



AVI KATZ

Near misses with the divine

After his spiritual quest, Eric Weiner ends up being as wracked by doubt as he was at the outset

Tibor Krausz

AS ELUSIVE QUESTS GO, the one in search of God has been a hardy perennial. Ever since Gilgamesh set out to become immortal like the Sumerian gods, countless seekers have followed close behind in hopes of divinely inspired wisdom, grace and fortitude.

Invariably, such spiritual quests have yielded the same three time-honored insights (or a combination thereof): 1. The ways of God are mysterious and He's beyond knowing; 2. The divine is in the eye of the beholder as it manifests itself in myriad ways; 3. We're all one with the Universe.

You're free to take your pick, as each an-

swer is so vague as to be meaningless. None of them achieve much in the way of enlightening less esoterically inclined fellows about the nature of God other than through the suggestive power of obscurantism by hinting at some Gnostic wisdom only initiates can fathom.

Eric Weiner is certainly no such initiate.

The author, who bills himself "a gastronomical Jew" (one with a taste for kosher holiday feasts but not so much for daily observance), is an agnostic who professes ignorance in the face of one of life's essential questions: Is there a God? After a health scare that reminds him of his mortality, Weiner, who is in his late 40s and lives

in Washington, DC embarks on a spiritual quest that takes him from Istanbul to Las Vegas.

His latest quest comes on the heels of an earlier one, which was detailed in his 2008 bestseller, *The Geography of Bliss*, an edifying romp through the global landscape of happiness quotients from which we learned that the world's most persistently unhappy people are the Moldovans. That came as a bit of a surprise to this reviewer, who would have wagered on Hungarians, that long suffering nation of gloomy pessimists whose national anthem has the rousing ebullience of a funeral dirge and includes the verse: "Long beset by misfortune... this people

has already suffered for [both] the past and future.”

Studies have shown that the religious tend to be happier and more optimistic than the non-religious, so one presumes Moldova is a nation of diehard atheists prone to long bouts of brooding spiritual nihilism. Sadly, Weiner doesn't return to that ex-Soviet state of despondent souls to find out.

Equal Opportunity

A former correspondent for National Public Radio who did stints in Jerusalem, Tokyo and New Delhi, Weiner is an equal-opportunity seeker. He is willing to give each faith he explores the benefit of the doubt – more or less.

A professed neurotic with a melancholic temperament and self-deprecating wit (“I have opinions about my opinions, and opinions about those too”), he has few illusions about religions in general. “I’m the guy,” he confesses, “standing near the exit of the synagogue or the meditation hall, plotting his escape in case things get dull, or strange.” In other words: a kindred spirit.

Still, he prefers to play it safe. Rather than stumble head-on into the world of zealots, he cherry-picks among the more benign manifestations of religious devotion. He twirls with dervishes in the Turkish city of Konya; meditates (reluctantly) with gurus in Kathmandu; observes the Shabbat with Kabbalists in Safed; has his chi unblocked in Wuhan; roughs it out with Franciscans at a homeless shelter in New York (where he flirts with a Catholic confession but eventually bows out).

He also steers clear of the more exotic manifestations of the 10,000 or so faiths practiced around the world, apart from a closer look at shamanism, Wicca, and Raëlism. The latter is a wacky sci-fi cult of lascivious UFO enthusiasts whose potty theology makes the faux-mythology of the Star Wars movies seem profound by comparison.

Raélians believe we were created by a master race of alien beings called the Elohim, whose earthly messenger is Claude Vorilhon, a French race-car driver turned extraterrestrial ambassador who calls himself Raël and claims to be following in the footsteps of earlier prophets like Moses and Jesus. He hopes to build a Raëlian embassy in Jerusalem for aliens.

At a Raëlian gathering in Las Vegas, whose highlight is a cross-dressing “gender-switching workshop,” Weiner

meets the great man himself, garbed all in white with thinning hair pulled back into a snazzy topknot, through which Raël claims to receive telepathic messages from his extraterrestrial friends. “I have a question for you,” Weiner recalls him inquiring “with a heavy Inspector Clouseau accent.” “Are you appy?” Raël’s modus operandi is “Shut up and be happy, feeling sad is crappy.”

A religious way of thought can teach us valuable lessons: to slow down; to live in the now; to appreciate the world’s small pleasures; to count our blessings

Yet titter derisively as we might at Raélians, whose symbol is a Star of David intertwined with a Hindu swastika, they can muster as much factual evidence for the empirical validity of their beliefs in their supreme alien deities as believers of more normative faiths can do for theirs – which is to say, none.

Raélians, several of whom Weiner finds to be reasonably well-adjusted professionals, understand this well enough. “Christians don’t demand proof of the Virgin Birth; Muslims don’t demand proof of Muhammad’s revelations at the Cave of Hira,” one points out. “Look,” adds another, “this philosophy enriches my life.”

“One person’s insanity is another’s theology,” Weiner rightly concurs. Should Raélians stick around for a while longer, their faith may well become as accepted as, say, Mormonism, another patently make-believe creed. “Time has a way of transforming wild tales into received wisdom, madmen into sages,” Weiner notes.

