

One Path, Many Paths

A Dialogue on the Role of Religion in Modern Times

Adam Bucko and Zachary Markwith



The growing recognition that possession of Divine Truth cannot be exclusively claimed by any single sacred tradition is an important sign of the broadening of religious thinking in our time. The “Perennialism” of René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon and the “Interspirituality” of Fr. Bede Griffiths and Br. Wayne Teasdale are two major conduits of universalist thought in the last century. Among the emerging generation of teachers and activists, Zachary Markwith (right) and Adam Bucko (left) stand out as notable representatives of these respective schools of thought.

After Seven Pillars’ founder, Pir Zia, read Adam Bucko’s recent manifesto (co-authored with Rory McEntee), “New Monasticism” (excerpt [here](#)), he was inspired to invite Adam and Zachary to engage in a dialogue about the relationship between religion and spirituality. Adam and Zachary happily agreed, and the first installment of their correspondence is published here, preceded by Pir Zia’s invitation. A second installment will follow soon.

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Dear Adam Bucko and Zachary Markwith,

The Belgian classicist Franz Cumont wrote in 1906:

“Let us suppose that in modern Europe the faithful had deserted the Christian churches to worship Allah or Brahma, to follow the precepts of Confucius or Buddha, or to adopt the maxims of the Shinto; let us imagine a great confusion of all the races of the world in which Arabian

mullahs, Chinese scholars, Japanese bonzes, Tibetan lamas and Hindu pundits would be preaching fatalism and predestination, ancestor-worship and devotion to a deified sovereign, pessimism and deliverance through annihilation—a confusion in which all those priests would erect temples of exotic architecture in our cities and celebrate their disparate rites therein. Such a dream, which the future may perhaps realize, would offer a pretty accurate picture of the religious chaos in which the ancient world was struggling before the reign of Constantine.”

Just over a century later, it is clear that the state of affairs that Cumont could only conceive as a distant possibility has been realized as an undeniable reality. We live today in a world in which almost all of the great spiritual traditions of the world are within reach of the modern seeker in some form.

This plethora of choices creates new questions. Should the seeker remain committed to the traditions and institutions of her ancestors? Should she, instead, study the various available traditions, and choose the one that speaks most meaningfully to her? Should she try to ascertain commonalities between the various traditions, and follow the principles and practices of more than one faith? Or should she abandon traditional forms and institutions altogether, and create her own worldview and practice? These, I believe, are questions that many young people are grappling with today.

I am writing to you because I know that you have both deeply reflected on these questions. Zachary Markwith has an advanced degree in Islamic Studies, and has written a superb book on traditionalist universalism entitled *One God, Many Prophets* (forthcoming from Fons Vitae). Adam Bucko has been working for years to bring spiritual and material renewal to disadvantaged and homeless urban youth, and is an heir to the interspiritual legacy of Br. Wayne Teasdale.

You clearly have in common a deep sense of the sacred, but it seems to me that you have quite different approaches to religion and tradition. I feel that a conversation between you could be very fruitful. It could help, I think, bring into focus the questions, problems, and opportunities that confront the modern seeker. Exchanging thoughts with each other might offer you both the opportunity to hone your own messages.

I could imagine the dialogue beginning with a response from Zachary Markwith to Adam Bucko’s recent [New Monasticism manifesto](#) (with Rory McEntee).

Key questions in the discussion might include:

Tradition and change: How is “tradition” defined? What kinds of adaptations are legitimate? Who decides?

Esotericism and exotericism: Is orthodox exoteric observance a requirement for authentic access to the esoteric dimensions of a tradition? Is it possible to successfully practice multiple exoteric and/or esoteric traditions simultaneously? What is the relationship between the inner and outer layers of a faith?

And, individuality and community: Is an authentic sense of community, shared vision, and responsibility possible without tradition? Does tradition impose unacceptable limits on individual experience and discovery?

Of course, if you accept to undertake this dialogue, what is most important is that you pursue the issues that are most interesting and relevant to you.

I send with this my very best wishes.

Sincerely yours,

Zia Inayat-Khan

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Dear Adam,

I share your inclusive vision of the revealed religions, humanity and the world. It seems to me that we can and in some cases must take cognizance of and learn from all of the great traditions, East and West, and those who embody their highest ideals in the past and present. You have mapped out some of the different paths a spiritual seeker might take, including adopting a single religion, creating a synthesis between two, and even forging one's own path not bound by any one. It seems to me that each revealed religion is a unique path that leads to the same Summit, to paraphrase Ananda K. Coomaraswamy. Many in the West are wary of taking a single path because of our history of religious exclusivism and chauvinism, but one can be a sincere Buddhist, Christian, or Muslim, for example, while also taking inspiration from other religions and those who practice them. I think many have lost confidence in the efficacy of the religious rites and spiritual path of a single tradition because the dedication to one tradition is so often accompanied by intolerance and the abuse of power.

