



An Excerpt from

# The Presence of the Infinite

*The Spiritual Experience of Beauty, Truth, and Goodness*

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By Steve McIntosh

## ***Taken from the Introduction***

This book is about spiritual experience, which can be understood as an encounter with the presence of the infinite within our finite universe of time and space. While the human experience of spirit takes many forms and can be conceived in a wide variety of ways, I have found that this idea of spirit as the “presence of the infinite” sheds a considerable amount of light on this complex subject. Gaining a deeper understanding of spiritual experience is important because as we come to better appreciate what spiritual experience is and how it works, this enhances our ability to have such experiences more abundantly and to use them more effectively for our personal growth and for our service to others.

My foundational premise, based on my own experience and the reported experience of millions of others in both ancient and modern contexts, is that spirit by whatever name is real and that it is possible for humans to make authentic contact with it. The question of what spirit is in itself, of course, is subject to debate. But the idea that spiritual experience is—actually and literally—an experience of that which is infinite or transcendent, may find agreement among many who are open-minded about the possibility of some kind of spiritual reality.

All humans crave spiritual experience (properly understood), whether they know it or not. Indeed, an encounter with transcendence is an end in itself. Such experiences can be thrilling and delightful, they can be illuminating and inspiring, they can be heartwarming and comforting, and they can even be awesome and terrifying. But as we will explore, what all authentic spiritual experiences have in common is this connection to a *quality of being* that is best described as *infinite*. Within the context of spiritual experience, the idea of the infinite includes not only a *mathematical infinity of quantity*—boundless, endless, unlimited, immeasurable, and eternal—but also a *metaphysical infinity of quality*—unified, whole, complete, perfect, self-sufficient, and largely beyond definition or conception. Yet even though the infinite is largely transconceptual and elusive, it can be directly experienced by humans.

For those who have experienced spirit personally and directly there can be little doubt about the authenticity of this reality. And even those who claim not to be acquainted wit



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spiritual experience have nonetheless had such experiences, whether they are labeled “spiritual” or not. Everyone who has felt the power of truth, the kindness of goodness, or the loveliness of beauty has had an experience of spirit. The only reason such common yet profound experiences are not universally identified as spiritual is that our collective understanding of spiritual experience remains under-developed. However, recent advances in the philosophy of consciousness are now making it possible to understand this important subject with new depth and clarity.

Spiritual experience is important not only because it is an intrinsically valuable end itself, bringing joy, happiness, and greater sense of well-being. Spiritual experience is also important because it causes us to grow. The experience of spirit evolves our consciousness, it develops our character, and it makes us more real. Our experiences of spirit, however, are not only personally beneficial, they can also benefit others by inspiring us to share our gifts and bring spiritual experience into the lives of our fellows.

In fact, history reveals that when the quantity and quality of spiritual experience is increased in a given social context this results in cultural evolution. In other words, spiritual experience, broadly understood, is what causes consciousness to evolve. And when consciousness evolves among a critical mass of people, their larger culture also evolves in the process. Our personal encounters with a transcendent or infinite dimension of reality can therefore have indirect political implications. Accordingly, as I will argue, deepening our understanding of what spiritual experience is and how it can be fostered in ourselves and others is one of the most direct ways we can make the world a better place.

Much has been written about spiritual experience in academic, religious, and even popular contexts. But as of the time of this writing the most famous and influential book on spiritual experience remains *The Varieties of Religious Experience* by American psychologist and philosopher William James. First published in 1902, *Varieties* is remarkably prescient of many of the developments and controversies that would subsequently appear within spiritual and religious culture during the last century. And while progress has been made by both scholars and spiritual visionaries since James first penned his cogent insights over a hundred years ago, most of the literature in the field continues to be framed in terms of James’ focus on mysticism. But as we will see, while mystical experiences are certainly a significant kind of spiritual experience, there are other kinds of spiritual experience that can be had more frequently and used more effectively to develop our characters and bear spiritual fruit.

### **The Rise of Evolutionary Spirituality**

Evolutionary spirituality is being born out of the growing realization that the scientific and historical story of our origins actually presents a profound spiritual teaching about the purpose of the universe and our place within it. Evolutionary spirituality, however, is not a religion or belief system. Rather, it represents a new level of cultural agreement that can include and uplift many of the existing forms of spirituality found within contemporary culture. In other words, evolutionary spirituality aspires to create a widely agreeable public form of spirituality that can provide a greater sense of solidarity and cohesion for those living in the developed world, while simultaneously retaining pluralism and making



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abundant room for a diversity of convictions about what is ultimately real. In short, evolutionary spirituality endeavors to “transcend and include” that which is currently on offer in the spiritual marketplace of ideas through a new approach to spiritual teaching and practice.

