We live in a world lacking generosity.

By Kittirat Yothnangrong

Spirituality within Religion

By Lady Layla

Person, Place & People

By David Sparenberg

New Age Spirituality:
A Universal Pan-Religion or a Reinvention of the Wheel?

By Dr. Emanuel L. Paparella

Variety of Spirits

By Amir Khatib

An introspection on some Eastern Religion/Philosophies

By Murray Hunter

A Debate between an Anti-Religious Skeptic and a Practicing Catholic Christian

By Mirella Ionta

Spirit, the mythological bird of art

By Ali Najjar

Shadows

By Nikos Laios

Converts

By David Sparenberg
Hagia Sophia is a former Greek Orthodox patriarchal basilica, later an imperial mosque, and now a museum in Istanbul, Turkey. From the date of its construction in 537 until 1453, it served as an Eastern Orthodox cathedral and seat of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, except between 1204 and 1261, when it was converted to a Roman Catholic cathedral under the Latin Empire. The building was a mosque from 29 May 1453 until 1931. It was then secularized and opened as a museum on 1 February 1935.
Istiqlal Mosque, or Masjid Istiqal, in Jakarta, Indonesia is the largest mosque in Southeast Asia.
St. Peter’s Basilica is a Late Renaissance church located within Vatican City. Designed principally by Donato Bramante, Michelangelo, Carlo Maderno and Gian Lorenzo Bernini, St. Peter’s is the most renowned work of Renaissance architecture and remains one of the two largest churches in the world.
Gopalaswamy Temple, in India, was built by the Hoysala King Ballala during AD 1315. Later, the Wodeyars Wodeyar dynasty of Mysore who were ardent devotees of Lord Venugopala displayed keen interest in maintaining the hill temple. The temple is dedicated to Gopalaswamy, which is one of the names of the Hindu God Krishna. The gopuram of the temple is single-tiered and rests on the compound wall of the enclosure.
Wat Phra Kaew or the Temple of the Emerald Buddha; is regarded as the most sacred Buddhist temple in Thailand. It is a “potent religio-political symbol and the palladium (protective image) of Thai society”. It is located in Phra Nakhon District, the historic centre of Bangkok, within the precincts of the Grand Palace.
Mount Athos is a mountain and peninsula in Macedonia, Northern Greece. A World Heritage Site and autonomous polity in the Hellenic Republic under the official name Autonomous Monastic State of the Holy Mountain, Mount Athos is home to 20 stauropegial Eastern Orthodox monasteries under the direct jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople.
An issue about spirituality has problems with semantics by definition. There are so many pathways to touch spirituality that makes it impossible to identify the meaning of the world, or at least I had problems to do so.

According to the popular internet encyclopaedia, spirituality is a process of personal transformation, either in accordance with traditional religious ideals, or, increasingly, oriented on subjective experience and psychological growth independently of any specific religious context. In a more general sense, it may refer to almost any kind of meaningful activity or blissful experience. There is no single, widely-agreed definition for the concept.

Still, spirituality means something different to everyone. For some, it’s about participating in organized religion, going to the church, synagogue, a mosque or temple. For others, it’s more personal. Some people get in touch with their spiritual side through private prayer, yoga, meditation, quiet reflection, or even long walks. I find the more personal as a more comfortable way for me at least.

In a more personal level I find spirituality at the times I can silently communicate with myself and my surroundings without the need of touching, seeing, smelling or hearing. I also found that the best mediator to help this form of personal communication has always been art. Looking at the painting of Xue Jiye, a contemporary Chinese painter lately, I felt that I was entering a different dimension. I have also often mention that doesn’t matter how many times I have visited the Tate Gallery the last 35 years, – and it is a lot of times – I have always
found myself bewitched by William Blake’s work and never been able to move to the next room in one of the most famous galleries in the world.

So is this a spiritual experience? You might say that looking at a Buddha status in Thailand might give you the same sensation and somebody else might add that reading the Quran or the Bible might lead to the same spiritual experiences. The same applies to Edgar Alan Poe’s books or Shakespeare. The complexity of the meanings and the symbolisms might lead you to a different understanding and a spiritual experience.

The same time I didn’t feel any spiritual awaking visiting Hagia Sophia in Istanbul or St. Peter’s Basilica in the Vatican, without that meaning that I didn’t appreciated the art of the architecture or the interior work. I was actually in awe with both architectural and artistic miracles. But this was it. At least for me, these are creations of master architects and artist and nothing more.

But the same applies with the paintings of William Blake that fascinate me so much, isn’t it? They are also creations of a master, why do they establish a spiritual connection for me?

So is it personal? Is it how you observe and understand and how this something communicates with your inner understanding? Is it a personal and silent procedure which has little to do with the things you use to meditate?

I suppose the contributors of this issue will try to answer to some of these questions or at least share their experiences with spirituality and believes.

Thanos Kalamidas
The word spirituality comes from the Latin word spiritus, which is translated as breath. Spirituality is most commonly defined as “relating to, consisting of or having the nature of spirit; not tangible or material.” Another definition centers on the thoughts of people and their relationship to the cosmos. Up until the 20th century the concept was seen as central to religion but by the end of the century it was viewed by some as being a quite separate entity.

Some would argue that spirituality makes a person more sensitive to love, justice, peace and more of the intangible things that cannot be directly perceived by a person’s senses. It supports the idea that the human being and the rest of creation are composed not only of matter but of something that is immaterial and beyond our knowledge. Other definitions of spirituality explain it as a power, greater than oneself, that is operating in the universe; a sense of interconnectedness with all living creatures; and an awareness of the purpose and meaning of life and the development of personal, absolute values. It is impossible to point out the “right” definition as each individual perceives the word spirituality in his or her own way.

For many spirituality is a way to find meaning, hope, comfort and inner peace in their lives. It is important to note that spirituality is not religion. The term is often related to religious life but spirituality can be reached outside religion. The characteristics of spiritual life include selflessness, altruism and the experience of inner peace. In general, spirituality provides a way for people to escape from the negativity, frustration, anger and stress in their lives. Practices such as prayer, meditation and yoga allow a person to reach the balance between his or her thoughts and actions.

Despite the fact that it varies from person to person, spirituality has a number of common themes. A person living spiritual life seeks to reach beyond his or her limits. This goal may include questioning beliefs, keeping an open mind and trying to better understand the ways of the other people. Self discovery is an important factor to many people who regard themselves as spiritual. Spirituality’s objective is not always to reach a conclusion or solve a problem but rather to help find a direction, meaning and purpose in life. Another major theme in spirituality is reaching and understanding a higher power that, depending a person’s views, may be rooted in religion or nature.
Many believe that there is a clear connection between spirituality and health. In the early beginnings of Western medicine, generations of healers saw the body and spirit as intertwined. That changed with the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment but many contemporary studies show that spirituality has a major role in the healing process. Spiritual practices are believed to improve coping skills and to foster feelings of optimism and hope. They also promote healthy behavior, lift feelings of depression and encourage a sense of relaxation.

Faith, hope, forgiveness and love are part of the teachings of spirituality. Researchers believe faith bolsters the body’s resistance to stress, which in the 21st century is a common reason for many widespread health problems. Hope, on the other hand, may help a person fight depression and lower the chances of falling ill. Forgiveness as a practice is encouraged by many religious and spiritual traditions as it helps get rid of hostility and resentment. In the United States, there are many medical schools that have spiritual teachings as part of the curricula. Still, no one has yet ventured to persuasively validate or disprove the theory that spirituality and health are connected.

Mary MacDonald, in the Encyclopedia of Religion (2005) examines the concept of spirituality in relation to religion. She focuses on spirituality and different faiths - describing “classic spiritualities” - which range from Christianity, Hinduism Buddhism and Islam to the spirituality of indigenous Australians. “By spirituality one denotes the characteristic sentiments and way of life of those who were born into, or came to embrace, a particular tradition.” MacDonald also discusses “contemporary spiritualities,” which combine religious practices with concerns for what is happening in terms of ethics and ecology in relation to the planet, with an emphasis on seeking peace. The author cites the work of Matthew Fox In A Spirituality Named Compassion and the Healing of the Global Village, Humpty Dumpty, and Us (1979), in which Fox suggests that spirituality is an alternative to religion, with an emphasis on compassion.
One of the interesting things of life, is that from the moment of birth, every form of life wants something, be it a plant, animal, or human infant. As we grow, we want the latest clothes, the latest technological mod-cons, the best food, and love and affection from others. The latest generation wants a ‘pin-up’ partner, yet still wants their parents to support them. We have learnt how to take everything we can get out of life in proportions never seen before.

Today our minds are full of wants. This dominates us, as we always think about what we feel we need and can’t live without. It’s like a continual hunger that we can never satisfy.

We have forgotten giving. We have forgotten about others. We consume, we take timber from the earth and don’t replace it, we take the fish from the seas until they have become scarce, and we have polluted the earth to the point that the balance of sustainability maybe tipping.

If we try and quantify this, our society takes everything and only giving back 1-5%. There is a great deficit which is destroying not only our sense of humanity but the earth as well.
We live in a world lacking generosity. It’s so easy to do something about it. A life without giving is a life that exists within a barren landscape. It’s a life where the plants and trees receive no water. A dry life without happiness and contentment.

The interesting thing is that reversing this is very easy. It’s not about parting with money. Many parts of the world are rich enough and don’t need money.

Generosity is about giving part of yourself to the world.

The world needs generosity to survive.

Being generous is about getting up in the morning and watering the plants, feeding the animals, helping your parents, and giving a smile to the neighbor. These are gifts that money can’t buy. It takes a decisive thought to do this.

See the world today, particularly in many of the large cities, life is starved, where nobody smiles, nobody cares about how others are feeling. We have created rich societies, but the souls of those within them are as dry as the desert.

When one understands that giving makes you feel so rich, it becomes very easy to give. If these small actions were taken by everyone, the world would be such a different place.
I would like to explore the topic: spirituality within religion to see how the people belonging to different religious groups define their spirituality; in other words, how religion affecting identification of the person with own spirituality.

**Spirit**

*pirit is defined* in literature as a purity of consciousness that brings intuitive knowledge to the people who experience it. Spirituality is an essential component of consciousness and in literature is described as a “knowledge” present in that consciousness. A human being is a multi-layered energetic complex and spiritual ‘soul’ positioned within a conscious self. Another idea for spirit presented in literature is that it comprises a “subtle structure” of energy and consciousness within the human energy complex. Moreover, it being agreed that the “spirit” is present in all human beings as an energetic structure within the subtle anatomy, and present as a state of consciousness.

**Religion**

In online encyclopaedia Wikipedia, religion is defined as an organized collection of beliefs, cultural systems, and world views that relate humanity to an order of existence. In Oxford Dictionaries religion defined as the belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power, especially a personal God or Gods or as a particular system of faith and worship.
Spirituality

In Wikipedia, spirituality has been defined as a process of personal transformation in accordance with religious ideals. However, from the beginning of 19th century spirituality has become more and more separated from religion and referred more to own psychological growth. People who are seeking spirituality, searching for transcendent meaning.

How spirituality shapes the world?

The search for inspiration in life...our own place in the universe, justification for own existence and growing achievement cannot fit in the borders of religion, where everything already in predisposition. Open minded people are questioning old system of beliefs and exploring the world around them daily. Once realizing that persons should take their own responsibility for the way their life is going, they are moving from religious beliefs to the Tantra philosophy. It is not so much about organized religion; but rather, it is more a solitary path for the person who has questions and is looking for answers not from religious leaders, but from law of nature itself.

From the beginning of time, people were observing the forces of surrounding nature, learning more and more about the planets and solar system. Some of them started questioning their destiny and events in their life, purpose of their life itself. They started giving names to forces which weren’t understood, but could be felt or observed. They started using stones to mark on rocks their observations of the nature. Moreover, they started to link events they observe in sky to events that occurred on the Earth. As groups of the people living together developed in to larger groups, those who had already accumulated some knowledge from observation of the nature, developed advanced positions to other people in the groups they belonged to.

This natural human tendency to form groups was associated with dynamics from long time ago. Therefore, as history goes back in the time, shamans were first who took power and lead groups, assigning
prejudice and believes, introducing “evil” and remedies to get read of it. They were strong leaders with solid knowledge, moving forward by organizing communities who worshiped together. The shamans were followed by other members of the community, which promoted almost unlimited power to them in the way events were interpreted and decisions made within the community. Meaningful community rituals and ceremonies were used to unite community participants, promoting the values of courage in a face of hardship and optimism in a face of uncertainty.

Such, religions were formed. One important element here was that it was not important if there was one God or many Gods. Rather what was important, was how “evil” or “bad” things were identified and what “good” things should be implemented to defeat “evil” things. With time moving on, one God substituted in any of current religions other Gods. In Christianity and Judaism “original sin” was adopted as a doctrine of humanity’s state of sin resulting from the fall of men. Adam’s rebellion in Eden was the one that brought all his decedents into position where they are born with a “sin”. In Catholicism, the ‘original sin’ existed by the very fact of being a human. The Catholic Church teaches: “By our first parent’s sin, the devil has acquired a certain domination over men, even though man remains free” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 491). The concept of “original sin” is not recognized in Islam. However, Islam defines sin as an act which goes against the teaching of Allah, therefore all human beings sin, as none of them is perfect.

