



FAITH SPEAK

READING BETWEEN THE LINES OF RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

*A Contemporary Re-thinking of the 300
Most Important Words, Concepts & Personalities
in the World's Languages of Faith*

THE NEW LEXICON
FOR BELIEVERS, SEEKERS & SKEPTICS

MARK HASKETT

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INTRODUCTION
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SAMPLES
FROM THE
LEXICON**

Under, Between and Beyond Words

During an episode of the iconic television series, *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, one of its more obscure characters, Natira, utters the following line:

“Words are here, on top. What’s under them—their meaning—is what’s important.”

Natira’s advice about the hidden subtext beneath the words we use applies not only to our native language, whether written or spoken. It also applies to the world’s *religious* languages. Unfortunately, if we are conditioned by social custom and sectarian loyalties to pay attention only to what’s “on top,” to what our sacred texts and rituals merely look like or sound like, we tend to overlook the fact that “what’s under them” are surprisingly similar meanings.

Here’s another line, in this case spoken by a friend who helped me put together a year’s worth of *Star Trek* quotations for a book of daily readings first published back in the 90s:

“What is it with religious people, anyway?” he complained over coffee one morning. “Half the time you can’t understand the point they’re trying to make. The other half you *can*, but what they’re saying defies logic, or else it’s just plain crazy.”

The fact that my friend considers himself religious goes to show just how frustrating this mode of communication can be at times. And it’s true: Using religious language does seem to be an increasingly specialized skill. Some people are both adept and comfortable using it—in their own places of worship, at least. But more and more of us won’t even bother.

It’s not merely atheists who find religious terminology embarrassing or complain that it defies logic. Those who salt their conversations with religious references often come across as spiritual snobs or hypocrites. Or as unquestioning folk who enjoy their microwaves and smart-phones, but possess a world-view more consistent with campfires and smoke signals.

And reactions like these often come from people who attend the same church, or share the same tradition. *Outside* that tradition, you’d expect problems with religious language to go from bad to worse. After all, if my friend often fails to understand his fellow Christians, surely the words of Jews, Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus should prove even more perplexing.

Not so fast.

Because one of the primary assumptions of *FaithSpeak* is that getting outside your usual religious environment—or lack of it—

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SAMPLE FROM THE INTRODUCTION (CONTINUED)

is actually the best way to understand it. Author/journalist Ari Goldman, in his best-selling book, *The Search for God at Harvard*, quotes one of his divinity school professors as saying, “If you know only one religion, you don’t know *any*.”

It’s a profound statement. And the implication is, to fully understand your own tradition, you need to study *other* religions and learn what makes them tick. You need to see how other religions do what they do; to hear the words and rituals of your own “native tongue” translated into the words and rituals of someone else’s. Only then can you begin to hear and experience the deeper meanings that lie under your particular religious language—the Mother Tongue, so to speak, from which they all derive.

Which is precisely how the process worked for me...

BREAK IN TEXT

SAMPLE FROM PART ONE, CHAPTER THREE

The Case for Faithspeak

In his classic song, “Imagine,” John Lennon asked us to visualize a utopian future in which the entire world would “live as one.” Without greed or hunger or borders.

Or religion.

If I read Lennon correctly, we would still have “faith” as this book defines it. The very process of living as one—in fact, the whole outlook envisioned in Lennon’s song—is a faith. It’s just that we would no longer need the help of religion (as previously understood) to artificially shape it. In this imagined, ideal world, we would simply grow up with that faith. Expressing it in our lives would be as natural as breathing in and breathing out.

In their own visions of the future, most religious traditions also embrace this ideal. Some Jewish, Hindu and Islamic theologians will even admit that all the rituals and external trappings which seem so fundamental to their religion are only a kind of scaffolding to support a deeper truth. And if we weren’t so dense, if we didn’t need all the constant reminders to do the right thing, to act with justice and mercy and love your neighbor as yourself—in short, if our behavior were already as it *should* be, then God couldn’t care less if we tore down the temple at Tenth

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SAMPLE FROM CHAPTER THREE (CONTINUED)

and Main and built another Kentucky Fried Chicken in its place.

Except that it's *not* an ideal world, and we're not ideal people. We desperately need to change our faiths and be changed *by* them. And because many people grow up in religious traditions, those traditions still offer some of the most effective tools for shaping Who We Are.

During my first year in college I worked as Youth Director for a group cleverly dubbed "CommunicaTeen," whose membership was composed mainly of teenagers considered at-risk for drug abuse. The program was sponsored by a pastoral counseling center affiliated with a major hospital in my hometown of Long Beach; and I had numerous occasions to rub elbows with the Christian clergy and interns who worked there with both kids and adults. To my surprise, several of them admitted they didn't believe in the divinity of Jesus, or in dozens of other doctrines supposedly required of committed Christians.

I couldn't help asking: "How can you remain in the Church and continue to do what you're doing?"

Because, they all replied, that was the only way they *could* do what they were doing.

And what *were* they doing? They were preventing people from committing suicide. They were helping people cope with the death of a loved one, or empowering them to abandon some destructive behavior like gambling or alcoholism or child abuse. They were nurturing their patients' self-forgiveness and self-acceptance, while giving them tools for happier, more productive lives. And the people they were dealing with, for the most part, grew up as Christians and were therefore familiar with that religious landscape.

These were pastors who sincerely wanted to help people, to reshape their behavior, to mend broken lives. They were simply using the most powerful tools within the context of their patients' own experience to affect them. "To have any chance of reaching the guy on the street," one of them explained, "you find out what's important to him, what his triggers are, how he talks. You learn his slang."

"But isn't there something dishonest about that?" I pressed.

"If you spoke German," he pushed back, "and you had a very important message for someone who could only understand French, would it be dishonest to learn his language so you could communicate with him?" That answer, for me, was the earliest confirmation of what I eventually came to look upon as The Mother Tongue.

Which brings me to the first of three points I want to make in defense of Faithspeak...

BREAK IN TEXT

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SAMPLE FROM CHAPTER THREE (CONTINUED)

...The Lexicon that begins on the following pages includes the basic vocabulary that runs through most religious/spiritual traditions. (Or at least the words/names you're likely to encounter in a diverse, predominantly Western culture.) Some of these words will be more important than others. Some are more universal and thus more easily translated from one religion to the next. Some of the words I've included, frankly, are linguistic excuses to talk about *other* words or religious issues.

I can't claim to deal with each of them in great depth. There are books on religious topics that spend a full chapter on words I've parsed in only a few paragraphs, and entire books devoted to a single concept or religious figure.

What I *do* claim, however, is to treat these words in a different way, because I'm not trying to make a case for any single religion. On the contrary, I'm looking for the common ground between them and the shared meanings "under" their words, as Natira put it. I'm trying to explain religious terms outside of a narrowly sectarian context, to recast them in ordinary language that can be plugged back into any particular religion to find their functional equivalents.

Of course, I'll also be attempting to observe the principles of Faithspeak. Which means looking for appropriate models, presenting unfamiliar concepts in terms you're already familiar with, and phrasing it in such a way that it cuts through all the clutter and stands a chance of making a real difference in your life. That, after all, is what faith is about. That's what we both want.

And we've got three hundred chances to try.

**SAMPLES
FROM THE
LEXICON
BEGIN ON THE
NEXT PAGE**

ADAM AND EVE

Assuming you're reading the Lexicon from A to Z—which happens to be the way most of it was written—you might wonder if it isn't a little premature to be grappling with the sensitive issues raised by these two scriptural figures. Christian and Islamic fundamentalists, for example, practically live or die by the story of Adam and Eve, the supposition being that if we can't believe the First Couple were historical figures who shared a rib and conversed with a snake, there's no reason to believe anything *else* the Bible or the Qur'an (Koran) says either.

Not to mention that their case against “godless evolution” hinges on it. As does the Christian concept of Original Sin developed by Saint Augustine and heavily promoted in both Catholic and evangelical Protestant theology. Are we really prepared, so early in this Lexicon, to take sides on whether the Bible is literally true, word for word, exactly as written? Or, more to the point, as we *think* it's written?

Because there are dozens of versions around, with slightly different shades of meaning depending on who does the translating. And even where the translators agree, there are some passages that flatly contradict others. Quite a few passages simply *can't* be interpreted literally. “In the beginning was the Word,” the New Testament says, “and the Word was with God, and the Word *was* God... And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.” Try interpreting *that* literally.

In the case of the “Old” Testament's Adam and Eve, here's the first clue that we're dealing with something equally non-literal: The name “Adam” comes from the Hebrew *adhamah*, meaning “from the dust” or “of the earth.” It is also the generic word for “man” (human being).

The ancient Hebrews knew what was going on here, as did other cultures with rich folk traditions. So rather than giving a character some meaningless name, “Adam” pointed symbolically to humankind's genesis through a process firmly rooted in the material world. It's the same process that earlier formed the plants and animals (depending on whether you're reading chapter one or two of *Genesis*), and left an imprint on our natures we must all come to grips with sooner or later.

Except for one small difference. There was something “extra” about Adam's creation (read: *our* creation)... something that raised him a cut above the animal kingdom. We already know this instinctively, if you'll pardon the expression; but the Biblical story dramatizes the idea by showing us that Adam wasn't truly alive as a human being until “God”—if you'll pardon *that* expression for

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SAMPLE ENTRIES FROM THE LEXICON: A

now—breathed into him the *nefesh hayah*, the “breath of life.” Which is figurative language for “the soul.”

What therefore becomes most important about Adam and Eve is not their historical reality, but the messages being delivered through their story—about humanity’s relationship with creation and a Creator; about a world that should be seen as “very good”; about the fact that male and female are inter-dependent; about the fundamental premise that our choices and our actions can have life-changing consequences.

Virtually every culture tells its own story of the first human beings, many of which use equally fascinating symbolism. The Hindu *Rg-Veda*, for example, talks about an immortal Purusa/Man whose sacrificial offering of himself produced everything in the world. The Blackfeet Indians’ “Old Man” fashions a woman and boy child, while giving creation a more feminine twist. The African Maori/God creates Mwuetsi, the first man, who together with Massassi and Morongo populate the world, eventually bringing sorrow into it (much like Adam and Eve) through disobedience. The Qur’an’s first man is basically the same character that stars in the Biblical role, except that Adam’s disobedience is considered an “error in judgment,” not a sin that stains the human race for all time.

In these and dozens of other “First Stories,” we find cultures trying to grapple with their place in the overall Scheme of Things, showing how human beings are special in some sense, how we are both created and agents of creation. The Adams and Eves who populate these stories are the opening statements religious traditions make about Who We Are. If certain religious authorities insist that we must subscribe only to their party-line version, or that we must attribute historical reality to certain characters or else those “opening statements” can’t have any meaning, then such views also say much about who those authorities are.

ANOINTED

Angels are anointed. Kings are anointed. Messiah, in Hebrew, *means* “Anointed One.”

In dozens of cultures, anointing was a ritual during which someone was identified and publicly “set apart” to receive God’s healing, or to perform a special service or task. Since substances like Frankincense and Myrrh were rare and valuable, daubing them on someone was perceived as a very powerful symbol denoting that honor.

The Gold Medal, the Nobel Prize, a Master’s Degree—or maybe

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SAMPLE ENTRIES FROM THE LEXICON: A

a few sprinkles of holy water—are symbols used today to publicly honor someone for their special qualities. The particular symbol used is not what actually *confers* those qualities, of course. It merely acknowledges what is already a fact.

On the other hand, recognizing what already exists *does* have power. When the Wizard of Oz gave the Tin Man his heart and the Cowardly Lion his courage, he was only acknowledging something they'd had all along. But the public ceremony helped them *realize* it in a compelling way that changed their lives. It elevated them above their own self-doubt. It encouraged them to use the special talent they already possessed, to release its full potential, to let it transform them and, by example, to transform others.

Religion, at its best, functions to point out the powers we have *if only we would recognize them*. All religions know that in addition to our built-in weaknesses, the strengths to overcome them are also in some sense hidden within us waiting to be discovered. They're *given*. Christianity describes that “given” in terms of a blood sacrifice already made on our behalf, that now frees us to embody our divinity. Judaism calls it The Law, given to Moses on Sinai but also built into us like the 613 statutes and rules that mirror the number of bones, muscles and organs in the human body. For Islam it's the new life conferred the moment one submits totally to God/Allah. For Eastern religion it's acknowledging the *Tao* (Way) already present throughout nature, and then living in accordance with it.

We are *all* anointed insofar as we recognize these inner resources for ourselves, and as we make them public through our interactions with each other, and with the world.

ASCENSION

This one's short and sweet. Short enough merely to point out that the prophets Elijah, Jesus and Muhammad (among others) were reported to have “ascended” directly into heaven at the end of their lives. As beloved as these people were, dying a normal death and being buried in the cold, hard ground was simply not good enough. Stories of ascension were the badges of literary respect our ancestors bestowed upon these especially gifted people—*divinely* gifted people. Surely we can appreciate that respect for what it is.

But we can also see it as a kind of theological statement that the more divinity we express in our own lives, the less of a hold the material world has on us. As we overcome our physical limitations, we too can ascend to greater heights.

