

The Esoteric Unity Of World Religions

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Introduction

The religions we know today as Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have their historical roots in the time between 800-200 B.C.E. During this period in history we find Confucius and Lao-tse in China, the Upanishads and Buddha in India, Zarathustra in Persia, the Old Testament Prophets in Palestine, Homer, the Philosophers, and tragedians in Greece. But the source of religion is not to be found here within history. Even though we can trace the historical origins of specific forms of religion to a certain time period, religions themselves are meant to function as links to an eternal original source outside of, or in the background of, history.

The word 'religion' comes from the Latin, *religio*, which means re-linking or re-union, linking or uniting with the whole or the source. The Sanskrit equivalent is *yoga*, which also means linking or joining and is related to the English word *yoke*.¹ Yoke is associated with disciple or practice. Religions represent connecting links, connecting our separate lives with all that is by means of certain disciplines or practices. Most of the world religions explicitly acknowledge ancient eternal wisdom as their foundation. The ancient collection of songs and poems, which are known as the Vedas, are said to take their roots in ancient times at the very beginning of human speech.

In India two classes of scripture are recognized: the *shruti* or inspired writings, which are their own authority, since they are the product of unmediated insight into ultimate Reality; and *smriti*, which are based on the *shruti* and derive from them what authority they have.² The Vedas are *shruti*, that which has been "heard," they are the products of

revelation, an 'unveiling' of the truth. They are also called *nitya*, 'eternal', signifying that they do not derive from this world of time and change, but are reflections of the eternal. The Vedas are *apaurusey*, "without human authorship," they are expressions of the eternal word.³

The Upanishads come at the end of the Vedic period (500BCE) and form the basis of the Hindu texts called the Vedanta – the end (*anta*) of the Vedas. The word 'Upanishad' means "sitting down with" and indicates that these collections of writings are to be used to transmit from teacher to student truths that transcend any particular time, place, political or social situation. Hinduism, the religion of the Upanishads, links humanity to the ancient timeless wisdom revealed in the songs and poems of the Vedas. It says in the Bhagavad Gita "I am born in every age to protect the good, to destroy evil, and to re-establish the law."⁴

Similarly, other religions acknowledge that their core precepts are timeless, rather than new and unrelated to any other source than themselves:⁵

Buddhism: All Buddhas of the ten parts of the universe enter the one road of Nirvana. Where does that road begin?
(Zen Buddhist koan)

Confucianism: The Master said, "I have transmitted what was taught to me without making up anything of my own. I have been faithful to and loved the ancient ones." (Analects of Confucius, 7.1)

Judaism: And Moses said unto God, "Behold, when I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them, The God of your fathers hath sent me unto you; and they shall say to me, What is his name? What shall I say unto them?" And God said unto Moses, "I AM THAT I AM;" and he said, "Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, 'I AM hath sent me unto you.'" (Exodus 3: 13-14)

Christianity: Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son. (Hebrews, 1.1-2)

Islam: Nothing is said to you (Muhammad) except what was said to the messengers who came before you. (The Koran, 41.43)

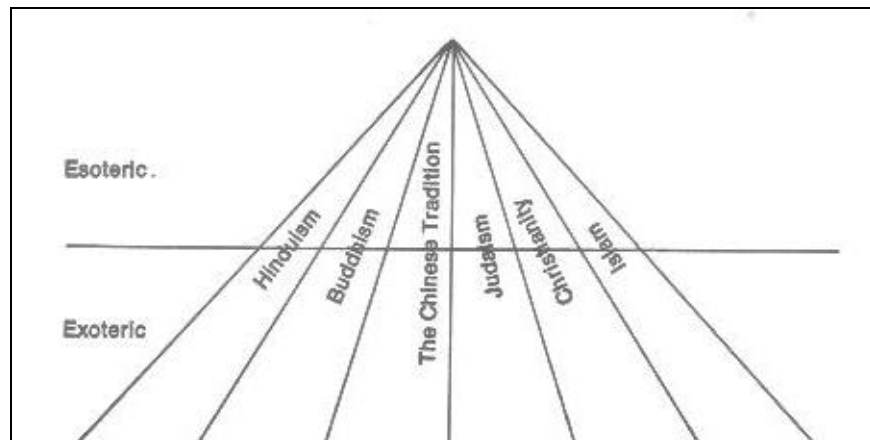
Who or what is God, "I AM THAT I AM," that is born in every age? And what is the message being transmitted? What is the one road or path and where does it began? What is the common core of the world religions? We know that they differ, sometimes drastically, in their specific beliefs and practices. Therefore, what unites them must be a general frame stripped of specific details and concrete content. Just as each individual human is unique and differs from each other in the details and particulars of their physical form yet they share a common skeletal structure, so too the world religions are alike at heart or in essence, that is, esoterically, while differing in content, that is, exoterically.