Dozens of religions flourishing around the world, competing with each other for people’s mind and faith. Religions are in some manner like a government, which tries to control people’s mind. In reality, governments tend to control bodies, and through body attempt to control people’s mind. Religions trying to control the mind, to control the actions of the people, and prevent them from doing particular things that are taboo. That enhances organized and institutionalized religion’s ability to control the human body.

Both religions and governments, are seeking an ultimate control of our mind and body. This is why it is so dangerous to unite government and religion. Religions address certain social
operatives regarding sense of community and moral order. They are primary social constructs with political and fiscal agendas. In many countries separation of church and state was done many years ago, so nobody can force its people to worship any deity or follow any spiritual practice, nor interfere with religious freedom of people. However, despite freedom of choice, religions by its nature still remain socio-political organizations. They do have a history of social and political manipulations.

Buddhism doesn’t have a God in its teaching. It goes beyond religion and is more of a philosophy of the life itself. There is no one to reward or punish people, and human beings are responsible for one’s own self. The ultimate objective in Buddhism is enlightenment. Moreover, there is no holy war concept and killing is breaking a key moral precept. One is strictly forbidden to kill another person in the name of religion. Tantra, which originated several thousands of years ago in India and spread to China and Tibet, is neither religion nor an “ism”. Tantra is fundamental spiritual science. It has common roots with Buddhism and it can be described as an alternative way to enlightenment. Although its divergence from “original” Buddhism may appear extreme, followers and scholars of Tantra hold it to be authentically Buddhist in its essence. They believe in nature of duality, and the thrush of the interaction of cause and effect. Religions tend to say “it’s bad, don’t do it”, but tantra says “this is an expression of the mind, observe it” (Satyananda Saraswati, 1980, p.72).

What is important and strong in Buddhism is the practice of mindfulness, aided through meditation. Meditation practices are based on discreet, controlled manipulations of energy flows in the perceived subtle anatomy known as the body of energy (including physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual layers). In Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2002 meditation defined as “private devotion or mental exercise consisting in any of innumerable techniques of concentration, contemplation, and abstraction, regarded as conducive to heightened spiritual awareness or somatic calm”.

However, any religious organized ceremony are types of meditation. In Christianity can be identified three stage hierarchical characterization of prayer, which begins with
vocal prayer, then moves to a more structured form in terms of Christian meditation, and finally reaches the multiply layers of contemplative prayer. The progression from Bible reading, to meditation, to loving regards for God, was first formally described by Guido II, a Carthusian monk, who died in the 12th century (Lawrence S. Cunningham, Keith J. Egan, 1996). Separately, among Roman Catholics, meditation on the Rosary remains one of the most widespread and popular spiritual practices (Alister E. McGrath, 1995). In Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2723 it stated: “Meditation is a prayerful quest engaging thought, imagination, and desire. Its goal is to make our own in faith the subject considered by controlling it with the reality of our own life”. But it referral to the union with God, in contrary with Tantra which targeting to bring yourself into harmony and balance with universe. In Islam, mosque as a house of God, is the sacred ground for the meeting with Allah. The main architectural objective of the mosque is to provide an appropriate stage for the communal performance of prayer (maybe could put the practice of Zikir or chanting rather than meditation. Well known meditation practices in Hinduism.

While all religions teach some forms or variations of stabilizing meditation, only Buddhism emphasizes meditation as a powerful tool to assist one in seeking enlightenment. It is well known among practitioners, that meditation can calm the mind and “restore” the spirit, leading practitioner to enlightenment. Meditation, above all, in Tantra considered the key to reaching transcendent understanding and spiritual transformation.

Anything that is considered expending our mind, understanding the human conditions called spirituality. Thus Tantra is a form of spirituality. Understanding humanity, not just about yourself, but rather how we fit with another people and universe. It’s about how we can exist in harmony, which is a major goal for Tantra practitioners. By making personal changes to fit into cosmos is what spirituality is about from the Tantra viewpoint.

By studying mathematics, biology, history owe are not expanding our mind - we are learning information. Spirituality is not about learning information. Trying to understand the core of our existence - why we are here, what is my purpose in life, how can it be that I understand that other creatures don’t.
Conclusion.

So, what is difference between Tantra, Christianity, Catholicism, Judaism, and Islam in regards to spirituality?

As I mentioned before, the core of beliefs are very different. Tantra is not comparable with any other religion, because all of them holding believe in “sin”. In contrast, “sin” doesn’t exist in Tantra. The concept doesn’t exist at all. There is no concept of “punishment”. In any other religion you can go pray, pay money to Church - and your sin will be forgiven. Then, you can go and do wrong things again. You can do it as often as you want, just pray and pay money, go to the Church regularly and show everyone you attending the church regularly. People are trying to be good in the eyes of the priest and community, this is all that matter to them.

In Tantra, if someone did something wrong - he/she need analyse what happened and why and look at what causes the problem. Next, to take actions to bring things back into balance, harmony.

Tantra is about changing “poison” to “nectar”, in another words, transforming negative emotions into liberating energy and finding the gifts in shadow energies. It takes in consideration our primitive basic urgent needs and turns it into beneficial ones for us. Tantra teaching: don’t fight against our basic needs - use them. What are our basic needs? It is food, sex, reproduction. Other religious oppressing our urgent needs and called them “sin”, they have “Don’t do it” presumption. Everyone is a sinner since the moment they are born. However, Tantra said that sex is not an evil, sex is beneficial to us, helping people to maintain healthy body and mind. Sex is one of our basic needs, genetically programmed in our DNA. In Tantra teachers teaching how to use sex for being happy, productive in life. Moreover, in Tantra what our life will be depends on us and our behaviour is one that affecting our future.

We responsible for our own life and what we plant today inside our self is an investment for tomorrow.
Behind the obscenity of our time is a face of nobility. This is a mirror of God and Humanity.

Behind the wars of our time is a face of wisdom, justice and enduring peace. This is a mirror of God and Humanity.

Behind the hatreds and the madness of our time is a face of compassion and sanity. Beauty’s face! This too is a mirror of God and Humanity.

Behind immaturity, the cruel immaturity, of our species is a face of luminous vision and profound responsibility. The maturity is a mirror between God and Humanity.

Behind the collapsing stalks, decaying, decomposing stems of winter are the cyclical buds and spontaneous blossoms of spring (for person, place and people): the lotus of earth in balance, ecstasy of the tree of life, mandala of the cosmic rose.
By David Sparenberg
In 2012 David Sparenberg’s “Life in the Age of Extinctions – Part I” made a record with hundreds of thousands of downloads. An enlightenment standing with humanitarianism, spirituality and life for all.
In 2015 David Sparenberg’s “Life in the Age of Extinctions - Part II” is coming in the next few weeks to take it even further.
New Age Spirituality: A Universal Pan-Religion or a Reinvention of the Wheel?

At the end of the millennium, in the year 2000, a yearning for an age of freedom from the evils afflicting the world, the spirit of millenarianism, has returned as indeed it has so many times before. It is not a sect, a religion, a single organization, a science or a philosophy, it is not even a “conspiracy of hope,” as Ignazio Silone has aptly defined millennialism.

Paradoxically, while it claims to be new and original, it is far from being new as we will endeavor to demonstrate. It is called a movement to indicate that it is a network of individuals and groups who share a world-view and a common desire to change the world. This so-called New Age movement is a cultural current that is by now global. In some way it is in tandem with the so-called post-modern historical era.
Christianity at its inception must have appeared the same kind of global movement among the religions tolerated within the Roman Empire. As G.K. Chesterton points out in his famous book The Everlasting Man, new movements and heresies declaring Christianity moribund and an anachronism have repeatedly sprung up during the two thousand year old history of Christianity. Indeed, to many Jews of the first and second century Christianity itself must have appeared a sort of heretical movement, a sort of betrayal of one’s cultural identity. In the first years of Christianity most of its devotees were in fact designated by gentiles as “Christian Jews” practicing a sect of Judaism. Therefore, the latest of these break away movements is hardly something new. If one takes a careful look at the various heresies that arose within Christianity from its very beginning, it is logical and plausible to arrive at the conclusion that far from being original and unique, the New Age movement may well be a reinvention of the wheel.

When one in fact breaks apart and analyzes New Age thought and practices one realizes that it is somewhat similar to second and third century Gnosticism. Astrologists today believe that what they call the Age of Pisces, 0 – 2000 A.D., has ended and that the Age of Aquarius, 2000 – 4000 A.D. is at hand. “This is the age of Aquarius,” sings the chorus in the famous musical “Jesus Christ Superstar.” In the historical wake of the events of the Renaissance and the Reformation, many are less inclined nowadays to obey external authority; they think of religion in a way that leads to the notion that the self is sacred and to an exaggerated idea of freedom, self-reliance, and authenticity. Organized religion is frowned upon as a source of corruption, if not the very root of all evil and faith in God is quite often abandoned, except perhaps as a tool for the self’s advancement. Voltaire with its vehement “enlightened” attacks on religion defined as superstition and ignorance is the perfect icon for this mind-set. One wonders if it ever occurs to those “enlightened” people declaring religion retrograde and mere superstition, to be ostracized from the public discourse in the agora, that the enlightenment may still have to enlighten itself.
Voltaire: the first “enlightened” debunker of religion

Indeed, a society which has undergone a breakdown of faith in the Christian tradition and has substituted it with scientific Positivism, with what it considers the unlimited process and progress of science and technology, finds itself with the task of confronting this surprising return of Gnosticism, a compendium of cosmic religiosity, rituals, and beliefs which has never really disappeared since the third century A.D. This is especially surprising to the positivistic atheistic philosophers, with a positivistic mind-set, who don’t like fuzzy distinctions between religious language, which they despise, belief in God, materialism, spirituality, science and religion. They like clear and distinct demarcation a la Descartes with no ambiguities and gray areas in between.

Ancient Gnosticism has its origin in the pagan religions of Asia, Phoenicia, Egypt, Greece, and Babylon, as well as in astrology and Greek Platonism. Its basic tenet is the doctrine of salvation through knowledge. As Socrates put it: “knowledge is virtue,” to know the good is to do the good. The New Age movement claims to be able to acquire this knowledge in an esoteric way through such methods as dream analysis, the medium of a “spiritual master,” or via contemplation of nature and the cosmos, just to mention three such methods.
The Christian interpretation is slightly different and based on the theology of St. Paul who informs us that he knows the good but he discerns in his members a tendency toward evil and so ends up doing its contrary. Nevertheless man remains free to choose his ultimate destiny. This is the existential dread mentioned by Kierkegaard. Human nature, within Christian doctrine, is good but it is flawed at its origins, and this flaw was not intended by God but willed by man who was created in God’s image with a free will.

The central question about the New Age movement is how it defines spirituality, a concept that more often than not is a substitution for the concept of religion (etymologically the word religion means to bind together), or, as Protestant German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it, it is a reformulation of religion as a “religion-less religion.” For the New Age devotee, spirituality means the use of the powers of nature and of an imaginary cosmic “energy” to communicate with another world and to discover the fate of an individual, or to help to make the most of oneself. One’s self is key here since, unlike Judaism that believes that salvation is a collective enterprise in which all the people are engaged, New Age puts emphasis on the individual self where it locates even good or evil, if indeed good and evil are even postulated and conceived of.

New Age is certainly not an ecclesia or an assembly of the people of God journeying toward a transcendent destination; it is rather a Church or an assembly of one, and its temple is nature or the cosmos. It is the preferred religion-less religion practiced by all those who have left the orthodoxy of the great global religions or have indignantly stormed out of temples, synagogues or mosques, in protest of perceived injustices and corruptions, to forcibly assert their individual freedom and independence. They find in New Age an umbrella under which it is possible to gather all the religions of the world, now considered an anachronistic cultural encrustation and simply call the whole “spirituality.” But this pan spirituality and assertion of freedom is not so new either; it is as old as “if you eat of the tree of good and evil you shall be gods.” These rebellious break away “heretics” are usually in their teens tired of being forced by their parents and other authority figures to attend church on Sunday. They have never internalized what
they were compelled to observe exteriorly and so they have mistaken the brick church or even the Vatican as the Church as the body of Christ. Sometimes they are older and more mature individuals, if not much wiser than teen-agers. They end up worshipping the idea of God rather than the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, which is clearly what the Scriptures call idolatry.

And there is after all a good logical reason for the substitution, given that Christianity, even more so than the other religions, invites its followers to look outwards and beyond, to the “new Advent” of the God who calls us to live in the dialogue of love. The New Age, on the contrary does not believe in a providential God who transcends His creation. If there is a dialogue it takes place within the self, almost solipsistically, subjectively, in contemplation of the cosmos. It is a sort of cultish idolatry that fails to distinguish between God who created the universe and the universe He has created, thus ending up in pantheism or panentheism. It does not even believe in the objective reality of good or evil, has no room for judgment or blame, and holds that belief in evil is negative and causes only fear. This too is not as new as New Agers tend to claim: one may find it in ancient Epicurean atomistic philosophy and in Stoicism.

