

LOVE OF PERENNIALS, Part II

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on the Third Sunday of Easter, April 19, 2015

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Finding Two Polarities: Exegesis versus Eisegesis and Exoteric versus Esoteric

Last Sunday, under this same sermon title, “Love of Perennials, Part I,” I talked about two polarities. The first of them was looking at how to handle a sacred text, whether it’s from the Bible or one from a different religion, or even the Constitution. And you have the polarity between “exegesis,” which means drawing out from the text its inherent meaning, and then the notion of eisegesis, which means forcing the text, against its inherent meaning, to say what you want it to say.

Drawing Toward the Centers of Faith Shows the Commonality Between Them

The second polarity was a matter of looking at the inner versus the outer forms of religion in particular. You can compare the outer forms of the various world religions and find they have almost nothing in common. But when you go toward the center of a faith, as you plumb the depths in its core, you find in the profundity of various faiths a commonality and even a communion between them. So on the outside there is the exoteric, and on the inside is the esoteric.

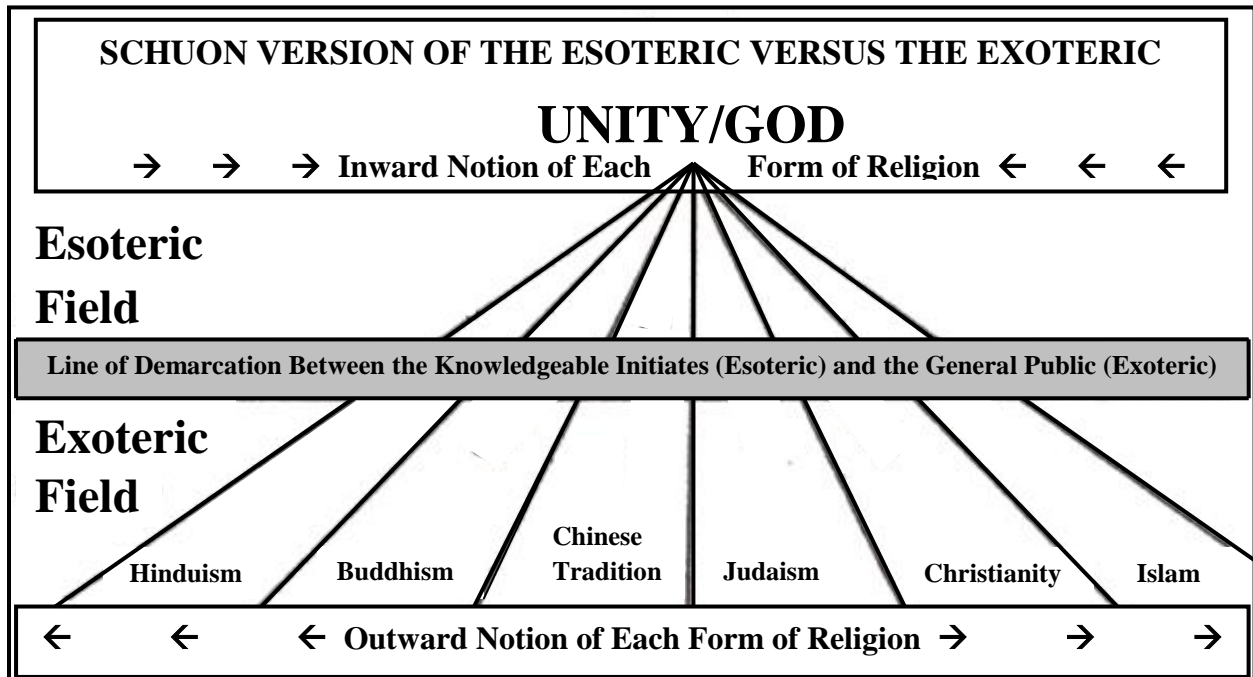
In Part I of this sermon on April 12, I attempted to show a diagram of these two polarities and their relationships. Unfortunately the TV was on the fritz that day. Having fixed it, that diagram is now included on page 2 of this Part II. It also appears in the on-line version of Part I, which has been published on our website.

