7 “Why not ten 60-foot wells?”¹

Peter Savastano

Religious book knowledge and the heart’s religious experiences

William C. Chittick, the scholar of Islamic philosophy and Sufism, distinguishes between two kinds of spiritual knowledge: “transmitted” and “intellectual.” We acquire transmitted knowledge by studying theories about religion constructed by acknowledged experts such as theologians, religious scholars and the custodians of orthodoxy (Chittick 2007).² Transmitted knowledge, therefore, is that which we take for granted based on the claims of authority and expertise. Such received knowledge, religion based on theories, doctrines, and dogmas, has a venerable history, because the transmission of ancient traditions from master to student and from past communities to new generations is paramount in educating human beings. We learn the rules so as to conform our experiences to align with our received traditions that socialize us into the religious communities into which we are born. But this book knowledge and accumulation of theories is not enough. Inevitably, theories are never enough: theory eventually hits the wall of personal experiences. For those whose religious knowledge limits a genuine spiritual journey or quest, a breaking out of traditional and received forms, Chittick claims the acquisition of “intellectual knowledge” becomes crucial, although his term is counter to what Westerners would understand by this term as knowledge gained by reasoning and processes of abstraction. However, in the Islamic mystical tradition and in its particular emphases employed by the Sufis (Muslim mystics), intelligence is not acquired solely by the ratiocinative functions of the mind alone. “Intellectual knowledge” is learning by and through the heart (*qalb*), a knowledge formed in the crucible of one’s experiences “on the ground” as opposed to the nonturbulent flights of personally untested theories. Grounding spiritual experiences are attained (hopefully) by practices through which we write our own books. In Islamic mysticism, the intellect is the “heart,” the core of a person’s religious and spiritual self where experiences override theories to produce deeper truths.

I am an academic, an anthropologist of religion and consciousness by training, forced by my guild to teach my students traditional concepts and theories rather than to transmit what I have learned about being human and religious through my life's actual experiences. I know how to write and speak about the Great Mystery (God) conventionally in ways all scholars in my field would approve. It has taken me years to realize that I teach my students best as I learned best. I help them to trust their own experiences so that they can confidently test for themselves the theories we discuss in class. They must not regurgitate for me what has been written and said. Instead, they learn best when they are free to explore the viability of theories within the context of their own lives and experiences. As the Quaker saying goes: "Jesus said this, Paul said that, George Fox says this, but what do you say?" In the light of these received traditions, who are you? Let your "heart" be critical. What's your perspective on these theories from where you actually stand? My students must learn, as I have struggled to learn, that in the face of religious traditions I must "hold my ground" and realize that, in the end, as Thomas Merton wrote, "only experience counts."

A foremost scholar of world religious traditions, Huston Smith, during an interview in the 1990s with NPR's Terry Gross, referred to the personal path he found and made through his encounter with various religious traditions. He learned he knew these traditions best when he practiced what they preached:

Mine has been a rather peculiar history, and I don't want to leave the impression that one is in any way spiritually ahead because of this kind of incorporation. I liked what a teacher in India once said to me. If you are drilling for water, it's better to drill one 60-foot well than ten 6-foot wells. And generally speaking, I think a kind of smorgasbord cafeteria, choosing from here and there is not productive. So I would not at all put what's happened, I feel, to be feasible for me in any way ahead of where I might be if I had devoted my entire spiritual exercises to Christianity.

The authenticity of Smith's scholarship, however, is that he did dig ten 6-foot wells, metaphorically speaking, rather than one 60-foot well. The map he charted through his own spiritual journey was uniquely informative. We would not hold his career in such esteem had he not explored and been transformed by the many practices he utilized from religious traditions other than his received Christianity.