What is most important to me is what works and the evidence suggests that the surest way to enlightenment or sanctity is through one of the great living traditions, be it Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, or Buddhism. It is true that inspired syntheses exist and continue to create men and women of virtue and even sanctity. Sometimes particular individuals and entire communities may be forced down this road by circumstance and providence. However, I wonder how helpful it is for most people to explore these possibilities when spiritual disciplines and guidance remain accessible in Buddhism, Orthodox Christianity, and Islamic Sufism, for example? I recognize that there are always exceptions and even great saints such as Sri Ramakrishna who practiced multiple forms. In his case, it seems that he reached the end of the path before embarking on others.

There are many who find doctrinal and aesthetic supports from other religions—their sacred texts, saints, and art—but in my view it is most helpful to be rooted in the practical aspects (i.e. rites, spiritual disciplines, etc.) of a single tradition. My own understanding and even practice of Islam and Sufism has been profoundly enriched through exposure to Advaita Vedanta, Zen, Taoism, Hesychasm, and the Kabbalah. While I firmly believe that all of these paths lead to Self-

realization, it seems to me that it is sufficient and in most cases necessary to focus on the Divine through one. A single revealed Name of God or apophatic meditation contains all of the power and grace to deliver us. It also requires all of our concentration. There is always the temptation to mistake the path for the Goal, but it seems that there are a growing number of religious people who recognize that other paths also lead to God or the Unity of Being in the language of the Sufis. I think we have a challenge to preserve religious diversity precisely so that we can perceive our spiritual unity with all that is. The revealed religions remain so many pathways to that realization.

I am of course open to other possibilities and welcome your own views on the matter. I am intentionally trying to tease out some of the questions and issues that Pir Zia encouraged us to look at. However, I recognize through him and others such as Huston Smith that my own approach is not the only one that works. We do live in a unique time and place, and I will leave it in your capable hands to present the other side of things. I also hope that we can look at related points you made in “New Monasticism,” including the wedding between the paths of action and contemplation that you articulated with great insight.

I send this with my very best wishes and respect.

Sincerely,

Zachary

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Dear Zachary,

Thank you for your thoughts on our manifesto. I am grateful for your perspective and for your openness of spirit and heart.

I would like to open my response by saying that I too think that following one single path is often the best way to pursue the journey into God. In my own life, I often desired that kind of straight path and guidance. However, as my life unfolded, I realized that while I related everything in my journey to the “Christ Archetype” present in my soul, much of my path was directed and inspired by mentors from traditions other than Christianity. In many ways, I feel it is because of those mentors and their willingness to share the “heart” of their experience of God with me that I am able to have a sense of Christ in my life. Reconciliation of those experiences with mentors has not always been easy. It is because of that that I looked for guidance in people like Br. Wayne Teasdale and other students of Fr. Bede Griffiths. I believed that the Hindu-Christian tradition that they lived and articulated could provide a framework and home for the journey that my soul was on.

In addition to my own “interspiritual path”, which through difficulty and praxis has shown itself to me to be an authentic mystical path to God, I have also worked with young people for over a decade, and have learned that most young people these days don’t start or end their search in a single tradition. In a recent article in the LA Times Philip Clayton, the Dean of Faculty at

Claremont School of Theology, talked about the fastest-growing religious group in the United States; sometimes called “the nones”, “non affiliated” or “spiritual but not religious.” As he pointed out, 75% of Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 now consider themselves “spiritual but not religious.” Young people are not necessarily rejecting God, they just feel that “religious organizations are too concerned with money and power, too focused on rules and too involved in politics.” It is for this reason that many of us feel that the rise of “spiritual but not religious” is not a sign of spiritual decline but can be “a new kind of spiritual awakening” if it can be shepherded in a mature way.

For me, the burning questions then become, what does it mean to have a deep spiritual and contemplative life in this new framework? How does one enter and commit in a mature way to this path? Is it possible for this interspiritual path to deliver the type of transformation that all of the more traditional paths promise? These are valid questions that our times demand that we pay attention to. Like Rilke’s advice to the young poet, however, the answer to those questions lies less in trying to find articulations that satisfy the mind than in the wholehearted living out of them in the praxis of one’s life and in proper discernment of the results.

