

Spirituality for Christians

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Introduction

Many men and women over the past 2000+ years have done hard spiritual work yielding simple ultimate truth. I had no idea this material existed which I regard as a personal loss, as I missed over 50 years of study.

This material isn't doctrine of any church, and isn't New Age type spirituality. It's the deepest segment of classic Christian spirituality. It's pure Christianity stripped of religious dogma - practiced, tested, and found true for millennia. Furthermore it's beneficial regardless of religious preference or church activity.

Jesus said:

"Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice." (John 18:37)

What is truth, and where do you find it? A thinking person contemplates this vast question with no seemingly good answers.

Spiritual truths cannot be found at the level of the mind. The answer is, and has always been, direct experience with God. Many people achieved it and it's from their experiences that we learn the nature of things.

The concepts described here are bedrock concepts in spirituality. Spirituality being the inner work leading to God, whereas religion is an outward introductory form. Each can help the other.

Pursuing spirituality requires effort and a thirst for knowledge. Knowledge and wisdom obtained by asking deep questions and being willing to discard previously held beliefs. As you practice asking questions, your skill in asking deeper questions will increase, and every answer will prompt a new and better question. There are more than a few doors to knock on leading through the interior castle, and God is there to answer every one.

Humans formed our conception of God by experiencing Him, and there's a thread through recorded history of situations where God and man interacted. These are referred to as mystical experiences when they are accompanied by an ecstatic unitive experience of Self and God. Directly experiencing God falls into the general field of **Mysticism**.

Few arrive at the point of having direct unitive experience, and doing so needn't be the goal. In fact most will find happiness in being somewhat freed from the troubles of the world, and with achieving greater indwelling of the Spirit. Embracing concepts of the path will fundamentally transform you, increasing the space within your soul for God.

A great number of Christian Saints, spiritual men prior to Christ and since have walked this Path. Inner work in the soul must be done before one is qualified for direct experience. This work requires putting to death the many urges and activities of the carnal man. From a historical perspective this is termed **Mortification**.

Increased indwelling of the Spirit and mysticism are practiced in parallel with working on mortification. All together they've been termed **The Perennial Philosophy**.

The Path isn't so much about becoming someone, but about letting God burn off the dross of your gold, about uncovering the divinity that's been part of you all along. It's not about how much you know, but about who the real you has always been.

Earth is a school for the development of your soul.

To benefit from what's written herein you likely need to temporarily put aside beliefs (especially as to the nature of God) and give the overall concept time for consideration.

A 12th Century theologian said:

"Our salvation depends upon our knowing and recognizing the Chief Good which is God Himself. I have a capacity in my soul for taking in God entirely. I am as sure as I live that nothing is so near to me as God. God is nearer to me than I am to myself; my existence depends on the nearness and presence of God." (Meister Eckhart's Sermons)

God is always waiting on us.

"God is very zealous to be at all times with man... God is always ready, but we are very unready; God is near to us, but we are far from Him; God is within, but we are without; God is at home, but we are strangers." (Light, Life and Love - W. Inge)

But the path to truly finding Him is narrow.

"Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it. " (Matt 7:13-14)

Religions are external to God, something we participate in for structure, purpose, belonging, and hoped for salvation. Most provide few tools for significant internal spiritual growth. Spirituality is much more than going to church on Sunday and fellowship during the week. For those with a thirst for truth and experience with God much can be learned from traditional Christianity.

I've always believed in God. Besides having enjoyed spiritual events I watch and study, and what I've learned about biology and the universe just didn't allow atheism to work for me. For instance, the DNA decoding system in a cell is made of ribosomes. The instructions to build the ribosome is on the DNA but you need the ribosome to decode the DNA. It's a circular process that had to have had an external start. One could also ponder intricate things like flagellum and the unlikelyhood of the fine-tuned universe, or contemplate the fractal nature of a forest or flowers. As a factually oriented engineer I've personally experienced physical manifestations from the unseen/spiritual world, and I have no doubt that it exists.

Yet I struggled with my connection to God. I would read things suggesting that Jesus should indwell my heart, but I didn't know what that meant or how to accomplish it.

Several years ago I had a meaningful talk with a good friend. He was both a dentist and a farmer and at the time in his early 60's. He'd served a mission and was an active believer in the church. One day on the farm an accident occurred rupturing a large propane tank. The tank spewed propane and he was horribly burned in the ensuing fire.

Laying alert in the hospital burn unit he was visited by heavenly beings who instructed him.

As a result he became relatively less active in the church. When I talked with him he told me he'd found that God isn't someone out there to pray to, but is found within. I discussed this with him several times and pondered it for months. The concept was so foreign to me so it didn't sit well, and I put it on the shelf, to be revisited later as I learned more.

Many of the quotes used herein were from Catholic / Orthodox sources, resulting not from bias but the Catholic Protestant split. Protestants didn't carry forward the institutions and traditions that encouraged these practices. Spirituality doesn't require Catholicism. These principles are universal. If however you're looking for religion, three are reviewed in the addendum.

Benefits

We're inundated with information, time has to be allocated, so why read this?

Higher Self verses lower self is a fundamental principle of spirituality, higher being the spiritual created by God, and lower the carnal self. All worldly, mental, and emotional problems are entirely problems of the lower self. To the extent that you move the center of your consciousness to your higher Self you'll be much less affected by things going on around you.

Detachment is a crucial principle. A lot of stress results from attachment to things and outcomes with people. As we operate more out of the higher self we become less attached, freeing us to enjoy life.

Man's ego causes great trouble in the world. As we stop focusing on our self and view the world and people in the world as, in a way part of us, we criticize less and love more.

If we progress along the path, we not only purify the lower self, but transcend it. By emptying ourselves of self we make room for God and enjoy a fuller relationship with Him regardless of "religious" belief.

It's also possible, if you're so inclined, to prepare for reception of ultimate unitive knowledge, not knowing *of* God, but *knowing* God.

Part 1: Spirituality

Spirituality is the art of pursuing union with God. It's composed of two things, mortification and mysticism. Mortification is the purification of the lower self. Mysticism is the process where the purified soul can, through prayer and contemplation, unite with God. Both parts are essential, neither stands on its own.

Basic characteristics of Spirituality:

- Everything is interconnected with a single underlying reality or source.
- There is a transcendent dimension beyond ordinary material existence.
- God can be immanent, reaching down and pervading the world.
- Ultimate reality is mysterious, partially beyond human comprehension and invites humility.
- Mortification is required to subdue the lower carnal self.
- Prayer and contemplation lead to awareness and direct experience of God.
- Faith is needed to see a reality that can't be proven fully by reason.

Religion East and West

Religion is the door through which people can *begin* their spiritual path towards God. Religion is good to the extent that it points people in the way, bad when it by itself, satiates a persons hunger for the Divine. There is a spiritual world in which God and angels exist, and also the material created world. Religions, brick and mortar churches, icons and ordinances exist in the material world of form only. Any intermediary human or organization between God and man exists in the material world and is external to God because their access is through the mind and senses, the lower self. Reaching God is an inward process, helped initially by outward entities, but ultimately inward through the higher Self.

The Chinese Taoist master and scholar Liu Yiming (b. 1737) in "Awakening to the Tao" wrote regarding not only religion, but spirituality:

"There are seventy-two schools of material alchemy, and three thousand six hundred aberrant practices. Since the blind lead the blind, they lose the right road; they block students and lead them into a pen."

Liu Yiming went on to say that it's not only the teachers and schools that are the problem, but the student himself, as pure motivation is essential:

"The reason the spiritual treasure does not appear to seekers is that they themselves will not allow it to do so... what a pity that false people spend their lives madly in sidetracks."

There's a fundamental difference between how eastern religions (such as Buddhism and Hinduism) and western religions view approaching God. Eastern religions generally see the experience as an inward journey through meditation, contemplation, and prayer. Western religions view it as outward expression through attending church and performing ordinances. Of course eastern religions can have outward ceremonies, and western Christians can individually have inward experiences. Eastern Orthodox and Catholicism have characteristics of both with a strong history of inward experience.

Every human soul is capable of achieving a profoundly deep connection with God. Aldous Huxley pulled it together in his book "The Perennial Philosophy". Huxley surveyed the worlds religions and identified their common thread. For a Christian it begins recognizing the indwelling of God, and progresses to a deep unitive experience occurring in the highest part of the soul.

Higher Self and Lower self

It's appropriate at this point to discuss the terms Higher Self and lower self.

Scripture as well as most religious traditions have traditionally recognized two components of the human soul, the spiritual, and the carnal.

The **Higher Self** is the soul's self-less, deepest, inner, God related aspect. The Higher Self is a creation of God and wholly dependent on God. Through it the soul can experience God. In fact, a part of the Higher Self has always been connected to God, and it's through that we can reach Him directly.

The **Lower self** is the ego centered part of the soul with its associated appetites and passions of the flesh as well as attachments to thought, emotion, and material items.

These terms weren't explicitly used in early Christianity but are used here because they are the best overall fit considering differences in terminology in varying faiths.

For the Higher Self they used concepts such as Spiritual, Nous (the highest seat of contemplative vision and direct knowledge), image of God, new man, and inner self which is God centered identity.

The Higher Self terms for Protestants would be similar to: new man, born again, renewed heart, inner man, spirit led, sanctified, spiritual, regenerated nature, man of faith.

For Catholics: Soul, spiritual soul, renewed soul in grace, renewed self, sanctified soul, higher faculties, inner man, interior man, image of God, and rational soul.

"The inward man is renewed day by day." (2 Cor 4:16)

“And have put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness.” (Eph 4:24)

Lower self for Protestants would be similar to: old self, the flesh, sinful nature, carnal self, unregenerate self, sinful, corrupt heart, and enslaved to sin.

For Catholics: the flesh, concupiscence, passions, lower faculties, sensus, appetitus, old self, disordered self, sensual self, exterior man.

"But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit." (Rom 8:9)

"Because the carnal mind is enmity against God" (Rom 8:7)

Early thinking is well described by St. Gregory of Nyssa in his book *On the Making of Man*:

"I think that by these words Holy Scripture conveys to us a great and lofty doctrine; and the doctrine is this. While two natures, the Divine and incorporeal nature and the irrational life of brutes are separated from each other as extremes, human nature is the mean between them: for in the compound nature of man we may behold a part of each of the natures I have mentioned."

St. John of the Cross was an early adopter of the term lower self.

"The soul gains so many benefits that it holds it to be a happy chance to have escaped from the bonds and restrictions of the senses of or its lower self, by means of this night aforesaid; and utters the present line, namely: Oh, happy chance!" (Dark Night of the Soul)

St. Augustine used the phrase lower self as well as inmost self to refer to the spiritual.

"To find my delight in your law as far as my inmost self was concerned was of no profit to me when a different law in my bodily members was warring against the law of my mind, imprisoning me under the law of sin which held sway in my lower self." (The Confessions)

In relatively modern times the concepts have been described using these pairs: true Self / false self and **higher Self** / **lower self**. Unfortunately higher Self has sometimes been associated with spiritualism which is a faulty connection.

“The lower self must die if the higher Self is to live; meekness and self-renunciation are the way.” (A.W. Tozer)

"That great thinker and ecstatic [Plotinus] said, that all human personality was thus two-fold: thus capable of correspondence with two orders of existence. The 'higher life' was always tending toward union with Reality; towards the gathering of itself up into One. The 'lower life,' framed for correspondence with the outward world of multiplicity, was always tending to fall downwards." (Practical Mysticism - Underwood)

Early Christians called the higher Self the 'eye of the soul,' as God is perceived through it.

Duality and Non-Duality (Oneness)

There's a concept called Oneness, adherents to which believe that we are God. It's an overly simplified and mostly incorrect concept. We are not God, and we don't have God in His entirety inside us. But we do have within us a common ground with God, although we maintain our individuality as souls. At the moment of birth we enter the world of duality, where we recognize our separateness. Yet the soul feels a connection with, and a longing for God, and wants to be united.

Where can that union take place? Jesus said "behold, the kingdom of God is within you."

"Now though the Scripture nowhere gives this Direction in these very Words, yet, since it is said in Scripture, that God dwelleth not in Temples made with Hands, but in the Temple of our Hearts, since the Kingdom of God is said to be within us, and not to come with outward Observation, but to be in us, as a secret, living Seed of the incorruptible Word; since our Hearts is our whole Life, and we are said to live, and move, and have our Being in God, it is directly telling us that we are to turn inwards, if we would turn to, and find God." (The Works of the Reverend William Law)

The connection with the Father isn't something that occurs in a physical sense but can happen two ways within us. First and most essentially it occurs through the indwelling Holy Spirit. Second, for some it can occur in the innermost and highest part of our soul, while we're still mortal. The soul's progression towards this however necessitates work both inward and outward.

We're born into the physical world for a reason, to master and cleanse our soul, and to experience and master the joys, fears, and tendencies of the physical world. If this wasn't so, it could all have been done without bodies in a spiritual realm.

Interior vs Exterior

The physical world and spiritual world are sharply separated. We live almost our entire lives in the physical, with only fleeting glimpses of the spiritual. The physical world, though beautiful at times, has negative aspects of ego, pride, possessions, and gaining or maintaining the power needed to retain these.

Unless we purposely take time for prayer and meditation, all of our activity in the phenomenal (physical) world draws us away from the spiritual. Spirituality requires purposely taking a path which improves the soul and reaches towards God.

The inward Path is precisely that. Everything other than it, including religion is outward and not central to truly experiencing God in the deepest mystical sense. The mind is external because it's the interface with the physical, which is why the mind cannot ultimately bring you to God. The God connection occurs at the highest level of the soul, above the mind.

Religion can help you get on the Path by providing structure. A good religion, used as a base, can give you a start, but it's a belief system, and it's wise to examine your beliefs. Religion is always external to spirit and God.

Society is moving rapidly from the spiritual to the physical with more and more reliance on the lower self. This began slowly when books replaced the memorization of scripture and oral traditions. Each step in technology is a further crutch, distancing the mind and soul from it's spiritual roots, and taking us further into the exterior world of the senses.

Part 2: Danger of the self

The singular most damaging thing to spirituality is self, because being full of self and selfish issues we have little space for God. I'm sorry if this notion is offensive. If it is the discussion is probably needed.

The Lower self in Modern Times

The lower self seeks attention by achieving (transitory) beauty and acquiring possessions. "Keeping up with the Joneses" has become, through modern technology, keeping up with hundreds of images seen throughout the day of bodies, fashions, makeup, food, cars, vacations, homes and technology. The lower self, despite being the domain of the mind, is often more the domain of emotion. Saturated with, and responding to advertising, the importance of the (lower) self has grown to gargantuan proportions. Inflated egos develop if one is doing well, deflated egos if not. Both damage the soul.

Society transformed to allow people to satisfy these vanities, whether through direct purchase, or worse through debt which further threatens the ego and leads to a larger cycle of purchase and debt. What would the son of King David thought? "Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity!" (Eccl 1:2)

Words for the lower self today are: individual, self, self reliant, self righteous, self esteem, self aggrandizing, self indulgence, self absorbed, self loathing, victim, genius, egocentric, self pity, self delusion, myself, self conscious, self deprecation, 'i'dentity, self destructive, himself, and herself.

All of these through repetition over years confirms to the mind the importance of self, and that importance equals separation from God. Words dealing with the lower self far outnumber words associated with the higher Self or spirit level. Even New Age terms such as higher consciousness typically pertain to thought related processes of the lower self.

Part 3: Mortification

Origin of the word Mortification

The term "mortification" (Latin mortificare, "death") comes from classical Latin and means "making dead." What are we making dead? All characteristics of the lower or carnal self. Mortification is used because most historical writers use the term and it's most correct technically. Contemporary synonyms are: self-discipline, self-denial and asceticism.

Mortification is worked on in parallel with prayer, but must mostly be completed before the soul is ready for contemplation.

Awakening of the Soul

In our hyper materialistic world, what would cause a person to seek a spiritual path and begin the practice of mortification?

Awakening **of** the soul is something that happens to you. You didn't ask for it. How could you have asked for it, if you didn't know what it was? Many, most unfortunately, never experience it.

More than a religious experience, it's viewing life beyond self, life within a much larger whole. It's the emergence of a deep thirst for the Divine. While it may appear to occur suddenly it likely follows a long period of spiritual restlessness, searching, and stress. Once realized it marks an abrupt change in how you view reality.

"We might describe it as a sudden, intense, and joyous perception of God immanent in the universe; of the Divine beauty and unutterable power and splendor of that larger life in which the individual is immersed, and of a new life to be lived." (Underwood)

As magnificent as the outward manifestations can be, it's the hope of inward personal association with God that will stir your soul and motivate you towards purification. For a Latter Day Saint it also includes that moment when you transition from thinking about a God on a foreign planet to the God reachable within your soul, the God imminent in the world.

Relax the mind and *let* it happen.

Practice of Mortification

Purification of the Lower self

"You love the self – it's lit in you a fire
Of nagging lust, insatiable desire,
A blaze that burns your vigor, wastes your heart,
Leaving infirmity in every part –
Consuming all your strength, till deaf and blind
You're old, forgetful, rambling in your mind."
(Sufi - The Conference of Birds)

With awakening comes a clear view of the world, and the need for deeper introspection. The soul begins to realize the extent of the gulf between itself and God.

What is your lower self? All of your thoughts, your *personality*, impulses, beliefs, emotions, desires, hatreds, and anything related to the senses. People believe they are these things and are afraid of losing *themselves*, but they *should* lose the false lower self, as these personal attributes prevent them from seeing who they really are, like fog on a window.

