunday morning and Sunday evening sermons. (This practice was only carried out in smaller congregations that couldn't afford to hire full-time ministers.) I used the opportunity to thoroughly research my sermon topics and, in the process, explored my own feelings about the Bible's stories.

The second church practice that stuck with me is that it never had the heavy emphasis on an emotional attachment to Jesus. Yes, it believed and taught that Jesus died for our sins, but it parted company with other evangelical-type churches by stressing the need for "obedience to the Word," rather than emphasizing an emotional attachment to Jesus.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF TRANSFORMATION IN THE GOSPELS—INTENTIONAL OR ACCIDENTAL?

Now let's go back to the three main questions that will likely arise as you continue through this book. As for the first question, I can categorically state that the psychology of transformation in the Gospels is a deliberate construction—it is no accident.

For one, it's obvious that such a message couldn't have been embedded in the Gospels unless that had been the intent from the outset. Two, the psychology of transformation has an internal consistency that gives it coherence and plausibility. Further, the design of the psychology corresponds with that which underpins the Eastern disciplines of Yoga,* which predated Christianity by thousands of years. These Yoga disciplines are geared toward helping the individual organize and focus all of his energies—intellectual, emotional, volitional, and physical—on the goal of spiritual realization. The central idea within the various disciplines of Yoga is that the human being is a “God-seed,” awaiting the conscious cooperation of the individual in order to awaken and progress into full flowering. That's not to say such insights into our human potential are lost to Christianity. The thirteenth-to-fourteenth-century Christian mystic Meister Eckhart expressed similar sentiments quite forcefully in his writings. He wrote, for example, “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.”¹ Such realizations have been lost only on the mainstream expressions of Christianity.

A key component that the psychology of the Gospels shares with the various Yoga disciplines is a structural framework of human consciousness which shows us humans as having the potential to experience life at seven different levels of consciousness, with each successive level representing a higher level of relationship to Reality. In the Gospels, this framework serves as the key to a fuller understanding of the teachings and miracles of Jesus.

It's unfortunate that this structural framework lies hidden from the casual observer. If one does not have an understanding beforehand of the design that is being utilized, it goes undetected.** In my own case, had it

*The term yoga means union, and is the equivalent of the Christian concept of yoke. There are three main classical Yoga disciplines, widely accepted as different paths to God: Gyani Yoga (the Yoga of contemplation), Karma Yoga (the Yoga of good works), and Bhakti Yoga (the Yoga of devotion). Hatha Yoga, the most familiar form of yoga in the West, consists of physical exercises designed to strengthen and integrate the mind and the body, and is not classified as a yogic path per se.

**An exposition of this framework will be discussed more fully in Chapter 5.

not been for the personal experience with Kundalini, described in the introduction, and the search it inspired, this reality of the underlying framework to the Gospels would have remained hidden from me.

The Kundalini experience and the revelations that were to follow also awakened me to the realization that we can derive entirely new levels of meaning from religious concepts that we've been previously content to interpret literally and superficially.

During intense sessions of Bible reading and contemplation, prayers, and meditation, I was flooded with intuitive insights on the spiritual life. I realized that the most important concepts and doctrines of Christianity were more meaningful when viewed within a frame of reference that is allegorical and psychological—in other words, when viewed in ways that relate to our present, lived experience—as opposed to one that is historical and literal. My deepest intuitive insight during those early months was the realization that there is one God, meaning that all the aspirations of all peoples of all ages resulted from different levels and qualities of insight into one Ultimate Reality. This did not come to me as an intellectualization, but as a felt, embodied realization. It is this intuition that led me to familiarize myself with various world religions and mythologies. And it is because of this familiarization that I was able to see some of the common themes that permeate both Christianity and other world religious traditions.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF JESUS IN THE PSYCHOLOGY OF TRANSFORMATION?

We can now address how best to understand the role of Jesus in light of the deliberate embedding of the psychology of transformation in the Gospels. In short, we must reassess our own views about salvation and Jesus's role in it.