Reflecting on your letter and being present to the questions that arose for you, I want to try to speak from the sense of unfolding that my friend Rory McEntee and I spoke from when we put into words our inspirations on what a deeply committed contemplative and universal spirituality for young people in the 21st century could look like. Our perspective has been informed by our experiences of the contemplative journey and by our wonderful teachers and mentors from varying traditions (also in my case by my friendships with friends from Pir Zia’s order). We feel that the manifesto is an expression of a specific lineage that has been lived by people like Raimundo Pannikar, Swami Abishiktananda, Fr. Bede Griffiths, and most recently Brother Wayne Teasdale, who was a close, personal friend and mentor for Rory. In it we are attempting to name an impulse that we feel arising in our world and to articulate a framework that can begin to guide young seekers into a genuine contemplative path. Our feeling is that “Interspirituality” can offer youth in particular an avenue to access the deep contemplative wisdom of our traditions, as well as lead to a greater “mutual irradiation” of the traditions and a more universal framework that incorporates their insights. This all, of course, has to be done in a very careful, patient, and mature way that is led by and infused at all stages by the Spirit of God.

As you mentioned in your letter, in the manifesto we talk about three different ways of being interspiritual:

(1) When one has a solid grounding in one tradition, and from this foundational point reaches out to experience and understand the wisdom of other traditions. This has been the way of many of the founders of the Interspiritual movement, such as Father Bede Griffiths and Brother Wayne Teasdale.

(2) When one goes the way of “multiple belonging” by fully immersing oneself in multiple traditions, such as Lex Hixon, also known as Shaykh Nur al-Jerrahi, did.

(3) When one follows one's inner guidance, what George Fox, founder of the Quakers, called one's "inner teacher", and what Christians have often referred to as the "guidance of the Holy Spirit" as a primary methodology for one's spiritual path.

In your letter you refer to this third path as "forging one's own path not bound by any [tradition]". When people talk about this third way of being interspiritual, they often assume that one is creating their own path by following "whatever one wants" (relying on self with a small "s" vs. the guidance of the tradition). I would like to, however, distinguish following "whatever one wants" from "following the guidance of the Holy Spirit." Especially in my own experience of the Christian tradition, there is a tradition of saints whose primary way into God was following the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Its emphasis lies on the relationship aspect of the Ultimate Mystery. It is my intuition that while in the past most examples of this particular path happened within the framework of a specific order within the "church", in our age this way may not lead to being embedded in a particular tradition (without eliminating this possibility), but instead to taking on, in a mature and disciplined way, differing teachers, practices and service roles throughout one's lifetime, under the guidance of the Spirit.

It is this distinction between self and Holy Spirit that I believe allows us to really explore what it means to have an authentic spirituality that can serve young people, many of whom don't necessarily feel called to start or end their journey in one specific tradition. It is also important to recognize that we make pains to assert that this journey doesn't occur on one's own, but requires the discernment of a "sangha", one's spiritual community, as well as deep and intimate relationships with "elders." It is how our journeys have unfolded and we can't imagine a path to spiritual maturity that doesn't include this important feedback, spiritual direction, and shadow work. While there are many examples of people who simply "shop around" and use their quest and lack of commitment as a way to bypass important issues of the path, it is important to make a distinction between that and what we are talking about here. Too often this third way has been described as being selfish, flaky, a spiritual "Esperanto", or arising out of an inability to commit. In fact of matter, it is all about commitment. As Philip Goldberg points out in his recent article called "Spiritual But Not Religious: Misunderstood and Here to Stay", many people who identify as "spiritual but not religious" don't necessarily practice less when compared to typical church/temple/mosque-goers, many of them actually practice more. The commitment however is not to the tradition or even a specific teacher but rather to one's own path, to the inner impulse that arises within us, and the courage to commit to it with all of one's being, allowing ourselves the freedom of movement that it demands.

In my experience, most young people (especially those who call themselves "spiritual but not religious") start with this third way of being interspiritual. The longing of their hearts and the guidance of the Holy Spirit brings them into contact with a set of principles and practices (like yoga or meditation). While this leads to some insight and in some cases helps people to fully commit themselves to a spiritual path, it rarely gives them a framework and guidance that can produce spiritual maturity. One only needs to look at many yoga studios and other institutions to realize that most spiritual training that is available to young people is available by "workshop mode", where young people tend to take disconnected workshops that address different aspects of spiritual life but don't necessarily produce an integrated practical path, theoretical framework or dedicated mentorship. As a result, one can spend years taking workshops and

never really get a sense of depth and direction. The guidance of the Holy Spirit also becomes very difficult to recognize, unless one can work with a seasoned spiritual director or guide who can help one recognize the unfolding of God in one's heart.