The soul must be purged of anything impure that stands between it and God, just as dross floating to the top of molten metal is discarded. In *refining*, the metal is first melted, with flux added to aid in the separation of dross. In spiritual matters, work and trials melt the lower self, to which God adds His grace as flux so the spiritual dross can be separated and discarded, concentrating our souls more and more in the higher Self.

Work on your flaws one at a time until each is completely conquered, then move to the next. Like peeling an onion they can be discovered and repaired layer by layer. It's better to completely cure one flaw than to partially work on four at a time.

Purification of the ego is needed in the lower self before it's possible to transcend to the higher Self. The process of spiritual cleansing can last a long time, even years, as it will, layer by layer, expose flaws hidden over a lifetime. Testing is also part of the process, and failed tests will set one back temporarily as they are repeated.

Repentance (Metanoia)

In both a transformative injunction and beautiful forecast Jesus said:

"Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." (Matt 4:17)

Metanoia is the Greek word for repentance, a combination of the words meta (beyond) and nous (mind). Its meaning is deeper than the usual definition of repent, that of turning from a particular sin. Since mind is a function of the lower self God is asking us to go beyond that to functioning in the higher spiritual Self. For Christian mystics repentance is an essential part of the process of purifying the lower self prior to transcension to the higher Self.

Confession and external work are more a function of the believers particular religious tradition. Repentance is not about external penance or a ritual act. The real work must be done internally. Prayer and contemplation help to discover deep issues that require work.

Repentance requires humility to see yourself as you are. It's a continuous process over a lifetime, addressing many issues. It shouldn't be viewed as a singular event. Most of all it's discarding your ego and giving yourself entirely over to God in all aspects of living.

"We will continue to shed layers of conditioning together with our compulsive thought patterns. At unexpected moments of the day, we will suddenly become aware of aspects of our corrupted condition that had previously been hidden from us." (Christ the Eternal Tao - Damascene)

Repentance is not a singular act but an ongoing state through which deeper spiritual problems will be exposed, and cleansed.

As cleansing goes on it's important to replace the bad with good.

"When the unclean spirit is gone out of a man, he walketh through dry places, seeking rest; and finding none, he saith, I will return unto my house whence I came out. And when he cometh, he findeth it swept and garnished. Then goeth he, and taketh to him seven other spirits more wicked than himself; and they enter in, and dwell there; and the last state of that man is worse than the first." (Luke 11:24-26)

Ego, Pride & Humility

When a soul enters the material world, the world of polarity between spirit and matter, it identifies with thought rather than spirit and the ego is born with a separate identity, the false lower self. Separation of the lower self from God was necessary to permit growth but without God's closeness the ego lives in fear because unconsciously it knows that it's a false self. It does what it can to protect it's illusory existence. Just think about daily life and how people act. "I've done great things, I'm smarter than most, I'm powerful, or I'm humble," are examples of the 'I'ness that affects us. The ego wants to keep it's identity, to feel important at least to itself.

Man's ego is the source of great trouble in the world. We need to absolutely know ourselves, and who we are not. We must be watchful. In spiritual matters having a large ego is fatal.

Ultimate progression isn't possible until we relinquish the separate lower self. Our ego cannot be conquered by thought or by will of the ego itself. Only to the degree that the lower self has been purified can it be transcended.

Do we have a large ego because of possessions, titles, education, occupation, or money? Is that ego keeping us from waiting on God?

The goal is to get rid of, to mortify, all impure aspects of the lower self and get rid of ego so the higher Self is open to unitive knowledge of God.

"To think of oneself as nothing, and always to think well and highly of others is the best and most perfect wisdom. If you have wealth, do not glory in it, nor in friends because they are powerful, but in God Who gives all things and Who desires above all to give Himself. Do not boast of personal stature or of physical beauty, qualities which are marred and destroyed by a little sickness. Do not take pride in your talent or ability, lest you displease God to Whom belongs all the natural gifts that you have." - (The Imitation of Christ - Kempis)

Being proud reflects the ego's attempt to boost itself. A proud person is actually weak as he depends on being better than others for self esteem.

It's best not to say "Thank You" to a compliment as saying thank you acknowledges the compliment as being towards one's self. Being 'pleased' is a healthier way of acknowledging accomplishments. Pride can also be dangerous.

"Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall." (Prov 16:18)

Pride resulting from feeling superior to others is wrong. The easiest way to not put yourself above others is to not think about yourself at all when thinking of others.

"If there is good in you, see more good in others, so that you may remain humble. It does no harm to esteem yourself less than anyone else, but it is very harmful to think yourself better than even one. The humble live in continuous peace, while in the hearts of the proud are envy and frequent anger." (The Imitation of Christ - Kempis)

Progress on the Path will, if you're not cautious, strengthen your ego because of your greater knowledge compared to others, but ultimately the knowledge you've received has been given to you as a gift.

Charismatic teachers while teaching spiritual things can boost your ego and make you feel you're doing a great job at learning. A good teacher will instead give you exercises, or lead you to situations, where humility is learned.

Humility should be prayed for, and situations leading to it patiently suffered. It's an essential component of the Path. All spiritual masters of every age were humble, and all knew themselves to be nothing (no self). In other words, they had transcended the lower self.

A good way to acquire humility is to be sufficiently humiliated.

"I once saw a yogi prancing about and barking like a dog in the middle of a bazaar. He was not begging. I asked what on earth he was doing that for, and was informed that he was a holy man who was doing this as part of his training [sadhana] for overcoming self-esteem. He could not have chosen a better means in India, where the dog is despised. Everyone took the yogi's antics as a matter of course." (Boy and the Brothers - Puri)

The Book 'After the Ecstasy, the Laundry: How the Heart Grows Wise on the Spiritual Path' says a Buddhist will often bow forward with hands in prayer form when meeting someone. They do this to acknowledge that the other human is a noble soul, having had a lifetime of struggle. This simple gesture, even if done mentally, comes naturally when we recognize that we're all connected at the level of the Divine Ground and all share the human condition.

Attachments - Non-Attachment

To the extent that your lower self is insecure or incomplete your ego will form attachments because attachments bring comfort. Being attached to people isn't bad as long as it stems from pure love, without expectations. Expectations of people is a destructive form of attachment.

Having material things isn't intrinsically wrong, but love of them can be. Whenever attachment to an item becomes more important than another human being or God, it's problematic.

The separation you feel from God is related to your ego being attached to anything other than God.

We can be attached to emotions. We dwell on sorrow, experience the rush of a fast car, or gamble for thrill. We can be attached to our thoughts or ideas and to stories we tell ourselves, all of which solidify in our minds as we have sunk cost in them. Confirmation bias hampers rational thought. Are we willing to give up the cherished but wrong ideas we're so attached to?

Cleansing and Putting Away Outward Things

When your soul awakens and desires the fullness of God, it goes through regeneration shifting from the lower self to the higher Self. This process is usually hard because of the dross most of us have.

Mortification describes putting to death inordinate bodily passions, vices, and the old self. It includes weakening the dominance of lower self appetites, sensual desires, pride, and attachments. Putting away outward things through mortification is a step on the Path, but not the end.

"The first step is for the soul to put away outward things and look within so as to know its own real interest. In the next step the soul must add the contemplation of God. The third step is that, ceasing from a restless self contemplation, the soul begins to dwell upon God instead, and by degrees forgets itself in Him." (Christian Perfection - Fenelon)

Things cleansed in mortification are sometimes known as the 7 deadly sins:

Lust: Any form of unbridled desire for people or money.

Gluttony: Overindulgence of anything in excess, particularly food.

Greed: An inordinate desire for more than what one needs.

Sloth: Avoiding spiritual, mental, or physical responsibilities.

Wrath: Anger, rage or hatred.

Envy: Covetousness towards the possessions or qualities of another.

Pride: Ego driven, pride is the worst of the sins as it can lead to every other vice.

The soul needs to rid itself of everything not in harmony with God, every false belief, every evil desire, every blotch. This requires knowing ourselves and honestly acknowledging our flawed nature. Until we're honest about ourselves our thoughts about every subject will be distorted and we won't clearly see what we need to work on.

The lower self is so centered on the material world that it's almost incapable of perceiving the higher realms as it's tuned to the illusions of the senses. In duality we work hard to preserve our fake personal identity. Most everything in modern life takes us away from God and ultimate reality. Our idols are our cars, homes, clothes, bank accounts, and credit ratings. The soul must detach from all of these outer things.

"Vain is the man who puts his trust in men, in created things. Do not be ashamed to serve others for the love of Jesus Christ and to seem poor in this world. Do not be self-sufficient but place your trust in God. Do what lies in your power and God will aid your good will. Put no trust in your own learning nor in the cunning of any man, but rather in the grace of God Who helps the humble and humbles the proud. " (Imitation of Christ - Kempis)

Death of the Lower self

If elements of me, mine, are still present then the ego is still present, and purification is not complete. The soul must detach from them, as they are part of the world of duality. Focus on God and on the intimate unitive knowledge possible with Him.

Jesus was speaking of the higher Self when he said "Let your heart not be troubled." Your upper Self, the important part of your soul, is beyond reach of the world and can't be damaged if you remain detached from whatever happens in the material world. It's your lower self ego that gets damaged from external sources, not your upper Self. So, to avoid pain, detach from things, and expectations of people. To transcend to God, detach.

We truly own nothing in this world, we are stewards, and share with God the rest of His creation.

"It is only when we have renounced our preoccupation with 'I,' 'me,' 'mine' that we can truly possess the world in which we live. Everything is ours, provided that we regard nothing as our property. And not only is everything ours; it is also everybody else's." (Huxley)

The lower self is not only about physical things. Everything not spirit falls into the realm of the lower self and this includes thoughts.

Attachment to intellectual thoughts and positions is problematic as they are connected to the ego. Even images and icons, while helpful if used to focus on God, can be detrimental if too connected to the ego.

"Some men love knowledge and discernment as the best and most excellent of all things. Behold, then knowledge and discernment come to be loved more than that which is discerned; for the false natural light loveth its knowledge and powers, which are itself, more than what is known." (Theologia Germanica)

The gospels showed Jesus in a variety of settings but hardly ever revealed Him as having a personal self. He, as well as great spiritual masters had only two aims, unitive knowledge of God, and serving others.

The hardest step on the path is allowing the lower personal self to die, but there's no room in the soul for God if we are filled with self. Emptying ourselves makes room for God. The illusory lower, personal self is centered on the physical, sensual parts of existence. It can never be spiritual so it must be purified then transcended.

"If anyone feels his heart revolted by such entire sacrifice of the ego to him who has created us, I deplore his blindness. I feel badly to see him the slave of himself, and I pray God to deliver him from himself by teaching him to love without self-interest." (Christian Perfection - Francois Fenelon)

The impure ego of the lower self cannot act against itself, but it can be purified and finally transcended. Spirituality exists in the higher Self. Religion, or any spirituality centered in the thoughts and emotions of the lower self are ineffective.

In meditation and prayer, it's hard to escape what can be called monkey mind, that constant mental chatter that creeps in as a distraction. Rather than using the mind to try to quiet the mind a better way is to not entertain thoughts as they come. Don't pay attention to them. The same applies to getting rid of the ego. The ego will not allow itself to be disabled by mental force. Best to just give it no time or energy, as fighting ego only makes it stronger. Love your neighbors, drop attachments to things, and work on purifying the lower self.

While direct communion with the Father occurs in the higher Self, the God's influence is felt by the lower self through the Holy Ghost (Spirit), through God's angels, and through God acting through man. Thus, while we need to work on purifying ourselves, we are always assisted by God. Common prayers from the lower self raise our spirituality, contemplation in the higher Self connects us with God.

The mortified soul is a simple soul. It's no longer weighed down with the things of the world. Time is in the realm of the lower self. The higher Self isn't concerned about the past, or the future.

"But I say that mortification should not be our principal exercise; nor should we prescribe ourselves such and such austerities, but follow simply and merely the internal attractions of grace; and being possessed and occupied with the Divine Presence (without thinking particularly on mortification) God will enable us to perform every species of it; and most assuredly He will give no relaxation to those who abide faithful in their abandonment to Him, until He has mortified in them everything that remains to be mortified. We have only then to continue steadfast in the utmost attention to God, and all things will be rightly performed."
(Short and Easy Method of Prayer - Guyon)

The soul must detach from ego-centered achievements, roles, feelings, and opinions. It can then, in the Divine ground realize union with God. This involves transcending the personal ego and its limited self-concerns.

Mortification, or the dying of self does not imply that a person loses individuality or existence. Individuality survives, but instead of being centered in the lower self, it is grounded in the Divine higher Self. The soul still acts independently but sees things from God's perspective rather than the worlds. It finds happiness in being freed from the world.

Inner poverty implies openness and emptiness so God can work within. All actions are performed for God, not through self-interest. The true individuality that emerges is within the Divine life.

Part 4: The Spiritual Path

Prayer

Prayer is spiritual / metaphysical action, and was practiced prior to the establishment of any religion. Properly understood it is the expressed desire to raise one's soul toward the Divine.

The Greek ἀναλήψις (*analēpsis*) describes "taking up" or "ascent," the soul's ascent or elevation of lower desire into higher love.

The English word sublime means an elevated, lofty, beautiful thought.

In physics and chemistry sublimate describes the process of a substance converting from a solid phase to a gas phase. The best known example is water, which can sublimate directly from ice to water vapor without the intermediate liquid phase. The ice is giving part of itself to the gas.

In human terms, sublimation is devoting and giving a part of yourself to a principle, a person, or an entity. It's taking a piece of yourself and feeding it to something else.

In a negative sense we sublimate by giving part of ourselves to an endless number of distractions in life. Giving in to evil, one little piece at a time, is also a process of sublimation.

Prayer is the expressed desire to sublimate our thoughts to the Divine. Prayer with uplifted hands is symbolic of the desired spiritual sublimation where the soul is willing to sacrifice the lower physical self to achieve Divine union. It's allowing increasingly more parts of your Self to float up, or sublimate towards the Divine.

Prayer is essential in purifying the heart. When we pray we lay our whole heart and all of our failures before God, trusting that He will fully understand and forgive. It's an intimate sharing between friends and a time to be alone with He Who loves us.

Pray, with a contrite heart, with knowledge of your deeply seated faults, and a desire to improve. Pray to know Gods will. Pray to know what to pray for. God will answer prayers of a timeless spiritual nature, and sometimes those of a temporal nature. One should not pray for things one does not truly need.

Intensely spiritual people may begin vocal prayer without intentionally formulating what they want to discuss because they constantly carry a prayer in their heart, and vocalizing is just an extension. Many of us though, have jumped into a prayer with no idea about what we wanted to pray, saying things that seemed good, perhaps things that covered our immediate friends, relatives or food. Often this happens when we're asked to pray when our minds have been somewhere else. Public performative prayer, unless we have a prayer in our heart, likely rises no higher than the ceiling.

If we looked forward to meeting with a head of state, wouldn't we learn as much about the person as we could, and prepare our minds with what we wanted to discuss? Why not with God?

"When you approach God then, try to think and realize Whom you are about to address and continue to do so while you are addressing Him. If we had a thousand lives, we should never fully understand how this Lord merits, and before Whom even the angels tremble. He orders all things and He can do all things: with Him to will is to perform." (The Way of Perfection - St Teresa de Avila)

Prayer should happen often while ignoring all distractions.

"For he prays too little, who is accustomed only to pray at the times when he bends his knees. But he never prays, who even while on his bended knees is distracted by all kinds of wanderings of heart... For at the time of its prayers the mind cannot help being affected by its previous condition, and while it is praying, will be either transported to things heavenly, or dragged down to earthly things by those thoughts in which it had been lingering before prayer." (The Conferences Of John Cassian)

"When you pray, guard your memory strongly so that it does not present you with its own passions, but instead moves you toward knowledge of the service - for by nature the mind is too easily pillaged by the memory at the time of prayer." (Early Church Fathers - Evagrius Ponticus)

Pursuit of the spiritual Path will eventually, while in contemplation, lead to a state of intuition, which is different than simply emptying the mind and letting it drift while in prayer.

"Some people begin to think it their duty to cultivate a kind of pious imbecility. There is a notion in the air that when man turns to God he ought to leave his brains behind him... But those whose feet are still firmly planted upon earth gain nothing by anticipating this moment; they will not attain to spiritual intuition by the mere annihilation of their intelligence. We cannot hope to imitate the crystalline simplicity of the saints; a simplicity which is the result, not of any deliberate neglect of reason, but of clearest vision, of intensest trust, of most ardent love." (The Essentials of Mysticism - Underwood)

On the other hand, over intellectualizing produces the opposite problem. We can think too much.

If possible, considering health, age and experience, a person may move from vocal prayer to mental prayer, or do both.

"There is no thing that can compare to the grace of mental prayer! Angels do not have sensible voices, but mentally they offer up constant praise to God. This is their whole occupation; their entire life is dedicated to this. And you too, brother, when you enter your closet and shut the door, i.e. when your mind no longer wanders to and fro, but enters the inner recesses of your heart, and your senses are locked up and kept away from the things of the world, and in this manner you always pray, then you are like the holy angels." (St. Gregory Palamas)

Augustine Baker in his work "Directions for the Prayer of Contemplation" divided spiritual life into three parts:

The Purgative way, in which all sinful defects are purged out of the soul.
The Illuminative way, by which divine virtues and graces are introduced.
The Unitive way, where a soul attains a union with God through contemplation.

God hears the humble and loving, and responds by opening spiritual and physical opportunities.

As a result of our prayer God helps us with repentance and cleansing of the lower self. Continued prayer then helps to illuminate our mind and spirit. Finally, through contemplation we may be blessed with unitive knowledge.

Watchfulness

Repentance and watchfulness are interlinked. In order to be watchful you need to know yourself, especially your vulnerabilities, which results from the inward searching during repentance.

