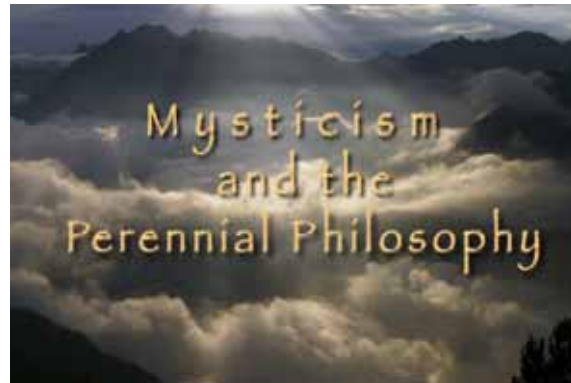




BEYOND THEOLOGY



“Mysticism and the Perennial Philosophy”

(#109)

Host: Have you ever heard of the perennial philosophy? Do you know what it is? Stay tuned and see how it relates to the mystic's vision.

Announcer: Production funding for this program has been provided in part by the Shumaker Family Foundation – promoting social and environmental justice, education, spirituality and the arts.

Host: With innovations in transportation and communication, the world has in effect become a smaller place than it used to be. It's easier for people to travel and to see what's happening in other parts of the world. In the process, people of different religious faiths have been rubbing shoulders with each other more often and sometimes coming into conflict. This has stimulated a greater interest in the study of other religions. Huston Smith published a well-known text on world religions back in 1958. In this program, we explore the views of this mystic philosopher and his perennial quest for truth.

Huston Smith (Emeritus Professor of Philosophy and Religion):
From as far back as I can remember, what I most wanted ... outside of family and the intimacy there ... was truth, but with a capital T -- The Truth about the ultimate nature of reality.

Narrator: Born in China in the spring of 1919, Huston Smith grew up in a rural Chinese community, where his parents served as missionaries for the Methodist Church.

Huston Smith: Yes. My parents were missionaries. And actually, I'm third generation of missionary parents because she was born in China, too, of missionary parents that went out in the 19th century. But it's true, I was there until I came over here for college.

Narrator: Living in the heart of Eastern civilization, Huston recalls that his family was the only one in the village that came from the West. Although his mother was born in China, his father had grown up on a farm in Missouri, where Huston would later attend college. Up to that point, he assumed that he would follow in his father's footsteps.

Huston Smith: Oh, I did. You know, I grew up in a town where I had only one adult, male role model -- my father. And so I assumed that missionaries were what American boys grew up to be. Well, I came over with the intention that I was just going to get my credentials and then I would go back. However, I had not reckoned on the dynamism of the West. Never mind that it was Fayette, Missouri -- this was my landing pad -- population 3,000 and Central Methodist College, enrollment 600 ... compared with Podunk, China, it was a Big Apple -- the bright lights and the big time. I mean, cars, telephones, radios, even one motion picture theater. And it only took about two weeks for me to see clearly I wasn't going to go back and stagnate in rural China.

Narrator: At Central Methodist College, Huston majored in religion and philosophy. In the beginning, he planned to become a minister after he graduated. Then, in the spring of his junior year, he experienced a revelation that changed his plans. He still clearly recalls the night when he returned from a stimulating discussion with some classmates at the home of their professor.

Huston Smith: My mind was getting excited. And on the way back, we kept on talking and when we got to the dormitory, four or five of us just stood in the hallway still discussing hammer and tong -- does God exist, does God not exist? And then at midnight we went to bed. But my brain still kept going. I couldn't sleep. And so I would estimate about two o'clock, why, all I can say is it detonated. And ideas became visible, palpable. And I knew then that I was not going to be a minister. I still respect the vocation. But you have to run an organization, pastoral counseling and this sort of thing, raising budget. It would take too much time away from my ideas. So again, no vocational crisis -- I would be a professor of philosophy and religion. And that has held in place ever since.

Narrator: Following graduate studies at the University of Chicago, Huston Smith moved out to California to write his dissertation. He was living in Berkeley when he came into contact with the esoteric world of mysticism, which immediately captured his imagination. He found a wealth of mystic revelations in a book written by Aldous Huxley.

Huston Smith: I'm glad you mentioned him because his book *The Perennial Philosophy* had a profound effect on me. At the University of Chicago Divinity School, which was basically Protestant, wasn't ... mysticism was not in fashion then. In fact, they had a pretty low regard for it. I mean ... four undergraduate years in philosophy of religion, five graduate, and hadn't read a mystic. That could not happen today. Mysticism is in, but then it was not. And I'm sure that the mystics were probably listed in the suggested reading list, but whoever gets around to that? But when I came upon *The Perennial Philosophy*, that changed my mind. And at Chicago, my mentor was ... the phrase was naturalistic theist, that is, naturalistic -- meaning this universe that science tells about is all there is -- and theist is to spot within nature in the broadest sense what is most important and that we call divine. Well, I went ... graduated from the University of Chicago an ardent naturalistic theist. And then ... until I came upon *The Perennial Philosophy*.

