

Introduction

**Spiritual Ancestry and Reading the Bible
How They are Connected**

“A person without roots cannot be a happy person.”—Thich Nhat Hanh¹

Our main concern is not to gain pleasure or to avoid pain but rather to see a meaning in our lives.—Victor Frankl (paraphrase)²

Ancestry—My Story

“Ancestry” is a theme that has occupied me for practically my whole life. I was born in Manila, the capital of the Philippines, as the second son of a Japanese father from Kyoto, Japan (the ancient capital); and a mother from the Province of Iloilo in the Western Visayas region of Central Philippines. From the time I became aware of myself, my family, and my communities of affiliation, I was always struggling to define who I really was. Although I was born and raised in the Philippines and continue to love my *Inang Bayan* (mother country) deeply, as a child, I was always labelled a “*Hapòn*” (a Japanese) because of how I looked and my dead giveaway last name—“Kato.” Despite growing up in the capital region, I couldn’t speak Tagalog/Filipino straight at first (the language of the region as well as the national language) because my mom spoke to us in her own native language called *Hiligaynon*. English was the common tongue that united my Japanese father and Filipino mother and, hence, we used a lot of English at home.

I distinctly remember that when my grandparents, granduncle and grandaunt visited us from Japan and spoke amongst themselves or with dad in Japanese, a language I wasn’t functional in as a child, I vowed to be able to speak with them one day in that language which, I

¹ Thich Nhat Hanh, “How to love and understand your ancestors when you don’t know them?” See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pdodGeRNjt0&list=PLV7Diz4DTv4nv-RTpS-0QuDNHUh0b1OLP&index=2&t=130s>, timestamp 2:58. Accessed May 20, 2022.

² The original is: “man’s main concern is not to gain pleasure or to avoid pain but rather to see a meaning in his life.” Victor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, 4th ed. (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1992), 117.

felt, was a part of me that had not yet been awakened. When I started to attend school and the teacher would do roll call at the beginning of the year, she would eventually pause when faced with my Japanese surname and ask me, “Are you Filipino?”. I remember that I would reply, “I’m Japanese” (meaning: I’m *not only* Filipino *but also* Japanese). There were times when I would sit in agony through social studies sessions on the Second World War as my teachers and classmates would glower at me when they learned of the various atrocities committed by—what some of them expressed as—my “brutal” Japanese ancestors during the war.

Experiences such as these left such an indelible mark on me that, at the end of my teens in the mid-1980s, I left my mother’s country, the Philippines where I grew up, and moved to my father’s country, Japan. I did that for a number of reasons, a major one of which was because I wanted to search for that part of my ancestry that I did not know very well—my Japanese roots.

Those first years in Japan were tough ones. “Japanese who grew up abroad,” the so-called *kikoku-shijo* (literally, “kids returning to the homeland”) face a lot of difficulties when they enter a strictly regimented and very different Japanese society from wherever they came from. Besides, the *hāfu* (the half-Japanese or mixed-race kids) had even tougher challenges as they were not well-regarded by many people, given the general tendency to prefer a kind of “Japanese purity” at the time. And I belonged to both groups! Add to that the fact that learning not only to speak but also read and especially write Japanese as a grown-up is nothing short of a gargantuan task. But I was young, idealistic, and on a high stakes search for my Japanese roots. I just gritted my teeth and told myself that, against all those great odds, I would learn the culture and the language well enough to *truly* become Japanese, even if that were the very last thing I would do. The search for my ancestry and roots had a “do or die” importance for me at that point.

After a few years in Japan, I started to feel that I was indeed becoming Japanese with the result that the people and culture that seemed so “other” to me once upon a time were becoming a part of me. It was at this time that my dad, younger brother, and I had a chance to visit our ancestral tomb in the place where my dad’s family originally came from – Akita in Northern Japan. By this time, I could speak, read, and write Japanese with some fluency and conversing first with my dad and with my other relatives in their ... or rather, *our* Japanese language jolted me with the realization that I had fulfilled my childhood vow to speak with my family in Japanese!

Moreover, listening to my uncle’s hypothesis about our ancestors possibly being *samurai* because of the location of the tomb was also an unforgettably moving experience. I still tell my daughter when things get rough to remember that she is descended from the famed *samurai* of old! Standing in front of our ancestral tomb in Akita—that concrete, material embodiment of our lineage—was a high point in my life. It gave me the shivers! I tangibly felt that I truly and experientially knew now what it meant to be deeply connected also to my Japanese roots and ancestry. Now, I was no longer limping on one foot (knowing just one side of my roots—my mother’s); I was also tapped onto the other part of my ancestry, my father’s Japanese side. This experience finally made me feel whole. Then and there I realized that knowing one’s roots and ancestry, as many teachers have reminded us throughout history, is indeed one of the most essential and vital things in life.