Over the course of my own 49-year spiritual journey, I, too, have heard exhortations similar to the one given to Smith by the Indian teacher. In my case the warnings to me that I should stick with one religious tradition only and not "dig ten 6-foot wells instead of one 60-foot well" has been suggested to me by a number of spiritual teachers from whom I have sought enlightenment. Over the course of my life, I have sat at the feet of teachers of my received traditions, Catholic and Eastern Orthodox, but I have also sat

with the Quakers, with a Qalandar Sufi Shaykh from Kashmir, with a Zen Buddhist teacher, with a Tibetan Buddhist Lama, and with a Tibetan Bon Lama. At first, I tried to follow their instructions but, ultimately, another deeper urge took over. Their exhortations often contradicted my life's experiences. At the same time, I have always been aware that relying on personal experience risks delusion, so for over 20 years I have maintained a relationship with a spiritual director. My spiritual guide has helped me to discern and adhere to a personal spiritual path that can ground and critique all my "inner promptings." But like Huston Smith, my spiritual journey has plumbed heights and depths. My heart knowledge has been expanded through my immersion in religious traditions other than the Christian tradition into which I was baptized and first nurtured.

I self-identify as an Episcopalian Christian who is also an ordained Episcopal Clergyperson. But I acknowledge that my being grounded in my Episcopalian tradition has been given more solid ground by my practices in various religious traditions that include the Tibetan, Zen and Bon-Buddhist, the universal Sufi tradition, strands of Native American sacred healing traditions, and diverse forms of Western Esotericism.³

In choosing to follow my inner guide, I have found it beneficial to dig many 6-foot wells rather than only one 60-foot shaft. I have allowed "the Spirit" through my experiences with other religious traditions to disclose its presence to and within me. I have engaged "the Spirit" and have become more in touch with the Divine Presence within by going outside the circle of Christian concepts, symbols, and narratives that I still must acknowledge as my native tongue, religiously speaking.

The importance of practice

In my experience, spiritual exercises have been the agents of my spiritual transformation and growth. More than my studies of doctrine and dogmas, it is practice that facilitates actual spiritual experience. Yet I am also an academic, an anthropologist, and a scholar of religious studies. As an anthropologist I conduct research by doing fieldwork, learning a society's culture by participating in it as comprehensively as possible rather than observing it from afar. I consider spiritual exercises drawn from various religious traditions as a form of doing inner fieldwork. I have learned less about "the Spirit" alive in religious traditions by hearing and so much more by tasting and feeling.

I cannot name every practice from every spiritual tradition I have engaged in and found fruitful, but it might be illustrative to list at least a few.

Christian exercises

I have practiced Centering Prayer as developed by Fr. Thomas Keating, Cynthia Bourgeault, and others.⁴ Within Eastern Orthodoxy, I pray with holy

icons and practice “prayer of the heart” as inspired by the collection of texts from the early fourth century CE to the eighteenth century known as the *Philokalia*. The English translation of this Greek and Slavic compendium exposes the *hesychastic* practice of continually reciting “the Jesus prayer,” its most complete form being “Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.” The recitation of this prayer involves bodily postures, often in the form of prostrations that accompany the recitation of the prayer. One of the aims of this practice is to redirect one’s consciousness away from its traditional Western orientation in the head and place one’s awareness into the heart. The prayer is usually synchronized with the inhalation and exhalation of the breath while using a prayer rope to count the number of repetitions of the prayer (and also as a way of engaging the body). The greatest proponent of the *hesychastic* method of prayer is Gregory Palamas (1296–1359) in his classic *The Triads* (Palamas 1983).

From the Quaker tradition, I have incorporated the practice of sitting in silent, expectant waiting on The Inner Light of Christ, or The Light Within, as more universalist Quakers refer to the divine presence immanent in human beings.

Sufism

From the Sufi tradition, I have participated in the Dances of Universal Peace and by the “turning” of the Mevlevi lineage of Sufis, popularly known as “whirling dervishes.” The Mevlevi regard Rumi as their primary *sheikh* (master) and founder. I have practiced the *Zikr* (Remembrance) of the Divine Names, of which there are traditionally 99, identified in the *Qur’an*. I have prayed the formula *La ill Allah illallahu* recited in synchronization with the breath, both in a group and individually.⁵

Buddhism

From the Vajrayana Buddhist tradition, I have practiced the *Tersar Ngondro*, translated as “Preliminary Practices.” These meditations involve the body (postures), speech (recitation of mantras), and mind (visualizations), all of which are done simultaneously and draw on the various yogas (stages of development toward enlightenment) of the rich tantric repertoire of *sadhanas* (meditation practices).⁶