In traditional Christian theology, Jesus is seen as a unique phenomenon on the screen of history. He is championed as God's answer to man's need for redemption from sin. Indeed, one of the most quoted Bible verses is John 3:16, which states, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his

only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

Unaware of the transformation that the teachings of Jesus are designed to engage in us, Christian doctrine has become primarily focused on Jesus's role in our salvation. And since there is no shared understanding of what constitutes salvation, it's up to each Christian group to settle on its own definition, which, in turn, is based on its own surface reading and interpretation of scripture. As a result, Christian teachings on salvation are as varied and diverse from one another as the preferences, prejudices, fears, and desires of the various groups within the faith. Positions in the debate range from those that regard salvation as a matter of Christian heritage to those that advocate it is achieved only by accepting Jesus Christ as savior (meaning that one must make a verbal and emotional acceptance of the salvation that Jesus is understood to have provided through his suffering and crucifixion). For those who see salvation in a more cultural context, it is entirely sufficient to be born of Christian parents, baptized in infancy, and perhaps attend church once in awhile. And on the fundamentalist end of the spectrum, we find even more polarization on issues such as whether a person who is once saved is always saved, whether faith alone is sufficient for salvation, or whether faith plus works is the key.

Yet, as diverse as these positions are, all Christian groups find common ground in the Gospel story that Jesus paid the price for our salvation through a sacrificial death by crucifixion. This knowledge is so pervasive that it's part of our cultural endowment in the West. I was a small child when, one Good Friday, I learned from an older cousin the story of Jesus dying for our sins. Though that disclosure made me feel sad that someone had to die, it made as much sense to me then as it does now. Of course, my intellect was not developed enough to frame the questions I was to pose later.

Even accepting the surface account of how Jesus came to save us, those of us who probe further could never find an intellectually satisfying Christian answer as to the mechanism by which Jesus's death actually translates into our salvation. Most times, one is told that it's something one must

accept by faith. However, the typical Christian answer is aptly demonstrated in the Mel Gibson–directed movie *The Passion of the Christ*.² The psychological mechanism by which the death of Jesus confers salvation is through the feelings of guilt that are stirred in us when we contemplate his suffering.

It is reasonable to surmise that the architects of the Gospels relied on the appeal of the story of Jesus's birth, life, and crucifixion to engage converts at an emotional level. They likely intended this historical drama to serve as a "hook," to use a marketing expression. Most of the teachings intended to engage people were never meant to become a permanent fixture in the believer's world view. They were simply to serve as easily digestible spiritual food, meant for "infants in Christ."* Said another way, these teachings were meant for a sort-of spiritual kindergarten, delivered in hopes that a believer would progress to following the prescription Jesus lays out in his teachings for the saving of the soul. Provided that these teachings of love for God and one's neighbor were put into practice, believers would experience a transition to a higher level of consciousness. In turn, this higher level of consciousness would enable them to discover the true purpose of the Gospel message, thereby releasing them from the need to cling to a literal interpretation of the Gospel story. Getting people to believe the narrative was an initial first step to applying the psychology. It was not to be an end unto itself.

Two related factors suggest themselves as to the reasons why we've missed out so terribly on achieving a deeper understanding of what our salvation consists of and Jesus's role in it, as played out in the Gospel story. The first is that we do not have a clear understanding of what life requires of us as human beings; or, to put it differently, we do not know what we

*For example, Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth states: "I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready" (I Cor. 3: 1-2).

should be making the goal of our striving. The second reason is a lack of understanding of the roles of religion and spiritual disciplines in helping us meet this requirement. In both cases, our poor understanding is directly related to our inability to distinguish mythic themes and images in scripture from actual historical events.

OUR HUMAN POTENTIAL AND THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN HELPING US ACHIEVE IT

In my early twenties, wanting to learn how to do my own car tune-ups, I took an auto mechanic course at a community college. The instructor provided a definition of a tune-up that still resonates with me; he said it was the task of returning a vehicle, as closely as possible, to the manufacturer's specifications. I've often thought of that definition when reflecting upon the role of religion in human affairs. The function of religion is to imbue each of us with a sense of our potential as a human being, a potential that includes a state of wholeness. Our religious practice should then become our human equivalent of a tune-up, restoring us to psychic wholeness. As for what life requires of us, it is nothing less than our desire for and pursuit of wholeness, together with a willingness to realize the complete truth of *what* we are—both goals that the psychology embedded in the New Testament is designed to help us achieve.

In the view of the Indian philosopher and mystic Sri Aurobindo* (1872-1950), the proper role and practice of religion is to help man in searching for, and finding, God, and to help him use the experience of the encounter with the Divine to energize a life of devotion and service. Our wholehearted turning to the Divine would, in turn, prepare the way for God to “descend” into and live through us. Says Sri Aurobindo:

*Sri Aurobindo is identified here as a philosopher and mystic only for the sake of convenience. Many recognized him as an Avatar of the “supramental manifestation” that defined his personal Yoga discipline.