It is for this reason, that Rory and I feel that it is not so much whether young people will choose a specific tradition, but rather will have access to proper training and formation that can speak to their hearts and teach them to humbly empty themselves so they can welcome the "whisperings and light of the Holy Spirit." To this end, we are currently collaborating with elders like Fr. Thomas Keating on developing modes of training for the young generation who are drawn to this interspiritual path, where one could go through a 7 year long formation process that will include personal guidance with a spiritual director, a theoretical framework, deep contemplative practice, small group work, silent solitary retreats, immersive dialogical dialogue and forms of heartfelt celebration and community. Much of our thought process along these lines has been inspired by friends from Pir Zia's Sufi Order and their experience of Suluk, which in our view is one of the most effective training processes that we know of.

If spiritual training is what will determine the depth of spirituality of the new generation, how does one offer training in an interspiritual context? In few words, it is our view that training may start with a universal framework like the one articulated by Br. Wayne Teasdale. Once some work is done gaining an understanding of the framework, and once one works with a spiritual director for an extended period of time (focusing on learning how to recognize God's unfolding and guidance in one's heart), one can be encouraged to enter a tradition (in some cases more than one if the spirit demands that) and receive extended training within that tradition, working with a guide from the tradition and fully respecting the integrity of that practice and tradition. So, naturally one may move from a type 3 of interspirituality to a type 1 or 2. This brings us closely to what you suggested in your letter, namely that there are benefits to being faithful to a specific set of teachings and guidance. In the end, one may still go back to type 3 of interspirituality. It may be that very few people are called to exist outside of traditions, we believe that remains to be seen, but we do feel that those who are called to do so can serve in such a way that their insights may benefit the building of new frameworks, ones that may be necessary for our future.

With Gratitude,

Adam

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Dear Adam,

It seems to me that you are indeed speaking to a particular impulse and serving many spiritual seekers, which I can only commend. The Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said, "There are as many paths to God as there are children of Adam." The human response to the Divine is characterized by diversity, despite attempts by some to impose uniformity. Spirituality itself is innate. In Islam, in a manner similar to the Greek, Indian, and other Abrahamic traditions, each person is envisaged as essentially tripartite, consisting of a body (jism), soul (nafs), and Spirit (ruh). Jesus is also honored in the Quran as the "Spirit of God" (ruh Allah). Each person thus

already has a Christ-like Spirit, Prophetic light, or Buddha nature within the heart. The only question is how to reside in and act from that spiritual center, as opposed to our baser aspects?

I don't make a sharp distinction between religion and spirituality, even if there are many who practice religion more or less without spirituality and others spirituality without religion. The Traditionalists or Perennialists maintain that spirituality is in fact the inner or esoteric dimension of religion that awakens or actualizes the inner aspect of the human being, eventually leading to the alchemical wedding of the Spirit with both the soul and the body. This is the function of Hesychasm within Orthodox Christianity, the Kabbalah in Judaism, and Sufism in Islam, for example.

It seems to me that being rooted in a particular tradition has many advantages for a spiritual seeker. In the life of Muslims, the five Islamic prayers punctuate our days and orient us towards the Sacred with a rhythm and grace that is difficult to come by on our own. My sense is that Jewish and Christian believers feel the same way when they observe the Sabbath in their own ways. I am not entirely against borrowing certain elements from other traditions and learning as much as we can from them, but the central rites and spiritual dimensions of each religion seem to have certain conditions that require regular and even exclusive observance to be fully efficacious. To return to the exceptional Hindu saint Sri Ramakrishna, when he practiced different forms of Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam—each with the permission of his celestial guide Kali—he did so exclusively.

As I said, I do believe that the Spirit or spirituality is innate and also works outside of or across the established boundaries of the religions. One can sense this in serious interfaith initiatives such as “A Common Word,” peace and environmental groups, the inspiration behind Alcoholics Anonymous, and great works of fiction such as *The Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars*. Even though many of these remain influenced by religious or spiritual people, they speak to the needs and aspirations of so many in our time. For me, such manifestations are signs of Divine Mercy and prove that “the Spirit bloweth where it listeth.” (John 3:8)

While recognizing that flashes of inspiration illuminate all souls and societies, including our increasingly secular ones, it seems to me that many spiritual seekers are looking for more stable and lasting nourishment from the Spirit. Decadent and truncated versions of religion have failed so many in this regard, but I not sure we can say that experiments have led to anything better. The abuses of power that we sometimes find in religion are often more prevalent among New Age teachers and groups, as well as those who are against or actively oppose religion and religious believers. Given the potential failings of human nature inside or outside of religion, one has to search for authentic teachers and rely on one's own discernment.

