

Modern Religious Spirit: Eastern Illumination and the West

Aaron J. French

Introduction

Throughout the recorded history of the West, religion has occupied the minds of the greatest thinkers and the souls of the most devoted hearts. Indeed, even those who appear to have opposed religion have, in a sense, played a part in shaping and furthering its cause, by analyzing and studying the religious topic as concept, helping to evolve it and acting as a necessary weight against the tide of fervency. Religion continues to permeate the lives of most Western people; it is built into their holidays, their cultural outlook, their idiomatic language, and even the structure of the seven-day week. Nevertheless, the increase in both scientism and atheism begs the question: Are Westerners truly religious or spiritual, or have they lost their original devotion to the cause?

The Psychology of Religious Individualism

Renowned Jewish scholar Jonathan Sacks suggests in his 2012 article —*The Moral Animal*¹—that conventional religion has fallen out of favor in the West, with many people claiming they hold no religious affiliation—a percentage that is increasing. Although Sacks is a proponent for the religious life, he uses neuroscience to support his position: “We have mirror neurons that lead us to feel pain when we see others suffering. We are hard-wired for empathy. We are moral animals.” While this is a valiant claim toward pro-religious thinking, it is nonetheless materialistic, aligning with the deification of scientific knowledge. As we shall see, when the above statement is brought into the light of the individualism sought after in the West, and compared with the old spiritual knowledge of the East, which became westernized in the book *Siddhartha* by Herman

Hesse,² the statement “We are moral animals” is rendered irrelevant. A true understanding of what is happening in the evolution of human consciousness reveals that the Western quest to attain individualistic freedom is indeed a religious act—in accord with the change and development of modern souls.

In his foundational book on the psychology of religion, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*,³ William James examines the phenomena of religion through a pragmatic and scientific lens. Over the course of his study, he delineates the neglect of science in the academic study of religion, explaining that there needs to be a shift from the dogmas of outer religious expression to an inner, experience-based form, including the states of consciousness associated with such experiences. In this regard, James would be in agreement with Sacks when Sacks calls humans “moral animals” and endeavors to support his statement with neurological (materialistic) data.

For Sacks, as for James, the human is at the mercy of fluctuating mental states, which are triggered and constructed from the sensory data of the physical world, as a computer program is at the mercy of the fingers tapping the

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keys. There is no focus on the organic substance of human consciousness as it relates to the Soul, whose substance is invisible to mundane modes of perception. Rather, consciousness is seen as a static paradigm through which experiences and concepts are processed, resulting in the psychological makeup of the human being and leaving little room for the maturation of the Soul.

However, James goes further than Sacks, and where Sacks departs, James asserts that experience is the real driving force of religion, stating at the start of his book: “[I will] ... confine myself as far as I can to personal religion”⁴ He describes personal religion as the most important function of mankind, and says that it is based upon experience. So, in the end both James and Sacks are in favor of a kind of religion, as both agree on the neurological apparatus, yet they wind up at opposite sides of the same coin, with James asserting religious individualism based upon experience, and Sacks concluding: “Religion is the best antidote to the individualism of the consumer age.”⁵

There is absolutely nothing wrong with either of these positions. Both men, in their own related yet varied ways, do well in coming to conclusions based upon their own materialistic data, which has been gained via sense perception. Furthermore, there is absolutely nothing wrong with scientific, materialistic data, nor with the scientific method itself, the tool that has garnered so much progress for contemporary life. The problem lies in the deification of materialistic data—the idea that it remains the authority on what is true, a God-above-God judging matters of reality with an iron assurance, when clearly it has been incorrect on numerous occasions throughout history, (e.g.,

The striving after full attainment of individualism has replaced the old forms of religion. This development is in harmony with the Christian mythology of self-deification by finding oneself in Christ and linking up Christ-Selves with Christ Himself. Moreover, the only possible way to become an individual is to make decisions, have experiences, and reflect honestly upon them. That is the modern religious spirit.

the corrective publication of *On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres*⁶ and other similar works). What is missing from the equation is individual human experience that, as James rightly points out, is the sole religious force in driving the evolution of consciousness in the modern-day West.

