

Living in the Light

How the warmth of genuine

personal spirituality



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Pacific Press® Publishing Association

Nampa, Idaho

Oshawa, Ontario, Canada

www.pacificpress.com

Table of Contents

Preface	9
Chapter 1: A Light in the Darkness	11
Chapter 2: The Only Rational Act	22
Chapter 3: The Ultimate Revelation	29
Chapter 4: The New Spirituality	41
Chapter 5: Who Are We Anyway?	54
Chapter 6: Living God's Love	61
Chapter 7: Psychospirituality	65
Chapter 8: The Forgotten God	74
Chapter 9: The Coming of the Kingdom	81
Chapter 10: Through a Glass Very Darkly	88
Chapter 11: The Path out of Hell	101
Chapter 12: Salvation for Dummies	110
Chapter 13: Beyond Belief!	118
Chapter 14: The New Intimacy	123

CHAPTER ONE

A Light in the Darkness

“The darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining” (1 John 2:8, RSV).

“It was dark. Pitch black. I couldn’t see my hand in front of my face. I was totally disoriented. Debris was falling all around me. People were moaning and screaming in the darkness. Then this light came on from somewhere nearby. I reached toward it. A hand grabbed my arm and pulled me forward. It was a policeman with a flashlight. We made a human chain with several others, and he led us out of there” (survivor, World Trade Center).

While the explosion of terrorism and the dark clouds of hatred threaten to obscure our vision of all that is good, we must not allow the blackness to diminish the reality that we have been and are in the middle of a tremendous explosion of light and spirituality. The evolution of human consciousness is accelerating at an astounding rate today. A spiritual renaissance has been going on all around us. This phenomenon has resulted in a remarkable, growing thirst for personal, authentic spirituality. It has also contributed to unprecedented changes in the world in the past quarter century—dramatic changes, such as the fall of the Berlin Wall and the destruction of the Iron Curtain. It has brought a new enlightenment that abhors war and violence. It has gifted us with a new

LIVING IN THE LIGHT

sensitivity to the needs and rights of women and children. It has created a new concern, respect, and appreciation for our planet and every living thing on it.

Indeed, this movement toward light and freedom and individual worth and liberty that has been going on in the past few decades has actually contributed to triggering the intense hateful reaction of religious extremists. Darkness cannot tolerate light. Evil is enraged by good.

The perpetrators of the war against America are not godless atheists. They are religious people. They are acting for a religious cause. Their incomprehensibly malevolent acts are motivated primarily by their religious beliefs. We are fighting an extremely distorted belief system, not a country. All the military might on earth cannot solve this problem that threatens to plunge the world into chaos. To get to the root of this crisis we must turn to spiritual insight and spiritual solutions. This book is about the weapons in our spiritual arsenal.

The Muslim extremists represent a sick, medieval religiosity that stands in direct contrast to the light of modern, progressive spirituality. The differences between the two belief systems could not be greater. It is like a clash of two entirely different civilizations. Their twisted theology presents a God who is harsh and vindictive, a God who rejects as infidels all who do not believe as they do. Their distorted theology teaches them that they can earn favor with God and automatic entrance to heaven as heroes of the jihad if they martyr themselves for their cause and take innocent lives in the process.

These militant radicals are trying to return to the Dark Ages. Their ultimate goal is to force their archaic, dysfunctional brand of patriarchal theocracy on the modern world. They make up a terrible new army who do not pledge their allegiance to any country, but rather to a religious cause. This is a religious war we are in. It is not about territory. It is not about oil. It is not about race. It is not about money. It is most of all about God. It is about who these extremists think He is,

A Light in the Darkness

what they think He is like, and how they think He wants you to believe and behave.

Our antagonists want to destroy Western democracy and modernity. They want to destroy a culture that recognizes women as being of equal value as men. They want to destroy spiritual modernity. This is a war between cultic, archaic religiosity and contemporary, progressive spirituality. It is a war between religious darkness and spiritual light. The religious extremists are intent on destroying the very principles of the Enlightenment, of the spiritual renaissance. They cannot tolerate the progressive American values of democracy, freedom of religion, freedom of conscience, equality, economic opportunity, and political choice. They cannot abide a society that places the value of the individual above the value of a religion. The idea of a country where the people instead of the mullahs rule drives them into a frenzy of hatred.