The movement has several characteristics or phenomenological expressions by which it can be easily identified. Let us briefly explore three of those characteristics. In the first place there are dreams or the dream world. For the past thirty years the works of psychologist Carl Jung have been used as a spiritual guide in the Catholic Church and other Churches throughout the United States and Europe. Sister Pat Brockman O.S.U., who trained at the Jung Institute in Zurich, explains that dreams act as our “personal scriptures.” She suggests “Dream Play” as a substitute for Catholic devotional practices such as the morning offering, acts of faith, hope, and charity, examination of conscience, and prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. The “Dream Play” that she recommends consists in naming, describing, interpreting, and dialoguing with the dream. She also holds that “Some think that the Church is the center of the world but we are really the center, the abode of God.” This resembles the Hindu belief that life is a dream and when we come out of this dream (at our death) we shall come face
to face with reality, what Kant calls the “neumemon,” beyond time and space and beyond reason, as distinguished from the “phenomenon” which remains accessible to reason and science.

Secondly, there is the so called eco-spirituality. The theory behind this spirituality is that the divine is present in all creation (dubbed panentheism) and that we are to expand our love of “neighbor” to include the entire cosmos. It is somewhat related to the philosophy of Teilhard de Chardin and to evolutionary theology, one of whose advocates is John Haughey, S.J. and Thomas Berry. Eco-theologians hold that because humans are so intimately interconnected with the organic cosmos, they cannot come to completion without the cosmos, and that the universe is a single dynamic whole into which humans are imbedded.

All this may sound uncanningly similar to St. Francis’ love of nature and its creatures (brother sun and sister moon and brother wolf) but there is a crucial difference; St. Francis’ approach to the creatures and the cosmos brings one back to their Creator who may be immanent within them but at the same time remains transcendent to it. On the contrary, New Age believes that the earth is self-organizing and self-transcending. Humans are a tool for the earth to explore itself; it is the cosmos becoming conscious of itself. This too is idolatry. Here Darwin’s evolution may come into play understood theistically or atheistically. We are told to abandon “value assignments and blind judgments” and choose actions which are “effective and appropriate” for the consciousness of the cosmos to come about. It is not man who needs God but vice versa it is the Cosmos, substituted for God, that needs man to arrive at full consciousness of itself.

Thirdly, one discerns what is called “Creation Centered Spirituality” which has great affinities with panentheism or eco-spirituality. Matthew Fox is its foremost advocate. He was a Dominican priest who in 1993 left in protest both the Dominican order and the Church; but he did not found his own heretical church or join the New Age movement, he simply moved into the Episcopal Church. What the official Catholic Church, or better, the Vatican’s Congregation of the Faith (at
the time headed by Cardinal Ratzinger who later became Pope Benedict XVI) objected to was Fox’s refusal to deny belief in panentheism (God is all and all is God), identifying humans as “mothers of God,” and calling God “our Mother.” Eventually this refusal put him outside the communion of Catholic doctrine and orthodoxy, which is the definition of heresy or apostasy.

Be that as it may, Fox simply disregards the harm done to creation by the sin of disobedience, borrows from Teilhard de Chardin and Jung substituting the more positive “original blessing” (“and He saw that everything he made was very good”) to the more negative “original sin.” To make this substitution he must simply disregard the problem of sin and must reject the very idea of personal sin and responsibility which is also a rejection of free will. He also fails to distinguish Creator from creature and good from evil, or to realize that the spiritual world is a battleground between God and the fallen angels. For him, God is interdependent with the cosmos for both His experience and His very being, an idea which is similar to that held by the proponents of evolutionary theology: as already mentioned, it is not man that needs God but god that needs man. Ultimately Fox substitutes a “Cosmic Christ” kind of Christianity, for a “personal Savior” kind of Christianity.

It is worth mentioning here that many North American Native Peoples were and still are largely panentheistic but theirs is a peculiar kind of panentheism. Unlike the Western rationalistic approach they make no duality and are able to encompass the highest of paradoxes, that is to say, they conceive of God as both confined in God’s existence in Creation but also transcendent from it. In other words, transcendence and immanence need not be mutually exclusive as we also learn from the concept of providence in Vico’s New Science. North American Native writers have also translated the word for God as the “Great Mystery” or as the “Sacred Other,” a concept is referred to by many Native Americans as the “Great Spirit.” Their religious beliefs have been thoroughly studied by the Christian Catholic theologian of the earth spirit Fr. Thomas Berry (see his The Dream of the Earth), who bases his theology on the philosophy of both Vico and De Chardin.
Also worth mentioning here is the historical philosophical fact that in ancient philosophy Plotinus taught that there was an ineffable transcendent “God” (The One) of which subsequent realities were emanations. From the One emanates the Divine Mind (Nous) and the Cosmic Soul (Psyche or in Junghian terms “the collective unconscious”). In Neoplatonism the world itself is God. This concept of divinity is associated with that of the logos, which had originated centuries earlier with Heraclitus (ca. 535–475 BC). The Logos pervades the cosmos, whereby all thoughts and all things originate, or as Heraclitus said: “He who hears not me but the Logos will say: All is one.” The logos is the Word of the prologue to the gospel of St. John: in the beginning was the Word...essential to the doctrine of the Incarnation and the very identity of a Christian.

Baruch Spinoza later claimed that “Whatsoever is, is in God, and without God nothing can be, or be conceived.” “Individual things are nothing but modifications of the attributes of God, or modes by which the attributes of God are expressed in a fixed and definite manner.” Though Spinoza has been called the “prophet” and “prince” of pantheism, in a letter to Henry Oldenburg Spinoza states that: “as to the view of certain people that I identify god with nature (taken as a kind of mass or corporeal matter), they are quite mistaken” For Spinoza, our universe (cosmos) is a mode under two attributes of Thought and Extension. God has infinitely many other attributes which are not present in our world. According to German philosopher Karl Jaspers, when Spinoza wrote “Deus sive Natura” (God or Nature) Spinoza did not mean to say that God and Nature are interchangeable terms, but rather that God’s transcendence was attested by his infinitely many attributes, and that two attributes known by humans, namely Thought and Extension, signified God’s immanence.

There are several other, more esoteric, expressions of the New Age movement. The few that we have briefly examined are representatives of the more classical types of heresies from the orthodoxy and commonly held doctrines of Christianity, the Incarnation being the most important. By classical types of heresies I mean the ones that have recurred time and again since the birth of the Church on Pentecost day. Chesterton points them out thoroughly in the above mentioned book.
Indeed, as Chesterton persuasively renders it, what ought to be surprising to any objective observer, even one just arrived on earth from outer space, is not that Christianity and the Church, with its all-too-human failings and its recurrent heresies is about to crumble and die, that is not new and has in fact been predicted, prophesized and announced several times before, contrary to what those who have lost their faith and wish to justify their apostasy would like to believe; but rather the fact that despite it all this religion called Christianity and this Church called Catholic (that is, universal) is still around two thousand years later and, like a phoenix, it has always resurrected from the ashes.

If history is any guide, those misguided new-agers with an ax to grind against religion and the Church mistaken for an institution rather than the body of Christ, who go around declaring “gothic” Christianity moribund and loudly prophesying its imminent dissolution are likely to be greatly disappointed. Voltaire would have been, had he lived in the 21st century. They may in fact have a very long wait ahead of them, given the opposite claim by the same Church that it will hang around for quite a while more, in one form or other, (“upon this stone I shall build my Church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it”) as the Pilgrim Church here on earth journeying toward its final destination till the end times and history, only disappearing when it finally joins the saints of the Church triumphant beyond time and space.

The Jews had it right all along: salvation belongs to all the people and it is obtainable only with the people, not solipistically in the contemplation of a deterministic nature and cosmos and the escape from the self. That way lies the misguided delusion that one has somehow escaped history and the human condition here on earth. In truth, all that one has managed to escape is freedom and grace.
II
Spirituality and the Sacred as a substitution for Religion and Theism

As already mentioned above, since the times of Voltaire and the Enlightenment there is afoot within Western Civilization a very intriguing cultural phenomenon: a tendency to see religion as the root of all evil in tandem with a debunking of its claims to transcendence and the supernatural substituted with the immanence of the Cosmos, often conceived as eternal, with the sacred conceived as immanent within the Cosmos and discoverable not exteriorly or objectively but interiorly and subjectively within the self, or the human brain, a material organ quite often confused for the immaterial mind. Paradoxically, to arrive at this discovery one has to obliterate the self in a state of contemplation of the same Cosmos. Philosophy and rationality simply will not do.

What is very interesting in this cultural tendency, which is now some three hundred years old, is that unlike the more secular materialistic scientific positivistic schemes, it retains the language of religion albeit it disposes of the word religion: contemplative ritual, or spontaneous ritual and contemplation, sacred space to be discovered within, mysticism, are all retained. Many are easily fooled by this language which in reality disguises an attack on theism.

There is a name for this phenomenon in philosophy; it is called the “non-realist” attack on theism which rationally argues that it is a mistake to think of God as someone existing independently of human beings. That the true meaning of any religious language (or contemplative or mystical language) is not to describe some sort of objectively existing being; rather it is a way of representing to ourselves the ideal unity of all our moral and spiritual values, and the claims that those values have on us.

This is usually presented as something “enlightened” new and progressive to be opposed to the gothic thinking of medieval scholastics such as Thomas Aquinas. And indeed, it all sounds spiritual and even pious, a far cry from the sardonic attacks of a Voltaire on Christianity and the Catholic Church, but one ought
not to be fooled by it. It is religious language all right but one useful to talk about spiritual values in a materialistic godless world going toward its own destruction. Within this kind of language, more often than not one will detect an ax to grind, a blatant biased attack on religion in general. Since religion is the cause of all evils in the world, the sooner it is disposed of, the better. In fact, these “non-realists” vis a vis God, see religions and Christianity’s demise as imminent. Never mind, a St. Francis of Assisi, a Nicholas of Cusa, a John of the Cross, a Christopher Dawson, a J.K. Chesterton; a William James, a Giambattista Vico, all scholars these who have examined the phenomenon of religious experience throughout the ages; they simply do not know what they are talking about, so the argument goes, since they have probably never discovered the sacred within their own brain.

There are in fact five relatively modern scholars who have had much to say about the phenomenon of religion and religious experiences: Vico, Jung, Eliade, Bonhoffer, and James. All five are convinced that one will understand precious little about the nature of man unless one first understands that such a nature, from its very inception is underpinned by religion (expressed as the burial of the dead in primitive man); which is to say, man is by nature religious, and when he proceeds to throw religion and a transcendent supernatural God out the window, it will promptly return from the back door as an ideology and as idolatry or as a cult or sort. He will invariably end up worshipping an ideology (a product of his mind) such as Nazism or Communism, or an idol such as the God or the philosophers (that is to say, the idea of God) or the Cosmos worshipped as a god of sort. “We are made of the stuff of the stars” used to exclaim the astronomer Karl Sagan, implying that like the stars and the Cosmos we are also gods and are eternal. This is worship of the self, is known in psychology as narcissism or megalomania, a refusal to accept one’s finitude and creature hood. Karl Sagan considered it his duty to inform those who did not know about their godliness immanent in the Cosmos that they were gods and therefore eternal with the Cosmos. His language also came close to the mystical and spiritual.
We have already explored extensively in this magazine the philosophy or religion of Giambattista Vico and his concept of Providence immanent but also transcendent within history. I have also contributed at least one article on Jung’s concept of “the collective unconscious” and the religious nature of man. Let us now briefly look at the religious paradigms of Mircea Eliad, who wrote several insightful books on the phenomenon of the sacred and the profane in the 50s and 60s. One of his most famous was his The Sacred and the Profane (1957). Indeed, to speak of the sacred one must also have in mind what is not sacred, the profane.

Mircea Eliade was an historian of religion, fiction writer, philosopher, and professor at the University of Chicago. He was a leading interpreter of religious experience, who established paradigms in religious studies that persist to this day. His theory that hierophanies form the basis of religion, splitting the human experience of reality into sacred and profane space and time, has proved very influential. One of his most influential contributions to religious studies was his theory of the Eternal Return, which holds that myths and rituals do not simply commemorate hierophanies, but, at least to the minds of the religious, actually participate in them. In his The Sacred and the Profane (1957) Eliade claims that, whereas for non-religious man the spatial aspect of the world is basically experienced as uniformly neutral, for religious man it was experienced as non-homogeneous, partly sacred and partly not so. In particular, religious man experienced the world as having a sacred centre and sought to live there.

Eliade qualifies his claim that modern, non-religious man experiences the spacial aspect of his world as uniformly neutral. In fact, the latter experiences particular locations as special on account of personal associations: locations such as his place of birth. This sort of experience is to be regarded as degraded religious experience. Eliade next discusses sacred places. An obvious example for us is the church, whose door is a threshold between the profane on the outside and the sacred inside. An equivalent to the church in archaic cultures was the sacred enclosure, which opened upwards towards the sky, the world of the gods. Sacred places were revealed to religious man by means of signs of various sorts, recognised as coming from the divine.
The major differentiation of space for religious man was that between cosmos and chaos. Traditional societies understood their own territory as cosmos, a world created out of primordial chaos by their gods, with surrounding territory remaining as chaos. Any extension of its territory was understood by a society as a repetition of the cosmogony, of the original divine act of creation of its world.

