

CHAMBERS

A Periodic Newsletter for
the Oriental Orthodox Order in the West

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AN OVERVIEW OF THE ANNUAL GATHERING FOR 2014

AMIR VAHAB *and* ABRAHAMIC CONVERGENCE

Our gathering at this Annual Retreat was graced by the presences of Amir Vahab, from New York City, as well as Gail and Alex Wiggin who introduced and brought him to us. They were all gifts..

As usual, there were multiple themes running through our four days together. Predominant this year was the subject of Abrahamic convergence—that is, the realization that after thousands of years of separation, and sometimes hostility, there is today the possibility that the “adults” in each tradition, and its wisdom seekers, can sit down together as colleagues (and as kith and kin) to share in a deep conversation. The traditional term for this conversation is (*sohbat*—heart to heart communication) which expresses the sense that our mutual learnings through the centuries, and the wisdom we have gained by long experience, are the insights that can be the gift we give one-another now.



Each tradition shares in the heritage of its great-grandparents, Abraham and Sarah, and their beginnings and journeys of spirit across the ancient inner and outer landscapes of our world. But more importantly, we not only share their common history, we share in their trajectory of spirit to be a God-given goodness for the rest of the world. The Absarian (Abraham and Sarah’s) off-spring were to grace and bless the world, not to curse it with hatred and violence. It is time to bring this offering to the planet, and in an attempt to do so, the Order invited Amir, a faithful Muslim and a practicing Sufi to attend and share not only his insights and life-long learning, but his incredible gift and talent for contemplative Sufi music and prayer (*sema* and *zeker*).

It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience, but the gift of it can be shared and multiplied. We dedicate this issue of Chambers to that effort and to bringing other insights from the Gathering to bear upon our work as practitioners of contemplative wisdom.

THE WORLD of SPIRIT in SUFI ISLAM

The Spiritual Insights of Amir Vahab

Amir began his remarks by telling us the story of his life, and his father and mother as both Sufis and mentors in his young development. He spoke of his early drawing toward spirituality and music and how they intertwined to make complete a whole that shaped his life. He expressed how his intense interest in both and his capacity as a master of Sufi music using the traditional instruments of Iran compelled him. He demonstrated particularly the Tanbour (a 5,000 year old two or stringed lute mentioned in the Psalms) and the Daf (the large hand-drum that can be played by both hands with internal rings that add additional percussive expression).

The three pillars of his own life, Amir explained, are the spiritual teachings of Islam based upon the Qur'an, the traditional sacred music of Iran, and his expertise in micro-technology which balances out the other two pursuits. These have shaped his life trajectory so that today he is able to derive most of his living from teaching music in New York City around which most of his work centers.

What informs his spirituality is the tradition of Islamic spirituality centered in the heart and based upon the mystical writing of the poets that speak of the inner, intimate relationship of the Lover and Beloved. The core of Sufi teaching is the practice of purity—and the aim of all Sufi practice is to purify and bring maturation to the

soul while on earth.

The Sufi metaphors of wine, tavern, moth, candle, rose, gardens, and music speak to this process and grace not only his music, but inform his life and spirit as well as ours, if we understand their significance.

According to Amir, each human being possesses an angelic soul which is thousands (perhaps tens of thousands) of years old. That soul has traveled through many life-times and many dimensions, but is related to the Great Angelic Soul of humanity, which was expressed through Jesus animated by the Arch-Angel Gabriel. The same angel-soul that possessed Jesus, says Amir, also brought the revelation of the Qur'an to the Prophet Muhammad, and so the two, in their essence, are coherent.

We lived poised between our Angelic Soul and our Animal Soul, and our work of remembrance is to keep us moving toward our Celestial Self which is the ultimate goal. To assist us in this task is the practice of remembrance

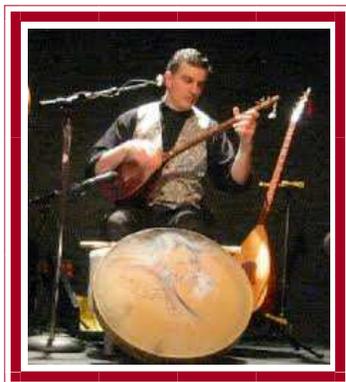
Islam as a tradition helps to balance between these forces and provide a licit, ethical, and legal means of walking through the world in a community of committed men and women who are surrendered (*taslim*) to the Ultimate Reality of Oneness (*tawhid*).

