

## Spring Awakening by M. R. Wallace

We are privileged to live in one of the most culturally and religiously diverse cities in the world. Religious tolerance, which we New Yorkers practice everyday, is no mean feat and sometimes mutual understanding and respect prove even more difficult. The Easter holiday with its universal themes of renewal and rebirth belongs to many religions – not one or two. It reminds us that the basic cores of the world's great religions are astonishingly similar. "Easter" derived from the German pagan feast in honor of the goddess "Eastre", coincides with spring and celebrating the vernal equinox dates as far back as the Druids.

Common themes such as spring appear repeatedly throughout the great religions. In addition to celebrating spring, historical and symbolic connections are remarkable. For example, a holy woman is visited by a spirit who tells her that she will bear a son who will be a great and sacred teacher. She then becomes pregnant for the first time. What appears to be the story of the virgin birth of Christ is the narrative of the birth of Buddha around 580 B.C. The "Golden Rule" of doing unto others what you would have them do to you was taught by Confucius and Rabbi Hillel well before the birth of Christ. The basis for natural law as expounded upon by the reverend St. Thomas Aquinas was the philosophy of Greeks Plato and Aristotle – who both lived before Christ. Our essential beliefs resound with contextual and historical similarities. Abraham had two sons: Isaac the son of Sarah and Ishmael who was the son of Abraham's mistress, Hagar. Isaac's descendants included King David and Jesus Christ. Ishmael's descendants included the prophet Mohammed. The popular Muslim name "Ismail" honors the son of the father of the Jews.

The similarities and connections go on and on. They remind us over and over that we are more alike than different. We humans have always searched for spiritual connections to higher powers and to each other. But it certainly can be argued that in the past these connections were made in groups that were geographically isolated and culturally similar. The pessimistic view is that contact between the groups leads to war and friction. The optimistic view, which I prefer, is that we live in a world that is truly global leading to unprecedented cooperation and good will. A trip down 15<sup>th</sup> Avenue in Brooklyn reflects more multiculturalism and religious diversity than ever before. Crime is down and quality of life is vastly improved. Contact between these varied groups can work.

We New Yorkers are remarkably and uniquely tolerant of a broad spectrum of the religious groups in our midst. Organizations like CIAO and CURE try for a higher goal – mutual understanding and respect. Understanding our common ideas and beliefs may be a part of that. Mary Sansone often says, "You know, we're all the same!" She's right. Happy Spring.