

PREFACE

By the time we reach adolescence, many of us wake up one morning and realize we are standing at the gate just outside the Garden of Eden. The question for the rest of our lives at different stages will be: If there is no garden, where are we?

That realization can take many forms, but my awakening occurred after my confirmation at the age of thirteen into the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. “We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth,” I had said, reciting the first and subsequent lines of the Nicene Creed along with my peers.

The Nicene Creed, determined in 325 CE by a council of bishops under the auspices of Emperor Constantine I, settled once and for all the pressing issue of the day. After much debate and discord, the council declared that Jesus Christ was indeed a divine being, the son of God borne by a mortal woman—a virgin, in fact—named Mary.

I desperately wanted to believe every word. I couldn’t bear to be excluded from a group that included my parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. I wanted to believe in God, saints and stigmata and that those whom I loved would be waiting for me in an amorphous place called heaven. And yet, equally deep within my bones and soul, I knew that the doctrine laid out in the Nicene Creed was not true.

In *Beyond Religion: The Cultural Evolution of the Sense of the Sacred, from Shamanism to Religion to Post-religious Spirituality*, cultural philosopher and poet, William Irwin

Thompson, founder of The Lindisfarne Association, traces his journey from a boyhood spent under the harsh doctrine of the Catholic Church in Los Angeles, where he was raised, to his growing spirituality and rigorous scholarly path as a historian. Thompson's aim is to provide the context and tools to create a new planetary culture, one in which we as a species incorporate a modality which includes complex dynamical systems as well as prayer and meditation.

Thompson explains in his foreword:

In the Pliocene Era we began the long process of hominization by coming down out of the tree canopy—a move the hominins did not choose but was forced on them by weather change and forest desiccation—to get together on the ground. This emigration required new skills for a new world: such as recognizing many faces, organizing in protective hierarchies of dominance, developing a culture around sexuality and child-rearing, and learning how to communicate through language. To manage all these new cultural skills, our brains responded over time by growing larger and more complex. In a good Buddhist fashion, there was no such entity as an isolated self; we became human through a process of dependent co-origination in which an I was an expression of an Us.

Therein lies the key to Thompson's careful analysis of human spirituality. From the beginning, we humans, who came down from the trees (and before that, up from the muck), were hardwired to ask where we came from, where we were going, and how we would survive in a harsh world. Contrary to the myth of the hero who strikes out on his own and saves his clan, we have always relied upon one another to survive. As Thompson points out:

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Fellowship is the critical word here because it indicates a shift from organism, hierarchy, and reproduction to a noetic polity of entelechies—inspired minds carrying a new condition in which a more symbiotic evolution moves from the reproduction of the past to the emergence of an emanational future.

Early in human development, one of the richest sources of protein available to us was meat. The consumption of meat enabled our brains to grow and in the process we became conscious of the fact that in order to thrive we needed to kill creatures akin to us. We imbued the animals we hunted with spiritual powers so as to make sense of their deaths. Thompson describes the world's earliest known sculpture, the Lionman of Englehard, circa 30,000 BCE, where the form of a man has melded with the body of a lion.

The image of a man still half-embedded in animality presents us with a good description of a level of consciousness in which the emerging personal ego is not yet stabilized and the labile mind can function in both the dreaming and waking consciousness at the same time. The individual sees the world, but the dreaming mind riffs on the percept and transforms it into two objects at once.

As we settled into communities, the role of women and the concept of menstruation—or the wound that heals itself—gave rise to the cult of the mother goddess. Here Thompson presents a history of consciousness tied to the only mystery greater than our existence. Men with their strength and power cannot conceive, gestate, give birth, and nourish offspring. In this form woman becomes the preeminent source of worship

and with her powers of wisdom, healing, and divination she becomes *la sage femme*.

