



THE EVOLUTION OF DIVINITY

A New Spiritual Vision for Our Time

ABSTRACT

Marc Gafni met Andrew Cohen through a mutual friend and student of Andrew's in 2005. Andrew Cohen invited Marc Gafni to visit and teach in Andrew's community to his senior students in Lenox, Massachusetts. Marc Gafni visited and taught and dialogued with Andrew Cohen in Fox Hollow several times. As a result of their shared interest in evolutionary spirituality, Marc and Andrew planned a teaching week and retreat in Israel together, which was hosted by Marc Gafni. This teaching week and weekend took place in late December 2005. During this period of time, this article was published in What is Enlightenment.

Marc Gafni

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The Evolution of Divinity: A New Spiritual Vision for Our Time

by Dr. Marc Gafni – Reprinted from [What is Enlightenment Magazine](#)

The world today is filled with suffering of the most infinite and painful kind. Anyone who has fought in or been exposed to war or who has witnessed a bus full of children explode—a tragically familiar scene in my part of the world—finds it difficult to embrace a theological perspective, whether it's from the Eastern or Western traditions, Meister Eckhart or the Kabbalah or J. Krishnamurti. Because in the face of that kind of suffering, what do you do? How do you meditate and embrace a ground of being that is divine in a world of radical suffering? How do you live in a world where supposedly, God is king, and yet real kingship or stewardship seems to be lacking in the most profound way possible? In a world of evil and suffering, how do you begin to talk about love and healing and transformation? That is the question.

Classical theology arose in order to answer that question. And the core motivating force in the formation of the great religions was love for one's neighbor—a love and magnanimity that were transmitted at the greatest possible depth to the largest number of people. This required the development of religious systems whereby the great revelations of spirit were translated into practice and conveyed to wider and wider audiences. These systems included law, ceremony, and ritual, and there were many versions of them. The development of spiritual practices also grew out of the desire to transmit these experiences and the religious values borne from them to future generations, to guarantee an ongoing religiosity in society at large.

But if that wholly positive intention was the entire story, the old religions in their original forms might never have fallen into their well-deserved contemporary disrepute. Over time, religion transgressed its bounds and made two major mistakes. First, it generated the popular understanding that nonbelievers were damned to eternal perdition. St. Augustine spoke to this in all religions in his classic formulation, "There is no Redemption outside of the church." Thus, religion often degenerated into chauvinism and triumphalism, in which murder and untold cruelty were perpetrated in the name of God. It is not insignificant that enlightenment philosopher Voltaire's battle cry against religion was "remember the cruelties."

Second, amid the untold suffering experienced by those of medieval Europe, classical religion could no longer provide true meaning and succor to a plague-stricken population. And yet, in spite of that, religion continued to make claims of knowledge, authority, power, and dogma. It insisted on asserting its relatively arbitrary authority over what was good or evil, proper or improper in all fields of human endeavor, including government, science, the healing arts, economics, and moral thought, ultimately fettering each of these arenas and impeding human progress.

For these reasons, a powerful and correct critique of the classical forms of religion appeared in Western civilization in modernity and then in postmodernity. As we can see, however, the results of that critique have been both positive and negative in their ramifications. One expression of that critique was the shift of authority to individual autonomy and to the democratic stage. These were classically understood as a move away from the authority structures of religion. Scientific rationalism replaced premodern dogma, freeing human inquiry, innovation, and agency.

But I will focus here on what is, for many of us today, the most significant aspect of the move away from classical religion. The reaction against religious tradition that began with modernity has emerged as a contemporary preference for a loosely defined and more loosely practiced spirituality—one that is to a considerable extent defining the spiritual landscape of our time.