An example of how cosmogony worked, of how cosmos was imposed on chaos, concerns a nomadic Australian tribe, called the Achilpa. Their divine founder had fashioned and anointed a sacred pole, which the tribe carried with them on their wanderings. Its bending told them in which direction to travel and its very presence ensured that wherever they were they had cosmos, their world, around them. At the same time, the pole linked the people with their founder, above them in the heavens: after making the pole, he had climbed up it and vanished into the sky. Similar beliefs in other pre-modern societies attached to sacred pillars, trees etc. They maintained the cosmos of our world amid the chaos of surrounding space and kept open the connection with the divine founders in the heavens above.

In fact, in developed religious systems of this kind, there were three cosmic levels: not only earth and heaven, but an underworld as well. The axis mundi, the vertical feature, was seen as the centre of the world and as linking together all three cosmic levels. Instead of a pole, pillar or tree, the axis mundi might be, say, a ladder or a mountain. Beliefs in cosmic mountains included the idea that our world is holy because it is the place closest to heaven. Eliade notes that temples might be seen as equivalents of sacred mountains. Indeed, some, such as the Babylonian ziggurat, were built to be artificial sacred mountains. Religious man might understand his world as being at the centre of the world on three scales: country, city, sanctuary. That way, Palestine, Jerusalem, the Temple were all seen as the centre of the world.

What is more, for religious man, cosmos in its birth spread out from the centre. Consequently, when he undertook new construction work, religious man, by analogy, organized it outwards from a central point. Thus, a new village might be
developed from a crossroads outwards, giving it four zones. Such a plan made a new construction an imago mundi, a representation of the cosmos on the ground. Understanding his world this way, religious man experienced attacks from enemies as the work of demons, enemies of the divine creation who threatened to return that creation to chaos. Typically, such demons were represented as dragons; in fact, chaos itself might be represented as a dragon.

Eliade notes that something of this way of thinking persists in his contemporary world, in talk of dark forces threatening to plunge civilization into chaos. Going back to the imago mundi, the cosmic order represented in construction, Eliade points out that religious man saw it in his dwelling. Thus, peoples whose tents or huts had a central post or pillar could understand it as an axis mundi, supporting our world and linking it to heaven.

An alternative way of associating the dwelling place with the cosmic order was to make the building of it imitate the creation of the cosmos. So, we may associate traditions in which new construction work involved blood sacrifice with cosmogonies in which the creation of the world out of chaos was represented as the slaying of some primordial monster. Overall, Eliade finds a chronological progression in sacred space from that created by the sacred pole of the nomadic Achilpa, to that of fixed dwellings, to that of religious architecture.

With the advent of the temple, Eliade discerns an altogether new stage in religious man’s understanding of sacred space. A temple was an imago mundi, symbolizing the cosmos, the sacred order divinely imposed on primordial chaos. But it was more than that: it was the house of the gods and as such positively sustaining the sacredness of our world. This new understanding carried through into the Judeo-Christian tradition.

In his concluding remarks, Eliade points out that religious man’s experience of sacred space obviously differed from culture to culture. However, beneath the differences there was an underlying commonality of experience that becomes evident in the contrast with non-religious man’s non-experience of sacred space.
When I taught comparative religions at a prep school in Boca Raton I always included in the syllabus’ list of required reading Chesterton’s The Everlasting Man. The reason was not to do apologetics for Christianity but because in some way the book can be seen as a comparison of the most important world religions as still vibrantly practiced by millions and even billions of people, namely Judaism, Christianity, Islam (the so called Abrahamitic monotheistic religions), and Hinduisms, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism.

In his treatise on Jesus the Christ Chesterton compares those religions and discovers many affinities and much common ground especially in the field of ethics and morality. He says that if an alien from outer space were to land on earth and observe those religions for a while he would soon discover many common features, but he would also notice that there is one that stands out from the others, namely Christianity. How so? Well, because this religion makes two astonishing claims that the others refrain from making. In the first place,
its founder went around saying things such as “I and the Father are one” or “Before Abraham was I am” or “your sins are forgiven you,” forgiveness of sins being one of God’s prerogative for the Jews; meaning that he claimed to be God incarnate, not just one with God as Moses or Abraham could have claimed. The incarnation is what is celebrated at Christmas time, not pretty carols, and gifts from Santa, and wonderful church rituals with pretty red poinsettias which many fallen away Christians still enjoy from time proudly but misguided reducing their faith something dead, a caricature and an historical anachronism of sort... Secondly, this religion makes another astonishing claim, that its founder actually resurrected from the dead after dying on a cross.

Chesterton points out that if somebody goes around saying “I am god” as Caligula did, there is a good chance that he is certifiably insane, as in fact emperor Caligula was. But if one goes around saying and implying the same thing but then acts perfectly normal and sanely as a human being and in fact acts wisely, that ought to give one some pause at the question that he posed to his followers: who do you say that I am? To get the full import of these powerful intimations, one needs to read the argument in its entirety written in a wonderful English prose, as only Chesterton was able to accomplish.

Which brings us to this intriguing passage from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians: “And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.” (1 Corinthians 15:17-19). What exactly is Paul driving at” Simply this: Christianity as he understands it is not the best way to maximize pleasure and minimize pain and suffering, if this life is all there is. Paul tells us the best way to maximize our pleasures in this life: “If the dead are not raised, ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die” (1 Corinthians 15:32).
When Paul says, “If the dead are not raised, let us eat and drink,” he does not mean “Let’s all become lechers and hedonists.” He means there is a normal, simple, rational, comfortable, ordinary life of human delights that we may enjoy with no troubling thoughts of heaven of hell or sin or holiness or God—if there is no resurrection from the dead. The Epicureans have shown us the way, and if we are dissatisfied with the Epicurean philosophy of life we can always storm out of the Church in protest and resort to Buddhism which advises us to kill our desires and thus diminish the pain of not being able to attain them.

What is astonishing about this train of thought is that many professing Christians seem to aim at just this—and then call it Christianity. Kierkegaard calls it “a life of quiet desperation.” Paul certainly did not see his relation to Christ as the key to maximizing his physical comforts and pleasures in this life. No, Paul’s relation to Christ was a call to choose suffering—a suffering that was beyond what would make atheism “meaningful” or beautiful” or “heroic.” It was a suffering that would have been utterly foolish and pitiable to choose if there is no final resurrection. Here is how he put it: Whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of
knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ. I share his sufferings... that by an means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead (Philippians 3:7-8, 10-11).

This is a conscious choice for Paul: “If the dead are not raised.... Why am I in danger every hour? I protest, brothers, by my pride in you, which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die every day!” (1 Corinthians 15:29-31). He does not have to live this way. He chooses to be “in danger every hour!” “dying every day!” This is why he says he should be pitied, if there is no resurrection from the dead. He chose a path that leads to trouble and suffering virtually every day of his life. “I die every day.” This is quite different from Epicureanism or Stoicism or Buddhism, or Taoism which encourage meditation as a way of quieting desire, of avoiding extremism and of diminish pain and suffering. The problem is that sometime the desire to eradicate evil and unfairness from the world is not only quieted but killed. One remains in Plato’s cave thinking oneself enlightened because one is staring at the fire within the cave.

Monotheistic theology faces “the problem of evil” and the related “problem of suffering” - the task of defending the Christian, Judaic, or Islamic good, just, all-powerful and loving God against accusations of unjust suffering and evil in the world. This is the famous question of Dostoyevsky in The Brothers
Karamozov: if your God is so powerful and good why does he allow little children to suffer? Buddhist teaching, however, grounded in the classical Buddhist doctrines of impermanence, non-self, interdependent co-origination and the Law of Karma, faces a different challenge. Buddhist teaching explains the presence of suffering as a result of individuals attempting to cling to permanence in a fleeting universe. The difficulty for Buddhism, however, lies in how to address, from a worldview grounded in non-violence, the suffering that results from oppression institutionalized in social systems. Institutionalized injustice cannot be defeated by contemplating one’s navel in a lotus position, whether it is done in India, China or California. The issue of suffering is not approached anywhere in Buddhist thought as a ‘problem of evil,’ since, given the non-theistic character of the Buddhist world-view, the problem of theodicy which in the West begins with the Greeks’ natural theology of Aristotle cannot even occur. Furthermore, Buddhist reflection on unmerited systemic suffering has occurred only within the last thirty years, mostly inspired by Buddhist dialogue with Christianity.

Did Buddha believe in God?
Which bring us to another glaring misunderstanding of the ongoing dialogue between Christianity and Buddhism. It is often said that Buddhism is preferable to the theistic Abrahamic religions since it does not postulate a God that is transcendent and personal and separate from the individual self, postulates no duality and therefore postulates no God. And yet according to Professor Robert F. Thurman, of Columbia University, who is also a Buddhist monk, this couldn’t be furthest from the truth. He passionately emphasizes that: “Buddha not only believed in God, he knew God. There were numerous atheists in Buddha’s time – the Charvaka materialists – and the Buddha specifically critiqued their lack of belief in any spiritual reality.” So, if the good professor is to be believed there definitely is theism in Buddhism.

Moreover, in a chapter entitled: “The Differing Viewpoints of Buddhism and the Other World Religions regarding Ultimate Reality” William Stoddart, in his book, Outline of Buddhism, explains that the true Buddhist belief is really theistic, but that the existence of Ultimate Reality (i.e. God) who is both immanent and transcendent, has been misunderstood because of the emphasis of the immanence component. It is easy to see how the emphasis of the Buddha on the non-corporeality of God has led to many erroneously believing that there is no God in Buddhism. This is of course the problem of immanence and transcendence in the concept of God. Actually even within Christianity there is no duality: God is not either transcendent or immanent within the cosmos, a la Karl Sagan, but is both immanent and transcendent. It would be enough to read Vico’s New Science to be convinced of this seeming paradox.

In many respects, Zen’s response to suffering and the problem of evil is the same as that of Buddhism in general. Zen’s understanding of these issues is best expressed in Xinxin Ming, or “On Faith in Mind,” a prose-poem that is traditionally attributed to Sengsan, the third patriarch of Zen. Little is known of the historical figure Sengsan, but according to legend, he approached the second patriarch of Zen, Huike, and told him that he suffered from a terrible disease. Sengsan asked Huike to absolve him of his sin so that he could be healed. The patriarch responded, “Bring me your sin and I will absolve you.” When Sengsan replied that he could not get at his sin to bring
it, Huike told him, “Then I have absolved you.” Xinxin Ming proposes that all suffering and unhappiness are caused by dualistic thinking. It begins, “The Great Way is not difficult for those who have no preferences.” For many, having no preferences at all may seem like a most difficult attitude to attain. Nonetheless, according to the text, the moment the smallest distinction is made, “heaven and earth are set infinitely apart.”

This is not simply a proposal of a psychological state of mind to aim for; it is a description of the nature of reality. Things are neither real nor not real, neither empty nor not empty. From this point of view, to see things in an either-or fashion is to be deceived by delusion. In an analysis similar to that of the Buddha’s Four Noble Truths, which indicates that suffering is caused by desire, Xinxin Ming states that the process of creating distinctions and preferences causes human suffering. Discriminating between “coarse or fine” leads to “for or against” thinking, which leads to notions about right and wrong, which lead, in turn, to mental confusion. There is confusion because there is no agreement about what is right or what is true. These are not characteristics innate to human existence; they are illusions caused by dualistic thinking. But the problem persists and the dialogue goes on and the journey continues.
IV

“Christianity is a life lived together so that we may save ourselves together.”

--Charles Péguy

The Ambiguity of Christianity and its influence on Western Spirituality

I have several agnostic and atheist friends who more often than not are ex believers. They will make a point to tell me, and anybody else who will listen to them, that a long time ago they walked out of the Church and any form of organized orthodox religion bitter and disappointed, and have never regretted it. In fact, what they are most proud of is the non regretting. They insist that one does not need the crutch of religion to live a fully ethical and happy life.

I don’t disagree with that position, for a faith that is not free and considers reason an enemy is a sham and an insult to human rationality, but if I determine that an honest dialogue is possible and welcomed on the matter, I will at times follow-up with a confession of my own: in my college years in the sixties, when the temptation was strong to give up religion and Christianity as so much superstition and ignorance, I come very close to becoming a non-believer and leaving the Catholic Church which I had mistaken for a mere temporal institution inevitably corrupted by wealth and privilege. What persuaded me that I might eventually regret abandoning it and be the greater loser for such a decision, were three 20th century authors who were also so tempted, some of them in fact became atheists, but in the end deepened their faith and fully accepted and practiced Christianity: G.K. Chesterton, C.S. Lewis and Diego Fabbri and their respective books The Everlasting Man, Mere Christianity, and Jesus on Trial.

