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**Continuing Education Encore Events**

**Transcript of**  
**“The Meeting of East and West: Spirituality Beyond Boundaries”**

presented on July 8, 2017 by  
**The Reverend Dr. John Philip Newell**

**Dean Thomas Stegman, S.J.:**

John Philip divides his time between Edinburgh, Scotland, with his family, where he does most of his writing, and the United States, where he teaches and preaches across the nation. In 2015, he became the Distinguished Visiting Scholar of Spirituality at Iliff School of Theology at the University of Denver, where he offers a course every spring. John Philip is an ordained Church of Scotland minister with a passion for peace among the great wisdom traditions of humanity.

In *The Rebirthing of God*, he writes, “The deeper we move in the mystery of Creation, the closer we come to the Presence that Christ embodies. Deepest in us is the yearning for union, to remember the oneness from which we have come and to live and move as one again.”

John Philip’s recent work embodies this conviction. In 2011, he launched the Praying for Peace initiative in New Mexico to nurture greater relationship between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. That same year, he was honored with the first ever Contemplative Voices Award by the Shalem Institute in Washington, DC, in recognition of his service to spirituality and peacemaking. John Philip Newell is the cofounder of Heartbeat: A Journey Towards Earth’s Well-Being, a scholarship-awarding foundation committed to enabling the articulation of earth-honoring spirituality, the pursuit of interfaith relationship, and the practice of contemplation in action. In 2016, he founded the School of Celtic Consciousness in the belief that Celtic wisdom is needed urgently at this moment in time, a program that meets in Madison, Connecticut, among other US locations.

Please welcome a man of peace, John Philip Newell, our 17<sup>th</sup> Underhill Lecturer, to speak on “The Meeting of East and West: Spirituality Beyond Boundaries.”

[applause]

**Rev. Dr. John Philip Newell:**

Good morning to you. Thank you for the welcome.  
May I begin with a prayer, a prayer for Presence:

In the gift of this new day,  
in the gift of the present moment,  
in the gift of time and eternity intertwined  
let us be grateful  
let us be attentive  
let us be open to what has never happened before,  
in the gift of this new day,  
in the gift of the present moment,  
in the gift of time and eternity intertwined.  
Amen.

**Boston College**  
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY

[from John Philip Newell, *Sounds of the Eternal: A Celtic Psalter*, San Antonio, TX: New Beginnings, 2012, p. 53]

“The Meeting of East and West: Spirituality Beyond Boundaries.” May I begin by saying something of where I start and what my perspective is on nearly every topic related to spirituality that I try to address? That is from within the Celtic inheritance. One of the most cherished images in the Celtic world from which I draw so heavily in my life and in my teachings is the memory of John the Beloved leaning against Jesus at Last Supper. It was said of him in the Celtic world that he therefore heard the heartbeat of God, and he became a symbol of the practice of listening—listening deep within ourselves, listening deep within one another, listening within the body of the earth for the beat of the Sacred Presence.

Do we know that we are bearers of this unspeakably beautiful beat of life? And do we know that we can honor that beat of life in one another and in everything that has being? And do we know that it is this combination, growing in awareness that we are bearers of Sacred Presence, combined with a faithful commitment to honor that Presence in one another and in the body of the earth, that this combination holds the key to transformation? I believe that that is essentially why we gather for a day like this while we study spirituality, while we are committed to spiritual practice. It is because deep within us is a longing to be part of this holy work of transformation, of bringing back into relationship again what has been torn apart within us, between us in our world.

But when I refer to Celtic spirituality as my starting point, what do we mean exactly by Celtic? The term Celts first emerges historically in about 500 B.C.E. The Greeks refer to them as *Keltoi*, transliterated K-E-L-T-O-I – Celts. Around the same time, the Romans refer to them as *Galli*, G-A-L-L-I, or Gaels – Celts or Gaels. At that stage, they spanned the whole of Middle Europe, ranging from as far east in Europe as Turkey right through to the Atlantic coastline of Spain, taking in places like Galatia, which simply means the land of the Gaels, the land of the Celts—or Galicia in ancient Spain, the land of the Gaels, Gaul—the land of the Gaels or the Celts, and then of course Gaelic-speaking Ireland and parts of Britain.

The Celts were not an empire but rather a federation of tribes sharing a common language base. The Gaelic spoken in Ireland and Scotland, my territory, its closest linguistic equivalent is Sanskrit, much closer to Sanskrit than to any European language. This speaks of an ancient although forgotten connection with the East. One, in a sense, only has to listen to the bagpipes to remember the connection that is the sound of the East, tuned to the B-flat.

So although it is a forgotten connection—we don’t know quite how that migration of peoples happened—I believe that in the spirituality, in the art, in the music of the Celtic world, we can still hear something of the sound of India, and we can hear the sound of India’s sense of the sacred universe and of the immanence of the sacred. So that is to show where I come from as we approach this subject, East and West, the meeting of East and West.

But today I’d like us to focus on the subject primarily through a great prophet in our Christian household, a prophet of journeying into what he called the marriage of East and West. I refer to Bede Griffiths, a great English Benedictine monk who spent most of his life in India. I invite us to allow his journey to be the lens through which we look today at the meeting of East and West.

Bede Griffiths spoke about finding the other half of his soul in India. Even before he went, as a fairly young Benedictine monk, he was aware that he was going to the East essentially as pilgrim, that is,

**Boston College**  
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY

with an open heart, to receive from the East as well as to offer. Think of how our Christian history might have been very different if we had approached the other—other territory, other wisdom traditions—essentially as pilgrims, going with an open heart, to look for the light that is at the heart of other wisdom traditions.

