

The roots of Modern Spirituality

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By Merlyn

Why is pursuing spirituality such an important goal in the 1990s? What is spirituality anyway? Some definitions call it a sensitivity or attachment to religious values. Spiritual means relating to things consisting of spirit, which can include supernatural beings or phenomena. Beliefs about spirituality often lead to practices that are common to many religions such as meditation, prayer, daily ritual, and ascetic life styles.

The pursuit of spirituality is so important now, I feel, because we live in a time when many people are dissatisfied with both their mundane (physical) and spiritual lives. Ironically, it is still a fairly prosperous time compared with, say, the late 19th Century, but our hopes for better personal economic conditions have not been realized for too many of us. Social observers have long noted that people turn to religion when their economic hopes are dashed.

The pursuit of spirituality can follow many paths. I will briefly examine traditional Christian spirituality, the Creation Spirituality of Matthew Fox, gnostic and hermetic spirituality, Eastern spirituality, and finally the "rational spirituality" advocated by some secular humanists. Other spiritual paths including those of the Qabalah and New Age religion are omitted due to space limitations.

Each religious tradition is based on a certain cosmology and accompanying theology, so I will summarize these different beliefs. Cosmology describes our beliefs about the structure of the universe and how it came into being and can also can define how our individual lives fit into the big picture.

What cosmology you find acceptable depends on whether you consider the universe as being basically good, bad, or a mixture of good and bad. Dualism, the idea that the forces of Good and Evil or Light and Darkness interact to produce the world we know, is a concept based in Judeo-Christian traditions.

If you consider the universe, the earth and humans to be basically good, then you need an explanation for the "evil" that we too often see today in human actions. Your spiritual progress may depend on learning to deal with the Darkness inherent in your life.

Christian Spirituality

Much of traditional Christian spirituality is based on St Augustine's concept of 'original sin,' which he defined as a condition of being separated from God into which we are all born. Life's main spiritual goal is to re-establish contact with the transcendent God so we can ask Him to help us overcome our inherent state of sin. This spiritual path includes practices designed to show the God up-there that we truly regret our sinful state and thus do not deserve His eternal damnation when we die.

Time spent in prayer and meditation often is part of an attempt to communicate with this supreme Deity. The general self-denial the ascetic Christian imposes on himself/herself stresses his/her seriousness and dedication in trying to convince God that he/she should be included among the select group of 'saved' humans. Few, if any, Neo-Pagans accept this model of 'original sin' and its negative

spiritual consequences.

Creation Spirituality

The Creation Spirituality developed by present-day Christian theologian Matthew Fox represents an attempt to recapture the ecstasy felt by some medieval mystics (Julian of Norwich, Meister Eckhart, Hildegard of Bingen and several others). Fox believes that humans were originally blessed, not cursed with 'original sin' as traditional Christian theology teaches. This "goodness of creation" contrasts with another of St. Augustine's views, which is that the soul is at war with the body. "We are in God, God is in us," Fox writes. St. Augustine's idea that spirit is about soul and not body, is not a biblical teaching, according to Fox.

Fox defines the spiritual path as a process of letting go, becoming transformed, and then practicing compassion by getting involved in this world. "Spirituality is about heart knowledge and about awakening the being in us." Pantheism, the belief that all things are in God and God is in all things, includes Creation Spirituality.

"[E]very single person is a unique expression of the Cosmic Christ," according to Fox. The Christ "describes the pattern that connects us as just, loving, and essentially friendly toward the universe and all things, humans included." The driving force for our compassion is that we are connected with the world in both its both human and non-human aspects.

Fear is the biggest obstacle to spirituality, Fox goes on to say. No one owns spirit and no religious tradition has a monopoly on it. All spirituality is about becoming alive, and letting go of pain, enemies, and guilt.

Fox recognizes four paths of Creation Spirituality, which include: the Via Positiva - creation is a blessing, so enjoy it; the Via Negativa - experiencing the darkness of letting go and letting be; the Via Creativa - using creativity as the basic spiritual discipline; and the Via Transformativa - developing compassion and acting in accord with this compassion.

Gnosticism and Hermeticism

Gnosticism, an ancient Greek philosophy, was incorporated into a major branch of Christianity that thrived from around 100 C.E. to 350 C.E., when it was suppressed as a heresy by the Roman Church. As a religion gnosticism was characterized by the conviction that matter is evil and emancipation comes through gnosis or knowledge. Much later in the early 19th Century, the Christian mystic and Romantic poet William Blake clearly expressed this gnostic concept when he wrote that '[n]ature is the work of the Devil.' However, some other gnostic concepts are found in today's NeoPagan movement, despite gnosticism's hostility toward nature.

