

## ***Emerging Heart: Global Spirituality and the Sacred*** **STUDY GUIDE**

**CHAPTER 1** introduces the idea that every major shift in planetary consciousness began with a series of new revelations for the world; and asks: In our own time, is there a vision, a revelation, a truth so compelling, so vast that it will become a founding moment of a new type of human consciousness and community? Is there a breaking in of the sacred for us today? Who are its prophets? Who are its saints? How can we learn to live and practice it?

As a human community, we are in the birth pangs of a global spiritual reality. In this turn toward global spirituality, we traverse a new era in human consciousness, one reminiscent of what the historian Karl Jaspers termed the “Axial Period.” Between 800 and 200 BCE, Jaspers contended, “the fundamental categories within which we still think today, and the beginnings of the world religions, by which human beings still live, were created.”<sup>1</sup> Ewert Cousins, for one, contends we are in the throes of a Second Axial Period, exemplified by the convergence of religious traditions and a feminine mode of consciousness.<sup>2</sup> Everything we know and everything we are is pushed to the limits of comprehension as a new reality—perhaps one that is immensely primeval—breaks into our world. This Second Axial Period is transforming the foundation of what it means to be human and is affecting the social, economic, religious, and cultural orientation of current civilizations, and others yet to be born.

### **Questions from Chapter 1:**

1. Has your personal journey attuned you to the idea of a new spiritual consciousness?
2. What do you think of Jasper's notion of an Axial Period and Cousins' contention that we are in a Second Axial Period?
3. How would you describe the distinctive characteristics of a new global consciousness?
4. In your own faith experience, have you felt a mystical or spiritual call that was not part of your tradition or that somehow took you to a different place than your peers?

**CHAPTER 2** recounts the author's personal mystical experience of unconditional divine love and divine-human suffering. It also explores the author's search to understand the call to faith within and outside of formal religious structures. In this chapter we glimpse inside one person's journey and understand the grace of being opened to a new vision of the sacred and the challenges one faces in seeking to live and practice a spirituality that is at once multireligious and rooted in the deepest silence.

### **Questions from Chapter 2:**

1. How did the author's mystical experience occur? Were there any signs or symbols that particularly resonated with you?

2. Why does the author refer to God as “nameless”? What does she mean by this and how does it relate to her journey? Does the namelessness of divinity resonate with your own spiritual experiences?
3. At the same time that the author speaks to a desert experience—of a God with no name—she also affirms the importance and value of religious identity. How do you see the relationship between belonging to a community and being beyond community working out in your life? Describe your experience.
4. The author writes: “We contain within us the whole of human spirituality and our very selves are constituted in some way by this collective heritage.” Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?

**CHAPTER 3** provides insight into the usage and meaning of the term “mysticism” and the characteristics associated with the “mystic” personality. Like other concepts within humanity’s spiritual heritage mysticism is depicted in diverse and sometimes contradictory ways. We might find common agreement, however, in Bernard McGinn’s idea of mysticism as “the immediate consciousness of the presence of God” or ultimate reality, however named or defined. This experience takes place on a level of personality deeper than the consciousness of emotions, cognition, or psyche. “Mystics continue to affirm their mode of access to God is radically different from that found in ordinary consciousness, even from the awareness of God gained through the usual religious activities of prayer, sacraments, and other rituals.”<sup>3</sup> The paradox of mysticism is that at the same time it is labeled “secret” or “ineffable,” mysticism is not beyond human understanding, but is the capacity within each of us to touch and be touched by wonder and awe.

### **Questions from Chapter 3:**

1. Review the several definitions of mysticism provided by the author. How would you describe mysticism in your own words? What does the word “mystic” mean to you?
2. The author is explicit that mysticism is a capacity of consciousness, and a gift of divine presence, intrinsic to being human. Have you ever had a feeling of the mystical in your own life? Was it similar to or different from the one Kevin describes.
3. From the author’s account, mysticism is related to religions in their deepest center, but a direct experience of God is not dependent upon belonging to or even believing in a particular tradition. How do you understand the relationship between the mystical and the religious? Do you find a tension in your own experience between your religion and mystical consciousness?
4. More than an etheric or esoteric experience divorced from daily life, the author highlights that the mystic is one who is open to feel and know the profound sensitivity, fragileness, and interconnection of all creation. How would you say this intrinsic connection has been lost in contemporary society? In what way has this mystical awareness been oppressed in your personal life; by religions; or by material culture?

**CHAPTER 4** reflects on this new spiritual movement that is initiated not by religions or teachers, but by the action of the divine in the souls of people around the globe. It is a direct touching of the inner spark of the soul by Divine Mystery that is calling people—many of whom never thought about leaving their tradition—to a deeper experience of the sacred that is related to but may be outside of formal religious community. The author emphasizes that this multi-religious spiritual focus is not something constructed by people to assuage religious doubt and confusion or to be rebellious and prideful. Rather, it emerges as a faith experience of the utmost seriousness that compels each person to give up whatever is oppressive, superior, exclusive, hurtful, or violent in his or her own religious worldview. It is felt as a deep compunction in the soul to dispense with religious sectarianism, pride, or possessiveness.

**Questions from Chapter 4:**

1. In your own interior life, how have you developed in relationship to your God or Divine Source? Do you find your prayer and meditation leading you to a spirituality that is more inclusive or more global?
2. The author recounts a spiritual direction session with Charlie, who is struggling to find the ground of his own faith. Does Charlie's story resonate with you? What are some common themes in your own life? How have you responded to them?
3. The author describes the person of faith who is open to this new global spirituality as being "in a spiritual paradox between paradigms." What does the author mean? Do you recognize elements of this paradox in yourself or others?
4. In this chapter, the author focuses on the deeper, interior spiritual process. She emphasizes the seriousness and intensity of this new faith journey, calling it "God's dark night in us." Reflect on and write down some of your dark night moments in relation to your faith or religious openness.