Maintaining a state of repentance requires vigilance, attention and watchfulness. The Greek word γνῶση (gnósē) means watchfulness, but also vigilance.

Jesus put a high priority on being watchful:

"Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." (Matt 26:41)

"Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come." (Matt 24:42)

Peter and Paul emphasized watchfulness:

"Be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer." (1 Pet 4:7)

"Watch ye, stand fast in the faith" (1 Cor 16:13)

Awareness is important. Society is more sensually than spiritually oriented. What we're presented with on a daily basis requires watchfulness to hold it off.

Regarding attacks by the adversary:

"Man cannot prevent provocations from assailing him; what does lie in his power, however, is to maintain constant watchfulness (q.v.) and so to reject each provocation as soon as it emerges into his consciousness." (Philokalia Glossary)

In the forth volume of the Philokalia, St. Symeon states that watchfulness protects prayer:

"Vigilance first goes on ahead like a scout and engages sin in combat. Prayer then follows afterwards, and instantly destroys and exterminates all the evil thoughts... By means of vigilance we keep prayer pure."

Silence

Silencing the mind is of utmost importance.

"The Lord is in His Holy Temple, let all the earth keep silence before him" (Hab 2: 20). Inward silence is absolutely indispensable, because the Word is essential and eternal, and necessarily requires dispositions in the soul in some degree correspondent to His nature, as a capacity for the reception of Himself... when He would speak within us, requires the most silent attention to His all-quickening and efficacious voice." (Short and Easy Method of Prayer - Guyon)

It's easier to commune with God while alone.

"Seek a suitable time for leisure and meditate often on the favors of God. Leave curiosities alone. Read such matters as bring sorrow to the heart rather than occupation to the mind. If you withdraw yourself from unnecessary talking and idle running about, from listening to gossip and rumors, you will find enough time that is suitable for holy meditation. Very many great saints avoided the company of men wherever possible and chose to serve God in retirement. 'As often as I have been among men,' said one writer, 'I have returned less a man.'" (Imitation of Christ - Kempis)

Grace

Practically the only time I heard the word in any context was in old movies where people "said grace" before dinner, which seems a distortion because grace is not something you say, but something you receive.

Grace is an undeserved gift given by God. It's not a reward for obedience or moral living. It originates from Divine love and helps engender a better relationship with God. Grace embodies God's readiness to forgive and transform despite our shortcomings. It is a gift that radically transforms you as the receiver.

No one escapes life's difficulties. We all have periods of hardship, some worse than others but we also have heavenly helpers who are personally interested in each of us.

God's grace is an essential part of contemplation. We cannot make the final approach to God simply through our own efforts. We need to do the preparatory work through mortification and prayer, but final access is granted only by the grace of God.

Faith and Sacrifice

Faith has many meanings. If a righteous leader can be found in religion or government, it's appropriate to have faith that he will do the right thing. We likely have faith that our car will take us to where we want to go and that the sun will come up.

Religious faith is exemplified by this passage for many in Christianity:

"For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works" (Eph 2:8-9)

About this Huxley said:

"To the danger that faith in the doctrine of justification by faith may serve as an excuse for and even an invitation to sin must be added another danger, namely, that the faith which is supposed to save may be faith in propositions not merely unverifiable, but repugnant to reason and the moral sense, and entirely at variance with the findings of those who have fulfilled the conditions of spiritual insight into the Nature of Things." (Perennial Philosophy - Huxley)

Foundational faith is necessary for spiritual growth. One must have faith that God exists, and is approachable, faith that He loves us, and that He sustains our life. Faith in anything other than God, such as religious doctrine is simply belief.

Doubts will come and go, especially if faith stems from intellect. Testing can come at any time, but the most severe tests accompany our having doubt, and doubt can last for a long time. Similar to our being on earth, and not constantly in God's presence, His temporary withdrawal enables us to honestly take the tests of mortality, but He has not forgotten us.

Sacrifice is an integral requirement. Sacred is the root word of sacrifice, and sacrifice is to offer up to God, to make sacred. You must be willing to give everything up, and will in fact have to give up your illusory lower self as you transcend towards the higher, still individual but not ego centered, Self. Keep what you actually need and give up the rest. Give up everything that isn't God in order to make room for God.

Charity and Service

Charity is selfless love, and compassionate giving towards others. It's God's love flowing through us to the recipient. It is both intention and action.

"And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing. Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up." (1 Cor. 13:2-4)

Charity is love that doesn't depend on the response of the recipient, acknowledgment (do it anonymously), or reciprocation, as these result from self love instead of charity. Selfless charity brings us closer to others and to God.

"Charity is a bond of love, in which we are drawn up to God, and through which we renounce ourselves, and whereby we are united with God and God is united with us. But natural love turns back towards itself, and towards its own profit, and ever abides alone. Nevertheless, in its outward works, natural love is as like unto charity as two hairs from the same head; but the intentions are different. For the good man always seeks and means and desires, with an aspiring heart, to glorify God; but in natural love a man has always himself and his own profit in mind." (Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage - St. John of Ruysbroeck)

The lower self, being insecure, desires recognition for serving others or serves on a transactional basis with hopes of return. The higher Self serves others without any expectation whatsoever. Service increases our love for others, and the recipient feels the unselfish love offered. Resentful service damages the soul. Just as a pure soul allows God to be seen in ones continence, service should be God's love flowing through the giver to the recipient.

"It is the Spirit that maketh the work perfect, and acceptable in the sight of God. All that a man undertaketh and doeth in faith, he doth in the spirit of God, which Spirit of God doth cooperate in the work, and then it is acceptable to God. " (Way to Christ - Jacob Boehme)

God is immanent in the people we serve.

"In everyone who is poor, oppressed, or sick, it is Christ who encounters us, asking - through this abasement - for our help. In the outstretched hand of the poor is the outstretched hand of Christ; in the faintness of his voice we hear the faint voice of Christ." The Experience of God - Staniloae)

Part 5: The Holy Spirit

The foremost benefit of working on the lower self and following the spiritual path is increased companionship of the Holy Spirit. It's through the Spirit, the still small voice, that God communicates with man. As we improve the lower self the Spirit becomes more and more a part of our inner life.

Teacher and Witness

John Owen discusses the Holy Spirit in detail in his book *Communion with God*, describing some of It's attributes. The Spirit teaches, and brings into remembrance spiritual principles and scripture. The Spirit glorifies Christ. The Holy Spirit sheds God's love on us.

"What it indicates is that the Comforter gives a sweet and plentiful evidence and persuasion of the love of God to us. It is such that the soul is taken, delighted, and satiated with it. This is his work, and he does it effectually." (Communion with God - John Owen)

The Spirit bears witness to us that we are sons and daughters of God and anoints us, that we too can be made kings, priests, and prophets to God.

It's worth pondering that the Holy Spirit conveys truth more effectively directly to our heart, than Christ Himself did personally to his disciples.

"While he was with them, the heavenly promises Christ gave them had little effect on their hearts! When the Spirit came, he made all things full of joy for them! This unique work, which belonged to the Spirit by virtue of his office, was reserved for him so that he too might be glorified. His work to the end of the world is to bring the promises of Christ to our minds and hearts. He gives us their comfort, joy, and sweetness, far beyond what the disciples experienced when Christ spoke the promises to them in person. Their gracious influence was being restrained, so that the dispensation of the Spirit might be glorified." (Communion with God - John Owen)

The grace of God is bright as perceived through the Spirit.

"The grace of God in a soul is like a candle in a lantern or in a glass vessel; for it enlightens, and brightens, and shines through, the vessel, that is, the righteous man. And it manifests itself to the man who has it within him, if he be observant of himself. And it manifests itself through him, to other men, in virtues and in good example. This flash of divine grace inwardly stirs and moves a man with swiftness, and this swift movement is the first thing which makes us see." (Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage - St. John of Ruysbroeck.pdf page 66)

And the Spirit illuminates and also reveals.

"Again, I feel that by the visitation of the Holy Spirit I have gained purpose of soul, steadfastness of thought, keenness of heart, together with an ineffable joy and transport of mind, and in the exuberance of spiritual feelings I have perceived by a sudden illumination from the Lord an abounding revelation of most holy ideas which were formerly altogether hidden from me." (The_Conferences_Of_John_Cassian,_EN.pdf page 197)

Perception of the Holy Spirit depends on the person and openness.

"So God is often hidden when at work upon a human soul, awakening, convicting, converting; a good work going on and not known to be a divine working. God's indwelling is hidden behind second causes. His real presence with his own may be easily overlooked; depends, in the perception of it, upon spiritual delicacy, sensitiveness, faith." (The Divine Indwelling - Edmund Brown)

"The Spirit's work within is usually gentle and delicate; is made only in the responsive and sympathetic soul, as we make precious communications only to those who value them." (The Divine Indwelling)

"It is a Light Within which illumines the face of God and casts new shadows and new glories upon the face of men. It is a seed stirring to life if we do not choke it. It is the Shekinah of the soul, the Presence in the midst. Here is the slumbering Christ, stirring to be awakened, to become the soul we clothe in earthly form and action. And He is within us all... The Living Christ within us is the initiator and we are the responders." (The Light Within - Thomas Kelly)

It's a gradual process.

"The soul that is faithful in the exercise of love and adherence to God above described, is astonished to feel Him gradually taking possession of their whole being: it now enjoys a continual sense of that Presence, which is become as it were natural to it; and this, as well as

prayer, is the result of habit. The soul feels an unusual serenity gradually being diffused throughout all its faculties; and silence now wholly constitutes its prayer; whilst God communicates an intuitive love, which is the beginning of ineffable blessedness." (Short and Easy Method of Prayer - Madam Guyon.pdf page 21)

"I was once asked why good folk feel so happy with God and are so zealous to serve Him. I replied by saying it was because they had tasted God, and it would be strange indeed if the soul that had once tasted and tried God could stomach anything else. One saint says that the soul that has tasted God finds all things that are not God repugnant and stinking." (The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart)

Inviting the Spirit

The presence of the Holy Spirit within us increases as we purify the lower self.

"If I love the flesh, my imagination is often taken up with the things of the flesh. If I love the spirit, I delight to think of spiritual things. For whatsoever things I love, of the same willingly speak and hear, and carry home with me the images of them. But blessed is the man, who for thee, O Lord, lets go all things created: who offers violence to his nature; and through fervour of spirit crucifies the lusts of the flesh: that so his conscience being cleared up, he may offer to thee pure prayer." (The-following-of-christ.pdf page 233)

"For according to the manner and way in which the Spirit of God urges, and drives, and draws, and streams into us, and stirs us; in this way we must go out and progress in our inward practices, if we are to become perfect. But if we withstand the Spirit of God by a life that does not accord with it, we lose that inward urge, and then the virtues will depart from us." (Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage - St. John of Ruysbroeck.pdf page 69)

Part 6: Mysticism

Christian Mysticism

Elements of mysticism can be found within many religious traditions but Christian Mysticism represents the highest spiritual path.

"For ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." (2 Cor 6:16)

"Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me." (Gal 2:20)

"Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?" (1 Cor 3:16)

Christian Mysticism is the emphasis within Christianity of direct, experiential union with God through prayer, contemplation, and inner transformation. It is the ultimate indwelling of God spoken of in the scriptures.

"From being regarded, whether critically or favorably, as a byway of religion, it is now more and more generally accepted by theologians, philosophers and psychologists, as representing

in its intensive form the essential religious experience of man." (Mysticism - A Study - Underwood)

Mysticism is not based on New Age spirituality. Experiences in Christian Mysticism date back to the 1st century with John and Paul, followed by the Desert Fathers, Augustine of Hippo (354-430), Gregory of Nyssa (335-395) and many others. Mysticism itself is decentralized with no hierarchical structure and no need for authority. Although it's historically been practiced by members of Christian faiths it does not depend on those associations.

Everything in Christian Mysticism centers on a relationship with God. In a way it is work based, meaning work you must do within your soul, enabled by the grace God gives you through faith and Christ's atonement.

History of Mysticism

Knowing God is knowing the ultimate truth.

"Great mystics, such as Plotinus, write to let us know that they have actually known the ultimate Truth, experienced it, 'seen' It, with a subtle sight that is directed inward; and that we too following upon them, attending to their directions, we too may obtain that direct knowing of whence we came, and who we truly are." (Plotinus: The Origin of Western Mysticism S. Abhayananda)

Mystics are found both inside and outside Christianity. In his eBook "The Greatest Achievement in Life" R.D. Krumpos identifies 17 mystics in Judaism, 20 in Christianity, 19 in Islam, 12 in Hinduism, and 20 in Buddhism. Most of these had their experiences between the 3rd and 16th century.

Vedic practitioners (1200-600 BCE) identified Brahman (God), Ātman (the true or higher Self), and jīva, ahaṁkāra, manas, and buddhi, (the desires, ego, mind and body of the lower self). These important concepts are common to all later expressions of the Perennial Philosophy.

"The wise one [i.e. the soul, the atman, the self] is not born, nor dies. This one has not come from anywhere, has not become anyone. Unborn, constant, eternal, primeval, this one is not slain when the body is slain." (112 Upanishads Sanskrit Text)

"Higher than the senses are the objects of sense. Higher than the objects of sense is the mind (manas); and higher than the mind is the intellect (buddhi). Higher than the intellect is the Great Self (Atman)." (Upanishads)

"All this is guided by intelligence, is based on intelligence. The world is guided by intelligence. Brahma is intelligence. So [the person], having ascended aloft from this world with that intelligent Self (Atman), obtained all desires in heavenly world and became immortal." (Upanishads)

"Lord Brahma further added that [man] should abandon entirely the vices like sensuality, anger, happiness, gloom, fury, greed, attachment, ego, envy, desire." (Upanishads)

After the Vedics, Buddhism, Jainism and Hindu each had their own mysticism.

Mystic experiences weren't as common in Old Testament times because ancient Israelite religion prioritized prophetic, legal, and communal worship forms, while Vedic culture fostered discussion and writing about inward experience.

In the West, the classical Greco-Roman world (500 BCE to 500 CE) emphasized rational philosophy (Platonism, Stoicism) and public religion rather than personal mystical experience, however Neoplatonists, like Plotinus placed emphasis on personal experiential union with the divine. Eventually the monastic movement that nurtured mysticism began in the Early Middle Ages (6th–9th centuries). Any apparent historical gaps in mysticism likely reflect cultural patterns only.

In Christianity The Perennial Philosophy encompasses the entire Path including transcendence of the self, allowing the soul to experience unitive knowledge of God.

Dionysius the Areopagite (~100 CE) describes both dying to self and contemplation:

"This relationship must now be transcended by a process leading to ecstasy. The human spirit must seek to go forth out of itself (i. e. out of its created being) into the Uncreated Object of its contemplation and so to be utterly merged. So it ceases to desire even its own being in itself. Casting selfhood away, it strives to gain its true being and selfhood by losing them in the Super-Essence. Laying its intellectual activity to rest it obtains, by a higher spiritual activity, a momentary glimpse into the depths of the Super-Essence, and perceives that There the distinction between "Me" and "Thee" is not." (On the Divine Names)

The Desert Fathers were early Orthodox Christian Mystics in the 3rd and 4th centuries AD. They practiced a life of poverty, discipline, and self-denial as followers of Christ.

"If I had not destroyed myself completely, I should not have been able to rebuild and shape myself again." (Sayings of the Desert Fathers)

"For when the soul arrives at the perfection of the Spirit, perfectly cleansed from passion, and united and mingled with the Spirit Paraclete (Holy Spirit) by that unspeakable communion, and is permitted to become spirit itself in mixture with the Spirit, then it is made all light, all eye, all spirit, all joy, all rest, all gladness, all love, all compassion, all goodness and loving-kindness." (Fifty Spiritual Homilies - Macarius of Egypt)

Prominent later Christian Mystics include St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), Meister Eckhart (1260-1327), Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), and St. John of the Cross (1542-1591). Each found union with God.

St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582):

"This supreme state of ecstasy never lasts long, but although it ceases, it leaves the will so inebriated, and the mind so transported out of itself that for a day, or sometimes for several days, such a person is incapable of attending to anything but what excites the will to the love of God" (The Interior Castle - St. Theresa de Avila)

"Our Lord unites the spirit to Himself and makes it both blind and dumb like St. Paul after his conversion, thus preventing its knowing whence or how it enjoys this grace, for the supreme delight of the spirit is to realize its nearness to God. During the actual moment of divine union the soul feels nothing, all its powers being entirely lost." (The Interior Castle - St. Theresa de Avila)

St. John of the Cross (1542-1591):

"Then the soul enters on the contemplative life, passing through those ways and straits of love which are described in the course of the canticle, till we come to the thirteenth, beginning with 'Turn them away, O my Beloved!' This is the moment of the spiritual betrothal; and then the soul advances by the unitive way, the recipient of many and very great communications, jewels and gifts from the Bridegroom as to one betrothed, and grows into perfect love." (A Spiritual Canticle of the Soul - St John of the Cross)

William Law (1686-1761) was a Church of England priest and mystic:

"As a soul sinks down in humility, meekness, patience, and resignation to God, it proves that it consents to the death of self as utterly sinful and impotent, and sets its hope on Christ alone. No one can thus persevere in the path of humiliation and self-emptying without knowing that there is deliverance, and sooner or later experiencing that the life of Christ does triumph over the life of self and takes its place." (Dying to Self - William Law)

The book "Christian Mystics" by Ursula King portrays many Christian mystics in their historical settings. It's a great book and very easy read, readily available both new and used. For a much deeper perspective (but still easy to read) I recommend the Underwood books on Mysticism which are reasonable to purchase and available as free PDF's on the web.

The Divine Ground

God is the whole Divine reality as personally known by humans, the great creator and sustainer of life. We can relate to God, offer devotion to Him, love Him, and be loved by Him. We offer prayer to Him and receive His grace.