Esoteric Unity

Esoteric knowledge is achieved through intuition which is direct and active participation in divine knowledge. The esoterist is conscious of the colorless essence of light and its character of pure luminosity; a given religious belief, on the other hand, will assert that light is a specific color - red not green and another belief will assert the opposite. Both will be right insofar as they identify light from darkness but not insofar as they insist on a particular color to the exclusion of the entire spectrum.⁶

The fundamental distinction between religions is in the way in which the esoteric is

articulated. Thus the distinction between religions is not represented by a line that divides religion's historical manifestations vertically, or like a family tree, Hindus from Buddhists from Christians from Muslims, and so on. The dividing line is horizontal and occurs but once, cutting across the historical religions.⁷ Above the line is esoterism, below exoterism.



The founders of the great traditions underwent a series of profound spiritual experiences. Their revelations, their direct spiritual experiences, were not reasoned theories about the creation of the world or about sin and redemption, but rather direct apprehensions of the Divine (Spirit, Emptiness, Deity, the Absolute). These were apprehensions of the direct union or even identity of the individual and Spirit, a union that is not to be thought of as a mental belief but lived as a direct experience. This direct realization confers a great liberation, rebirth, or enlightenment on the soul immersed in that extraordinary union, a union that is the ground, the goal, the source, and the salvation of the entire world.⁸

Levels of Being

The experience of unity or oneness is at the heart of all religions. The esoteric unity of world religions is an experience of unity in which knower and known are one. It is important to realize that this "one" is not a numerical oneness, religions do not lose their individuality in the One. As Rabbi David Cooper explains: "The Oneness of Ein Sof, the Oneness that is referred to in the Shema ("Listen Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One"), is a paradoxical Oneness that defies all relationship to the duality of time and space, including numbers themselves. This Oneness is not related at all to the number one." ⁹ It is a paradoxical Oneness in that it is both One and Many. But paradox is only a problem for reason, intuition embraces the unity. Intuition grasps the whole in all its parts.

Reason, which tells us that the One cannot be Many, proceeds discursively through language, and like a bridge, joins two banks, knower and known, without removing the river between them. In Sanskrit one who knows in this mode is *evamvit*, a Comprehensor, or esoterist, one who has "verified" in her own person.¹⁰

My Me is God, nor do I recognize any other Me except my God.

St. Catherine of Genoa

The knower and the known are one. Some people imagine that they should see God, as if He stood there and they here. This is not so. God and I, we are one in knowledge.