The author endorses the late Christian philosopher Paul Tillich’s view that religious faith in all its forms is the embrace of an “in spite of” attitude: belief in God in spite of any demonstrable evidence and hope in an afterlife again in spite of any evidence. “In spite of” makes a mockery of common sense,” Weiner writes. “That is precisely why we need it.”

As is usually the case with self-proclaimed guardians of esoterica, Weiner’s learned interlocutors, from Sufis to Kabbalists to Buddhists, express themselves in Deepak

Chopra-esque aphorisms, wherein banality often masquerades as wisdom.

“First steps are often last steps,” a Buddhist teacher opines.

“The fear of the Void is the beginning of wisdom,” a Sufi master explains.

“Die without dying, and you’ll endure forever,” a Taoist sage counsels.

There may be some profound insights there, but it’s hard to know what they are. As a rule of thumb, the more counterintuitive, paradoxical or self-evident an adage is, the wiser it is taken to be.

Weiner doesn’t bite, either. “For me,” he acknowledges, “spiritual insights are about as sturdy as soap bubbles.” Yet he still believes that reason unadulterated by a sense of wonder at the possibility of the divine is wanting.

Borderline

As he navigates the borderline between the sacred and the profane, Weiner rubs up against some memorable fellow seekers. Meet Wayne, an aging hippie of Jewish extraction from New York who is a permanent fixture in Kathmandu. He communicates in riddles and email haikus, and agrees to school the author in the ways of meditation on the roof of his abode. He also teaches Weiner how to massage himself with the power of thought – an exercise that works



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rather less well for the author, as he soon discovers, than actual massage by a trained practitioner.

Then there's Father Louis, a hirsute Franciscan who was once a muscle-bound womanizer and Wall Street hotshot before he decided to heed the call of Jesus. He now does good works for the needy in the South Bronx, where he calls his brethren "bro." The friar saves Weiner the embarrassment of making "a theological ass of myself" when the Jewish man mistakenly joins the line for Holy Communion during Catholic mass.

Rinpoche

And let's not forget the dour Tibetan lama, a Rinpoche ("precious teacher") no less, who holds court in the style of a revered rebbe. During invitation-only sessions he dispenses wise counsel to his star-struck foreign students on such solemn matters as to whether it's prudent to start a business on a Tuesday or fly on a Friday. (Weiner doesn't tell us the Rinpoche's answers to these great mysteries.)

Yet despite their disparate religious goals, the seekers Weiner encounters seem genuinely earnest in their search for a more meaningful life. While you may not share their enthusiasm for their individual brands of spirituality or want to follow their religious prescriptions, you can't help but admire their dedication and discipline.

A religious way of thought, Weiner finds, can teach us valuable lessons: to slow down; to live in the now; to appreciate the world's small pleasures; to count our blessings. Even Raëlians, it turns out, do good works, like raising funds for reconstructive surgery for the victims of female genital mutilation in Africa.

Weiner winds up his journey in Safed, the ground zero of Kabbala, thereby coming full circle, as it were, back to his roots. He pores over tracts from the Zohar. He puzzles over seemingly nonsensical Kabbalistic notions. He dabbles in Jewish numerology. But spiritual knowledge continues to elude him. He ends up being as wracked by doubt as he was at the outset.

Ironically, it's the Raëlians' comical rites of libidinous hippie-style bonhomie that throw the benefits of spirituality into the sharpest relief. "The Raëlian movement, like all faiths," Weiner writes, "provides its followers [with] a sense of community, of belonging, of human grace. Their beliefs are almost irrelevant." ●

Understanding Christianity



A Jewish theological and literary commentary to the Christian Bible

Ralph Amelan

“WE WILL EAT ON THE seventh of Passover the ‘Messiah Feast,’ intended to infuse the faith in the messiah’s coming into our blood and flesh, like a meal that becomes our blood and flesh.”

This sentence got its author, Chabad spokesman Rabbi Menachem Brod, into trouble. According to a recent Haaretz story, he was criticized in Internet forums for importing the Christian symbolism of the Eucharist, where bread and wine are likened to the flesh and blood of Jesus, into a Jewish ceremony. Brod denied it: the accusations were “wild associations that say more about the forum’s participants, who are apparently immersed in Christian ideology. I, happily, don’t have such associations.”

Should he be happy? The scholarly editors and contributors to The Jewish Annotated New Testament beg to differ. They provide theological and literary commentary to the Christian Bible from a Jewish standpoint,

underpinned with essays sketching the Jewish political and religious milieu in which Jesus lived.

Their aims are ecumenical rather than contentious. “Ideally, it will serve to increase our knowledge of both our common

The New Testament gives a snapshot of a vital and vigorous pre-Talmudic Judaism

histories, and the reasons why we came to separate,” state editors Amy-Jill Levine, a professor of New Testament and Jewish Studies at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, and Marc Zvi Brettler, a Biblical Studies professor at Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts, in their preface.