Unfortunately, the question I heard after the sermon on April 12 as people were leaving was “What did that sermon have to do with perennials?” “I thought you were going to talk about flowers.” This comment cropped up nearly half-a-dozen times.

Perennial Faith Shows in Its Inner Core

So I never got to that point. Being without my trusty diagram, I figured that was enough for one day. So today you get the full benefit of “Love of Perennials, Part II,” with the missing diagram herein. What I wanted to talk about was the way in which that inner core of our faith has a perennial quality about it that abides throughout the ages. It doesn’t rise and fall with the seasons, and has been called the perennial philosophy. A philosopher called Gottfried

[To continue reading this sermon, go directly to page 3. Page 2 begins a reprint of a chart and related text from Part I, preached on April 12, 2015.]



DIAGRAMMING THE RANGE OF FAITHS

The text beginning on this page is loosely abstracted from "Love of Perennials, Part I," preached on April 12, 2015, and available on the church website. It is descriptive of the above diagram and is republished here as a convenience for our readers.

In the early part of the 20th Century, two spiritual teachers, Rabindranath Tagor (a Nobel laureate in Literature) and Erithjof Schuon, met and engaged in deep articulation about the differences between the exoteric field (suitable to be imparted to the general public) and the esoteric field (limited to a small circle of knowledgeable initiates) in our religion.

Schuon then met up with an itinerant teacher, a Muslim holy man, who engaged

him in conversation about the inner-ness of their different faiths versus the outer manifestations of those differences.

The diagram above and its interpretation started with the itinerant teacher. The holy man drew a circle in the sand with a dot in the center. Then he announced that the dot represented God.

Next he began drawing spokes, radii, for this entire circle, and he remarked that each radius delineated one of the world religions. The teacher continued in this fashion, labeling the spokes as the paths of many religions until all of them were accounted for.

[Text for this abstract continues under the heavy horizontal line on the bottom of page 6, following the end of the sermon on the top of page 6.]

[Text of the Part II sermon continues here from page 1 to end at top of page 6.]

Leibniz came up with that name, which he Latinized, of course, as *Philosophia Perennis* because it sounds more academic that way.

At any rate *Philosophia Perennis* has to do with an accord that continues throughout the ages on end and that has been part of the understanding that humanity enjoys vis-à-vis God and our place in the world during the millennia. All religious traditions, Leibniz claimed, have been based on the foundation of that perennial philosophy.

Facets of the Foundation Of Perennial Philosophy

Here are some of the facets, or notions, of that foundation to give you a feeling for what I'm talking about:

- ☞ The notion that God is spirit. God is not a human being writ large. God is not of the material realm. Therefore, an idol, regardless of what form it might take, or whether it is made of gold or clay, is seriously inappropriate.
- ☞ The notion of the Golden Rule, that if you need ethical guidance in your life, and who doesn't, that suffices. You don't really need much more than that. It's called the rule that is golden.
- ☞ The notion that humans are made in the image of God. That there is some sort of linkage, a parent-child kind of linkage, between what a

human being is deep, deep inside and what God is.

- ☞ And so that notion by itself is one of the main sources of hope for humanity, that there is an intrinsic tie between us and what God is. And that at the deepest level of reality, you don't find material realm but rather spiritual love. The material world goes only so deep, and you can go deeper than that, but then you find spirit and you find love.
- ☞ And finally, one other amazing principle of faith, part of this perennial philosophy, is that the path is also the goal. Sounds contradictory, sort of ridiculous on the outside of it. But with the notion that we live and move and have our being within God, that our path, whatever the path is, is within the goal. And so therefore, it is another source of hope for the life of anyone and everyone.

The Goal of Our Path Lies in God

So those are just some of the facets of what the perennial philosophy is and has been. Another philosopher by the name of Aldous Huxley wrote a book called *The Perennial Philosophy*, and I want to read just one paragraph out of that because he sort of spelled it out. His writing can be difficult, but what he says is worth hearing:

- ☞ "This idea is a metaphysic that recognizes a divine reality substantial to the world of things in lives and minds."