Eckhart

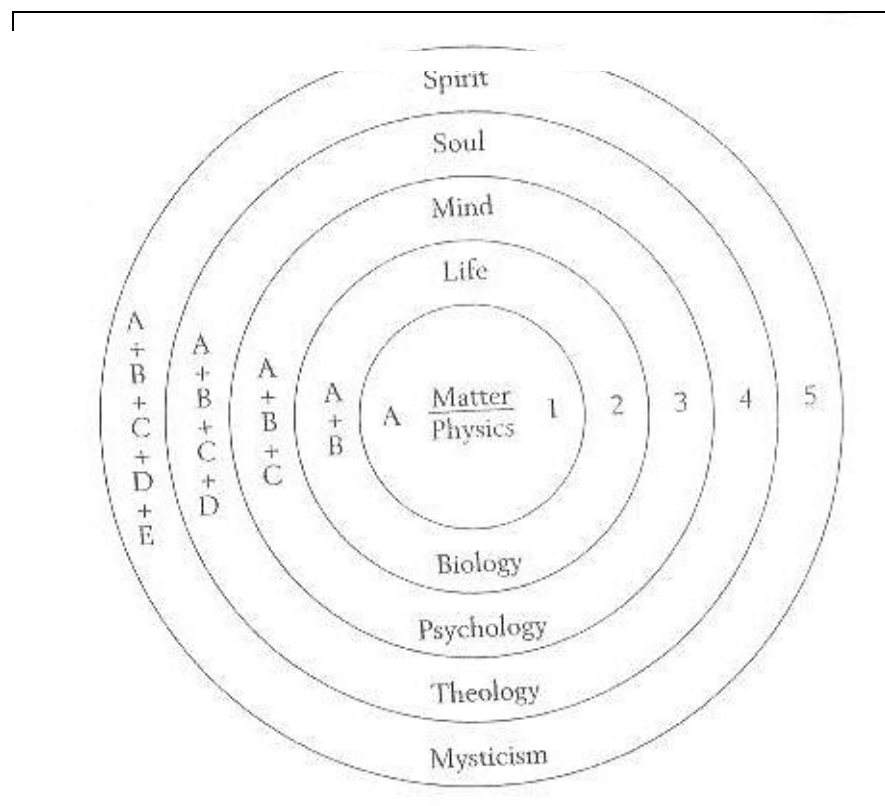
When the Ten Thousand things are viewed in their oneness, we return to the Origin and remain where we have always been.

Sen T'sen

Although it is often difficult to convey the nature of the experience of Unity, it is

almost universally said to reveal the structure or pattern of the universe. This structure, the esoteric unity underlying the various world religions, has been called "The Great Chain of Being" by philosophers and "The Hierarchy" by theosophists -- the universe appears as an infinite series of links in a chain, a hierarchy of beings in which every possible form is actualized (or actualizing). This structure allows for unity and difference, the one and the many, and gives us an image of the inclusivity of the "Absolute One."

Ken Wilber gives us a more contemporary expression of this ancient universal wisdom. He describes reality as a rich tapestry of interwoven levels, reaching from matter to body to mind to soul to spirit. "Each senior level 'envelops' or 'enfolds' its junior dimensions – a series of nests within nests within nests of Being – so that every thing and event in the world is interwoven with every other, and all are ultimately enveloped and enfolded by Spirit, by God, by Goddess, by Tao, by Brahman, by the Absolute itself."¹¹ The idea that each senior level envelops or enfolds its junior dimensions is also expressed



by saying that each level transcends and includes the preceding level. Thus Spirit transcends but includes soul, which transcends but includes the vital body, which transcends but includes matter.

Every single religious tradition does not have exactly this scheme of matter, body, mind, soul, spirit. Some traditions have only three basic levels - usually body, mind, and spirit. The levels forming the basis of the earliest Shamanic traditions are earth, human, and heaven. This three-level scheme reappears in the Hindu and Buddhist notion of the three great states of being: *gross* (matter and body), *subtle* (mind and soul), and *causal* (spirit). Many traditions, such as the theosophical, have extensive subdivisions breaking down into five, seven, twelve, or even more levels and sublevels. But the basic point remains essentially identical: reality is a series of nests within nests, reaching from matter to mind to Spirit, with the result that all beings and all levels are ultimately enfolded in the all-pervasive and loving embrace of an ever-present spirit.¹²

In order to understand each level, the knower's consciousness must be able to shift from level to level. This is analogous to climbing a ladder, each time seeing a larger view but not leaving behind the earlier/lower knowledge.¹³ This describes the process of "consciousness raising" which involves expanding consciousness to be more and more inclusive. As our knowledge increases in this way, we ourselves change and as we change our knowledge changes. Knowing is a function of being.¹⁴ When there is a change in the being of the knower, (climbing to a higher rung on the ladder), there is a corresponding change in the nature and amount of knowing.

Each level of reality has a specific branch of knowledge associated with it (indicated in the diagram above). Physics studies matter. Biology studies vital bodies. Psychology

and philosophy address the mind. Theology studies the soul and its relation to God. And mysticism studies the formless Godhead or pure Emptiness, the radical experience of Spirit beyond even God and the soul.