The deepest heart, the inmost essence of religion ... is the search for God and the finding of God. Its aspiration is to discover the Infinite, the Absolute, the One, the Divine, who is all these things and yet no abstraction but a Being. Its work is a sincere living out of the true and intimate relations between man and God, relations of unity, relations of difference, relations of an illuminated knowledge, an ecstatic love and delight, an absolute surrender and service, a casting of every part of our existence out of its normal status into an uprush of man towards the Divine and a descent of the Divine into man.³

When viewed against such a lofty view of religion, it is easy to see why a more modest understanding of our spiritual duty and the related role of religion would lead to correspondingly less effort in our day-to-day spiritual practice. But, if the truth lies more in line with Aurobindo's vision rather than in the issue of finding personal salvation, then our failure to understand the higher standards we're being called to achieve would mean that we are shortchanging ourselves. And such shortchanging can start a cycle of self-reinforcing errors that can lead to our spiritual disenfranchisement. This cycle begins with a failure to penetrate the outer layers of our religious symbols in order to acquaint ourselves with the deeper meanings of our religious texts. This misunderstanding of scripture then leads us to misinterpret what we should be striving for in our religious practice. Finally, when we're busily engaged in expending our energy in misdirected pursuits, we miss out on opportunities to become acquainted with the knowledge and practices we need in order to make genuine spiritual progress.

Real spiritual progress consists foremost of the upliftment and eventual transformation of our natural impulses toward a life that progressively embodies the ideals attributed to Jesus—to name a few, love, charity, kindness, compassion, and obedience to the will of God.

DISCERNING MYTHIC THEMES AND IMAGES IN SCRIPTURE

As we look at the state of Christendom today, it's hard not to conclude that a serious miscalculation was made in interpreting the message of the Gospels. Jesus was not to be the final resting place for the attention of Christians; he was to be the mobilizer, the shepherd herding the flock to greener pasture. Instead, what we have is emphasis on an emotional attachment to Jesus that cannot go beyond the literal, surface level. Believers were expected to grow out of these infantile attachments to Jesus. They were to look not to the past but to the future, to a return of the Christ not without, but within themselves. There seems to be some cosmic irony at play here, in that our belief in, and adoration of, a historical Jesus has stood in the way of the Christ Principle having a greater representation in our lives and our human affairs.

The human tendency to become fixated on a symbol while failing to assimilate into our consciousness the life lesson represented by the symbol is the target of the Zen Buddhist aphorism, "The finger pointing at the moon is not the moon."* Indeed, by becoming fixated on Jesus and the historical drama presented in the Gospels, we are staring at the finger rather than at the object to which it is pointing, and which, in our case, is the psychology of transformation in which we need to become engaged.

Once we are aware of the underlying psychology, and the intent of the historical drama, we can have a deeper appreciation of Jesus's role, and discover that this role is not unique. It belongs to a special class of symbols named *archetypes* by the renowned psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung. The term was used reservedly by Dr. Jung to represent "those psychic contents which have not yet been submitted to conscious elaboration and are therefore an immediate datum of psychic experience."⁴ As an archetype, Jesus was modeling principles for us to live out in our own lives, and in this

*The context here is someone pointing at the moon in conjunction with a verbal exhortation to an onlooker to "Look at the moon!"

sense, his role of world savior is hardly unique. Such a designation has been assigned to various personalities across the march of history. Although different religious traditions employ different concepts and metaphors, none can legitimately lay claim to being the exclusive embodiment of truth.

The development of a religion is simply an attempt to give local relevance to an eternal truth by drawing upon the culture from which the realization of that truth occurred. Consequently, the most appropriate way of portraying the purpose of life in one time and place may not be the most appropriate way to portray it in another, considering the bigger picture of our human unfolding and development.

REVISIONING CHRISTIANITY

One cannot help but wonder what might have been if, over the past two millennia, there had been widespread recognition within Christian communities that the true purpose of Christianity was to engage in spiritual practices that lead to a transformation of consciousness. But as intriguing as it might be to speculate on this, it has no practical benefit. What is more beneficial is to look forward, to speculate instead on the potential for Christianity should the awareness of an underlying psychology in the Gospels become common knowledge. Of course, this is not something that can be known, because we know that a characteristic of human beings is that different individuals react differently to the same information, but one can hope that greater awareness would lead to greater responsibility.