Many years ago, I was giving a talk in Ottawa in Canada. The talk was exploring aspects of the prologue to John's Gospel, especially the words "the true light that enlightens every person coming into the world." A Mohawk elder had been invited to make observation at the end of my talk, an opportunity to observe the resonance between native spirituality or First Nations spirituality and Celtic spirituality, and there are many resonances. But at the end of the talk, this strong Mohawk elder stood with tears in his eyes and said, "As I have been listening to the themes this evening, I have been wondering where I would be tonight, I've been wondering where my people would be tonight, I've been wondering where we would be as a Western world tonight if the mission that had come to us from Europe centuries ago had come expecting to find light in us."

We cannot undo the tragic wrongs that have been done in the name of the truly humble one, Jesus. We cannot undo our history of perhaps being the most arrogant form or religious expression that humanity has witnessed, conquering, triumphing in the name of our truth. We can, however, be part of a new birthing, and I believe a major feature of that new birthing that we are being called into is radical humility in relation to the wisdom of other great spiritual traditions, given not to compete with each other but to deeply complete each other. As much as the species of the earth need one another to be well, so our great spiritual traditions need one another to grow into full maturity.

Even before Bede went to India, he was aware of what he called the "fossilization" of much Western Christianity, of how it had got stuck, fixed in form doctrinally, liturgically, in so many ways. And he was aware that something that is not unfolding is finished, because the very nature of the universe is that it keeps unfolding. It keeps finding new form, new manifestation, new expression.

Bede was never hesitant to prophetically name the rot that had set into much of our Western Christianity, but one of his favorite mantras was "But there are seeds in the rotten apple. There are seeds in the rotten apple." If we're serious about rebirthing, if we're serious about our Christian household again carrying blessing for the world, let us keep our eyes on the seeds. Yes, let's not be afraid of naming the rottenness, but primarily let us keep our eyes on the seeds of new beginnings, of ways in which we can be part of this holy work of transformation and healing.

Some of you will be familiar with the great eco-theologian Thomas Berry. Thomas Berry was very committed to what we are talking about today—the meeting of East and West. He made what I found a very useful distinction between what he called the "micro-phase" of a religious tradition—and he used that term to refer to when a religious tradition is just coming into being, it's just discovering its charism for humanity. And in the micro-phase time, he says, a religious tradition is like a young sapling that has just emerged from the ground. During that early phase, it needs some protection. It maybe even needs a bit of fencing around it to protect the young thing.

But when it grows up into its maturity, which Berry calls its "macro-phase," it is free. In its early stage, when it's bounded for its own protection, it's primarily those who come within the fence, within the walls, that receive blessing. But when it grows into its maturity, it can give its blessings away freely. It doesn't need boundaries of protection.

# Boston College

## SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY

Think of the wealth the seeds that are in our Christian household, in our inheritance. Think of the Jesus wisdom that we are being invited to give away freely, not on the basis of whether people sign up to our doctrines, whether they come within our boundaries to access our sacraments. We are being invited to grow up into the maturity of our Christhood.

Think of the way a mature tradition like Hinduism is blessing the whole world at the moment with one phrase, *Namaste*: the Sacred in me bows to the Sacred in you, the Divine in me honors the Divine in you. This phrase that is now becoming common parlance around the whole world, Hinduism gives it away freely. We don't have to become Hindu. We don't have to somehow sign up to its religion to know its blessing.

I'm always struck in India by the fact that this phrase, *Namaste*—or sometimes it's *Namaskar* from the north—this phrase is used even at the beginning of airport announcements. Not that it has yet transformed Indian airports into places of total peace, but think of how much worse it would be if they didn't say *Namaste*. [laughter]

It was in early 1960s that Bede arrived at Shantivanam—which means forest of peace—Benedictine community in Tamil Nadu, which was increasingly styling itself as an ashram. It was there that Bede led what he called “the marriage of East and West,” and that is the title of one of his greatest works: *The Marriage of East and West*. It was there, during morning prayer, that they would read from the Indian Vedas, from the Koran, from the Hebrew Scriptures, from the Christian Scriptures. It was there that Bede embodied the practice of, as he called it, “stripping Christ of Western garments and allowing our Christhood to be clothed in the meditative practices and wisdoms of the East.”

This was not syncretism on the part of Bede. This was belief in marriage and his belief that true union differentiates. Who are the people who have most truly loved us in our lives, with whom we know the deepest of unions? These are the people who have most radically set us free to be ourselves, because true union is not about uniformity. It's not about conformity. It's about a love that can truly set the other free to be wonderfully differentiated and unique.

This in part is what I find again and again in my interfaith work: that teachers from other traditions look to me to be true to Jesus. They don't look to me to somehow play down my treasure. They want to hear our wisdom from Jesus, and they recognize it. And they look with total perplexity at the fact that Christianity, for the most part, does not access Jesus's wisdom around nonviolence. They don't understand us. They ask, “Are you saying that you know more than Jesus on this point? Are you saying that Jesus was naïve in this teaching?” They are looking to us to be true to Jesus. Mahatma Gandhi says when Christianity went to the West, it became the religion of kings. That is, it became religion used to prop up empire. Whether the Roman Empire, the British Empire or the American Empire, we have been used to sanction the use of violence, claiming to know better than the one we call Lord.

Let's look at the marriage of East and West. Let's reflect on what the West and the East bring in their dowries to this marriage. Part of what the West brings in its dowry is that the West has always been quite emphatic about the transcendence of the Sacred; that is, the otherness, and in that sense the aboveness or the beyondness of the Sacred. The East, on the other hand, has always had a very clear sense of the immanence, the withinness of the Sacred.