And that's sweet.

SAMPLE ENTRIES FROM THE LEXICON: B

BIBLE

In some circles, “Bible” is shorthand for “The Word of God.” Technically, however, the word simply means “books.” *Which* books depends on whom you ask. And in what century.

Jews regard the first five books as a fully self-contained, self-sufficient revelation of God’s Word called The Torah. The rest of what eventually became the Old Testament is seen as an appendix of historical and inspirational commentaries. Of course, Jews don’t recognize an Old Testament to begin with, because “Old” implies that it’s now outdated and superseded by a *New Testament*.

For Christians, the New Testament *does* supersede the Old. In fact, the Old is sometimes looked upon as a rather long and boring “Preface” to the *real* Word of God, namely the account of the life/death/life of Jesus Christ and his early followers.

For Islam, the entire Bible is acknowledged as the Word of God, though over time followers have altered and even corrupted it. (Which, ironically, happens to be the view of many Biblical scholars today.) Surprisingly, Islamic scripture imports a large portion of both the Old and New Testaments, but only after purportedly cleansing the passages of any errors.

And so it’s been for thousands years. One culture appropriates the words and truths of an earlier tradition, giving them a new and distinctive spin, while eliminating whatever seems contradictory to its own home-grown version of The Truth. Islam was only doing to both Judaism and Christianity what Christianity had previously done to Judaism. Except that Christians were less inclined to change the words in the Old Testament than re-interpret them.

Which they *did*. Liberally. Sometimes vastly changing the meaning from what was originally intended.

But having done so, many Christians also decided that their interpretations were the only ones possible. After all, it was clear enough to *them*, wasn’t it? In fact, the whole Bible should be clear because it simply means what it says. Exactly. Literally. If a snake and a donkey are said to have spoken, they spoke. If the sun reportedly stopped in the sky for a few hours, it stopped. If the Red Sea parted to let the Hebrews cross it, it parted. And if the Book of John says Jesus walked on water, well, no wonder he never bothered with swimming lessons.

Trouble is, even for literalists, the Bible is ultimately *not* simple and not exact. Otherwise why would there be so many millions of sermons by thousands of evangelists over hundreds of years trying to make sense of it, trying to continually explain

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SAMPLE ENTRIES FROM THE LEXICON: B

it? No one has ever read the Bible cover to cover and understood its entire contents the first time through. Or the second. Or the tenth.

Because the Bible is a vastly *unclear* collection of books, written in unfamiliar language in an unfamiliar era by unfamiliar people. To truly understand it requires a knowledge of the original languages, and especially the context in which each book was written. Failing that, the Bible can be as obscure and inscrutable as the *I Ching*, as boring as Intermediate Algebra class on a hot afternoon, and as unintentionally funny as *Death of a Salesman* performed by third-graders.

“Cast your bread upon the waters,” the book of Ecclesiastes says, “and you will find it after many days.” What’s *that* supposed to mean? For most people visions of soggy bread are all that come to mind.

It might help to know that the fishermen of Galilee sprinkled bread onto the water to attract fish. The more bread, the better one’s chances for a sizeable catch, often for several days running. The author, identified as The Preacher, was merely using an analogy familiar to people of his day. To our generation he might’ve said, “To make the really big bucks, first you’ve got to *spend* some.” Or “Take a risk and you’ll be rewarded many times over.”

Or maybe he meant something else entirely. Like “Before you reel in people’s souls, give them something to eat.” In other words, you can’t address people’s spiritual concerns without solving their physical needs first. Someone who’s hungry can’t hear the sermon if his stomach is growling.

Or perhaps The Preacher meant to say *all* of these things. Perhaps the truth of the words depends on who’s reading them and what else is going on in their lives at the moment.

Which is simply to say that one’s *interaction* with the Bible is what’s important, not some textbook-style truth supposedly contained in each word. The reason the Holy Bible continues to be one of the most important written documents in human history is because it *can* mean different things to different people. Like all the world’s great scriptures, the Bible is a two-way communications device. The receiver is as important to the message as the transmitter. What you bring to the reading—not only in terms of knowledge and experience, but in what you hope (or need) to get out of it—greatly affects what message comes through. In fact, if you *believe* the Bible has answers, you tend to find them.

And it *does* have answers. Because, taken as a whole, the Bible is the story of humankind in parable form. It speaks of man’s coming-to-be and his repeated self-destruction; of his deepening awareness of the world and who/what created it, and his “whor-

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SAMPLE ENTRIES FROM THE LEXICON: C

ing” after false gods in spite of that awareness; of his longing to know the truth and his constant inability to face it; of his belief and unbelief, and the difference it made or didn’t make. There is almost no story that can be told today that wasn’t first told in the Bible. Even if it was clothed in different language.

It’s the story of *us*. And sometimes, in holding up a mirror, we see truths about ourselves that can set us free. That’s about as good a definition of “Word of God” as you can get.

CHRISTIAN SCIENCE

The philosopher-scientist (and church bishop) George Berkeley was among the first Westerners to theorize that all of nature, all of reality, was a projection of Mind. A century-and-a-half later, Mary Baker Eddy was the first to successfully build a religion around that hypothesis.

Bishop Berkeley reasoned that all objects could be boiled down to our perceptions, our *thoughts*, of them. So why couldn’t those perceptions and thoughts themselves be part of a much larger, purely mental matrix? And why, Eddy chimed in, shouldn’t we consider Berkeley’s all-pervasive Mind as “God”—or let’s call it Divine Mind—and use our own individual, separate minds to connect with, and draw guidance from, that supreme Mind?

Unlike some of her contemporaries who saw this quasi-scientific view as the basis for a brand new religion, Eddy made the politically-savvy decision to enfold this perspective into America’s religious majority. So not only was this new Science of Mind (as Ernest Holmes would later name his off-shoot) fully compatible with biblical Christianity, its principles were *already built into it* from page one. Its founder, Christ Jesus, specifically taught Christian Science through his parables and living example. Before the modern era, however, followers didn’t have the scientific framework for understanding them. They didn’t have the “key” for interpreting the Bible’s teachings correctly, or at least fully.

Eddy’s book, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*, unlocked the Bible’s secrets, interpreting the code hidden in its pages and especially within its ultimate Teacher’s words and miracles. Like Hindu sages who claimed that Truth had always lain hidden in the similes of the Vedas and Upanishads, or like Jewish Kabbalists who found multiple levels of esoteric teachings camouflaged in the Torah, Eddy was only following a long tradition of reinterpreting ancient wisdom in light of current thought.

The fact that most Christians were further confused or unconvinced, or simply disheartened by yet another sectarian

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SSAMPLE ENTRIES FROM THE LEXICON: C

spin-off, is not as important as the fact that Christianity was able to handle the controversy. Nobody died as a result (as happened to Mormons). Baptists didn't declare holy war. Christian Scientists were not stoned to death for heresy, or otherwise excommunicated from the larger tradition. Indeed, many of Eddy's ideas found their way into contemporary Christianity's vocabulary, if not its theology.

Still more people, religious or not, found yet another example that the prevailing establishment never has the last word, or the only correct interpretation. They also reaffirmed, once more, that the bottom line for a religion isn't its rituals or its trappings, but its effects on a person's life, on the kind of *person* one becomes while following it.

CULT

A cult is any other religion or denomination you happen to dislike. At least, that's how some people use the word.

For many Baptists, Mormonism is a cult. For some Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses are a cult. For Hindus, Buddhism is a cult—or *was*, at least at first. Likewise Christianity in the eyes of most first-century Jews, including a certain Jew who later changed his name to Paul.

Nearly every religion/denomination has been considered a cult at one time or another. Even Baptists.

In fact, among Baptists themselves, there are subdivisions and sects and off-shoots that are looked upon with the suspicion and distaste usually reserved for the Moonies or Ramakrishnans. Because not only are there ordinary Baptists, we have Southern Baptists and American Baptists. There are also National Baptists and National *Primitive* Baptists, as well as the Evangelical Baptists and the Predestinarian Baptists, who are opposed by the United Free Will Baptists, who in turn see themselves as superior to the merely United Baptists or the merely Free Will Baptists. There are a dozen more Baptist denominations, too, each of which somehow became convinced that a particular interpretation of scripture or personal revelation from God justified going off on their own. Not the least of which is the National Evangelical Life and Soul-Saving Assembly of U.S.A. Baptists.

No joke.

And maybe that's what a cult is: A religious off-shoot defined by some narrow viewpoint that seems to demand separation from the larger tradition. That demand is usually whipped up by a charismatic leader (or leaders) without whose influence the sepa-

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ration probably would not have occurred.

Cultus, it turns out, is Latin for “adoration.” Which follows nicely from the last paragraph since, in a cult, the interpretation given to a specific line or two of scripture is adored more than the scripture as a whole. The leader of the new denomination is also adored more than the original prophet or founder of the religion, or the principles and lifestyle for which he stood. As a result, perspective and balance go out the window. Details and minutiae become more important than the overall theme. Language is more important than meaning.

There are some who think the world’s major religions are themselves cults. Because their adherents mistake their particular brand of Faithspeak for the One Truth behind them all. Or because they adore the founders and leaders of their religions more than the Ultimate Power that inspired them. Or because they adore the Torah or Bible or Qur’an or Ramayanas or Tao Te Ching more than the greater Reality to which those sacred texts can only point.

And that, regrettably, is no joke either.

DHARMA

Now familiar to Western ears as the name of a character in the popular sitcom, “Dharma and Greg,” *dharma* is one of the most central concepts to both the Hindu and Buddhist traditions. And, as it happens, the concept has very much to do with “character.”

From a Sanskrit word meaning “to establish, or hold steady,” *dharma* refers to the foundational truths supporting the natural universe, including the truths that govern the activities of human beings. Obviously, if we humans could know those truths and live in perfect accord with them, we would be saved from the suffering and degradation that have characterized our history from Genesis onward.

Dharma therefore became synonymous with the daily practices and observances by which individual Hindus and Buddhists live in accord with The Truth as they understand it. Back in the Sixties, “doing your own thing” conveyed the same meaning in youthful slang, although that slogan took on a regrettably self-centered emphasis.

Which is why learning what the foundational truths *are* can make all the difference. Since the historical Buddha was considered by his followers as the singular teacher who expounded the essential truths and practices required for righteous living, *dharma* (for Buddhists) came to mean “the teachings of Buddha.”

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Self-centeredness was specifically *not* among those teachings, the decade of the Sixties notwithstanding. Character-building *was*. In fact the closest Western equivalent to dharma is “service.” Presumably the kind focusing not on oneself, but others.

Many Hindus freely admit that Christians, Muslims and Sikhs have a “different dharma”—that is, a different understanding of the truth, as well as different practices and observances (i.e. kinds of service) consistent with it. The core meaning of dharma, however, refers to what is eternal and unchanging, regardless of how anyone understands it or who may have taught it to us.

The Western equivalent of *that* is Ultimate Reality. Or, as some prefer to call it, God.

DOGMA

Using the term “belief” as commonly understood, there are some beliefs we hold or “come around to” based on personal experience or serious reflection. There are also beliefs we *must* come to and agree with and put into practice in order to become, or remain, members of a certain religion or social group. The latter beliefs, together with all the teachings surrounding and supporting them, are what’s known as *dogma*.

If you don’t believe Muhammad was the last and most authoritative prophet of God/Allah, you can’t be a Muslim. If you don’t believe in Original Sin and the necessity of being “born again,” you can’t belong to most evangelical denominations within Christianity. If you don’t believe that the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution guarantees an individual’s right to own an R-15 assault weapon, you don’t deserve to be a member of the National Rifle Association. All these mandatory beliefs are examples of dogma.

The problem with dogma is that it’s usually enforced in a compulsory way—through public affirmations and loyalty oaths, or assigned tasks designed to prove one’s allegiance, or even threats of punishment ranging from the Amish practice of “shunning” or the Spanish Inquisition’s tortures to Islam’s *fatwahs* authorizing death for designated individuals. The irony is, if the reason you believe something is a result of such punitive measures, you can’t, by definition, truly believe it.

And if the tradition or group you belong to *uses* any of these measures, you might want to consider that practice as a strong incentive to resign from it. Or, in keeping with a long line of prophets and other radicals before you, attempt to *reform* it.

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EASTER

It's a shopworn argument to remind everyone that Easter evolved from a pagan rite, just as Christmas did, just as many of the festivals in Jewish, Hindu and Islamic traditions did. So what?

So... what was the theme in the pagan Ostara/Astarte/Oester festival that was so profound, so moving, so fundamentally true that it was transformed into the single most sacred day on the Christian calendar?

Answer: *Death and rebirth.*

Easter is all about the Cycle of Life and victory over death that are celebrated without exception in every culture and tradition. And, quite logically, springtime is the best time to celebrate it. In winter the earth goes dormant, stops producing, all but dies. Even the sun can't seem to warm the cold, hard ground. The very season symbolizes the darker and more depressing times in our lives, the failures, the endings.

Spring, on the other hand, represents beginnings, new opportunities, the promise fulfilled, the hope that's finally rewarded. It proclaims in an explosion of green (and every other color!) that, life is supreme. No matter how hard the winter, how gloomy the predictions, how total the destruction, life goes on. You can't stop progress, can't keep a good man down, can't keep them feet from dancin'.