I have repeatedly mentioned Chesterton. In fact, when I first started contributing to the magazine I wrote a piece on all those three authors. In the light of the latest discussion on “religion-less religion” and New Age spirituality which created a veritable tempest in a tea-cup among those
who consider religion simply a social phenomenon to be used instrumentally and commercially for the promotion of people’s heritages. So, it may perhaps be worthwhile to revisit Diego Fabbri’s existential theater, a theater passionately committed to the exploration of the human condition and the spirit of the modern age. Unfortunately Fabbri is all but forgotten nowadays, and that is too bad, for the theatrical production of Diego Fabbri (especially his masterpiece “Jesus on Trial”) is still vitally relevant to post-modern Man’s self-knowledge, and the rediscovery of the cultural identity of Western civilization; an identity that seems more and more in danger of being forgotten. In that sense he is more relevant today than he was sixty years ago. A few years ago I translated from the Italian into English a play by Diego Fabbri titled “Processo a Gesù” [Jesus on Trial]. This is perhaps his best known work, his masterpiece so to speak, originally performed in Milan on March 2, 1955. It might be hard to believe it, but in the 50s and 60s Fabbri became even better known than Pirandello, not only in Italy but also abroad. At that time his above mentioned play was performed in Germany, Sweden, Austria, the USA, France, England, Spain, Australia, even Japan; it was eventually made into a movie in Spain. However, despite this early popularity Fabbri and his theater simply vanished from circulation.

Jesus on Trial
Fabbri is one of those rare dramatists who, like Pirandello, is concerned with philosophical-ethical issues relating to the existential human condition. Some of his other plays are “The Seducer,” “The Liar,” “Inquisition,” “Portrait of an Unknown.” The mere titles of these plays hint at Fabbri’s existential concerns. He was the kind of author who in Italian goes under the name of “impegnato” [engaged].

The classical authors who greatly influenced Fabbri, as he himself revealed in his book of essays titled Christian Ambiguity (1954), are Dostoevsky, Cechov, Pirandello, Brecht, Plato, St. Augustine, Pascal, Kierkegaard, Kafka, Rilke, Berdiaev, Manzoni, as well as the contemporary French authors he was reading at the time the play made its debut: Andre Gide, Maurice Blondel, Jacques Riviere, Charles Péguy, Paul Claudel, Georges Bernanos, Francois Mauriac, Julien Green, Etienne Gilson, Jacques Maritain, Emmanuel Mounier. This list will persuade anybody that Fabbri is not an esoteric elitist intellectual, (of either the classical or the modern tradition); on the contrary, he speaks the language of everyman and is concerned with the problems of everyman.

The protagonists of his drama are mostly ordinary people who struggle with the great issues, “prosecuting charges,” indictments, and ultimate problems of the human condition and destiny as lived today by post-modern Man, especially in Europe, who the more he distances himself from God and religion, the more he feels Her/His absence and the more he searches for Her/Him through the labyrinthine byways of the spirit.

And what is this play all about? It is really a modern trial, an in absentia trial of Jesus and to a certain extent of the ancient Jewish people by modern Jews. Paradoxically, as the trial progresses, we come to realize that it is in reality the trial of a decadent technological rationalistic positivistic civilization examining itself; that is to say, the trial of a civilization steeped in nihilism devoid of the ability to hope in the future and to conceive salvation and redemption of any kind, a civilization, stuck in the horizontal (the immanent), forgetfulness of the vertical (the transcendent), and unable to conceive the two together as “both-and,” often given to apocalyptic scenarios.
of a dark future destiny. Frankly, the play had that powerful effect on me personally as I translated it.

Important to point out here that behind this bleak assessment by Fabbri of the modern social phenomenon, there is Charles Péguy, an author who perhaps influenced Fabbri more than any other, and who had written that «Christianity is a life lived together so that we may save ourselves together.” In a true Judeo-Christian tradition Péguy had grasped the notion that salvation is not an individual affair but is achieved with and through the people and the common good.

After reading the play one realizes that indeed while Pirandello is Fabbri’s artistic inspiration, Charles Péguy is Fabbri’s spiritual inspiration for the conception of an authentic Christian society: a society that finds its “raison d’etre” in communion and solidarity and is thus alone able to free Man from that deep solitude of spirit described by Vico as “the barbarism of the intellect,” a kind of barbarism afflicting post-modern Man within the third historical rationalistic cycle of Vico’s ideal eternal history.

As far as dramatic techniques are concerned Pirandello is undoubtedly present, behind the curtain, so to speak. He is there for the fundamental emotions and conflicts which are explored, for the conception of dialogue as a search for identity and truth, and for the stage returned to its original classical function of authentic place of drama, almost another protagonist. It was in fact this Pirandellian inspiration and conception of the drama as advertised by Fabbri that led to the rediscovery of Pirandello in Italy and abroad.

Fabbri’s theater flows naturally into film. In the 60s and 70s he wrote manuscripts for the RAI Television which include among others novels by Silone’s among which “Il Segreto di Luca,” Greene’s “The End of the Affair,” Dostoievky’s “The Brothers Karamozov” and “The Devils.” However Fabbri is no Dostoievsky, he remains uniquely himself hard to subsume under any other director. If one were to search for a kindred spirit to Fabbri among modern film directors, it would not be Fellini of “Satyricon,” but Bergman of “The Seventh Seal.”
EVERY YEAR WE FIGHT TO END RACISM
I have been told that during 1950s an Indian thinker came to Europe to study philosophy. After 5 years of living in Europe, he went back home and wrote about his experiences in Europe. His experiences and learning were all included in one sentence: “Europe is very well organised but without spirit”

That was during the 1950s and the 1960s and many other thinkers from all around the world agreed with him, including some Arabs. But that was just after the WWII. The WWII was an explosion of change – not for the best - in Europe, which put a very thick shadow all over the world.

This shadow remained until the collapse of the Soviet Union. Then the world became one block with one philosophy, the philosophy of the market economy that spread everywhere. The clash of spirits was the next war and this time it was harder because defences and aggressions started and touched the spirit of the people; the new war was a “clash of civilisations”.

I do not agree with the term “civilisation” as such, I believe that civilisation has some kind of globality and one centre; and this centre moves from one place to another through history. It was in Greece, it was in Rome, it was in Baghdad, it was in Paris, it was in London and now it is in the USA.
Through this “clash of civilisations” people found answers or salvation through spirituality and faith. Only they misunderstood both faith and salvation. The Russians went back to strict Orthodoxy, the Muslims back to Mohammad’s time; Christian radicals in USA murdered kids in a school and radical Japanese exhibit violence in the name of their faith.

As a migrant to Europe during this time and since the collapse of Soviet Union - I arrived to Finland at 1990 - I have a clear picture – I think - on how the world was changed and how Europe has changed. This change is still under process and I have to admit that watching it as an insider outsider it really fascinates me.

Multiculturalism - which has roots in the USA during the 1970s - came to Europe during the 1990s, here I don’t mean the term Multiculturalism but the practice of a multicultural society. So since I came to Europe and aware of the theoretical side I took it as a life project - or better my life’s struggle – to create a European Union for Migrant Artists Network and work in making practice and not keep it in theory, multiculturalism.

Through my struggle with multiculturalism I also tried to make sense of spirituality since it was what divides and the same time unites people and somehow to understand if what the Indian man had concluded 50 years ago was still true in the beginnings of the 21st century.
In a visit to London in 1998 I had the clearest picture of contemporary spiritual Europe. All the faiths and all the races where there.

London it is an Arab city, it is Chines city, it is Indian city, a Pakistani city, a Russian city and it is European city. London fascinated me, gave me motivation and a lot of power to work; and without any hesitation I can say that I do hope Helsinki or any other European city could become London.

After that I went to Berlin. Another example of tolerance and multiculturalism. All cultures and all faiths live side by side, all keeping the characteristics of their culture, their rituals and their spirituality.

And then now came. Now I see evil trying to destroy this great variety of spirits that lives and blossoms in Europe. And this evil unfortunately can do a lot and will do a lot. And I smile at an inevitable war that is coming. A war that will kill the most beautiful experience that mankind has lived on this earth, the harmony of faith and spirit. All in the name of spirit and faith.
An estimated 100 million people are homeless worldwide.
3 million people are homeless in Europe
2.5 million homeless in the United States
4,500 children are homeless in Buenos Aires
According to estimates by NGO Klimaka over 20,000 homeless in Greece of the austerity measures and eurozone economics.

THEY CALL IT ECONOMIC GROWTH
An introspection on some Eastern Religion/Philosophies
Over the years that I have lived in some part of South East Asia, the Eastern religions and philosophies have become more familiar to me than the occidental religious and spiritual philosophies that I left behind in Australia. In fact, upon some brief returns to Australia, I have seen the profound influence some of these philosophies now have in Australia and some other “western” countries.

I have become interested in the non-esoteric parts of these philosophies and the lessons and messages they present to me personally. The impact of many of these philosophies has not been ‘a coming’ as a monolithic piece of knowledge, but rather a journey of understanding and meaning to me.

In this article I wish to convey some random and ‘off the cuff’ images to the reader about the ‘truths’ and metaphors that have meaning for me. These images may not necessarily be the main content or message that these philosophies seek to espouse to followers, they are what is important to me.

Hinduism has penetrated almost all societies in South-East Asia. So many Malay customs are still Hinduistic, and Thai culture is full of Hinduistic rituals and meanings. Not to mention Indonesia, Lao and Cambodia, Hinduism from the old temples of Angkor Wat, to the customs and culture of Bali, to the practices in the Royal Courts of Malaysia, all embrace aspects of Hinduism.
Carl Jung, the great German philosopher and psychoanalyst borrowed so much from Hinduism in constructing his typologies and explaining the world of consciousness.

What Hinduism made me realize is that there has been a fascination with everything being interconnected into one deep reality for centuries. The Quantum is not a new concept, it is in fact something ancient, well explained by our forefathers, long before the era of modern Quantum Mechanics was proclaimed around the turn of the last century.

Hinduism has made me consider that we in fact live within one of a number of multi-verses, or rather false realities, which eludes us about any true reality, if there even is one. We cannot see any true realities from one sphere of the world. Our view of the world is only but one layer of the ‘big picture’ or ‘truth’.

Hinduism has made me realize that we live within a world of multiple narratives, which create multiple realities upon which we as humans bare out world views that we accept as our truths. Ironically we are all interconnected, but haven’t as yet learned that important lesson, so we remain so much divided to the point we seek to destroy ourselves.

Buddhism is widely spread throughout the region in one of a number of forms and hybrids. Buddhism is also merged with Hinduism, The Dao (Taoism), and Animism, to form deep ritualistic forms of reverence. But the basic message of Buddhism is simple and to the point.

Buddhism is not a Religion, but rather an idea and methodology. Simply put, Buddhism espouses that all humans are suffering from their own misery of want, greed, envy, and desire. The Buddha found a way to free the person from this ‘cycle of suffering’ so that one could find happiness or contentment, through following the Nobel
Eightfold Path by practicing right view about things, right intentions, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

Consequently, Buddhism is a therapy rather than any form of religion. Buddhism is a way of living, a way of embracing the world. Buddhism takes a compassionate view of humankind and the world, and has much to offer about how people should live and interact.

The Eightfold path offers a way to approach interpersonal relations, business, community, and deal with one’s own grief. The ancient texts of Buddhism, The Pali also outlined a human cognitive map that neuroscientists only discovered through MRI over the last few decades.

This is almost forgotten with the bureaucratization and ritualism of Buddhism.

I think one of the real gems that Buddhism has offered to human knowledge is a Theory of Everything or what is called paticcasamuppada (dependent origination). This theory summed up as;

When this is, that is
This arising, that arises
When this is not, that is not
This ceasing, that ceases.

Can be used to reinterpret Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution, from one of survival of the fittest, to one of co-arising and interdependency as is witnessed in the last paragraph of his book The Origin of Species.

“It is interesting to contemplate a tangled bank, clothed with many plants of which many kinds with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the deep earth, and to reflect that these
elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent upon each other in so a complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us.”

Steven Hawking has been spending his life looking for a TOE, the Buddha presented one more than two Thousand years ago.

The Dao (or Taoism) as practiced with mirrors outside buildings to scare away evil spirits, is not the esoteric philosophy that Taoism offers. The Dao is simply the process of living according to one’s own true nature. The Dao is not a path like the Eightfold path in Buddhism. Our life is the path, and along the way we obtain valuable lessons and experience which helps to guide us upon our journey.

The Dao sees the world full of paradoxes and contradictions upon one must make sense of and feel comfortable with. The Dao is about perspective from our experiences, which upon reflection enables us to see the differing perspective viewpoints or versions of the truth.

The Dao works on the premise that a contradiction leads to a more complete understanding. With deep sets of ‘natural ethics’, The Dao potentially provides us with a framework for what I like to call ‘practical wisdom’. This ‘practical wisdom’ is a commonsense that should enable individuals to navigate their life and make wise decisions about their life, vocation, and personal affairs.

Developing a ‘practical wisdom’ in the individual is, in the opinion of the writer, one of the most important things that any education system should empower the individual with. Unfortunately today, this is an area much neglected on curricula.

If one takes a secular examination of the Al Quran the major text of Islam, which is ironically discouraged within the Islamic world, there is a whole roadmap of social structure and an
organization to be discovered. Yes, Islam has many answers about how society could be organized to eliminate poverty and prevent exploitation by one group upon another.

The *Al Quran* was written in the metaphor of business and has many things to say about social economics. Islam with the Gold *Dinar* and Silver *Dirham* describes currency system that would possibly prevent many of the evils of the current economic system that went into meltdown in 2008. Islam promotes transparency and market unencumbered with regulation that distorts the monetary and fiscal mechanisms that promote inequality. For example debt with interest (*riba*) is frowned upon. One could argue that if many of the economic initiatives promoted in the *Al Quran* existed, the economic problems that the world is facing today would not exist.