The wise woman is midwife and has knowledge of plants, both healing and psychedelic. Like the shaman, she has concourse with the world of animals and spirits, but she can also have strong human societal relations and have inherited her skills from her mother. As a midwife, she is an embodiment and epiphany of the Great Goddess, the Great Mother. In the two modes of divine manifestation, one can say that *la sage femme* represents the imminent mode of Spirit and the shaman the transcendent mode.

As we moved from the agrarian culture to city-states, a priestly cast arose; and with it, control of property and the procreative power of women in the form of human sacrifice.

Human sacrifice is a male priest's appropriation of the power of women that was traditionally expressed by the menstrual blood and its symbol of red ochre. The mysteries of birth are replaced by bloody death; the female is replaced by the male who is now the master of life through the agency of killing in sacrifice and war—both of which we see expressed at the threshold of Western Civilization in that warrior epic, Homer's *Iliad*.

In our age where a bomb blast anywhere in the world is broadcast on numerous media platforms, and where fundamentalism has reared its head in all faiths, a new generation is asking different questions. With the great mathematician Albert Einstein as one of his guiding lights, Thompson says that to move beyond religion, we must move beyond the cult of leaders and followers.

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Einstein is also a cultural marker in the sense that—unlike Freud and Jung—he was not a prophetic leader of a movement. He was so intelligent that there were few who could follow him, or become his followers. His colleagues were not followers but highly individuated geniuses as well: men like Niels Bohr in Denmark, Paul Dirac in England, and Werner Heisenberg in Germany. Modern physics was neither a church nor a mystery school; it was a fellowship of geniuses.

In his early teens, Thompson became interested in the work of one of the first Indian gurus to teach in the West, Parahansa Yogananda. Says Thompson:

Yogananda went to work in finding a way to transmit esoteric knowledge and practices of transformation to the most extroverted and exoteric culture in the world. A generation before Carlos Castaneda popularized fables about the mysterious Yaqui shaman Don Juan, Yogananda, in his 1946 bestseller *The Autobiography of a Yogi*, fascinated readers with his stories about legendary superhuman yogis who remained above the course of human events in caves in the Himalayan mountains.

While it's instructive to understand the history of yoga in the west and to marvel at yogic feats, Thompson is after something greater. In the final essays of this collection, Thompson explores the relationship of male and female energy and its potential to transform the way we view ourselves as animal and spiritual beings. Through the lens of Tantra, which literally means “the weaving of cloth,” he recounts his visit to Auroville, the ashram of Sri Aurobindo Ghose and his consort, The Mother, Mirra Alfassa. There at Auroville, Thompson had a life transforming mystical encounter with The Mother

which led him to add Aurobindo's and the Mother's Integral Yoga to his already existing interest in Tantra.

The Mother said that it would be the psychic being that would unite with "the Descent of the Supramental" in the next stage of human evolution. If the psychic being is the one who takes over the direction of the sadhana of the individual incarnate ego, then each path to the Supramental is unique, so there can be no uniform religion with standardized rituals, techniques, and practices. "The guru within" takes over.

Thompson's wholly original and radical view is at great odds with the safe harbor of established religious codes and doctrines. Within the framework of Integral Tantra, Thompson shows how mathematics and science, as exemplified by the nineteenth-century polymath Henri Poincaré, can become a framework for re-imagining modalities of being.

You can date the birth of complex dynamical systems with Poincaré and say that the new era begins with his mathematical revisioning of the geometry of behavior of the solar system. At about this time the premodernist esoteric cosmologies began to experience what Marshall McLuhan called "cultural retrieval," and thinkers like Rudolf Steiner, Hazrat Inayat Khan and William Butler Yeats began their visionary careers. The linear reductionism of modernism was going to be challenged by a cultural retrieval of animism on one side and higher mathematics on the other.

Ultimately, Thompson presents a poetic view of the evolution of consciousness, one in which he celebrates the resilience of our species, and illuminates our potential to grow and thrive as spiritual beings. If we pay attention to what

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scientists, philosophers, and poets have to teach us, we will find our own way of being, one in which we are fully part of humanity and an evolving universe.