THE MUSIC of REMEMBRANCE

Zekr—Divine Invocation

As a virtuoso of the traditional sacred music of Iran, Amir Vahab weaves a fiery blend of instrumental and vocal accompaniment to invocatory prayer—*zekr*—the divine invocation of Sufi Sema. The remembrance of God and the chanting of the divine Names of God are at the center of a practice of contemplative prayer that calls one to the center of one's own being which is at the same time the Center of All Being.

We experienced this powerful practice which has echoes in the Psalms and in all Abrahamic traditions, but is brought to new heights of intensity in contemporary Sufi tradition. Moving from the opening notes of the traditional ney (reed flute) to the artistry of the tanbour and the thrumming of drummed chant, our experience of prayer under the guidance of Amir was intense and powerful.



Amir's abilities with the tar, seta, tanbour, saz, oud, ney, dar and zarb (traditional Iranian instruments used in all sacred music) allowed us to reach new heights of experience in this form of traditional Sufi prayer. This was for us a form of spiritual recital that blended accompaniment from all participants in voice, song, and instrumentation with languages both ancient and new. We were left deeply moved by this and held together in some deep embrace, glad for such an amazing and powerful experience of contemplative prayer from one of the sacred branches of Abrahamic tradition.

Our experience together demonstrated something that Amir had already affirmed: (*Traditional Sufi*)...*Music should be so powerful such that one is powerlessly dragged to the unknown. It should invade the listener's mind to the point of losing awareness.*

THE STATE of THE ORDER

A Review

During the proceedings of the weekend we took the time to review the current state of the Order, its work, life and mission.

We are at an interesting point in our work together, for we have reached, perhaps, a critical mass. We are large enough to be a force in the development and emergence of Wisdom Christianity, and small enough to be flexible to deal with the diversity that we represent.

There is energy and excitement in what is unfolding around us. It is all very surprising—very serendipitous, and we are growing. Our work together is expanding and we are constantly making new discoveries and innovations in response to a fast changing world.

It is our intention to leave a legacy for an alternative form of Christianity: An Alternative Vision for western Christendom based on and rooted in the original seeing, teachings and practice of Yeshua (mystical/interiorized Judaism) and its Oriental stream East. To that end we are restoring sacred texts and Scriptures—expanding the canon to include the Eastern and Oriental writings that have been given to us at this point in history.

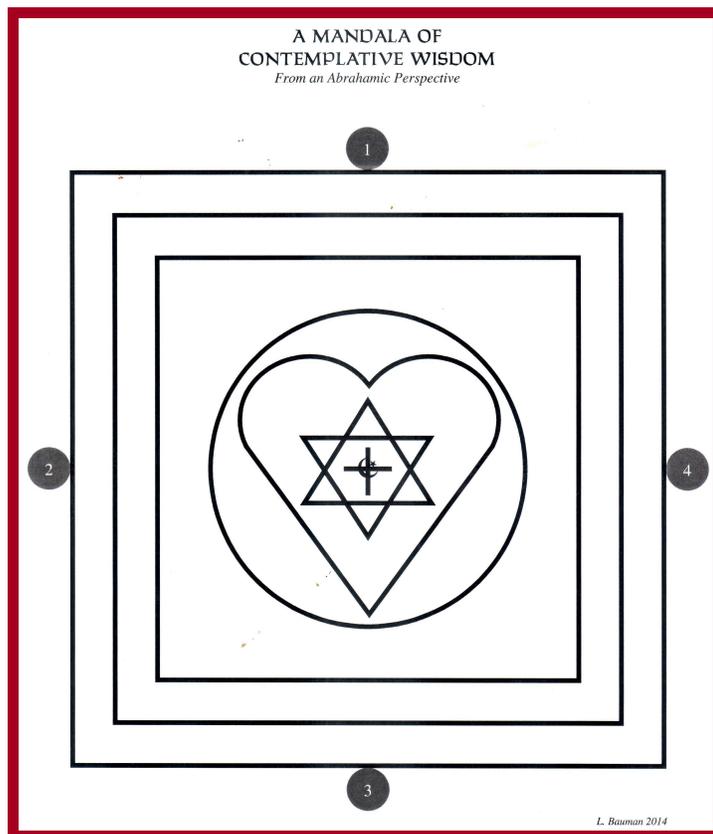
The sociologist Peter Berger has called this, “The Heretical Imperative” because it is deliberately