AN UNAVOIDABLE CLASH

Over the past several years a hunger for the spiritual has occurred in our society as it has become clear that neither science, academic knowledge, economic prosperity, nor military strength can prevent the clash between Islamic extremism and progressive spirituality. Nor can these things solve other serious problems that society faces. Insight into the inadequacy of what were once considered to be the most hopeful solutions to world problems came at a time when people were growing increasingly disenchanted with materialism; when they could see that the economy is fragile; when they could see that politics and politicians were wavering in their commitment to the common good and morality; when they could see that capitalism was being weakened by the lack of moral and ethical values among corporate executives.

The tragedies that befell the United States on September 11, 2001, and the grief and suffering that continue to this day have had a profound spiritual impact on many hearts. The realization of the preciousness of every human life and the sacredness of the bonds

LIVING IN THE LIGHT

between loved ones, the extraordinary bravery and courage of those who gave their lives to save others, the dignity and quiet suffering with which so many have borne the loss of those who were dear to them—all of this has changed our society and touched us deep in our souls.

Even before 9/11, however, there had been a growing awareness of the importance of an inner spiritual life. More than twelve years ago, a Life magazine editorial stated:

America is turning to spiritual values as a reaction against the greed binge of the eighties. Along with the fall of communism, there's been a resurgence of the spirit in Eastern Europe too. There's a worldwide spiritual revival, and it's one of the great stories of our time.¹

In the past several years entire issues of major magazines like Newsweek and Time have focused on topics such as God, angels, and spirituality. There has been a growing interest in the effectiveness of prayer, an effectiveness that appears to be substantiated by some interesting modern research.

The media is finally beginning to honor people's search for the things of the soul. More and more stories that feature spirituality, morals, ethics, and values are appearing. In recent years, television has been carrying more prime-time shows on religion, spirituality, the clergy, and angels than ever before in its history. Traditionally, television has given anything to do with God and religion a very wide berth. Now, a major network can run a miniseries on the life of Jesus in prime time and receive excellent ratings. Touched by an Angel, a show that spoke freely and frequently of God's love, power, and concern for the individual, was among the highest-rated TV programs of the past decade. Mel Gibson has produced a classic motion picture devoted to the last days of the life of Christ that has drawn crowds. A decade ago, for the first time, ABC World News Tonight hired a full-time correspondent, Peggy Wehmeyer, to cover

A Light in the Darkness

the areas of religion and spirituality. And in January 2003, PBS (Public Broadcasting System) began broadcasting all across America a regular weekly show focused on religion and ethics.

Speaking of the significance of the emergence of the new hunger for the spiritual, Peter Jennings said:

About three years ago I began to get the feeling that religion or spirituality was playing a much larger role in American life generally, so I began to agitate to see whether or not we could get it as a regular department on World News Tonight. ²

The following quotation above is not from some religious journal but was published in the December 7, 1992, issue of U.S. News & World Report.

There is a hunger these days, a gnawing dissatisfaction with the answers provided by materialism and scientific progress, a craving for an inner life. . . . Increasingly, Americans are looking for solutions that speak to the spirit as well as the psyche. ³

Psychology Today put it this way:

We are witnessing a spiritual awakening unprecedented in modern times according to scholars in American religious thought. . . . Spirituality has moved beyond institutional religion and now flourishes at large in the culture. ⁴

The world of competitive sports provides evidence that spirituality is making headway. When Phil Jackson was coach of the Chicago Bulls, he led his basketball team to three National Basketball Association championships by integrating spiritual training with their regular training. He emphasized awareness, selfless teamwork, and aggressiveness without anger. And even the world of politics is being penetrated by

LIVING IN THE LIGHT

rays of spiritual life. Several prayer and fellowship groups now meet on Capitol Hill. Some members of congress attend these, as do a number of legislative staff people.⁵

In the world of music, where rap artists bring records to the top of the charts with violent and pornographic lyrics, the Benedictine monks of Santo Domingo de Silos brought out an album of Gregorian chants—which became one of the top five bestsellers of all time! The Christian recording industry is flourishing as never before, with groups and individual artists using lyrics that uplift spiritual values set to a wide variety of music styles.