Pitfalls and Problems

It is important to address some of the confusions and pitfalls in talking about levels of knowing and being. The idea that reality is multileveled and that there are levels of knowing often leads to misunderstanding and difficulty. In the first place, "levels imply space, space entails distance, and distance spells separation. But separation is what religion seeks to overcome."¹⁵

Spatial metaphors are always dangerous, though unavoidable, in Theology. In space if A is touching B then B must be touching A. In the spiritual world this is not so. God is near me (or rather in me), and yet I may be far from God because I may be far from my own true self.

Dionysius the Areopagite¹⁶

Levels of reality and consciousness cannot be located in space and are not rankings of greater or lesser value. One might be tempted to abandon the talk of levels altogether and yet, it seems indispensable for the very reason that Spirit, the human spirit included, is nonspatial and thereby belongs to an order of existence, or level of being, distinct in kind from our everyday world. It follows that no spatial, geographical terms -- out there, deep within, high and lifted up, basic, fundamental, exalted, whatever -- can characterize Spirit literally but neither can these terms be avoided. Insofar as we think, spatial images are inevitable, for thought proceeds through language, and language is forged in our encounter with the spatio-temporal world.¹⁷

There are also problems stemming from the use of the word 'hierarchy'. Hierarchy today has a very bad reputation, mostly because people confuse dominator hierarchies with natural hierarchies. A natural hierarchy is simply an order of increasing wholeness.¹⁸ Arthur Koestler, in Ghost in the Machine, suggests using the word 'holarchy' instead of 'hierarchy'. A holarchy is an order of increasing wholeness which is made up of 'holons'. A holon is a whole that is part of another whole. On the physical level, whole atoms are parts of molecules; whole molecules are parts of cells; whole cells are parts of organisms, and so on. Each whole is simultaneously a part, a whole/part, a holon. A normal hierarchy becomes pathological when there is a breakdown between levels and a particular holon assumes a repressive, oppressive, arrogant role of dominance over other holons.¹⁹

In Christian tradition *Hiero-* means sacred or holy, and *-arch* means governance or rule. The sixth-century Christian mystic, Saint Dionysius the Areopagite, quoted above, said that the "Hierarchies" referred to nine celestial orders, with Seraphim and Cherubim at the top and archangels and angels at the bottom. Among other things, these celestial orders represented higher knowledge and virtue and illuminations that were made more accessible in contemplative awareness. These orders were *ranked* because each successive order was more inclusive and more encompassing and in that sense "higher." 'Hierarchy' thus meant, in the final analysis, "sacred governance," or "governing one's life by spiritual powers."²⁰ Making decisions from the most wholistic perspective.

In the course of Catholic Church history, however, the celestial orders of contemplative awareness were translated into *political* orders of power, with the Hierarchies supposedly being represented in the pope, then archbishops, then bishops,

and on down to priests and deacons. It is easy to see how a normal developmental sequence of increasing wholes might pathologically degenerate into a system of oppression and repression.²¹

Caste, creed, family and lineage do not exist in Brahman. Brahman has neither name nor form, transcends merit and demerit, is beyond time, space and the objects of sense-experience. Such is Brahman, and "thou art That." Meditate upon this truth within your consciousness.

Shankara²²

Shankara tells us to meditate because we cannot imagine a something that excludes nothing save distinctions, any more than we can visualize light that is simultaneously wave and particle, electrons that jump orbit without traversing the intervening space, or a particle that travels alternate paths simultaneously without dividing. Physics transcends the paradoxes nature poses for human imagery and the ordinary language that derives from it by means of mathematics: nature cannot be consistently imaged, but it can be consistently conceived, through equations. Esoteric knowledge, ancient wisdom, transcends by means of the intuition the parallel paradoxes that reality poses for language and visualization.²³

It seems implicit in the multilayered experience of being that, as we move from one layer to another and encounter "more wholeness," we eventually reach the experience of Absolute Unity, the Wholest Whole, unnamable referent of the term God. The highest rung of the ladder. Again our spatial/temporal language is problematic. In speaking of the "top" or the "wholest whole" we imply a final, static, completed One - the perfect set up for a pathological dominator hierarchy. Beatrice Bruteau, a contemporary Christian Contemplative, suggests another way of imagining the "Absolute One." She refers to

Edward Fredkin, an early computer genius, who has said that the universe looks to him like a great computer with a program running in it. This being so, he says, two questions arise: What is the algorithm (repeated rule of operation) for the program? and, What is the question whose answer the program is supposed to compute? Bruteau suggests that the answer to both questions can be found in the beginning of the Bible. The rule of operation is "Be fruitful and multiply," or more generally, Be more! Communicate being and be in every possible way! And the question to be answered by running the program is the interrogative form of "Let us make human beings in our own image": Can God make an image of Godself One that really images the Creator by being self-possessed, self-giving, conscious, and creative? The only way to find out the answer is to let the program run in real time. The only way for God to find out whether an image of God is fully possible is to try it and see.²⁴ Here the "Absolute One" is expressed as an unfolding possibility.