The Divine Ground is what we have in common with God at the highest part of our soul. It's the intersection between God and the soul where we can ultimately be united with God.

Most mystics taught the principle of shared Divine ground in one way or another.

Gregory of Nyssa taught a mystical theology stressing union with God through likeness and participation in the divine life. John of the Cross taught of an interior ground where the soul is transformed by union with God. Hildegard of Bingen taught an indwelling Divine presence. Jacob Boehme discussed the Divine ground and inner birth of the Divine in the soul. Various metaphors and vocabularies were used.

Meister Eckhart was, according to tradition, "the man from whom God hid nothing." Eckhart wrote extensively on the nature of God and the human soul. He proposed the existence of an innermost Divine quality in the soul, which he designated the ground of the soul. God did not create the ground, rather it existed above, beyond, and prior to all created things.

Eckhart was unique in his description of the Godhead. His usage of this term is completely different from our normal usage. According to Eckhart the Godhead is the absolute, nameless primordial ground, the source beyond all names, attributes, and relations. It's not personal, just as the ground of the soul is not personal in humans. The "Godhead" is the source for the personal God, just as the ground of the soul is the innermost uncreated core out of which God creates the human soul.

Regardless of how a particular mystic perceived the ground it's on the ground that a unitive experience with God can occur. Mystical birth is the realization that the soul's ground participates in or is united with the Divine.

Contemplation

For mystics, "contemplation" has a different meaning, and is much more significant than simply thinking deeply. It's turning the whole person, mind, heart, and will to intimate communion with God, rather than just pondering God or doctrine. It is about being *with* God rather than talking *to*, or asking things from God.

The highest purpose of life is to obtain unitive knowledge of God.

"In all the historic formulations of the Perennial Philosophy it is axiomatic that the end of human life is contemplation, or the direct and intuitive awareness of God; that a society is good to the extent that it renders contemplation possible for its members." (Perennial Philosophy - Huxley)

We are all called to contemplation. St. John of the Cross explains God's desire as follows:

"How this can be so cannot be explained in any other way than by showing how the Son of God has raised us to so high a state, and merited for us the 'power to be made the sons of God.' (John 1:12) He prayed to the Father, saying: 'Father, I will that where I am they also whom You have given Me may be with Me, that they may see My glory which You have given Me.' (John 17:24) That is, 'that they may do by participation in Us what I do naturally, namely, breathe the Holy Spirit.'" (A Spiritual Canticle - St John of the Cross)

Yet we are not to become as God (as proponents of Oneness would suggest):

"We are not to suppose from this that our Lord prayed that the saints might become one in essence and nature, as the Father and the Son are; but that they might become one in the union of love as the Father and the Son are one in the oneness of love." (A Spiritual Canticle)

Contemplation is a higher experience of the soul, beyond verbal and mental prayer. It's the sustained, receptive state of focused attention in which your mind quiets its restlessness and opens to direct perception, insight, and unitive knowledge. Although you quash wandering thoughts, the contemplative state is not one of mental drifting or thoughtlessness. You want to not think about or feel, but *be* in the presence of God on the ground of the soul. Consider:

"Then said the Lord to him, Put off thy shoes from thy feet: for the place where thou standest is holy ground." (Acts 7:33)

Removing shoes is akin to getting rid of the lower self.

"The highest prayer is the most passive. Inevitably; for the less there is of self [lower], the more there is of God." (Perennial Philosophy - Huxley)

And if possible, direct prayer inwardly.

"The use of voluntary vocal prayer in order to contemplation (sic) may, in the beginning of a spiritual course, be proper... yet it must always give place to internal prayer when they find themselves disposed for it." (Holy Wisdom or Directions for the Prayer of Contemplation - Baker)

Preparation of the mind before prayer and contemplation is essential:

"For whatever our mind has been thinking of before the hour of prayer, is sure to occur to us while we are praying through the activity of the memory. Wherefore what we want to find

ourselves like while we are praying, that we ought to prepare ourselves to be before the time for prayer. For the mind in prayer is formed by its previous condition, and when we are applying ourselves to prayer the images of the same actions and words and thoughts will dance before our eyes." (The Conferences Of John Cassian)

Prayer and meditation can appropriately be used preceding contemplation, but you'll know when to lay aside imaginative meditation (of thought and forms) and make the transition to contemplation when, aside from distractions, you no longer find pleasure in meditation nor have continuing desire to fix upon particular objects, and your soul desires to be alone but also attentive. Details of this can be found in *Ascent to Mount Carmel*; search for "He can no longer meditate."

Contemplation should not be the whole of one's existence although all of your existence will be enhanced by it.

"For the fully enlightened, totally liberated person, Samsara and Nirvana, time and eternity, the phenomenal and the Real, are essentially one. His whole life is an unsleeping and one-pointed contemplation of the Godhead in and through the things, lives, minds and events of the world of becoming. There is here no mutilation of the soul, no atrophy of any of its powers and capacities. Rather, there is a general enhancement and intensification of consciousness, and at the same time an extension and transfiguration." (Perennial Philosophy - Huxley)

Mysticism, where it is, and isn't found.

"Such practice of inward orientation, of inward worship and listening, is no mere counsel for special religious groups, for small religious orders, for special 'interior souls,' for monks retired in cloisters. This practice is the heart of religion... It is the special property of no group or sect, but is a universal obligation and privilege. Roman Catholics have treasured this practice, but have overlaid the authority of the Light Within by a heavy weight of ecclesiastical authority. Protestant emphasis, beginning so nobly in the early Luther, as grown externally nationalistic, humanistic, and service minded. Dogmas and creed and the closed revelation of a completed canon have replaced the emphasis upon keeping close to the fresh upspringings of the Inner Life. The dearth of rich Protestant literature on the interior aspect of Christian living, except as it bears on the opening experience of conversion, bears testimony to its emphasis being elsewhere... A practicing Christian must above all be one who practices the perpetual return of the soul into the inner sanctuary." (The Light Within - Thomas Kelly)

Part 7: Following the Path

The material world must be mastered as well as the spiritual. Doing so is part of the Path. When people become aware of the spiritual there's a tendency to want to live only in it, to escape the hardship of physical life. But experience in the physical is also part of the Path. Integration of the spiritual with the physical, and mastering both, is the Path.

Spirituality is fullness, mastering all aspects low and high. If it were possible to learn everything we needed solely in the spiritual world we wouldn't have needed to come to Earth. The lessons and testing here are of enormous importance.

So, we shouldn't try to avoid life totally by escape into spiritual pursuits, because life in the world is an important training ground for spirituality. Live in the world but not of the world, enjoy the world but don't be attached to it.

The Path involves acknowledging our faults and flawed nature, repenting, loving God and people, long suffering, service, and getting rid of self.

Start with an unwavering desire to know truth and to know and love God. It may be necessary to deconstruct existing beliefs. Depending on your background this can be difficult, and it may take years to progressively unveil the truth. You have to lose your life to gain it as the Savior said. You have to crave absolute truth, not religious dogma.

Knowing God and loving God are related. One does not proceed the other, neither can one exist without the other, they have to grow together.

Knowledge of God progresses through a lifetime. When we're children our parents teach us that God exists and that He loves us. We're taught to pray to (an external) God, which is a good first step. Then as we grow older and our particular religion shapes our view of Him we read scripture and see both a vengeful, angry, jealous God as well as a more caring and fair Son. These contradictory views reflect the time and the culture in which they were written.

The God you'll eventually discover is not one to be feared, but one who consistently loves and encourages your growth. Mercy always comes before justice.

Once we see glimmers of truth, and feel the pull of a loving God, it's time to get to work. The spiritual Path, like all honest forms of work, produces in proportion to the effort put in. Even a little bit of effort will produce noticeable results. Treading the entire Path is difficult. It requires total honesty about faults and a willingness to change. The hardest parts of the Path will be traveled alone, or at least apparently so, however God and His angels will always be there.

Acquiring knowledge along the way is a lonely quest. It's very easy to be misled by one teacher or another. You have to ignore the often loud voices pulling you this way or that, and listen to the still small voice in the higher part of your soul that comes directly from God.

Real progress on the Path is through inward work, but outward efforts such as prayer, study, and service are needed as these produce humility and discipline and lead to introspection. Sacrifice is needed. Emphasizing the pursuit of knowledge of the Path past a certain point can slow progress of actually progressing on the Path.

Don't waste effort trying to find perfection in the external world. It will never happen and will lead to discouragement. The world is a temporary place, designed as imperfect, to disintegrate. The world and imperfect people should not be looked down on. Health decline, taxes, and rust are all intended and needed. Our task is to show the disintegrating world hope by showing God in our continence and actions.

We encounter what we fear or dislike the most, and the trials we try to avoid.

Suffering will be required. It shouldn't be sought and those suffering should be comforted, but suffering can dig through problems in the ego as nothing else can.

Anything unfinished on the Path will be revisited. Don't purposely try to avoid a lesson, as it will be repeated with increasing intensity to the point where you can't avoid it.

New Age feel good spirituality falsely leads participants to believe the spiritual Path is filled with bliss, joy, wisdom, and enlightenment. On the true Path these may be encountered intermittently, but must be paid for by hard work in purification and detachment from things one holds dear.

God supports you as you progress. His often undeserved grace will buoy you up, and you'll find joy in increased perception of Him both as a transcendent being, and in His creation.

You'll be presented with situations in life that you didn't ask for. Experience these thankfully, with detachment for the opportunities they offer your soul.

God will reveal his plan for you as you progress on the Path. Worldly desires will decrease. A tremendous indescribable feeling of love for others and God's creation will sweep over you.

Rewards and Goals of the Path

Detachment from material goods, expectations of people, and from the ego free you from many life burdens. The intellectual framework embodied in the Path provides insight and access into the transcendent aspects of God. The simplicity of the Path frees time to experience beauty in art, music, and nature.

A true saint in the fullest sense is one who has paid the price of the inner journey to God. He or she is disciplined, loving to neighbors and God, is an example to others, and is selfless.

"Souls that have reached the transforming (unitive) union are, so to speak, nothing in themselves and all in God. For when the soul is wholly transformed in God, it loses its proper being and becomes, as it were, a pure receptacle and instrument of God's operations."
(Ascent to Mount Carmel - St John of the Cross)

Jesus in his earthly life was almost totally not about self. He was about His Father and His Father's business. In the dark night of His soul Christ totally abandoned self in the garden and upon the cross. He wasn't concerned with Himself, even knowing the agony he would go through. "Not my will but thine be done." In a similar way, in order to transcend, our soul has to eventually abandon everything self related in order to return to God.

Goals of the Path

1. Eliminate as much as possible traits of the natural man.
2. Subdue ego and all things involved with self.
3. Transcend the personal self bringing it to alignment with the Divine. Be one with God in thought, purpose and action.
4. Experience unitive knowledge of God if God calls us to that.

Living in the World

Gratitude

Life is hard for many, but regardless of our situation in life there's always some little thing we can express appreciation for.

"Every inhalation of the breath prolongs life and every expiration of it gladdens our nature; wherefore every breath confers two benefits and for every benefit gratitude is due." (Rose Garden - Saadi Shirazi)

Prayer, supplication, and thanks bring us closer to God and help us develop gratitude.

"Inward devotion often brings forth gratitude; for none can thank and praise God so well as the inward and devout man. And it is just that we should thank and praise God, because He has created us as reasonable creatures, and has ordained and destined heaven an earth and the angels to our service; and because He became man for our sins, and taught us, and lived for our sake, and showed us the way; and because He has ministered to us in humble raiment,

and suffered an ignominious death for the love of us, and promised us His eternal kingdom and Himself also for our reward and for our wage." (Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage - St. John of Ruysbroeck)

Relationships

You can never find completion in another person. In fact you cannot find completion in anything external, not even an external God. Completion can only be found in God.

Relationships help us to see ourselves clearly and are designed to encourage and test the spiritual growth of both people, bringing out good and bad qualities. A relationship with a perfect match wouldn't produce much spiritual growth, whereas a moderate amount of difference is helpful. Resolving those differences, especially by getting rid of the lower self induced problems, is essential for growth. It helps if both parties are self aware and acknowledge their weaknesses. One who can't is a learning opportunity for their partner.

Unless there's true abuse, don't bring a relationship to an end simply because it's hard. You're in it for a reason that you may not even realize. Through pure love you may point out weaknesses in others from an unattached standpoint, not out of anger, fear or other internal reaction. Assisting your partner to reach his or her highest desired spirituality is a noble goal in marriage.

You become who you associate with and this is especially true in spiritual matters.

"It is of the utmost importance for the beginner to associate with those who lead a spiritual life, and not only with those in the same mansion as herself, but with others who have traveled farther into the castle, who will aid her greatly and draw her to join them." (The Interior Castle or the Mansions - St. Teresa de Avila)

Physical Suffering

Do individuals suffer for societies sins? It seems the answer is yes. We're not as individual as we think. We're all part of humanity, and suffer as individuals for errors made by the whole. We should help the unfortunate who suffer, as they are in a sense part of us, and we part of them.

Suffering helps develop compassion, can strip away attachment to worldly comforts, and refine the heart.

"Behold, I have refined thee, I have chosen thee in the furnace of affliction." (Isa 48:10)

Individual suffering can be intense, physically mentally and emotionally, and situations precipitating it may come instantly or may have occurred over several years. The sufferer may receive compassion from others, or may have to bear the pain alone. In either case, the burden is best carried by detaching from the situation as much as possible. Nothing can damage the upper Self.

"If man is in himself emptied of all things, whatsoever befalls him without his co-operation, is a gift of God, and is the best thing for man, whatever it be, be it grateful or painful, sour or sweet. For when a man turneth himself away from all things and holds on to God, God must needs go to meet him with all good, be it bodily or spiritual." (Following of Christ - John Tauler)

Obedience

Organizations require some degree of hierarchy and authority in temporal matters.

Organizational rules of conduct should be followed, but spiritual truth ultimately comes from within, and to that, obedience is always owed.

Obedience to a church leader depends on the commitments you've made, especially with regards to faith sacraments. A Catholic for instance who has received the sacramental disposition of penance by a priest following reconciliation, should follow his direction as it is perceived to be directly from God. Most faiths however believe there are no intermediaries other than Christ, to whom only obedience is required.

Obedience to anything contrary to God's law is wrong.

"It appears clearly that those who command things evil are not to be obeyed, especially when in yielding to wrong commands, in which you appear to obey man, you show yourself plainly disobedient to God, who has forbidden everything that is evil. For it is altogether unreasonable to profess yourself obedient when you know that you are violating obedience due to the superior on account of the inferior, that is, to the Divine on account of the human."
(Life and Works of Saint Bernard)

Obedience without humility is folly.

"From this humility there springs obedience, for none can be inwardly obedient save the humble man. Obedience means an unassuming, submissive, and pliable humor, and a will in readiness or all that is good. Obedience makes a man submit to the biddings, the forbiddings, and the will of God; it subjects the senses and the animal powers to the higher reason, so that a man may live decently and reasonably." (Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage - St. John of Ruysbroeck)

Sin

Sin at a fundamental level is knowingly going against the natural Divine order as it pertains to humans. Since actions can easily be rationalized and one may not have a good grasp of the natural order, religions have moral codes. Within Christianity the moral code is summarized in the Ten Commandments as well as admonitions to practice forgiveness, humility, and charity.

In traditional Christianity much of the power that churches hold comes from their perceived ability to identify and in some way cure or facilitate forgiveness of sin. Sin is cast as a destroyer of souls, which if not properly handled may result in eternal damnation.

Sin has a different meaning in truly Eastern traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Sufism, and Zen treating it not as a legalistic offense against deity but a mental distortion or energetic blockage that keeps the seeker separated from God. In Taoism, sin is going against the natural flow, creating disharmony rather than moral guilt.

Significantly, in non religious spirituality, the subject of sin is rarely touched upon. Sin is a manifestation of a deeper spiritual problem, and the problem is what needs to be addressed, not suppressing its expression as sin.

Christian Mystics frame sin as a spiritual condition, a disruption in the soul's communion with God rather than a break of moral code. Improving man's relationship with God is emphasized rather than guilt and institutional penalties. Sin is a wound to the soul, particularly the lower self. It separates the soul from the light of God. It's forgetting our true Self as an image of God, and misidentifying with the temporal lower self of the senses.

When man first became aware of himself and his separation from God, he began to regard his own self as higher than God. This is the essence of sin, putting one's own thoughts, desires, and choices above those of God. Carnal man unfortunately perceives this as normal, if not healthy.

Sin = "I know what You want, I don't care, I want what I want." Furthermore, it's a message sent to God about how we feel about our relationship with Him, more powerful than prayer.

Sin is setting our will against God, dethroning Him and making ourselves king in our own minds following Lucifer's lead:

"For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High." (Isa 14:13-14)

Just like wood that will split due to an internal weakness, humans often have a particular weakness they may not know about or may try to hide from. Attending church and following all the commandments doesn't equate to being sinless, and being proud of ones imagined sinlessness sets one up for testing.

"Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall." (Prov 16:18)

God will help when we're ready.

