

# **The Enigma of Consciousness**

A Philosophy of Profound Humanness  
and Religion

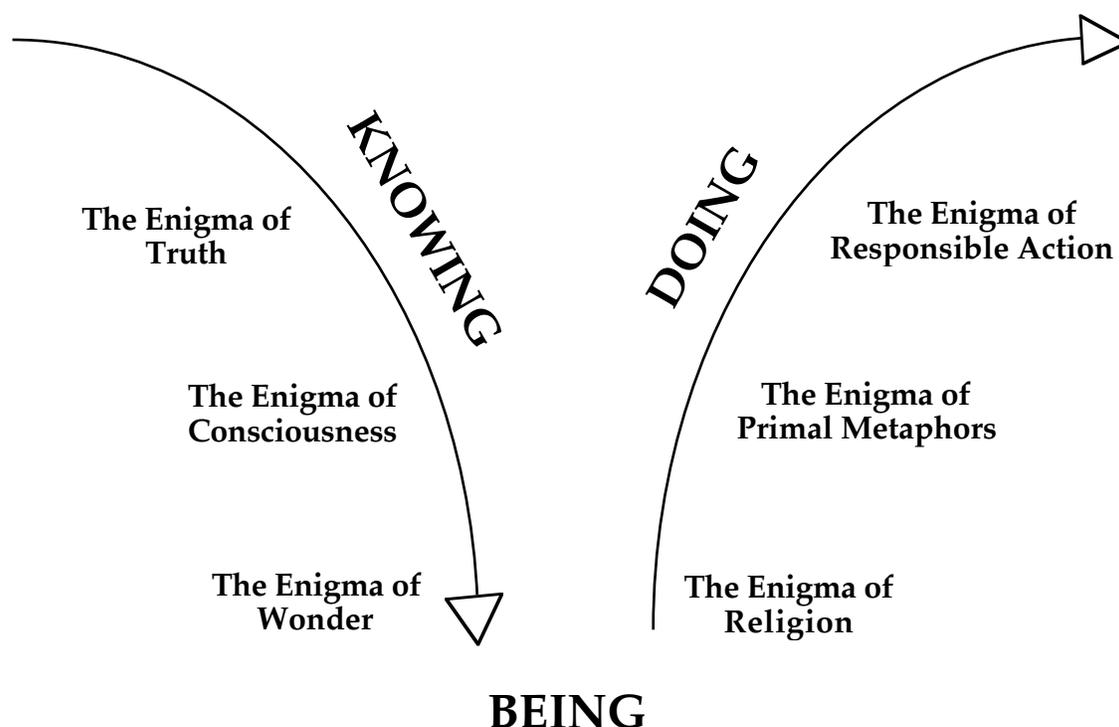
**Gene Wesley Marshall**

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# The Enigma of Consciousness

A Philosophy of Profound Humanness and Religion

A Chart of the Contents



**Knowing** has to do with taking in Reality, with letting Reality speak to us. The first three parts of this book have to do with letting Reality speak to us, letting Reality tell us what is so. That sounds passive, but knowing is also an active quest. It is science. It is contemplation. It is actively noticing what works and what doesn't.

**Doing** has to do with putting forth our lives into an engagement with and a shaping of history. The last three parts of this book have to do with doing. Doing is a creative response to Reality, a response that co-creates with all the other forces of the cosmos what the future shape of Reality will be. That sounds very active, but it is also passive in the sense of being attuned with the real limits and real possibilities of Reality.

**Being** has to do with the support of the Final Enigma that puts us into the grand drama of knowing and doing. Being is the Source of all our knowing and the Calling for all our doing. Being is both gift and challenge to act. Being is both the Mystery that upends all our current knowledge and the Inspiration that opens deeper awareness. Being is both the Judge of all our doings and the Command to do the never before done.

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# The Text of a Talk about this Book

You can hear this talk by going to: [RealisticLiving.org/mp3/EnigmaofConsciousness.mp3](http://RealisticLiving.org/mp3/EnigmaofConsciousness.mp3)

My name is Gene Marshall. I am the author of a new book entitled *The Enigma of Consciousness: A Philosophy of Profound Humanness and Religion*. It is about the most important revolution in our lifetimes, a revolution that few people see clearly – even though all of us are experiencing it in one way or another. This revolution is a shift going on all across our planet. It is a cultural shift. It is a shift from angels and devils as well as gods and goddesses to personally describable dynamics of our profound consciousness. It is a shift from the double-deck metaphor for religious understanding to a one-story, one-Reality, one-realm approach to the most profound matters of our existence. This is not a shift in my religion or your religion or someone else's religion. It is a shift that affects everyone's religion.