Or, in other words: Death, where is thy sting?

The Christian celebration had distinct advantages over the earlier pagan rites. It neatly symbolized the resurgence of life and hope in the dramatic death/resurrection of one Jesus of Nazareth. Seasonal renewal is abstract; a man's life is concrete. The image of a tender green shoot bursting up through the decaying leaves from last autumn is an inspiring motif, yes; but the pageantry of an empty tomb, its heavy door rolled aside, is Faithspeak of unsurpassed power.

Of course, the obvious question is: Was the empty tomb—Jesus' resurrection—an actual, historical event?

Clearly, many Christians are counting on it. "If Christ be not raised," Paul wrote in one of his letters, "our preaching is in vain." Which is why so much effort is spent trying to prove it; why the Shroud of Turin that reportedly covered Jesus' body is put on display to show that a supernatural event *did* happen. It's why there are four Gospels, not just one—as if four different witnesses have testified in some international Court of Law and we are now legally obliged to accept their evidence.

Forget the historical fact that other mystery religions also proclaimed savior gods who were raised from the dead long before

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Jesus. One of these gods, Mithras, was even put to death on Black Friday and resurrected after three days. But those similarities were only part of a conspiracy by Satan to cast doubt on the *real* truth. At least, that's what the Church fathers said.

But the real truth of the Easter story can't be taken away even if the empty tomb is only a rousing good story. The fact remains that life *is* supreme. Death *isn't* the last word. Inherent in even the most rigorous scientific conception of reality is an almost miraculous tendency toward greater complexity, toward life out of non-living matter, toward increasingly autonomous forms that are more and more capable of controlling their own destinies. Decay and destruction only serve to provide nutrients for more growth. The explosions of supernovae only provide star dust for more suns and planets and life and, eventually, intelligence—an intelligence that somehow, to some degree, reflects the Intelligence that lies behind the whole cyclical, super-natural process.

As we celebrate that process, and the Intelligence behind it—by whatever symbols and at whatever season—we celebrate Easter. And we acknowledge that renewal, rebirth and resurrection are not only possible, but programmed into The Way Things Are.

“Christ is risen” is just one way to say it.

EVOLUTION

Funny how some evangelists characterize the Theory of Evolution by spelling the word, “Evil-lution.” What's funnier, or else ironic, is that evolution is not only the most potent tool for understanding the physical world, it's the scientific synonym for what is perhaps the evangelist's favorite concept: *Salvation*.

In its most technical sense—though this is hardly a technical discussion—evolution is the fundamental explanatory framework for biology. The theory states that life forms grow into, and become increasingly adapted to, their physical environments through a combination of genetic mutation and natural selection. Obviously the living things we see all around us are too complex and wonderfully constructed to have suddenly come into existence by chance. But a sequence of tiny, accumulated changes that *are* random, and are then rewarded or punished by increasing or decreasing a particular life form's ability to survive—that process *can* explain how those forms came to be.

Other sciences have borrowed the term “evolution” for its generic meaning of coming-to-be through some natural, mechanical process. Astronomers, for example, have shown that stars evolve through a process whereby massive clouds of interstellar

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gas contract under gravity, their cores eventually igniting according to the laws of nuclear physics, then consume themselves in successive stages until they either explode or shrink into an incomprehensibly dense ball of matter, or both.

Even *non*-physical things are said to evolve—our relationships, our understanding, our personalities—whenever a process of transformation appears to be at work. The main ingredient in each case is the action of *accumulated changes from natural causes*, which in time produce a measurable difference.

This process, however, doesn't exclude sudden or major changes that often seem to come out of the blue. But if we look closely at those sudden changes, we invariably discover some kind of build-up that preceded it. The star that "goes supernova" is only undergoing a natural event predictable from its massive size and remaining elements. The sudden transitions of certain animal species in the fossil record—or the appearance of seemingly *new* species—only testify to some migratory event or environmental cataclysm that brought new selective forces into play, rewarding existing or mutant variants that, until then, were less successful.

And the sudden "conversion" that turns a person's life around is only a natural response to the steady accumulation of conscious and subconscious forces: The external and internal clues that one's life has been going down the proverbial hell-hole, combined with a growing awareness that it doesn't need to be that way, and the fortuitous appearance of an answer that finally breaks through the ego's defenses to one's heart-of-hearts.

Bingo... *Salvation*.

Not that the conversion event is itself salvation. Conversion is simply the heartfelt climax of the process to that point—a process that will no doubt continue by testing one's new faith, by working out the bugs, by adapting the details of that individual's life to its new direction and purpose. Future transformations, or at least further refinements, are a certainty.

In other words, evolution applies to faith, too. Religious traditions of all stripes embrace this as a fundamental precept, however they may phrase it: *Faith evolves*.

The theory of evolution is therefore as religious as it is scientific. That's the main reason it's here in this Lexicon. Evolution is The Living Testament to the fact that, everywhere in the universe, from inanimate matter to the human soul, ongoing transformation is built into the very nature of things. The details of that process may be subject to debate. The mechanics are still being worked out—in both science *and* religion. Which is why people still refer to it as a "theory." But the basic premise of evolution is

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as close to an Absolute as you're likely to find. It is the process from simple to complex, from dissolution to preservation, from mere survival to abundant life, from the narrow perspective to The Big Picture, from the selfish constraints of our individual ego to the infinite resources of Ultimate Reality.

If there were no evolution, there would be no salvation. Because the same mechanism that transforms the physical universe transforms hearts. The journey from primordial bacteria to human being mirrors the spiritual journey from sinner to saint. The process that rewards life forms for traits better adapted to the environment is the same dynamic that selects human behaviors which contribute to both individual and communal fulfillment.

Salvation. Evolution. One is framed in the language of Faithspeak, the other in the terminology of science. Thank God for both.

FAITH

This is what it's all about. Not a compilation of doctrines. Not some collection of definitions in a religious Lexicon. Not the church you belong to, or which religion you identify with. It's not "religion" at all but the *product* of religion.

Faith is how you interact with the world. It's your attitude toward life. Which is what Part One of this book deals with and why we're not about to go over the whole discussion again here.

Except...

Except to remind ourselves that the bottom line for faith is action. All the arguments against evolution, say, or to prove the existence of God—all our going to church or studying the holy books or praying to some Higher Power—are ultimately meaningless unless they result in refining and improving our behavior. And making those improvements part of Who We Are.

In most sacred scriptures, the word "faith" implies a sense of reliability. What can we be *relied on* to do? This is something we can determine in the same way others do: By observing ourselves in action. We must become more conscious of our own behavior, more aware of what we do. Forget all the so-called good intentions and rationalizations that "it's the thought that counts." What have we actually *done*? Or at least *tried* to do, despite our admittedly limited capabilities and imperfect understanding?

This is where the New Testament emphasis on "faith over works" kicks in. Some people continue to insist that Paul's doctrine minimizes the importance of actions. It *is* the thought that counts, they claim. Tender feelings for Jesus are the legal tender

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for admittance to heaven. But what Paul was really saying about faith is that our attitudes are where it all starts; that action is the result of right thinking; that the proper alignment with Spirit will produce whatever “works” are possible within the context of each person’s life.

It is also to say that, even with the very purest of intentions and proper spiritual alignment, we can still manage to screw things up. And we often do, sometimes seriously. Maybe because we didn’t know enough, or the outcome was beyond our control.

Which is where yet another sense of the word “faith” kicks in: We must still risk the “work.” We are still required to act. To try. To have faith.

GNOSTIC

There aren’t too many words left in the English language that start with “Gn.” It’s just about as odd as starting a word with “Kn.” As a matter of fact, Gnostic and Gnosticism come from the Greek *gnosis*, usually translated as “knowledge.” Why it’s not “gnowledge” is anybody’s guess.

In addition to implications of heresy attached to the word by the early Christian church, “Gnostic” has a more generic meaning that’s revealed in the contrast with its opposite. *Agnostic*, you’ll remember, is the word applied to someone for whom the existence of God is still an open question. Or who simply doesn’t know. The Gnostic, on the other hand, *knows*. Or *gnows*.

Before the Christian era, Gnosticism was already an established philosophy that regarded individual knowing as the ultimate source of authority. External sources were helpful, of course, by bringing other people’s ideas and experience into our awareness. But nothing could be accepted as true unless the individual soul confirmed it through an internal process which was partly rational, but also intuitive.

In principle, this kind of internal assent by the believer is the ideal of all religious traditions. Thoughtless obedience to doctrines is usually characterized as the lowest form of faith. As Islamic tradition has it, Muslims are asked not to believe anything merely on the basis of what another man says. According to the Muslim writer, Al-Ghazali, one must first “...know the truth, and then you will know who are truthful.”

But the Greek or Persian Gnostic was even more radical than that. Everything worth knowing, according to the earliest traditions, was already inside oneself. It wasn’t necessary to look “outside” for God or Truth, or for the proper rules of behavior. The

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Gnostic need only look within, to investigate his own inner workings and behavioral patterns. Because there, on a personal scale, lay the entire universe and the Ultimate Reality behind it.

The First-Century stories about Jesus, which circulated in several forms throughout the Roman Empire, were embraced almost immediately by the Gnostics. Based on Jesus' teaching that "The Kingdom of God is within you," together with his reliance on an inner voice rather than external authorities, Jesus came to be regarded as the perfect, divinely-commissioned role model for the Gnostic faith. Indeed, a set of Gnostic gospels that pre-dates the New Testament was found in circumstances not unlike the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. These manuscripts—the most famous of which is The Gospel of Thomas—convey a strikingly different portrait of Jesus than traditional sources paint. We are introduced to a Jesus who speaks of illusion and enlightenment rather than sin and repentance. We meet a Master who play-acts the role of Savior only until adherents learn to drink from the same well-spring of knowledge he does. "Know the truth, and the truth shall make you free," the New Testament says. "If you bring forth what is within you," Jesus says in *Thomas*, "what you bring forth will save you."

In combination, these gospels are an uncanny blend of Eastern and Western philosophy. Gnostics were contemptuous of bodily resurrection, preferring the more Eastern "release" from the body and eventual re-absorption into The Source. There were apparently meditative techniques that involved the intoning of a repeated sound, like the mystical *Om* of Hinduism. Events as well as words held meaning for the enlightenment of one's soul—a recurring theme in both Buddhism and Hindu tradition.

It just so happens that East-West trade and interreligious dialog were not uncommon in the Middle East during the first and second centuries of the Common Era. Buddhist missionaries had long been proselytizing in Alexandria. Roman historical records reveal a detailed knowledge of Brahmin (Hindu) practices. In short, there was far more diversity of thought at the time than most of us have been lead to believe—a widespread and remarkable sharing of cultural and religious ideas that must've been as exciting and potentially universalizing as it is today.

But there were also power struggles of the life-and-death variety. Both Gnosticism and a budding women's movement were increasingly seen as threats to the growing alliance between the Christian priesthood and the Roman government. The crushing of these and other so-called heresies is as shocking an example of Church/State totalitarianism as any on record.

Alas, if only we gnew then what we gnow now.

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GOLDEN RULE

Just a quick lesson on the underlying unity of religions...

Fifty years before Jesus, a Roman soldier reportedly asked another famous Jewish rabbi (by the name of Hillel) to explain all of God's laws while standing on one foot. Hillel accepted the challenge without missing a beat. "What is hateful to you," he replied, "do not do to another. This is the entire Torah. The rest is commentary."

Centuries earlier Confucius had already come to the same conclusion. "Is there one maxim which ought to be acted upon throughout one's life?" he wondered aloud. "Surely it is the maxim of loving-kindness: Do not to others what you would not have them do to you."

A quote from Hinduism's epic tale, the *Mahabharata*, put it in almost identical terms: "This is the sum of duty. Do nothing to others which would cause pain if done to you."

Likewise Muhammad, who would later say, "Let none of you treat his brother in a way he himself would not like to be treated."

Taoism brought in a positive affirmation alongside the negative. "Regard your neighbor's gain as your gain," said Lao-tzu, "and your neighbor's loss as your own loss."

Buddha preferred the strictly positive slant when he said, "One should seek for others the happiness one desires for one's self."

Which is closer to the pro-active form Westerners are most familiar with. "Do unto others," Jesus taught, "as you would have them do unto you."

Any way you slice it, it's the same Rule. And if the common meanings shared by all religious traditions are sometimes difficult to demonstrate, here's one case where it's open and shut.

HOLY

Many of us encounter this word in situations that suggest almost the opposite of what it really means. As in "That kid's a holy terror" or "Holy (four-letter word)!" Antiquated titles like "His Holiness, the King" don't help either, since "Your holiness" has become the tongue-in-cheek appellation for people who regard themselves as holier-than-thou.

Even to the average churchgoer, "holy" is attached to so many words—Holy Spirit, Holy Bible, Holy Communion—that it's now little more than a generic prefix implying some vague connection to religion. The word lacks any separate identity of its own.