"To turn from sin by one's own power and come to God is still much more impossible. Therefore, whosoever is to turn from sin and come to God in His heavenly kingdom, must be drawn by the heavenly Father with the might of His divine power. The Father also draws the Son who comes to help us with His grace, by stimulating our free will to turn away from, and hate sin, which has drawn us aside from God, and from the immutable goodness of the Godhead. Then, if she is willing, He pours the gift of His grace into the soul, which renounces all her misery and sin, and all her works become living." (Meister Eckhart's Sermons)

After a lengthy discussion on the problems with immorality C.S. Lewis concludes with this interesting comment:

"If anyone thinks that Christians regard unchastity as the supreme vice, he is quite wrong. The sins of the flesh are bad, but they are the least bad of all sins. All the worst pleasures are purely spiritual: the pleasure of putting other people in the wrong, of bossing and patronising and spoiling sport, and back-biting; the pleasures of power, of hatred. For there are two things inside me, competing with the human self which I must try to become. They are the Animal self, and the Diabolical self. The Diabolical self is the worse of the two. That is why a cold, self-righteous prig who goes regularly to church may be far nearer to hell than a prostitute. But, of course, it is better to be neither." (Mere Christianity - C.S. Lewis)

God's Forgiveness of Sin

Mystics base God's forgiveness of sin on Christ's atonement. However He didn't pay for our sins in a legalistic sense. Rather, His sacrifice opened the door enabling us to spiritually follow Him.

"For Christ, then, are we ambassadors, as of God entreating through us. We are beseeching for Christ's sake, 'Be conciliated to God!' For the One not knowing sin, He makes to be a sin offering for our sakes that we may be becoming God's righteousness in Him." (2 Cor 5:20-21 Concordant Version) CV used because of it's literal translation of original text.

"For seeing that Christ also suffered for your sakes, leaving you a copy, that you should be following up in the footprints of Him Who does no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth; Who, being reviled, reviled not again; suffering, threatened not, yet gave it over to Him 'Who is judging justly, Who Himself carries up our sins in His body on to the pole, that, coming away from sins, we should be living for righteousness; by Whose 'welt you were healed. For

you were as straying sheep, but now you turned back to the Shepherd and Supervisor of your souls." (1 Pet 2:21-25 Concordant Version)

We live through Christ as we receive ongoing sanctification. His atonement is a shelter for us as we progress past our sins, helped by the love and grace of God.

"In this was manifested the love of God among us, that God has dispatched His only begotten Son into the world that we should be living through Him. In this is love, not that we love God, but that He loves us, and dispatches His Son, a propitiatory shelter concerned with our sins." (1 John 4:9-10 Concordant Version)

Mystics downplay religious legalities and emphasize inward healing, transformation, and conformity to Christ as the means to obtain forgiveness. Forgiveness is tied to deep, ongoing inner purification of the lower self. Love and contrition born of love, not fear, accompany forgiveness. Mystics describe progressive healing of the mind and passions as the person becomes less attached to sin. They describe forgiveness as being part of Christ's saving work. The soul is united to Christ so His life and righteousness become part of the believer.

Mystics experience the most profound and beautiful experiences of God's forgiveness. Mystics receive direct experiential assurance from God, an interior encounter with God's love that brings certainty of forgiveness beyond intellect or normal, even spiritual, feeling.

Body, Mind and Emotion

Purification includes caring for the body, as well as subduing the mind and controlling emotions. Spiritual pursuits require energy and clarity, and you can't do that effectively with a sluggish body. Lust for food centers the soul on the lower sensual level and prevents it from recognizing and rising to it's higher level. Proper sleep helps both the body and mind rejuvenate.

"Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are." (1 Cor 3:16-17)

Be true to yourself. You must know yourself, and this requires being accountable for every mistake and every character deficiency. Spiritual progress cannot outpace emotional and mental stability although progress spiritually can lead to improvements in these.

The mind directs the body and controls the emotions.

"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God." (Rom 12:1-2)

Critical thinking accompanies and balances spiritual practices such as prayer and religious practice. Religious doctrines in particular, as well as spiritual teachings, should be double checked for validity. The mind and heart should act as checks on each other. Does it totally check out analytically, and does your heart say it's okay?

Mind and thinking are part of the lower self. Don't think too much, as profound spiritual truth comes through the higher Self while in contemplation. Raise the center of your consciousness to the higher Self where you will meet God.

While the goal is to transcend the physically centered lower self as far as attachments, the world does provide an essential learning and testing ground. It's not being in the world that's the problem, it's centering yourself mentally in the world with any degree of ego. Thinking too much about yourself is damaging.

Physical activity, if not ego based, offers the opportunity to take mind off of "me" and "mine." A quiet hobby or work, especially using your hands, allows space to offer thanks, to pray, and to contemplate.

Emotions are of the lower self. Even love, if it comes from your 'I', rather than God's love passing through you, is of the lower self, especially if you tie expectations to it. Extreme negativism, hate and anger break down ones spiritual armor allowing entry of darkness. Controlling external expression of negative emotion is insufficient, as it's the inner association with it that damages the soul.

Progress and transcendence do not require absence of emotions and passions, as they're a natural part of the soul. You can experience feelings but shouldn't be attached to them. The upper Self can witness them and grow from them. Sorrow and joy can both be catalysts for purification. Embrace them then move back to being centered in the higher Self, the inner ground of prayerful attention and silence. Your soul will learn to experience emotions without being defined by them, enabling transcendence.

Miracles

Normal experience is in the worldly domain of the lower self. Through miracles God's grace occasionally reaches down into this realm, breaking the normal order. Miracles are lower level manifestations that can awaken the higher Self. They reveal Divine love and mercy and open the soul to a personal encounter with God.

Miracles have occurred throughout history to show non believers the existence and power of God as well as to bolster believers. Across traditions they affirm doctrine, inspire devotion, and provide tangible evidence of the transcendent.

Scriptural instances include Jesus turning water into wine, feeding the 5,000, walking on water, healing the blind, and raising Lazarus from the dead. From Moses onward and especially through New Testament times, miracles demonstrated who was sent from God.

In the Catholic Church, miracles are taken as signs that God approves the holiness of a candidate for sainthood. The Church requires verified miracles to confirm that the person (who is in heaven) can intercede for the living. Catholics may go through 4 stages of personal canonization:

1. Servant of God (while living) - No miracle required, focus is on candidate's virtues.
2. Venerable (living) - No miracle needed, heroic value, the Pope declares the person venerable.
3. Blessed - One verified postmortem miracle, usually medically related.
4. Saint - A second verified postmortem miracle.

For Catholics, proposed miracles are first evaluated at a local level where the diocese gathers medical records, witness statements, and expert testimony. Next the Vatican convenes a panel of independent physicians who must conclude the healing doesn't have a natural or scientific explanation. Then a theological commission examines whether the prayer was directed specifically to the candidate and whether the event fits the Church's understanding of Divine intervention. Finally Cardinals and Bishops approve and the Pope issues the final decree.

The importance of miracles in proving God's interest in humanity can't be overstated, but on a personal level they are of little importance as they occur in the physical domain and are not in themselves central to the soul's growth.

Enjoy and appreciate them when they happen, but it's best not to overemphasize them.

Spiritual Training, Learning from Life

Embrace what life throws at you. Learn from all of life experiences. Go with the flow of life, as it carries you to people and places where you'll find opportunities for growth.

If successes on the Path cause arrogance and refusal to learn from practical experience, progress will stop. Studying about something is nowhere near being something.

Taking shortcuts on the spiritual Path won't work, as God sees through them. The price for entering His kingdom is dedication and hard internal work.

Don't use another's faults as an excuse for not working on your own. Imperfect people may become our source for growth because they are uniquely positioned in life for a lesson we need to learn.

No one else can do the work for you.

Judging and Forgiving Others

Beware of judging other's sinfulness.

"Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again." (Matt 7:1-2)

If done without emotion or energy, and simply for planning purposes judgment is reasonable. If judgment involves emotion, ego, power, or elevating oneself over the other it amounts to assuming a power reserved to God.

It's also hazardous to criticize anything created by God, be it man or thing.

"There is no greater curse than discontent." (Lao Tzu)

Emphasis of the concept of forgiveness is another gift given to us by Christ. In pre-Christian times forgiveness wasn't necessarily considered a virtue. Older societies had practices and virtues overlapping with forgiveness, but the interpersonal moral idea of unilateral, grace-centered forgiveness was emphasized by Christ.

Forgiveness is an inner release in the forgiver once he recognizes the underlying unity between himself and the other. Prayer, meditation, and compassion help dissolve resentment.

"But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which spitefully use you, and persecute you;" (Matt 5:44)

Repentance and forgiveness are two sides of the same issue.

"And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." (Matt 6:12)

Aloneness

Progress on the path requires increasing detachment from things, people, and ideas once held closely. You may feel that the world you now see is unreal, that you don't belong. People run as

a herd and tend to reject anyone out of the norm, and as you pursue a spiritual path you'll increasingly be out of the norm.

You'll feel inwardly alone, especially when being tested, as tests are an individual matter.

The aloneness (not necessarily loneliness) the lower self experiences paradoxically coincides with increasing connection of the higher Self with God.

As the Path narrows towards the top aloneness will become more pronounced. Your changes will be noticeable to other people. They will recognize perhaps subconsciously that they aren't doing what's necessary. They may think you're aloof or misguided. Religious friends may feel insecure around you. Show unconditional love to them, and be confident that you're doing what your soul needs. Let God's unconditional love shine through you.

We need to learn to stand alone in facing life's tests. The end of the Path, the most difficult part where you loose self, is actually an initiation, and must be done alone. Such were the final hours of Jesus. He had gone the whole Path but at the very end on the cross said:

"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (John 3:16)

St. John of the Cross had this to say about abandonment:

"Inasmuch as God here purges the soul according to the substance of its sense and spirit, and according to the interior and exterior faculties, the soul must needs be in all its parts reduced to a state of emptiness, poverty and abandonment, and must be left dry and empty and in darkness. For the sensual part is purified in aridity, the faculties are purified in the emptiness of their perceptions and the spirit is purified in thick darkness." (Dark Night of the Soul - St. John of the Cross)

Angels

God has helpers, Divine beings that watch over us.

"For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways. They shall bear thee up in their hands, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone." (Psalm 91:11-12)

"In heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven." (Matt 18:10)

"Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?" (Heb 1:14)

St. Teresa described one angel as:

"He was not large, but small of stature, and most beautiful—his face burning, as if he were one of the highest angels, who seem to be all of fire: they must be those whom we call cherubim. Their names they never tell me; but I see very well that there is in heaven so great a difference between one angel and another, and between these and the others, that I cannot explain it." (The Life of St. Teresa of Jesus)

Eckhart describes spiritual beings as being coexistent with other spirit:

"There is a difference between spiritual things and bodily things. Every spiritual thing can dwell in another; but nothing bodily can exist in another... Every single angel is in the next with all his joy, with all his happiness and all his beatitude as perfectly as in himself; and

every angel with all his joy and all his beatitude is in me, and so is God Himself with all His beatitude, though I know it not." (The Complete Works of Meister Eckhart)

But, Eckhart also said that angels are created and exist in the domain of time.

"[Regarding his vision] The second question is whether St. Paul understood outside of time, or in time. I say he understood out of time, for he did not understand from the angels who are created in time; he understood from God, who was before time was, whom time never comprehended." (The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart)

The soul is directed by angels.

"The soul is guarded and directed by the angels, who whisper Divine counsel and intercede for her on the way to perfection. " (Spiritual Canticle - St. John of the Cross)

Angels are beautiful.

"Take the lowest angel in his pure nature: the smallest splinter or spark that ever fell from him would suffice to light up the whole world with bliss and joy. " (Eckhart Sermon 5)

Spiritual Teachers

Seeking must be initiated from within by a pure heart. You are ready to be taught when you have pure intent and a love for God. Your goal should not be happiness or joy, but truth. You must be open and always be ready to adopt new ideas, after proving them.

God will bring teachers in many forms - friends, nature, and others further along the Path. Teachers or teaching situations will appear when you need them, but you are likely to run into a false teacher if your motives are wrong or your heart impure.

Your spiritual teacher should love to teach because he loves to help others. He shouldn't do it in any degree to feed his own ego. He should be humble and teach without receiving any personal reward, especially money. He will know that his teachings are not his, but come from God, and that they flow through him.

He does not want, and will discourage his students from becoming dependent on him and will leave if you do become dependent. The teacher's only goal should be to help raise you to point where you receive knowledge directly from God through your higher Self. The teacher will emphasize, and the student should pursue, dying of self, service to others, and love of God rather than so called enlightenment.

You can recognize a true spiritual teacher because you see nothing of 'them' in them, instead you will feel the presence of God, which flows through them. You will see it in their eyes, and in their face, and this will change you.

The heavens will not abandon you in your search for truth.

Helping others Spiritually

Progress on the Path increases spiritual depth, and provides an example for others to follow. It also gives insights into others needs. A spiritual person should share his knowledge when appropriate.

"Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house." Phil 2:14-15

When another person is actively seeking truth it's relatively easy to show them the right direction and offer support along the way. Even if they're not consciously on the Path your love and help will be uplifting.

Following the Path is not like being in a proselyting religion. While you have the desire to help others, you also recognize that each individual must find and enter the Path by themselves. Spirituality is not something that can be pushed. Your example is important and conveys the message without you saying a word. Even if you're only partially down the Path you can and should help others.

Adversity

Evil

Evil entities exist. Their purpose is to turn us from the spiritual Path. The farther we are along the Path, the more they'll try to sabotage us, but they can only affect us if we let them. If we're pure, evil has little to attach to.

"For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places." (Eph 6:12)

Evil attacks through the lower self but we can't fight evil through the lower carnal self.

"For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds" (2 Cor 10:3-4)

Evil can influence us or those we're around. It's hard for evil to gain entry if we're watchful, but easy if we leave an opening through sin of any sort. If it can't get to you directly it will try to influence those close to you. In daily life, supposed emotional reactions may be due to evil influences. It's best to just ignore any annoyance. Evil feeds on negative energy, anger, sadness, fear, sin.

If someone hurts you, try to respond with love. If possible be thankful that it's a learning and testing opportunity. React outwardly if absolutely needed to protect life and property, but never react inwardly, as that test determines whether you're operating out of higher or lower self.

Evil cannot hurt the higher Self, and can only affect the lower self to the extent you pay attention and give energy to it. Detach and rise above situations that cause a bad mental or emotional response within you.

What you think about expands, so don't give any energy to bad situations. Train yourself to ignore the normal response of inward reaction.

Money buys and represents the things of the world which trap the soul:

"They that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil." (1 Tim 6:9-10)

While lack of money or things doesn't make one pure, elimination of physical wealth does somewhat free the soul. How you're poor makes a difference though, if you're proud of your austerity then you've defeated the purpose. Being rich doesn't necessarily disqualify you from walking the Path, however walking it becomes much more difficult.

Testing Spirits and Phenomenon

God's immanent beauty, His fingerprint throughout creation, can appropriately be appreciated through the senses. But unusual psychic manifestations through the senses of seeing, hearing, smelling, taste, or touch, may or may not be from God.

On the one hand they may be, as when angelic visitors appear. But supernatural manifestations can also be generated by the dark side where people see figures and forms of persons, and hear words spoken by those they see.

The safest course is to flee from these occurrences if they stand by themselves.

"And it must be known that, although all these things may happen to the bodily senses in the way of God, we must never rely upon them or accept them, but must always fly from them, without trying to ascertain whether they be good or evil; for, the more completely exterior and corporeal they are, the less certainly are they of God. For it is more proper and habitual to God to communicate Himself to the spirit, wherein there is more security and profit for the soul, than to sense, wherein there is ordinarily much danger and deception; for bodily sense judges and makes its estimate of spiritual things by thinking that they are as it feels them to be, whereas they are as different as is the body from the soul and sensuality from reason. For the bodily sense is as ignorant of spiritual things as is a beast of rational things, and even more so." (Ascent of Mt. Carmel - St. John of the Cross)

True communication from God will also directly affect your spirit.

"Corporeal vision, or feeling in respect to any of the other senses, or any other communication of the most interior kind, if it be of God, produces its effect upon the spirit at the very moment when it appears or is felt." (Ascent of Mt. Carmel - St. John of the Cross)

Physical manifestations should never be sought because if received they will ultimately diminish faith in spiritual matters. God may use them to reach a soul mired in the lower self but not to reach one operating in the higher Self. And the adversary is more than willing to use them.

"It is always well, then, that the soul should reject these things, and close its eyes to them, whencesoever they come. For, unless it does so, it will prepare the way for those things that come from the devil, and will give him such influence that, not only will his visions come in place of God's, but his visions will begin to increase, and those of God to cease, in such manner that the devil will have all the power and God will have none." (Ascent of Mt. Carmel - St. John of the Cross)

Temptation and Testing

In Hebrew the noun נִסָּה (*nissāh*) means temptation or trial.

In Greek the word πρόσκλησις (*prosklēsis*) means temptation or invitation. In a literal sense it is a "drawing forward" or an "invitation" toward sin.

Temptation can be a test or trial sent by God to aid your progress on the spiritual path, or a suggestion from the devil to entice you to sin.

These are common levels of temptation (when knowledge of its sinfulness is present):

- 1a. Demonic provocation - the initial incitement to sin, an evil stimulation in the heart without images. At this point man is not culpable. Once images form in the mind it becomes the start of sin.
OR
- 1b. Disturbances in the mind - Not the same as provocation. Disturbances will occur prior to a certain point on the Path, but can eventually be moved beyond, whereas demonic provocation can still happen. Formation of images in the mind bring the start of sin.
2. Entertaining the thought - Turned over to the mind for pleasure, yet still not acted upon. Replaying the images.
3. Assent - The resolve to act on the thought.
4. History of repeated sin - If this is the first time the thought is entertained, the man may still eliminate it. If however there is a memory of repeated sin, it becomes harder to extinguish the thought.
5. Passion - If memory of repeated instances is not fought against the sin develops into a passion.

Spiritual schooling can be divided into two categories, lecture and lab. Class learning includes studying the scriptures, listening to spiritual teachings, prayer, and contemplation. The lab portion consists of interaction with people, technology, and the environment. Testing occurs as we apply theoretical knowledge to everyday situations.