We have had teachers in our Christian household, of course, who have known both. Someone like Meister Eckhart, the 14<sup>th</sup> century Dominican mystic, who says God is both un-nameable and omni-

# Boston College

## SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY

nameable, both un-nameable and omni-nameable. No name, no word can be used to speak of the One. No name, no word can capture the Mystery. Yet on the other hand, every name—Tom, Jane—is a unique manifestation of the One. They will never be repeated again. Do you know that each one of you is a unique manifestation of the One? That at the heart of your being is a word, an expression of the One that will never be again? That you have been born into this world because the world needs the unique expression of the One that is at the heart of your being? That's not to inflate ourselves. It's to say that we are part of a divine destiny to be here to speak the Word, to live the Word—the unique Word that each one of us is.

Some of you may have come across Gerry Hughes, Scottish Jesuit most known for his *God of Surprises*, but other writings. At gatherings such as this one, people would stand up to introduce themselves. Gerry used to stand up and say "Hello, I'm Gerry, a unique manifestation of the Divine." [laughter]

One of the things I so love about India is the way in which people still, this is still a very spiritual culture. Yes, it's being bombarded by the materialism of the West, but it is still a deeply spiritual culture in my experience. People so eager, quite early on in conversation, to engage philosophically, to engage spiritually in conversation.

During one of my first visits to India, I was in Bangalore. India is a real onslaught on the senses—color, sound, scent—and especially in Indian cities, it feels like sort of 24 hours a day. We delicate Westerners need a bit more space often than what Indian cities provide. So in Bangalore, it was my custom every day to go to the botanical gardens, the Lalbagh Gardens at the heart of Bangalore.

On one occasion, I was seated on a bench in the gardens. And an Indian gentleman—it turned out he was a retired Indian banker—came up to me and said "Namaste." And after a few pleasantries, he said to me, with a gentle wagging of his head, he said "I have one question for you; who are you?" I realized he probably wasn't asking me what my name was, but I thought, well, I'm going to feel my way into this conversation, so I said, "I'm John Philip." He said, "I was not asking you what your name was. [laughter] I was asking, who are you?" So I said to him, "I come from the same One you come from." That pleased him well enough to move deeper in our conversation.

Over the next number of minutes, he gave me a type of synopsis of Hindu wisdom, and he spoke of the Soul within all souls, the Self within all selves, the Life at the heart of all life. Then he said, "I must be going now, but I have one final thing to say to you." He said, "You are God. And until you realize that you are God, you will not be wise, you will not be free, you will not be happy. Namaste." Off he went. Since then, I have often wondered when I am going to have such conversation in the Edinburgh Botanical Gardens with a retired Scottish banker—with a retired Scottish Presbyterian banker. [laughter]

Well, how do we understand the wisdom of the East, because we've lived such a divorce that often we don't even have the tools to understand, what was that man talking about? In the West, we have so defined ourselves in terms of our ego that we are prone to think that he was addressing my ego. Emphatically not. One only has to scratch beneath the surface of Eastern wisdom to know and to hear that the only way to access a sacred depth of our being is through the work of dissolving the way the ego claims to be the center.

That's not to put down the ego. The ego is an amazing God-given faculty, our faculty of conscience and consciousness and will. But we are being called in our great traditions—and this is part of Jesus's

# Boston College

## SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY

wisdom—we are being called to die to the way in which the ego claims to be the center. Ego is not the center. It is given to serve the center, to serve the soul within the soul, the life within all life.

Again, we have had teachers who know this: again, Meister Eckhart, who says God is to be found in the human soul not by addition but by subtraction. We don't need to add anything to the human soul. You don't need anything added to your depth to find the Sacred. That is your essence. We are being called into a costly work of subtraction. This is what we owe one another in our communities, in our disciplines; to do this work of subtraction, subtracting the way in which the ego tries to be center.

Another aspect of what the West and the East bring in their dowries to this relationship: the West has a sense of the permanence of the physical. Yes, we know that it's passing, but we give it quite a significance and a type of permanence. The East, on the other hand, is very aware of the impermanence of the physical. The Sanskrit word that is often used to describe that is *maya* – M-A-Y-A in transliteration. It's sometimes incorrectly translated "unreality." It means more specifically passing or impermanent. Everything physical is passing, and in that sense it doesn't have ultimate reality. But the word *maya*, or passing or impermanent, is used also to refer to religion. It, too, is passing. It exists to point beyond itself.

A number of years ago, I was giving a sermon in St. Giles' Cathedral in Edinburgh, our little national cathedral. It's one of my favorite ecclesiastical places, its four central pillars over a thousand years old. The pulpit hugs one of those ancient pillars. At the beginning of the sermon, I said "There will come a day when this building is no more, and there will come a day when our Scriptures are no more, and there will come a day when Christianity is no more."

That last point was too much for one of my listeners. She shouted out, "Heresy." That, of course, is when the rest of the congregation woke up. [laughter] I could see people looking at one another as if to say, "Did he say something?" We need one of these in every congregation every Sunday morning. She was seated in a traditional sort of Scottish boxed pew, so in order to get out, which she wanted to do, she flung the door open, slammed it shut, and stomped down the central aisle stone floor. She was power-dressed that day. She had some good hard heels on. And she made her way to the main door. Before she slammed it, she shouted out it was now not heresy, it was "heretic." Slammed the door.