In the literary world, the light of spirituality is making incredible inroads as well. The Bible continues to be a bestseller. An average of 25 percent of the titles on the New York Times bestseller list deal with the subject of spirituality.⁶ The Prayer of Jabez, written by a Christian evangelist, rocked the secular publishing world with its incredible success, remaining at the top of the charts of bestsellers for months on end.

The great interest in things spiritual is certainly not uniquely a North American phenomenon. Kenneth L. Woodward, the religion editor for Newsweek magazine, reports that there is, in his words, an “explosion of Christianity in developing nations that is transforming the world’s largest religion.” He says that in the heart of Africa, among the Ashanti and Baganda and the thousand other tribes who occupy the world’s second largest continent, “Christianity is spreading faster than at any time or place in the last 2,000 years.” He reports that the same phenomenon is occurring in Latin America and even in parts of India and Asia. Korea has some of the world’s largest Christian churches. Woodward says the Republic of Korea now has four times as many Presbyterians as does America!⁷

A DEEPER QUEST

This spiritual explosion is moving in a new direction. Many people are coming to realize that while church attendance is important for sustaining religious life, it cannot replace a more per-

A Light in the Darkness

sonal and deeper quest for the spiritual that can go on only in one's own heart. An article in the New York Times reported on a study of religious values done by a leading researcher. It showed that Americans, while still supporting their churches, are searching for a deeper spiritual experience. They are beginning to draw upon inner, more personal experience and feeling to define their faith.

According to the researcher Dr. William McCree, this represents a major change in the nation's religious character. "Religious faith remains strong," he says, "but for growing numbers of people an individual search for meaning has become the central religious experience replacing unquestioning obedience to religious authority. More adherents of organized religious institutions are going beyond the required minimum standards of membership to explore the deeper meaning of faith."⁸

Timothy Leary urged people to "question authority." Today, it seems, people have expanded that to read: "always question all authority, especially religious authority"! Many Roman Catholics, adherents of the Christian world's largest denomination, are refusing to blindly accept and support all the extrabiblical policies and doctrines of that church. They have come to believe that they have the right to create a more personal system of belief and practice. The shocking revelations of the coverups by the church hierarchy of child molestation by some Catholic priests has left the church reeling and further eroded the confidence of the members in the integrity of their religious leaders. It has helped them to see that they cannot depend on religious authority figures to be the ultimate spiritual example.

Martin Luther's incredibly courageous questioning of religious authority changed the world. When he began to explore the Bible for himself and stopped accepting as absolute truth the church's traditional religious views of God and of how to receive eternal life, he was led to discover the profound truth of salvation by faith alone. This discovery, this great theological and spiritual enlightenment, became

LIVING IN THE LIGHT

the foundation for the Reformation. It has become the core belief of Christian spirituality.

The good news is that the Reformation has not ended. The light still burns and leads on. It always will, as long as men and women accept the responsibility for their own personal spiritual growth and maturity.

On another front, there is a growing interest in spirituality among many men and women of science. The emergence of quantum physics in the past few decades has opened the eyes of many scientists to the possibility of a Force, a guiding Power behind creation. They no longer believe that the universe is a purposeless accident. They can see that it has been put together with such an astonishing ingenuity that thinking people are compelled to conclude there must be an intelligent, creative Presence behind it.

More and more scientists are willing to be open to the metaphysical, to admit that there may be truths beyond the known spectrum of logic and the scientific method. Important dialogues between science and spirituality are taking place. At a recent meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, a symposium on religion and science drew standing-room-only crowds.

