

For the

# LIFE of the WORLD

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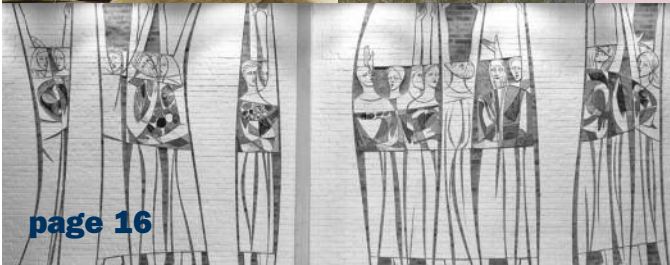
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## For the **LIFE** of the **WORLD**

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## FEATURES

### 4 I Am a Christian

**By Professor James G. Bushur, Assistant Professor of Historical Theology at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana**

In communion with Christ our identity is fundamentally altered. Here we are Christians—not because we merely act, speak, or think like Jesus—but because Christ Himself lives within us. At Christ’s altar our families and ethnicities are forgotten; our careers, economic status, as well as every other earthly association, must be left behind.

### 6 Christ and the Challenge of Neo-Paganism

**By the Rev. Larry A. Nichols, Pastor of Our Redeemer Lutheran Church, Smithfield, Rhode Island**

Christ in a pagan world is not about the past. It is about a very real present. This is true because our culture is filled with cults, the occult, neo-paganism, Wicca, the New Age Movement, etc.

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While the joy in the forgiveness of our sins remains firm because of the Lord’s gifts in baptism, the world into which we are placed each day is ever changing. As the “mainline” churches continue to decline in membership “spirituality,” the impulse to seek communion with the Divine is thriving.

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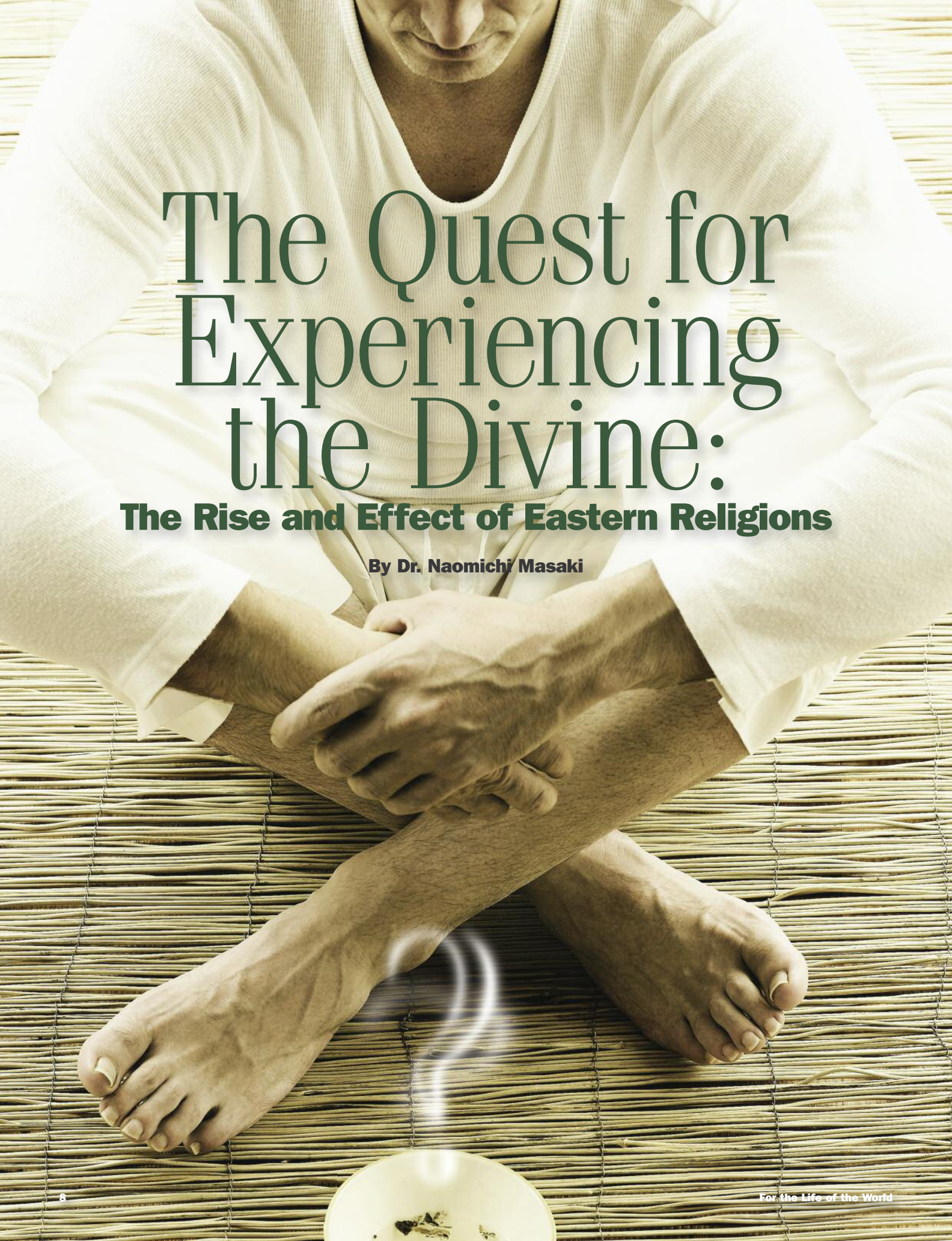
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# The Quest for Experiencing the Divine:

**The Rise and Effect of Eastern Religions**

By Dr. Naomichi Masaki

**“Then go joyfully to your work, singing a hymn . . .”** “Joyfully” rings a bell of the Gospel; with vitality we are moved into the places of our daily calling as the Morning Prayer in the *Small Catechism* suggests. A hymn that comes out of our lips may be one of Paul Gerhardt’s hymns in *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006):

All Christians who have been baptized,  
Who know the God of heaven,  
And in whose daily life is prized  
The name of Christ once given:  
Consider now what God has done,  
The gifts He gives to ev’ryone  
Baptized into Christ Jesus!  
*Lutheran Service Book*, 596, v. 1

The rhythm of Christian living always starts with our Lord Jesus. The Lord’s initiative and bestowing of His gifts prompt creating and enlivening of faith which ushers the faithful into living the life of service. With the Lord’s giving and our receiving, the richer our life of service.

While the joy in the forgiveness of our sins remains firm because of the Lord’s gifts in baptism, the world into which we are placed each day is ever changing. As the “mainline” churches continue to decline in membership “spirituality,” the impulse to seek communion with the Divine is thriving. Our friends and neighbors may say: “I’m a spiritual person, but I’m not religious.” More people now ask how they may *experience* God in their own lives rather than how much they should know about God. A recent article in *Newsweek*, “In Search of the Spiritual,” confirms such an observation when the writer of the article comments that according to the latest poll Americans are looking for a deeper and immediate personal experience of God (Aug 19–Sep 5, 2005). In other words, “if you *feel* God *within* you, then the important question is settled; the rest are details.” People are seeking “a religion that *empowers* them” rather than “a God who commands them.”

Some scholars remind us that since the time of Constantine in the fourth century, Christians have by and large enjoyed a sense of superiority over the religions of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The main challenges to Christian faith, especially in the West, did not come from those non-European religions but from the inroads of the enlightenment religions and secularized society, in addition to numerous heresies and controversies within the church. But today, Christians in North America encounter not only particular accents in the so-called post-modernism such as ambiguity, healing, taste, progress, and choice, but also non-Christian religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, each with its specific teachings and worship practices.

Zen Buddhism is discussed in the aforementioned article of *Newsweek* as to how it has affected the worldwide meditation practice known as *centering prayer* popularized by Father Thomas Keating. This fact may illustrate that the blending of eastern religions and modern day spirituality in America has already taken place.

Zen Buddhism is often considered as the final form of Buddhism developed in Japan. Unlike the original teaching of Buddhism, it does not require followers to forsake the world to live in seclusion. Nor does it teach that one needs to train oneself rigorously in order to *become* a Buddha. Rather, it teaches followers to live as if they were *already* a Buddha. As in Buddhism, the main teaching of Zen is still how one may be rescued from this world of suffering. But the attention is now drawn not only to the rigorous exercises of self-discipline, but also to the *empowerment* of one’s heart. To *feel* a god *within you* is common in both Zen Buddhism and post-modern spirituality.

Surprisingly, the same *Newsweek* article reports that some Americans talk to their ancestors on a regular basis. Although such a practice derives not from Zen Buddhism but from Confucianism, it is what most Japanese have practiced for centuries. When we consider what is generally acknowledged as three characteristics of Japanese culture and religion, our observation of the similarity between current spirituality here in America and the traditional Japanese religiosity may be further underlined. Those three characteristics are *aestheticism*, *ambiguity*, and *amalgamation*. *Aestheticism* has to do with the traditional Japanese culture which values a sense of delicacy, precision, and aesthetics, developed out of the demands to live in harmony with the four seasons. *Ambiguity* is seen most clearly in Japanese language which causes harm at times in business contexts because it is more fitting to communicate

feelings rather than subject matters. In terms of *amalgamations*, over the course of Japanese history at least four such experiences may be identified:

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**As the “mainline” churches continue to decline in membership “spirituality,” the impulse to seek communion with the Divine is thriving. Our friends and neighbors may say: “I’m a spiritual person, but I’m not religious.”**

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**We observe that spirituality today is polytheistic and that all polytheism is projections of our thinking of God. Idolatry is usually symptomised by having more than one idol. When I am sad, I want a Jesus to make me happy. If I have just lost my job, I want a Jesus who will help me get another one. If my son or daughter is going astray, I want a Jesus who will bring him or her back. In each of these Jesus seems to come only second; first is what I want Him to do.**

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amalgamations of primordial religion and Shinto; Shinto and Buddhism; Buddhism and Confucianism; and Shinto and modernization.

The effect of eastern religions on our post-modern culture may continue among us. This prompts us to ask what implications there are for our life of service. First, we observe that spirituality today is polytheistic and that all polytheism is projections of *our* thinking of God. Idolatry is usually symptomised by having more than one idol. When I am sad, I want a Jesus to make me happy. If I have just lost my job, I want a Jesus who will help me get another one. If my son or

daughter is going astray, I want a Jesus who will bring him or her back. When I am sick, I want a Jesus to help make me healthy. Facing death, I want a Jesus who will get me through that. In each of these situations Jesus seems to come in second; first is what I want Him to do. To fit Him to that, I may choose the appropriate piece of Jesus I want. Luther's profound insight in his *Large Catechism* is that it is *our faith* that creates false gods. Beside the fact that false gods can never give good gifts, they don't forgive our sins. They only require our efforts, making us work and be useful.

Secondly, even if our heart may be able to *feel* the Divine, the point of departure is what *I* think of God and how I end up finding "the hidden God." We wind up remaining in darkness because there is no certainty in the hidden god or gods of which we can take control.

Thirdly, we confess that the only God who finally holds is the One who bestows forgiveness of sins *extra nos* (from outside). The initiative is the Lord's and His ways of Law and Gospel. We are *under* the Word at

the receiving end of His gifts. We don't discover the Gospel, the Gospel discovers us. God *in Christ* (2 Cor. 5:17–21) is the opposite of what people expect God to be. His glory is seen not in His majesty or in His almighty power, but in His suffering and dying. Jesus is the Son of God not because He did miracles but because He died on the cross (Mark 1:1,

15:39). We can speak of God only when God reveals Himself *in Christ* to whom the Holy Spirit bears witness in the means of grace.

Fourthly, we should joyfully consider doctrine as

important even when it is despised at the expense of *experiencing* God *within you*. Doctrine is important not only because we confess it as a norm of our faith and life, but because doctrine belongs to Jesus, not to us. As such, the doctrine *lives* as Christ lives. The doctrine has to do with our Lord's dynamic giving of His gifts which are received from outside. We should keep in mind that Satan attacks the means of grace point so that the sinners may not be comforted (Eph. 4:14). Nevertheless, the tremendously good news is ours; that in our Baptism the devil has already been renounced with all his works and all his ways. Moreover, our Lord continues to sustain us by the life-giving body and the life-giving blood that we are given to eat and to drink.

"You who worship ancestors!" Dr. David Scaer teased me one day when he had just heard me speak something very nice about Dr. William Weinrich as I introduced him as a speaker at our annual theological symposia. To this I replied, jokingly, "You worship ancestors only when they are *dead*. Don't make Dr. Weinrich *dead*!" Who knows when America will "catch up" more fully with the attraction from the East to embrace such a practice. But no matter what happens around us, we remain profoundly joyful and confident because we are in the Lord. Now is the time of the church, the time when our Lord Jesus is distributing the fruits of His cross to the whole world through the means of grace. We don't have to force ourselves to rejoice in the Gospel. In fact, as the *Small Catechism* confesses, we can't.

There are many challenging moments in the life of a Christian. But when the Gospel from outside touches our hearts, we no longer serve our neighbor with the Gospel because we "have to"; rather we "get to" do it on account of an inability to keep silent about such a wonderful Savior (Acts 4:31). Paul Gerhardt concludes the wonderful hymn of baptism in this way:

So use it well! You are made new—  
In Christ a new creation!  
As faithful Christians, live and do  
Within your own vocation,  
Until that day when you possess  
His glorious robe of righteousness  
Bestowed on you forever!  
*Lutheran Service Book*, 596, v. 6

So singing a hymn we go *joyfully* to our work  
serving our neighbor today and every day for His  
mercy is new every morning!

*Dr. Naomichi Masaki serves as an Assistant Professor of Systematic Theology and Supervisor of the Master of Sacred Theology (S.T.M.) Program at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana.*

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