And yet "holy" is precisely about separate-ness. The meaning

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behind the word—*kadosh* in Hebrew—refers to being “set apart.” Someone or something, for example, might be set apart for a special purpose, and thus be made holy. God reportedly asks us to make *ourselves* holy. Which simply means to not allow ourselves to be swept up in the world’s busy-ness or madness, to avoid going along with things just because that’s the way everybody else does it. Instead we are called to stand apart or to stand *out* from the crowd, to remember Who We Are and not give a rip if people label us as “different.” Holiness is therefore an attitude.

Holiness is also a condition. Something may be perceived as holy because it already possesses a quality that sets it apart, that makes it stand out. And that quality, the *way* it stands out, has something to do with God or Ultimate Reality or whatever lies below the surface of our mundane existence. It might simply be a place that has some special or inspirational meaning for us. Not necessarily a towering cathedral, but a mountain stream, or a spot in the woods where the light filters through the trees just so. Maybe it’s an “energy vortex” around the red-rock cliffs of Sedona. Or the back porch at grandma’s house where she used to sit in her rocker and darn socks. Or your own four-poster bed where little Sarah climbed up alongside you when the sky opened and the thunder let loose and she learned the difference between fear and awe. Wherever it may be, when you’re in the presence of holiness, you just know it.

People, too, can possess this quality. It’s easy enough to spot in a spiritual advisor or your favorite college professor. But it’s just as likely to be found in the old man shuffling with determination down the hall of the rest home, or a baby fast asleep, lips intermittently pursing as if to suck from a breast that isn’t there. It might be visible in the face of a friend or a lover or, for a few fleeting seconds, in a father’s glance that says “I understand, and I still love you.”

Actions, in particular, can be holy. Sometimes even our religious acts—if we aren’t merely going through the motions. Dropping your last few coins into the Salvation Army bucket surely qualifies, or sharing half your peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich when your school chum forgets his lunch bag. Not to mention those rare, heroic acts like pulling an accident victim out of a burning car, or admitting when you’re wrong despite your god-awful pride.

Holiness is an awareness of something going on that transcends what’s “only human,” that’s not just mechanical, that’s beyond appearances. It’s the hint of a deeper reality, the presence of something that reaches down into our hearts and has the ability to profoundly affect Who We Are for the better. And the expe-

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rience of that moment, that place or person, stands out in our awareness, separate, like a light glowing in the darkness, undimmed by the workaday world, the crowded freeway, the kids fighting again, the rent payment due tomorrow, the headlines on tonight's news.

Nothing can ruin it. Nobody can take it away. It's holy.

IDOLATRY

A story is told about Abraham, the ancestral father/patriarch to Jews, Christians and Muslims. Abraham's father, according to tradition, was a maker of idols for his fellow pagans in Chaldea. With the flair of an accomplished artist, he would carve fierce-looking creatures and delicate fertility goddesses out of wood or stone, or cast them in clay. People would come from all over the region to buy them, believing the idols to be inhabited by spirits or gods. And then they would cajole, bribe or otherwise worship those idols, hoping to receive some benefit from their magical powers.

Watching his father make these "gods" with his bare hands, Abraham realized at an early age how foolish it was for people to fall down on their knees before these man-made creations. Even if the idol was meant only to represent some deity, people rarely treated them that way. They related to their idols as if they really *did* have some inherent power, as if the wood or stone or oven-fired clay could by itself determine their fates... as if the success of this year's crop, or how many lambs would be born this year, revolved around their new owners' "service" to these inanimate objects. Young Abraham understood that the idols were therefore a trap, that they turned people away from the truth and focused their attentions on things that had no real power to benefit them, much less save them.

Which is the case today as much as in Abraham's time.

Except that now, instead of worshipping a block of wood carved into the shape of an eagle, we worship pieces of paper etched with eagles. Instead of bowing down to a golden calf, we make ourselves subservient to a gold-toned BMW or a six-bedroom house on Goldenrod Avenue, or the gold watch at the end of forty years' worth of sixty-hour workweeks during which our children never went hungry but hardly got to know us between our commuting to the office and our nighttime stops at the bar or bowling alley so we could blow off enough steam to do it all over again the next day.

In other words, our priorities often get mixed up because we

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fail to understand what's ultimately important in our lives. "Idolatry" is the misplaced focusing of our efforts and energies on things which cannot ultimately help us achieve life's most important goals. Idolatry is looking at our car, or our house or career or body, as if each of these is an end in itself rather than a means or a tool to assist us in achieving our higher purposes. Idolatry is making things of only relative importance into the supreme standard against which everything else is measured. Idolatry is allowing what should be our servants to become our masters.

And it isn't just material things that end up ruling our lives. Our idols can just as easily be our country or religion, or the Torah or Qur'an or Holy Bible when their forms become more important than the messages they contain. Our idol can also be unrestrained science or Reason or "progress," or whatever else masquerades as Ultimate Reality but is only one facet of it.

Chances are we've all been guilty of idolatry at one time or another. Likewise every religion and denomination. So much so that merely reorganizing our priorities isn't enough. Occasionally we must clean house from stem to stern and throw the bastards out: Dump that collection of Hustler magazines, flush the valium down the john, find a new church or mosque or 12-step group that doesn't just pump us up with hot air but actually transforms our faith for the better.

Like Abraham did. One day when his father was out taking new orders for his latest line of magical figurines, little Abe sneaked into the workshop and beat the hell out of the previous week's handiwork. Just plain smashed the deaf-and-dumb idols to smithereens. And you know what happened? *Nothing*. Even his father couldn't lift a finger to punish the future patriarch. He too realized it was time to move to the next stage of theological evolution. Because the idols, reduced to wood splinters and shards of burnt clay, spoke louder from his workshop floor than they ever did from the altars people erected for them.

And a little idol-bashing might do *us* some good now and then.

JIHAD

Here's one of the most unnecessarily frightening words to enter the religious lexicon in recent years. "Frightening" because jihad raises the specter of Islamic terrorists flying jumbo jets into skyscrapers or beheading helpless captives as fodder for the internet. "Unnecessarily" because that specter has no more connection to mainstream Islam than the Holocaust or the Iron Maiden had to mainstream Christianity.

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Let's face it: Some people are fanatic and downright loony, and they often take religious ideas out of context and use them to justify their own fanaticism and lunacy. "Jihad" is an easy target for such misuse.

Which is not to say that jihad is one of the kindest and gentlest ideas, either. After all, the Arabic word does connote the concept of Holy War. And one of the two primary interpretations of that concept does justify the use of armed, even ruthless, violence whenever the practice of Islam is threatened.

A similar understanding of holy war is documented in the first few books of the Hebrew Bible. When faced with a threat to its physical or spiritual survival, the tribe or nation was encouraged—no, *required*—to slaughter its opponents down to the last man. Canaanite cities were "laid waste," their idols and places of worship violently torn down. Even women and children could be put to death to prevent non-believers from staging a chromosomal comeback. Considering seventh-century Arabia, it was something of an innovation that Islam counseled against leveling unbelievers' cities or destroying the land's productive resources. And like the Christian definition of holy war—assuming that's not a contradiction in terms—armed violence was permitted only as a last resort, and only after all other legal measures had been exhausted.

But more importantly, this outward kind of Islamic holy war was clearly understood as "the *Lesser Jihad*." A second type, the "Greater Jihad," refers to the more life-transforming, and ongoing, holy war: The inner battle each individual wages against the evil in his own soul.

The literal meaning of the Arabic *jihad*, in fact, is simply "effort" or "struggle." Overcoming one's weaknesses, bad habits and sins requires effort. Finding a higher purpose in life than the pursuit of pleasure or comfort is a struggle. And winning that inner battle must be our primary goal because, if we can't transform ourselves, we certainly have no right to impose our religious laws and traditions on anyone else.

So the greater struggle is always *within*. Jihad is therefore a call for personal transformation of the same kind every religion encourages. As Sufi Muslims would later contend, even the Lesser Jihad should be understood only as a symbol, a graphic allegory, for this struggle-with-self. The call to arms merely depicts the fervor with which we must root out our own evil inclinations. The practice of killing every last remnant of "the Infidel" illustrates that the job requires more than a quick-fix or half-hearted commitment.

And it's true. The alcoholic mustn't leave even an airline

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sample of scotch in the kitchen cabinet (or sock drawer). We can't allow ourselves to fudge on our income taxes, even if it's only a few dollars. We can't tell "little white lies," or take something that's not ours "just this once," or commit adultery because "no one will ever find out." Minor dishonesty inevitably breeds the major kind. We must be ruthless with our faults, Islam tells us, in the same way Christianity says to "pluck out your own eye" or "cut off your hand" if those physical features continually lead you astray. Better to lose an eye or a hand than your soul.

Jihad, then, is Faithspeak for the internal struggle we all experience. Its graphic imagery can be useful in convincing our heart-of-hearts that the struggle is crucial, and that it can spiritually (if not literally) make the difference between life and death. Because, in the end, it does.

KRISHNA

After the fearful depiction of Kali a few listings ago, here's a vision from the Hindu pantheon that's a bit brighter. Perhaps even playful and erotic. Said to be an Avatar (or embodiment) of the supreme god Vishnu who lived sometime around 3,100 BCE, Krishna has more recently been celebrated by some as Hinduism's Christ-figure, even to the point of linking the title "Krishna" to the Greek "Kristos."

Although admittedly, it's a stretch. Whereas Christ/Kristos literally means "anointed one," Krishna is Sanskrit for "black." (Or was Krishna anointed with ashes, which made him *appear* black?) True, the Lord Krishna delivers an inspiring message, recorded in the Bhagavad-Gita, describing the human soul and its purpose as we live out our years on Earth. And likewise the Lord Jesus taught his disciples about a purposeful, love-driven life, as recorded in the New Testament. Moreover, similar to Krishna's portrayal as a flute-playing cowherd, Jesus is pictured as a Good Shepherd, guiding and tending his metaphorical flocks like the boyhood King David.

But the similarities end there. The playful god/man Krishna also happened to be the celebrated lover of Radha, thereby adding a sensual, human dimension the celibate Jesus did not have. Unless you believe all that church-censored gossip about Jesus and Mary Magdalene, or that crazy theory about Jesus' death being faked so he could be spirited away from Palestine to France, along with a wife and child who carried on his bloodline. (*The DiVinci Code*, anyone?)

Whatever your belief, human history demonstrates that we prefer our divinities (and heroes) to reflect our own earthly pursuits

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and passions as well as their more heavenly qualities. This makes it easier for us to bridge the gap between ourselves and the deeper resources that might yet save us. Some of our sacred stories focus more on the earthly—or better, “earthy”—aspects of those divinities, some less.

Try reading a few tales from other traditions. Then ask yourself which ones inspire your spiritual journey the most?

Then ask yourself why.

LORD

Many people will admit to being uncomfortable with the word “Lord.” It seems a bit too quaint and anachronistic, doesn’t it? Like “thou” and “thine.” We recall late-night movies about twelfth-century England during which lowly serfs kneeled before kings and dukes—or the thieving landowners to whom they were indentured—and said things like, “Yes, my Lord” and “If you wish, my Lord” and “Let me give thee the shirt off my back, my Lord.” There’s a kind of implied subservience about the word that offends the modern ear.

Actually, the word “Lord” *does* imply subservience simply because it means “Master.” Reflecting the Hebrew *Adon* or *Adonai*, a Lord is a person to whom someone owes their allegiance or obedience, who rules over them. “Guru” is the corresponding term for Hindus, *Bhagava* for Buddhists. Whatever language it’s in, this is hardly a politically-correct, twenty-first-century, right-to-life-liberty-and-the-pursuit-of-happiness sort of concept.

On the other hand, even if we modern sophisticated types don’t recognize any one person to whom we are subservient, we are nevertheless “ruled over” by any number of things. The Law of the Land, for instance. Current economic conditions. Unexpected events in our personal or corporate lives. The weather. Gravity. All these things control *us*, rather than our controlling *them*. They are, even if in a strictly impersonal way, lords over our lives.

But Lord, technically, implies a personal relationship. A lord is not merely something that happens to control us at any given moment. It’s what we consciously acknowledge as having legitimate authority over us. Or even *ultimate* authority over us. Phrases like “Jesus is Lord” or “The Lord our God, the Lord is One” or the Islamic equivalent “That then is God your Lord” are all ways of verbally acknowledging one’s primary relationship.

Of course, we all know by now that lip-service doesn’t cut it. Behavior is the bottom line. So if our top priority is the accumulation of money and material possessions, those things are our real

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SAMPLE ENTRIES FROM THE LEXICON: M

masters. If we are motivated primarily by whatever contributes to our own personal satisfaction, even at the expense of others, our Lord is more likely our own ego, our *self* (as understood in the adjective, “selfish”).

Identifying who or what one’s Lord is, is another way to characterize one’s faith.

MARY

“Holy Mary, Mother of God...”

A direct quote from the well-known Hail Mary prayer of Roman Catholic tradition. And which, to Jews and Muslims (as well as most Protestants), would be downright blasphemous if it wasn’t just plain silly from the start. Because God *has* no parents. The Supreme Being can’t be born of a woman like we are. If it could, it wouldn’t be “supreme,” would it?