From a Kabbalistic perspective, "...it is not a One that can be contained in any way; there are no garments to clothe it, there are no words to describe it, and most of all, it is not really an 'It', for it is not a thing, not a noun, rather it is an ongoing process that can never be captured."²⁵ God is a verb, not a noun.

In one of the earliest Upanishads we find the Absolute One described as a Super-Essential No-Thing.

The significance of Brahman is expressed by neti neti (not so, not so); for beyond this, that you say it is not so, there is nothing further. Its name, however, is "the Reality of reality." That is to say, the senses are real, and the Brahman is their Reality.

Brhadaranyaka Upanishad

The world of our everyday experience is real with a relative reality that is, on its own level, unquestionable; but this relative reality has its being within and because of the absolute Reality, which, on account of its eternal nature, we can never hope to describe except to say "not this, not that." Further, it is not available to our five senses even though it is possible for us directly to apprehend it.²⁶

Levels of Knowing

Just as there are levels of reality, there are levels of knowing. According to the Christian mystic St. Bonaventure, every human being has the eye of flesh, the eye of mind, and the eye of contemplation. Each of these modes of knowing discloses its own corresponding dimension of being. This gives us empirical knowledge, rational knowledge, and spiritual knowledge.²⁷ The eye of contemplation is called by Moslem esoterism and others, the "eye of the heart."²⁸ In systems which designate more levels of being there are corresponding levels of knowing. Esoteric knowledge is gained via a spiritual organ which may be called "the eye of the heart" or "the eye of contemplation."

What the founders of the great traditions, and the spiritual pioneers throughout history, gave to humanity is not doctrine and dogma but instructions on how to engage the eye of contemplation. Spiritual teachers present the student with practical exercises: "Do this in remembrance of me." The "do this" varies from tradition to tradition, it may include specific types of contemplative prayer, instructions for physical exercises and so forth. If you want to know this Divine union, you must do thus and so.

The unique form of knowing for religion is the eye of contemplation and its domain

is the spiritual. The relation of the planets to each other can be disclosed by the eye of the flesh, the mathematical equations that give us astrology are apprehended by the eye of the mind, the spiritual nature of the universe can be disclosed only by the eye of contemplation. These "eyes" see progressively deeper into the One self-creating Godself.

The eye of the flesh is not inferior in the sense of "less valuable" than the eye of the mind, and neither is inferior to the eye of contemplation. But the truly religious experience requires the eye of contemplation and its direct experience of unity to link us to the truth of the interconnectedness of all Being. The value of such experiences is revealed in the lives and relationships of those who have them, not in material success or academic achievement.

Today there is a renewed interest in developing spiritual sight. This desire in the individual is indicative of the evolution of humanity. Just as the collective mind has developed over generations to such a remarkable degree as to create this computer I'm typing on and flights to the moon, so too the ability of humanity to have direct experiences of the divine is available as never before. At one time it was said that only after sitting in a cave in Tibet for many, many years or even life times with nothing to eat does one reach enlightenment. Perhaps these souls in caves opened a door to the realm of spirit which many walk through today.

Spiritual Science

All of the great religious traditions have esoteric and mystical branches that teach the "how to's" of religion. An example of this is Sufism, the esoteric branch of Islam. A century or two after Muhammad's death (632 CE), those within the Islamic community

who bore the inner message of Islam came to be known as Sufis. They objected to the emphasis on outer or worldly concerns and the ignorance of the inner or eternal world.