Some call this shift the "New Religious Mode." Some call it "the secular revolution." Some call it "the transparency happening." We can even call it a redefinition of the very word "religion." But I am getting ahead of my story. I am not going to discuss the topic of religion until Part Four of this six-part book. Before I can talk about religion, I have to talk about Wonder – about the conscious experience of Wonder in the depths of our consciousness. And before I can talk about Wonder, I need to talk about consciousness. And before I can talk about consciousness, I need to talk about Truth, The enigma of Truth – Truth that we can approach through science, but also Truth that we can approach through contemplation of our inner states of consciousness.

My discussion of Truth may be disturbing to some, for I will not be using the word "Truth" to point to something we know, but to something we do not know, the Final Mystery of things. I will talk about three approaches to Truth, but I will not talk about getting to the Truth, for we never do. Truth is a Mystery that never goes away, however much we learn about it.

**Part One of this book is about The Enigma of Truth.** I will examine scientific truth, contemplative truth, and a type of truth that has to do with group decisions about the sorts of things that will work for us in being workable groups. All three of these approaches to Truth will help us understand Consciousness, Wonder, Religion, Culture, and Ethics

**Part Two is on The Enigma of Consciousness.** What is consciousness? Here is a poem I wrote in Pat Webb's poetry class, when she asked me to begin with the words "I am," and then an adjective, and then the name of an animal. Here is the poem.

I am an alert deer.  
Dread gets my attention  
and I can move quickly in many directions.  
I am a surprise and hard to predict.

A fear of real enemies is the alertness of a deer,  
While my alertness is dread of a mysteriousness no deer can know.

And I am unpredictable in a manner no deer can match.  
Dread of the Unfathomable is my essence.  
Surprise is my being.

It is certainly true that deer and dogs and cats are conscious beings. Even an amoeba is a conscious being. Unlike a rock, an amoeba feels and tastes its environment and makes creative responses to it. A dog's consciousness is more complex.

And we humans are conscious of being conscious is a way that enables us to face our births, our deaths, and build whole cultures and libraries on what it means to be the strange creatures that we are.

When we humans talk about consciousness we talk mostly about our own selves. We sense that our dogs and cats are also conscious beings, but we are making a mistake to project our form of consciousness upon them. Nevertheless, part of what it means for us to be conscious is also present in our dogs and cats. We know we share with them a basic mammalian form of consciousness.

So what is consciousness that it can have so many forms – that it can evolve from something relatively simple to something far more complex. We cannot experience directly the consciousness of other species, but we can theorize that everything that is alive is also in some measure conscious, that consciousness and aliveness are corresponding concepts, that consciousness does not exist without aliveness, and aliveness does not exist without consciousness.

Such statements lead us into deep water that may not please some biologists, physicists, and scientific-minded philosophers. Some of these denizens of abstract thought have thought that aliveness and consciousness can be explained with the concepts of physics or with the concepts of an objective scientific biology. These objective thinkers can examine the behaviors and reports from conscious beings, but they cannot see consciousness itself, except within their own beings. Science can tell us much about brains, nervous systems, and the behaviors of living beings, but science cannot say anything about consciousness itself that does not depend upon human beings telling about it from their own experience of being conscious beings.

I am going to suggest that consciousness, like gravity, is another enigmatic force in the structure of the cosmos – that this enigmatic force is waiting for just the right environmental conditions to leap into play. And when it does leap into play, it is a powerful force that can change the biological and physical features of an entire planet.

And I am going to suggest that the cosmic force of consciousness is not Eternal or something that proves the existence of a second story of the cosmos. No, I am going to show that consciousness is just one more finite force, like gravity, like the electromagnetic force and other finite but primary parts of this one enigmatic cosmos.

When we sleep, part of our consciousness turns off, other parts of consciousness continue while we sleep. In our awake lives we can talk about being less or more awake. Less or more does not describe something Eternal or Infinite. Less or more describes something finite. Just as consciousness is born, consciousness dies. Human consciousness exists between birth and death – and on every step along life's way, consciousness confronts the black abyss out of which consciousness has come and into which consciousness returns. And this abyss can be described as "black" because the light of consciousness cannot penetrate it. A black, black, shiny black mystery surrounds our consciousness, supports it, but also limits it, and will one day end it.