I would suggest that the millennial religions remain our best options because what directly descends from Heaven can best ensure a felicitous return. Manmade experiments have been going on for some time, but they rarely produce a Saint Francis of Assisi, Mawlana Jalal al-Din Rumi, or Sri Ramana Maharshi, as well as great works of art such as Chartres Cathedral, the Dome of the Rock, or the Taj Mahal. It is precisely our loss of tradition as something living and not only a relic of the past that has created so much confusion and disequilibrium in the modern

world, including alienation, the loss of meaning and spiritual orientation, destructive forms of technology, the environmental crisis, as well as religious and secular fundamentalism.

This spiritual crisis began in the West, which now imposes its norms globally. Historically, Western Christianity was largely intolerant of its own mystics, as well as rival Christian denominations and other religions. These factors, along with the rise of secularism, have left many in the West with a negative impression of religion. It seems natural that some will cling to their Christian roots and secular attitudes, while looking East for spiritual nourishment. I would contend that Christianity still has active spiritual paths, especially in Orthodoxy, but also in certain mystical currents of Catholicism and Protestantism. My own understanding of spirituality was deepened when I read *The Way of a Pilgrim*, which is essentially a commentary on the words of St. Paul to, “Pray without ceasing.” (1 Thes 5:17)

Many also turn to Buddhism or Islam, for example, which are wonderful possibilities and compensations for those searching for a contemplative way. My advice for the person who is spiritual but not religious is that one can find tried and tested methods or spiritual paths in the living religions. Authentic teachers may be more rare today, but the path of the Buddha, Bodhisattva and enlightenment remains accessible through Buddhist teachers; the way of Christ, the Virgin and deification through Christian teachers; and the way of the Quran, the Prophet and Sufi through Muslim teachers. One simply has to have the discernment and courage to dismiss those who use religion for their own questionable motives. Then one can truly benefit from what a Thomas Merton, Thich Nhat Hanh, or Seyyed Hossein Nasr have to teach us about religion and spirituality, not to mention those who have dedicated themselves specifically to the path of service, such as Mother Teresa, Mahatma Gandhi, and Ahmadu Bamba.

Some blessed souls have taken from more than one tradition. A few even traverse the path in a somewhat solitary manner, although generally within the matrix of a revealed form. I recognize and honor these possibilities. However, I am not sure how far a path entirely outside of a given religion can lead. Some of these specific questions and possibilities seem rather nuanced, complex, and contextual. It is difficult to say anything absolute or definitive about particular individuals and their unique circumstances. With that said, one can see the proof of a tree from the fruit it produces. If one can find an enlightened or sanctified soul from a given path, then one can have a measure of confidence that it produces such results.

No one should be compelled to accept a given faith, which is against the spirit and very letter of the Quran, which reminds us that, “There is no compulsion in religion.” (2:256) While it is now imperative to recognize all revealed religions as authentic paths to God and Divine realization here on earth—and the freedom of religion in general—the practical commitment to a single religion and spiritual path offer us sustained contact with the Spirit and That which is beyond all limitations, secular, religious and even spiritual. Some will no doubt get there through a more circuitous route, even though we maintain that the way of a given Prophet, Avatar, the Buddha or Christ is most direct. And God knows best.

With warm regards & Peace,

Zachary

March 1, 2013

Comments (4)

- Greetings Dear Friends:

Having read through this discussion, with respect and appreciation for both points of view, I would like to add a few observations to the dialogue. Following on Adam's "three different ways of being interspiritual," I would add a fourth and perhaps a fifth way. I call this fourth way the "call of inspiration" when an individual discovers, through a transformative encounter, a recognition of depth and fullness that opens into the Infinite. I do not mean a psychic encounter that stimulates awareness of alternative modes of perception, nor an affirmation of paranormal interactions in the subtle worlds. What I mean is a direct, heart-centered, authentic opening into Being that leaves a soul shaken by the intensity and fullness of the experience. Such a call of inspiration, a deep breathing in of sentient depth, does not in my experience flow through any particular necessary channel, but more commonly overflows the constraints of belief and established mental attitudes. The fullness of Being is not, it seems to me, amenable to containment in any variety of form, however sacred that form may be.