There's been a tendency to absolutize our religion. When Christianity forgets that it is pointing beyond itself, it becomes not a road sign, it becomes a stop sign. It becomes a destination rather than a serving to point beyond itself. We have no right to perpetuity. Why should we think that we have any right to perpetuity? We will exist only as long as we are bearing blessing.

Every summer, I spend some time in the high desert of New Mexico. One of the great blessings of that place for me has been teaching closely with a rabbi from Santa Fe, Rabbi Nahum. We realized we're brothers almost the first minute we met. The first time we taught together, I overheard Rabbi Nahum say to the people in our class on the side, he said, "Now, when John Philip teaches, it comes out Christian, but it goes in Jewish." [laughter] How do we do that for one another? We've been so trained to think that our traditions are exclusive, instead of given to deeply be in relationship, to deeply feed one another.

So a couple of summers ago, I was in New Mexico. Rabbi Nahum and I were on the same conference center at the same time. But on this occasion, we weren't teaching together. We had separate classes. In the class I was teaching, on the day I'm remembering, we were looking at that beautiful

# Boston College

## SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY

Resurrection story in John's Gospel of Mary Magdalene going to the garden to the tomb and finding the stone rolled away, and she fears that the body of her beloved has been stolen. She's standing weeping in the garden, and the Risen Christ addresses her. She doesn't recognize him until he calls her by name. Then there is this wonderful dialogue, at the end of which Jesus says, "Do not hold me. I am going to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God. Do not hold me."

As I was reflecting on this passage with the group, I kept thinking of Rabbi Naham. I kept thinking I must speak to him about this passage. And I felt I had some theological observation that I wanted to share with him about the way in which Christianity has tried to hold Jesus, which we have tried to say he's ours. He's not ours. He was born a Jew. He lived a Jew. He died a faithful Jew. He's not ours. If anything, he is humanity's. We're being invited to find ways of giving him back to humanity.

But at the end of the teaching that morning, I felt I wanted to look out for Naham, and we ended up in the same queue in the eating place. I asked if I could speak to him, and we took our trays of food out to a picnic bench outside the dining hall and sat down. What I wanted to share—well, I thought what I wanted to share—was this theological observation. But when I began to speak, I began to weep. I realized this is not a theological observation. This is a spiritual confession. And I had to ask his forgiveness, and the forgiveness of his tradition, for the way in which we've tried to hold Jesus.

All great teachers know they are not to be held. They all know that they're passing. Think of the amount of time in John's Gospel given to Jesus speaking about the coming Spirit who would do in them what the Spirit had done in him. Perhaps the least-preached-upon text in our Christian Scriptures is that verse in John in which Jesus says, "Those who come after me will do greater things than I." Do we believe that? This is the language of love. This is how we speak about children. We wish greater things for them than even what we have experienced.

I first went to India in 1990. It was at the invitation and gift of Harry Underhill, the nephew of Evelyn Underhill. I think she would have so appreciated what Harry did. He saw I was at that stage on the island of Iona heading up the abbey community, and Harry was a great friend of the Iona community, and he perceived that we needed some exposure to the East. So he offered to fly me to the East to spend some time in India, which I agreed to with some keenness, but also with some deep reservation. I had been trained in Edinburgh. I'd done my Ph.D. at a place of great philosophical theology. We knew it all. [laughter] It was all up here. [pointing to head] We, of course, didn't know anything about the heart.

I was older than 21 at this stage, but I had about me what G.K. Chesterton calls "the towering infallibility of 21." So part of me was actually a bit anxious about going to the East. Part of me wondered, what is this interior world that the East accesses? Is it just a world of subjectivity? Is it a world of delusion? Some of that anxiety came out my first night in India. I had a dream in which I was drinking vodka with Mikhail Gorbachev, as one does in one's dreams. My wife tells me I have an inflated dream ego. In the dream, my buddy Mikhail and I were knocking back shots of vodka. After the third shot, I discovered a chemical residue in the bottom of the glass. And in the dream, I thought I'm being drugged. I woke up, and even I at that stage could see that the dream was speaking of a type of anxiety about being drugged or deluded.

Now, Mikhail Gorbachev is not exactly an Eastern guru, but this was February 1990. This was two months after the Berlin Wall had fallen. Gorbachev was at the height of his revolution of *glasnost*, openness, *perestroika*, being restructured through relationship. India was inviting me into being restructured through relationship, through openness to its wisdom.

**Boston College**  
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY

Harry and I arrived at Shantivanam, Bede Griffiths' ashram, late at night, so I still haven't seen the lay of the land. But before being shown to my monastic cell, I was told that there would be a ringing of the bell in the morning, and that would indicate time for meditation down by the river. The bell was ringing long before the sun rose, and I got up and followed the sound of padding feet towards the river. There was no light around.

When I got to the riverbank, there was enough early dawn light to see that there were many others there. There were monks from Shantivanam in their saffron-colored garb. There were villagers around, sort of hunkered down with their arms around their knees, waiting for the rising of the sun as they have been doing since before time began, really—that beautiful practice of meditating at the rising of the sun. There were Westerners I could see from their clothing, many of them.

As I stood there about to join that company for morning meditation, I had one of the most important realizations of my life. That is, I don't have a clue what to do. We have been trained up here. [pointing to head] We hadn't been given even the simplest of instruction how to access the heart, how to access the soul; not the simplest of instructions. Tragedy. This is true of many, many of our theological places of training today.

That important awareness led me to seek the guidance of an old monk at Shantivanam later that day. He chose to teach me the simplest and perhaps the most ancient form of meditation from the East, and that is the simple repetition of the first word, *Om*. The East, of course, has something so close and equivalent to the opening words of our prologue to John's Gospel—really. In the beginning was the Om. The Om was with God and the Om was God. Everything has come into being through the Om. It's just the first sound, the first word through which everything has come into being.