There are positives that can be hoped for, namely: first, that Christians rediscover the transformative power of their sacred symbols; second, that they rediscover contemplative practices; third, that they make the acquaintance of the *spirit of truth*; and fourth, that each individual assumes primary responsibility for his or her spiritual progress. These third and fourth “positives to be hoped for” are combined in the discussion to follow, but in anticipation of that discussion, this fourth point about personal respon-

sibility holds the greatest promise for the renovation, not only of our spiritual practice, but our experience of life in general. For once we become aware that spiritual practice, and religious life in general, are about the transformation of consciousness, every life situation and encounter become an opportunity for spiritual advancement.

Rediscovering the Transformative Power of Religious Symbols

I believe that religions such as Christianity are repositories of ageless symbols with transformative value.

Seeing Jesus as a symbol offers us a much better chance of understanding what he represents, much more so than when we only relate to him as a historical character. Further, a historical character, to a large extent, functions as a barrier to appreciating the Divine Principle it is supposed to represent.

Our human mind tends to get stuck at the level of admiring the personality of Jesus, losing sight of the need to move on to a more meaningful relationship with the principle he symbolizes. This is the Principle of Life, which must be understood as something transcending biological life. In this sense, biological life is only one form of expression of life as a principle. Life, as a principle, expresses itself in terms of sacrifice, and this involves the action of voluntarily consecrating one's individual energy to something greater.⁵ All the other attributes ascribed to Jesus are secondary to this overriding principle of sacrifice and consecration to a higher cause. To move forward, we need to withdraw our projections and assume the responsibility of developing within ourselves those qualities we attribute to him. Until we can relate to Jesus as a representative of a Divine Principle that we must embody, no level of admiration or worship can amount to much in the way of our transformation.

Our human propensity for projecting our higher nature onto Jesus is not peculiar to Jesus alone. It is characteristic for us to reduce a transcendent reality to a symbolic form that can easily fit our individual circumstances.

This tendency ensures that the transcendent reality gets representation, albeit distorted or diminished, in our everyday reality. But it also means that to avoid becoming emotionally and spiritually stunted, we must take ownership of these higher principles and develop them within ourselves.

In the case of Jesus, he is presented in the Gospels and the apostolic letters as the perfected man, but because this presentation is too transcendent for ordinary human consciousness, he has been reduced to the symbol of the cross over millennia of institutional practices. The cross as a true religious symbol can be regarded as the epitome of sacrifice, the principle of a higher consciousness reaching down into the lower consciousness to revitalize it. To many people, however, there is an emotional barrier to this realization; the mind does not go beyond the cross as an institutional object that identifies someone or something as belonging to the Christian faith. Its potential for revitalizing the personal consciousness has become stunted, rendering it a “dead symbol.”

A dead symbol is one that has lost its potential for reminding us of something higher and then propelling us toward it. To keep a symbol from going dead, we must continually take stock of whether we are drawing all possible inferences from it. The relationship between us and our symbols is therefore an interactive one.

Living symbols keep growing as we grow. As we mature in understanding and become more conscious, we are able to see more levels of meaning in the symbol, which, in turn, helps us to grow in consciousness even further. This is why we can say that certain symbols have transformative power. However, before we can access this transformative power, we must take our attention beyond the outer form of religious symbols to the kernel of higher reality that each represents.

The Promise of Contemplation

Contemplation is the exercise of going beyond the surface of things—words, ideas, concepts, and even events—to their more profound depths. When we contemplate a religious symbol, we are rewarded with the

opportunity to experience that which often lies hidden behind religious formalism. This is the experience of the “Numinous,” which is defined in *Webster’s Dictionary* as

- (1) supernatural, mysterious;
- (2) filled with a sense of the presence of divinity, holy;
- (3) appealing to the higher emotions or to the aesthetic sense:
spiritual.

In reality, the Numinous is something that eludes precise definition. Ultimately it is that which cannot be circumscribed by words, but must be experienced to be understood. Therefore, short of having a direct personal encounter with it, the best we can do to understand the Numinous is to look at the lives of individuals who have experienced it.

Usually, those so touched talk about feeling awe, reverence, joy, enhanced mental understanding, or a sense of all-encompassing love, unity, oneness, or sense of harmony. Some even confess to receiving insight into the meaning of life. Irrespective of the form in which it is encountered, the Numinous leaves its mark. The individual may even feel that his entire life up to the point of the encounter was one long preparation for just that moment, and he may resolve as a result to give more of his life over to spiritual and humanitarian pursuits.