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FOREWORD: THINKING OTHERWISE ON RELIGION

Sometimes I think what religion is really all about is wearing funny clothes. Whether you are a Catholic priest in a soutane, a nun in a wimple, an Amish farmer in a black suit and a horse-drawn buggy, a Muslim woman in a burka in Paris, a Hasidic Jew with a *shtrimmel* in Jerusalem, a Sikh in a turban in Toronto, or a Hare Krishna sect Hindu wearing a *dhoti* in winter at JFK airport, funny clothes declare your commitment to your group. Like fraternity hazing, the more absurd the group demand, the more obedience proves commitment.

Churchgoers interviewed by journalists about why they attend Sunday services, often admit their attendance is more about a sense of belonging to a community and a culture than a belief in doctrines. Religion is comfort food for the emotions and we humans are fundamentally emotional beings. So intellectuals who no longer go to church have to accept the fact that religion is basic to human nature and will not disappear anytime soon.

Humans are animals, if not always with a conscience, at least always with a consciousness. It doesn't matter what the content of that consciousness is—the old man in robe and sandals walking on a cloud in *The New Yorker* cartoon depictions of God or the invisible tooth fairy. Filling the container of consciousness with a cosmology is what is

important for us humans, and not the veracity of any particular content. Kids know that their parents are fibbing about the tooth fairy, and grown-ups know their priests are fibbing about virgin birth.

Virgin birth is a Near Eastern myth that antedates Christianity; it found a new relevance in helping the Church Fathers fight Gnostic sects like the Borborites who sought to make sex into a magical sacrament by putting menstrual blood and semen on the communion pita bread. Fall-awful!

By lifting Jesus out of the muck of sexuality, and elevating Mary with an Immaculate Conception, the men of the new Christian Church sought to create an idealized Woman that could help them keep actual women in their place—and that was out of the priesthood.

Historical facts are not really what religious storytelling is all about. Folks will believe in anything as long as it makes them feel better. The universe is too big and scary—with crashing galaxies, bombarding asteroids, catastrophic tsunamis and floods, disease, and menacing bad guys everywhere for the individual to want to go it alone.

In the Pliocene Era we began the long process of hominization by coming down out of the tree canopy—a move the hominins did not choose but was forced on them by weather change and forest desiccation—to get together on the ground. This emigration required new skills for a new world: such as recognizing many faces, organizing in protective hierarchies of dominance, developing a culture around sexuality and child-rearing, and learning how to communicate through language. To manage all these new cultural skills, our brains

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If religion is an expression of the evolution of consciousness and the growth of the animal into the human mind, then fundamentalism is the metastatic cancer of consciousness—a malignant growth of mind that displaces a healthy sense of humor, ambiguity, compassion and tolerance for a violent commitment to a literal reading of a sacred text. In the theory of “cognitive dissonance,” when you are asked to believe something patently absurd, it generates a need to proselytize, for if you can convince others that your religion is acceptable, it stills your own inner doubts and the ontological terror they generate.

Fundamentalists degrade metaphor into code. Here one needs to remember that fundamentalism comes in many forms and domains of culture: religion, politics, and even science. In politics we have the shouting sects of the extreme Right, and in science we have the linear reductionists of the sociobiologists and eliminativists. The literalism of Richard Dawkins’s selfish genes is another way of reducing the complexity of the cell into a genetic code. The cognitive science of Patricia and Paul Churchland that eliminates the self in favor of an information-processing machine called the brain is another example of culture reduced to a binary code.

Religion is not a static thing; like everything else, it is time-bound. The funny clothes are chosen because they come from a storied past—like the nineteenth-century Polish fur

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hats and coats the Hasids wear in hot Jerusalem, the burka Islamic women tried to wear in fashionable Paris, or the starched linen Breton wimples the nuns of my childhood wore in hot, sweaty, pre-air conditioned Los Angeles.