While not as nebulous as it sounds, this progression of consciousness will be better and more clearly explained pictorially—and the organic process is beautifully depicted, both in its narrative form and the situation surrounding its composition—in *Siddhartha*, the aforementioned book by the German poet, novelist, and painter Hermann Hesse. For, as Robert C. Conard wrote in his 1975 article entitled *Hermann Hesse's Siddhartha, eine indische Dichtung, as a Western*

*Archetype*⁷: “Although Hesse’s *Siddhartha* is subtitled *eine indische Dichtung* (an Indian Poetry), and a prominent Indian scholar has discovered in it ‘the core of Indian thought’ and ‘the greatest tribute of one of the greatest minds of our time to the sons of India,’ Western critics still claim the work as a product of Occidental culture. While the Orient sees the book as a great Eastern work by a Western writer, many Western scholars perceive the book as typically Western with merely an Oriental facade.”⁸ Conard concludes with his study that *Siddhartha* “reveals the bodily structure of the work as Western despite the Indic garment it wears.”⁹

This is all stated with accuracy, but again, as with Sacks and James, Conard is missing a key component—which is exactly the point of this seeming mask of the Occident in Indic guise: that the Western quest for individualism has become the new religious mood in the evolution of human consciousness—inspired by the advent of Christianity, its spread, globaliza-

tion, and even the Internet. At this point in the game, it is nearly impossible to return to previous conditions, as an irreversible change has been set in motion. Humans on this planet now feel as if their own individuality, inspired by the kinds of personal experiences they select and carry out, has become irreconcilably bound up with the religious feeling life.

The plot of *Siddhartha* takes us through this process, revealing young Siddhartha's brazen defiance of the imposed way of life, being a Brahmin and having no sense of Self, indeed with the goal being to *abandon* that Self. This is followed by his own carefully selected set of experiences, which he undergoes, and throughout the course of the novel he eventually gets to teach himself, as it were, what it means to be religious. Siddhartha's is a personal religion, whereas his childhood friend Govinda is left at the end of the novel in the old consciousness paradigm, a follower having no sense of Self, gazing on the transformed divinity of Siddhartha, yet not comprehending it. In a very vivid manner, this final scene shows the movement out of the Eastern or Old World style of intellect, into the more Occidental one, which is steeped in individualism and experience. Indeed, the Occident's religious quest for individualism has permeated the entire world-culture, and it will only continue to do so. Hence, there is no possible way to "un-expose" the world to this development.

And yet, what is not implied here is that the West has now eradicated the East, replaced it—killed it off, in other words. Rather, the current religious mood is the blossoming of the rose bud (the West) upon the firm stalk of the East, the whole of it arising naturally, as the rose sprouts over time from the garden bed, when properly cared for and nourished. Indeed, the concept and process can only be described pictorially and poetically, as above, because it is a spiritual, organic manifestation; *not a materialistic or mechanistic one.*

Conclusion

While it may appear to those who are armed with materialistic data and feel themselves an authority in some capacity that the old religious models are dying out and must be saved by importing the Orient to the Occident, as depicted so correctly in Hesse's novel *Siddhartha*, the truth is that "personal religion," and even non-religion, is wholly bound up with the evolution of human consciousness. The striving after full attainment of individualism has replaced the old forms of religion. This development is in harmony with the Christian mythology of self-deification by finding oneself in Christ and linking up Christ-Selves with Christ Himself. Moreover, the only possible way to become an individual is to make decisions, have experiences, and reflect honestly upon them. *That* is the modern religious spirit.