The forms of tradition, their value and significance, arise through their worth as a means for transformation, through the training and discipline inculcated by genuine practice and based in mature guidance and soul direction. However valuable such direction and world construction may be to real and actual souls, the reality of encounter very often overflows the vessel that is truly prepared to receive utmost guidance and inspiration from the ground of Being Itself. As such, my metaphor of choice is that when the path reaches the Ocean, the Ocean cannot be contained in the path. No path, in this direct sense, can contain the full abundance of that which is Uncontainable. Thus the fourth way is a kind of Awakening that may flow through the cut channels of tradition, arise in the interplay and overflow between traditions, legitimize inner guidance, or illumine a dedicated soul through direct encounter (even unsought), and yet, in no one instance, can it be said to be containable. The Infinite is not containable, though, by grace and love, it is knowable. Thus the fourth way is that moment of knowing, of authentic gnosis, in which belief is transmuted into the malleable gold of luminous experience, offering a new wealth of insights for the purpose of fostering understanding.

The fifth way is perhaps even more profound and harder to describe. For me, the fifth way is not didactic or a matter of choice based on beliefs, creeds or doctrines. It requires choice but is mediated by a realization of one's personal limitations. It is a renunciation of authority as a primary guide to spiritual life. By authority I do not mean to question the legitimacy of tradition nor the gifts that traditions may offer a seeking soul. What I refer to is deep recognition of human limitations in the face of the Infinite. The prophetic soul, the soul in search of immersion in divine life, the soul crying out from a heartfelt longing for presence and authentic Beingness, understands the limitations of its own capacity to comprehend. We do not truly understand the nature of revelation; what we comprehend is the human response to such a cry and the formalisms that arises around the cry to protect

and nurture that core desire for spiritual truth. Even a taste of the Infinite is enough to make one realize the poverty of his or her beliefs; full immersion only confirms that lack.

This does not mean that the strictures and principles of tradition are not valuable—they are valuable, necessary, in so far as human beings need guidance and direction. Every revelation is the beginning of a tradition or a confirmation of tradition, or the discovery of the impulse to formalize for the purpose of preservation. And yet, the medium of the revelation, the human soul aflame with presence, is like a moth attracted to the Flame, fluttering about that which might consume it, simply because the Flame cannot be contained or reduced to such a fragile, ephemeral life. The fifth way is an acknowledgement of this truth, that no account is sufficient and no inner guidance adequate to unveil what requires the entire human species, through a hundred thousand generations, to barely comprehend. I celebrate the reality of revelation, its mystical depths, but I am constantly aware that no particular account can do more than touch the hem of the garment what appears as divine life. The actual body of that garment is a soul so vast, profound, holy, illumined and transcendent in to its immanent cosmology that I can only bow my head and be thankful for the embodied opportunity to acknowledge how far surpassing the greatness is in contrast to my own limited understanding.

Praise be to That which always calls us beyond what we are and what we think we know. Selah.

Sirr al-Basir

May 7, 2013

— Lee Irwin on May 8, 2013

- I very much enjoyed this dialogue between Adam and Zachary, and express appreciation to Pir Zia for providing the opportunity and encouragement for this inspiring interchange. What really prompts me to write, however, is my special gratitude for Sirr al-Basir's insightful comment beautifully elucidating the possibility of additional ways of being interspiritual.

In particular, his fourth way hits the mark for me, and is eloquently summed up in his quote: "...when the path reaches the Ocean, the Ocean cannot be contained in the path." His words are lovely, and strike me as true.

— Alan Zulch on May 15, 2013

- Thank you Pir Zia for initiating a discussion on this topic, and thank you to Adam and Zachary for your thoughtful and sincere contributions. It has certainly been a very living question for me all of my life, and it has been on my mind very strongly as of late. I believe the questions of meaning related to religion and spirituality are crucial issues of our time, as the structures that have supported humanity for so long are changing and breaking down, and yet there is no consensus yet on a new structure.

I wanted to share some thoughts relating to the idea that one can choose to enter into a religion. People of my generation have grown up in the age of the internet and easy access to information and perspectives on all the world's religions as well as a mind boggling array of contemporary spiritual ideas and practices. Having this context, where it is a common understanding that religions are all different pathways to an experience of meaning and truth, we simply cannot engage with religion in the same way. Even if I wanted to, I cannot be a "true believer." I might choose to commit to a particular religion because I feel it will do me good, or because I want some structure and order in my life, but this choice feels a bit like choosing to change the interior decoration of my house. It is a rational decision, rather than a deep calling or revelation. It is a sad fact, but I think that people of my age and culture have already lost religion, whether we like it or not.

