

Book Reviews

Extraordinary Times, Extraordinary Beings, by **Wayne S. Peterson**. Charlottesville, VA: Hampton Roads Publishing Company, 2003. Paperback, 178 pages. US \$16.95.

For most students of esotericism, the Reappearance of the Christ is learned about as a concept—an event of great magnitude destined to materialize in the distant future. Wayne Peterson's book raises the question: "What if that future is here? Is it possible that the World Teacher is already among us? In recounting the extraordinary events of his life, this former American diplomat tries to convince the reader that the answer is unequivocally "yes."

Two things lend credence to Peterson's hypothesis. One is his rock-solid background in the U.S. government, where he spent over three decades. The other is the strong note of destiny that has resonated throughout his life. His career was shaped by a "chance" encounter with David Rockefeller, while still in college, which led Peterson to join the Peace Corps. While serving in Brazil, another fateful incident gave him the permission he needed to initiate what became the first program, in the history of Brazil, dedicated to eradicating poverty.

From there, other fateful interventions led Peterson to begin a stint in the U.S. government that spanned 32 years—first as an officer in the Foreign Service, where he was posted to various countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, and then as a director of the Fulbright Scholars Program. In this latter post, he continued travelling throughout the world while being stationed in Washington, DC.

One night at home in Washington, in 1982, he turned on the TV and flipped the dial to the Merv Griffin Show. Griffin, accompanied by historian Gore Vidal, was interviewing Benjamin Creme, a Londoner who was in the U.S. giving lectures about the reappearance of the

Maitreya. Shortly thereafter, Peterson was getting into his car in a parking lot when he overheard two women talking about Creme's forthcoming appearances in Washington. At one of these appearances, the author's first life-changing encounter with the Maitreya took place. The story takes off from there.

Some of the tales told in this book would stretch anyone's imagination, yet the facts of Peterson's diplomatic career predispose the reader to rein in the skepticism that naturally arises. The author also claims he was not the only one among Washington's elite to have had such encounters. As his journey unfolded, he met others in the inner circles of government and finance, both national and international, including associates of Pope John Paul II, all of whom had similar experiences with the Maitreya or with certain of the Masters. (For reasons not entirely clear, it is said that all of them have chosen to remain anonymous.)

Some of the tangible effects of these encounters were mentioned by Peterson in a radio interview on "Coast-to-Coast AM," on June 24, 2000. He implied that the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of the Soviet Empire, and the peaceful transition of South Africa after apartheid all had been influenced by higher Beings, and said that journalists who interviewed the likes of Gorbachev and Mandela would be most surprised. The general purpose of these encounters, Peterson says, is to help humanity through these times of "endless and mindless destruction," and to clear a path to a new era in consciousness.

Building on this theme, the author links his own experiences to other phenomena that have been taking place around the world in recent decades that have been observed by millions of people. These phenomena range from the "materializations" of Sai Baba in India to the apparitions of the Virgin Mary at Medjugorje. All of them, Peterson says, have the same purpose: to signal the arrival on Earth of higher

forces who are preparing the ground for a new era of peace, justice and sharing.

In the conclusion to his book, after ending his personal narrative, Peterson offers a message to his readers and asks them to take it to heart. It reads in part:

“The story of the emergence of Maitreya and the Masters of Wisdom into the daily lives of all humanity is about our need for their help and guidance at what may be the most perilous time in history. The purpose of their return is not specifically religious, nor is it confined to any one sector of human endeavor. Rather, they come now to teach us how to live together as brothers and sisters.”

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The Return of the Perennial Philosophy: The Supreme Vision of Western Esotericism, by John Holman. London: Watkins Publishing, 2008. Paperback 170 pages. US\$17.95.

Esotericists are fond of speaking of the “perennial philosophy,” or “ancient wisdom,” a body of universal truths believed to have pervaded all cultures and civilizations throughout history (and prehistory). Those truths, often assumed to be encoded in symbols transcending ordinary language, are held to underlie the world’s exoteric religions as well as the mystical and occult traditions that have arisen in different places and at different times.

The outcome, according to believers, has been a fundamental cohesiveness of insights and intellectual formulations across space and time. The wells from which the world’s mystics and philosophers drank were filled from a common subterranean stream. Some authorities claim that the perennial philosophy is inherent in the human condition, while others claim that it was given to humanity in remote antiquity by higher beings concerned with the long-term mental and spiritual evolution of the race.

John Holman’s *The Return of the Perennial Philosophy* seeks to establish the continuing

reality of the perennial philosophy and to trace its impact on the western esoteric tradition. The book is written in a somewhat dense scholarly style, though its relatively short length avoids tedium. The work is exploratory, not offering or even perhaps needing firm conclusions. Perhaps wisely, Holman even refrains from a simplistic definition of his subject. Instead he suggests that the perennial philosophy has to be experienced:

[T]o know the perennial philosophy as *Divine Reality*, one has to “go there”... In the writings of many contemporary thinkers, the perennial philosophy is essentially the pre-modern worldview—a philosophical consensus of sorts, featuring a multilevelled universe from matter, through living systems, mind and soul, to spirit/God. This gives us a perennial philosophy “map” of sorts but... we are to remember that the map is not the terrain. Moreover, the map may only refer to *part* of the terrain anyway, depending on how far into the territory the majority of travellers went and/or what they were able or thought necessary to express... [p. 127]

John Holman’s brief historical review covers a broad swath of ideas from classical Gnosticism to modern psychology. To his considerable credit, the author discusses the work of individuals and groups rarely mentioned in surveys of western esotericism. He devotes a whole chapter to the 20th-century Traditionalist School, associated with French author René Guénon, German-Swiss philosopher Frithjof Schuon, and others. Two chapters are devoted to the “spiritual psychology” of Carl Jung, Roberto Assagioli, and Ken Wilbur—whose integral theory of consciousness was influenced by Traditionalism.

Traditionalism and its derivatives are important to Holman’s thesis that the perennial philosophy had to be rediscovered and defended in the face of the pervasive rationalist mindset of the times. Wilbur might add that it also needs to be defended against the superficiality of New Age movements.

On the other hand, topics which many people might regard as central to western esotericism—and which formed links in the outward

expression of the perennial philosophy—like the Kabbalah, alchemy, and the Rosicrucian movement, are relegated to a short chapter headed: “Some Other Esoteric Schools.”

Surprisingly, in view of the book’s subtitle: *The Supreme Vision of Western Esotericism*, fully one-third of the book discusses *eastern* concepts brought to the West by Helena Blavatsky and others of her lineage inside and outside the Theosophical Society.

To be sure, concepts such as the planes of nature, the subtle bodies, and the initiations have become firmly established in modern esoteric philosophy. And few people would disagree that they have added greatly to our understanding of reality and humanity’s evolutionary potential. However, this reviewer was disappointed that the author offered no evidence, or even hints, from the western tradition to support them—or even provided points of contact between eastern and western esoterica.

The perennial philosophy was preserved by initiates, and initiates are more likely than others to recognize and respond to its pervasive influence. But the author misses an opportunity to discuss initiation in a western context. Although the notion of graded initiations was less developed in the west—and sometimes was misunderstood or flawed—it was not totally unknown before *The Secret Doctrine* appeared in 1888.

John Holman clearly has done useful research, but, as it stands, the book does not do justice to his work. The lengthy account of Theosophical teachings—most of which is taken from the literature without significant commentary—should be shortened, and the discussion of western esoteric topics expanded. Both need to be integrated more successfully into the book’s overall theme. Holman has whet our appetite. We hope he writes a second edition that builds upon the strength of his ideas and remedies the weaknesses of this edition.

Editorial Staff