Narrator: *The Perennial Philosophy* is not comprised of writings by professional philosophers and scholars. It's an anthology featuring insights expressed by mystics and sages from different cultures and different times.

Seyyed Nasr: Many people have found the responses of the perennial philosophy as being extremely satisfying.

Narrator: A professor of Islamic Studies at George Washington University, Seyyed Nasr sees the perennial philosophy at the heart of all traditional philosophies, tracing the phrase itself back to the 16th century.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Professor of Islamic Studies, George Washington University): The term itself was used for the first time in the West, as far as we know, by the librarian of the library of the Vatican in 16th Century -- Agostino Steucho -- and was later on used by Leibniz. And everybody thought Leibniz had first used it. In one of his letters, Leibniz, the great German philosopher, writes that "I don't follow this or that, I'm the follower of the *philosophia perennis*," in Latin. The term was then claimed by many different groups. But the real, you might say, centrality of the perennial philosophy and its depth was demonstrated by the people who are called the traditional writers -- starting with René Guénon, the great French metaphysician, and then Ananda Coomaraswamy, Frithjof Schuon, others -- all of whom have spoken of the perennial philosophy as understood as perennial in the sense non-historical -- truth which has survived over the ages, concerning the nature of reality, of the ultimate divine reality, of cosmic reality and the microcosmic reality -- all of them, which have manifested themselves in various great religious traditions in their sapiential aspect, whether it be the Vedanta or Islamic philosophy or Mahayana or Neo-Confucian philosophy in China and Augustinianism and Thomism in the West and so forth and so on. And this way of understanding the perennial philosophy was given a popular twist by the late

British writer Aldous Huxley, who wrote the book called *The Perennial Philosophy*. He was not a perennialist in the sense that I am. That is, he did not really accept the traditional point of view, but he was interested in what he considered to be the perennial philosophy. And because he was a very famous novelist, when he brought out the book *The Perennial Philosophy*, it made the term more popular.

Narrator: As Huxley put it, "the perennial philosophers are primarily concerned with liberation and enlightenment" – helping others awaken to the divinity within and around them. It only took one reading of *The Perennial Philosophy* to dramatically change Huston Smith's outlook on life.

Huston Smith: In that one reading, my naturalistic theism collapsed like a house of cards and I've been a mystic, not I should make a very important distinction -- in worldview, but attainment is another matter. And I don't make any great claim about being a mystic in attainment, but in understanding -- that's my position.

Seyyed Nasr: It is not enough to talk about these things. We are a mind, but we're not *only* a mind. This doctrine ... this truth ... has to be wed to spiritual practice. And that is why Schuon oftentimes uses the term *religio perennis*. *Religio perennis* or the *sophia perennis*, in a sense, compliments the *philosophia perennis*. Ultimately, they are the same, but in order to avoid the error that we can sit down for the next 50 years and think about the ultimate reality and then think that we've reached there. The spiritual life is much more complicated than that and requires of us our whole being and not only our mind.

Narrator: The mystics speak ... when they choose to speak ... of the mystery of life – that which we can never fully comprehend. Huston Smith, in *his* effort to explain what the mystics represent, says that human beings are in essence transitional creatures.

Huston Smith: Transitional creatures in that we need to understand, intuitively, and more important, flood our lives with the fact that we have the breath of God -- the divine spark is the most important element and bring it to pervade our lives. And to the extent that we succeed in doing that, then our lives are fulfilled. So that's the basic meaning of our being transitional creatures.

Narrator: Huston Smith is not alone in thinking that there's a transitional quality to human nature. The futurist and filmmaker Peter Russell, who also has studied mysticism and religion, believes that they hold the key to understanding where we're heading as a species. He maintains that we're on the cusp of a significant transition in human evolution, being accelerated by the convergence of diverse cultures and religions.

Peter Russell (Futurist): For the first time in history, we have access to all the world's spiritual traditions. If you were born 200 years ago, you'd have just had access to those in your particular culture and the only teachers you had would probably be any, you know, wise people that happened to be in your community. That was it ... and perhaps reading some books. But even then, the books would have been from your own particular culture. Now we have access to the world and all its spiritual traditions, and just in the last 30, 40, 50 years going back and really delving deeply into Eastern traditions, into Tibetan traditions, into Indian traditions, which we've only just recently discovered. I mean in the last 200 years, well I think it's just the last 50 years, we've actually really gone in and begun to uncover what they're saying. And that, I think, is what's going to take us into our next evolutionary phase.

Narrator: In his book *Waking Up in Time*, Peter Russell makes reference to an evolutionary model of spirituality developed in the 1930s by the French Jesuit priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, someone with whose work Huston Smith is also well acquainted.

Huston Smith: Teilhard de Chardin said everything that rises converges. And even though we're talking metaphysically because God and spiritual matters are outside of geography, but ... so we eventually get to a point, which is like a mathematical point -- no extension, and yet it has every virtue elevated to infinite degree and they all converge in that mathematical point.