So this old monk invited me first of all just to pay attention to my breathing. He said notice, when you breathe in, your body lifts up slightly. And when you breathe out, your body settles in a downward movement. So he invited me just to allow that natural rhythm to be the rhythm of the mantric repetition of the word. And he invited me to say Om in the down-breath as my body settled downwards to address that deepest sound, that word that is at the heart of my being and all being, and in the up-breath to receive from that place that is deeper than the ego self. Beautifully simple. It's been the heart of my practice for these 25-plus years.

When I returned to the West, though, I found—and I think this was a good desire—I wanted to enculturate this practice. I wanted to bring it much more into my own spiritual, religious inheritance. So instead of always saying Om, I found myself often using words from the Book of Psalms, "You are my strength," in the down-breath, and then just breathing up from that place of strength that is deep within me, deep within us. Or I found myself sometimes wanting to more explicitly Christianize this practice, so using this mantra of Jesus's teaching, that "We need to die in order to live," so I would use the words "die to live" in the down-breath, and on the up-breath to breathe up to receive from that place that is deeper than myself, deeper than my ego.

Some of you know that my second daughter has spent many years in India. She spent five years at a dance ashram in Chennai, formerly Madras. I would say that Kirsten found the other half of her soul in India, just like Bede. But the big difference between Kirsten and Bede is that she didn't know the first half of her soul. It was through the meditative practices and wisdom of the East that she found the first half of her soul, her Christian half, and claimed it deeply.



# Boston College

## SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY

This is the nature of true relationship with other wisdom traditions. They can, in fact, guide us back to ourselves. They can, in fact, guide us in a new way to what is deep within our inheritance. That, of course, is what people like the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh say to those who want to access Buddhist wisdom: yes, of course they can share Buddhist wisdom. But what do these great teachers say? Go back. Go back to the heart of your own tradition. Look deeply there for wisdom.

In a sense, it was Kirsten's body that took her to the East. She had grown up in the West as a dancer. Since knee-high, she was on tiptoes, leaving the ground—Western dance, ballet, transcendent form. But what the East offered her was the form of sacred dance in South India known as Bharatnatyam—flat-footed, bent knee, pounding the earth to receive sacred from within, immanent form of dance. So she danced at Kalakshetra for five years. Kalakshetra had been founded in part by Mahatma Gandhi and others in the run-up to Indian independence. They knew that part of nationhood was accessing the spiritual wisdom and practices and art forms of their nation.

During my visits to Kalakshetra when Kirsten was there, I loved going to morning prayer, which happened around the banyan tree—a sacred tree in India—great banyan tree with these interwoven trunk systems and branches shooting out, and every 20 feet or so they dive back down into the ground to do a type of secondary rooting. That's how the banyan grows and becomes more and more a place of shelter and sanctuary. It was around the banyan tree that the dancers would gather every morning, using words from the Vedas, words from the Koran, words from the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures to pray for peace.

The young women—beautiful Indians for the most part, a few internationals—would be there in their colorful saris. Beautiful young men—dancers in their *kurtas* gathering to pray. The banyan is such a powerful image, I believe, of what our spiritual traditions are called to be: strong central trunk, but with branches that can reach out into the wisdom of other traditions and do a type of secondary rooting in order to be stronger at the trunk, at the center.

I was sharing this image with a woman from Florida a number of years ago, and she shared with me what had happened in her town in Florida. At one stage, the central boulevard of her town had banyan trees. The town council decided they wanted to tidy up the banyan trees, so they cut all the secondary roots. When the next storm came in, all the banyans were knocked down.

We're living in a mighty type of storm in the Western world, in relation to our home tradition of Christianity. We will not be stronger by denying secondary roots. We will be stronger by humbly learning from and receiving the wisdom of other traditions. We are being called to be pilgrims, strengthened in our Christhood by the wisdom and practices of other traditions.

At this point, I invite us to move from the realm of ideas, words, images, and to move towards the heart, into that equipoise, that place between the head and the heart that I believe is the most creative place to be. Before we do some hearing from one another, I invite us to move towards the heart through a simple use of chant. I'm going to play a recorded chant. This has been created in collaboration with some Scottish musician friends of mine. We've used words from the Koran, from the Hebrew Scriptures, and from the teachings of Jesus, to pray especially on themes of peace and relationship. So the words of this chant are from the Koran. The words in English are:

Whichever way you turn, there is the face of God.  
Whichever way you turn, there is the face of God.

# Boston College

## SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY

You'll hear an Arabic descant running through the chant. What you'll be hearing is *ya basir*, which is "the face everywhere" or "the eyes everywhere." But we'll sing the English words. So the words are, "Whichever way you turn, there is the face of God." I invite you to join the chant as soon as you become familiar with it. It's very simple. There are a couple of instrumental interludes during which we can just listen to the words silently sounding within us. And then when the lyrics come back in, we can join the chant again.

So the chant runs for just over five minutes, and at the end of the chant, I invite us into a minute of silence, continued silence, not so much to think about the themes of the morning, but just pay attention in that place between the head and the heart. Just pay attention. What's stirring? What's calling your attention? And then Jane will lead us into sharing in small groups for a little while, an opportunity to share what's been stirring for you. And then Jane will bring us back into the full group, an opportunity to make comment, to put a question, if you'd like, or whatever you'd want to share with the full group.

So lots of instructions. Is that clear enough? So we begin with the chant: Whichever way you turn, there is the face of God. Please join the chant. And then after the chant, a minute of silence, and then Jane will guide us into sharing.