"Love the pitcher less," they admonished, " and the water more."²⁹

Sufis saw the distinction between the inner and the outer, the pitcher and what it contains, as deriving from the Koran itself, where Allah presents himself as both "the Outward and the Inward."³⁰ From the Sufis point of view, the worldly Muslims (even if they followed the Divine Law in ordering their lives) could at most only know Allah partially. They wanted to encounter God directly and completely in this lifetime and, to that end, formed themselves into circles around spiritual teachers. By the 12th century these Sufi orders had developed special methods and practices for encountering God directly including certain forms of singing and dancing; prayers, reciting rosaries in unison, and lessons from their teacher. They developed three overlapping but distinguishable routes to Allah: the mysticism of love, of ecstasy, and of intuition.³¹

The mysticism of love is sung in world famous Sufi love poetry. An eighth-century woman saint, Rabi'a, discovered in meditation that God's love was at the core of the universe and that it is human nature to be steeped in that love and reflect it to others. Because love is more evident when the beloved is absent, Sufi poets often dwell on the pain of separation, as symbolic of the soul's separation from the divine.

Listen to the story told by the reed, of being separated.
 "Since I was cut from the reedbed, I have made this crying sound.
 Anyone separated from someone he loves understands what I
 say, anyone pulled from a source longs to go back."

Rumi

The reed becomes a flute longing for its riverbank, just as Rumi longs for his beloved who in turn longs for him, just as human love is returned the divine lover:

Never does the lover seek without being sought by his beloved.
 When the lightening of love has shot into his heart, know that
 there is love in that heart...

Mark well the text: "He loves them and they love Him." (Koran 5:59)
 Rumi

Rabi'a celebrates the eventual meeting of the two souls, one infinite, the other finite,
 in her night prayer:

My God, eyes are at rest, the stars are setting, hushed are the
 movements of birds in their nests, of monsters in the deep.... The
 doors of kings are locked and guarded by their henchmen, but
 your door is open to those who call upon you. My God, each
 lover is now alone with her beloved. Am I am alone with you.

Rabi'a

The mysticism of ecstasy is a Sufi approach that involves entering such a deep state of concentration that there is a change in consciousness, one loses awareness of the "outer" self. Often the Sufi practitioner will say that it feels as if their wills were placed in abeyance and a superior will takes over.³² This is basically the experience described by Muhammad (as well as Abraham, Moses, Samuel, Isaiah, Jesus, and others) when God spoke to him and said, "You are the appointed one." Muhammad was taken on what is known as the Prophet's Night Journey through seven heavens into the Divine Presence. It is this journey, through the seven levels, that the Sufi is after. However, they are not just after a tranced out experience but believe it is equally important to bring that consciousness into the realm of their day to day life. The transcendent must be made immanent; the God who is encountered apart from the world must also be encountered with in it. The way to accomplish this is through the third Sufi approach: the way of intuitive discernment.

By developing the eye of contemplation and intuition the Sufi learns to discern God in the world. They do not say that the world is God but that the world is God in disguise, God veiled. The veil becomes progressively more transparent as the intuition develops. The principle method the Sufis employ for penetrating the disguise is symbolism. Al-Ghazali, a Sufi mystic, defines symbolism as "the science of the relation between multiple levels of reality."³³ The Sufis say that every verse of the Koran conceals a minimum of seven hidden significations, and the number can sometimes reach to seventy. The discernment of this symbolism is not its own end but a technique for leading the Sufi practitioner directly to the God-Within. Al-Hallaji, who asserted "I am God," was put to death for blasphemy by orthodox Muslims despite the Sufi's explanation that he was referring to the divine essence that was within him.

Hinduism's directions for "how to" find God are called *yogas*. As mentioned earlier, *yoga* means a linking or reunion. There are four paths or four types of *yoga* and all lead to the same goal, to unite the human spirit to the divine. Which *yoga* one chooses depends on the type of person one is. All four paths begin with moral preliminaries. As the aim of the *yogas* is to render the surface self transparent to its underlying divinity, it must first be cleansed of impurities. The first step of every *yoga*, therefore, involves the cultivation of such habits as non-injury, truthfulness, non-stealing, self-control, cleanliness, contentment, self-discipline, and a compelling desire to reach the goal.