You'll be tested exactly in your weakest spots. When you think you've passed a particular test one way you'll be given another version in a disguised form. Testing difficulty will increase as you progress. You only really pass in a certain area when situations in that area no longer present a test.

The more intent you are on following the Path, the more frequently and more deeply you'll be tested. Tests will come in all sorts of ways. A poor person will be tested for resentment toward someone with money. A rich man may look down on the poor, perhaps thinking "if they'd only worked harder or made better decisions." Failure can test you, as can success. An easy life tests by encouraging spiritual laziness while a hard life is a test of ones resilience.

Spiritual highs can occur on the Path, followed by long periods of dryness. Feeling abandoned by God is one of the hardest tests of all, but its part of the growth process.

"Spiritual persons suffer great trials, by reason not so much of the aridities which they suffer, as of the fear which they have of being lost on the road, thinking that all spiritual blessing is over for them and that God has abandoned them since they find no help or pleasure in

good things.... It is well for those who find themselves in this condition to take comfort, to persevere in patience and to be in no wise afflicted. Let them trust in God, Who abandons not those that seek Him with a simple and right heart, and will not fail to give them what is needful for the road, until He bring them into the clear and pure light of love." (Dark Night of the Soul - St. John of the Cross)

Thoughts

We've become accustomed to trusting our mind. We're told we can solve a problem by thinking about it long enough, and applying the right mental tools. But for large and especially spiritually rooted problems, the mind is inefficient at best, unusable at worst. People will often come to sharply different opinions on identical issues depending on the makeup of their minds.

We have to think to get along in the world, the mind is a gift from God. But don't think too much. Try to move the center of your consciousness from the lower self mind, to the upper Self spirit. Live a life without a lot of attachments. Approach God in prayer and contemplation. Trust what the Spirit gives you. At first it may be small things, but over time you'll be given more. On complicated/intuitive problems you'll see better results compared to what you could have reasoned out.

"Untold mental energy is wasted on compulsive thinking. If an answer does come, it cannot be a true answer, for it comes from a false self and a false god, the ego, laboring under the illusion of its self-sufficiency... The devil does not hunt after those who are lost; he hunts after those who are aware, those who are close to God. He takes from them trust in God and begins to afflict them with self assurance, logic, thinking, criticism. Therefore we should not trust our logical minds." (Christ the Eternal Tao - Damascene)

Distractions, Worries and Living Simply

It goes without saying that a perfectly elevated soul will not be troubled by things in time and in the world, but few of us are at that point. We have to slowly dig our way out of worldly problems as we try to reach upward. Some things come at us unexpectedly and out of our control, but others can be anticipated and avoided.

Worries generally have an external source. Some we can't do much about, such as world conditions. But we can eliminate or reduce others by minimizing avenues for entrance.

Live simply and purely to avoid mental and emotional burdens.

Things - Everything owned has its place in the mind and is food for distraction.

Maintenance - Keep absolutely needed items in good repair.

Situations - "Agree with thine adversary quickly." Forgive and move on.

Health - Eat quality foods if available, and exercise.

Media - Every image seen or video watched fills the mind unnecessarily, choking out God.

Debt - Avoid debt where possible and pay off obligations speedily to sleep well.

The simple life is essential for spirituality. Too many nagging thoughts about things, finances, health, and issues with people make it difficult to settle into prayer and contemplation. Minimize, keep only quality needful things thereby living abundantly.

The Occult

Early on a presumed spiritual Path the seeker may be exposed to the occult in one way or another. Occultism draws from folk traditions and ceremonial magic. It's a deception and not a shortcut to spirituality. It's alluring to intellectuals but exists in the domain of the mind, in the lower self.

Occult spiritual entities (demons, spirits, deities) have distinct personalities, motives, and agendas. The fact that they have a personality, name, or ego is a clear indication that they're not enlightened beings who have achieved death of self. Occult personalities can be benevolent but also hostile and deceptive. Dialogues, contracts, invocations, or summoning rituals suggest interaction with an entity with an independent self. True spirituality by contrast aims for dissolution of the personal ego separate self.

Examples of the occult are seance's, spirit guides, and New Age channeling. Occultism is in the world of form, not in the realm of the higher Self. No true spiritual teacher has taught it because real transformation comes through God's grace, not through secret knowledge or magical techniques, and generally not through the senses.

The New Age religion of Theosophy errors by concentrating on mediums, signs, wonders and false masters with personalities. It emphasizes sensationalism rather than true spirituality. Most significantly Theosophy diminishes the role and attributes of Christ. Theosophy re-frames Christ from our unique, incarnate, divine Savior into an impersonal "Christ-principle." It reduces His exclusive status, alters his nature, and removes the necessity of his atoning work.

Idolatry

And God said: "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth."
Exodus 20:4

And yet man being man, the ancient world was filled with idolatry including human shaped images of gods and deities depicted as animals. Nature was worshiped in trees, mountains, springs and celestial bodies. Small personal cult images and amulets were kept at home for protection and worship.

Why were these a problem?

"Thou shalt have no other gods before me." (Exodus 20:3)

"God alone is unoriginate, and the source of all being. The basic sin of idolatry is to rob God of the worship that belongs to Him alone, and to apply it to creatures." (The Triads - Gregory Palamas)

In an advanced society people generally don't equate pieces of stone with a god, so it's easy to think we're above idolatry. But there are other forms of idolatry, more subtle, and more dangerous.

"How different is the case with the developed and more modern forms of idolatry! These have achieved not merely survival, but the highest degree of respectability... Technological idolatry is the religion whose doctrines are promulgated, explicitly or by implication, in the advertisement pages of our newspapers and magazines - the source, we may add parenthetically, from which millions of men, women and children in the capitalistic countries derive their working philosophy of life." (Perennial Philosophy - Huxley)

Idolatry robs God of our dedication to Him.

"Yet they love God no more when their oratories are ornate than when they are simple - nay, rather do they love Him less, since, as we have said, the pleasure which they set upon their painted adornments is stolen from the living reality." (The Ascent of Mount Carmel - St. John of the Cross)

Idolatry of self.

"All the vices of fallen angels and men have their birth and power in the pride of self, or I may better say, in the atheism and idolatry of self; for self is both atheist and idolater. It is atheist because it has rejected God; it is an idolater because it is its own idol." (The Selected Mystical Writings of William Law)

Wrongfully putting emphasis on images.

"There is much that might be said of the stupidity which many persons display with regard to images; their foolishness reaches such a point that some of them place more confidence in one kind of image than in another, believing that God will hear them more readily because of these than because of those, even when both represent the same thing." (The Ascent of Mount Carmel - St. John of the Cross)

Adorning images is wrong.

"Holding not in abhorrence the vain trappings of the world, they adorn images with the garments which from time to time vain persons invent in order to satisfy their own pleasures and vanities. So they clothe images with garments reprehensible even in themselves, a kind of vanity which was, and is still, abhorrent to the saints whom the images represent. Herein, with their help, the devil succeeds in canonizing his vanities, by clothing the saints with them, not without causing them great displeasure." (Ascent of Mount Carmel - St. John of the Cross)

Part 8: Nature of Existence & Theology

The Nature of God

God exists outside the physical universe. While everything in time and physicality exists apart from God, there exists the spiritual Divine Ground, which is common to us and God.

God the Father has two aspects. In His transcendent aspect he is uncreated and beyond all attributes. In His immanent aspect He creates in the material world and can be experienced personally by man.

AW Tozer claims both men and religions reveal themselves by how they characterize God.

"Only after an ordeal of painful self-probing are we likely to discover what we actually believe about God... Among the sins to which the human heart is prone, hardly any other is more hateful to God than idolatry, for idolatry is at bottom a libel on His character. The idolatrous heart assumes that God is other than He is, and substitutes for the true God one

made after its own likeness. Always this God will conform to the image of the one who created it." (AW Tozer)

When we make God in the image of man we have a problem that runs deeper than all the good a religion might otherwise do.

"To think of creature and Creator as alike in essential being is to rob God of most of His attributes and reduce Him to the status of a creature." (AW Tozer)

God is Incomprehensible.

"The incomprehensible and most high Nature of God transcends all creatures in heaven and on earth. For all that a creature can comprehend is of the creature; but God is above all creatures and within and without all creatures, and every created comprehension is too narrow to comprehend Him. But if a creature is to comprehend and to understand God, it must be caught up beyond itself into God, and comprehend God with God." (The Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage - St. John of Ruysbroeck)

God isn't our servant.

"Left to ourselves we tend immediately to reduce God to manageable terms. We want to get Him where we can use him, or at least know where He is when we need Him. We want a God we can in some measure control." (AW Tozer)

Divine Attributes

The first quality of the Father is eternity, God lives in eternity. God is called Father because all things are born from Him. God is always stable. The Father is brightness, too radiant to behold by natural eyes and He cannot adequately be described by words.

"if we would think accurately about the attributes of God, we must learn to reject certain words that are sure to come crowding into our minds - such words as trait, characteristic, quality, words which are proper and necessary when we are considering created beings but altogether inappropriate when we are thinking about God. We must break ourselves of the habit of thinking of the Creator as we think of His creatures." (AW Tozer)

Transcendence

God exists beyond, above, and independent of the created world and its limitations. Above does not refer to physical distance but to quality. God does not live in space, which is part of the material world. Most dimensions found in scripture are figurative as God is beyond all names, concepts, images and distances.

God's mode of being is fundamentally different from finite creatures; God is not composed of parts, changed by time, or confined by space.

God does not depend on anything outside Himself for existence; rather, God is the cause of all being.

Transcendence emphasizes God's otherness and separateness.

Immanence

Immanence, is God's personal, transformative presence within the soul and world, a presence normally experienced through the senses, but also in the upper region of the soul more deeply through prayer and contemplation.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

"And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters." (Gen 1:1-2)

God is still found in the world.

"I am the Self, O Gudakesha, dwelling in the hearts of all beings. I verily am the beginning, the middle and also the end of all beings." (Ramannuja Gita Bhashya)

"If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me." (Psalm 139:7-10)

"Do not I fill heaven and earth? saith the LORD." (Jer 23:24)

God reveals Himself through beauty in His creation - the night sky, towering clouds, rainbows, snow capped mountains, colorful creatures, meadows, and flowers. He created us with senses in part so we can behold the majesty of His works.

Immanence is God's direct interaction in the world. The most important is His indwelling of the human soul enabling man to participate in Divine life.

Knowledge of God is primarily experiential rather than intellectual. Direct encounter through contemplative prayer or ecstatic union depend on the immanence of God.

Immanence does not mean God is identical with creation. God indwells and pervades but remains distinct, preserving His transcendent nature while being close to us.

Why does God Create, and the Nature of the Soul

God creates because (to quote the trite phrase) God is love, and that love expresses itself by creating others. Creating souls enables loving relationships beyond God's internal life, beings who can relate to Him and to one another.

The soul is created prior to it's incarnation in time and space. It's explicitly created with intellect and will, allowing it the freedom to embrace or turn away from God. The Divine life is manifest in the soul as it responds to, and mirrors, God's love and wisdom.

Individual souls are created by God out of the ground of the soul and in a way are extensions of God, inheriting some of His attributes. The soul descends from a high spiritual state into the material world and while here only occasionally catches glimpses of the spiritual realms.

Although the soul shares common ground with God, the majority of it is separate from God because love requires at least two entities. This separation allows response and reciprocity with God's love and allows the soul to learn compassion, patience and selfless giving. Suffering, conflict, and loss that arise in the material world promote growth, purification, detachment, and interior transformation.

The higher spiritual Self of the soul, and the lower materialistic self aren't two separate things, but rather represent the percentage of the soul engaged in spiritual vs. material life.

Meister Eckhart speaks of the higher part as the soul's 'ground', an inner immutable spark, that is one with God. It is beyond images, concepts, normal prayer, and thought. It exists out of time, and can be reached through contemplation. It is the immortal innermost Self, purified of ego.

“The soul must be turned inward to its ground, for in the ground the soul is one with God.”
(Meister Eckhart, Sermon 17).

The lower part of the soul is tied to sense, imagination, reason, thought and normal prayer, and operates in time in the material world.

To grow, the soul must be separated from God just as a child is separated from his parents. Gods desire is that we become co-creators (in a local sense) with Him. Creation is enjoyed both in success and failure, in making beautiful things or bad. This ability to create on earth comes with the latitude to choose, and that requires separation from God. Separation occurs at physical birth, where the soul is introduced to the world of God and man duality. Ego is born at this time, allowing man to act for himself. Exercising his creative power, man experiences and grows.

What does God want us to do? Work on our lower self, purify it to the point where we can rise above it. The ultimate goal is to master thoughts, feelings and things relating to the material world, then rise above it all to communion with God.

Life is a school in which we're presented with lessons that if taken with the right attitude and internalized, improve our soul. We are born into duality but must see past the physical illusion to the point where we see God in all people and things. Our purpose should be, with God's help, to raise our consciousness and spirituality.

The Trinity

I didn't accept the Trinity, and couldn't for many years, and still grapple with it. It's been a great barrier to accepting traditional Christianity. Although I'd mentally accepted God being a spirit I still couldn't entirely wrap my mind around the Trinitarian concept. I suppose it's because I tend to think of things from a 3D material viewpoint.

The Trinity doctrine was formalized at the Ecumenical Councils of Nicea (325) and Constantinople (AD 381). The word Trinity doesn't appear in scripture, and there are scriptures that both support and reject it, depending on the bias of the reader. It's been postulated that the doctrine arose to satisfy both the old testaments "one God," with the New Testaments references to Jesus as God (although Jesus never called himself God).

Following the mystical path doesn't require belief in the Trinity although Catholic and Orthodox mystics generally, but not always, used Trinitarian language. Certainly, it hasn't been a requirement for the many non Christian mystics.

Jesus Christ

Knowledge of God has grown through human history. Anciently God was experienced through his immanence in the world, through His grace, or energies (Orthodox). Ancients felt His benevolence as He provided plants, animals, soil, and rain, as well as the beauty of the natural world but because God was mostly experienced impersonally He was regarded as harsh, with exact judgment.

There were only a few instances in the Old Testament where man saw the personal aspect of God, Moses being one. Then, just as now, a personal relationship with God cannot be *obtained*, it has to be *given*.

Foretelling the coming of the Christ to earth, the Chinese Lao Tzu (600 BC), without an Abrahamic background, wrote:

"The Great Tao (God) clothes and feeds all things,
Yet does not claim them as its own.
All things return to it,
Yet it claims no leadership over them."
The Tao does not show greatness,
And is therefore truly great.
It does not contend, and yet it overcomes." Tao Teh Ching

Note the use of the word "it" instead of "He," as Lao Tzu had only experienced God impersonally.

Jesus Christ (the anointed one) is the historical human, who according to traditional Christianity is God incarnate.

Everything changed when Jesus was born. When Christ took on a tabernacle of flesh he was self less, poor, humble, reserved, and loving. He had no earthly authority but took upon Himself the role of servant.

"But made himself of no reputation (died to self), and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross." (Phil 2:7-8)

Salvation through a soap analogy

Soap helps oil and grease disperse in water. Water, symbolic of the spiritual world is a polar molecule (2 hydrogen, 1 oxygen). Grease and oil are non polar molecules symbolic of the material world.

Normally oil and water won't mix. That's our condition, without some help our human material nature is incompatible with the spirit world. Soap molecules have two distinct polarity regions, polar on one end, and nonpolar on the other end allowing one end of a soap molecule to attach to a water molecule, while the other end attaches to the nonpolar oil molecule. Thus the oil and water are bound together.

In an analogous way, Christ has two polarity regions, the spiritual, and the human / material. Because of this He binds the spiritual with the material. He does this not just on an individual level but for all of creation. But, just as with soap we need to "apply" Christ in our lives.

"This union is a mutual participation in the qualities and mode of existence of each other, a mutual perichoresis, or inter penetration, that unites God and the human being without destroying their identity. This penetration takes place on behalf of the whole of creation through an act of mutual love, sustained by God's grace and the freely responding human will. In effect, both God and the human being go out of themselves to reach toward the other, finding union in love." (Christian Mystics)

Christ as instructor and mediator -

"Like Clement, Origen conceived of the purpose of Christian life as the *immediate* knowledge of God by the believer, a goal hampered by the natural inability of humans to

comprehend God, for 'God is incomprehensible, and incapable of being measured... whose nature cannot be grasped or seen by the power of any human understanding, even the purest and brightest.'... Nonetheless, the situation was not hopeless, for God sent his divine Logos, his Son, as a mediator to instruct humans in the knowledge of divine matters." (Mystics of the Christian Tradition - Fanning)

We (and the Earth) shall be Healed

Christ facilitates our continual healing through His sacrifice on the cross.

"Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed." (Isaiah 53:4-5)

And, through Him the world will be healed.

"And if anyone should be sinning, we have an Entreater with the Father, Jesus Christ, the Just. And He is the propitiatory shelter concerned with our sins, yet not concerned with ours only, but concerned with the whole world also." (1 John 2:1-2 Concordant Version)

Mystics see Christ's sacrifice as the transformative event that makes healing and inward union possible. Christ's dying on the cross was His ultimate action of dying to self, by totally submitting to God. The imagery of Him dying on the cross can serve to remind us of the importance of dying to self, just as his resurrection reminds us of promised salvation.

Heaven

"In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth." Gen 1:1

Heaven has two aspects and generally suggests a "place" where transcended man can enjoy frequent communion with God and His angels.

Heaven's first aspect is outside of time and space, accessible through the higher self. Speaking of this aspect only:

"Heaven is untouched by time and place. Corporeal things have no place there, and whoever is able to read the scriptures aright is well aware that heaven contains no place... Nothing hinders the soul so much from knowing God as time and place." (The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart)

"Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you." (Luke 17:21)

The second aspect we are more familiar with is a created place where we'll eventually live.