Such an understanding of consciousness is a prelude to understanding Wonder and how the experience of Wonder is our taste of something that is Eternal. Wonder is an essential characteristic of our true selves (or of our true "no-selves" as some Buddhists put it.)

Yet while we are alive, an understanding of consciousness helps us understand many things about our lives – evolution, social history, social processes, intimacy, and religion. Yes, I am going to get to the topic of religion, but first our consciousness of Wonder.

**Part Three is about the conscious experience of Wonder – The Enigma of Wonder.** The Experience of Wonder is an enigma, and the experience of enigma is an experience of Wonder. The experience of Wonder is a trip into the Land of Mystery, and this Land is a our true land, our home, our essence, our true self – which is also "no self" that we have ever thought we were.

Here is part of a poem I wrote about discovering this Self of Wonder.

Some time recently  
a hole appeared  
in who I thought I was.

I looked into that hole and I saw nothing.  
I saw blackness.  
I saw the darkest of all dark nights.

As I walked into that hole  
I looked back and saw my deficient self.  
I saw that "he" was not me.

I am larger than I thought.  
I am not the me with a hole.  
I am spaciousness, vastness.

Being this vast person is my focus.  
This is my life.  
This is my calling.

Living the here and now  
of my vast actuality  
is my direction.

Being my vast being  
is my purpose.  
I need not cling to passing purposes.

Nothing is more important than my vast being.  
My self-constructed selves are but shells  
that cannot contain me.

I have no need for value added to my life.  
I am value.  
I am filled with wonder.

Everything I touch has meaning  
because it is I who touch it.  
I make meaning wherever I go.

This is the point of my existence:  
to shed all self-made selves and  
to be the being I am being be-ed to be.

Wonder is the perspective from which I have begun this book. And Wonder is the destination of the first three Parts of this book. In Part One I talk about Truth in order to talk about Consciousness in Part Two in order to talk about Wonder in Part Three. Wonder is like the bottom of a deep well. I am leading the reader down a descending path through our first curiosities about what is true to the truth of consciousness, and then to our consciousness of Wonder.

The overall experience of Wonder can be called "entering The Land of Mystery." Mystery is the core category that informs us about the nature of Wonder. But as we enter this Land of Mystery and look around we come up with other categories that can assist us to describe the experience of Wonder: Freedom, Care, and Tranquility are

three categories that can hold in our minds many other aspects of Wonder. To put this poetically, The Land of Mystery contains a River of Freedom, a Mountain of Care, and a Sea of Tranquility.

All this is poetry. Wonder can only be expressed in poetry or dance or some other form of art. We can use scientific and other insights to compose our poetry, but we need to remain clear that the mind is reaching beyond the mind to talk about Wonder.

A key chapter in Part Three is entitled: Nine Aspects of the “I Am.” In this chapter I give names to nine aspects of our profound humanness – nine aspects of Wonder. That the human mind can give names to aspects of Wonder is itself a Wonder, impossible to explain.

We cannot even see the relation between religion and Wonder unless we look at religion from the perspective of Wonder and notice that religious practices can access Wonder. And we can also notice that Wonder has its own power – that it is never controlled by the religious practices we use to access it.

I never tire of telling the short story about the aspirant who asked his Buddhist teacher if meditation practice caused enlightenment. “No,” said the teacher, “Enlightenment is an accident. Meditation merely makes you more accident prone.” This is a deep awareness that reveals the extent to which religion is merely a human-made social practice. It has not dropped down from Eternity, or crawled up from Eternity, or anything of the sort. Religion was made up by humans and kept by humans because sometimes, not always, religion enables us to access the accident of Wonder.

#### **OK, Part Four of this book is about The Enigma of Religion.**

With our experiences of Wonder in our memory banks, we can meaningfully explore the creation of religion as an action by humanity, a first action to give historical presence to our essential Wonder. Such religion, religion that is accessing and expressing Wonder, moves into the entire culture of a society – affecting the knowledge banks, the styles of living, the basic social ethics of that society, and everything else.