Religions have not lasted as long as they have because of people making a rational decision to enter into them. The people who have formed the blood and beating heart of a religion were either born into that religion and compelled by their culture, or had an inner conversion experience, a deep calling and utter faith that becomes the core of one's life. Conviction in religious beliefs has been a fierce shaping force in human history. There has never been a collective idea such as "your religion is as good as mine, it's just different." This tolerant, inclusive approach is a very recent idea. If religions do survive, it would have to be in a radically different way, where we can appreciate all the particulars of the tradition but not have the whole-hearted conviction in its story. I suppose an alternative would be to revise or re-interpret the tradition from the standpoint of contemporary or mystical awareness. But again, it does not seem like religions have survived because of a small subset of people honing in on the mystical and universal truths hidden in the scriptures. Without the conviction that one's religion is THE truth, I don't understand how one can really inhabit the religion fully? And I don't see how religions will really survive in the context of this soft, pluralistic approach. Either the religion has blood and a beating heart or it doesn't. Otherwise, the whole religious impulse seems to shrink to the level of a self-improvement program, a personality preference or the taste for a particular flavour.

One important point that Zachary made was that religions are "revealed," streams of wisdom which are given to humanity as a gift, and thus more trustworthy sources of guidance. I would like to believe this is true, but that is just it—it is a matter of belief. Even seeing religions in this way requires blind belief, since I cannot experience the truth of this idea in any other way (other than a mystical insight, which is still subjective). To non-religious people, the idea of religions being "revealed" to humanity is incomprehensible. It may indeed be true, but it requires the kind of belief that many are unable or unwilling to muster.

Because of this perspective, in general I resonate with Adam's approach to helping young people navigate different approaches to an authentic spiritual life. I would just add that perhaps the uncertainty of young people right now is exactly as it should be, and that it cannot be otherwise. I believe we may have already lost the capacity to use religions to give meaning and structure to life, because of the evolution in our awareness. Perhaps our job is to struggle and search until truth reveals itself in new ways. This may not happen in

our lifetime but perhaps several generations into the future, a new shared understanding of human life will dawn, one that will make our current religions seem archaic.

— Siddiqi Heather Ferraro on May 18, 2013

- Thanks to Lee Irwin, Alan Zulch, and Siddiqi Heather Ferraro for joining this conversation and adding important insights and questions.

In particular, I appreciate Lee Irwin's emphasis on what has been termed *ma'rifah* (gnosis) and *hayrah* (bewilderment) in Islamic-Sufi spirituality. These seem to me to be universal fruits of the spiritual path in all traditions and might even be described as trans-personal stations of Divine realization Itself. There is much to ponder in Lee Irwin's words and to discover on our own paths, God willing.

With Siddiqi Heather Ferraro, I also find myself grappling with questions related to meaning and religion in our increasingly global, postmodern, and technological age. You discuss some of the serious challenges and opportunities that are raised in this context, where a particular religion is championed as the only truth or dismissed precisely because others seem to be just as true. I tend to take a middle path wherein one can accept that all of the revealed religions are true, but not the whole Truth, which is an attribute of God as such. It seems to me that any one of these partial disclosures or revelations lead us to the One, wherein we discover all Truth, Goodness and Beauty. Frithjof Schuon has written about this perspective with remarkable clarity in his book *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, which contains a helpful introduction by Huston Smith.

You also touched upon the question of epistemology and in particular how we know whether or not a particular teaching is revealed, inspired, or simply invented. I tend to take revelation and mystical insight as seriously as logic, empirical observation, doubt or anything other way of knowing that has been advanced by modern and postmodern scientists and philosophers. All methods of knowing can be tested and verified through direct experience; otherwise we are simply accepting the claims of the philosopher or physicist based upon what amounts to faith or an appeal to authority. Christian mystics, Jewish kabbalists, Muslim sufis, Hindu yogis, Buddhist bodhisattvas, etc., also invite us to employ their revealed and inspired methods to approach the Source of all being, consciousness and bliss within ourselves. This is certainly subjective, but beneath the layers of the body, mind, soul and even Spirit is the non-dual Self, which is simultaneously pure Subject and Object from the perspective of Advaita Vedanta. I don't think we can ignore the sense of certainty or Truth that consciousness alone or the Supreme "I" within us contains. And if one is uncertain, how can one be certain about that very uncertainty?