Then again, most Catholics already know that. Or at least Catholic theologians and their seminary students do. Insofar as we take “Mother of God” literally, we’ve missed the point.

To say that Mary formed “out of her own flesh” the body into which God incarnated is still too literal. Perhaps the only way to make sense of the phrase is to understand what “Mary” represents.

Certainly Mary represents, in Faithspeak, far more than the woman who bore the Jewish child eventually proclaimed as The Christ. How else can anyone explain the almost fanatic devotion Mary has inspired through the centuries? Eight hundred years ago, for example, an incredible building program spread across Europe, resulting in hundreds of chapels and churches and glittering cathedrals, all named and dedicated not to Jesus but to Mary. A whole new system of theology called—what else?—“Mariology” was developed, equating Mary with the “new Eve,” the mother of redeemed humanity, the Head of the Mystical Body who was nearly as crucial to one’s salvation as Jesus Christ.

Which is a pretty amazing jump, actually, given Mary’s light-weight treatment in the New Testament. If anything, her son’s own words minimize her importance. Jesus practically ignores Mary during his ministry. Worse, he spurns her. “What do I have to do with you?” he says bluntly on one occasion. And apart from the four Gospels she is mentioned only once, in a routine listing of people at a certain prayer meeting. Hardly the stuff rock-stars are made of.

What makes Mary a major actress on the Catholic stage, despite her lack of good written material, is that she brought back

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the missing element in what had become a stuffy, patriarchal, male-oriented tradition. Quite simply, Mary resurrected “the goddess.” Any drama, any tradition that purports to address issues having to do with real life is only half-baked without the feminine ingredient—and feminine symbolism. And not merely in terms of the tenderness, the freedom to express emotion, or the so-called nurturing instincts that are regarded as female qualities. Mary is also The Earth, the Womb, the flesh from which we spring. She is the raw material, the ground-of-being that has its own built-in Way, a more instinctive, more intuitive mode of action.

Mary is the message that we don’t necessarily become good people through cold logic and harsh discipline and rule-following. We do so by giving birth to the Image of God already within us. Acknowledging the Holy Spirit in ourselves somehow fertilizes the seed of divinity. And each of us, male or female, becomes mother of a Child of God who can then incarnate in our lives.

Mary’s son said as much. Once, at someone’s house, Jesus was told that his mother was waiting outside in hopes of speaking with him. “Who is my mother?” Jesus replied before going on to answer his own question: “Anyone who follows the will of my Father in heaven.” That person, Jesus implied, is his mother.

So Mary is *us*. By following the “will” of Ultimate Reality, we give birth to the Incarnation and thereby express Divinity. Mother and son, together. Female and male. Spirit and flesh. Yin and Yang. The bitter—for Mary literally means “bitter”—as well as the sweet.

MYTH

More than one cynic has put down religion with the accusation that “It’s all just a bunch of myths.” What that cynic probably means by using the word “myths” is that the stories on which religions are based are nothing but primitive folklore. Or that they lack scientific accuracy. Or that they’re outright fabrications and fairy tales.

But what the person has actually said (even if he doesn’t know it), is that the stories are *full of hidden truth*.

Because a myth, by definition, is a story not meant to be taken at face value. It’s a story that may look like a straightforward account of an event, or an explanation of how something happened. But it actually hides a deeper level of meaning—sometimes even for the people who tell the story over and over.

According to last century’s champion of mythology, Joseph Campbell, myth is “the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural mani-

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festation.” Nice line. It’s as if, when the storyteller weaves his tale, he can’t help but unleash elements from the world of dreams, from deeper resources that motivate not only him, but us—elements that transcend the storyteller’s private language and speak to his audience in a kind of universal symbolism.

Psychoanalyst Carl Jung called it the “collective unconscious,” an internal, wordless language all people share because of the way the human mind works. And insofar as a story appeals to others, insofar as it becomes a part of a culture’s tradition, it is almost certainly because that story possesses a power to tap into these unconscious elements. It connects with us on a level deeper than the verbal, delivering a message of importance that can change one’s whole outlook.

Which happens to be a good description of Faithspeak.

Today, movies can perform this same cultural/religious function. After all, what is it that makes some movies and characters so popular? Was the 1990 epic, *Dances With Wolves*, just another entertaining diversion about white men versus the natives—or was it attempting to reconnect us all with that simpler, earth-oriented part of ourselves modern society is losing touch with?

In the scene where Dunbar makes friends with the wolf, was he merely trying to turn a wild animal into a house pet—or was he really acting out our efforts to recover the animal side of ourselves without which we are less than full human beings? Was Dunbar’s capture by the soldiers (who promptly put him in chains) only the required Act Three plot-point leading to the movie’s climax—or was it a graphic symbol for our struggles against the so-called forces of civilization, forces that are supposed to raise humanity to a higher level but only end up repressing and destroying our native (natural-at-birth) freedom and joy?

Dances With Wolves was only a film. It might have been based on real, historical incidents or entirely fabricated. Whether it’s true or false by some objective standard isn’t the point. The dynamic *behind* the story is what matters. And this story has the ring of truth because the outward plot activates those unconscious elements deep within us. It frames questions about the meaning of life; it tells us that something is wrong and needs to be made right. It shows us a Way forward.

Not literally—*please*. The movie isn’t suggesting we all live in tepees and hunt buffalo and dance in a big circle when there’s a drought. We mustn’t make the same mistake as those who read scripture like it’s a scientific or historical textbook. The story simply asks us to review Who We Are and Where We’re Going. It reminds us we’re on a Journey, as individuals and as a community.

Joseph Campbell and others have outlined a paradigm for this

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“mythic journey.” It’s a story structure most myths follow, that makes sacred scriptures “sacred,” that gives the world’s great books and films an enduring quality.

And it begins with a central character—let’s call him or her our “hero”—who receives a “call to adventure,” a challenge that forces our hero to do something because things simply can’t go on the way they are. The hero (read: *us*) may ignore that call at first, but circumstances eventually force his/her hand. Suddenly there’s no turning back. Our hero is plunged into uncharted territory and subjected to incredible physical and mental ordeals with no one around to help, and yet he’s not entirely alone. Someone or something is watching over him. The universe itself, maybe. And the fate of the universe seems to hang on our hero’s success, as if to say our own salvation and the world’s salvation can’t be separated.

What’s discovered in this foreign, uncharted land—the golden fleece, perhaps, or the ruby slippers, the Wolf inside us or the Kingdom Within—is what eventually saves us. But not until the hero *brings back* this treasure. Because only when we apply this new discovery to our previous lives can we be genuinely transformed. And hopefully transform others by our example.

The power of myth is that it mirrors life. It shows us our selves and the resources to which we can connect. The answers may be hidden for a time. But they’re there. Always have been, always will be.

And eventually circumstances will force us to go looking.

NAMASTE

One of the most beautiful greetings in any tradition, the word *namasté* is derived from two Sanskrit words meaning, literally, “I bow to you.” It is usually delivered with palms pressed together over the heart, fingers pointing upward, followed by a slight but respectful bow.

Almost from the beginning, however, the “you” in this phrase was understood by Hindus to mean the divine essence within the person being greeted. What the speaker is therefore saying with this single word is more like the sentence, “I honor the divine in you.” Or better, “The divine within me acknowledges the divine within you.”

To take it even further, *namasté* reflects a faith. “We are more than this physical form,” it proclaims. “Beneath this outer skin, we are more alike than not. Let’s be together in this moment as incarnations of the holy spirit, not as contentious, self-centered

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SAMPLE ENTRIES FROM THE LEXICON: O

mortals.” *Namasté*, in short, is an appeal to our higher natures.

It is also a reminder that greetings are important. Because our initial interactions set the tone for what happens next. That’s why *Shalom Alechum* or *Salaam Alekum*—“Peace be upon you”—is the traditional greeting for Jews and Muslims... and why the more familiar “Hello” is so emotionally barren and meaningless by contrast. “How are you?” at least conveys interest in the other person, even if the words are rarely intended or understood as an actual question.

Of course, *namasté* can also be uttered without feeling, as if it were little more than a verbal acknowledgement that another person has entered one’s proximity. Which is why it might be better to speak the longer sentence it represents. Sometimes we need to hear all of those words in order to remember who we really are.

And then act accordingly.

ORIGINAL SIN

Look up “Original Sin” in most Bible dictionaries—even solid, upstanding, Evangelical ones—and you know what? It can’t be found. Because nowhere in scripture is there any mention of it. Not in the Hebrew Bible. Not in the New Testament Gospels or the Epistles of Saint Paul. Nothing. Nada. Zip.

And yet it’s presented to us as fundamental Christian theology. It’s like the First Theorem in geometry. When Adam took that fateful bite from the “fruit of the tree of knowledge”—the proverbial apple given to Eve by the proverbial snake in the proverbial Garden of Eden—Adam supposedly stained the human race with a sin so deep and so permanent that nothing could wash it away.

Except, of course, for the blood of Jesus Christ, Savior of the World.

Which is why, when the concept of original sin was finally fleshed out hundreds of years after the death of Jesus, the Church embraced it as if it *were* scripture. It became the primary reason for our need to accept Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross. No one else could make up for the abiding sinfulness we inherited from Adam. Left in the death-grip of Original Sin, human beings were depraved, disgusting, murderous, perverted, sex-crazed animals doomed to everlasting Hell.

Who the hell dreamed this up, anyway?

Answer: One Augustine of Hippo, later sainted by the Roman Catholic Church for the insightful book he authored, aptly named *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*. Today’s soap operas would do well to take a lesson. Augustine, you see, was your basic hedonist

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during his early life. Having both wealth and leisure, he indulged in all the pleasures money could buy. Rich food, fancy clothes, loose women... *especially* loose women. Maybe the guy was insatiable for a time. But he also had a change of heart. After getting his fill of the good life, he realized (like The Buddha before him) how ultimately empty it was, and he promptly began searching for something to explain his previous, evil behavior.

Whereupon he invented Original Sin. Not that it excused his years of mindless partying. But there was something in the human heart, Augustine argued, that makes us all prone to evil. Despite our best intentions (and an uncanny ability to fool people into thinking we're Mr. or Ms. Goody Two-Shoes), we have a streak in us that's downright devilish.

And, by God, it must've originally begun with ol' Adam.

Okay—so the Jews never bought it. Muslims, many of whom take Adam as literally as today's Christian fundamentalists, don't buy it either. Even the Roman Catholic Church that first embraced it now finds the doctrine a little harsh, if not slightly embarrassing. A few radical theologians have suggested replacing it with a more positive concept they call "Original Blessing," preferring to accentuate the best in human nature rather than dwelling on the worst.

But with all that said—and admitting that Original Sin has become something of a public relations problem—Augustine of Hippo *had* hit on an important point. Because, damn it all, there is a streak in human nature that, if it isn't exactly evil, at least gives every one of us a heap o' trouble now and then.

And the fact is, it *is* inherited. Not from Adam but from a million-plus years of evolution. As a result, human beings now possess not only an amazing aptitude for higher level thinking and creativity, but a physical body that is every bit a part of the animal kingdom as lions and tigers and bears, oh my.

Anthropologists and biologists tell us that our bodies are ideally adapted to the evolutionary stage in which human beings roamed a relatively unpopulated earth in small hunter/gatherer bands, along with other animals that hunted *us*. Our emotional responses and instincts—and yes, humans do have instincts—are therefore matched to the demands of a more ancient, more primitive environment. Fight-or-flight was a daily survival skill for obvious reasons; and continuous breeding in not-necessarily-monogamous pairings was necessary to maintain the population. And with apologies to the politically-correct guardians of male/female equality, the sexes had evolved distinctly divergent roles.

All of which makes the modern-day human being more than a

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little schizophrenic. While major evolutionary changes take place over hundreds of centuries, human society utterly changed us in six or seven thousand years. Like the critical mass in a nuclear reaction, the human brain/mind reached a certain point, then exploded with creative energies that not only redesigned the face of the earth, but the lifestyle to which our physical bodies were once superbly adapted. Unfortunately, our more-advanced minds are still married to our less-advanced bodies. Both have needs. And for better or worse, they frequently conflict.

Augustine, bless his fifth-century soul, was simply trying to put into words this on-going conflict—a struggle science has only recently given us the tools to better understand. Original Sin, if we look on the concept as Faithspeak, is as good a name for it as any. And what it means is that all of us are carrying some heavy baggage from the moment we step through the turnstile. Whatever wonderful things human beings may be capable of, we also have an inherent potential for doing things society labels as “bad”—if only because our genetic programming was in place before polite society was. And now, like every notable religious thinker has said (in so many words), *We just gotta deal with it, darlin’*.

It turns out that one of best ways to deal with it (in so many words) is to become a “new creature.” We do this by first acknowledging our sinful nature—our legacy from evolution, so to speak—then reaching out for whatever resources might help integrate that sinful streak or evolutionary legacy into Who We Are.

The good news is, those resources are already within us. The very minds that caused our estrangement from the physical roles for which we were designed, can now reconcile us. By tapping into a realm that is stronger than the purely physical—whether submitting to Allah, or to The Law, or by “accepting Christ” or “annihilating the ego” or “becoming clear”—each person can overcome the universal problems that go along with being human. And unless we *can* do that, we’ll never be as fully human as we could. Or as fully divine.