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- 1 Jonathan Sacks, "The Moral Animal," *New York Times*, 23 December, 2012.
 - 2 Hermann Hesse and Joachim Neugroschel. *Siddhartha: An Indian Tale* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2003).
 - 3 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1997).
 - 4 *Ibid.*, 23.
 - 5 Jonathan Sacks, "The Moral Animal."
 - 6 *On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres* is the seminal work on the heliocentric theory of the Renaissance astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus.
 - 7 Robert C. Conard, "Hermann Hesse's Siddhartha, eine indische Dichtung, as a Western Archetype," *The German Quarterly*, Vol. 48: No. 3, May, 1975. Published by Wiley, on behalf of the American Association of Teachers of German Stable.
 - 8 *Ibid.*, 358-369.
 - 9 *Ibid.*

Book Review

A God that Could be Real: Spirituality, Science, and the Future of Our Planet, by Nancy Ellen Abrams, Boston: Beacon Press, 2015. Hard cover, 163 pages, publisher's list price US\$22.95. Available from all leading online and conventional retailers.

Nancy Ellen Abrams clashed with her rabbi, while in her teens, and soon rejected the Judaism of her upbringing. Through her husband, astrophysicist Joel Primack, Abrams came into contact with leading scientists from around the world and lived in an environment of skeptical atheism. She and Primack coauthored two books on the philosophy of science, neither of which acknowledged any role for religion in human, global or cosmic affairs.

Given her background, Abrams would not seem to be the ideal candidate to write a book on theology. But participation in a twelve-step program persuaded her that turning one's life over to a higher power—"of one's own understanding"—has healing potential. So Abrams set out on a quest to find such a higher power, posing the question: "*Could anything actually exist in the universe, as science understands it, that is worthy of being called God?*" [p. xxviii, emphasis in original].

Reflecting her background, the higher power of Abrams' understanding had to satisfy a number of stringent preconditions:

1. God could not have existed before the universe.
2. God could not have created the universe.
3. God can't know everything.
4. God doesn't plan what happens.
5. God can't violate the laws of nature. [pp. 24-34]

Those preconditions would seem to pose almost impossible obstacles to Abrams' quest for a higher power, but she found a way

around them. Her ingenious solution was to turn to complexity theory and the concept of emergent phenomena. The basic idea of emergence can be traced back as far as Aristotle, and the term itself was coined by the nineteenth-century English philosopher George Henry Lewes. But only in recent decades has the new discipline of complexity theory given it broad visibility in scientific and philosophical circles.

A basic tenet is that when a system acquires a certain level of complexity, it begins to exhibit emergent properties, patterns or entities, qualitatively different from those of the system's component parts, and unpredictable from even the most detailed knowledge of the latter. For example, the crystalline patterns of snowflakes could not be predicted from the study of water molecules. And no amount of knowledge of elementary particles could predict the nature of consciousness, which, according to the mindset within which Abrams is working, emerges from physical matter. Abrams makes the important assertion—though it is unclear whether a majority of complexity theorists would agree—that emergent traits are *goal-oriented*. "They are *about* something, *for* something." [p. 43, emphasis in original]

Abrams' God is an emergent phenomenon from the collective aspirations of the human race:

Our ancestors over tens of thousands of years *collectively* gave rise to almost everything that is now most important to us and most influential in our lives. . . . They're abstractions that emerged from different aspects of human behavior, and they're real, even though no one can completely define what any one of them actually is.

God has emerged from some aspect of us, something we were already doing in prehistory, something so ancient and fundamental that it was in our ancestors before the first ideas of gods arose. It has to be so basic to

us that, without it, we might not be human. [pp. 48-50, emphasis in original]

She explains further:

We humans are the aspiring species. Because we feel driven to be better, to do better, to create better, to understand better, to have more, to be safer, we have become far more than the sum of our instincts. The interacting aspirations of humanity make up an extremely complex system. . . . *God is endlessly emerging from the staggering complexity of all human aspirations across time.* [pp. 49-50, emphasis in the original]

The result is a God who can inspire us, whom we can love, to whom we can pray. It is a God within whom we can look forward to an after-life. Abrams rejects the cynical notion that man created God out of a need for solace or salvation, or the desire for an almighty to smite one's enemies. Her God emerged without humanity's conscious desire, even—until now—its awareness.