[audio plays]

### **Dr. Jane Regan:**

Thank you, John Philip. Thank you very much. Let me invite you to continue our journey here, invite you to take about five minutes or so to have conversation with a neighbor beside you or a couple of neighbors. What stands out for you? What do you want to remember? And what do you want to know more about? Or questions like those. OK, about five minutes, and then we'll call back for a gathering of those ideas.

If you have a question, we ask you to please come to one of the two mics in the cross aisles and kind of wait your turn. I'll just point to who's next. You can begin. Yes, sir?

**Participant:** I just want to say this is one of the most beautiful Saturday mornings I've spent in a long time, and I am so blessed. I am blessed to be with you people. [applause] But I also wanted to say, having gone to Boston College from 1967 to '71, which were tumultuous years and just before, when you had to have your Mass card punched before you could actually get into class. But just seriously, for one minute to think I am at Boston College, and the administration has chosen you to be speaker is astounding and wonderful to me as to how far we've come on being able to accept others, etc.

But what I wanted to say was that one of the terms right now is—and my children, three millennials, use a lot—which is "I'm spiritual but not religious." That mantra has a little bit of a sadness to it, to me as a parent, in that as am I, I read a lot of John Muir, I read a lot of other transcendentalists. Moving. However, could there be a casting off from that they're saying somewhat, of how much can be gleaned, you know, almost a universality amongst many young people rejecting anything that has a religious label? I try to, in my own way—you have to be, as a parent—weave your way into that direction and the beautiful experience you had with your daughter. But just could you talk on that just a little bit? Thank you.

**Boston College**  
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY

**Rev. Dr. Newell:** Thank you. Yes, Diana Butler Bass, the spirituality teacher, theologian, has done some very useful work with these categories of spiritual but not religious, religious and spiritual, religious and not spiritual. [laughter] I don't know how many people sign up to that third category. But useful in some ways to have these categories to express some of what is happening at this moment in time, and this is very much the sort of starting point of my book, *The Rebirthing of God: Christianity's Struggle for New Beginnings*.

In some ways, the starting point of that book is to say we are in the midst of the collapse of Christianity in the Western world as we have known it. There are different reactions, responses happening, and the one that I'm really committed to exploring is what is it that's trying to be born? What is it that's trying to come forth from within the soul of the Christian household at this moment in time? So let's not be frightened of the collapse. Let's turn our eye to what's trying to be born, and as we pay attention, birth within ourselves, but I think also very importantly within our children and within many of our peers but also many in the younger generation who would fall into that category of spiritual but not religious.

Let's do a couple of things, I believe. Let's first of all thank God that they see themselves as spiritual and that part of the spirituality that they are now carrying is as offspring of the Christian household. They may not find religious language helpful or religious practice any more helpful to give expression to that. Indeed, that is part of—and, you know, in one of my daughter's, for instance, not the dancing daughter, but the other daughter—the other daughter really is very unwilling to tolerate God language or to be around religious practice, but she's a deeply spiritual person, and she really channels her spirituality into justice work. I would say that that is a real birthing from within her Christian inheritance. So let's primarily celebrate the fact that they are seeing themselves in spiritual terms.

In my wanderings, I'm often asked, "How are we going to bring the young back into the church?" And I always say, "You know, that is emphatically not my question. Why would I want to bring them back into the church, to the extent that Christianity is in a state of collapse?" So I think it's not a matter of trying to shore up the old thing. I think that our primary responsibility is to be in true relationship with our children and with those who, for various reasons, are choosing not to come within the four walls of our religion anymore. Many of them have pretty emphatic and strong reasons for not.

Let's primarily find a way of staying in true relationship with them: really honor what their journey is, listen to them, learn from them. Not in a sense so much to get them back, as to say true relationship always leads to pregnancy. [laughter] If we are truly in relationship with the many who regard themselves as spiritual but not religious, something is going to happen. We're going to be changed, and they may be changed in the relationship, and something that we don't even imagine yet, can't even imagine.

I love Thomas Berry, who I referred to earlier on, but he used to say the universe is so amazing, it must have been dreamt into being. And then, prophet as he was, he didn't leave it there. He said, "We are in such a mess—ecologically, religiously, politically, nationally—we're in such a mess," he says, "We need to dream the way forward." We need to allow ourselves to imagine ways of relating, ways of being church, ways of spiritual practice we haven't known anything about yet, and we do this with that generation. I'm a great believer that that will be honored. Thank you.

**Participant:** Thank you.

**Boston College**  
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY

**Participant:** When I was contemplating asking this question, I was going to start out with a short sentence in Latin to prove it's the only sentence I know about Gaul. *Omnia Gallia est divisa in tres partsia*. And my name—it means peace. And because, Reverend Mister, you are wiser than I, I have a question, a practical question.

Sister Joan Chittister, who gave a previous Underhill Lecture, has a column in the most recent *National Catholic Reporter* on the front page. She calls Christians, Catholics, anybody that reads: How are we going to be in politics because our shared Christian? How can we act, think, work for the good, for the poor, the disenfranchised? I don't know the answer.

Practical question: what do you do when you pray for your country? I sing *God Bless America*, because I know God holds as prayer what we intend as prayer. And I know from running a prayer group at Boston College just about since I got here, that only the Holy Spirit can move people's heart to commitment. We all need your wisdom.

**Rev. Dr. Newell:** Thank you. Well, I'm prepared to engage with your question, but I want to disagree with your first point, and that is that I'm wiser than you are. [laughter] Within us is the wisdom of God—pure grace. But how do we access it together? We are living in a moment in time in which part of what we're being invited to do, I believe, within our Christian household is to deeply access our prophetic inheritance.