"For, behold, I create new heavens and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind." (Isa 65:17)

"Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness." (2 Pet 3:13)

"Heaven is so vast and so wide that if I told you, you would not believe it." (The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart)

Does God live in heaven? God created heaven, and as God is fundamentally beyond all created things including heaven, God's essential being is not contained in heaven. Heaven is a state of union with God, rather than a separate thing that confines God. God is immediately present in the highest spiritual realms, including heaven.

Eckhart alludes to the different aspects of heaven:

"St. Paul was carried off into the third heaven. Observe which are the three heavens. The first is detachment from all bodily things, the second is estrangement from all imagery, and the third is a bare understanding in God without intermediary." (The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart)

This is remarkably close to steps of mortification and contemplation, where the soul detaches from the lower sensual self, then through contemplation ceases imagining God through images, and in the final step achieves unitive knowledge of God.

Ruysbroeck discusses the levels of heaven.

"Now mark well: I will show you an image of this. God has created the highest heaven, a pure and simple Radiance, which enrings and encloses all the heavens and all bodily and material things that God has ever created; for it is an *outward* dwelling-place and a kingdom of God and His saints, full of glory and eternal joy. Now since this heaven is an unmingled Radiance, there is here neither time, nor space, nor movement, nor any change; for it is immovable and unchangeable above all things." (Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage - St. John of Ruysbroeck)

Knowledge of heaven must be approached through contemplation.

The single most significant thing that will keep one out of heaven is "self" in all of its negative expressions.

"In a word, the difference between heaven and hell is, that hell is full of nothing but self-love and propriety; whereas there is not the least degree of either in heaven, nor anything but the fulfilling of God's will and seeking of His glory." (Holy Wisdom or Directions for the Prayer of Contemplation - Baker)

Which way?

"There is nothing that is nearer you than Heaven, Paradise, and Hell, unto which of them you are inclined, and to which of them you walk, to that in this lifetime you are most near: You are between both. And there is a Birth between each of them; you stand in this World between both the Gates, and you have both the Births in you: God beckons to you in the one Gate, and calls you; and the Devil beckons you in the other Gate, and calls you; with whom you go, with him you enter in. The Devil has in his Hand Power, Honour, Pleasure, and [worldly] Joy, and the Root of these is Death and Hell Fire. On the contrary, God has in his Hands, Crosses, Persecution, Misery, Poverty, Ignominy, and Sorrow; and the Root of these is a Fire also, and in the Fire there is a Light, and in the Light the Virtue, and in the Virtue the Paradise, and in the Paradise the Angels, and among the Angels Joy." (Three Principles - Jacob Boehme)

Hell

There's a general fear of winding up in this place, but is it really a place?

Mystics generally don't write much about hell's characteristics. Rather than being a place, mystics view hell as an existential state of the soul's separation from God. The soul experiences pain as it realizes it's distance from God. Suffering "in hell" results from the soul's rejection of God's love rather than God inflicting torment. God's love is primary, and hell results from rejecting that love.

Views vary regarding the ability of a soul to repent and escape hell. Some mystics leave the possibility open, including some Orthodox who allow for post-mortem repentance emphasizing God's mercy.

Catholic's and Protestants generally believe the state of the soul is fixed at death, that the soul's orientation is permanently fixed toward or away from God, and isn't something that can be changed.

After death the soul exists in a different mode. The dynamics that enabled growth in time such as experience, sacrament and community are absent, so growth and repentance are no longer available in the same way. Repentance requires humility, self-knowledge, and a turning-toward God, and these depend on relationships and opportunity to love others. Also, if the soul is hardened, repentance isn't possible, according to many traditions.

"For Love possesses heaven, and dwells in itself, which is dwelling in heaven; but that which is called I, this vile self-hood possesses the world and worldly things; and dwells also in itself, which is dwelling in hell, because this is the very root of hell itself. " (The Way to Christ - Boehme)

"For the more a man followeth after his own self-will and self-will groweth in him, the farther off is he from God, the true Good, for nothing burneth in hell but self-will." (Theologia Germanica)

So hell is likely not a place, but a state of mind/soul. The state of our soul depends largely on how well we practiced mortification, death of ego, and love of God.

"The question is asked, what burns in hell. The masters generally say it is self-will." (The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart)

Part 9: Practical Spirituality

Love

Love others as God loves us.

"Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love. In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him." (1 John 4:7-9)

We do not generate true love within ourselves. Rather love stems from God and flows through us. We can't directly teach ourselves how to love. If we "try" to love it's often an empty imitation

unless God is involved. We open the door so that love can flow when we serve others, as Gods love will naturally flow through unless blocked by the lower self. Negative thoughts and emotions stop love that should be coming through transparently. Once there is no self love can flow freely.

A spiritual person loves as he recognizes God in others and in the world. Love a person not for what he is, but because he is.

Love God. Being able to love is an attribute essential to reaching God and *knowing* God. "We can only love what we know, and we can never know completely what we do not love."
(Huxley)

Normal human love, sensible love can't unite the soul with the Divine Ground because love involving emotion or the senses intensifies selfness.

Man first loves himself, his flesh, which can't appreciate anything beyond itself. Then realizing that he cannot exist by himself he begins to seek after and love God selfishly, viewing Him as something necessary for his welfare. After worshiping, and getting to know God, he starts to find God beautiful. Then he loves God not for what he can get from God, but because he knows God.

"Should anyone ask what God is, this is what I should now say, that God is love, and in fact so loveable that all creatures seek to love His loveableness, whether they know it or not, or whether they wish to or not." (The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart)

Spiritual Knowledge

The world is largely against truth because truth doesn't play well in the machine we call modern society. Truth usually doesn't sell products or political philosophy's.

"Nothing true is popular, nothing popular is true" (K. Wheeler)

Ego is the enemy of spiritual truth, it prevents it's reception and corrupts its meaning.

External religion is centered in the mind, and in the modern world most aren't trained to perceive the spirit.

Spiritual people recognize that God is manifest in all humans and throughout creation.

Spiritual truth is relatively simple, but can only barely be perceived by the mind. Thinking is a good start, and you have to start somewhere, but ultimate spiritual truth is perceived in the higher Self, beyond time, mind and thinking. The mind cannot receive or process spiritual truth, yet can, because of preconceived notions or teachings, limit reception of spiritual truth by the higher Self. Even book learned spiritual teachings can hamper the soul's learning.

"Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth." (2 Tim 4:7)

Proof of the spiritual comes from within, not from without. Spiritual truth can only be known not thought, and it originates outside of time and space. It can be perceived in the brain, but doesn't originate there.

If you use what you've been given spiritually, more will be given.

"His lord said unto him, Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things." (Matt 25:21)

'You' will never transcend because transcension can't happen until death of the lower self 'you' has occurred. And, it's not something you could do anyway. All you can do is prepare and let God meet you. The end is not the goal, following the Path and loving God is.

Spiritual Experiences

You may have spiritual experiences occasionally, and especially early on the Path to help you get going. Spiritual experiences are not to be sought. If they come by themselves be grateful. Experiences are a gift, not a reward and you need to maintain a humble attitude with respect to them.

Many have physically experienced the risen Lord and a sweet smell of flowers often accompanies His visits.

Spiritual experiences point toward the higher reality, to show us that it exists. They're encouragement to proceed with spiritual development. Goodness doesn't come from the experience but from the work you do that follows. Attachment to spiritual experiences is as wrong as other attachments.

The purpose of meditation is not to have spiritual experiences. It's to prepare the mind for contemplation, through which unitive knowledge springs.

Attributes of an Enlightened Soul

An enlightened soul is transparent without a trace of ego or self. Enlightenment isn't a personal attribute, and possessing enlightenment is contradictory.

An enlightened soul:

- Loves and knows God.
- Shows unconditional compassion and loving kindness.
- Has deep inner peace and heightened spiritual awareness.
- Isn't self centered, because there is no self, at least not one with ego.
- Is calm, wise, and has experienced God directly.
- Is humble and lacks all need for validation.
- Is unattached to things, thoughts, or outcomes.
- Has integrity, and lives simply with deep inward joy.
- Radiates calm, clarity, healing, and reveals transparently the presence of God.
- Perceives interconnection with all life and the Divine running through it.
- Acts from clear intuitive insight more than reasoning.
- Exhibits patience, forbearance, forgiveness.
- Is active in the world without being attached to the world.

The enlightened soul is perfected in and through Christ.

Accounts of Mystical Experiences

To be added, time permitting...

Catholic

Orthodox

Protestant

Other

J. Trevor

"In the loveliness of the morning, and the beauty of the hills and valleys, I soon lost my sense of sadness and regret. For nearly an hour I walked along the road to the 'Cat and Fiddle,' and then returned. On the way back, suddenly, without warning, I felt that I was in Heaven—an inward state of peace and joy and assurance indescribably intense, accompanied with a sense of being bathed in a warm glow of light, as though the external condition had brought about the internal effect—a feeling of having passed beyond the body, though the scene around me stood out more clearly and as if nearer to me than before, by reason of the illumination in the midst of which I seemed to be placed. This deep emotion lasted, though with decreasing strength, until I reached home, and for some time after, only gradually passing away." (My Quest for God - J. Trevor 1897 - Varieties -)

Unknown Soldier

"I was in perfect health: we were on our sixth day of tramping, and in good training. We had come the day before from Sixt to Trient by Buet. I felt neither fatigue, hunger, nor thirst, and my state of mind was equally healthy. I had had at Forlaz good news from home; I was subject to no anxiety, either near or remote, for we had a good guide, and there was not a shadow of uncertainty about the road we should follow. I can best describe the condition in which I was by calling it a state of equilibrium. When all at once I experienced a feeling of being raised above myself, I felt the presence of God—I tell of the thing just as I was conscious of it— as if his goodness and his power were penetrating me altogether. The throb of emotion was so violent that I could barely tell the boys to pass on and not wait for me. I then sat down on a stone, unable to stand any longer, and my eyes overflowed with tears. I thanked God that in the course of my life he had taught me to know him, that he sustained my life and took pity both on the insignificant creature and on the sinner that I was. I begged him ardently that my life might be consecrated to the doing of his will. I felt his reply, which was that I should do his will from day to day in humility and poverty, leaving him, the Almighty God, to be judge of whether I should some time be called to bear witness more conspicuously. Then, slowly, the ecstasy left my heart; that is, I felt that God had withdrawn the communion which he had granted, and I was able to walk on, but very slowly, so strongly was I still possessed by the interior emotion. Besides, I had wept uninterruptedly for several minutes, my eyes were swollen, and I did not wish my companions to see me. The state of ecstasy may have lasted four or five minutes, although it seemed at the time to last much

longer. My comrades waited for me ten minutes at the cross of Barine, but I took about twenty-five or thirty minutes to join them, for as well as I can remember, they said that I had kept them back for about half an hour. The impression had been so profound that in climbing slowly the slope I asked myself if it were possible that Moses on Sinai could have had a more intimate communication with God." (The Varieties of Religious Experience - James)

Dr. R. M. Bucke

"I had spent the evening in a great city, with two friends, reading and discussing poetry and philosophy. We parted at midnight. I had a long drive in a hansom to my lodging. My mind, deeply under the influence of the ideas, images, and emotions called up by the reading and talk, was calm and peaceful. I was in a state of quiet, almost passive enjoyment, not actually thinking, but letting ideas, images, and emotions flow of themselves, as it were, through my mind. All at once, without warning of any kind, I found myself wrapped in a flame-colored cloud. For an instant I thought of fire, an immense conflagration somewhere close by in that great city; the next, I knew that the fire was within myself. Directly afterward there came upon me a sense of exultation, of immense joyousness accompanied or immediately followed by an intellectual illumination impossible to describe. Among other things, I did not merely come to believe, but I saw that the universe is not composed of dead matter, but is, on the contrary, a living Presence; I became conscious in myself of eternal life. It was not a conviction that I would have eternal life, but a consciousness that I possessed eternal life then; I saw that all men are immortal; that the cosmic order is such that without any peradventure all things work together for the good of each and all; that the foundation principle of the world, of all the worlds, is what we call love, and that the happiness of each and all is in the long run absolutely certain. The vision lasted a few seconds and was gone; but the memory of it and the sense of the reality of what it taught has remained during the quarter of a century which has since elapsed. I knew that what the vision showed was true. I had attained to a point of view from which I saw that it must be true. That view, that conviction, I may say that consciousness, has never, even during periods of the deepest depression, been lost." (Cosmic Consciousness: a study in the evolution of the human Mind - Bucke)

Addendum: Christianity

I tried different Christian churches, all relatively small. I found most to be warm and engaging. Handshakes between members and visitors were common. Doctrine was straight out of the bible (according to each denominations interpretation). I enjoyed a Bible Baptist church whose policy is to help the hearing impaired by providing signing at each service. Services were traditional with beautiful music and hymns. I've attended a nice Lutheran church, the liturgy of which I enjoyed.

This writing is the result of my search, and failure to find a religion that checks all the boxes. Having a religion is important for most people as it offers hope for salvation and social connection. Most spiritually oriented Christian religions encourage people to reach towards God via scripture reading, prayer, and service. These are all beneficial, and membership in a religion is good as long as one has open eyes to its limitations.

What follows are some of my notes on Protestantism, Catholicism, and Eastern Orthodoxy.

The Bible

It's true that things have been left out of the bible (including the apocrypha), but it's not true that the bible is inaccurate for the most part. Tens of thousands of early copies exist having very little difference from the originals. Modern versions of the bible (including for the most part the KJV) are precise, and accurately translate the initial texts. Also recommended are the NASB1995, and for the most original text, Codex Sinaiticus. The "Concordant Version" of the Old and New Testaments are good.

Issues within Christianity

Here are some topics / issues within Christianity.

Sola Scriptura

Sola Scriptura (solo in Greek = "only"). There are five solae in the Protestant Reformation: Sola Scriptura: "Scripture alone," Sola fide: "faith alone," Sola gratia: "grace alone," Sola Christo: "Christ alone," and Soli Deo gloria: "to the glory of God alone." Sola Scriptura is the view shared by most Protestants, that the Bible is the sole infallible authority for Christian faith and practice. They reject any Divine authority based on sacred tradition. It means that a Christian is solely responsible for determining God's word by his own interpretation of the bible. In practice however interpretation of scripture is done by leaders of the local church and individual deviation from established interpretation leads to being distanced by the congregation.

"Protestant pastors have long realized (in fact, Luther and Calvin realized it) that, although they must preach the doctrine of private judgment to ensure their own right to preach, they must prohibit the exercise of this right in practice for others." (James Akin, *The Practical Problems of Sola Scriptura* 1996).

While the bible is accurate, the interpretation of it varies widely. Protestantism has allowed the church to be divided into hundreds of denominations according to local interpretation of scripture. Protestants are free to come to different and sometimes erroneous conclusions. Attempts are made to justify contradictory positions by use of scripture. This is not to say that

the doctrines of Catholicism and Orthodoxy are free from error, but they are mostly consistent within those religions.

Original Sin

While most denominations believe the doctrine of Original Sin, some do not. This is generally a small issue unless you're an infant.

Faith vs. the Mosaic Law

In Galatians 3, Paul discusses justification through faith in Christ vs. attempting to be perfect with respect to the Mosaic law.

Faith vs. Works

There are different types of works. In Galatians 3 Paul contrasts faith in Christ with following the Mosaic law "For as many are of the works of the law are under the curse, for it is written 'Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law'." Following the entirety of the external law is impossible so those works come to naught as far as securing salvation.

The second type of works are those that well meaning people do for others through charity or which otherwise improve the spiritual / religious landscape. Christians stress faith but also acknowledge these works are a fruit of faith.

The third type of works are those done internally. It can hardly be disputed that work done on improving the inner man is essential for spirituality. Catholics and Orthodox emphasize this type of work.

Rapture

Pre-tribulation rapture, post-tribulation rapture, or no rapture is a favorite point of discussion among Christians.

Preterism

A minor Christian view that many prophetic Bible passages were fulfilled in the first century, rather than predicting distant future events.

Baptism and the Holy Ghost / Holy Spirit

Is baptism a saving ordinance (sacrament), or does it just signify a persons conversion through faith that has already occurred?

Latter Day Saints view baptism by immersion as a required step to receive the remission of sins, the gift of the Holy Ghost and entry into the kingdom of God. It is the first of the saving ordinances. Faith should precede baptism but baptism is essential. The Gift of the Holy Ghost is conferred immediately after baptism.

Most Christian churches baptize using the Trinitarian formula ("I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit"), even though these verses in the New Testament are non Trinitarian:

"Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost" (Acts 2:38)

".. only they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 8:16)

"Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death?" (Rom 6:3)

"And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord " (Acts 10:48)

"When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.' (Acts 19:5)

Traditional Christian churches believe that baptisms done in another church are acceptable as long as the Trinitarian formula was used (interesting considering the above) and the person believed in the Trinity.

The End Times

Does end time scripture like Revelations apply to the earth as a whole, or to each individual, or to both?

Being "Saved"

Many Christians believe that a person has to have a "saved" experience, a particular moment where they confessed their sins and were "saved." If a person can't pinpoint that experience his validity as a Christian is questioned. One Christian flatly told me that if I couldn't identify my saved experience I would spend eternity burning in hell. There is also John Calvin's doctrine of "Once Saved Always Saved."

Christ and Paul

Jesus and Paul were both Jewish, Paul was also a Pharisee. Both had apocalyptic views, suggesting the end would come soon, within their generation. Both felt that scrupulous observance of the finer points of Jewish Law was unnecessary, but that love of one's neighbor and faith were essential.

Jesus primarily taught the Jews, although his message was for all. Jesus taught that faith should be in the goodness of God and that one must follow His teachings and the basic principles of the Jewish Law.

