

Spiritual Themes, Explored From Many Angles

By NEIL GENZLINGER

Channel surf around the television landscape, and it's not hard to find experts earnestly discussing politics or economics or even home decorating. But you'll rarely encounter anyone talking about spiritual matters, unless it's a megachurch pastor with an 800 number scrolling across the screen.

"Global Spirit," a series that begins on Sunday on Link TV (and can be viewed free at linktv.org/globalspirit), is hoping to change that, and to capitalize on what the program's creators see as a growing interest in spiritual exploration. Each week the show will bring together scholars and other experts from different religious and philosophical backgrounds, not to sell a faith or argue hot-button issues, but to discuss universal themes like forgiveness or the nature of the spiritual journey.

"Who are we? Why are we here? Where are we going?" said Phil Cousineau, the program's host, paraphrasing the title of a Gauguin painting. "In a sense, we're asking those three questions in every program."

Mr. Cousineau, a lecturer and author whose books include "Soul: An Archaeology," has the job each week of moderating a genteel discussion between people who may not have ever met but may find they have much common ground. In the opening installment, titled "The Spiritual Quest," Karen Arm-



Edward Tick, center, comforts a Vietnam War veteran in a segment from "Global Spirit."

LINK TV

strong, the scholar and author, who was once a nun, and Robert Thurman, the Columbia professor, who in the early 1960s was a Buddhist monk, share their stories and their thoughts on subjects like compassion and militarism.

"Forgiveness and Healing" features Edward Tick, a psychotherapist who counsels war veterans, and Azim N. Khamisa, who after his son was killed in a robbery teamed up with the killer's grandfather to spread a message of reconciliation and peace.

The discussions are broken up with short documentaries related to the guests and topics. In the "Forgiveness" installment, for instance, Dr. Tick accompanies Vietnam veterans back to that country to meet and learn from the people they once thought of as the enemy.

"We have been trying to come up with a theme that describes the

ONLINE: 'GLOBAL SPIRIT'

Excerpts from the series:
nytimes.com/television

show, and right now we're thinking: 'It's an internal travel series,'" said Lorraine Hess, a creator and executive producer of the program, along with Stephen Olsson.

Diane Winston, a professor of media and religion at the University of Southern California, said that although there have been occasional attempts to use television to examine spiritual themes — Bill Moyers, for instance, has such programs on his résumé — the subject has generally been seen as having little commercial potential.

Now, however, might be an opportune time for such an endeavor, she said: other niche-television markets have proved fruitful, and spiritual tourism (travel to holy sites and places of meditation) is booming. Also, she noted, the number of

A TV series avoids hot-button issues and selling faith.

people who identify themselves as spiritual but claim no religious affiliation — and thus might be more open to accepting a range of ideas — is growing.

Stewart M. Hoover, director of the Center for Media, Religion and Culture at the University of Colorado, also cited Mr. Moyers's work as among the precedents for the Link TV program, but said the series was new in several respects.

"What is different about 'Global Spirit' is that it lacks the endorsement of specific authority, biblical or doctrinal or historical," he wrote in an e-mail message. And, he said, it reflects the character of the cable-TV and Internet age.

"The digital realm carries with it an ethic of inquiry, of leveling," Dr. Hoover said, as opposed to the traditional voice-of-authority structure of many religions. "That is the way we think when we go to the new media."

Dr. Thurman said the types of discussions fostered on "Global Spirit" are urgently needed.

"The world as it has been functioning is kind of crumbling," he said. "I think that a complete reconstruction will have to go on, and very critical to building that new world that we now need is that we need to rethink things. And a very important place to begin is the world of spirit."

That view was echoed by Ravi Ravindra, a scholar who has written extensively on spirituality and religion and who is a guest on a segment titled "The Journey Towards Oneness."

"We have all sorts of fanatics and

fundamentalists in many religious traditions," he said. "Talking to people who come from different backgrounds is absolutely essential."

Though the program is having its premiere on Easter, Christianity is but one of many perspectives in the segments. An episode on April 26 explores "Earth Wisdom" with representatives of several indigenous peoples. "In Search of Ecstasy," scheduled for broadcast next month, includes footage from Africa, Australia and other parts of the globe.

Dr. Tick said getting insights from all over the world is one step to broader understanding, but another is getting the perspective of history, something he knows from studying post-traumatic stress disorder. Americans tend to think of that problem as a recent phenomenon, but countries where war has been a fact of life for many generations know better.

"The wounding of war is not new," he said. "A cultural understanding of the depth and complexity of that wounding is not new."

For Mr. Cousineau, keeping the dialogue flowing among his varied guests is both the challenge and the fun.

"I try to put myself in the position of people I know who are curious about cultures," he said, "and try to ask what they would ask if they were in my lucky shoes."

The story online:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/11/arts/television/11spiri.html>