Jnana yoga is the way to God through knowledge. This is intended for students who have a strong reflective bent. Such knowledge is not factual but is an intuitive discernment that transforms, turning the knower eventually into that which she knows. To lead the student along this path Hinduism sets forth a series of demonstrations that

are designed to convince the thinker that she possesses more than her finite self. Once the *jnana yogi* grasps this point, her sense of self will shift to a deeper level and she will distinguish between the surface self in the foreground and the larger self that is out of sight or in the background. There are three stages to this process. The first two, which may be called learning and thinking, involve listening to stories and lectures, and thinking in images and metaphors. Eventually the student gains a lively sense of the infinite Self that underlies the finite self. The third step consists in shifting one's self-identity to the infinite Self. She must learn to separate her personality from what Hinduism calls the Atman. This involves developing a witness consciousness.

Bhakti yoga is the way to God through love or devotion. This is said to be the shortest path to realization but also the steepest. The aim of *bhakti yoga* is to direct toward God the love that lies at the base of every heart. "As the waters of the Ganges flow incessantly toward the ocean, so do the minds of the *bhakta* move constantly toward Me, the Supreme Person residing in every heart, immediately they hear about My qualities." ³⁴

From the Hindu point of view, the most popular path in Christianity is *bhakti*. Whereas in *jnana yoga* the image of God tends to be impersonal, an all-pervading Self, which is as much within us as without, and with which we should identify. To the *bhakti* for whom feelings are more real than thoughts, God is an other that one can love and adore with every element of her being. The techniques utilized by *bhakti yoga* include the practice of repeating God's name, singing God's praises, praying, meditating on glorious images of God, reading the scriptures, regarding the entire universe as God's handiwork, and in all these ways moving one's affections toward God. One is also

encourage to see that all ways of loving - the love of a parent for a child, a child for a parent, the love of friend, the beloved and the lover - are always that we can experience God's love as well. Thus the *bhakti*, like the Christian, might refer to God as lover or parent or friend and even child.

Karma yoga the path to God through work. You don't have to leave the world to be on a spiritual path, according to the Hindu, you can find God in the world of everyday affairs. Throw yourself into your work with focus and concentration without thinking of yourself. This can be done either as a *bhakti* where the work becomes selfless service or as a *jnana* who might see her work as participating in the work of the Self-Creating Universe.

Raja yoga, the way to God through psychophysical exercises, is designed for people who are of a scientific bent. *Raja yoga* outlines a series of steps that are to be followed as rigorously as the steps in a physics experience. However, unlike most experiments in the natural sciences, those of *raja yoga* are performed on one's self. The experiments take the form of practicing prescribed mental exercises and observing their subjective effects. The experiments are designed to reveal the truth of the Hindu doctrine of the human self as a multileveled being as described above. The purpose of *raja yoga* is to lead the student to direct personal experience of the "beyond that is within." To take her through rather elaborate exercises through the body, the conscious mind, the unconscious mind to the Being Itself. The method involves willed introversion, its intent is to drive the psychic energy of the self to its deepest parts and activate the true or authentic self.

These four *yogas* can be considered alternative routes to the same goal. But it's not

always so clearly defined. Hinduism does not consider them exclusive of one another - no individual is solely reflective, emotional, active, or experimental, and different life situations call for different methods. The major division is between *jnana* and *bhakti*, the reflective and the emotional types. Most people feel more comfortable with either a philosophical or devotional attitude toward religion.

Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi: "While there are many differences between Jewish and non-Jewish approaches to mysticism on the exoteric level of methods, there are few on the esoteric, in regards to the experiences themselves."³⁵ We should not be surprised to find that the Kabbalah teaches of four worlds with striking parallels to the Hindu *yogas*.

The world as we know it is the world of *assiyah*, function, doing. This world represents creation as God's transitive object to which God relates as to a "thing." Here we experience God as other, as an I-it relationship. This is the plane of *hatha* and *karma yoga*. Perpendicular to it is the dimension/universe of *Yetzirah*, formation; the home of the affective soul aspect called *ruah*, spirit. Here there a dialogue with God is possible. This is the home I-Thou relationship. It is the plane on which the emotional feeling phenomena are known and experienced. *Bhakti yoga* is expressed here. Perpendicular to both of the others is the universe of *Briyah*. It is the world of the intellect, where the *jnani yogin* feels at home. Beyond these is the universe of *Atzilut*. This is the dimension of the divine dimension. It is the world of the *Raja yogin*, the realm of being. As Meister Eckhard puts it: "The eye with which God sees me is the same eye with which I see God." Here subject is one with object.