Augustine, in his bumbling, stumbling way, was absolutely right.

PAGAN

From a Greek word meaning “to tend flocks,” *pagan* was originally used to point to the simpler folk who populated the rural countryside. These, of course, were in contrast to the presumably more refined and more intelligent citizens to whom fell the

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greater responsibilities of government, priesthood, higher education and waging war. Like the Hebrew word *goyim*, which referred to everyone who wasn't Jewish, "pagan" became the Christian appellation for everyone who hadn't yet converted to the Roman Empire's new state religion. Or to those who *had* been given the chance to convert, but stubbornly refused to see the light.

It was the latter choice, especially, that turned the word into an epithet, dripping with judgment against a whole class of people supposedly ignorant enough or wicked enough to prefer their polytheism and their nature spirits to the Savior of the World. Ironically, scholarly research has shown how the suppression of pagan beliefs—an attachment to nature's cycles, a respect for the sometimes beneficent, sometimes scary forces behind the vagaries of life—were re-channeled into the festivals, saints and demons of Roman Catholicism. And maybe it's true, as scholars and psychologists have also suggested, that we are *all* pagans at heart, that we all need rituals and symbols to nourish this simpler, nature-connected part of ourselves.

Which explains why you'll find holy days in every religious tradition that celebrate changes in seasons, that commemorate times for planting and harvesting, that call for periods of both hunger (fasting) and consumption (feasting). It also explains why we have divinities who seek to save us, alongside equally-powerful devils seemingly hell-bent on our destruction. It's only natural. It's nature's dualistic, cyclical story. And the way we write our story's climax defines whether we think life is worth living, or it's all just a country lark.

PROPHET

If people made a list of the most commonly misunderstood words in the spiritual vocabulary, this word would be right there near the top.

Prophet—in Hebrew, *nabi*—does not imply some divine talent for crystal-ball gazing, fortune telling, or otherwise predicting the future. Prophet literally means "mouthpiece" and was used as a synonym for "spokesman."

The function of the prophet/spokesman was to put into words whatever the divine spirit wanted humans to hear. Muhammad is called The Prophet because Muslims believe his message is God's word for them. Moses was the Jews' first and greatest prophet because Mosaic Law seemed to have come straight from God. Ironically, Moses asked his brother Aaron to be *his* nabi/spokesman, since Aaron was so much better at public speaking.

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Moses appointed Aaron to that position; Aaron didn't ask for it. And apparently most of the great prophets didn't go looking for their jobs either. When Isaiah felt the divine finger pointing his way, the first thing he did was ask how long his mission would take, like someone who'd rather be fishing. Jeremiah objected on the grounds that he was too young. Jonah simply ran away. And Amos denied being one because he knew prophets weren't exactly the most popular guys in town.

In fact, prophets were usually the kind of people you'd go across the street to avoid. Not that they all looked weird or smelled bad, though a few of them did. It was just that they didn't have a lot of nice things to say. Many of them went around condemning people for idol worship—that is, for wasting their time and energy on false gods and religious practices that were the spiritual equivalent of masturbation or visiting the local whorehouse. And they enjoyed using terms and illustrations that were at least as shocking as that last sentence, and usually more so.

They also raged against corruption in high places as well as in the lives of the common folk. They criticized the religious establishment for paying more attention to the letter of the law than to its spirit (just as Jesus would do), and especially for thinking that worship consisted of rituals rather than righteousness. Whether someone performs Temple sacrifices (or goes to church on Sunday), the prophets railed, is the last thing that matters. Justice... *justice* is what matters. Taking care of the poor and the sick is what matters. Loving-kindness is what matters, saith the Lord.

And then—maybe—some prophets might indulge in a little forecasting of the future. But not because of any divine hocus-pocus or a talent for reading tea leaves. Prophets were chosen (or felt themselves chosen) because they had a pretty good handle on human nature. They also understood *divine* nature. And they could often see when the two were on a collision course. Their predictions were more like warnings: “If you continue to do what you're doing, here's what's going to happen...” Just as today someone might warn, “If this country continues to ignore its homeless, if it continues spending money on border walls or glass cathedrals or new casinos instead of people, then we're all going to pay a terrible price. And the currency won't be in dollars.”

It was all a matter of $X + Y = Z$, to borrow a line from the last entry. And whether or not Z actually came about was often the standard by which someone was labeled a genuine prophet/spokesperson, or his scrolls got tossed into the historical trash heap.

And therein lies the confusion between prophecy and predicting. Therein *also* lies the fact that most people don't know a

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prophet when they hear one, at least until after he's gone. Because what he said eventually turns out to be correct. Or it was something we needed to hear, even if we didn't appreciate hearing it at the time. It was, as the poet says, "a lover's quarrel."

After all, prophets don't usually appear to those who haven't made a commitment, who haven't yet tied the knot with divinity. They come to those who already profess a relationship with God, but who are in mortal danger of losing it. We're rarely happy with people who accuse us of failing to keep our commitments, or who point out that some of our new commitments conflict with old. We forget that our link with divinity is permanent only if we regularly renew our vows.

The prophet is the voice of Ultimate Reality calling us back to the relationship we once had, or to an even deeper, more lasting one. And the good news is, even if the voice is gone before we realize who was speaking, Who Was Speaking is still there. Still listening.

Now it's our turn to say a few words... preferably through action.

QUR'AN

The name of the book is often spelled "Koran" outside of this Lexicon. But the fact is, "Q" words don't exactly grow on trees. Besides, Qur'an is the more accurate transliteration of the Arabic.

For Muslims, the Holy Qur'an is the word of Allah/God as communicated to humanity through the angel Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad. It is the culmination of a long chain of divine communications going all the way back to Adam—whom Muslims revere as the first prophet because he was the first person to whom God revealed himself, and Adam passed on the news.

God also revealed himself to Abraham and Moses and Solomon and Jesus, who are likewise acknowledged by Muslims as prophets, and whose Jewish and Christian followers are mentioned numerous times in the Qur'an as "The People of the Book." That Book—which can mean either the Hebrew Torah or The New Testament—represented two earlier accounts of God's revelation. Unfortunately, between the time those revelations were received and scribes finally wrote them down, God's word had become distorted and even corrupted.

The underlying message was accurate enough—that humankind's success and happiness derived from submission to the One God, and that a Day of Reckoning would someday sepa-

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rate the wheat from the chaff. But many of the details in those Books, the Qur'an insisted, were perverted by men who were either evil at heart or simply mistaken. Muhammad promised to get it right this time. The Qur'an would be the Final Revelation, the divine message heard loud and clear and then committed to parchment before anybody could alter one single letter.

Which is probably why Muslims are only too happy to stand back and watch as Jewish and Christian scholars analyze their scriptures; as they develop complex theories about the various documents that went into them, and how vast portions were embellished and rewritten in the process of putting them all together. But try to subject the Qur'an to the same kind of scholarly scrutiny and you'll probably run into a stone wall. If not the holy outrage of the "defenders of the faith," complete with violent protests and maybe a *fatwa* threatening your life.

Not that Muslims have never been known to question their most sacred text. On the contrary, major debates were held centuries ago on such issues as whether the Qur'an was "created" or existed eternally, and whether its words are to be taken as literal truth or metaphor. The written records of these debates sound surprisingly reminiscent of more recent arguments between Christian fundamentalists and liberal theologians. For example, when Allah is referred to in the Qur'an as having hands and eyes and a face, did the text really mean it in a factual sense? And if the Qur'an was eternal and uncreated, was it somehow floating around in the heavens before there were people around to read it, already cast in Arabic letters exactly as Muhammad would deliver it?

Islamic scholars of "the Middle Way" tried to compromise. Qur'anic references to God's human-like attributes are true, Al-Ashari suggested, but the divine hands and face are not the same as human ones. And yes, the Qur'an *is* the eternal Word of God, a scheme built into the very fabric of Ultimate Reality (to put it in today's terms). But the sounds and written symbols by which people have access to it are "created things."

And as students of comparative religion will admit, the Qur'an is a very *powerful* created thing. Whatever its theological content, its descriptions in the original Arabic are reported to be as vivid, poetic, tender and terrifying as anything ever written. It deserves its place among the world's most cherished writings for that reason alone. In the context of seventh-century Arabia, it was the very light of salvation. For hundreds of millions of people the world over, it still is. Or can be.

But any light that shines is valuable not in the beauty of the flame itself, or in the candle that fuels it, or in the ornately-

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carved candlestick that supports it. Its value lies in the illumination it provides.

Its value—just like that of every other holy book—lies in how clearly people can *see* by it.

And, as with every other holy book, the evaluation is ongoing.

REDEMPTION

Back in the 1950s and 60s, many retail stores and gas stations offered what were called “Bonus Stamp” promotions. (To remember this, you must be *very old*.) Whenever you’d purchase an item from a participating retailer, you would be rewarded with an appropriate number of S&H Green Stamps, or the classier Blue Chip Stamps. After saving up a certain quantity and pasting them into the little books provided by the sponsoring companies, you could turn in your stamps at their redemption center and pick out a free gift or prize from their master catalog. The more stamps you accumulated, the more valuable the prize.

Redemption, religiously speaking, is something like a Bonus Stamp Promotion. Except that what we collect are the hard knocks and sacrifices and lessons of everyday life. And the free gift is our own salvation.

Christianity didn’t invent redemption. A thousand years earlier, God (Yahweh) had been worshipped as Redeemer of Israel. Muslims declare that they are redeemed by Allah. In Hinduism, the transmigrating soul is essentially redeemed through its absorption into the Absolute.

The common motif behind the concept of redemption is the unhappy fact that life can be a real pain. As communities or countries, we are often subjected to natural disasters or the ravages of war. As individuals we suffer the slings and arrows of economic misfortune and physical illness and personal attacks by mean-spirited people. And then there’s the ongoing temptation to lie or cheat on your income taxes or give in to that casual affair that “won’t really hurt anybody” but always does. We are the walking wounded. The pain and suffering of our lives is written across our shoulders like oozing, half-healed lash marks.

But at the heart of redemption is the assurance that each of those lash marks counts. They are the proverbial dues we pay to join The Club, the sign of having run the gauntlet before becoming a full-fledged Warrior of the Spirit.

And it’s not merely that these experiences make you “sadder but wiser”; those are life’s lesser Bonus Stamp prizes. The evidence of true redemption is that you’re not only wiser, but in

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some unfathomable way... *happier*.

This deeper transformation rarely occurs as just one more event in a routine sequence of events. There is usually some “outside” force involved, some unexpected or improbable conjunction of coincidences, some utterly explosive flash of illumination that seems to come out of the blue and put everything into perspective. Whatever it is, it’s as if you’ve bridged that unbridgeable Chasm, connected with The Way It Is, merged with the primal forces of the universe. And every one of those wounds you’ve collected suddenly seems to have had a purpose. Every scar, every bruise is an insight, a lesson learned, a purple heart. And not one of them would you give up. Not one.

Which explains why religious traditions celebrate this realignment of one’s whole outlook in such dramatic, forceful terms. It often *is* a One-Time-Only Event. It’s not something you can plan, or do to yourself. And it doesn’t necessarily happen to everybody. But when it does—hallelujah, sister!

Meanwhile the rest of us go on collecting stamps, patiently pasting them into our little books. And maybe it’s enough to know that each one is worth something, that every single event in our life has redeeming value even if we don’t know what it is yet, or whether we’ll have time to save up for the biggest prize in the catalog.

And if “sadder but wiser” is the best we can do for the time being, that too is okay.

RITUAL

Another by-product of modern life is a general dislike for ritual. Especially *religious* ritual. The dislike is understandable, even if unfortunate.

And one of the reasons for it is simply that, in a pluralistic society, there are so many different rituals, in so many different languages and theological frameworks. Learning what they all mean amounts to a full-time job. People have enough trouble learning what their *own* rituals mean.

Of course, some people don’t make the effort to do even that. Because they’re so weird, right? They don’t make any sense. What does sprinkling water on a baby’s head, or carrying the Torah up and down the aisle, or marching around the Ka’aba seven times, have to do with anything? Why do we need these rituals, anyway?

You already know: Because the shortest route to a person’s heart is not always through the written or spoken word. Ritual is heavy-duty, hard-core, high-octane Faithspeak.

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SAMPLE ENTRIES FROM THE LEXICON: R

In study after study, behavioral scientists have shown that the judgments we make about what other people say are only partially dependent on their words. Over sixty percent of our reaction to someone's message, in fact, is based on body language. Tone of voice and context account for another thirty percent; and less than ten percent relates to what's called "rational content." Sorry, professor: Communication is only remotely a logical enterprise.

Take the ritual of shaking hands. For our ancestors who frequently encountered tribes with different spoken languages, holding out one's hands in greeting, palms up, was a non-verbal sign that you were carrying no weapon and thus had no intention of doing harm. Taking the other person's empty hand in yours was a sign not only that you shared his intention, but you were each giving your pledge not to do anything "underhanded." A hearty handshake signaled a desire to be friends. Add an embrace or a kiss on the cheek and prospects were even brighter.