Paul extended his version of the gospel to the entire world. Paul taught that following the Jewish Law wasn't needed, instead that one must believe solely in the death, resurrection and blood of Jesus, and that salvation comes only to those who die with Christ by being baptized.

The Christianity that we know today in it's essence and structure is mostly Paul's teachings.

The Atonement, Transformative or Transactional?

From a transformative standpoint Jesus showed us the way whereby we too can transcend the mortal plane, the atonement being viewed at a deeper level with Jesus dying to self and giving Himself fully over to the Father. Jesus taught individual transformation.

Paul preached a transactional atonement for individuals, a Penal Substitutionary transaction where Jesus paid the price for our sins.

In the first case, we like Jesus, need to do our own work, in the second case Jesus did it for us. Which makes more sense from a spiritual growth standpoint for individuals?

Regardless of how you look at it, Jesus Christ is the essential bridge between God the Father and man. He enlivened the world and made God personal to us.

Pre-existence

No major Christian religion believes in the concept of pre-existence, and a belief in it isn't required for following the path. The book "When Souls Had Wings" tries to address the subject.

Saving the Soul

As far as ability to "save", Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox differ in authority, ordinances, priesthood and doctrine. Each tradition offers the follower a start at spirituality. Both Latter Day Saints and Catholics regard their church as the "only true church" and disallow ordinances from the other. Protestants are more lenient, especially since they generally don't believe in "saving ordinances," instead emphasizing being saved by faith in Christ.

Protestantism vs. Catholicism and Orthodoxy

There's a huge divide between Protestants, Catholics and Orthodox with quite a bit of arguing back and forth on the heresies of the others. All three make good points.

Protestantism

The Protestant Reformation of the 16th century marked the separation by Protestants from the Catholic church. Protests against Catholicism began with Martin Luther calling for debate on indulgences. The printing press accelerated broadcast of discontent. With the exception of Latter Day Saints, Catholics and Eastern Orthodox most every Christian church falls under Protestantism.

Protestantism emerged in the 16th century when Martin Luther and others protested practices of the Roman Catholic Church.

Protestants believe that the Bible alone (as different individuals or groups interpret it) is the ultimate authority and reject the "church tradition" of Catholicism.

Protestantism is decentralized and varies widely by denomination. Protestants reject hierarchical church structures. Leadership is often based on education. They view the Pope as a religious leader without authority over them.

Faith alone salvation comes entirely through faith in Jesus Christ, not through works or sacraments. Grace is given freely by God and cannot be earned.

Mary is respected but not venerated. They do not pray to her or saints, viewing these practices as idolatry.

Protestants generally have two "sacraments", baptism and communion (the Lord's Supper). Sacraments do not convey grace in themselves but are outward signs of inward grace.

They view communion as a symbolic act commemorating Christ's sacrifice, some believing it to have a spiritual component. Bread and wine remain bread and wine.

Baptists view baptism as an outward declaration of already existing personal faith. It does not itself confer salvation. Belief and faith must precede baptism and salvation is through faith alone. For adult believers, baptism by immersion is required. Infants are not baptized as they can not yet profess faith. Baptists believe the Holy Spirit is received by the person at the moment of personal faith (the "saved" moment). No formal laying on of hands is required.

Methodists believe that baptism is grace that both signifies and participates in the believer's salvation, personal faith remaining essential. Infants are baptized as a sign of God's grace, while adults affirm their own faith. The Holy Spirit is imparted during the baptismal sacrament for infants and adults. Adults may later receive a subsequent confirmation with the minister praying and laying on hands.

Lutherans believe that baptism creates and strengthens faith. They have a confirmation service in which the pastor prays and may lay hands on the person asking the Holy Spirit to strengthen faith.

Calvinists believe it's a sign and seal of the covenant and points to the believer's union with Christ through personal faith. Infants are baptized as a sign of the covenant, with the expectation they will later profess faith.

Protestants affirm the priesthood of all believers, that all Christians have direct access to God and do not need a priest as an intermediary. Pastors are their teachers and leaders and offer personal counsel.

Protestants view icons and images as potential distractions from worship of God and not objects of veneration.

Protestants generally reject the doctrine of purgatory, at death people either go to heaven or hell.

Protestants believe humanity is wholly affected by sin and that man is fundamentally a sinner inheriting his sinful nature from Adam and Eve. Sins are a matter of individual conscience and brings guilt. Unrepented sin results in eternal separation from God. Repenting of sin is an inward process not requiring confession to the pastor. Acceptance of and faith in Christ's atonement and following the commandments are necessary for salvation ("salvage"). The sinner may get help or counsel from a pastor but he's not required to do so.

Ultimately, because He love us, God forgives the repentant sinner because He wants the soul to progress and reunite with Him. Mercy before justice, if asked for, and whenever possible. The person perceives this forgiveness as love, with a tremendous weight being lifted off the shoulders.

Forgiveness is received by trusting Jesus Christ—his life, death, and resurrection as the basis for pardon and justification by faith. Sincere contrition and confession of sin to God are required along with turning away from the sin. Personal prayer and partaking of communion are part of the process. A Christian pastor will pray for and with the person, offer counsel, and may pronounce God's forgiveness liturgically, understood to be God's pardon received by faith, not of the pastor's own power.

Church tradition isn't important for Protestants unless it is grounded in scripture, and most Protestant denominations allow clergy to marry.

Protestants practice confession directly to God and do not require confession to a priest. They believe forgiveness of sins comes directly through faith in Christ.

Protestants study the early Christian councils for historical and theological value only. They inherited the Catholic Filioque belief that the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son.

Protestants view all vocations and marriage as equally valid callings from God.

Worship varies widely by denomination, most emphasize preaching and Bible study in both traditional and contemporary services. Music, prayer, and communion are important but secondary to the sermon.

Catholicism

The Catholic Church traces its lineage directly to the apostolic church through Rome, claiming unbroken succession from St. Peter.

It accepts sacred scripture and sacred tradition as authoritative sources of revelation. The Pope, as the successor of St. Peter, holds supreme teaching authority (magisterium) in the Church. The Bible is interpreted within the framework tradition and current teaching.

Catholicism has a hierarchical structure with the Pope at the head,. The Pope is considered the vicar of Christ on earth and has supreme authority over doctrine and discipline. followed by cardinals, bishops, and priests. The Pope is considered infallible when speaking on matters of faith and doctrine.

Salvation comes through faith in Christ combined with good works and participation in the sacraments. Grace is mediated through the Church and its seven sacraments.

Mary is venerated as the Mother of God and is believed to have been conceived without sin (Immaculate Conception) and taken bodily into heaven (Assumption). Catholics ask Mary to intercede with God on their behalf.

The seven sacraments recognized by Catholics are: Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Penance, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, and Matrimony. Sacraments are believed to convey grace in themselves and are essential channels through which God's grace flows to believers.

Catholics believe in transubstantiation, that the bread and wine are literally transformed into the body and blood of Christ, though they retain the appearance of bread and wine. This is considered a miraculous change.

Catholics view baptism as a sacrament that confers saving grace. Through baptism the believer is incorporated into the Body of Christ, original sin is remitted, and the Holy Spirit is received. Adult baptism is generally by pouring water over the head or by single immersion. Infant baptism by pouring makes the infant a member of the Church regardless of later professing faith. Immediately after baptism, the priest prays the "prayer of confirmation" by laying on of hands and anointing with holy oil.

Catholics maintain a hierarchical priesthood with ordained priests who serve as intermediaries between God and the people. Priests are celibate and are believed to benefit from apostolic succession.

Catholics use religious art and statues in churches and homes as aids to devotion, but are not in themselves worshiped. Veneration is directed to the person or saint depicted, not the image itself.

Catholics believe in purgatory—a state of purification after death where souls are cleansed of venial sins and the effects of sin before entering heaven. Prayers and masses for the dead are believed to help souls in purgatory.

Catholics believe in original sin, the inherited loss of original holiness. Beyond that, sins committed by men and women fall into two categories. Mortal sin, or sin of a grave matter, involves full knowledge and deliberate consent and severs communion with God. Venial sin involves lesser offenses that compromise the relationship with God. Mortal sins are a judicial matter within Catholicism requiring intervention by a priest. In Catholicism the priest acts as a mediator, in the person of Christ. In that role he offers absolution within the sacrament of reconciliation. In this process, the priest can forgive a mortal sin which otherwise would doom the person to eternal damnation.

Catholicism requires contrition, sincere sorrow for having offended God, conversion of the heart by turning away from sin and toward God, and performing penance (prayer, almsgiving, fasting) assigned by the priest in the sacrament of reconciliation.

Catholics highly value Sacred Tradition as equal to Scripture in authority. Tradition includes the teachings of the Church Fathers and papal pronouncements.

The Catholic Church requires celibacy for priests, viewing it as a spiritual discipline that allows priests to be fully devoted to their ministry.

Catholics practice sacramental confession (reconciliation) with a priest, who has the authority to absolve sins in Christ's name. Regular confession is encouraged, especially before receiving Communion.

Catholics recognize all ecumenical councils and their decisions are binding on the faithful.

Catholics affirm the Filioque clause as part of doctrine which means that the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son, emphasizing the unity and equality of all three persons of the Trinity.

Catholicism has a strong monastic tradition with orders such as Benedictines, Franciscans, and Dominicans. Monasticism is viewed as a higher calling, though all vocations in life are considered holy. Monks and nuns play an important role in the Church's spiritual and intellectual life.

Catholic worship centers on the Mass (Eucharist), which follows a set liturgical structure. Mass is highly formal and ritualistic, with specific prayers, readings, and ceremonies. Incense, vestments, and sacred music are integral to worship.

Not asking for Mary's intercession does not make someone less of a good Catholic. Marian devotion (praying to Mary, asking her intercession) is a recommended Catholic practice but not a requirement for salvation or being a faithful Catholic. The Church teaches Mary's role as model and intercessor, and encourages Marian devotion as a means to grow closer to Christ—but devotion is voluntary. Priests and spiritual directors typically respect different devotional practices and encourage what helps a person grow in holiness.

Eastern Orthodox

Orthodoxy claims apostolic succession through the Eastern patriarchs and developed distinctly in the Byzantine and Orthodox Christian world.

The Orthodox church emphasizes the authority of the early Church Fathers, particularly from the first seven ecumenical councils. It rejects papal supremacy but respects the role of bishops and ecumenical councils. Authority is not centralized as it is in Catholicism.

Leadership is decentralized with leadership shared among patriarchs in Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem, with no single leader equivalent to the Pope. Decisions are made through ecumenical councils and consensus among bishops. Bishops are highly respected as successors of the apostles. Rome's claim to universal jurisdiction is rejected, the split with Rome occurred in 1054 over papal authority claims.

Salvation is understood as deification, becoming united with God and sharing in His divine life. Orthodoxy emphasizes the role of grace and the sacraments (mysteries) but also personal transformation and sanctification. Salvation is seen as a process of spiritual growth and union with God. The sacraments are termed mysteries in Orthodoxy because they point to something infinitely greater than what humans can readily understand.

Mary is highly honored and venerated as the Mother of God, but not worshiped. Saints are venerated and their intercession is sought, but worship is reserved for God alone. Icons of Mary and saints are central to Orthodox worship and spiritual practice.

Eastern Orthodox recognize seven mysteries (sacraments): Baptism, Chrismation, Eucharist, Penance, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, and Matrimony. Mysteries convey grace. They are means of encountering the divine and experiencing God's presence.

Eastern Orthodox believe in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist but do not define the mechanism of change as precisely as Catholics do. They use the term "metabole" (change) rather than transubstantiation. The Eucharist is central to Orthodox worship and is received frequently by the faithful.

Orthodox baptism is similar to Catholicism however water immersion is required, and is done three times (trine) once for each part of the prayer. This late practice in Orthodox fits the Trinitarian formula.

Eastern Orthodox maintain apostolic succession and an ordained priesthood, deacons, priests, and bishops, but the priesthood is seen as a ministry rather than an overriding authority.

Members of the Orthodox church place great theological and spiritual significance on icons, which are windows to the divine and aids to prayer. Venerating icons (showing them reverence through bowing, kissing, incense) is an essential part of Orthodox worship and spirituality, and is thus sacramental.

Eastern Orthodox do not believe in purgatory but in a state of purification and growth after death. They pray for the dead and believe prayers can help departed souls, but the afterlife is less defined than in Catholicism.

Orthodox do not believe in original sin except for an inherited propensity and wounded nature. Humans are created in the image of God and that image is the basis of communion. Sin is a spiritual sickness that impairs the ability to commune with God. Sin is rooted in disordered desires and self centeredness. Sin affects both the individual and the world. For Orthodox sin is not a judicial matter, however the priest can offer counsel. The goal is healing through repentance and restoration, not punishment. The Eucharist and other sacraments assist the healing process.

Eastern Orthodox deeply respect the tradition of the early church, particularly the teachings of the Church Fathers and the decisions of the seven ecumenical councils. Tradition is understood

as the living experience and teaching of the Church throughout history, inseparable from scripture.

Orthodox priests can marry before ordination, and most parish priests are married. Bishops are normally celibate. Marriage is viewed as a holy sacrament.

Eastern Orthodox practice confession (penance) with a priest, but it is understood as spiritual guidance and healing rather than a pronouncement of absolution as it is with Catholics.

Eastern Orthodox recognize the first seven ecumenical councils (up to 787 CE) as fully authoritative and binding.

Eastern Orthodox believe the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father alone (without Filioque), with the Son's role understood as one through whom the Spirit is sent, but not as an originating source.

Eastern Orthodox monasticism is deeply valued. Monks and nuns are highly respected, and monasteries are centers of spiritual life, theological learning, and prayer. Monasticism is seen as a way of pursuing theosis (union with God).

Eastern Orthodox worship is highly liturgical and sacramental, centered on the Divine Liturgy (Eucharist). Worship is characterized by rich symbolism, icons, incense, chanting, and ancient liturgical forms. The liturgy is understood as a foretaste of heaven. Worship emphasizes beauty, mystery, and the transcendence of God.

Eastern Orthodox eschatology affirms the Second Coming, resurrection, and final judgment but focus is on living in relationship with God and the hope of theosis (union with God) both in this life and the life to come.

Suggested Reading

In suggested order:

The Perennial Philosophy - Huxley, essential easy to read all around treatment of subject

Essentials of Mysticism - Evelyn Underhill, large comprehensive book, well worth getting

Practical Mysticism - Evelyn Underhill, excellent, sometimes combined with above

Christian Mystics - Ursula King, a must have. Inexpensive used on eBay

Christ the Eternal Tao - Hieromonk Damascene - second half of book is great

The Divine Within - Huxley

The Greatest Achievement in Life - Five Traditions of Mysticism

The Imitation of Christ - Thomas Kempis

The Life of St. Teresa of Avila

Bibliography

This listing is heavily Orthodox and Catholic weighted, not because of bias, but because the majority of Christian Mystics were from those traditions.

Eastern Orthodox had monastic traditions that institutionalized contemplative prayer, and mortification. They passed contemplative methods down through centuries.

Catholic religious orders had structured prayer, scholarship, spiritual directors, covenants and monestaries that enabled consistent practice and devotion.

Protestant traditions had little structure and produced few mystics.

Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage - St. John of Ruysbroeck

Ascent of Mount Carmel - St. John of the Cross

Cloud of Unknowing - Anon

**** Christ the Eternal Tao - Hieromonk Damascene

**** Christian Mystics - Ursula King

** Concordant Literal New Testament - Concordant Publishing (also OT)

Dark Night of the Soul - St. John of the Cross

Dionysius the Areopagite - On the Divine Names and the Mystical Theology - C. E. Colt

Divine Indwelling - Woodward Brown

Dying To Self - William Law

**** Essentials of Mysticism - Evelyn Underhill

Evagrius Ponticus (Early Church Fathers)

Fathers of the Desert VOL-I & II

* Four Witnesses - Rod Bennett

I Am That - Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj

* Inner Christianity - Richard Smoley

Introduction to Carmelite Spirituality of the Cloister - Carmelite Monks

Introduction to the Devout Life - St. Francis de Sales

***** King James Version of the Bible

Life of St. Teresa of Jesus, of The Order of Our Lady of Carmel - St. Teresa of Avila

Life and Works of St. Bernard

*** Meister Eckhart's Sermons - Johannes Eckhart

* Meeting the Masters - William Wildblood

Nature and Grace - Thomas Aquinas

Pensees - Blaise Pascal

*** Practical Mysticism - Evelyn Underhill

Sayings of the Desert Fathers

Spiritual Canticle - St John of the Cross

St. Bernard of Clairvaux - On Loving God

The Ascent of Mount Carmel - St. John of the Cross - Carmelite Monks

*** The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart

The Complete Works of Saint Augustine

The Complete Works of Origen

The Complete Works of Pseudo-Dionysius

The Dialogue of St. Catherine of Siena

The Divine Indwelling - William Law

*** The Divine Within - Huxley

The Essential Plotinus

The Experience of God Vol 1 - Dumitru Staniloae

*** The Greatest Achievement in Life - Five Traditions of Mysticism

** The Imitation of Christ - Thomas Kempis

*** The Interior Castle - St. Teresa - Carmelite Monks

The Journal of George Fox

** The Life of St. Teresa of Avila - Carmelite Monks

The Life of St. Teresa of Jesus, of the Order of Our Lady of Carmel

The Light Within - Thomas Kelly

**** The Perennial Philosophy - Huxley

The Selected Mystical Writings of William Law

The Six Enneads - Plotinus

The Tibetan Book of the Dead

The Way of Perfection - St. Teresa - Carmelite Monks

Treatise on the Love of God - St. Francis de Sales

When Souls had Wings - Givens