Abrams' God did not pre-exist the universe; it did not create the universe: "*God transcends us, but the universe transcends God.*" [p. 56, emphasis in original] But it gives meaning to the universe, at least for us human beings. God is a planetary God, because it emerges from humanity that lives on Earth: "God is in all the places that we humans have changed, improved, interpreted, and loved. And nowhere else." [p. 55]

Our God may not be the only one. If our God emerges from human aspiration, other gods conceivably could emerge from the aspirations of thinking beings in other parts of the universe. Moreover, and this is a most important deduction: "Somewhere in the very, very distant future, some new emergent phenomenon might even arise from all those gods interacting." [p. 61] A meta-God could emerge, at a higher level of complexity, from the Gods already formed.

The author's primary thesis that "a God could be real" is presented in a little more than the sixty pages that comprise Part One of the book. Parts Two and Three attempt to attach meaning, still within her rationalistic mindset, to a

number of concepts more commonly associated with religion, spirituality, or even esotericism.

Abrams offers an interesting definition of "spirituality." She examines the sixty orders of magnitude (powers of ten) that separate the Planck scale, the shortest length that has any meaning in quantum physics, from the longest length that has any meaning to scientific cosmology: the diameter of the observable universe.

Our lives focus on a limited portion of that spectrum, from the size of "the tiniest creature visible to the naked eye up to maybe the sun." [p. 71] This is the range that Abrams defines as "physical." On the scale of the atom and smaller, and on the scale of galaxies and clusters of galaxies, reality is totally foreign to our understanding. Moreover, matter is so rarified, relative to the size of the entities that comprise it, that it can no longer be termed "physical;" rather, it should be called "spiritual." In fact, "Most of the scientific universe is spiritual! . . . [I]f we open our minds willingly and exuberantly to a real God in the real universe, we will find that there is indeed a spiritual world." [p.75] Strong affirmations for an avowed rationalist.

We can develop a relationship with the emergent God. Abrams poses four questions: "Can it love us? Can we love it? Can it respond? and Can it answer our prayers? And she answers an emphatic "yes" to all of them. Prayer, for example, "is a conversation among different faces of ourselves as we exist on different size scales. We send our ordinary consciousness out to connect to our roles on emergent size scales. Those roles speak back to us if we're open to their existence." [p. 84] The God that emerges from human aspiration loves its creators: "God loves us, even though God doesn't feel it." Moreover, it provides a favorable environment for mutual love: "God is what makes it possible for us to love one another." [p. 93.] As we shall see shortly, the love-oriented God that emerges from human aspiration also provides a basis for morality.

Abrams acknowledges a sense of the sacred. Things are not inherently sacred, however, or

sanctified by divine decree. Rather we anoint them as sacred: “*Sacred* is more of a verb than an adjective.” “The sense of sacredness,” she explains, “reflects our ability not only to see but to *appreciate* something to the depths of our being.” [p. 125, emphasis in original] Among the things that are sacred is humanity’s story, told not so much in cultural artifacts, like scripture and mythology, but in the scientific history of the universe, the planet and ourselves. “There is one magnificent cosmic origin story, and it is equally true for everyone on Earth. To know who we are, we must tell it in every language, every medium, and every generation.” [p. 142]

The question of an afterlife obviously poses difficulties for Abrams. Heaven and hell, not surprisingly, are dismissed out of hand, except as “potential futures for our species.” [p. 161] Reincarnation is worth considering, but it is rejected on probability grounds. Abrams views reincarnation as the reconstruction of our consciousness in a new body. But she is committed to the notion that consciousness emerges from physical matter as an emergent phenomenon, which exhibits a high degree of randomness. The probability that our consciousness could have been produced by the particular aggregate of atoms that we encompass is already exponentially small; in other words, we are who we are—rather than someone else, a different kind of creature, or an inanimate object—by the slimmest of chances. So reincarnation—the production of the same consciousness from a future aggregation of atoms—is a virtual impossibility.

The best prospect for immortality is that our consciousness lives on in the thoughts of others, in the memories of our ancestors, and in the impact we have on the world. Here, Abrams moves into a topic critically important to her cause: “We may not be our brother’s keeper, but we are our great-great-great-grandchildren’s keeper.” If we make the right choices, “We might become ancestors [our] descendants will honor.” [p. 109] In other words, we have moral obligations.