Spiritual Ancestry—Spiritual Intelligence

If our biological ancestry is this important as I’ve tried to relate in my case, there’s another ancestry that is equally, if not more important for our overall wellbeing. It is what we’ll refer to as “spiritual ancestry” and this book will be about it in a major way. The French

philosopher, paleontologist, and Jesuit priest, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin is often credited (perhaps wrongly!)³ as having said, “We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience.” Whoever the real provenance of that quote might be, its point is valuable: Spirituality is an essential aspect of being human because—according to this view—it is humanity’s primary dimension. What that means is: the deepest longing of the human spirit lies in things that are beyond the scope of both conventional science or the glittering material things that media ads continually trot out before us. No, our deepest longings *as humans* actually lie beyond the material realm, in the spiritual dimension. It is there where we find the deep drive hardwired in all of us that strongly urges us to seek for *meaning*. How? By a twofold movement of [1] journeying into our inner depths and [2] transcending ourselves for something “bigger” (than our puny egos). Hence, “depth” and “transcendence” are the key words here. That is, by the way, how I define spirituality which is clearly the heart of all religion. Nay, I would even say: It is the heart of *all authentic humanity*.

When I stood before my ancestors’ tomb all those years ago, I felt a deep connection to them despite the vast differences in our historical contexts and backgrounds because I finally felt that we shared a common Japanese culture, language, and ethos—things that I had spent a few years actively learning at that point at the cost of blood, sweat, and tears. I learned the valuable lesson that, *with some effort on our part to discover our roots*, blood and cultural ancestry can give us a deep sense of connectedness and wholeness!

³ Although the internet overwhelmingly attributes this quote to Teilhard de Chardin, the website *Quote Investigator* says that this quote should probably be more accurately attributed to the motivational speaker Wayne Dyer. See Wayne Dyer, *You’ll See It When You Believe It: The Way to Your Personal Transformation* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1989), 16. See <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2019/06/20/spiritual/> . Accessed May 23, 2022.

When it comes to spiritual ancestry, it is necessary to realize that in as far as all of us are “spiritual beings having a human experience,” we share a common faculty with our spiritual ancestors despite the wide gaps of historical time and worldviews that separate us from them. Let us call that innate ability “spiritual intelligence.” Spiritual intelligence can be described as the powerful drive in humans to seek to understand “the meaning of it all.” That in turn leads all humans everywhere and in every historical period to attempt to build big, overarching frameworks that, they hope, could encompass all things—material and spiritual—in the universe—“a theory of everything,” if you will. This spiritual intelligence is obviously the origin of our religious worldviews, our spiritualities, our philosophical systems, our ideologies, our visions of the world, our perceptions of reality, and so on. Surprisingly, spiritual intelligence is even the source from which comes the decision of certain people to reject “God” or, more properly expressed, to reject—what their spiritual intelligence shows to be—childish, naïve, and crude ideas about the Ultimate, not to mention dysfunctional forms of religion.

Despite spiritual intelligence producing an irreconcilable diversity of human ideas about the big nature of reality, it is this common drive that pushes us to attempt to figure out “the meaning of it all.” Let me go further to say that it is this very spiritual intelligence that actually unites us all. It’s also known as *the human quest for meaning*, as the Austrian Holocaust survivor and psychoanalyst Victor Frankl explains in his works.

In the past, that deep drive to seek “the meaning of it all” in the West almost always took place within religion, particularly, the Christian religion. But times have changed and nowadays many of us in this secular age try to bracket out religion and God as bygone and irrelevant things. This has unfortunately made us as it were adrift in a spiritual no-man’s land, a situation in

which we are disconnected from our spiritual roots and unsure how to move forward in the quest for a relevant spirituality for our age.

Despite that, I'm still convinced that what bridges the great divide between the deeply religious world of our ancestors and the secular age in which we find ourselves today is that both they and us still have this common spiritual intelligence that makes us try our best to understand "the meaning of it all." And if we can only connect with that common deep desire, we will actually find out that we are very much like our spiritual ancestors in the perennial human quest for meaning. We, like them, somehow know deep within that we will only slake that seemingly unquenchable thirst for meaning if we go deeper into ourselves and transcend ourselves for something "bigger."

The answers we now propose to the "meaning of it all" might be very different from theirs. Some of us may feel for example that they used the concept "God" too easily and uncritically. Many of us consequently react to that by developing some kind of allergic reaction to "God" and religion. But the deep desire to seek meaning through depth and transcendence, in short, the spirituality in our depths is still, I repeat, the one thing that unites us with them. That is the same thing that makes all of us, both us and them, part of species *homo spiritualis*.