Many of the economic gems that Islam offers are hidden from the world with spiritual dogma. Islam offers a ‘new’ economic model that may be able to solve basic economic problems that capitalism, socialism, the welfare state models have so far failed to solve.

Finally, Animism exists all over South-East Asia from the highlands of Vietnam and Laos, Burma, to the plains of Cambodia. Communities around Angkor Wat believe the ruins have a powerful guardian spirit called *Neakta*, based on ancestral spirits which has potency to heal illnesses and solve social problems, through shamans acting as mediums.

Animism is also rife through the Indonesian Archipelago, where different groups worship non-human entities such as inanimate objects in the belief that these things possess some spiritual essence or power. Many believe that supernatural powers can be used to caste spells on others, so many illnesses are seen as being spirit related, where a bomoh rather than a medical doctor is sought for treatment.
In Thailand, one will see shrines outside most buildings, villages, and even next to trees and along the roadside to pay homage to local spirits that inhabit specific geographical areas, which must be pacified in order to ensure a harmonious life for the populace in a specific location. One will see daily offerings of food, flowers, and red colored soft drinks by the shrines. Some of these shrines are extremely popular where people make a point of specifically visiting the shrine to pay homage and respect, and request some form of good fortune. These shrines and rituals are testimony to the high regard and reverence for the power of these spirits.

On the Malay Peninsula, the Orang Asli have traditionally been animists believing in particular objects and locations as having spirits residing in them. Further north along the mountain regions of Southern Thailand the Sakai, who still inhabit the forests pay homage to the spirits of the land.

In Sabah, the Kadazan-Dusun people would worship Kinoingan or the rice spirit, which is the basis of the very popular Kaamatan or harvest festival, celebrated every year. Specific rituals are practiced each year by priestesses known as bobchizans, although there are very few left today. Even though most Kadazan-Dusun people have long converted to Christianity or Islam, they still celebrate the Kaamatan.

Across in Sarawak, the Orang Ulu who live far inland, the Dayaks, and Ibans generally practiced different forms of Animism. The Iban version is sophisticated and similar to the accepted Kaharingan Religion practiced in Kalimantan, Indonesia by tribes like the Dayaks. The ibans hold the belief that all living creatures originate from the same processes and thus share a common origin where the earth exists in a very complex interdependence. In this view all seen and unseen coexist and influence each other.
Although many people have converted to Buddhism, Christianity, or Islam, over the region, animistic practices are still very much embedded, sometimes surreptitiously in the rituals performed or observed within their new religions. The Malay heartland is full of deep superstitious belief, which allows bomohs to flourish.

Bomohs have integrated their practices into Islam. The art of ‘silat’ or indigenous martial arts has many aspects of animism incorporated into rituals and practices. ‘Silat’ has a spiritual element based on the power of certain roots and plants, strengthened through reading verses of the Koran. Symbolic female circumcision is still widely practiced in the belief that this will tone down a female’s libido. Although Animism is not recognized by the Malaysian Government, although these practices are in reality common place.

Islam in Indonesia, particularly Java, has developed a hybrid culture, which has incorporated many Animistic rituals such as sacrificing a goat and burying the remains in the foundations of new buildings. Wayang kulit or shadow puppets are still very popular in Indonesia and Southern Thailand where mythical stories of supernatural powers are the main themes of performances.

Animism is also very heavily incorporated in traditional Chinese religions, as well as Taoism, and Buddhism. Many Buddhist monks are consulted because of the belief they possess the ability to see into the future. Many Chinese make pilgrimages to particular Wats or temples to get trinkets, or amulets for luck. Omens and numbers are still a part of everyday life.

Feng Shui, an age old practice based upon cosmic and geographic dimensions is widely practiced throughout the region. Many will not purchase a new residence without seeing if the location
and features are suitable according to Feng Shui consultants. These concepts also seem to be religiously upheld by other indigenous cultures where for example, it is not considered lucky to live at the top of a “T” intersection. In addition, many people including politicians consult the calendar to determine the best dates to do certain things.

While travelling around the region, one will not fail to notice the hexagonal mirrors placed on top of many doors to scare away evil spirits, hear stories about parts of the road that should be avoided due to spirits at night, be invited to pay homage to particular spirits, and be told many stories about the supernatural.

Asian life is much more affected by Animistic rituals than many would openly admit.

However, given that Animism has so much influence upon life, and there is so much interconnectivity and similarity in beliefs with other indigenous peoples all around the world, which are not in any way related to each other, either culturally or genetically.

Is there something we can learn?

Although Animism subscribes to the belief that non-human entities like animals, plants, geographical features, and other inanimate objects, or phenomenon possess some form of spiritual prowess, there is something deeper than that here.

Animism has an elaborate moral ecology and human-environment relations concepts that most other philosophies and religions miss out on. The world of Animism is shaped by the interaction of the material, natural, and spiritual worlds. All entities mutually exist, and with common origin are the same thing. Thus the individual cannot be
separated from the rest of the world, both in the material and spiritual sense. As a consequence, past and present are linked through social and natural actions, and cosmic phenomenon.

The moral code of Animism is based upon a sophisticated sense of sustainability. It’s about maintaining the environmental *status quo* and complying with the wishes of the spirit of the earth, which could be metaphorically the earth itself.

This provides a meaningful outlook towards the environment towards the environment, where destruction of the environment equates to destroying the spirits. This philosophy is not too far away from Nobel Prize winning environmentalist James Lovelock’s [GAIA hypothesis](#) which sees the earth as a living entity.

In addition, from the point of view of understanding the potency of our natural resources, much folklore and knowledge about flora is very quickly disappearing, as the jungles and rainforests are being cleared.

As the author and quantum physicist Nick Herbert espoused, Animistic beliefs encapsulated quantum theories of existence long before the discipline of quantum mechanics was devised. Quantum theory dismissed the duality of mind and matter, where Animism provided some of the answers to our contemporary problems, which we overtly dismiss today, but sub-consciously subscribe to.

We of the 21st Century cannot claim any monopoly on wisdom, and in the past, Animist philosophies may perhaps may help us gain deeper insights.
Peter White is an anti-organized religion skeptic who wanted to pick a bone with a practicing Christian Catholic, Mirella Ionta, in late January 2015. In a debate that lasted thirty minutes, the two with very opposing views decided to meet in a coffee shop on Montreal’s most exciting boulevard, Saint Laurent. Ionta, at one corner of the ring, showed up in a “I could be the sister of Donnie Brasco” outfit, that is a brown corduroy pants-and-blazer suit with a matching brown corduroy Fedora hat. From her neck hung a pendant of an enormous St. Benedict Olive Wood Crucifix. White appeared dressed in casual jeans, black t-shirt, and a Vancouver Canucks cap. It was clear from the get-go that this meeting was not set up for the mere purpose of mindless blah-blah or even conscious blah-blah. The two bought their coffees separately and sat facing each other, one glaring into the other’s eyes suspiciously. The debate began with words of fire as White was quick to lash out on Ionta’s religious beliefs. Ionta seemed to keep composed, even egging White on with “let’s spill coffee and turn the table on him” kind of questions. From violence in the Bible to the Crusades to Hitler and atheism to homosexuality to New Age Spirituality to human evolution and science, White addressed many controversial subjects and Ionta, as usual, took the tension with stride. The following is the entire dialogue that resulted from that meeting:
Peter White: “In light of the recent terrorist attacks, there should be a worldwide ban on all organized religions.”

Mirella Ionta: “Really? Should I be hung for crimes that I never committed?”

Peter White: “All religions encourage violence!”

Mirella Ionta: “As one who has closely studied The Bible, it clearly prohibits murder of another human.”

Peter White: “The Bible reads the way you want it to read.”

Mirella Ionta: “Reading the Bible with a sincere heart will not allow you to misinterpret it or take passages out of their contexts. If you do not have a sincere heart at the time of your readings, with the help of a priest leading mass, you will hear the proper interpretations of Biblical passages. A Catholic should be fine following the rituals and traditions of Catholicism. Beginning with repentance in the presence of a priest, the Catholic immediately feels that the burden of guilt from sinning is taken from his or her back and the Catholic becomes less tempted to sin and fall under Satan’s traps. When the Holy Spirit is nurtured, the believer becomes empowered to defeat the influences that Satan and evil have on his or her life. The believer will make his or her way to uncovering what his or her mission is in life and will take progressive steps to accomplish this mission for God.”

Peter White: “There is so much hate and violence in The Bible. How can you even read it?”

Mirella Ionta: “There is so much vile hate and visually-detailed violence in Hollywood movies. How can people possibly watch them? The story of humans, after the fall from paradise, is a story of human creatures who struggle between acting on their animal instincts and aspiring to live out their divine ideals. With the help of the birth and life of Jesus Christ, who graced our earth, it became possible to regain the paradise that was lost to sin and darkness. He brought divinity to a very sad reality. As far as I know, the New Testament of the Bible does not espouse hate at all.”

Peter White: “Mirella, sorry to disappoint you, but many Christians follow the old testament which says in many ways that non-believers should be killed, as should gays, adulterers, and many other people. It’s a very violent book.”
Mirella Ionta: “I never got to that chapter in the Bible where it is stated in clear terms that murder of a human is okay. Is it after the stories of Moses and the Ten Commandments or before? The Ten Commandments make it clear to anyone that murder is prohibited. When Jesus comes along, all he talks about is love for the other. Catholics read The New Testament because this is what Catholicism is based on: Realizing that Jesus is the Messiah and His word is the absolute truth, without exception. I sometimes read stories in the Old Testament, which give good examples of human behaviour and the consequences resulting from certain behaviour. But, tell me now, where does is it say that murder is allowed? Do you know the exact passages, the exact verses? Jesus Christ is all about love and only espouses love, even love of the enemy. He even forgives his executors for crucifying him and asks God to forgive them at the end of his life. For Catholics, it is made very clear in scripture, in prayer, and in ritual that God prohibits murder of another human and of oneself. The Hebrew Bible contains many prohibitions against unlawful killing, but also allows for certain justified killing in the context of warfare, capital punishment, and self-defense.”

Peter White: “Okay I came prepared. I bookmarked the pages of the Bible where murder is encouraged: Exodus 22:20 “Whoever sacrifices to any god other than the LORD must be destroyed.” Leviticus 20:13“If there is a man who lies with a male as those who lie with a woman, both of them have committed a detestable act; they shall surely be put to death. Their blood guiltiness is upon them.”

Mirella Ionta: “Funny, I have been studying the Bible for five years and never stumbled upon those passages, maybe I was never consciously searching for them. Practicing Christians as a majority follow the New Testament. Nobody follows the entirety of
the Old Testament, at least not literally to the very word. But it would be very nice to see people follow Christ’s teachings to the very letter. And that would actually be the best thing for society. Jesus made God more accessible to earthlings. Christianity, the name itself, is based on Christ-like teachings. Because we have pacifist, Christ-like teachings, it is forbidden to kill humans.”

**Peter White:** “Why is the execution of Jesus Christ at the end of his life so violent?”

**Mirella Ionta:** “Jesus was not very lucky. He lived during a time when the ancient Roman empire’s military occupied the place we call Israel in the present day. The Romans had the power to condemn a man to death by way of crucifixion. Crucifixion was a punishment for those who threatened the political state. A charismatic leader who proclaimed he reigned over the kingdom of God was seen as an immediate threat to the political kingdom led by a Roman emperor.”

**Peter White:** “How do you account for the hatred against homosexuals espoused in the Bible?”

**Mirella Ionta:** “The passages in the Bible pertaining to homosexuality are in relation to pederasty and to acts in warfare. The Bible condemns homosexual practices in the form of a heterosexual male degrading another heterosexual male after capturing him in battle. The Bible also condemns pederasty, an erotic relationship between an adult male and adolescent male. In antiquity, pederasty was practiced in educational institutions, where the adult teacher would use sodomy to transfer knowledge to his male pupil. The Bible clearly frowned upon this ancient practice. Many biblical scholars reveal that the Bible says nothing about modern homosexuality as we know it today (i.e. two consenting adult males engaging in a sexual relation).”

**Peter White:** “Shouldn’t the current leaders of Christian faiths be more effective when transmitting the message of Jesus? It is clear that our society lacks good moral judgement but shouldn’t the Church, for example, be doing more to mold people?”

**Mirella Ionta:** “I love how these lost people who claim that Christianity somehow failed them never think that their egos and arrogance may be the problem and that they are the ones who ultimately fail Christianity. Why do you think this current society lacks good moral judgement, Peter? Do
you think it’s the Church’s fault that people are not attending mass? What do people do during their free time instead? They are choosing not to follow Jesus. We are given freewill to choose.”

**Peter White**: “I do not think spirituality has to be linked with organized religion. Can’t one be spiritual without being religious?”

**Mirella Ionta**: “I suppose, but in a flaky and superficial way. There must be a methodology and process already in place to successfully connect the human spirit with its source, God. When one experiments with different religions and with New Age Spirituality, he will find that his stubborn logic will begin to question all of them. He will find though that the most logical connection that we have with God is through a human who graced our earth as “the son of God.” Humans have the ability to mentally understand a relationship of father, son, mother, etc. The way Jesus is presented to humanity is very logically sound and logically appealing. As one begins to follow the word of Jesus, one will find that Jesus is indeed “the way, the truth, the life.” Jesus Christ will become synonymous with the word spirituality because He offers the closest and most effective connection with the source of human spirits, God.”