If I may translate, Huxley means that divinity finds its way, is part of, is tied to, is impossible to separate from the material world, our lives, our minds. That it is a psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine reality. That it is an ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of the eminent and the transcendent.

So our end, our goal at the end of our path, is found in God, who is present everywhere.

Rudiments of this 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.

Mystical Spirituality Is the Origin of All World Religions; Interspirituality Is Likely to be Religion's Third Millennium

Our sermonizer next Sunday morning, Kurt Johnson,* can provide you with a feeling for where's he's heading toward this same idea. One quote from him:

☞ "The real religion of humankind can be said to be spirituality itself. Not everybody would agree with that because mystical spirituality is the origin of all the world religions. If this is so, and I believe it is, we might also say that interspirituality, the sharing of ultimate experiences across traditions, is the religion of the third millennium."

And that's what I'm trying to do here at our church. Interspirituality is the foundation that can prepare the way for a planet-wide enlightened culture and a continuing community among the religions that is substantial and vital and creative.

So there you go. You have a philosopher from a hundred years ago (Huxley), another one from two hundred years ago (Leibniz), and one who will be our speaker next Sunday.

Nothing frustrates me more when I'm trying to learn something new than to try to comprehend a theory without any examples to back it up. I find it deeply frustrating. I always question my understanding of a concept if I don't have an example set forth before me.

So let me offer you an extended example:

If you would look at the flowers that are on the communion table this morning, those are from Easter, a few Sundays back. I have a question for you, and I don't want you to be hasty in answering this question. As a matter of fact, I want you to be very slow and thoughtful in considering whether or not the answer is true..

Have Flowers Lost Their Beauty After Flowering, or Is Perennial Growth the Key to Eternal Beauty?

The question: Have those flowers lost their beauty? Should we ask Bob to take a photograph of those flowers and put it on our website?

Let me take you through the seasons. Bear with me, please, just a bit. We're in the

middle of springtime right now, and those tulips and hyacinths – that’s what they were, anyway – were beautiful. Now the purpose of the blossom, of course, is very obvious to anybody who has a little knowledge of biology.

If you take an ultraviolet photograph of your backyard, for example, you will see that any and every flower, including the little ones that are in the clover in the grass, will pop out like the sun. You would have to be one dumb bee to miss a flower if you can see ultraviolet. And they do.

To our eyes they’re just pretty, beautiful colors, but to the bees, it’s like flying into a sun over there in the middle of darkness. It is plain as day where the flowers are. And so now the bee has come and has been attracted to those glorious petals and has managed to rub off a little bunch of spores from the stamen.

Throughout Summer, Seeds Are Forming

At this stage that you see right now, later on in springtime, not quite summertime yet, what is happening is that germinated cells are drawing strength from the plant, and the plant is sending its strength toward those cells in order to form seeds. As the summer progresses, those seeds will grow and harden and become firm.

Now I realize that these particular hyacinths and tulips are hybrids and are not really doing that, and I see a number of faces out there that are saying, “Wait a minute! That’s not what these plants are doing.” But I’m thinking about plants in general. Humor me for a moment more.

So throughout the summer that is forming those seeds, my question to you now is this: Is that long process of gathering the strength to form seeds any less beautiful in your mind, even though you can’t actually see it going on?

And so now it’s late summer, and the seeds are fully formed. Then a fox comes by, and the seeds latch onto the fur of the fox, or in some varieties of plants they get caught by the wind, and in some other varieties they are eaten by birds and then they’re pooped out elsewhere, and in still other varieties they just fall to the ground.

At Frost, Seeds Lie Dormant for Months

And then the first frost comes, and these seeds now find themselves covered in snow and darkness. Cold and dark for months, they wait it out. My follow-up question for you now becomes this: Is that long and difficult process of getting scattered and then waiting out the winter any the less beautiful in your mind?