My involvement with Bon-Buddhism⁷ also required the practice of a *Ngondro*. However, since my engagement with Bon-Buddhism was approximately five years, I did not do as much practice in that tradition as I did in Vajrayana Buddhism. In both lineages of Bon-Buddhism and Vajrayana Buddhism, I received many empowerments (*Wongs*), which are direct transmissions of the Buddha-mind of Enlightenment from the teacher to the student, and initiations (*Lungs*), which authorized me to engage in various meditation *sadhanas* beyond the preliminaries of the *Ngondro*.

My encounters with Zen Buddhism included sitting practice (*shikan taza*, which means "just sitting" in English) under the guidance of a Zen teacher. I received instructions during *sessi*ens (intensive sitting and walking meditation retreats) and *koan* study, that is, meditation upon a series of paradoxical sayings and their commentaries, of which the most famous is "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" (Yuasa 1981).

Shamanism

I have engaged with "shamanism," a troubled term from the perspective of the many Indigenous peoples whose sacred ritual and healing traditions have been so labeled by Western scholars. I have taken workshops and various trainings in what I would term "neo-shamanic" techniques and rituals. From neo-shamanism I have similarly employed journeying techniques as I had been taught them to engage Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and many of the saints to whom I am devoted. In as much as Tibetan Buddhism has shamanistic components, I have used Vajrayana Buddhist "visualization" techniques to visualize Christian holy personages, like Jesus, the angels, or particular Christian saints to whom I am devoted.

There are also times when my experience of the divine surpasses all concepts and metaphors. This is an experience of the apophatic nature of The Great Mystery which I describe as "the scaffolding falling away."

To realize the divine in nonanthropomorphic terms and more as dynamic, verb-like qualities or attributes, such as "The Real" (*al-Haqq*) or as Mercy or Compassion (*ar-Rahman* or *ar-Rahim*), liberates me from thinking of God as a white male with long hair and a beard. This practice of visualizing the divine or ultimate reality as energies or qualities facilitates an experience of The Great Mystery that is vibrant and active rather than as static or noun-like. To switch modes of perception in this way facilitates an encounter with ultimate reality (holy wisdom) as a way of being that is greater than one limited by human characteristics. I am also able to plummet the depths of my being where I can encounter such divine attributes or qualities as bubbling up from deep within the recesses of my consciousness. These qualities are reflections to me of what Thomas Merton referred to as *Le Point Vierge*, that place in our consciousness which intimately unites us to the Divine Presence, making it difficult to make distinctions between the divine and the human.⁸

In describing the divine as the real, as ultimate reality, and as my personal favorite, The Great Mystery,⁹ I am describing the personal, relational God of the Abrahamic traditions, but not anthropomorphically. It might seem that I am describing some impersonal force or entity much more in alignment with the nontheistic traditions such as Taoism or Buddhism, but that is not at all what I am doing. But by engaging in these non-Christian practices, I have expanded my understanding and experience of the Abrahamic God. On other levels, my engagement with Taoism and Buddhism has allowed

a personal encounter with the Great Mystery informed by contemporary physics.¹⁰

Some years ago, I had a conversation with my spiritual director about whether or not God, ultimate reality, or The Great Mystery is personal or impersonal. We agreed that ultimate reality or God manifests in both personal and impersonal modes (or sometimes simultaneously as both), analogous to particle and wave theory in contemporary physics. We agreed that we humans do not control the mode in which the “divine” is disclosed to us; nor can we control how and when such disclosure happens. Manifesting in personal mode is analogous to particle mode in physics, while manifesting in impersonal mode is akin to wave mode. It is difficult to measure or prove a subjective experience of the Great Mystery, but at various times in my life I have experienced the divine both as a deeply personal and relational presence (I/Thou) and/or as an impersonal ground or force (I/It) that is animating my own consciousness and that of all of creation simultaneously.