**CHAPTER 5** explores the historical antecedents of contemporary interreligious dialogue and multi-faith experiences. Two distinguishing features of this early research was a shared concern to study religion in a manner free from the doctrinal claims of a specific tradition, and to seek for universals and commonalities in the human spiritual quest. Some of the questions scholars of religions have pursued are: What is the relationship of the various named religions—Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and so forth—to the religious structure of reality? Can the religious structure of reality be studied apart from the concrete religious expression and practice? What is the relationship between adherence to a particular faith tradition and faith as a dimension of human religiosity? What does it mean to speak of the sacred as a category of consciousness bracketed out from specific instances of personal belief and religious commitment?

**Questions from Chapter 5:**

1. The chapter invites discussion of the questions listed above. How would you respond to these questions? Have you found others with whom this type of religious questioning can be shared?
2. In this and other chapters, the author uses distinct terms such as "interreligious," "interfaith," "ecumenical," "interideological", and "multireligious." How are

- these terms distinguished? Take some time to research and discuss their usage and definitions in the library, on the internet, and with colleagues.
3. The author raises four commitments that are essential to authentic dialogue among religions: personal faith experience; truth as dialogic; alternative or mystical ways of knowing; and new visions of reality. Each of these commitments advances new ways of understanding self, God, and creation. Review these four commitments in some depth. Explore with others their implications in your spiritual life and faith.
  4. In recounting the personal stories and intellectual history of an interreligious conversion of heart, the author concludes the chapter with the following claim: "interreligious, interfaith dialogue is founded on the contemplative basis of all religions and the need to dwell in the core silence that stabilizes and enriches every religious form." Reflect on and discuss your understanding of her meaning and its relationship to your own practice.

**CHAPTER 6** opens by confronting the reader with questions of social conscience: How does interreligious dialogue help people who are homeless, in poverty, or marginalized by society? What is the relationship between contemplation and activism? How can the spiritual dimensions of dialogue contribute to finding solutions to worldwide suffering, combat religiously motivated violence, or alleviate the hunger in a child's belly? In response to these questions, the author devotes much of the chapter to the contemplative solution arrived at by Thomas Merton and others.

**Questions from Chapter 6:**

1. The chapter begins with an analysis of the terms "interspiritual," "intermonastic," and "intercontemplative," dialogue. Why does the author consider these terms important? How would you describe the essential point made by the author? Do these terms have meaning in your spiritual quest? Why or why not.
2. Thomas Merton, Thich Nhat Hahn, H.H. Dalai Lama, Mahatma Gandhi, Abraham Heschel and others were profoundly situated within the contemplative foundations of their own tradition as the impetus for spiritual and social action. Reflect on and discuss why these spiritual leaders hold that activism must be rooted in contemplation.
3. Thomas Merton proposes three levels upon which dialogue takes place: the preverbal, verbal, and postverbal. Discuss the emphasis he placed on the postverbal level or "communion." How does your religious tradition or spiritual practice encourage or dissuade you from entering communion with other traditions, practices, or faiths?
4. The chapter closes with the vows of nonviolence established by Leo Tolstoy, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Spend time reading and reflecting on these vows. Create your own vows of nonviolence. Share and discuss them with others.

**CHAPTER 7** highlights the essence of the book: that our common spirituality—our global spirituality—is forged together by the prayer of love that transcends religions. It is not a reality that is conceived and constructed by the mind, but a state of consciousness we discover is already present by surrendering ourselves to or sinking down into the spiritual core of life. Global spirituality is an affair of the heart that begins deep within one's soul, and is the soul's active expression of the unity of creation that sustains diversity and difference rather than marginalizing those differences. Global spirituality is not solely concerned with the coming together of different religions, but with following a Divine call to love in a new way, *to be more holy*. It is a sacred experience on the human horizon that is drawing people toward a mystical, rather than religious expression of faith.

### Questions from Chapter 7:

1. The author contends that a new spiritual paradigm for humanity cannot be accomplished through a collective consciousness that still perceives God, the Real, as separate from the person or creation, or as a punishing, revengeful force. Why does the author consider a new vision of God to be essential to our planet's future? Relate this to your own experience and analysis.
2. In this chapter, the author also states that a global spiritual perspective requires a God of peace and nonviolence; and an understanding of the Divine as the source of benevolence and unification. Reflect on how your culture or religion describes the divine nature. Write down your own experience of ultimate reality and the beliefs that have shaped your faith.
3. The author emphasizes that the contemplative heart of global spirituality works to sustain a sacred community on earth by bringing the voice of the spirit to matters of common economic, political, ethical, and religious concerns. If you were in a position to influence these systems of justice, how would you apply a global spiritual perspective? What qualities of consciousness would you bring to bear on decision-making?
4. The book concludes with a challenge to the reader: to go back to the beginning in order to be co-creators of a new earth consciousness. What does the author mean by going back to "the beginning"? How is the heart central to this conversion of soul? Reflect on and discuss the overall spiritual implications of the book for your life and faith.

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<sup>1</sup>Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, trans. Michael Bullock (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 2.

<sup>2</sup>Ewert Cousins, *Process Thought on the Eve of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, The Alfred P. Stiernotte Lecture Series in Philosophy (Hamden, CT: Quinnipiac College, 1985), 14; idem., *Christ of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Rockport, MA: Element Books, 1992), 7-10.

<sup>3</sup>Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*. Volume I of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*. (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992), xix.