challenging the Occidental point-of-view that has colonized the western mind and defined the word **Orthodoxy** simply as “right belief.” We are attempting to restore that precious word to something more original “*ortho-doxa*” (right-glory) as a way of seeing the beauty, glory, and *shekhinah* of God. Originally it referred to “beautiful worship or the right practice” of honoring the divine Majesty.

We are, therefore, heterodox to the western stream of Orthodoxy that insists on conformity to “right belief.” We are more interested in *orthopraxis*, a balanced way of life and action in a difficult world. Our form is an interpretation of **Alpha Christianity** (Based upon the Torah-Observant teachings of mystical Jews, the inner and outer Jewish Halakah of Yeshua and Ya’akov, the Semitic and Abrahamic Visionary Cosmology, the Oriental alternative to Christian tradition).

By definition it is very non-Pauline and Occidental which was

based on the stance of old Imperial Rome with its insistence on doctrinal conformity, and uniformity of practice. We are establishing instead communities (gatherings) of wisdom seekers based on contemplative practice of wisdom and beauty that are more inclusive and universal in scope.



The Mandala of

The Sapiential Context of Contemplative Wisdom

expresses many of the elements we are attempting to integrate:

1. *The outer frame is the Sophia Perennis, the primordial wisdom attempting to answer the four questions: Who are we, where did we come from, what are we doing here, and where are we going?*
2. *The second frame is the traditional Jewish wisdom stream from post-conventional religion that expresses the insights of the prophetic, sophianic and transcendent-*

immanent axis of Ascent and Descent Mysticism.

3. *The central frame is the axis of Yeshua and Ya’akov’s wisdom teaching which is both practical and visionary.*
4. *The Core teaching is that of Oneness, singleness, unitive non-duality which brings balance and harmony.*
5. *At the Center is the Kardial Core which is the shared, single heart where the human and the divine meet which allows the Completed Human as the marriage of the human and the divine.*
6. *There at the nexus of the heart are the axial dimensions, ascent and descent, self-sacrifice, deep friendship, love with abandon, shining star, and reflected light.*

STREAMLING ENTRANCE *into* THE ORDER

Becoming a Monk

In order to make entering the order more easily understood, the Abbots have taken steps to revise, clarify and streamline the step-by-step process of entering the Order and becoming a monk.

Abbot Blake Burluson has created a helpful diagram which outlines the natural steps that individuals take from being an aspirant, to becoming a postulant, and entering the Order as a monk.

Entry Points to Aspirant stage

- Website
- Personal associations with monks and friends of the Order
- Wisdom Schools, Seminars

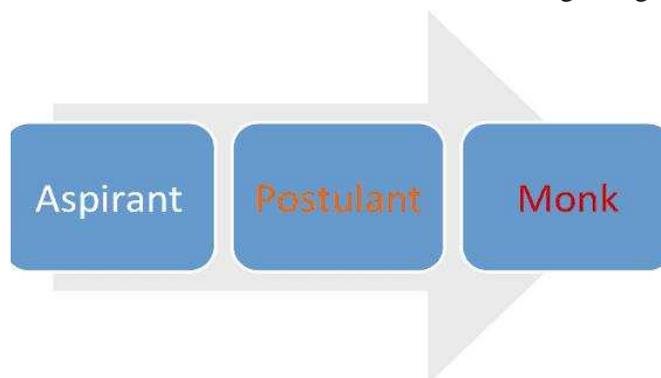
Aspirant Stage

- The aspirant stage begins with the submission to the Order's abbots of a letter of intent.
- The Novice Master assigns a mentor (either a monk or an abbot) to the aspirant.
- The mentor assists the aspirant in working through the Study Guide *For Interested Individuals Wanting to Know More About the Order* found on the OOO website.

- The aspirant, if at all possible, should attend a seminar of the Order.