Evolutionary spirituality, as I understand it, transcends previous forms of spirituality through two crucial insights that serve as its foundation. The first insight comes from an enhanced recognition of the spiritual nature and behavior of the intrinsic values of beauty, truth, and goodness. And the second insight involves what is coming to be known as the “spiritual teachings” of evolution itself. As I argue in chapter 2, the scientific truths of cosmological and biological evolution, together with the historical truths of humanity’s cultural evolution, reveal a truth so comprehensive and significant as to have spiritual implications of its own. Properly interpreted, the evolutionary unfolding of nature and history, as well as the evolution of human consciousness itself, represents a kind of revelation that serves as a useful criterion for evaluation—a reliable standard of measurement—for practically all spiritual truth claims.

Moreover, through the practice of evolutionary spirituality, we become agents of evolution—emissaries of the future—whose mission is the improvement of the human condition. And the experience and creation of that which is spiritually real—that which is beautiful, true, and good—is ultimately how we make things genuinely better. In other words, we become direct participants in evolution’s unfolding—the process by which something *more* keeps coming from something *less*—as we work to increasingly perfect ourselves and our world. Thus, those who are on an evolutionary spiritual path recognize that their purpose in life is to participate in the gradual perfection of the evolving universe of nature, culture, and self.

### **Integral Philosophy and the Evolution of Worldviews**

As mentioned above, evolutionary spirituality itself is arising as part of a larger cultural emergence known as the integral or evolutionary worldview, which is founded on the insights and discoveries of integral philosophy. This philosophy has gradually emerged through the efforts of a line of distinguished thinkers that includes Georg Hegel, Henri Bergson, Alfred North Whitehead, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Sri Aurobindo, Jean Gebser, Ken Wilber, Holmes Rolston, and many others. Although these founders of integral philosophy differ on numerous points, they have all endeavored to discern the spiritual meaning of evolution overall.

While this book is more cultural analysis and theological reflection than philosophy per se, integral philosophy informs the arguments and conclusions presented. So although prior familiarity with integral philosophy is not required, there is one fundamental integral concept that needs to be introduced here at the beginning. And this key concept concerns the evolution of worldviews—the sequential emergence of values-based stages of human cultural development.

Integral philosophy’s view of cultural evolution sees history as unfolding according to a clearly identifiable *developmental logic* or cross-cultural pattern that underlies the



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growth of human society. This developmental logic is not understood as a “deterministic law of history,” or as implying a strictly unidirectional course of cultural development, but it does reveal a recurring theme in humanity’s narrative story. The unfolding of this theme or pattern has produced a sequential series of cultural stages or levels that form a dialectical structure within human history. The most obvious and widely accepted example of this stage structure can be recognized in the distinct, historically significant worldviews most frequently referred to as *modernism* and *traditionalism*.

Regarding the worldview of traditionalism, history makes clear that prior to the Enlightenment the majority of the world’s population was divided among the great religious civilizations. These are the worldviews identified as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, and others. While there were, of course, major differences between these civilizations, there were also many remarkable similarities. And these similarities allow us to now classify these diverse religious worldviews together under the general heading of the *traditional* stage of development. Contemporary traditionalists value family life, lawful authority, self-sacrifice, and the sanctity of their beliefs. Although every traditional worldview has been significantly impacted and modified by the developments of modernity, this stage of cultural development continues to define reality for billions of people alive today. Even in the developed world, the traditional worldview provides the cultural center of gravity for significant minorities who give more credence to scripture than to science.

Regarding the worldview of modernism, history also makes clear that beginning in the seventeenth century a radically new, reason-based worldview emerged, which can now be identified as the *modernist* stage of cultural evolution. Like the traditional worldviews that preceded it, modernism is a complex structure of value agreements that frame a well-defined view of nature, history, and what it means to live a good life. Modernist values include personal achievement, financial prosperity, individual liberty, democratic government, scientific reasoning, and higher education. The values of the modernist stage are distinct, and in many ways antithetical to the values of the traditional stage. And the ongoing tension between the enduring traditional level and the spectacularly successful modernist level reveals the structure of these dialectically related stages of historical development.

Although there are many ways to divide up the course of human history, and although there are a variety of competing stage theories, few will disagree that traditionalism and modernism are authentic stages of cultural development. Like practically all forms of evolution, cultural evolution unfolds by discrete, emergent steps, rather than along a seamless continuum of growth. To paraphrase developmental psychologist Jean Piaget, “there is no development that lacks a structure” and the development of human civilization is no exception. I am introducing these worldview structures here at the beginning because I will be using the words “traditional” and “modernist” as defined terms to describe these stages of cultural evolution.



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