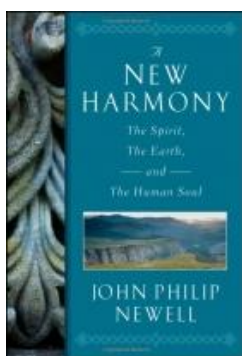


Every Bush is Burning



2011. St Andrew Press. Extract from the preface reproduced here with the author's permission.

In 1990, Harry Underhill, the nephew of the English mystic Evelyn Underhill, invited me to India. I was at that stage warden of Iona Abbey in the Western Isles of Scotland. Harry felt that the Iona Community could do with some exposure to the East. I met him in London, and we flew together to Madras. Our plan was to travel further south in Tamil Nadu, to the ashram of the great Benedictine monk Bede Griffiths, who had devoted much of his life to the marriage of East and West.

On my first night in India, I had a dream in which I was drinking vodka with Mikhail Gorbachev. In what at first seemed a convivial atmosphere, we were knocking back shots of vodka together. After the third round, however, I noticed a chemical residue at the bottom of my glass. I was being drugged. When I woke up I realized in part what the dream was about. In traveling to the East for the first time, there was some uncertainty in me about what I would encounter. I was still a good Western boy. I had been trained for the Church of Scotland ministry at New College in the University of Edinburgh. Everything about my religious history and philosophical training had led me to look to the transcendent for God and to the mind for wisdom. And here I was entering the East, the world of immanence and the unconscious.

Mikhail Gorbachev is not exactly an Eastern guru. He did, however, represent otherness to me, a world beyond the defined boundaries of the West.

Gorbachev at that moment was in the midst of a revolution of thought. The Berlin Wall separating East and West had come down two months earlier. And as leader of the Soviet Union, a political system based on fixed ideologies and doctrinaire structures, Gorbachev was teaching perestroika ("restructuring") and glasnost ("openness"). He represented the desire to open a system that had been closed and to restructure it through dialogue rather than doctrine.

I was anxious about entering the East. It felt like a strange land to me. My Western education had trained me to suspect Indian mysticism. It was too subjective. Part of me feared that I would be deluded by drinking at the well of Eastern spirituality. Carl Jung says that in India "one gets pushed back into the unconscious." That was my fear. Dream life and the unconscious represented for me a world of delusion. To open to it was to run the risk of being flooded by unreality. I had been taught that truth was primarily outside myself, to be accessed through the intellect and through propositional truths. And Western Christianity, with its doctrine of original sin, had given me the impression that what was deepest in me was opposed to God. Here in the East, I was about to encounter the opposite. I was about to be encouraged to draw from the deep wellsprings of my being and to open to the unconscious as a true channel of perception.

Meister Eckhart, the fourteenth-century Christian mystic, says that God is "everything" that is and God is "nothing" that is. God is the Life within all life, to be found at the heart of all that has being—within the light of the rising sun, within the early morning breeze, within the waking consciousness of our minds and bodies every day God is the Immanent One, everything that is. And at the same time, God is the Transcendent One, nothing that is. God is always more and other than the light of the heavens, the elements of earth, the spiritual and physical energies of the breath we breathe. The greatness of our Western religious inheritance is that we have been taught that God is nothing that is. God is purely transcendent. The East, in contrast, has never forgotten that God is everything that is. God is immanent.

My first visit to India turned out to be a great blessing in my life. It was both a perestroika and a glasnost. It restructured me, radically reorienting my way of seeing. And it opened me, to the East with its ancient wisdom as well as to the inner world of the unconscious. Such was India's blessing in my life that in the years to come I would draw heavily on its teachings and, even more important, on its prayerful meditative disciplines. And it was to lead me eventually to encourage my second daughter to go to the East and study. In 2007, our Kirsten decided to train in Bangalore. She enrolled in the Attakalari School of Movement and Art to study a combination of Indian sacred dance and Western contemporary movement. I accompanied Kirsten to India for her first week to make sure she settled in all right. Bangalore, like all Indian cities, is full of color and scent and sound. All day long, and sometimes all night long too, one's senses are bombarded by the ceaseless

honking of horns on crowded streets, the smell of cow dung and curries, and the brilliant array of saris that adorn even the poorest women of India.

We delicate Westerners require more space than what Indian cities typically afford, so on most days Kirsten and I would seek a few hours of sanctuary in the Lal Bagh Gardens at the heart of Bangalore. I have always been struck in India by how willing people are to engage in conversation with total strangers. On busy streets and crowded buses, I have met Indians eager to communicate, not just about the weather and cricket but about philosophical and religious themes.

One day as we sat in the Lal Bagh Gardens, we were approached by an elderly Indian gentleman. He greeted us kindly and entered into conversation. After a few pleasantries, in which I learned that he was a retired banker, he said with a gentle sideways wagging of his head, "I have one question for you. Who are you?" I sensed that he was not asking me what my name was, but, wanting to feel my way into the conversation, I said, "My name is John Philip." To which he replied, still kindly nodding his head from side to side, "I was not asking you what your name was. I was asking who are you?" So I said to him, "I come from the same One you come from." This pleased him well enough that he proceeded with our discussion, in which he expounded for me the heart of Hindu wisdom. He spoke of the Self within all selves and of true self-knowledge as consisting of an awareness that our selves are rooted in the One who is at the heart of all life. He then said, with an even more emphatic wagging of his head, "I must be going now, but I have one final thing to say to you. You are God. And until you realize you are God, you will not be wise, you will not be happy, and you will not be free. Namaste." And off he went. Since then I have often wondered when I will have such a conversation in the Edinburgh Royal Botanic Gardens with a retired Scottish banker!

How do we interpret such Eastern wisdom? For most of us in the Western world, it requires a lot of interpretation because in the East, God is everything that is, whereas in the West, God is nothing that is. One of the most emphatic things to be said about the Indian banker's words to me is that he was not addressing my ego. He was addressing the essential depth in me that is also his true depth and the true depth of everything that has being. He was pointing to the Ground of my being, to the Self within all selves, to the One in whom all life is rooted.