All Divine revelations have certain proofs that purely human ideologies do not. First, they embody or disclose the Transcendent Reality here on earth through their forms and essence. They also form the basis for all traditional civilizations. The Incarnation of Christ, the Holy Quran, or the Enlightenment of the Buddha have shaped the lives, devotion, ethics, learning, arts, sciences and institutions of millions of souls in ways that

no purely human person, book or temporal experience have until the modern period when the West broke from its revelation and tradition in the name of secular science, philosophy, art, and institutions. As Peter Kingsley reminds us in his groundbreaking studies, including his book *Reality*, Greek philosophy was also originally based upon a kind of revelation and disclosures to the great sages through spiritual praxis. From all Divine revelations also issue a sacred art, such as Christian iconography, Quranic recitation and calligraphy, or images and statues of the Buddha. Not only are these aesthetically poles apart from modern painting, literature, or music—not to speak of most forms of popular entertainment and advertising—but they have been known to miraculously heal people and even save us through their very forms. Among the greatest proofs of revelation are the presence of saints who have been transfigured through the Divine descent. Such as encounter, and we have had two or three, leaves one with the impression that God is still at the very center of our world. It also puts one in touch with the center of our own being given the macrocosmic-microcosmic symbiosis. This was Jalal al-Din Rumi's experience when he met his companion Shams al-Din Tabrizi. In my experience, good people are everywhere, but only a revealed religion can produce a saint of the first magnitude. The Divine Presence itself seems to me to be the best proof, but this is always accompanied by knowledge, virtue and piety.

I think one does have to be careful about conflating Divine revelation with inspiration and especially purely human endeavors. Someone claiming to forge an entirely new religion is essentially claiming to be a prophet sent by God. I think we can question and challenge all of the injustices that exist in modernist and fundamentalist versions of religion, while honoring the sacred and unique function of the prophets, avatars, Christ, the Buddha, and others God has chosen to establish both religion and spirituality here on earth.

Ultimately, there is something mysterious about how we know and what teaching resonates the most with us. There is a reciprocity between knowing, knowledge and that which is known, which is not that different from love. It is unfortunate, however, that both knowledge and love in the traditional sense are usually dismissed in our time as something entirely personal and meaningless. In any case, these questions are very important and deserve more consideration and space. I would recommend Seyyed Hossein Nasr's *Knowledge and the Sacred* for those who are interested in the relation between knowledge, religion and spirituality.

I certainly welcome other points of view and appreciate the opportunity to reflect upon the diverse experiences and knowledge of others here.

With all best wishes and thanks,

— Zachary Markwith on June 18, 2013



Zachary Markwith is a doctoral student and instructor at the Graduate Theological Union who specializes in early Islamic spirituality and the perennial philosophy. He earned an M.A. (cum laude) in Hinduism and Islam at the George Washington University and a B.A. in Islamic and Near Eastern Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He has also worked as a research assistant for the Council on American-Islamic Relations and the International Peace Project on subjects that include Islamophobia, non-violence in Islam, and interfaith dialogue. He has contributed articles to leading traditionalist journals, including *Sophia* and *Sacred Web*, and is the author of the forthcoming work *One God, Many Prophets: the Universal Wisdom of Islam* (Fons Vitae, 2013). In addition to his academic training, Zachary has studied with Sufi teachers from West Africa, Iran, and North America, and currently lives in Berkeley, California with his wife Sarah.

[Read more about Zachary Markwith](#)



Adam Bucko is an activist and spiritual director to New York City's homeless youth. He grew up in Poland during the totalitarian regime, where he explored the anarchist youth movement as a force for social and political change. Adam emigrated to the US at 17, but his desire to lead a meaningful life sent him to monasteries in the US and India. His life-defining experience took place in India, where a brief encounter with a homeless child led him to the "Ashram of the Poor" where he began his work with homeless youth. Upon returning to the US, Adam worked with homeless youth in cities around the country. He co-founded [The Reciprocity Foundation](#), an award winning nonprofit dedicated to transforming the lives of New York City's homeless youth. Additionally, Adam established HAB, an ecumenical and inter-spiritual contemplative fellowship for young people which offers formation in radical spirituality and sacred activism. Adam is a recipient of several awards and his work has been featured by ABC News, CBS, NBC, New York Daily News, National Catholic Reporter, Ode Magazine, Yoga International Magazine and Sojourner Magazine. www.reciprocityfoundation.org and www.adambucko.com

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