Our postmodern culture is characterized by an unprecedented individualism, narcissism, and materialism—autonomy gone awry. In this cultural climate, spirituality of the "New Age" variety has

emerged as being long on vision but short on commitment, depth, and rigor. This kind of spirituality is often primarily focused on spiritual experiences, few of which make demands on the very essence of the human soul or the way life is actually lived in the world. There is no sense of what Hebrew wisdom would call *mitzvah*. *Mitzvah*, which literally means commandment and is mistakenly translated as good deed, speaks to the sense that something must be done. But in much of contemporary spirituality, personal preference replaces obligation. Indeed, this preference is but a reflection of the underlying narcissism that lies at the heart of both the modern and postmodern quests for meaning. Instead of autonomy being an internal source of authority, freedom has come to mean free from the core obligation to grow; free to ignore the call of spirit to committed and consistent action.

The essential imperative to clear and decisive action in this moment often goes unheard in the din of postmodernity. It is blocked by the deafening deadness of a society whose true God is comfort and not pleasure. In fact, the definition of modern spiritual decadence is the linguistic assumption that the opposite of pain is pleasure. But the opposite of pain is not pleasure, but comfort, which is to avoid pain at all costs. If my goal is truly pleasure—the pleasure of spirit, which is growth—then I will be willing to engage the pain of committed service.

Hence modern spiritual seekers anesthetized by the comfort of their pallid “spiritual search” remain at their depths comfortably numb. And in a world gone awry and in desperate need of our help, postmodern spirituality has become a sophisticated form of leisure activity and escape, another variety of the many therapies we apply in the worship at the altar of ourselves.

As we can see, neither New Age spirituality nor the old religious orthodoxies have within them the power to heal our souls and our planet. And presently, they can both function to keep us from experiencing ourselves as partners in the healing of the world—a globalized, superconnected world where we can no longer claim emotional ignorance. A world where evil and suffering demarcate our reality.

So I want to put forth a different vision of how to manifest love and healing and transformation in this world—a new spiritual vision that emerges from the depths of Hebrew mysticism. One of the core revelations of the great empirical researchers of human development over the past hundred years has been the validation of perhaps the most important single teaching of classic Renaissance Kabbalah—the understanding that Spirit is not static but rather that it develops; it evolves stage by stage. And each stage adopts the great truths of the prior stage while discarding its dross, as it reaches for the next and higher level of Spirit’s unfolding.

The Zohar¹ says that we are God’s name—we’re God’s verbs, we’re God’s adjectives, we’re even God’s dangling modifiers. We’re the language of the divine in the world, and in that way, we become the voice of the *meshiach*—the messiah. Anything less than the realization of that is called, in the inner mystical tradition, heresy. The core liberation teaching of Kabbalah is that to be a heretic is to believe that God does not need me, that I am not required to participate in the evolution of God. But enlightenment means we participate in divinity; we don’t just submit to it by responding to the evil and suffering in the world with a traditional theology or a theodicy. The ultimate response to the suffering of the world is, like that of the Hebrew mystic, to cry in protest and to let that protest translate into action. I call this nondual humanism, which means that I participate in God’s evolving self, now.

¹ Widely considered the most important work of Kabbalah, or Jewish mysticism.

As the great nineteenth-century Hasidic master Nachman of Bratzlav implied, the most important thing in the world is to be willing to give up who you are for who you might become. He calls this process the giving up of *pnimi*, which literally means “what is within.” For Nachman, that means the old, familiar thing that comforts even when it no longer serves—and that can include our spirituality and religion, and even the very core way we understand our relationship to the divine ground of being.

In fact, we are now consciously responsible for the very evolution of divinity so that it becomes relevant for our time. Thus we are called on to reach for *makkif*—that which is beyond us, that which we can only reach if we are willing to take a leap into the abyss. This is what Abraham was called to do—to give up all his yesterdays and today's for an unknown tomorrow.

What we are talking about is much more than the evolution of man. The great privilege of being human is that we can participate in the evolution and healing of God. We participate in the yearning force of being, experiencing the interconnectivity of the all and the all—the fullness of presence and interiority. And that means to take up one's role as an evolved agent co-creating with God in the transformation of the planet. The evolution of the human spirit is what catalyzes the evolution of God, of divine consciousness. We are God's healers. In the words of Nikos Kazantzakis, we are the saviors of God. And when God and man meet in an evolutionary embrace, redemption is achieved.