An immediate effect of an encounter with the Numinous at its more intense levels is an appreciation of the underlying unity of all the major world religions, with the experience of the Numinous as the common goal. That’s because with the personal, direct experience of Truth that accompanies an encounter with the Numinous, one is able to move beyond the significance previously given to outer form. An encounter with the Numinous does not end our pursuit of Truth, but reenergizes and refocuses it. For in encountering the Numinous, we receive a glimpse into the larger reality of which we are part, but of which we are unaware in our ordinary

states of consciousness. It is this foretaste and inner assurance that it offers which serves as our new motivation to transform our consciousness from one that is ego-driven to one that is spiritual and holistic.

It's worth emphasizing that no one religion has a monopoly on the Numinous. This is why contemplatives from different religious traditions can easily bridge institutional divides and share in one another's contemplative practices and spiritual insights. The relationship between the Numinous and various religious forms is similar to that between a mountain's peak and its sides. Just as you can reach a mountain peak by scaling its various sides, so too can the Numinous be attained from different religious perspectives. In fact, a personal encounter with the Numinous can be hastened by a familiarity with more than one major religious tradition, since such an eclectic worldview will enhance one's chances of seeing what lies beyond the formal structure into that which, by its very nature, is formless.

Generally speaking, the failure in our Christian practice to move beyond the symbolic to "the depths" in matters of the Spirit can lead to practices that are equivalent in their spiritual effects to a soccer player scoring against his own team. Chief among these practices is the delivery of the "prosperity gospel" message, popular with some brands of television-based ministries. In recent decades, with the rise of televangelism, we've seen a rising tide of believers who see and present Jesus Christ as a magic potion for all of life's problems. Not only is Jesus seen as the solution to personal problems such as of loneliness, sickness, and financial hardship, but he is presented as the secret ingredient that can make one "a winner" in "the game of life." Daily, we see individuals who claim to have proven this success formula march across the television screen, attesting to the belief that Jesus is the critical factor to their success, and each time, I am reminded of Jesus's response to those who wanted to become his followers immediately after witnessing the miracle in which he fed the five thousand: "... you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves" (John 6:26).

Our Individual Responsibility for Making Acquaintance with the Spirit of Truth

The idea that the Gospels contain hidden teachings should not come as a surprise to the ardent biblical student. Indeed, in his discourses, Jesus gave several indications that there is an esoteric aspect to his teachings. On one such occasion, he referred to a time when this esoteric side would reveal itself. In this exhortation to his disciples he said:

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. (John 16:12–13)

I interpret this “Spirit of Truth” as being the spirit, or the principle of eclecticism or synthesis. From personal experience, I have learned that when guided by this principle, we do not confine our search for spiritual knowledge to any one religious tradition, but extend it to several. Once we allow ourselves to be guided by the Spirit of Truth or synthesis, we see that Truth, or Reality, is undifferentiated; it does not parcel itself out into different traditions, such as Eastern or Western, Catholic or Protestant. All such traditions through which we often insist on approaching Truth are our human creations, developed in an attempt to gain understanding—from our various cultural perspectives—on something that is universal and timeless. Consequently, to gain access to Truth in its own, universal domain, we need to free ourselves from the limitations imposed by our various traditions. When one embodies the Spirit of Truth, or synthesis, one does not have to belong to an esoteric school or tradition to obtain esoteric knowledge, since such hidden knowledge can make itself available to anyone, even in the most public of domains.

Also, let me clarify that the spirit of eclecticism and synthesis is not the same thing as ecumenism, which is institutional. Curiosity and an

open heart are required for the Spirit of Truth to manifest and work its alchemy in our understanding, and this can only happen at the individual, personal level.

Several years ago, I was engaged in discussion with a Catholic priest and a friend who has authored books on the transformation of consciousness. The question my friend and I had for the priest was why the type of knowledge we were so freely discussing—namely, the esoteric and mystical aspects of Christianity—was not shared more openly with the laity. To our surprise, the priest told us that he and others like him were usually kept in line by the parishioners, who would complain to the bishop if exposed to anything that deviated from the familiar doctrines. After some reflection, I realized that this made perfect sense. Until we're shaken out of our comfort zones by some form of discontinuity—job loss, illness, divorce, bereavement—we generally want things to remain as they are. There's nothing more comforting than the familiar, whether these be routines or stories. This is the same reason our children do not like us to skip portions of their favorite bedtime stories.

The simplest way to exercise individual responsibility in matters of the Spirit, then, is to be curious. Curiosity is our birthright and, as such, must be encouraged—not repressed. It is the responsibility of each of us to keep this light burning, for only those who are curious can advance in knowledge and understanding.