The Boston Theological Institute, a consortium of divinity schools in the Boston area, has established The Center for Faith and Science Exchange, which invites distinguished scientists to speak on religious themes.⁹ And the new science of neurotheology is focused on studying the biological or neurological underpinnings for spiritual and mystical experiences. Researchers believe they have found the existence of “spirituality circuits” in the brain. They think they can actually prove with brain-imaging data that the human brain is designed with structures and processes for experiencing spirituality. So far they have discovered that certain areas of the brain are consistently active during spiritual experiences. They know that contemplation affects brain activity and that there is a biological basis for spiritual experience.¹⁰

A Light in the Darkness

A PROFOUND CONNECTION

The medical field is also beginning to understand the profound connection between medicine, spirituality, and healing. New research is weakening the wall that has existed between medicine and spirituality, church and lab. As one doctor said recently, "Religion and medicine are inextricably related. We're seeing it time and time again. . . . Everyone has spirituality, . . . it's basically what gives your life meaning."¹¹

Some of the studies that support this view are striking. One comprehensive research project showed that people who attend religious services more than once a week live seven years longer than those who do not.

The Washingtonian reports:

Patient demand, coupled with scientific studies correlating faith with good health, is slowly converting a skeptical medical community. Scientific journals and many new books are taking up the subject. Doctors are attending conferences on faith and healing in increasing numbers. "I think it's a part of the general return to spirituality in the country," one clinician is quoted as saying.

Medical schools are responding to the demand for a greater emphasis on the spiritual: In 1992, only a few taught spirituality; now some 50 of the 125 medical schools in the United States have dedicated curricula. Students are taught how to incorporate a spiritual history into a medical history.¹²

One might expect that psychiatry and psychology would be the fields of science least open to the possibilities of the spiritual, but that is not the case. One of the most astounding developments in the past few years has been the unexpected acceptance by many psychotherapists of the significance, legitimacy, and healing potential of spirituality. It seems as though the iron curtain between psychotherapy and

LIVING IN THE LIGHT

spirituality is beginning to fall. The journal of the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill recently reported:

Whereas 10 years ago it was rare to consider a patient's faith in counseling, now discussions about how faith affects consumers [people with mental and emotional problems] are integrated into many psychiatry residency-training programs in the United States. . . . Faith, which previously had been generally discounted by mental health professionals, is now considered an important factor in rehabilitation.¹³

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual is rather like the bible of psychiatry; psychiatrists and other psychotherapists use it as an authoritative text and reference in standardizing their diagnoses and treatments. The latest edition includes a brand-new section: "Spiritual Emergencies." For the first time in history, psychiatry has become willing to recognize the spiritual enough to admit that people have spiritual lives. The new manual takes into consideration that people can have spiritual issues that should not be treated as mental conditions and might not be best dealt with using drugs or standard psychotherapy.

In many different ways, through many changing and unexpected mediums, the light continues to lead us out of darkness. The new, potent wine of personal, genuine spirituality is splitting asunder the old wineskins of traditional religious, psychological, political, philosophical, and even scientific thought and experience. It is literally transforming the world around us. When it has led to the understanding that people's personal connection with God is more significant than their loyalty and adherence to a particular religion, it has caused the defenders of traditional religions to rise up in reaction and even in hatred and persecution. Where it has created democracy and brought personal freedoms and liberties and a level of equality between sexes and between races that the world has never seen before, it is being fiercely resisted by the forces of evil through heinous terrorist acts.

A Light in the Darkness

Darkness cannot tolerate light. Yet this spirituality is the very antidote for the poison of terrorism, tyranny, and fear that threatens the peace and security of the world.

This book will demonstrate that the real power behind this explosion of spiritual light is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That is its foundation. That is what continues to empower it. Bethlehem was ground zero for the silent explosion of radiance that has been lighting up the world ever since!

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1. Life, July 1991, editorial page (emphasis supplied).
 2. Peter Jennings, in a video presentation to the Religious Newswriter's Association, 1994.
 3. U.S. News & World Report, December 7, 1992.
 4. Psychology Today, November/December 1994, 57.
 5. See Common Boundary, September/October 1994.
 6. See Psychology Today, *ibid.*, 56.
 7. Kenneth L. Woodward, Newsweek, April 16, 2001, 44, 48.
 8. New York Times, December 9, 1984.
 9. See Psychology Today, *ibid.*, 57.
 10. See Newsweek, May 7, 2001.
 11. Linda Strohl, Washingtonian, December 2000.
 12. *Ibid.*
 13. NAMI Advocate, Spring 2001, 29