**Peter White**: “There must be other ways by which a seeker can access God.”

**Mirella Ionta**: “What are these ways, Peter? New Age Spirituality? Touching your toes in a yoga studio? Talking to plants? The word spirituality includes the word spirit, which is great. But the word religion implies morality and implies that humans must act in morally good ways in order to successfully connect to the source of goodness, God. So the spirit must be purified and made good in order to connect to the source of purity and goodness. These new age
spiritualists are touching their toes in a yoga studio and talking to their plants thinking they are somehow nourishing their spirits. They are not taking steps toward building strong moral characters. They don’t have a developed concept of good and bad. They are not discerning. Instead, they are deceived into thinking that they are turning into better humans but are creating huge barriers that block them from accessing God. Do you think that yoga and Reiki, which seems to have replaced traditional religion, are going to save the world? Taking prayers from one religion, chants from another religion (or should I say cult), and mantras from yet another religion and combining them all together, do you think this patchy, incoherent information about a demigod or pagan creature (not even God Himself) will help people move forward spiritually? Do you think hippies and their flower power will help people during their darkest hours? Love, peace, and happiness and roll the cannabis?”

Peter White: “No. But I do not think that organized religion can realistically be applied to our modern times. “

Mirella Ionta: “God does not have to adjust to us and our changing times. We are the ones who must adjust to Him. Besides, what does Jesus Christ say that makes him come off as old-fashioned and outdated? His words are timeless, his teachings can be applied to any era, any race, any culture, in any situation. Jesus Christ has a way of developing His believer’s good qualities no matter what his or her race, personal history, and sexual orientation are.”

Peter White: “Don’t you think you are being extreme in saying that Jesus Christ is the only means by which to access God.”

Mirella Ionta: “There is nothing extreme in accepting and then proclaiming the absolute truth. Not doing so is to be “wishy-washy,” the character flaw that has afflicted those of our modern generations.”

Peter White: “What are your thoughts about vegetarianism, a big part of New Age Spirituality?”

Mirella Ionta: “And God said, let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping animal that creepeth upon the earth” (Genesis 1:26). There is one story that I must tell about a man who had a lot of anger and anxiety issues, as well as many
questions about the world and his own existence. He turned to scripture, read this particular passage and tested it with a personal life experience: He stopped eating meat and fish for 8 months. The New Age Spiritualists whom he associated with at that time were in favour of the dietary change he had made. They were so convinced that being vegetarian would eliminate his anger and anxiety completely. They kept on telling him that animals are killed realizing that they are dying and so meat-eaters receive all the negative energy and anxiety that animals feel at the moments of their brutal deaths. They recommended, “Vegetarianism and yoga are the paths to take in order to be a compassionate human.” During his non meat-eating months, he felt weak and he noticed that he was losing muscle mass. His anger and anxiety had not disappeared. He also noticed that as he kept on practicing yoga and associating with new age spiritualists, he actually became angrier and more obsessed with perfection. As time went on and he would observe how new age spiritualists would treat other humans, he concluded that these misled people were treating animals better than humans and were not very compassionate toward humans as they claim their spirituality made them out to be!

**Peter White:** “The new age also claims it will help you detach from materialistic desires. Did it help him in that regard?”

**Mirella Ionta:** “The opposite is true. The new age spiritualists are attached to their material bodies and although they may be trying to detach themselves from materialistic desires, they are not successful in doing so. They will always talk about their $5000 fancy travels and their superficial, expensive yoga purchases. Naturally, one begins to question what new age spirituality purports to be true: That vegetarianism is essential in order to be able to access God. In fact, one will come to realize that new age spiritualists do
not know God and they do not even want to get to know God. If people want to know God and get profound answers, they will not go to a yoga studio and pay $100/month. They would go to church, a temple, a synagogue, etc. The man began going to Church again and confided in a priest about his recent tendency toward New Age practices. The priest took this very seriously and immediately prayed on him. He asked him to attend his masses three times a week and say confessions. He explained that paganism (having false Lords) and the New Age are as dangerous as playing with fire.

Peter White: “We know with certainty that Jesus ate fish and helped his disciples catch fish.”

Mirella Ionta: “That is right. New age spiritualists purport that vegetarianism/veganism, yoga, and energy-invoking practices are the prime solutions to people’s spiritual crises. Some of them reference God as being the source of our spirits but they do not have effective rituals, cohesive prayers, or sufficient literature to support a concrete way to connect with God. Many of their chants and mantras are taken out of context and actually worship demigods and pagan icons. When they explain the theory to support their new age practices, they will use broken language (passages taken from each religion patched up together, making no cohesive sense at all) describing ideas that are rooted deeply in a pagan, pre-Jesus understanding of the universe. New age spiritualists also have a tendency to bash the West and glamorize the Eastern World. They will say things like “Look how evil the Westerners are.” They never will mention that China is the biggest abuser of Human Rights. Of course, new age spiritualists will argue that to meet the Western demand for leather, Indians kill their holy cows. They will always blame and demonize the Western world. New age spiritualists sound like bitter, lost atheists who claim Christianity has failed them when in fact they are the ones who fail Christianity.”

Peter White: “So, did anger and anxiety find its door out during those 8 non meat-eating months?”

Mirella Ionta: “No. It did not. Vegetarianism was clearly not the solution for the man’s anger and anxiety issues. When the priest absolved his sins formally in church, his anger and anxiety began fading gradually. The process of Christianity religiosity took a little less than a full year to show significant effects. He now eats white meat and fish regularly to ensure he receives full proteins but does not claim to receive any “negative energy” after eating
them. So what is the true path, the New Age or Christianity? He found his answer!

**Peter White:** “You mentioned how you find the New Age Spiritualists treat humans badly and they treat animals with compassion. But Christianity, which is based on Christ-like teachings, has a history of treating both humans and animals badly. It is a bloody history. Christians started the Crusades and killed millions.”

**Mirella Ionta:** “Christians sink in shame when hearing about the Crusades. The Western World is told to feel guilty about this event in history. In *Sir Walter Scott’s Crusades and Other Fantasies*, by Ibn Warraq, it is revealed that Christians were acting defensively and not aggressively as commonly believed to Islamic conquests of Christian countries. Moreover, in the dark ages, most people did not know how to read. If the crusaders were reacting too violently in defense of their lands, the slaughters that occurred were facilitated by people’s ignorance of The Bible.”

**Peter White:** “Did the Crusaders justify their defense in the holy war with passages from the New Testament?” The New Testament has many mixed messages with regards to how to react to an enemy in a situation of self-defense. Jesus says to give your other cheek when someone slaps you on one but also says “I have come not to bring peace but a sword.”

**Mirella Ionta:** “Is the highlight event of Christian faiths, the crucifixion, not clear enough? The idea is to surrender to God completely and God deals with your “enemy.” In time, sinners get their sin’s worth. Not one person so far has gotten out of here alive. We all have to face God at one point.”

**Peter White:** “But do you not think that certain passages in The Bible inspired the Crusaders to act violently in defense of Christianity during the Middle
Ages? How do you explain the passage “I have come not to bring peace but a sword.”

Mirella Ionta: “Not that line again! You seem to be really nitpicking on the poetic words he chooses to convey his message with. If there is any metaphor used in regards to war and struggle, it means INNER WAR. As life goes on, you will find the real enemy is yourself, your own stubborn self, the ego, your darkness, your selfish desire, your materialistic attachments, your envy of God. When Jesus may refer to fighting, etc., he does not mean actually going and fight an “enemy” in the outside world. He means going deep inside yourself to fight and conquer over your own demons of darkness.”

Peter White: “Okay. Enough about the Crusades. Let’s talk about Adolf Hitler.”

Mirella Ionta: “From ignorance of the Bible to the nothingness of our existence purported by atheistic ideologies, which fueled a slew of wars and inhumanities in the modern age: Atheism is definitely not a good alternative to your anti-organized religion sentiment. A failed Christian is a Christian who attempts to follow the basic principles of Christianity and falls short of succeeding. Hitler was not even attempting to follow Christianity. He was simply not a Christian. If history books are partially accurate with regards to details about who he really was and what he really managed to do, he was clearly an atheist turned Satanist. In his age, atheism was intellectually fashionable amongst know-it-alls and aspiring artists. Atheists cancel out the possibility of the existence of God with logical argumentation. When you ask them, “Hey atheist, where do you think you are going to go after you die?” they will get defensive and say things like “There could be an afterlife but no God, or a God but no afterlife. There is no logical reason for the two to be causally connected.” These atheists rely heavily on their “sophisticated” but very uninspiring, logical faculties.”

Peter White: “Atheists also cannot justify morality. Logic can argue that a moral wrongdoing is right and a good act is wrong.”

Mirella Ionta: “Atheists will also try to justify morality through an appeal to emotion. Atheists, having no moral characters, will either
decide right and wrong using their own sentimental feelings as a reference or their faulty flip-flopper logical apparatuses. Atheists will build the following argument, thinking they are the genius intellectuals of the world: “God is all good and all powerful. Then He is powerful enough to do all good. There exists evil in the world. But if God is all good, why does evil exist in the world and if he is all powerful, why doesn’t he use his power to cancel evil with good?” So atheists will argue that God cannot be both all-good and all-powerful and therefore they somehow cancel out the possibility of God altogether. They cannot accept that God is not accountable for the evil on earth. He is all good and all powerful but he gives humans freedom to choose between evil and good. But the atheists will insist: “But if God knows evil is not good for us than why does he allow it to exist and humans to choose it?” I say, well, humans made it clear to Him at a very early point in their history as humans that they liked evil and kept on choosing it. We all know chips are bad for our health but they are still sold on the market because there is an ongoing demand for it. He will not use his power to force good on us when He knows we like evil sometimes and continuously demand it.”

**Peter White:** “Humans do not consciously like evil, the forces of evil are so strong that humans get trapped by them.”

**Mirella Ionta:** “Then if humans get trapped by evil unwillingly, how do you explain Mother Theresa, Francis of Assisi, Marguerite Bourgeoys and all the saints that walked this earth? There must be a choice at a point in one’s life whether to side with good or ally oneself with evil. Everyone is aware of Jesus and His teachings, yet people are choosing to go golfing, shopping, or dining out on Sundays. So humans are making it very clear to God that they are choosing false Lords.”

**Peter White:** “Speaking about worshiping many Lords, anti-Catholics claim that there are many pagan elements
in Catholicism. When the Roman Empire married paganism and Christianity, the door was opened for pagan doctrines to enter into the early Christian Church.”

**Mirella Ionta:** “Christianity replaced a pagan understanding of the universe during the Roman Empire. There was no marriage between the two. It is clear to a Christian Catholic that Jesus Christ eliminated the system of demigods and goddesses. Catholics worship Jesus Christ as the son of God and it is clear that Jesus is the only LORD who appeared on earth in a human form. Catholics do not have demigods and goddesses.”

**Peter White:** “Mass, one of the key traditions in Roman Catholicism, has components of sun worship rather than Christ-worship. Catholicism has declared Mary the queen of heaven. This reflects pagan goddess worship.”

**Mirella Ionta:** “Is your information taken from a drunken Fraternity Boy’s Masters Thesis which tries to discredit Catholicism by showing similarities between it and the beliefs or practices of ancient paganism? In doing just this, these skeptics commit serious logical fallacies. They will say that the wafers of Communion are round, just like the wafers of the sun worshippers of Baal. But pagans also used wafers shaped as ovals and triangles. The fact that a wafer is round does not make it connected with or rooted in paganism.”

**Peter White:** “But Christianity itself is simply a copycat of pagan myths: The incarnation of a divinity from a virgin, a venerated mother and child, just like Isis and Osiris, Isa and Iswara, Fortuna and Jupiter. The flames on the heads of the apostles were also seen as an omen from the gods in Roman poetry and heathen myths long before Pentecost. Also, Jesus is known as the ‘fish,’ just like the fish-God Dagon.”

**Mirella Ionta:** “Wow Peter. I feel sorry for these skeptics who read the Bible like they are picking out the dandruff off each strand of their hair. It must be a very frustrating experience. There is no real basis for the claim that Christianity is based on paganism. Because there is no Messiah in pagan religions, paganism will take you in
circles. Trying to connect Christianity with Paganism will take you in circles as well. Certainly in the Bible’s Old Testament, there is talk about the coming of a Messiah. The life and teachings of the Messiah is what the New Testament recounts. Christianity is based on accepting Jesus as the Messiah, who eliminates the system of worshiping demigods. Accepting Jesus as the Messiah breaks circular logic, enabling His follower to connect with God in a more convenient, logically linear, and accessible way.”

Peter White: “What about human evolution though? It contradicts the Biblical story of how humans were created.”