Postulant Stage

- This stage begins with a ceremony of commitment to postulancy at the Order's annual gathering.
- The main work during the postulant stage is the preparation of a Rule of Life in consultation with the mentor. *Guidelines for a Rule of Life* is found on the Order's website.
- In addition to guiding the selection of readings from the Study Guide *For Postulants preparing to enter the Order*, the mentor will assist the postulant in developing an office of daily prayer and meditation.
- When mentor and postulant are ready to move to consecration, the postulant submits his or her Rule of Life to the abbots. This should be done at least one month prior to the Order's annual gathering.
- Upon approval by the abbots, the postulant is consecrated as a monk at the Order's annual gathering.



MENTORING WISDOM

Our Work as Priests in the World

We may not all be teachers, but whether we know it or not we are all mentors—mentoring contemplative wisdom as priests in this world.

A mentor is a seasoned guide. You learned hunting, fishing, some craft, an art, music, cooking, working with children by watching and being guided by other mentors in your life. Someone who has real-world experience and was able to share that with care and gentleness, but with the conviction that what they have learned through experience was worth sharing became your guide.

A mentor is a “go to...” person, a “how to...” person—not an expert exactly, but someone with more experience to share with someone not as experienced with questions and concerns.

There are of course principles for mentoring... and these can be learned. There are **styles** of mentoring, and these can fit every person in almost any circumstance. A simple word, “Here let me show you what I have learned, see if it helps.”

There is a need for each of us to think of ourselves as a “mentor of wisdom”—to individuals, groups, in a casual, formal way, at all times and in all places. This **is** our work in the world—mentoring wisdom (our own learned, integral experience based upon our relationship to the vertical axis and our spiritual pilgrimage).

For further information see the outline: **Guidelines for Mentors.**

THE CONTINUING PROJECT A Rule of Life

There are three words that characterize the monastic tradition of Christianity: *monochos* (the Greek word for singleness) from which we get the word monk and monastic, *stabilitas* which has to do with establishing inward stability in an unstable world, and *sapience*, the tradition of wisdom which we follow in the teachings of the Master Yeshua. These are the backbone for our understanding of a Rule of Life.

Traditionally monks were cloistered in a monastic setting and a Rule of Life was imposed by higher authority. A monk vowed to live according to the rules of chastity, poverty, and obedience. These were the bases of a monastic rule. Ours is a unique adaptation of Monastic spirituality and community based upon the insights of the Russian master Paul Evdokimov which he called **Interiorized Monasticism** (for a review of this article see *documents on the Order's website*). In his interpretation, the traditional rule is not imposed from without, it is established voluntarily within, and each monk is given the opportunity to shape the rule according to the needs and circumstances of his or her own life.

Tom Shadyac film producer of *Liar Liar*, *Nutty Professor*, and *Bruce Almighty* has produced a riveting documentary after a serious accident and personal crisis that started out with the questions: What is wrong with the world, and how can we fix it?

Through his personal crisis and the continuing saga of faith he goes on a journey to answer this question, and ends up with another question: What is both right and wrong with the world?

Answers to both questions center on G. K. Chesterton's insight that I AM what is both wrong **and** right with the world.

Abbot Ann Johnson led us through a new text by Diana Butler Bass that asks the question, "What will Christianity look like and be like after religion?" The answer that is emerging in the world today is a new form of Christian faith that is post-institutional and very different from the

Such a Rule allows for personal responsibility and awareness, intentionality, accountability, guided by the Interior Master, but expressed in the local community of wisdom seekers and also as compassionate action in the world. The characteristic features of such a rule is that is self-regulated rather than rigidly imposed, it is organic and ongoing in a spiritual evolution that tracks the monks growth and life, it is both specific and yet natural to the individual's own needs and proclivities. Its aim is to achieve inner and outer balance, the union of heaven and earth, the marriage of the human and the divine, and allowing for both the inevitable chaos of this world but an inward order softened by Spirit.

The gathered community was asked to move into groups with an Abbot and share their Rule along with a discussion of the difficulties, questions and insights that each individual and our collective experience could bring to these questions. This will be a continuing project in the future for further group discussion.