Religion is something we do. Religious thinking is part of our religious doing, but religion is not a philosophy or a worldview or a system of beliefs. Religion is an action. It is something we do daily, weekly, annually, our whole life long. This statement is a paradigm shift for all those who have been attempting to understand religion as a system of thought.

Even those of us who are clear that religion is not words thrown down from heaven, have nevertheless been captivated by seeing religion as beliefs that have not been thrown down from heaven. Religions do include collections of rational statements, but these statements are poetry that points beyond itself to that irrational Wonder that can never be contained in rational statements. The teachings, rituals, icons, and myths of religion are all practices that people do as a means of accessing that enigmatic Wonder that no thought or social construction of humanity can contain or control.

Nevertheless, religion can be described by the mind of humans as the types of things that human do to access Wonder. In a core chapter of Part Four, I will describe in detail all these common practices: Profound Dialogue, Foundational Meditation, Persistent Intentions, Holistic Detachment, Devotional Singularity, Historical Engagement, Boundless Inquiry, Full-Body Exformation, and Visionary Trance.

Most of us specialize in only a few of these areas of practice. We could risk ourselves in doing practices we have not done before. In doing so, we might make ourselves more accident prone to the accident of Wonder in our lives.

**Part Five is on the Enigma of Primal Metaphors.** The part is about the wide variety of religions on planet Earth. One of my mentors, Joseph Wesley Mathews, came up

with a model of six basic cultural areas, each of which was rooted in a uniquely different way of giving religious form to our profound humanness. He described a basic cultural form for each of these areas and called that form an “Ur-image.” In the early chapters of this book I define “image” in a particular way, namely as mental recordings of multi-sensory reruns that are common to all animal life. I do not believe that the multi-sensory rerun understanding of “image” is what Mathews was pointing to with an “Ur-image.” Rather his “Ur-image” was a very special kind of religious symbol. So I will use the term “primal metaphor” rather than “Ur-image.” There is something poetic about the term “Ur,” (reflecting as it does an ancient city by that name), but perhaps “primal” is more clarifying. And “metaphor” is also quite descriptive of the cultural form that Mathews had in mind.

Here is my poetic summation of these six primal metaphors:

The Primal Metaphor of Sub-Asia—**Uniting with the Infinite Silence**

The Primal Metaphor of Arabia—**Intimacy with the Eternal Communicator**

The Primal Metaphor of Europe—**Ordering the Absolute Wonder**

The Primal Metaphor of the Orient—**Balance within the Master Community**

The Primal Metaphor of Africa—**Attunement with the Final Rhythm**

The Primal Metaphor of Native America—**Designing the Unstoppable Flow**

For an understanding of the full meaning of my cryptic poetry, you will simply have to read these chapters. And if you have never before examined these topics, you may find your attitude toward the variety of religion on this planet profoundly changed.

**Part Six, The Final Part, of this book is about action, The Enigma of Responsible Action.** Parts Four and Five were also about action, the action of religious creation. Now in Part Six we look at social ethics or action within the entire range of cultural, political, and economic life.

This Part of the book is not a comprehensive statement of social ethics for the specific issues of our times. For that, I recommend another book that I and four others have recently written: *The Road from Empire to Eco-Democracy*.

Part Six of *The Enigma of Consciousness* is about what makes social action responsible from the point of view of living from Wonder, living from our essential being as Wonder-experiencing beings.

Chapter 30. **A Being Basis for Responsible Action** makes the point that action can proceed from our Being rather than simply from the thoughts of our minds. This challenges every ideology, philosophy of life, and religion to look deeper than its set of ideas and beliefs for the roots of responsible action.

Chapter 31. **The Roots of Motivation** continues this deconstruction of the typical social ethics by helping us notice that motivation is a deeper topic than acting out of our feelings. We can enact our Being. We can see Compassion as something deeper than a feeling or a preference or a bond. Compassion is who we are, once the shells of malice have been ripped off.

Chapter 32. **Radical Monotheism as Center of Value** uses the example of the religious ethics of H. Richard Niebuhr as a clue to how the Whole of Being can be our center of value, a center of loyalty upon the basis of which all our values are constructed.

Chapter 33. **Contextual Ethics and Responsible Action** spells out a mode of ethical thought that is more useful in our day than the ethics of right and wrong or the ethics of good and evil.

