

Aberdeen Unitarian Church

THE CHALICE SCHOOL OF CONTEMPLATIVE MEDITATION



SESSION No. 7

PART TWO - THE PERENNIAL PHILOSOPHY

In this second part of the session I would like to deal with the type of philosophy or thinking that often provides a background of belief for a great deal of meditation practice. In a previous session it was mentioned that the old concept of God was dying and that a new concept was being born - and it was this new concept that many people now felt they could believe in and pray to. In reality this is not a new concept as such, but rather one which has always been there at the heart of each religious tradition - especially within the mystical tradition. The only difference is that it is now beginning to come to the surface as being many people's new understanding of God. (Sometimes it appears as if it is something to be found in new age thinking - but there is nothing new about it.). It is however, no longer the old benevolent man in the sky idea, or even the kind of God that you often find in the Old Testament - a God of wrath and thunder - a God always outside somewhere, judging us, and sometimes rather sternly. But rather it is something deeper, more profound and certainly a lot closer to home. It is to be found in the deeper part of ourselves, and in the whole of creation. The philosophy itself is sometimes named as the *Philosophia Perennis* or the Perennial Philosophy. In Aldous Huxley's well known book the *Perennial Philosophy* he gives an outline of this kind of thinking, however, many people have come to view it only in terms of comparative religion. There is however a definite mystical philosophy and dimension behind it as we will see.

In his book on Mysticism, F.C. Happold gives a very condensed and concise outline. This is helpful because it can be quite a difficult process to go through all the various ideas that Huxley deals with. Happold outlines the philosophy in this way (and perhaps we can see this new idea of God emerging). He starts off by explaining what mysticism is, how it has its origin in the Greek mysteries, and that the word comes from the Greek verb, *muo*, "to shut or close the lips or eyes". But, he adds, "in the course of time the word has come to have an extended, indeed a different meaning", especially through Neoplatonism where the whole question of *reality* has been in question. During the course of time there has been a fusion of Christian and Neo-platonic thought and this has resulted in a system of mystical theology. This then has been the main background of Christian mysticism. In short, it is from this background that there has arisen the Perennial Philosophy, although it must be said that to the Hindu and the Buddhist mystics, as well as the mysticism in other religious traditions, this philosophy has always been there in one form or another. In all religious traditions, indeed in all forms of mysticism there has been a similar and even an identical expression. And it is because of this there has arisen a way of thinking, indeed a whole way of looking at life which embraces this common approach - a common

experience - often referred to as the Perennial Philosophy. Happold then gives the following assertions, which have come out of that common experience :

1. "This phenomenal world of matter and individual consciousness is only a partial reality and is the manifestation of a Divine Ground in which all partial realities have their being.
2. It is of the nature of man that not only can he have knowledge of this Divine Ground by inference, but also he can realise it by direct intuition, superior to discursive reason, in which the knower is in some way united with the known.
3. The nature of man is not a single but a dual one, he has not one but two selves, the phenomenal ego, of which he is chiefly conscious and which he tends to regard as his true self, and a non-phenomenal, eternal self, and inner man, the spirit, the spark of divinity within him, which is his true self. It is possible for a man, if he so desires and is prepared to make the necessary effort, to identify himself with his true self and so with the Divine Ground, which is of the same or like nature.
4. It is the chief end of man's earthly existence to discover and identify himself with his true self. By so doing, he will come to an intuitive knowledge of the Divine Ground and so apprehend Truth as it really is, and not as to our limited human perceptions it appears to be. Not only that, he will enter into a state of being which has been given different names, eternal life, salvation, enlightenment, etc.

Further, the Perennial Philosophy rests on two fundamental convictions:

1. Though it may be to a great extent atrophied and exist only potentially in most men, men possess an organ or faculty which is capable of discerning spiritual truth, and, in its own spheres, this faculty is as much to be relied on as are other organs of sensation in theirs.
2. In order to be able to discern spiritual truth men must in their essential nature be spiritual; in order to know That which they call God, they must be, in some way, partakers of the divine nature; potentially at least there must be some kinship between God and the human soul. Man is not a creature set over against God. He participates in the divine life; he is, in a real sense, 'united' with God in his essential nature, for, as the Flemish contemplative, the Blessed John Ruysbroeck, put it:

This union is within us of our naked nature and were this nature to be separated from God it would fall into nothingness."

You can perhaps see a relationship here with some of the stages of prayer, meditation and contemplation that we covered in the other sessions. But this is the realm of mysticism in depth - indeed it is the deeper part of meditation and contemplation. Within the Perennial Philosophy there is this aspect of the Divine Ground - it is both Immanent and Transcendent, at the same time. This is the Divine Ground of all existence and provides the basis of the entire structure of the philosophy. But this, it is believed, takes away the notion that God or Divine Reality is something outside us. It prevents us from pushing the Divine Ground away from us - sometimes too far away - a remote Divine Power that only intervenes when it has a mind to. Seen from both a Transcendent and an Immanent aspect one then realizes that the Divine Ground - sometimes understood as the Spirit with us - is also the same Ground which sustains the whole of creation. The main difference in this approach is that it comes from a common experience that is found in all the great world traditions, especially at the heart of those traditions.

When we speak about meditation and contemplation like this, and if we go into it in any real way - to understand the process, and especially the thinking behind it - if we look at the heart of the tradition that the particular meditation method comes from (and it has to be the heart and centre, and not the circumference) - we will see that common ground - that common denominator - that common experience.

Bede Griffiths (a Benedictine Monk who went to India and adopted the Sanyasin way of life and thought) speaks about the Divine Ground as the Sacred Mystery. He writes: "What is this 'transcendent Mystery', this 'ultimate Truth'. This 'universal Law'? These are words we use to express the inexpressible. This is the whole problem of life, which continually baffles our reason. The ultimate meaning and purpose of life cannot be expressed, cannot properly be thought. It is present everywhere, in everything, yet it always escapes our grasp. It is the 'Ground' of all existence, that from which all things come, to which all things return, but which never appears. It is 'within' all things, 'above' all things, 'beyond' all things, but it cannot be identified with anything. Without it nothing could exist, without it nothing can be known, yet it is itself unknown. It is that by which everything is known, yet which itself remains unknown. It is 'unseen but seeing, unheard but hearing, unperceived but perceiving, unknown but knowing'. This is the mystery upon which both Indian and Chinese thought lighted in the sixth century before Christ. They called it Brahman, Atman, Nirvana, Tao, but these are only names for what cannot be named. We speak of 'God', but this also is only a name for this inexpressible Mystery." (*Return to the Centre* p 19-20).

In conclusion

Prayer, meditation and contemplation, when seen in the light of the Perennial Philosophy experience, that common mystical/spiritual experience to be found at the heart of all religions, leads to the Sacred Mystery - it has a name, but paradoxically it is beyond all names. Its ultimate goal is *Divine Union*, which is the *highest stage of contemplation* - **Union with the Ground of all existence.**

This concludes our Meditation Sessions. Go forward in the Light and in the Truth.

May we all attain
