

Foreword



While working on a project establishing an Interfaith Council in a small, diverse college in Vermont, I first met Alice Gardner. My path has been as a Christian theologian, a staff member of an international ecumenical organization, and a professor at Andover Newton Theological School. In these roles I have been able to provide many people with guidance and support as they sought out a meaningful spiritual life and as they prepared to aid others in that search as ministers. I was pleased to be asked to read this book. I was *delighted* when I finished reading it. It fills a needed niche in the burgeoning spiritual literature of today: the spirituality of everyday life. Already it has helped shape my own practice. I can commend it to others on the basis of that experience and its appeal across spiritual and religious divides.

In this book Gardner clearly draws on eastern traditions but writes as a child of the west (not as an imitator of the east). There are many points where the resonances to biblical tradition are evident to me in her writing, allowing easy substitution of my own Christian vocabulary for the reality she describes. For instance, her description of the “mind-made” version of ourselves and the difficulties it causes us, translates beautifully into the Christian tradition. (Paul struggles with the problem in Romans 7. “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do

what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.”) Awakening to our authentic selves puts the mind-made persona in its proper place—as the servant of the self rather than its master. This same transformation is called for in the Gospel tradition where Jesus says, “Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” (Matthew 10:39) I suspect people from other religious traditions could easily do the same. Gardner writes in a mystical tradition that historically has transcended the boundaries of the various faith communities, uniting us in the commonality of our everyday life experiences.

Frithjof Schuon describes this kind of boundary-crossing in his book, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*¹. He posits that the various revealed religions are diverse pointers to a divine reality that transcends them all. As Huston Smith observes in his introduction to Schuon’s book: “Forms are to be transcended by fathoming their depths and discerning their universal content, not by circumventing them. One might regard them as doorways to be entered, or rather as windows, for the [mystic] doesn’t leave them behind, but continues to look through them toward the Absolute. . . The [mystic] finds the Absolute within the traditions as poets find poetry in poems.”²

¹ Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*. Wheaton, Illinois: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1993.

² *Ibid.*, p.xxv

It is in the context of such an understanding that Gardner's work is so important. She sees our traditions and religions as our servants and not our masters: they are asked to both support and challenge us in every circumstance of our ordinary lives.

As knowledge of diverse traditions increases, there is more and more "borrowing" amongst them. Huston Smith, a devout Methodist, nevertheless engages in more than one spiritual practice he learned from his study of eastern traditions. Trappist monks in Massachusetts had a Zen master teach them meditation. A Dominican priest wrote a book on "Christian Yoga." My own pastor is a yoga practitioner and takes retreats at meditation centers periodically. It is clear that many religious people in the west discover that practices from the eastern traditions are helpful to them. The goal is to weave together whichever practices are fruitful for each unique individual in such a way that they provide us with integrity and coherence.

Love is the ultimate nature of reality for Gardner, and therefore the actuality of our authentic self—even when we do not realize it. All the processes she describes as functioning naturally in daily life are designed by Love to open us to this reality not only in fact but in function.

Gardner's very title, "Life Beyond Belief" gives an important perspective on belief in a time of fundamentalisms and ideologies functioning as idols in human life. Her experience points out that belief

is a shallow substitute for the actual experiencing of the divine in the midst of life. No matter what our spiritual leanings, she invites us into to a way of living that connects us with the divine at work in our own daily experience.

MB Handspicker, Ph.D.

Professor of Pastoral Theology, Emeritus

Andover Newton Theological School, Newton, MA

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