Gnosticism has a complex cosmology with many different levels of creation and governing deities, which were arranged in hierarchical order going from the ultimate source down to humans. One gnostic creation story says that in the beginning there existed only the transcendental God, a male principle, who existed for eternities in repose with a female principle, the Ennoia (Thought). Together they created the Mind (male) and Truth (female) who in turn created thirty male-female pairs known as Aeons. The last and youngest Aeon, Sophia (Wisdom), became possessed by a passion to know and comprehend the greatness of the unknown Father. Without the knowledge or consent of her male counterpart, she projected from her own being a flawed creation, the Demiurge,

who imagined himself to be the absolute God. For some Christian gnostics, the Demiurge was the Old Testament God Yahweh or Jehovah.

According to *The Elements of Gnosticism*, psychologist Carl Jung was also interested in gnosticism and in 1917, he explored gnostic ideas in his book *Seven Sermons to the Dead*.

Jung referred to the obtainment of gnosis, or psychic wholeness, as 'individuation'. Individuation is the goal of resolving opposites and maintaining the self apart from them, which means not being governed by thoughts and ideas, 'because thinking alienates us from our true nature.'

In Jungian psychology every dynamic component of our psyche has its 'shadow.' God and Devil correspond to 'fullness and emptiness, [or] generation and destruction.' Evil is part of the dynamic interactivity of the above powerful forces. There can be no obtainment of gnosis, no individuation, without submission to the raw energy of the life force.

Jung is important to the NeoPagan movement because of his work with gods as psychological archetypes, the concept of the anima and animus residing within each of us, and the concept of a collective consciousness that we can all tap. These three concepts are useful for those Pagans who do not literally believe that there are gods and goddesses floating around in the heavens.

An early basis for gnosticism was the *Corpus Hermeticum*. The presently-surviving books of this huge work were written between 100 C.E. and 300 C.E. They are clearly gnostic, but contain hardly any references to Jewish or Christian traditions, unlike the writings of numerous Christian gnostics. Their reputed source, Hermes Trismegistos, was a mythical combination of Hermes and Thoth.

Hermeticism resurfaced as a profound influence upon Renaissance thought more than a millennium after its initial flowering in ancient Alexandria. Its revival in the 15th Century was tolerated by the Roman Catholic Church, because it did not challenge their orthodox religion directly and did not seek a mass following. Renaissance Hermeticists in Italy and the rest of Europe were a marginalized community of intellectuals and esoterics.

The Hermetic gnostic tradition relied heavily on magic and occultism as does much of Neo-Paganism. Hermeticists believed that the soul's progress was dependent on frustrating or appeasing magical powers by applying the correct magic toward them. Hermetic magic was the science of working with these powers. Much of today's NeoPagan witchcraft is based on Hermetic materials, according to Rosemary Ellen Guiley in *The Encyclopedia of Witches and Witchcraft*.

Thus Gnostic spirituality has come down to us through esoteric Hermetic and Christian traditions and psychological theories. The spiritual practice it suggests is the pursuit of a hidden knowledge that is available to all of us. Dealing with the inner dark forces within ourselves is part of this spiritual path, in which we strive to liberate ourselves from our physical selves by obtaining and using the correct knowledge or gnosis.

Eastern Spirituality

Eastern spirituality is based on the complex cosmology and theology of Hinduism and its offshoot, Buddhism. A belief in reincarnation is central, but it is viewed not as a reward but rather a punishment for not having become sufficiently enlightened in this lifetime. Various ascetic practices are often followed, not to connect with God, but rather to focus our attention on our own spiritual

development.

The complete evolution of each individual usually is worked out through a series of reincarnations. Karma is the Hindu concept of fate; evil actions result in rebirth in a more evil life, while good actions bring future lives of increasing virtue and happiness. The state of Nirvana or cosmic non-being is the ultimate spiritual goal, in which the individual dissolves into the infinite.

Buddhism also considers that the goal of the religious life is to escape from the cycle of rebirth and achieve Nirvana. Buddha, "the Awakened One," entered this blissful, eternal, spiritual realm of being. The Three Fold [Spiritual] Path consists of practicing meditation, morality and wisdom. In Buddhism any advanced practitioner might become a bodhisattva (Buddhist saint) through devotion to the holy life.