Most of our rituals, religious or otherwise, are connected in similar ways to some form of primal symbolism. Sprinkling water on a baby's head wasn't just a crazy idea some priest hatched after drinking a little too much sacramental wine. The ritual has roots as old as the handshake and as ancient as the connection between an expectant mother's breaking water and giving birth. It's not even necessary to know what the connection *is* exactly, just that there's something in us which resonates, some unconscious transaction that symbolically unites us with the elemental, life-giving forces of the universe.

Ritual, in short, is the symbolic "acting out" designed to evoke life-affirming responses. It is body language. It is tone and context; it only indirectly involves conscious, rational analysis. Rituals break open our protective shells, cut through the layers of excuses and rationalizations and speak to our hearts precisely because they *are* so weird and because they *don't* always make sense. And the only fair way to judge those rituals is to look at what effect they have on us. Because what a ritual means is what it *does*.

There is one other characteristic of ritual worth noting. Because another thing ritual does is repeat itself—over and over. Catholics are given Communion at every Mass. Jews recite the same prayers in virtually the same order every Sabbath. Muslims prostrate themselves five times a day, every day. The same root word that gives us "arithmetic" is what gives us "ritual." It's all about numbers. Repetition. The more the better. Do it again, and again. And again.

Someday maybe the message will finally sink in.

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SAMPLE ENTRIES FROM THE LEXICON: S

SAVE

In Hebrew, the word usually translated as “saved”—*yashau*—literally means “to be expanded.”

The implications are both physical and spiritual. Being saved implies freedom, the condition of not being physically confined or enslaved. In a wider sense it also means to be healthy and prosperous enough to meet your basic survival needs. Otherwise you’d still be enslaved.

On a mental/spiritual level, it implies a new awareness of ourselves, a new sense of possibilities, of room to grow. To be saved is to realize that we needn’t be held back by our own past, that we can rise above Who We Are at this particular moment. We can discover a whole new aspect of Self not defined merely by our evolution as animals in a physical environment, with material needs demanding material solutions. Instead we become connected to a deeper reality behind the world we see and touch. We become “expanded.”

Recognizing this at a gut level—whether inside or outside of a religious context—can change our lives. Because we’re suddenly aware that we’ve begun a journey, and there’s no turning back. It’s not that we’re perfect, or that we’ve “arrived,” or even that we’re moving forward all the time. It’s just that we know we’re on the way and that everything we do affects our progress.

One more thought: When you’re working on your laptop, it’s a good practice to hit a specific combination of keys every so often and save your work on your hard drive, or to an external disk. You thereby record it in a more permanent fashion so that if the power goes down, or some glitch in the program trashes your working file, you haven’t lost everything. You can recover.

To be saved, in the spiritual sense, is to confirm what you’ve learned on your journey toward salvation. The more often, the better. So even if the power fails, or what you’re working on at the moment gets trashed, you haven’t lost everything.

You can recover.

SELF-HELP

The same year Charles Darwin launched all the uproar over Evolution with his book, *Origin of the Species*, another British author by the genial name of Samuel Smiles published his own best-seller entitled *Self-Help*. Translated into nearly two-dozen languages, Smiles’ masterpiece set the stage for a whole new genre of periodicals and handbooks based on the premise that people

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SAMPLE ENTRIES FROM THE LEXICON: S

are quite capable of doing lots of things for themselves, tank ya veddy mooch, many of which they'd ceded over recent centuries to social programs and government. Sadly, many people had now come to depend on those institutions, or even become enslaved by them. And since Smiles believed that individuals have ultimate power, it was their own bloody fault. Self-Help was the solution.

While planting your own vegetable garden and rebuilding your classic car are among today's most popular self-help subjects, books featuring do-it-yourself spiritual practices and techniques for the feeding and caring of your soul are not uncommon. People can read, after all, and don't need cantors or imams to chant from the scriptures to know what they say. Nor, in countries where a Bill of Rights is enshrined and the Common Man is equal to royalty, do people need priests to stand in for them, or conduct the rituals designed to nurture their faith.

Thus saith Self-Help.

And there *is* much we can do for ourselves (and our Self), certainly. But having said that, there's also much we can do in tandem with others, in a spiritual community, that can make things so much easier. We can let a book be our guide and guru, allow our private meditations to substitute for the call-and-response of a reading in church. But something qualitatively different happens when we *hear* words rather than read them. Something unique occurs when somebody shows us how to fix a carburetor instead of handing us a repair manual. Something almost sacred takes place when we stand up from our folding chairs and admit our drinking problem in the company of other alcoholics—something that does not, or maybe cannot, happen if we try to go it alone.

We are social animals. We are organically programmed for certain kinds of nurturing only others can give, for developmental stages where group interaction facilitates our progress and isolation hinders it.

It's no coincidence that the word "self" has meaning only in relationship to others.

SPIRITUAL

In the second episode of the original *Star Wars* trilogy, Yoda, the diminutive Jedi Master, lectures young Luke Skywalker after he once again fails to learn an important lesson. "You are not this crude matter," Yoda says, poking Luke's shoulder. "A luminous being you are."

It's a great line—one most religions try to convey in their own fashion, sometimes crudely. A line that can change one's faith.

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SAMPLE ENTRIES FROM THE LEXICON: S, T

In the film, the statement was meant to encourage Luke to look at the world in a new way. “Don’t be fooled by your human form,” Yoda was saying. “You have powers that go beyond what hands and feet or bone and muscle can do... powers that transcend the boundaries of the ordinary physical world.” And the point was, before Luke could unleash those deeper powers, he first had to accept his “luminous being-ness.” He needed to expand his frame of reference. His faith had to grow.

To be “spiritual” is to have a different—expanded—frame of reference. Specifically it is a frame of reference which acknowledges that What We Are, ultimately, is more than this “crude flesh”; that what animates and re-purposes our physical lives comes from another, more illuminating dimension.

This level is so profoundly different that it may seem downright other-worldly—even though it’s as commonplace as light, as natural as the concentrations of swirling energy that form and transform matter. Or that vibrate in and around us all the time like electromagnetic waves, passing through walls and turning into sounds and images when our hi-def TVs are turned on.

Spirituality is the frame of reference in which our outward lives are the TV reality shows we help produce and play essential roles in. Tuning to the proper channel, improving the reception, and getting the color and sound just right can make all the difference.

TEST

Whereas temptation is an opportunity to grow spiritually by not doing something bad, a test is an opportunity to advance by doing something good.

There are at least as many potential tests in the world as temptations. Unfortunately, they’re harder to identify. It takes initiative to be “tested.” A certain situation arises, let’s say, that requires us to do something. We must choose a course of action from numerous possibilities, and then we must act.

Failure to act when we should—not necessarily failing to do the right thing but doing nothing at all—is as damaging to our spiritual health as yielding to temptation. We become more and more callous, or, as some scriptures describe it, “hard-hearted.” We look the other way, refuse to get involved, shut out that still small voice that calls us to get up from our easy chairs. According to the famous parable, the Good Samaritan passed the test. The other guys only passed by.

Which is simply to point out (again) that what we do, regardless of what we say or think, is what we truly believe. The opportu-

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SAMPLE ENTRIES FROM THE LEXICON: T

nity to do something is a “test” of our beliefs.

Try this sometime: Write down what you think you believe, or what you’d *like* to believe. Then, after each item, write down what it would take to demonstrate—to prove without any shadow of a doubt—that you do, in fact, believe it. What act or series of actions would convince you? What would convince other people? Or perhaps God?

Whatever those actions may be, those are your “tests” for each specific belief. Make a chart of them. Keep score. Look for opportunities to be tested. If you don’t pass with flying colors, reward yourself for the smallest improvements you can manage. Figure out how to do better next time. Get advice or assistance if you need it.

Shakespeare wrote that “All the world’s a stage.” In other words, *life* is a stage. Religion says that life is a series of tests. In the first scenario we’re actors; in the second, students. Actually, we’re both: We’re students of acting.

The curtain’s up, Mac.

TRUTH

The modern understanding of truth is virtually absent in most sacred texts until quite late, historically speaking. Truth as we know it was a Greek concept, originally a philosophical proposition which held that something could exist—a scientific law, say, or an historical event—apart from what anyone thought about it, or whether they thought about it at all. What happened during the creation of the universe happened regardless of what contemporary cosmology may hypothesize. The laws and forces that govern nature are whatever they are, whether we’ve managed to figure them out or not. What is, *is*. What is, is The Truth.

And knowing the truth, as both Christianity and Greek Gnosticism put it, will “set you free.” Knowing the What Is, instead of depending on the philosophies and religions and thought-control systems designed to keep the masses in their place, is the only real freedom.

Naturally, how people come to know the truth is always an issue. A certain Roman Procurator’s query to the would-be Messiah is informative. “What is the truth?” Pontius Pilate asks Jesus. The narrative records no answer. Not because there *is* no answer, but because truth can’t be coughed up like some concise, one- or two-liner on the back of a Trivial Pursuit game card.

In fact truth can’t really be put into words at all, not in any final form. Having a series of words in proper order isn’t the same

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SAMPLE ENTRIES FROM THE LEXICON: T, U

as having the truth. The real truth lies *behind* the words. And the best anyone can do is witness to it in their behavior and in their lives, and then let other people discover and incorporate it into *their* lives when they're ready. Jesus must have realized, as Pilate stood there waiting for a response like the host of Family Feud with fifteen seconds left on the clock, that Pilate wasn't ready for it.

Jewish tradition relates a similar story that pre-dates the Christian one, in which a cynical Roman soldier reportedly confronts a rabbi and asks him to distill the truth of the Torah while standing on one foot. Unlike Jesus, who stood before Pilate in silence, the Jewish rabbi took his best shot. "What is hateful to you," he replied, "do not do to another. That is the whole of the Torah. The rest is only commentary."

Most people who retell this tale leave it at that point. So did this Lexicon in the entry on "Charity." But the real story doesn't end there. The rabbi adds one more thing—the most important thing, really—before the surprised soldier turns away. "Now go and learn it," he says.

Which is simply to restate the point that any one-shot answer, or magic formula, or article of faith, is simplistic and hollow unless we do something about it—unless we learn it by studying it and applying it and making it a part of Who We Are. To genuinely know the truth is to embody it, to incarnate it, to *be* it.

This is The Truth behind the goal of becoming Sons and Daughters of God, or becoming "Bar Mitzvah" (Son of the Commandment). It is the meaning of submission to Allah or "annihilating one's ego." And while the Pilate in us may ask for an easy answer, the God in us remains silent, knowing that it remains for us to learn it in our own way.

And in our own good time.

UTOPIA

Coined by Sir Thomas More as the title of a book he published in 1516, *Utopia* combines the Greek word *ou*, meaning "no" or "not," with *topos*, meaning "place" or "location." Utopia therefore literally means "no place." Or, in street slang, "Ain't never gonna happen, bro."

The utopian communities envisioned by 19th-Century social philosophers and Transcendentalists like Henry David Thoreau, in which everyone was supposedly equal and life's necessities were available to all, were simply unsustainable. The experimental Essene community at Qumran could never live up to its ideal of an observant, orthodox Jewish life unsullied by a corrupt Temple

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SAMPLE ENTRIES FROM THE LEXICON: U, V

priesthood and the Hellenizing influences of the Roman occupation. The so-called Islamic State's idealized Caliphate was a disaster before its first beheading. The American Dream remains a nightmare for many, if only because some people still believe black lives don't matter, and if other people live in poverty it's only because they're not working hard enough. Even the Garden of Eden didn't last, because knowledge can be used for evil as well as good, and the more we know, the more potential there is for evil.

That doesn't mean we shouldn't continue to hold on to our visions for such an ideal place—or to *any* ideal, for that matter—even though we may never achieve it. Having a vision is more about striving than achieving. The Kingdom of God is a goal, not a location.

Which brings us to a kind of Zen Buddhist interpretation where “no place,” like the concept of “No Mind,” is actually our objective. It's where we no longer think of “place” as either an external or internal reality. It's the condition where your needs are as important as mine, where “yours” and “mine” are irrelevant distinctions to begin with.

And yes, it ain't never gonna happen this side of heaven. But it's a worthy exercise to try and visualize it... to see where that takes you.

To see where that takes “you.”

VIRGIN BIRTH

Author Frederick Buechner probably summarized it best several decades ago: “Life is complicated enough,” he wrote, “without confusing theology and gynecology.”

Which may be a kinder and gentler way of saying, *What the heck difference does it make?*

The thing is, the Christian notion of the Virgin Birth *does* make a difference to millions of people. For the fundamentalist, the issue (as always) hinges on whether we're going to take the Bible literally or not. The New Testament says—or seems to say—that the mother of Jesus was not impregnated by her husband-to-be, Joseph, nor by any other human male. She was sexually unsullied at the time, and therefore, by the modern definition, a “virgin.” And yet there she was, a mother-to-be all the same.

To get clinical about it, Mary supplied the ovum, the Holy Spirit supplied the sperm, and the end product was the Babe in the Manger. And if you don't accept that, the Christian fundamentalist will insist, you can't believe *anything* the Bible says.

Literalism, again, is one lens through which to read the Bible.