The Kabbalah, or tree of life, is made up of ten Sephiroth in the four worlds.

Each Sephirah has many levels of meaning and can be seen as a phase of evolution, and in the language of the Rabbis they are called the Ten Holy Emanations. The Paths between them are phases of subjective consciousness, the Paths or grades by which the soul unfolds its realization of the cosmos.³⁶ The study and mediation of this complex symbolism has been used by generations of students to achieve spiritual development. Each symbol upon the Tree represents a cosmic force or factor. When the mind concentrates upon it, it comes into touch with that force - "a surface channel, a channel in consciousness, has been made between the conscious mind of the individual and a particular factor in the world-soul, and through this channel the waters of the ocean pour into the lagoon. The aspirant who uses the Tree as her meditation-symbol establishes point by point the union between her soul and the world-soul."³⁷

The outward forms of the esoteric practices of religions are different but, as Ken Wilber points out³⁸, the structure is basically the same -- first the seeker after spiritual knowledge declares herself so and makes some sort of commitment acknowledging the reality of and the desire to attain firsthand direct experience of a spiritual domain. You can't learn to swim without acknowledging the lake and getting in the water. Secondly, there are assignments and experiments to perform -- gathering data so to speak. The last step involves checking out your experiences with a community of like-minded seekers who are further along the path.

An example of this process is the meditation class at Sancta Sophia Seminary. Carol Parrish, like all the spiritual pioneers throughout history, has had profound spiritual experiences of the Christ that led her to develop teachings which guide the student to her own experience of the Christ-Within. As she says, "Meditation is a portal

behind which the soul awaits. The Inner Teacher eagerly anticipates your presence, *for now we see darkly, but then we shall see face to face.*"³⁹ The student is guided step by step, lesson by lesson, through a developmental process leading to the alignment of the soul with the divine world. The process takes the student through five levels⁴⁰ and utilizes the principles and virtues of *Agni Yoga*. The student keeps a record of her experiences and at each step along the way, she gives the meditation tutors a summary of her findings. The tutors respond in ways that encourage the student to come into alignment with her soul.

The spiritual teacher wants to see direct evidence of immediate realization apprehended with the eye of contemplation, not just intellectual philosophy apprehended only with the eye of the mind. The process of finding the Christ-with, the Godself, Atman, Buddha nature, by whatever name, is like baking a pie: you follow the recipe, you bake the pie, and then you actually taste it. To the question "What does the pie taste like?" the teacher can give out the recipe to those who inquire and let them bake it themselves.

If it is true that every path leads to the same goal, does it matter which tradition one decides to follow? Many people today skip from one form of practice to another, never really embracing or even understanding the tradition behind it. Can we jump directly to the esoteric level of a tradition and bypass the exoteric doctrine and rites? Frithjof Schuon argues that even esoterics must, almost without exception, submit to exoteric rites. "Forms are to be transcended by fathoming their depths and discerning their universal content..."⁴¹ I am one of those people who have tried out many techniques in my spiritual seeking but something Carol Parrish said to me makes sense, "It is important

to heal your relationship to the religion you were born into."⁴² The esoteric meaning of healing is releasing the soul. The religion we were born into is often the path which links us back to our Source. But whatever path we chose, the important thing is the transformation in knowing and being that results.

Endnotes

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- ⁶ Frithjof Schuon, The Transcendent Unity of Religions, Theosophical Publishing House, 1993, P. 30
- ⁷ Schuon, P. xii
- ⁸ Ken Wilber, The Marriage of Sense and Soul, Random House, 1998, P. 168
- ⁹ Rabbi David Cooper, "Gender and God," The Quest, Winter 1998, P. 7
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- ¹³ Carol Parrish, Workshop, November 12, 1999, Brixey, MO
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- ³⁵ Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, Paradigm Shift, Jason Aronson, London, 1993, P. 172
- ³⁶ Dion Fortune, The Mystical Qabalah, Samuel Weiser, 1935, P. 37
- ³⁷ Ibid. P. 18
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- ⁴⁰ Ibid. Diagram following introduction.
- ⁴¹ Schuon, P.25
- ⁴² Initial Interview, January, 1996