Finally the snow begins to melt, the sun comes out, and the days lengthen. You find in this alchemy of warmth and moisture and light that something gets awakened inside that seed. It begins to burst forth. The leaves know how to grow upward, and the roots know how to grow downward, and the plant forms its own new tulip or hyacinth. Eventually, with enough light and water and warmth and nutrients from the ground, it forms its own new blossom.

And I ask you, in all seriousness, is that any less beautiful than the flowering plant?

The Perennial Philosophy Is not a Flower; It's a Way of Seeing the World

So this perennial philosophy is not the tulip; it's not the hyacinth. It's a way of looking, a way of seeing the world.

And may I suggest to you to look at religious faith that way, look for the inside. Don't get fooled by the particulars of the outside. I would suggest that you look at world affairs that way. Don't get caught up in the ups and downs and the turmoil, but look at what is happening with the trends, look at what is happening on the inside.



[Text for the abstract on "Diagramming the Range of Faiths," beginning on page 2, continues here to end on page 7.]

This exercise sparked an idea by Schuon, who went on to publish it. To increase the lucidity of the diagram, he changed it from a circle with a dot in the center into the shape of a pyramid, with God at the top and the religions represented by many different columns. They started with wide bases and narrowed gradually until they converged at a single point at the top. There were many different columns rising up to meet God, each representing a particular kind of faith.

Then Schuon drew a horizontal line of demarcation in the middle. Above it is the esoteric dimension. Below it is the exoteric dimension. Below that the outward form of the religion is displayed, and above it is the inner notion of a faith. Each religion was shown: Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, and many others as well.

And most important of all, look at your neighbors that way. Don't get caught up in their cars and their houses and their clothes. Look at their souls, and see in them the image of God. That is a way of looking.

Amen.

** Dr. Kurt Johnson is an Evolutionary and Spiritual Theologian who will have led a three-day conference on the weekend of April 24-26, 2015, under the theme of "The Coming Interspiritual Age."*

Most of the sermons of the Rev. Dr. Suggs may be found on the church's website.

In preparation for this sermon, I made an image of the kind of diagram that was adapted by Schuon in some of his early textbooks, showing the range of the various faiths.

The symbolism cannot be mistaken. The columns representing the various faiths are wide at the bottom where they include a few to many millions of people among their adherents, with perhaps great variations of belief under a wide umbrella of faith.

Each column narrows as the strictures of faith tend to reduce the number of closely knit believers. Not only that, but observe how close the different faiths are to each other as they rise ever nearer to God, whereas the wider assemblages of people near the bottom of each column are clearly much farther apart from each other.

Also, it ought to be noted that the Line of Demarcation between the knowledgeable

initiates and the general public is in fact not a wall, not even a line of shrubbery, with humanity filtering back and forth as their beliefs are constantly subject to change.

Nevertheless, that line does have a purpose in that people gathered in the Esoteric Field are likely to have more in common with each other than with people gathered in the Exoteric Field and vice versa. The esoterics as a group will undoubtedly be more knowledgeable in the specifics of their chosen ways of life while the exoterics may have much wider ranges in their chosen ways of life, if somewhat less depth of specifics.

A further word about the direction of the arrows on the two lines representing the inward and outward notions of each form of religion: In the Esoteric Field, the direction of the arrows is inward, toward the center of Unity, or God if you prefer, the result being a higher concentration of Unity. By contrast, in the Exoteric Field, the direction of

the arrows is outward, away from the center of Unity or God, the result being a wider dispersion of unity.

Now look at the diagram on page 2 of this Part II with Unity/God at the top center, and I want to make one observation about it. Okay, you've got a bunch of religions, and they all have lines that go up to one point at the top that's titled Unity or God, but it could be energy, conscience, spirit, wind. It could be all sorts of different names that we have used for the one that some of us call God.

Think about this: The closer you are to God, the closer you are to your neighbor. Note that the closer you are to God on your path, whichever one it is, the closer you are to your neighbor's path as they converge. When you are not close to God, your neighbor's path also appears far away.

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