But what precisely is morality, and where does it come from? The essence of morality “is hu-

man beings struggling to *express something they already feel*.” “[A]ctive morality—really thinking about right and wrong—is an *expression of our highest aspirations*. That’s the connection between morality and a God that continually emerges from our aspirations.” [pp. 130, 131, emphasis in original] From another perspective, morality arises from our inherent need for harmony: “The more we are in harmony with the universe and God, the more sustainable—even regenerating—our lives will be. We’ll experience taking the long view not as sacrifice but as oneness and fulfillment and harmony with God—because that’s what it is.” [p. 144]

Nancy Abrams’ theological model is an attractive one. One key element is not acknowledged, however, and that weakness seriously undermines her thesis. The aspirations from which God is alleged to have emerged: “to be better, to do better, to create better, to understand better, to have more, to be safer, we have become far more than the sum of our instincts,” are all of a positive nature. In consequence Abrams’ emergent God has beneficent qualities. Why, we may ask, did not some meta-being emerge from humanity’s fears, spitefulness, greed and sloth? We could equally have created a Devil. Perhaps we have created both, and the present book simply focuses on one of them. Not until the very end of the book does Abrams concede: “Collectively we are influencing God. The worse we behave, measured against our deepest aspirations, the weaker God becomes, not only for us but for future generations.” [p. 150]

The author has imposed an unacknowledged, positive ethical bias on her emergent phenomenon. Her God has emerged from a system of cardinal virtues, whereas its polar opposite could have emerged from a system of deadly sins. While the author claims to be proposing a God that is “real,” by the standards of scientific rationalism, we can only suppose that she has an underlying framework of belief that is not disclosed—or perhaps of which she is not yet aware.

Abrams expresses great optimism for the future: “Awakening to the emerging God prom-

ises us love on previously unknown scales—for Earth and the cosmos, for the immensity of what it took to create us, and for all the children to come.” [p. 161] But a similar optimism, a belief in humanity’s basic goodness, seems to have preceded and guided Abrams’ formulation of her thesis. Esotericists share that optimism, recognizing it as an element of humanity’s evolution toward higher consciousness, urged on by our own souls and by the Second Ray emanation from the Solar Logos.

Her suggestion that emergent Gods from different planets could form an even-greater emergent God is a valuable one. It points the way toward broader acceptance of a hierarchical deity, which could alleviate important conceptual challenges modern people face as they try to reconcile theology and science. Abrams’ multi-level God has much in common with the hierarchy of Logoi described by trans-Himalayan teachings. But there is a crucial difference. Abrams’ is a bottom-up model of Deity, founded on the belief that form creates consciousness. Esotericists, by contrast, insist that consciousness creates form. The Logoi precede and create, from their own being, their worlds and the lives that inhabit them. Abrams’ meta-God may emerge “in the very, very distant future.” But the Logoi have been here all along.

One of two forewords to *A God that Could be Real* was written by Desmond Tutu, former Anglican Archbishop of South Africa and a

leading figure in the reconciliation process following the end of apartheid. Archbishop Tutu comments that he disagrees with much Nancy Abrams says but believes that people “will come away better for having read it.” [p. ix] He adds: “I recommend it highly to all, religious or secular, believer or atheist, who are ready to explore honestly their understanding of the divine in our beautiful, expanding universe.” [p. x] This reviewer joins him both in his evaluation and his recommendation. The book is well-written, in a lively, journalistic style, and it should be of considerable interest to readers of *The Esoteric Quarterly*.

Whether she would acknowledge it or not, Abrams is on a spiritual journey—using “spiritual,” not in the sense of remoteness from our everyday frame of reference, but in the more familiar sense of expanding consciousness. At present, however, she is a prisoner of her rationalist mindset and its associated premises and terminology. Many of the concepts she examines could be reworded—and in some cases reoriented—to fit in well with modern esoteric teachings. Our hope is that she will continue on her journey, following her insights, giving voice to those unspoken beliefs she reveals from time to time, and allowing herself to open up to new language that could provide a better basis for expressing her insights. Nancy Abrams would make an excellent esoteric student.

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