

The Spiritual Hub

Exploring Our Rich Spiritual Heritage

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LIGHT ON THE PATH

Light on the Path, a one day workshop, will be held at St Paul's Church, Bedford on Saturday, June 25th.

See [EVENTS](#) page for more details.

WALKING THE LABYRINTH

Walking the labyrinth is an ancient spiritual exercise which is experiencing a renewal of interest across the world today.



Christian Labyrinths

The Spiritual Significance of Labyrinths In Christianity

In seeking to discover more about the spiritual significance and usage of labyrinths a good place to begin is with their history

History

The earliest known labyrinth in Christian usage can be found at the basilica of San Reparatus at El Asnam (formerly Castellum Tingitanum) near Orleansville in Algeria and is believed to date from the fourth century. Although similar in style to Roman labyrinths of the time in its centre are the words *Sancta Ecclesia*, or *Holy Church*, and this sets it apart as being Christian.

It seems that much information regarding the use of labyrinths over the next few centuries is now lost but they are next seen appearing as diagrams in ninth century manuscripts. The oldest extant manuscript labyrinth is the 7 circuit Jericho found in Monastery in Abruzzi, and dates from 822 AD. Although originally square this was later redrawn as a circular pattern. The second oldest is that of Otfrid of Weissenburg, Alsace, (which is now in France) and it dates from 871 AD. This is the basic 11 circuit pattern.

The pinnacle of labyrinth usage came in the Middle Ages when they began to built into the floors of churches and cathedrals across Europe, the most well known of these is that of Notre-Dame de Chartes Cathedral which is about 80 km from Paris. Following the Reformation many European labyrinths were destroyed, they then experienced a brief renewal of usage in the early 19th century, which is when the one in Ely Cathedral, Cambridgeshire, England was built. Today a further renewal of interest in the labyrinth is developing within the Christian Church and it is spreading across the world.

Spiritual Significance and Usage

Those who have walked the labyrinth today are likely to have experienced the way in which it can help to develop a sense of inner peace, how it often assists in helping to gain insight into the theme that is being reflected on while following the path and some recognize that following the path can be aid meditation. Many understand that the labyrinth is a symbol for our journey through life and that walking it can take us on a journey to the centre of our own beings.

It is also widely known that in the Middle Ages walking this sacred path was seen as a pilgrimage and, indeed, prayer labyrinths were called *Chemin de Jerusalem* (Roads of Jerusalem). Beyond this there seem to be no written records of their spiritual purpose or use. Yet when it comes to spiritual teaching it has always been the case that there is often little need to write detailed descriptions. Those who have eyes to see will see (Luke 10:23, Mark 8:18) and often all that is needed is a symbol or a key to

understanding.

In this case we have the symbols, the designs of the labyrinths themselves, which can provide a key to the understanding that is missing. Applying this key simply requires appreciating two things. The first is that throughout Christian history the main emphasis of the Church has not been solely on the worship of Jesus Christ but also on the central essence of his message, namely the nurturing of the spiritual development of all. This understanding began to fall into decline after the Reformation and remains all too neglected today, in spite of the fact that this message and the very means of such nurturing permeates the Bible, liturgy, worship and many other aspects of the life and work of the Church.

The second part of the key is another aspect of understanding which, although not forgotten, is not adequately appreciated today. It is found specifically stated in Hebrews 11:3. *Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear.* In other words the Church below was specifically built in the image of the Church above and its practices and laws were formed in the image of very real spiritual principles and laws.

For example, throughout our lives we journey on pilgrimage towards the New Jerusalem and this is heightened when greater emphasis is placed on spiritual development. The earthly Jerusalem is the corresponding image of this and as labyrinths were known as roads of or to Jerusalem it is not difficult to see that the pilgrimage of walking the labyrinth regularly provides a means of assisting our spiritual development. Regardless of where we are on our journey or whether we are seeking peace, deeper insight and understanding into an issue we have encountered in life or an aid to entering more deeply into prayer or meditation, walking the labyrinth can help to provide sustenance along the way.

This, however, is not all that the labyrinths of old can convey to us regarding their meaning and usage because each of the three most usual basic shapes have their own story to tell.

Circular Labyrinths

Invariably labyrinths found in the Christendom of the Middle Ages consist of a single winding path which leads from the perimeter to the centre. Symbolically the circle means eternity. It can also refer to the wheel of life, with its stages of birth, life, death and rebirth. The concept of baptism as a spiritual rebirth is far from being unfamiliar but there are a number of other stages or points of rebirth or renewal on the journey of spiritual development.