What this all comes down to is that *we don't have to reinvent the wheel in the area of trying to discern "the meaning of it all."* Our perennial quest for meaning should neither be performed in a vacuum nor from scratch. Rather, *it should be done first and foremost with a proper acknowledgment of our spiritual roots and ancestry.*

A Broad Description of This Book

This work is a "first step" in a long-term project I have to attempt to propose to people nowadays (I'm thinking particularly of the young people who can potentially be my

undergraduate students) how to develop a relevant spirituality (a “quest for meaning” if you will) for themselves, whether they are religious (in the traditional sense) or not. And that first step can be solemnly expressed thus: *Thou shalt know thy spiritual roots!* For, as various philosophers remind us, to be rooted, to be connected with one’s ancestry, especially in the spiritual realm, is one of our deepest and fundamental needs as humans. To paraphrase Thich Nhat Hanh (see the quote above), without roots, happiness will always elude us.

For us in the West, it is clear from an unchangeable and inescapable history that Christianity and its heart the Bible are, for good or ill, the essential components of our spiritual roots for the simple reason that the quest for “the meaning of it all” has been done for most of Western history in serious conversation with, even often controlled by Christianity and the biblical tradition.

Because of that, I propose here that we get to know our spiritual ancestry by metaphorically standing in front of a concrete and material symbol of the Christian tradition—the book known as the Bible, particularly the part called the New Testament. And then, it’s a matter of doing the same thing that was whispered by a divine voice to St. Augustine of Hippo when he was on the verge of a great spiritual breakthrough, “*tolle et lege!*” (take up and read!).

This book first and foremost will make a case for why it would do us good to take up and read the Bible although we are living in a secular age which frowns down upon such activities related to “old-time” religion. We should read the Bible even in a secular age because it is one of the best ways to be connected with our spiritual roots and ancestry. I will flesh out my case by suggesting that the New Testament is a kind of a textual village where some of the most important spiritual ancestors that began the Christian tradition continue to live through the texts that either they wrote, were written about them, or were first received by them. The good news is

that by learning some strategies to read and interpret the Bible, we can get to know these spiritual ancestors, have relevant conversations with them and thus reconnect with the earliest roots of our spiritual tradition in the West. In this way, we will know where our roots and ancestry lie and, with this, we will be better equipped to proceed in our continuous quest for a deeper and bigger meaning in life, whether that involves “God” and established religion or not.

There is an (unfortunately fake yet perceptive) Dalai Lama quote that goes like this: “Learn the rules well in order to know how to break them properly.” Applied to our spiritual ancestry and roots, this work will insist that, as a first step, we have to encounter our spiritual ancestors in the New Testament and converse with them meaningfully. When we are finally in touch with our roots, we can then more properly discern how to seek for meaning in our world and decide what to embrace from our spiritual ancestry, as well as what to revise, resist or even reject.

An Overview of the Structure of This Work

To go into details, this book will take the following concrete form: It will have two main parts. In Part 1 (chapters 1–5), we will begin by getting an overview of our broad topic and discuss some themes that will prepare us to make a metaphorical journey to the New Testament village to encounter some major “village elders” (spiritual ancestors). That will happen in Part 2 (chapters 6–11). Chapter 12, the conclusion, will bring us from our journey to the New Testament village back home to our Western secularized world and suggest how we can both embrace and struggle with the spiritual ancestry that we have come to know better after our journey.

Let me give a more detailed description of the individual chapters. Chapter one will offer broad but key reflections on why we need to read the Bible even in a secular age. Chapter two

will explain more in detail the nature of the secular age in which we find ourselves in the West today. Chapter three will offer a foundational paradigm for viewing the Bible, shifting the focus from a too facile idea of “the Bible as God’s word” to the most plain and demonstrable fact – that the Bible contains the words of our spiritual ancestors. It will also discuss some foundational ideas that are linked with the Bible such as God, faith-as-trust, revelation, belief or unbelief, etc. Chapter four will present the main metaphorical image of the Bible, particularly, the New Testament as a village where our spiritual ancestors continue to live. It will also suggest some concrete strategies on how to relate with these spiritual ancestors and how to interpret their writings. Chapter five will give a general orientation to the New Testament village by giving a “big picture” so that readers could grasp the whole before they enter into details about specific spiritual ancestors in Part 2. It will also give an important background review of the Old Testament for those who need it.

With that, we will enter Part 2 of the work. Here, we will discuss in detail six important spiritual ancestors who were present at the very beginning of what would eventually become the Christian tradition. They are: Mark, Matthew, Luke, John, Paul, and, of course, Jesus, the great founding ancestor. The intent is to pay a visit to a particularly important spiritual ancestor, encounter them and grasp some—what I will call—“*sine qua non*’s” (Latin, “without which”). By this, I mean some essential characteristics without which we would not understand what “made this particular spiritual ancestor tick” and what is going on in the work attributed to this particular village elder.

After those encounters and conversations with the six spiritual ancestors, we will come back to our present, secular world in chapter twelve. The journey will have hopefully given us enough knowledge and insight that would equip us both to embrace and wrestle with our

spiritual ancestry. All this is for the purpose of eventually directing us toward constructing a more relevant spirituality here and now that would be effective in aiding us to pursue the depth and transcendence that all of us long for as humans.

There you have it! Does that sound like a plan? Without further ado, let's proceed. The journey begins now ...