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SAMPLE ENTRIES FROM THE LEXICON: V, W

And certainly a forceful way to emphasize how very, very important its broader message is.

On the other hand, stories of virgin births were being told all over the ancient map, most of which pre-dated Jesus. From Attis to Mithra, from Osiris to Zoraster, holy men and gods (and even a Caesar or two) were said to have been conceived in their mothers' wombs without fatherly fertilization. Considering the competition, the story of the latest Savior could hardly begin with routine human reproduction.

But the *non*-literal content is the real story of the virgin birth. Because what the story beautifully symbolizes is the idea that bringing a Son of God into the world—that is, attempting to mirror the Image of God in one's own life—is not a strictly biological process. If the ingredients are two parts flesh, the results are less than divine. The seed of the Holy Spirit must be planted in our wombs, or hearts or guts. Human instinct and flesh must be balanced by equal parts sacredness and soul. On this earth-bound plane at least, it takes both: A unity of seeming opposites. A unity without which there is no real salvation.

We're familiar enough with how evil takes root. Through child abuse and gun violence. Through a failure to provide role models and experiences that promote a sense of self-worth and direction. So when goodness appears in history, or in the life of someone we know, it's almost like a gift from heaven. It's as if such a life couldn't have come about without a dose of divine intervention, without God Himself coupling with the fairest maiden Earth has to offer.

Which is simply to admit that we're not very good at sowing the seeds of peace and harmony on our own. We may be able to conceive it intellectually. We're just having trouble getting past the flesh part.

WICCA

From the Indo-European *weik*, meaning "sacred, holy," Wicca is the more formal name for the nature-oriented religion that's as old as our Paleolithic ancestors, and which sees the Earth (Gaia/Mother Nature) as one of its two primary deities. Unlike the equally ancient Shamanism, however, which restricted control of nature's animistic forces to a select few practitioners, Wicca is far more democratic in the sense that all (or most) of its tribal group members were given access to its ways.

That's one of the reasons why, as other religions became more formalized and their rituals confined to a priestly class, Wiccans

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SAMPLE ENTRIES FROM THE LEXICON: X

were increasingly ostracized. Wiccan practices, now pejoratively labeled as “Witchcraft”—after all, any ol’ witch could perform the rites, not just the authorized agents—were not only considered “wicked,” but outlawed under penalty of death.

It’s an interesting commentary on human progress that our more primitive forebears were often denigrated (and in some cases hunted to extinction) for their honest efforts to cope with life’s spiritual questions, using their best understanding at the time, along with symbols that carried special meaning for them. Ironically, some of those primitive symbols still carry profound meaning, despite great advancements in knowledge and science.

And if you thought those last two sentences apply only to Wicca, think again.

XEROGRAPHY

It’s not that the author of this Lexicon is desperate to find any word that begins with an “X.” Xerography really *does* have something to do with religion. And not just because the church bulletin may still be run off on your trusty Xerox copy machine.

One of the jobs of Faithspeak is to continually search for new and useful analogies for conveying the eternal truths. Computers and robots turn out to be excellent models for understanding abstract concepts like mind, soul, and body. But an even more difficult concept to get across is how the so-called material world “manifests itself” from, and interacts with, the spiritual dimension. Even supposing there *were* these two separate dimensions, how would the process work?

Enter the lowly Xerox machine. Or whatever brand-name copier or four-in-one machine you may prefer.

And by the way, “lowly” is hardly a fair description. The process of xerography is as amazing a technological feat as you’ll find. What happens, basically, is that the image on an original document is converted through light into an electrostatic charge on a metal drum. That electrical information attracts a powdery black substance (toner) which, under heat and pressure, is then fused onto a blank sheet of paper to create an exact replica of the original.

If a Xerox machine could have been transported back into, say, the fourteenth century, someone watching this process might well have concluded that the machine contained a spirit. Or worse, a demon. It was the *demon* that transformed the original into an apparition of itself, probably by use of black magic. The operator of the Xerox machine would thereupon be accused of witchcraft

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SAMPLE ENTRIES FROM THE LEXICON: X

and promptly burned at the stake. Along with his demon-possessed box.

The point here isn't that our fourteenth century friend just wasn't ready for the technology of the future, that it probably scared the hell out of him and he was only interpreting what he saw in terms he was familiar with. (Though all of that may be true.) The point is that one thing or "reality"—namely, the replica that was made, which we can now see and touch and read as if it were the original—can be created from another reality that seems so different to whoever is watching that it might as well have come from another dimension.

The fact that there was an original, material thing from which our duplicate was copied isn't the issue. We could just as easily have built our analogy around a fax machine or an ink-jet printer or even a TV screen. The lesson is that what all these devices produce, at some point during the process of producing them, was nothing more than an invisible electrical field or magnetic pattern or wave phenomenon.

In fact, in the case of the ink-jet, what ends up as a page of text was never a material thing to begin with. It originated in the author's mind as he was sitting at his computer or thumbing away on his iPhone. It was input through the electrolytic impulses within the nerves of his fingers, conveyed through the electrical signals of a keyboard and translated through binary digital language into temporary magnetic patterns on a memory chip, and then into the somewhat more permanent magnetic patterns on a hard drive or flash card. Each of these steps is barely comprehensible even to those who designed this process. But out comes the page of text anyway.

So let's imagine the electrostatic charges in our Xerox machine (or the magnetic patterns on a computer drive) as the "spiritual" dimension. The type on the printed page would be the "material." Fortunately for us, even after our page has "materialized," we can still use other material objects to change it. For example, we can brush a little white-out fluid over the smudges and misspelled words, then slip the paper into an old-fashioned typewriter and make corrections or additions.

In like fashion we can apply purely material solutions to other material problems in our lives. We can treat diseases with medicines. We can repair dented fenders and broken axles with Bondo and welding torches. We can hammer and dig and manipulate physical reality in all sorts of totally physical ways.

But what if we could go back to the Xerox machine and change the electrostatic charges before they're transformed into a printed page? What if we could manipulate *that* reality in order to fix the

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SAMPLE ENTRIES FROM THE LEXICON: Y

copy that's about to come out, or at least the next one after that? To assume this is possible is no more inconceivable than to accept what happens during the process of xerography itself.

To the fourteenth century mind-set, the Xerox machine would have been magic, sorcery, demonic. But only because no one had figured out the technology yet. Nobody had the vaguest notion, the mental building blocks to even think about it. They didn't have a conceptual model for imagining the possibilities.

Stop reading for a moment. Close your eyes. Imagine the possibilities.

YES

In the field of mass marketing, there are several words that have special power to motivate people to purchase a product. Most of Madison Avenue's Top Ten marketing words haven't changed over the last fifty years. The word "you," for example, has always been near the top of the list. "New" is also right up there, or some variation like "Fresh" or "Improved." Other power words include "save," "love" and "younger." These words work because they grab our attention and push our emotional hot buttons. They connect with primal drives or instincts. They answer a need.

But of all these power words, nothing grabs, pushes, connects or answers our needs like "Yes."

YES!

Think how many times we've heard the word "No" in our lives. No, you can't go out and play. No, you can't have a cookie, or a new Barbie Doll, or a new car or pay raise. No, no, *NO*—until it's not merely the most common response to our requests, but a continuous refrain in the litany of our lives.

It doesn't matter that the denials may be justified. The word "No," for most of us, has come to symbolize the notion of denial itself, that our lives are continually corralled by limits and restrictions, defined by what we *can't* do instead of what we can. Worse, the phrase "No you can't" becomes synonymous with "You're not worth it."

"Yes" is the single word that turns this negative faith upside down. Yes means you *are* worth something. Yes means the glass is half full, not half empty. Yes is permission to try again, the freedom to become who you're meant to be.

Not that limits no longer apply. You still can't step off that ten-story building; but you can take up hang-gliding. You can't have sex with every attractive person you meet (or even the ones who say they're willing); but you *can* re-channel that same physical

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SAMPLE ENTRIES FROM THE LEXICON: Y, Z

energy into doing things for others that can be far more gratifying. There are probably ten things you can do for each thing you can't; and even the things you supposedly can't do you probably *could* do if only you made up your mind to. Or you had a little help doing. And many times—incredibly, astoundingly often, in fact—the only help you need is the permission you give yourself by overcoming the No deep down in your soul by substituting *Yes*.

This kind of self-empowerment is almost a religion in itself. Its banner has been carried by mystics from the Sufis of Islam to the Hasidim of Jewish tradition. It has been endorsed by history's greatest religious figures. Promoters of positive thinking populate the bookracks and video shelves. The New Spirituality has taken it on as a primary theme, and TV evangelists have jumped on the bandwagon by offering free gold-plated "Yes You Can!" lapel pins from their studio pulpits. For only a small donation, of course.

The fact that it's suddenly in vogue, that "Yes" *sells*, makes it no less true. In a profound way it's one of those eternal truths. Religious traditions have been saying Yes to us all along, even if the Thou-Shalt-Not's keep getting all the publicity.

Maybe "Yes" is the image of God.

ZOROASTRIANISM

While Zeus and the other Greek gods are now remembered primarily as the literary leads in a body of ancient myth and legend, not all ancient religious languages have become obsolete. Depending on the richness of the tradition and its flexibility for conveying What Is, the same old words may still be the best.

Zoroastrianism still exists—and elements of that religion live on in many other traditions—because it still conveys meaning. For some people its words are still "the best."

The name comes from its founder, Zoroaster—or, according to some translators, Zarathustra. (Remember the opening theme in the sci-fi classic, *2001: A Space Odyssey*? This is the guy in the title.) A spiritual activist who lived in Persia during the seventh century BCE, Zoroaster made quite a splash in the local tabloids, reportedly being born through an immaculate conception (read: virgin birth), then going on to preach that salvation could be attained by joining the Forces of Good in their battle against the Forces of Evil.

There was no spiritual neutrality, Zoroaster warned. As a consequence of which side you chose and the deeds that flowed from your choice, you would eventually be judged worthy of Paradise or else condemned to the eternal punishments of Hell. The goal of

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SAMPLE ENTRIES FROM THE LEXICON: Z

mortal life was therefore *to actively fight evil*—a theme articulated clearly for perhaps the first time in history.

The supreme judge and Lord of Wisdom, representing the spirit of Good, was known as Ahura Mazda. He was assisted by Mithras, originally conceived as pure Light, but later humanized as a savior-god born of yet another virgin—this one impregnated in a lake of Zoroaster's semen. (Who said immaculate conception had to be pretty?) The spirit of Evil, by contrast, was embodied in Ahriman, who assisted in spreading moral and physical decay among humans through the idols and gods of the past.

If much of this sounds familiar, it should. If the Jewish captivity in Babylon, their eventual release by Cyrus of Persia, and the sweeping changes that subsequently took place not only in Jewish theology but in Greek, Christian and Islamic thought—if all these so-called coincidences now seem less than coincidental, they *should*. Because Zoroastrianism laid the groundwork for most of the Faithspeak that came to characterize Western religious tradition. Even if Zoroastrianism itself is hardly the thriving tradition it once was.

Does all this cross-pollination diminish the uniqueness and credibility of its Western descendants? Not at all. Insofar as the basic themes and symbols of Zoroastrianism stuck, it was because they conveyed essential truths about reality, about who or what the ultimate powers of the universe are, and how humans should interact with them.

In fact, it is through the study of *all* religions, past and present, that we finally begin to catch sight of the Ultimate Reality beyond them. In their similarities and differences, in what these religions are saying and doing, the dynamic of faith begins to peek out from behind the specific words and symbols being used. Like the testimony of three witnesses in a court of law, their combined evidence begins to confirm and clarify not what those people *say* the truth is, but what the truth really *is*.

And sometimes, when we look deeply into another tradition—whether Zoroastrianism or any other—the language of our own religion opens up in surprising new ways, taking on deeper meaning, unveiling more to us than ever before. No longer can we mouth the same words or go through the same rituals with the same routine dispassion. We suddenly get an inkling of the great and amazing things going on around us and through us. We realize (along with Shakespeare) that there are far, far more things in heaven and earth, dear Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy. Or anybody *else's* philosophy. Or all of humanity's philosophies and religions and sciences put together.

Behold the awesome, infinite, now-you-see-it, now-you-don't

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ON NEXT PAGE)

SAMPLE ENTRIES FROM THE LEXICON: Z

Mystery of the What Is.

Behold the equally awesome Mystery of What We Are.

And watch the space between them grow smaller and smaller as we continue our mission to understand them both.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MARK HASKETT *is a working artist, writer and musician, and has been a student of philosophy and religion for all of his adult life. He has authored articles, novels and non-fiction books, each of which invites his readers to explore the deeper dimensions of everyday life that provide meaning and enhance mutual understanding. For more on his other books, including interviews about each of them, please visit: www.IFMedia.org/IFBooks.*

Active in his local interfaith community, Mark has been a frequent guest speaker and panel moderator on matters of practical faith and spirituality. He occasionally tours with his “Song of The Prophet” concert/service drawn from Kahlil Gibran’s poetic masterwork, THE PROPHET.

Mark lives with his wife Nancy in California’s Central Valley, and may be contacted directly by going to: www.IFMedia.org/Feedback.