As with other labyrinths the centre is the place of encounter and this can be variably understood, and experienced, as encounter with the inner self, with Christ or with God. God is sometimes represented as the point within a circle and, in circular churches, the altar is placed at the centre.

If the west wall of Chartes Cathedral were to be folded down flat onto the floor of the nave its great rose window would almost exactly coincide with the labyrinth and, at the centre of this labyrinth the petals of a rose are to be found. This feature adds much beauty not only physically but spiritually also. *I am the rose of Sharon* says the voice of Wisdom or the Transcendent Christ in Song of Solomon 2:1.

The circular labyrinth therefore emphasises the encounter with Christ within.

Octagonal Labyrinths

The octagon was sometimes used as the perimeter shape of a labyrinth, notably that found at Amiens Cathedral and its smaller version at the basilica of St Quentin, both of which are in France. The octagon is a symbol which is commonly found in Christianity. It can be drawn by interlacing two squares inside a circle. The circle, as was noted above, represents God's eternity while the square represents the secular world. The four corners also represent the four cardinal directions to heaven and the four characteristics of humans. In Old Testament times the number eight symbolized

salvation, rebirth and regeneration and Christians extended this so that it also represents resurrection (on the eighth day of the week), redemption and new covenant.

Rectangular Labyrinths

The four corners of rectangular labyrinths collectively represent the material world and the physical elements which constitute our bodies, as do the four arms of the cross. The centre symbolises the penetration of Spirit into matter. This is also the meaning of the place where the two beams of the Cross meet. On a crucifix or in most images of Jesus hanging on the Cross it is easy to see that the centre of the Cross corresponds to the heart of Jesus. This begins to convey to us the meaning of the Sacred Heart and it should also be remembered that Christian spiritual development is concerned with the awakening of the heart while one's intellectual ability is far less important.

There is, however, further symbolism to be found in some rectangular labyrinths and this is profoundly displayed in the great labyrinth of St Francis de Sales Cathedral in Cambery, France. First built in 1860-70 it was re-laid in 1989. It is 9.87 metres wide, 34.9 metres long and takes up most of the nave. When you arrive at the centre, facing east, you find that you are standing at the foot of the Cross. This point is only part way along the labyrinth just as in many ways standing at the foot of the Cross is only part along our spiritual journey. This beautiful symbolism is augmented by the very location of the labyrinth for the very symbolism of a cruciform church building also signifies the spiritual journey from darkness in the west to the rising light of the east. In addition to this, the liturgy of the Mass of Eucharist is also carefully structured to nurture and assist us on this journey from west to east, from darkness to light.

The Jericho Labyrinth

As was mentioned above the earliest known Christian manuscript to contain a diagram of a labyrinth dates from 822 A.D., and this, the Map of Jericho labyrinth, was drawn as a square pattern. Later it was modified into a circular form. Reflecting on why it was associated with the Old Testament city of Jericho soon reveals further insight into its spiritual significance.

The Old Testament relates in Joshua 6:1-16 how the Lord instructed Joshua to send his armies and priests, blowing trumpets and carrying the Ark, to circle the city of Jericho for seven days. On the seventh day, as they did this, the walls of Jericho fell down and the city was taken.

The Map of Jericho labyrinth has seven circuits and the path of spiritual development can be seen as having seven significant stages. This provides strong indication of both the taking of Jericho and this labyrinth being related to spiritual development. In the spirituality of the Judeo-Christian tradition escape from bondage in Egypt refers to escape from the bondage of sin and entrance into greater spiritual light; Jericho is the place of the Israelites' return from bondage in Egypt.

It is interesting to note that the name 'Joshua' is the original Hebrew form of the Greek name 'Jesus'. In Hebrew it consists of two parts. The first is *Yah*, a commonly accepted abbreviation of *Yahweh*, the Name of the Lord. The second part comes from the verb *yasha* which means to be saved or delivered.

Conclusion

By examining their symbolism it soon becomes apparent that Christian labyrinths have been used not only to speak of the journey of spiritual development but also to provide an excellent means of nurturing us along the way. Each of us find some spiritual exercises of more benefit than others and that some symbols speak to us more strongly and with greater meaning than others do.

We will each have some degree of preference in our favourite design of labyrinth or perhaps we will enjoy walking different ones at different times. Like all exercises greatest benefit is gained from spiritual exercises with regular practice. If you are not in a position to walk a labyrinth regularly try using a smaller finger version. These are inexpensive and very portable.

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