Chapter 1 - Perennial Philosophy (Eternal Philosophy)

In all times and in all cultures have appeared mystics, who have awakened to their true nature. Despite coming from diverse times and cultures, these visionaries seem to be describing essentially the same realizations, the same transformations of consciousness. At the heart of each great religion one finds one or more of these awakened ones. Perennial philosophy is the study of this most interesting form of cultural invariance. Truth arises naturally and spontaneously in all times and places.

Wikipedia offers this succinct definition of *perenial philosophy*:

> (Latin: *philosophia perennis* "eternal philosophy", also *Philosophia perennis et universalis*) is the notion of the universal recurrence of philosophical insight independent of epoch or culture, including universal truths on the nature of reality, humanity or consciousness (anthropological universals).

Agostino Ateuco first coined the term *philosophia perennis* in his book, *De Perenni Philosophia Libra X* (1540). In this work, he attempted to demonstrate that many of the great philosophic ideas of classical antiquity were in harmony with the tenets 16th century Catholic dogma. More than a century later one of the discoverers of calculus, Gottfried Leibniz, used this term to describe a consequence of his theory of monads; there's an aspect of consciousness that transcends all cultural conditioning. Every conscious creature shares a deep connection to the fundamental principles of existence. In 1945 Aldous Huxley published his influential *The Perennial Philosophy*, establishing this concept in the way it's currently generally understood. He defined perennial philosophy (in his book by that name) as:

> The metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being; the thing is immemorial and universal. Rudiments of the perennial philosophy may be found among the traditional lore of primitive peoples in every region of the world, and in its fully developed forms it has a

> place in every one of the higher religions. The Perennial Philosophy is expressed most succinctly in the Sanskrit formula tat tvam asi ('that thou art'); the Atman, or immanent eternal Self, is one with Brahman, the Absolute Principle of all existence; and the last end of every human being, is to discover the fact for himself, to find out who he really is.

Although perennial philosophy transcends any particular culture, it manifests rich and often elaborate cultural expressions. Often cultural expressions can be confusing to those from a different culture. In this class we'll avoid a scholarly encyclopedic approach; rather, we'll take a little world-tour, visiting a few examples of perennial philosophy shinning forth through various religious traditions. You may well know of other traditions that could well have been included in our itinerary. No slight was intended towards them. Indeed, the more one realizes the principles of perennial philosophy, the more one sees it manifesting everywhere!

We'll start with Zen, since it's relatively free of what can become quite elaborate metaphysics, and relatively free from cultural affectations. This simplicity makes it an excellent starting point. Also Zen provides surprisingly simple and effective meditation techniques.

Even many atheists have found themselves attracted to Zen, and to Buddhism more generally, for its lack of the Abrahamic concept of God. Any atheists who may be put-off by the word God may replace any occurrences of that word by the phrase "all that is". Roshi Joshu Sasaki (now over a hundred years old), a contemporary Rinzai Zen master, sometimes uses the word *God* to describe the direct experience of absolute being.

Following the roots of Zen, we'll study the Chinese Taoist philosophy, as well as Mahayana Buddhism including the Vajrayana practices of Tibet. Then we'll continue south to India where we'll encounter the ancient Advaita Vedanta teachings. From India we'll move west to explore the old Kabala of Hebraic mysticism (with its deep roots in the esoteric traditions of Egypt), along with spiritual alchemy and the Western Mystery Schools. Next we'll examine Christian mysticism, and finally we'll visit the gentile Sufi mystics from the land of Islam. We'll then see that "primitive" peoples are not necessarily so primitive, when it comes to a grasp of perennial philosophy, as we take a look at indigenous shamanistic traditions. Finally we'll compare and contrast perennial philosophy with modern science, including modern physics and findings from modern functional brain imaging techniques.

When examining a particular religious tradition, it can be very revealing to place it on the esoteric/exoteric scale. The more esoteric the tradition, the more clearly it espouses perennial philosophy. The more exoteric the tradition, the more dogma one encounters, as well as an insistence on a literal interpretation of scriptures. Esoteric traditions emphasize realization; exoteric traditions emphasize belief. Esoteric traditions are resonant with all other esoteric traditions, even from completely different religions traditions. Exoteric traditions tend to

contradict and conflict with all other exoteric traditions, even from the same underlying religious tradition. For example, Christian mystics seem in perfect agreement with Taoist sages, while thousands have died in religious wars between rival exoteric Christian sects. Islamic mystics (the Sufis) are in perfect agreement with Zen masters, while thousands have died in religious wars between rival Islamic sects. In this course we will explore esoteric traditions from diverse times and cultures.

Although the esoteric/exoteric scale is useful, one must realize that even within ostensibly exoteric religions traditions (i.e. Catholicism) one finds realized mystics. Indeed, in the Catholic tradition such mystics have sometimes even started new accepted orders within the Church, and some of these pioneers were later proclaimed saints (for example, Saint Teresa of Avila, Saint John of the Cross, and Saint Francis of Assisi). Also, seemingly esoteric traditions like Buddhism have been used by millions as an orthodox religious practice.

All mystic traditions teach that Reality is beyond the intellect, beyond words. Indeed, this is a very key concept – that Reality is always beyond any *concept of* reality. Reality is inconceivable. All mystical teachings are non-dualistic, and point to a vast Unity of all that is. But language is inherently dualistic. Words and concepts are always doomed to fall short of the mark. At least the intellect can come to grasp the concept that ***Reality is always beyond any concept of reality***. The word is not the thing it describes. The menu is not the food (hopefully the food is tastier!). A simple enough idea, to be sure. But to completely grasp this with one's whole being, that's true liberation. Yet many of our species' problems stem from confusing beliefs about the nature of reality (concepts about reality) with Reality. Words are taken far too seriously, and can become more important than life itself. (This might be comic if it didn't frequently involve such tragic consequences.) Though Reality cannot be grasped by the intellect alone, all mystical traditions teach that it *can* be realized. All mystical traditions proclaim the unity of all that is, and that the direct realization of this unity is possible, here and now.

Most people believe that they only use 10% of their potential brain power. There are some very real ways in which this is true, and people seem to intuitively grasp this. We spend much time, in the realm of conceptual thought; but that task is performed by only a small part of our cerebral cortex. Our attention seems so easily and even obsessive-compulsively focused on verbal thinking, which opens the door to Pandora's box of dualistic delusions.

By coming to our senses (and giving the linguistic processor a rest), we can start more fully using the rest of our brain, and thus perceive more of the magic of the cosmic dance of the Divine that is our everyday life. This is why Buddhists meditate - to experience primordial mind, mind beyond thought, and out of which all thoughts arise. Then the "monkey-mind" relaxes its frantic jumping around, and a vast spaciousness begins to open up. Once our tiny intellect loses its tyrannical control over our attention, some of our other (suppressed) human faculties may more fully blossom and unfold, including those important human faculties of love and compassion.

Further reading on Perennial Philosophy

Aldous Huxley's book, *Perennial Philosophy*, published in 1944

Wikipedia's entry for "perennial philosophy"

An interesting essay on perennial philosophy with some good links:
http://mythosandlogos.com/perennial.html

Videos related to perennial philosophy:

Eckhart Tolle: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fwr4zCuEmw0

Huston Smith:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D1AUjfl-Vnc
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lEPaHeP3fN4
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2YNUJBhR8UM

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