The downward spiral

No doubt I leave the impression that I have engaged in a rather meandering assortment of traditions in one lifetime (the very cafeteria or smorgasbord experiences Huston Smith describes and cautions against). However, my practice of the contemplative traditions of many religions has not been superficial or casual. I have studied and practiced in these various traditions over extended periods, sometimes up to 15 or 20 years consecutively. Taking this approach has prepared me for doing Theology Without Walls.

The pattern that best illustrates my inclusive religious experiences and spiritual exercises is that of a downward spiral initiated in my life as a youth of 15. Each time I have engaged with one of these traditions, I have practiced their exercises for several years at a time before moving on to another tradition. However, re-engagement does not occur with a previously engaged tradition until I have received inner instructions to do so. Each time I have engaged in another spiritual practice, I have gone deeper into it, thus making the pattern downward spiral-like. As I have spiraled down through various practices from other traditions, I have also maintained my engagement with my original Christian tradition simultaneously and interspiritually.

My engagements with various spiritual exercises have always included the study of sacred texts by drawing on many different academic disciplines; an encounter with living teachers of these traditions with whom I have studied; and an adopting of the ritual, devotional, and meditative practices that each tradition offers to the spiritual seeker.

My interspiritual approach has allowed me to learn not only the transmitted knowledge of these religious traditions but also their devotional and ethical practices that are their beating heart. Interspirituality has provided the field site by which I test a religious tradition’s transmitted knowledge through my personal experiences. I theorize and practice interspiritually so

as to taste the intellectual knowledge that is rooted in my heart and not only in my books. I have touched the kernel beyond the shell of each tradition. Aided by my spiritual director, I have discerned what spiritual practices have worked for me by years of testing and experimentation.

The scaffolding falls away

I now explore one of the most important features of this downward spiral pattern of living interspiritually. It can be identified as the experience of having “the scaffolding fall away,” where all structure momentarily disappears as one realizes one knows nothing of the divine. It is an utterly apophatic moment when one enters a “cloud of unknowing.” This consciousness of a void surpasses and defies all symbols, concepts, and sacred narratives, all of the predetermined givens of any particular religious tradition.¹¹ Living under this “cloud of unknowing” is basically an inexpressible experience as one “free-falls” when all the structures fall away.

In *Participation in the Mystery, Transpersonal Essays in Psychology, Education and Religion*, Jorge N. Ferrer writes that “Participatory enaction entails a model of spiritual engagement that does not simply reproduce certain tropes according to a given historical *a priori*, but rather embarks upon the adventure of openness to the novelty and creativity of nature or the mystery” (Ferrer 2017, 15). By participatory enaction, I understand Ferrer to mean that the mystery is capable of unfolding in unpredictable ways. There are no predetermined maps for navigating the experience. One enters a seemingly vast wilderness of thick trees. As Sarah Coakley so astutely points out,

A love affair with a blank, such as contemplation is, is a strange subversion of all certainties, a stripping, often painful, of what one previously took for granted [. . .] The act of contemplation involves a willed suspension of one’s rational agendas, a silent waiting.

(Coakley 2013, 342, emphasis added)

One becomes a co-creator (through participatory enaction) in the novelty of the mystery’s unfolding. To be a co-creator, as I read Ferrer, means that I am not separate from The Great Mystery or the cosmos, but rather, I have participatory agency in the process of novel, revelatory unfoldings. As such, I bring to the process of this novel cosmic unfoldment my bodily, instinctive, sexual, emotional, intellectual, and intuitive intelligence, all of which become the media for the manifestation (and embodiment) of The Great Mystery in ways unique and particular to me.

Ferrer goes on to write:

Hence, the participatory perspective does not contend that there are two, three, or any limited quantity of pre-given spiritual ultimates, but

rather that the radical openness, interrelatedness, and creativity of the mystery or the cosmos allows for the participatory co-creation of an indefinite number of ultimate self-disclosures of reality and corresponding religious worlds.