I often think of Mahatma Gandhi as a person who shows us some of the way forward in terms of working for real transformation and change. He committed himself to the freeing of his nation from British oppression. And he was very aware that he needed to access soul force for this holy work and that ego force was simply not up to the job. By ego force, I think that someone like Gandhi wasn't just referring to our individual ego but to the egos of our party, parties—you know, political parties—or the egos of our communities or the ego of our nation.

How do we access this soul force for this moment in time? Gandhi said that one of the most powerful words that we have in English is the word *no*. No, we will not be part of a nation that denies access to refugees who need sanctuary in our nation. No, we will not be part of it. And we will not look to legitimacy from a government if the government is denying the divine imperative of giving sanctuary to refugees, so no, we won't do it. We won't participate. And we won't look to your authority as to whether we will do it. No, we will not sanction any demeaning of women or putting down of the feminine. No, we won't do it. [applause] No, no, no. No, we will not be part of a lack of care for the earth.

But Gandhi says—and this is where I think that we have so much to learn, and we have patrons of this within our own Christian inheritance—and that is that these *nos* need to be undergirded by what Gandhi calls an even stronger word, an even more powerful word, the word *yes*. By that, he meant saying yes to the true essence of one another and to everything that has being, saying that yes even to those with whom we most passionately disagree, never forgetting that, at the heart of their being, is the image and likeness of the One from whom we all come, and by saying yes, calling the other back to himself or to herself, rather than calling the other to become like us, because often prophetic movements for change can destroy themselves or undermine themselves by self-righteousness.

So we're not calling the other to become like us. We are calling one another to access that true source, that soul within the soul. I believe that we learn and help one another speak this deep yes

**Boston College**  
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY

through the sort of spiritual practice that we've just been part of; continue to root ourselves in the soul within the soul and find strength to speak and to live from that place.

Gandhi's point is that if we try doing the *nos* without accessing that more powerful place, the *yes*, then all of our *nos* are going to be undermined in real strength, because our strength has to be based on the *yes*.

**Participant:** Namaste.

**Rev. Dr. Newell:** Namaste.

**Participant:** Thank you for all that you've shared.

**Rev. Dr. Newell:** Who are you? [laughter]

**Participant:** I am a child of God. [laughter] Thanks for all that you shared with us and food for thought that we can take home and digest. I was thinking about some of the imagery that you brought up: the phrase radical humility, the image of the new sapling that needs to be sort of protected in its growth, and what you had mentioned around, well, maybe if Christianity had been a little bit more open as Christians came out into other cultures, how would things look different today?

I think of the verse that in many Christian traditions is called the Great Commission: "Go out and make disciples of all nations." And I'm wondering, is there a meaning that we need to harvest out of that phrase, "make disciples," that maybe we haven't seen yet but that was originally there in the wording that we should be looking at a little differently in terms of making disciples in all that you've said?

**Rev. Dr. Newell:** Yes. Thank you. I'm reminded of the American rabbi who was asked what he thought of those words from John's Gospel: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but through me." These words, of course, that have been used so exclusivize Christianity, and of course the subtext usually in how we've used them is *we* are the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but through *our* doctrines, through *our* sacraments, and so on. But the rabbi surprised the questioner by saying, "Oh, I agree with these words." The questioner said, "But how can you, as a rabbi, agree with these words?" And the rabbi said, "I believe that Jesus's way was the way of love, that Jesus's truth was the truth of love, that Jesus's life was the life of love. No one comes to the Father but through love."

So the rabbi had taken this text that has been use to so exclusify us and turned it into this radically inclusive, universal truth—that Jesus embodies the way, the truth, the life that are deep within us, because we're made of God, we're made of love. Part of what we're being invited to do, I believe, in terms of how we give Jesus back to humanity and not hold to him so close as ours is to say, "What is this discipleship about?" It is discipleship in the way of love. And it is celebrating Jesus as manifestation, as revelation of this way that is this truth, this life that is at the very heart of our being made of God. That's something that we can do with passion, and it's not about serving the boundaries of our tradition. It's about again remembering that this tradition that I'm a son of, I believe in, but is given to do this wider work. It's not given to somehow serve its own empire.

**Participant:** I want to add my thank you to the other thank yous that you've heard so far and introduce myself. I am a member of a book discussion group at St. Ignatius Church, and it just so

**Boston College**  
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY

happens that we finished reading your book. I shared this comment with my colleagues that I've been looking for this book for 50 years, and to add to that your being here this morning makes what you read in the book even more real, while it's a dream vision.

What I'd like to comment and then ask you . . . I expected that there might be as many as 50 or 100 people here this morning. I walked in, and I couldn't believe . . . What do you make of it that there are so many people who got up on a Saturday morning to be here and hear what you had to say? I meant to ask each one of you, as I'm asking myself: why are we here? I'm here because I read the book. I rather doubt that you all read the book, but you were looking for something, so I'd like you to just think about that. So thank you again.