Mirella Ionta: “What about human evolution? No one said evolution and science were not allowed to exist alongside the belief in God and the Bible. One can sometimes accept scientists’ explanations about the universe. Other times, one can accept a Biblical understanding of the universe. However, one “scientific” theory that is ridiculously absurd and unacceptable is Charles Darwin’s theory that humans derive from apes. It is obvious human existence has a spiritual dimension. The ape theory does not explain how the human spirit sprouted from its spiritual source, which is certainly not the ape! But, yes, there certainly is evolution. Yes it is true: Different kinds of living organisms develop and diversify from earlier forms during their history on the earth. But how does that cancel out the belief in God? It never did and never will. God created humans and let his creations develop naturally, allowing them to adapt to their different environments in the physical world.”

Peter White: “In the past, the Church was so insecure about scientific findings of the universe, which did contradict a Biblical understanding of it, that people like Galileo, for example, were put on house arrest for having the courage to prove that earth circles
the sun and not the other way around as the Bible deceivingly tells. He is just one example of one scientist and intellectual who was condemned by the church for revealing the truth about the universe.”

Mirella Ionta: “The Catholic Church was extremely powerful then and they ruled that humans should not seek out answers in God’s universe as Galileo did with his telescope. Our scientists may have found the truth about our physical world and universe, but the fact that Galileo proved that the earth circles the sun, how does that help your life? Did it really enlighten you, Peter? Did it make what the mission of your life is clear for you? The fact that scientists of our present day are able to land a rocket on Mars, will this help you during your darkest hours? Does it fill your heart with eternal joy and bliss knowing that we sent a satellite to Neptune? As one who has strayed from The Bible in search of “answers” provided by science, the new age, modern ideologies, consumerism, political systems, etc., I returned to the Bible to find that everything I needed to know was in that little book anyway, free of charge!”

Peter White: “The debate has reached its abrupt close. I do not have any more questions and no further comments to add.”

Mirella Ionta: “And I will say Amen to that!”
In Iraqi popular tradition, the soul dissociates from the body the moment of death, tensile into space like a hidden bird. These birds, always accordingly to the Iraqi mythology, move to the other world ignoring or better avoiding any acknowledge of their connection with our world.

Our spirit that left us with those birds and want to heavens will never be seen again. Even though a fantasy, this tale describes in multiple ways the weight of the physical world, the lightness of the spirit (a bird can carry it) and the same time our struggle between the impossible and the eternal.

In fact in the end the bird absolutely disconnects from our physical world showing that eternity is something we cannot catch from our physical form.

The same time Sumerian traditions want a boat to carry the dead into a new world. In this new world they find food and drinks but this is depending on the generosity of the alive and the sacrifices they have done. Oddly there are sculptures describing this other world as old as since 3,000BC. So what the spirit really is and does it really have to do with death?
The Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca, describes that he saw once a flamenco dance contest. While all the dancers were young and strong suddenly appeared an old dancer, weak and fragile in the body everybody thought that it would impossible for him to perform an as tense dance as flamenco is. But there was a spirit inside this body, the creative spirit of the dancer that came out. And the old dancer did dance.

The flamenco dance of the old man was so tensed in the end that made Lorca’s hair to rise – as he himself describes. And the old dancer remained in Lorca’s poetry as an energetic, tensed and very creative spirit giving him inspiration and motivation.

The same spirit also inspired Lorca’s compatriot, Francisco Goya in his dark nightmarish drawings, it hunted war and peace, Napoleon’s campaigns and loses, characters on real life or art.

I mentioned Goya’s evil spirits and Lorca’s old dancer not to prove that either of them
were mad but to search the possibility that something – a spirit? – touched them and led them to dark and the same time creative places. And all through art, from Mozart to more contemporaries we meet those monsters that torture them.

Actually there is no satisfying realistic answer. Perhaps there is a soul that carries the memories of thousands years, the memories of our ancestors and their path on this world that transcribes in our minds as soul or monsters. Perhaps art is the way these spirits and monsters exhibit their scary presence in this world.

Paul Gauguin was trying to look away from his pain looking straight the pain in its eyes, but this is something you can see in his creations but not able to explain under the pretext of a mental illness. But the fear is there, realistically expressed in his painting, and the fear he feels is beyond time boarders, is the fear his ancestors felt, is the horror of war and pain his forefathers felt.

In a painting, Paul Gauguin looks at the pain as a bird escaping and while flying away rainbow wings open while a money and a parrot watch it as odd protectors. The body of the bird is full of wounds. But it is not the body that matters for Gauguin; the painter is satisfied because the bird can fly despite the pain, the rebel
spirit and the same time be connected with the mother forest through its protectors.

Again is the memories of the ancestors. Picasso’s cubism is it his inspiration or an evolution from the paint on the African masks? When you see the “Girls of Avignon”, if you watch carefully you will see African masks surfacing. The African masks represent the African people’s love for life and joy and this somehow has been crystalized through the masks and came to us in different forms still carrying the spirit of the ancients.

Maybe is just me, maybe is another Sumerian myth that wants aliens landing on earth and creating humanity thousands of thousands years ago, maybe is too many other things. But something for certain is that imagination or better inspiration in art proves that there is a spirit somewhere there that connects us with our past and our future, since both exist harmonically in all forms of art. And this diversity always existed in art, from the beginnings of time.

Both paintings in these two pages are By Ali Najjar
Medicine, once fully bound up with religion, retains a sacred dimension for many. Differing religious beliefs and practices can be divisive. Spirituality, however, links the deeply personal with the universal and is essentially unifying. Without boundaries, it is difficult to define, but its impact can be measured. (1) This is important because, although attendance in churches is low and falling, people increasingly (76% in 2000) admit to spiritual and religious experiences. (2)

The World Health Organization reports: “Until recently the health professions have largely followed a medical model, which seeks to treat patients by focusing on medicines and surgery, and gives less importance to beliefs and to faith—in healing, in the physician and in the doctor-patient relationship. This reductionist or mechanistic view of patients is no longer satisfactory. Patients and physicians have begun to realise the value of elements such as faith, hope, and compassion in the healing process.” In one study, 93% of patients with cancer said that religion helped sustain their hopes. (3) Such high figures deserve our attention.

A signal publication offers a critical, systematic, and comprehensive analysis of empirical research, examining relations between religion or spirituality and many physical and mental health conditions, covering more than 1200 studies and 400 reviews. (4) A 60-80% relation between better health and religion or spirituality is found in both correlational and longitudinal studies covering heart disease,
hypertension, cerebrovascular disease, immunological dysfunction, cancer, mortality, pain and disability, and health behaviours and correlates such as taking exercise, smoking, substance misuse, burnout, and family and marital breakdown. Psychiatric topics covered include psychoses, depression, anxiety, suicide, and personality problems. The benefits are threefold: aiding prevention, speeding recovery, and fostering equanimity in the face of ill health.

Especially interesting are the excellent results obtained in intractable conditions through teaching people coping methods based on meditation. (5) Qualitative research complements empirical studies, and “new paradigm” methods provide helpful detail about spirituality in clinical practice. (6), (7) Examples include questionnaires, (8) interviews, focus group studies, (9) and narrative based enquiries.

It is instructive to distinguish cure of symptoms from healing of people. (6), (7) The words “heal” and “whole” have common roots. Healing entails restoration of psychobiological integrity, with the implication of personal growth and a sense of renewal.

Spiritual values and skills are increasingly recognised as necessary aspects of clinical care, to be more openly discussed and taught. A textbook of nursing, for example, states: “In every human being there seems to be a spiritual dimension, a quality that goes beyond religious affiliation, that strives for inspiration, reverence, awe, meaning, and purpose even in those who do not believe in God. The
spiritual dimension tries to be in harmony with the universe, strives for answers about the infinite, and comes essentially into focus in times of emotional stress, physical illness, loss, bereavement, and death.” (10) Mental illness should be added to this list.

Guidance is available for doctors to assess spiritual needs and provide for healing even when they are unable to cure. (7) It may be especially cost effective if the hypothesis that to provide spiritual care affords reciprocal benefit proves true. If patients and their professional carers both gain, lower levels of conditions such as substance misuse and burnout can be forecast, with improvements in staff morale and hence recruitment and retention. Greasley et al’s cohort, however, observed that spiritual needs are not a priority for medical staff, relative to more tangible issues. (9) This is important because, for Nathan’s patients, spiritual care is an area perceived as necessarily involving all care providers. (11)

With much new research showing that prognosis is radically improved by spiritual care, (4) what are the hindrances to implementing it? Haines and Donald describe some general problems about getting evidence into practice. (12) McSherry gives more details where spirituality is concerned. (8) The problem areas are interrelated: education (lack of training, resulting in lack of knowledge or insight or confidence) and economics (lack of staff or time or resources), environment (lack of space or privacy), and personal obstacles (sensitivity or own belief systems). (8) These need addressing under
the two headings of clinical governance and continuing personal and professional development and can be remedied if given priority.

Compare spirituality with nutrition; neither is a subject that healthcare providers can take for granted. Inadequate nutrition is costly. If people are not fed properly, resistance weakens and wounds do not heal. Evidence is growing in volume and quality that this holds for spiritual sustenance too. (4)

The way forward is to give rein to natural inquiry, to rediscover and communicate openly about this vital area, and to foster the rhetoric of spirituality. Our managers, multidisciplinary colleagues, and—especially—our relatively few chaplains are natural coalition partners with whom to engage in this endeavour, together with our patients and their families.

According to Nathan, spiritual care promotes the healthy grieving of loss and the maximising of personal potential. (11) It provides a sense of meaning, resulting in renewed hope and peace of mind, enabling people to accept and live with otherwise insoluble problems. Physical and mental illnesses therefore provide all concerned with particular opportunities for healing, personal development, and spiritual growth. Improved outcomes naturally follow.

Many see religion and medicine as peripheral to each other, yet spirituality and clinical care belong together. The time is thus ripening for doctors to recall, reinterpret, and reclaim our profession’s sacred dimension.
References

5. Kabat-Zinn J. Full catastrophe living: using the wisdom of your body and mind to face stress, pain and illness—the program of the stress reduction clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center. New York: Delta Books; 1990.
12. Haines A, Donald A. Getting research findings into practice. BMJ. 1998;317:72–75. [PMC free article] [PubMed]
40 million children subjected to abuse each year. Suicide is the third leading cause of death among adolescents worldwide. 50% of severely disabled children in special homes in the Ukraine die before 18 years of age. Approximately 20% of women and 5–10% of men report being sexually abused as children, while 25–50% of all children report being physically abused. Statistics indicate that 3 million young girls are subjected to genital mutilation every year.
We Fought The Shadows, And The Shadows Ran.

The Blackened Bats In Darkened Caves.

The Wily Foxes In Forest Glens.
Shadows
By Likos Laios

The Creeping Sleep
Upon The Land.

We Fought The Shadows,
And The Shadows Ran.

Redemption In This Golden Land.

But rather to lead you from madness to sanity. To convince you that healing is superior to destroying the planet. That even the attempts at love are better than torture, terror and murder. That any victory for peace is greater than winning a history of wars. That kindness empowers the soul that is corrupted beyond itself by hatred. That honoring diversity throughout creation is antidote to the toxic consumption of everything, animate and inanimate.

Of course yes, I understand that madness is a status quo and it is easier and seems safer to remain as you are. That sanity requires change. That the evil habits of inhumanity have established their authority within the comfort zone of civilization. And that pretense, long before us, became more popular and profitable than honesty. That justice, life’s common salt, opens the way to dialogue and commensality.
And yet, yet still, I ask that you take a minute, one full minute only, to contemplate the face of a child without anger or bias, to caress a single blade of grass or flower’s petals, or to meditate on the antithetical balance and the generosity and longevity of a tree.

Then, shall we make a go of it together? Let us try, you and I. A simple beginning: to remove the blinding cinders of violence from your eyes, the thorns of vengeance from your heart, the serpents and the shadows and the hisses of fears and delusion from the intimate place where you live. And where we may in some tenderness of twilight-quiet sit down together over a cup of tea. To wonder there why we hesitated, and why it took us so long to feel joy in the presence of one another.
Murray Hunter

Dependent Origination as a Natural Governing Law

An essay that explains the concept of dependent origination and its place in Buddhist Dharma (teaching). Dependent origination is then described as a heuristic and discussed in relation to James Lovelock’s GAIA hypothesis, the solar system, the economic system, the social environment, event phenomena and entrepreneurial opportunity, consciousness and self concept, and the ethical standpoint.

Tony Zuvela

Berserk Alert

Berserk Alert is a collection of published in Ovi magazine cartoons from Tony Zuvela; including some unpublished. Over a hundred pages of alarmingly berserk humour.

Prof. Ernesto Paolozzi

Benedetto Croce: The Philosophy of History and the Duty of Freedom

Professor Ernesto Paolozzi’s book on Benedetto Croce, his ideas and his thoughts. Translation from Italian from Dr. Massimo Verdicchio

Dr. Emanuel Paparella

Aesthetic Theories of Great Western Philosophers

Professor Emanuel L. Paparella’s new book. In twenty chapters, twenty philosophers and their studies on art and aesthetics.

The Ovi Team

Mount Voio

Mount Voio is one of Greece’s most highly inhabited and forested mountains. Its rich ecosystems, which include numerous mixed forests, consist mainly of oaks, chestnut trees, beech trees, pines, firs and low bushes. Photographed by Ioli Petroulaki.

http://www.ovimagazine.com/cat/56