Through a series of interviews, experiments, on an ensuing journey to try and answer these questions, Tom visits some of today's great minds: authors, poets, teacher, religious leaders, and scientists. He comes to some startling and momentous conclusions that simultaneously give us insights into the fundamental endemic problems we face and reflect on the eventual choices that can bring about eventual healing of the world.

We watched the documentary together and reflected on how we as individuals and as an Order can throw our weight toward those answers that can change history.

traditional forms that we have grown up with. Using evidence from the latest national polls and from her own cutting-edge research, Bass exposes how the failings of the church today are giving rise to a new "spiritual but not religious" movement. This is a **must read** book for us.

CHRISTIANITY AFTER RELIGION

IMAGES of OUR GATHERING



THE PERSIAN CROSSES of INDIA

Oriental Christianity Came to India in the Fourth Century from Persia



BUSINESS DISCUSSIONS and OUR FUTURE WORK

We take time each year to look ahead to our future work and identify items for discussion that will bring us to the core purposes of the Order. Among them were the following:

1. Roof repair for a Mar Thoma Catholic school in India and the ongoing support of its work.
2. Future pilgrimages to places in the Thomas tradition: Turkey, Iran, India.
3. The experimental Facebook Page for Monks and Postulants.
4. Support of Contemplative Pedagogy at Baylor and other Institutions where academic teaching also includes learning a contemplative path and its practice.
5. With the possibility of the selling of Way of the Wolf, the Order will be looking for other
6. The Future of the Praxis Retreat and Learning Center was discussed along with the hope that the Order would help to run and maintain this center as a place of contemplative practice and wisdom study.
7. John Adam spoke about his experimental farm project at Texas A & M in College Station, and encouraged members of the Order to support this effort to learn sustainable practices of agriculture and farming.
8. Ron Poidevin spoke about the continuing need for financial support of the Order and invited its friends and members to pledge support for the its work on a regular basis.



A WORD *from the* HOST MASTER

As the Order continues to grow and deepen its reach, communication becomes increasingly critical. Especially true since we are flung across North America and only gather corporately annually. So, how do we maintain community and support on our journey as “monks in the world”?

Obviously, the annual gathering is central. Abbots Ron and Karen have graciously offered the gift of the Way of the Wolf in past years and we are deeply grateful to them for their gift of hospitality. But life is full of change, and 2015 may bring us to a different venue for fellowship and learning. Keep this transition in your prayers.

The Abbots will be writing and sending periodic communications distributed electronically to the community throughout the year. “Chambers” is a periodic newsletter with updates on Order activities and goings-on. This last year, a new format was also introduced. “Solicitude” is a periodic letter from one of the Abbots to the community reflecting on their care and concern for the community. Watch for them in your mailbox (and back issues are archived on the website).

Oh yes, and for at-your-fingertips support, we hope you use the Order’s website on a regular basis. The four main pages of theoow.com are great resources when you are having a general conversation with a friend about the Order. If you are an aspirant or postulate, the page “The Order” has all you need to know. The “Resources Page” has links to upcoming events, bibliographies, teaching materials, chants, and audio/pdf files of teachings that

can be downloaded and used for personal or group reflection, as well as links to other organizations that may be of interest and support the contemplative life. There is also a “Monk’s Page” accessible to Order members that includes additional resources including the Order roster with contact information, MP3 recording of past gathering, and personal offerings by Order members. The site is updated regularly with new announcements of Schools of Wisdom, retreats, pilgrimages and seminars. The Order Roster is updated twice annually. New chants are recorded and uploaded as they become available. This is the go-to spot for general information anytime you need it.

Direct email between members as well as personal contact is encouraged. Now, every monk has the ability with the roster to contact any other monk directly by phone or email. Monks are encouraged to set up their personal mail group for this purpose. In a pinch, email can be forwarded through the official email address (orientalorthodoxorder@gmail.com).

Small group conversation also helps us stay in touch while supporting us on the sacred path. Monk Gail Ostensen began a small group a few years back and it has supported her and others in the community. This May, Priest Debbie Gorden will start a small group using free teleconference technology that will connect 6-8 monks and aspirants. The small group will begin working through the study materials on the Resources page. If **you** are interested in starting a small group, let either an Abbot or the hostmaster know.