Theosophy, an alternative religion popular in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, is a synthesis of ideas borrowed from gnosticism, Buddhism and Hinduism, and the Qabalists. Theosophy states that human souls develop their inner potentials, free themselves from matter and ultimately return to the Source (from whence they came) with an increased consciousness. This may take many cycles of reincarnation. Theosophical spiritual practices are designed to gradually free ourselves from our present lower state of consciousness.

Rational Spirituality

Rational spirituality is an approach that does not depend on the expected rewards or feared punishments to be reaped in some future life. Instead it is practiced because of the enjoyment it provides now. It offers a spiritual approach that is compatible with the various self-help movements popular among secular middle-class professionals.

To learn more about the rationalist approach to spirituality, I interviewed Dale Arnik, minister of the Los Alamos, New Mexico Unitarian Church for nearly 20 years. He has a Ph.D. in religion and taught at Rocky Mountain College in Montana before coming to Los Alamos. He was raised as a fundamentalist Christian, but is now an atheist who is fascinated with religion. I interviewed him on a warm afternoon in late July in his study at the Unitarian Church.

Merlyn (M): "Why is spirituality so important now?"

Dale Arnik (DA): "The Boomer generation has reached middle age and is still not satisfied. Now they are looking for religion and spirituality to make them feel better. Remember that this was called the Me generation.

M. "What is spirituality?"

DA. "Many people are talking about many things in a variety of ways. Spirit is a vital principle of life, the breath of God, air, or wind. Spirit is more than simply being physical. Consciousness is a part.

"Spirit is the psyche in modern terms. Spirituality is anything that deepens or broadens the psyche. Spiritual practice involves exercises to make your spirituality broaden and deepen.

"Lots of psychological testing is available to characterize us. The Myers-Briggs test is a psychological profile. Some people are more introverted or extroverted, rational or emotional, senses-oriented or intuitive.

"We develop one of these styles. Spirituality is an attempt to take your style and go deeper with it. Deeper means whatever feels like development in that area. A sensing person becomes an artist. A feeling person becomes an actor or

empathetic counselor.

“The other path is broadening rather than deepening. You look at neglected areas in your life. Carl Jung said the midlife crisis is to realize the shadow side and look at undeveloped parts of you.

“Rationalism is a legitimate spiritual path. The search for rationality is based on the fact that there is always more to know.”

M. “Is ‘non-rationality’ just a different world view?”

DA. “If one deals with the non-rational or what can not be rationalized then any nonsense will do. A religious search is part of the basic human condition, which has a variety of discontents built in.”

M. “ We die.”

DA. “Ordinary consciousness is troublesome. It is “dis-eased” about itself and its world. The Buddhists are right, we cling too much. They have techniques for easing one’s dissatisfactions with life.

“Christians make original sin the cause of disease. We inherit it and we are all doomed. How to get through this world, to get a [better] life beyond [has] dominated Christianity.

“An analysis that something is basically wrong leads to the question of what to do. Techniques of transcendence lift you over normal human consciousness and stifling ordinariness. Everyday mysticism is losing yourself in that ordinariness in work, in being in and of the moment. Everyday mystery is better than cosmic mysticism.”

M. “Where is this new spirituality leading us to?”

DA. “I am frightened but not fatally pessimistic. A new Dark Age can come again if the wrong people win. People are open to [a] non-rational rebelling against a rationality they don’t understand.”

M. “Rationality promised us control of nature through technology and a resulting wealth and prosperity. It has not delivered on that promise.”

DA. “Rationality is a time-tested belief system that has reproducibility. It is the best system for determining what is trustworthy. The occult system doesn’t work as well.

“If reason and science failed, what else is there? A contempt for reason and science is the dangerous part. Science is the only belief system that is self-corrective [through verifiable experimentation].”

Conclusion

The above sampling of selected spiritual paths provides Neo-Pagans with many possible choices. However, we have no comforting reassurance that one of the above paths, or another other path not mentioned, is the right one for us. Our pursuit of spirituality involves making conscious and sometimes difficult choices among many competing religious doctrines and practices.

Dennis Carpenter of Circle Sanctuary recently wrote that “the experience of Nature communion represents the core spiritual experience for many Pagans.” For some Pagans, everyday life is regarded as consecrated, and each moment of life is

recognized as a spiritual experience. In contrast, many other Pagans consider the sacred as a separate realm, of which they are not conscious most of the time.

For those of us who are practicing Pagans, celebrating Sabbats and Full Moons is just a beginning. Figuring out how to apply our religion to our world in between these seasonal and lunar-inspired parties is a crucial part of our development of spirituality.

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