(Coakley 2013, 16–17)

Reading Ferrer helps me to name this experience of “the scaffolding falling away.” I am momentarily lost in The Great Mystery. I am an active participant in the radiance of the Mystery’s disclosure. I realize that I am a part of the unfolding, multiple possibilities of reality. I experience a world of possibilities in which I am, simultaneously, a co-creator and a total stranger. My task or “fate” is to explore the novelty of this experience in the hope that, as I assimilate it, I might be able to articulate it by making this “void” visible to myself and possibly for others.

When the epiphany of The Great Mystery within my consciousness reveals itself, I am stripped of all points of reference. In my experience, these periods of “the scaffolding falling away” coincides with the moment when my immersion in a particular religious tradition exhausts itself, when all elements of a tradition lose agency to help one’s searching. As much as I might cling to it, warning myself that I must remain faithful to the tradition engaging me, the reality is that I have no agency that mediates my relationship with ultimate reality or the divine.

In trying to make sense of this experience on a theoretical level, John Caputo’s exposition of Jacques Derrida’s work has been most helpful: “The point of view of Derrida’s work as an author is religious – but without religion and without religion’s God – and no one understands a thing about this alliance,” Caputo writes (Caputo 1997, xviii). I have been in the place Caputo describes here, especially in the last 15 to 20 years. I make no claims of being finished with this process. I am not in control when it happens.

This space/place/state with no scaffolding is both elating and troubling. I am elated because it is a life-enhancing adventure to lose the path of each religious tradition regarding prayer and meditation, with nothing to rely on or to guide me in the process. It is troubling because this loss of something to rely on leaves me having to face The Great Mystery alone and uncertain of the novelty which may emerge. In dealing with this uncertainty, not only have Caputo and Derrida provided guideposts along the way, but so have some Sufi traditions which acknowledge that there is a station in the spiritual quest when one transcends (or descends from) any religious structure as every crutch falls away.

Lessons from Thomas Merton and Sufism

The twentieth-century Catholic monk, mystic, poet, and social justice activist Thomas Merton, knew this too. Being very much aware of this part of the process by which the constructs of a religious tradition no longer

provide support or succor, one must come face to face with The Great Mystery on its terms. Here, Merton presciently anticipated thinkers such as Derrida, Caputo, and Ferrer. He did not have the opportunity to do very much subsequent writing about his own experience of what I name as having the scaffolding fall away, due to his sudden death on December 10, 1968. He was, however, able to recognize his own experience when he read a book that matched his own experience, *Final Integration of the Adult Personality* by A. Reza Arasteh (1965a).

Arasteh was an Iranian American psychologist who explored, through a Sufi lens, the process by which certain human beings undergo final spiritual integration. As the penultimate step in this final stage of adult integration, Arasteh emphasizes a phase by which a person is stripped of all cultural references and constructs, but most specifically those cultural references and constructs that are provided by her or his religion. He presents his case studies of ordinary twentieth-century persons experiencing this process. He also names well-known historical figures whom he identifies as having experienced final integration, among whom are the twelfth-century Persian Sufi Rumi and the eighteenth-century German poet, naturalist, and mystic Goethe.

In *Final Integration of the Adult Personality* and his subsequent books (Arasteh 1965b, 1980), Arasteh proposes a series of necessary steps or "stations" in final integration by which one is stripped of one's religious conditioning and traditions. This results in what he calls an "anxious search." The result of this anxious searching is the ultimate experience of returning to the religious tradition of one's cultural heritage,¹² free of its doctrinal and dogmatic constraints. Now integrated, according to Arasteh, one's own inner guide engages with the divine. But in light of Ferrer's ideas briefly outlined earlier, there may, in fact, be no need to return to one's religious tradition, given the novel and pluralistic ways that "The Great Mystery" may choose to disclose itself. "*The future of religion*," writes Ferrer, "*will be shaped by spiritually individuated persons engaged in processes of cosmological hybridization in the context of a common spiritual family that honors a global order of respect and civility*" (Ferrer 2017, 37, original emphasis). Thomas Merton, quoting Arasteh, sums up this state of final integration:

The man (sic) who has final integration is no longer limited by the culture in which he has grown up. "He has embraced *all of life*. . . . He has experienced qualities of every type of life": ordinary human existence, intellectual life, artistic creation, human love, religious life. He passes beyond all these limiting forms while retaining all that is best and most universal in them, "finally giving birth to a fully comprehensive self." He accepts not only his own society, his own community, his own friends, his own culture but all mankind (sic). He does not remain bound to one limited set of values in such a way that he opposes them

aggressively or defensively to others. He is fully “Catholic” in the best sense of the word. He has a unified vision and experience of the one truth shining out in all its various manifestations, some clearer than others. He does not set these partial views up in opposition to each other but unifies them in a dialectic or an insight of complementarity. With this view of life he is able to bring perspective, liberty and spontaneity into the lives of others. The finally integrated man (sic) is a peacemaker. That is why there is such a desperate need for our leaders to become such men of insight.

(Merton 1998, 207)¹³

Arasteh believed that such a final integration of the adult personality was achieved by only an exemplary few because of the suffering and anxiety required to attain this state. “Many are called, few chosen.” I do not claim that my experiences of “the scaffolding falling away” is a prelude to my attaining final integration. About such possibilities, it is best to remain speechless. If the end all spiritual exercises is the revelation of one’s ignorance, perhaps this is the only outcome to which I can authentically aspire. I realize I am no longer the teacher, only a novice always needing to begin again and again.

Notes

- 1 I am deeply grateful to my friend and colleague, Jonathan Montaldo, Thomas Merton scholar and of all things mystical extraordinaire, for his helpful suggestions in improving this chapter.
- 2 See especially Chapter 2.
- 3 About Native American sacred traditions, I have just finished editing a collection of essays on the Roman Catholic monk, mystic, social activist, and poet Thomas Merton’s engagement with such traditions entitled *Merton & Indigenous Wisdom* (2019).
- 4 See especially, Keating (2012), Bourgeault (2016), and Frenette (2012).
- 5 See especially, Helminski (2000). *La illaha illallahu* is usually translated as “There is no God but God” with the addition of the *Hu*. Sufis often interpret *La illaha illallahu* as “There is nothing but God,” and the *Hu* on the end of the formula suggests the vibratory or energetic nature of God’s presence much in the same way that *Om* does in Hinduism.
- 6 Unfortunately, time and space constraints do not permit me to go into any greater detail about the nature of Tibetan Buddhist practices, nor does the promises one makes when being initiated into these practices to not reveal their details any more than I have. For those who are curious or would like to explore these practices for themselves, the internet offers a rich resource of possible connections to teachers and Dharma Centers.
- 7 The Bon tradition of Buddhism in Tibet claims to be an older, more ancient form of Buddhism than that brought from Nepal to Tibet by Padmasambhava in the eighth century CE. In fact, the lore is that the founder of Bon was a Buddha who lived at least 2,000 to 8,000 years before the historical Buddha that most of us are familiar with. It is also believed that Bon embodies much more the pre-Buddhist indigenous shamanism of Tibet.

- 8 For more on *Le Point Vierge*, see Shannon (2002, 363–364).
- 9 As previously noted, to refer to the sacred as The Great Mystery is the way that seems to best approximate my own first-hand personal experience. I should also note that I am indebted to the First Nation Indigenous peoples of the Americas sacred ritual and healing traditions for this way of addressing the sacred.
- 10 There is a vast literature on the intersection of religion, science, and physics – too much to elaborate on here. However, one deeply personal source by one of the leading thinkers of contemporary physics is Heisenberg (1971). Another much more current is Lightman (2018). For ways in which the Abrahamic traditions are enriched and expanded through engagement with the sacred ritual and healing traditions of the First Nation Indigenous peoples of the Americas, see Charleston (2015). Charleston is a citizen of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma and also a retired Bishop of the Episcopal Church.
- 11 Although there is a wealth of writings on the apophatic dimension of mystical experience, among the best, though not easy reading, is Sells (1994). One of the interesting aspects of Sells’s book is that it addresses apophatic experience from within the context of many religious traditions rather than only the Christian tradition. Another is Keller (2015).
- 12 And, by extension I would add, to any religious tradition in which one has immersed oneself.
- 13 See especially Essay XIII.

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