Peter Russell: He called it the omega point -- the end point of human evolution. He saw it as all human beings waking up to their essential divinity. He saw it as thousands of years in the future because he hadn't seen what television and computers were going to do. Well, just at the end of his life, he saw what television could do and he saw computers. He said when he saw the first computer he said, 'This might bring the omega point much faster.' But I think that's what's happening now. Now we've got the internet and communication abilities. We're accelerating towards that point of collective awakening.

Seyyed Nasr: So this is a time to pay attention to what the perennial philosophy says about the nature of reality, because surely the present understanding of the nature of reality, which is called either modernism or post-modernism, is confronting us with immense challenges, to put it mildly. And it's strange that now that we really have just a few years to live on the earth if we don't change our relation to the environment. In a sense what we have been saying all the time is now taken much more seriously with many people. Now that we are about to commit mass suicide, and many people think we only have a decade left. Some people think it's already too late -- we're all going to burn to death and global warming and all these things -- I don't want to be alarmist, but the ambience is such that it's easier now to talk about these matters than 50 years ago.

Narrator: With all the conflicts taking place in the world today and all the challenges we face, it's a very fearful time for many people. The world is changing dramatically. It's not at all clear where it will lead. Change in itself can be unsettling, and resistance to change often results in even greater anxiety.

Peter Russell: So much fear is created because we hold on to things. We hold on to ... 'I want this to stay this way; I don't want this to happen.' And I think so much of what goes wrong in the world comes out of fear-driven activities. So I see when we begin en masse to make that next step in evolution and collectively recognize ... not just understand it, but collectively free ourselves, wake ourselves up, make that inner transformation, then I think we can move into a world which will be totally different in the way we operate. I don't know what it will look like, but the basic motivations of people will have changed. We won't be fighting each other. I don't necessarily mean fighting each other physically, but we won't be competing so much for what people think about us or getting our status, that sort of thing. We'll be in a much more compassionate, understanding mode of consciousness with regard to each other and not wanting to take so much from the world either. And I think it's that sort of shift that we need.

Narrator: In pursuing his understanding of world religions and mystic traditions, Huston Smith has chosen not to remain aloof and to study them from a distance. He actively engages in practices such as yoga and meditation in order to strengthen his connection with what he refers to as "the breath of God."

Huston Smith: And that breath of God is the deepest element within us. However, it is buried deep in our being. And we don't have ... except mystics can -- those experiential mystics -- can zoom down into that. And the point of meditation is to come closer to doing that.

Peter Russell: And on the personal level, I think more and more people are realizing we have so much as individuals. We can have almost anything we want. And we're beginning to realize that having yet another DVD player or whatever it is doesn't actually make us any more fulfilled. And so what we're seeing is this widespread shift throughout the culture of people beginning to look towards the more inner, spiritual, mystical traditions to improve the quality of their life. And I think that is the most fascinating change, and that's happening right now. I saw figures the other day, something like 20 million people in the U.S. now practice yoga, which is just the beginning point for many people. It may just be stretching their limbs for a start, but gradually they're opening up to doing inner work to begin to change themselves on the inside. And there's many other people who are doing other things besides yoga, so there's this widespread movement of people beginning to look inside. And

that's coming at just the time we need it. And that's growing. It's growing faster and faster and faster. And I think that's going to be the next major trend -- is more and more people putting a focus on their own inner awakening.

Narrator: While meditation, prayer and various other techniques are employed to cultivate and nourish one's connection with divinity, other avenues can bring an awareness of what Huston Smith calls "the intuitive discernment of the Infinite." He finds it expressed in many different ways – some of them poetic. A favorite verse comes from Edna St. Vincent Millay: "The soul can split the sky in two and let the face of God shine through."

Huston Smith: I think that's wonderful ... because I do believe that after death, why we're issued ... ushered and welcomed into an infinite world, which includes infinite understanding. But until then, why our job is to enlarge ours.

Host: According to the perennial philosophy, this type of mystical experience is not confined to internal explorations of consciousness, but may be encountered anywhere, at any time. As Aldous Huxley writes: "The universe is an everlasting succession of events; but its ground ... is the timeless now of the divine Spirit." Such expressions point to the nature of the experiences that might be encountered beyond theology. I'm Charles Atkins, Jr. Thanks for being with us.

(Comments during credit roll)

Host: Join us for a special edition of *Beyond Theology* as we travel to Montreal and participate in a global congress of the world's religions. We'll hear from some of the participants and learn about the role of religion in a post-911 world.

Shirin Ebadi (through interpreter): Since every violent action creates a more violent reaction, the world today is in an abyss of hostility.

Rabbi David Rosen: The battle between the godly and the godless ... seeing myself and my own as the righteous against the evil on the other side.

Karen Armstrong: But now that we know that we're living in one world, we have to not do to other nations what we would not like done to ourselves.

Host: A global congress of the world's religions coming up on a special edition of *Beyond Theology*.

Announcer: Production funding for this program has been provided in part by the Shumaker Family Foundation – promoting social and environmental justice, education, spirituality and the arts.



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