Chapter 34. **The Universal League of Profound Humanness** deals with the “*who*” that can actualize the above described ethical callings. If ethics is based on our essential Being, then it is not based in any one religious heritage. Therefore our ethics cannot be Christian ethics or Buddhist ethics or Jewish or Islamic or whatever. Our ethics must pull together an interreligious alliance of persons of many religious practices (and no religious practice) who are creating ethic guidelines from their Being rather than from the practices and thoughts of their own religious group.

Chapter 35. **The Battle with Dysfunctional Religion** denies the often heard sentimental notion that any religion is as good as any other, that religion is only a matter of subjective opinion – so, no religion has a criteria other than itself by which it can be evaluated. Rather, I spell out how and why there is such a thing as *bad* religion. In fact, for us to become critics of all religion from the perspective of Being is the beginning of accessing our deep sanity. And healing the human species from its insane religion is a core transformation required as part of every significant social revolution.

Well there you have it. A brief overview of this book. These topics are very deep. Reading every word of this book will not complete the needed discussion of these topics, but it might move us along. Thanks for listening.

## About the Author

**Gene Wesley Marshall** began his education as a mathematician and physicist. In 1953 he decided to leave a mathematics career and attend seminary at Perkins School of Theology in Dallas, Texas. He has served as a local church pastor, a chaplain in the army, and in 1962 joined a religious order of families (the Order:Ecumenical), and traveled across the United States, Canada, Latin America, Europe, and Asia as a teacher and lecturer of religious and social ethics topics. These trips included an in-depth study of world cultures and a vivid sense of the social conditions of the world's peoples. He was an active participant in the civil rights revolution, serving for one year as the Protestant executive of The National Conference on Religion and Race. For six years he served as dean of an eight-week residential academy that trained leadership for religious and social engagement work throughout the world. In 1983 Gene and Joyce Marshall organized a nonprofit educational organization, Realistic Living, and began publishing journals, books, and essays. This book is his seventh book-length project. Gene and Joyce live in Bonham, Texas in a straw bale house.

## Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Joyce Marshall and Alan Richard for continuing help with this book. Also, members of the Symposium on Christian Resurgence and participants in the Storywarrior web site (<http://www.storywarrior.net>) have made many editorial and substantial contributions to this book. The authors whose insights have gone into this work are too numerous to mention, but prominent among them are Joseph Mathews, Rudolf Otto, Susan K. Langer, Ken Wilber, Charlene Spretnak, and A. H. Almaas.

## Introduction

# The Meaning of Enigma

*E • nig • ma*: [in-nig'-muh] *a puzzling or inexplicable occurrence or situation.*

We navigate a river of enigma in a land of mystery. That enigma is openness and freedom, noticing and intending, paying attention and taking initiative. That enigma is consciousness, a consciousness that is conscious of being conscious. We know we are conscious, yet we do not know what consciousness is. It is an enigma, a mystery, something to be curious about.

Curiosity is itself an aspect of consciousness. Curiosity is a desire to know what is not yet known. The human mind feeds on mystery. When we joke that "curiosity killed the cat" we may be overlooking the fact that curiosity also made the cat an unusually enduring species. And the human being is capable of a depth of curiosity that no cat can experience. The human being is curious about the origins of the cosmos, the true nature of life and of human life, the very process of thinking itself. Curiosity is an affirmation of enigma, and this affirmation of enigma is an affirmation of that overall "land of mystery" that is the actuality in which we dwell. Reality continually confronts the human mind with enigma.

This book is an exploration of several areas of enigma: truth, consciousness, wonder, religion, primal religious metaphors, and responsible action. The underlying focus of this book is this core enigma: "What is religion?" "What sort of consciousness within human nature makes religious practices a recurring aspect in human society?" "What makes for a healthy or healing religious practice and what makes for sick, depraved, illusory, destructive, or demonic religious practice?"

Such questions about religion presuppose some human means of exploring these questions. What is truth? Or perhaps the better question is, "What are the 'valid' approaches to truth that are possible for the human mind?" Is truth simply a matter of arbitrary opinion, so that any viewpoint is as valid as any other? Or does the quest for truth imply some sort of "objective thereness" that challenges our lesser or partial truths and validates our more complete truths? And is our quest for truth such that we can arrive at a final resting place, or is our quest for truth an endless revolution in human understanding within a vast ocean of mystery that can never be fully mastered by the human mind? The enigma of truth will be our starting place in this book, a book that is primarily an exploration of the nature and validity of religion.