**Rev. Dr. Newell:** Thank you.

**Participant:** What do you make of it that we're here? [applause]

**Rev. Dr. Newell:** I was in Dublin for the Irish launch of the *Rebirthing of God* book. And there was a sister, Sister of the Presentation Order, present who had been also a midwife for part of her vocation. She was fascinated, of course, with all of the birthing imagery in the book. She said at the end of the talk, she said "The God that is trying to be born from deep within, the sacredness that's trying to come forth at this moment in time," she said, "is a cosmic God." She said the God of so much of our inheritance is a pretty small God, a pretty domesticated God, tamed. We've got God trained to look after just our nation, our religion, our species, and so on. So she said the God who's trying to be born is cosmic, so she said we're in for quite a stretching. [laughter]

I said to her, Sister, why could I not have had this conversation with you before writing the epilogue to the book? I mean, she really got it. I think there's this stirring in us. There's this awakening within us. Yes, a lot is collapsing, but there's something much deeper trying to stir. And I think there's a lot of excitement about that, a lot of willingness to be part of that together.

But I was so excited by this stretching image that I phoned my wife in Edinburgh that night, and I said this sister has just said we're in for a big stretching. This released in Allie, my wife, a memory from halfway through the labor of the birth of our first child, and the awareness was there's no going back. [laughter] That is equally profound. There's no going back. We may like to pretend that we can go back. We can't go back. We can't go back to the small God, because something wonderfully of God's wildness and God's cosmic dimensions and depths is what is stirring. So I believe it is essentially a very exciting time to be sons and daughters of our Christian household.

**Participant:** I'm sure I'm not the only one in the room who noticed at various times while you were speaking that the whole room uttered a collective "hmm" at many times. And for me, it was a response to your ability to articulate a truth that I recognized when you were speaking it. What I'm curious about and what I'm longing to hear you maybe articulate in a way where I could go "hmm" is that here we stand at Boston College, a Jesuit Catholic institution that births the calling of boys and girls, men and women, and yet only recognizes and ordains the calling of males. [applause]

I don't need to say anything more, I think.

**Rev. Dr. Newell:** Hmm. [laughter] It's important that our hmms be mutual. Yeah. A couple of things. It's good to leave the light question to the end, isn't it? A couple of things about this important point. One is, what are we doing when we try to utter spiritual wisdom? I believe that our

**Boston College**  
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY

role as articulators, and that is for all of us, is to articulate, to try to give expression to what is already in the soul of the other. You know, we've worked with a hierarchy of truth often, and we've often been given the impression that truth is somehow dispensed from above rather than truth being something that is to be awakened in one another. When we hear deep truth, part of our response is, oh, I knew it. I knew this.

I was giving a talk on wisdom of the Celtic tradition, Celtic Christianity, a number of years ago. At the end of my talk, a woman in her 80s came very purposefully up the central aisle with a copy of *Listening for the Heartbeat of God* in her hand and my book on Celtic spirituality. She was coming up the aisle so purposefully that the naughty boy in me thought she's going to hit me over the head with it. But I was quite wrong. When she got up, she said, "I want to show you what I wrote in this book after reading it." And she opened the cover. And inside she had written, "I knew it, I knew it, I knew it."

I so often wish I had asked her for that copy, because that is our deep response when we hear truth that's been neglected or covered over or lost sight of. It's not so much hearing it from without as it's this sense of, "Oh, I knew it." That's a very liberating place from which to speak, of course. It takes a lot of weight off our shoulders. Our role is not to try to articulate what our heirs don't know. Our role is to try to give voice to these deep knowings, and we're just serving those deep knowings. We're not sort of imparting something that isn't deeply there.

One of these deep knowings, I believe, is the knowing that you've touched on, and that is the deep sacredness of the feminine. What are we doing tolerating a practice that denies that role of leadership to the feminine? That we live in a Western world that has been dominated by the shadow form of the masculine? There is a great yearning to come back into relationship with the sacred feminine within us and within our communities. Only then, I believe, will we truly recover a sense of the sacred masculine within us, because we've relegated it to shadow form, because it's so much to do with power over.

I recently came across an ancient prophecy from the island of Iona. This is our little sacred island in Scotland that became the base of St. Columba's mission in the sixth century. The prophecy, which I haven't been able to date exactly when it comes from, but it appears to be an ancient prophecy. The prophecy is that, "Just as the masculine face of the sacred was shown to us in Jesus, so the feminine face of the sacred will become known through Iona."

Now, I don't believe it's to be taken literally, but I do believe that part of what the prophecy is speaking of is that within our Celtic inheritance, as within so many of our native spiritual inheritances, there is this deep knowing. There's this deep knowing of the sacredness of the feminine. That is where the feminine face of the divine is being disclosed and will be disclosed.

I've been doing quite a bit of work on St. Brigid lately. And in the early Celtic Christian period, there are many models of female leadership, and it seems that Brigid was not only a leader of her double-monastic community, men and women living in community together, but it seems that she carried episcopal status. Later accounts, of course, describe her ordination or consecration, whatever it is, of a bishop as accidental. Bishop Mel, it was said, who was consecrating her, read from the wrong service book. But another version of it is, so intoxicated was he by the grace of God, that he didn't know what he was doing. So let us pray—you know, we can love Francis in Rome, but let us pray that he becomes so intoxicated by the grace of God that he doesn't know what he's doing.  
[laughter/applause] Thank you.

**Boston College**  
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY

**Dr. Jane Regan:** Let's conclude. John Philip has asked us to conclude with just a moment of prayer.

**Rev. Dr. Newell:** This is a prayer from the prayer book *Praying with the Earth*. [John Philip Newell, *Praying with the Earth: A Prayerbook for Peace*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2011, p. 52]

To the home of peace  
to the field of love  
to the land where forgiveness and right relationship meet  
we look, O God,  
with longing for earth's children  
with compassion for the creatures  
with hearts breaking for the nations and people we love.  
Open us to visions we have never known  
strengthen us for self-givings we have never made  
delight us with the oneness we could never have imagined  
that we may truly be born of You  
makers of peace.  
Amen.