Several books about Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio’s work include the word “quest” in their titles. In part, these titles recognize that his work is ongoing. Writing is essential to his life, and his work has always posed questions that he does not fully answer. *Le Clézio’s Spiritual Quest* differs from other critical studies in that it focuses specifically on the religious and philosophical citations in his work in order to set forth an account of what can be construed as a sustained effort to develop a coherent set of spiritual and ethical views that draws on the traditions of many cultures, including traditions that are not often consulted by contemporary thinkers. While it is always risky to impute views to a writer of fiction, if no attempt is made to ascertain a writer’s ruling framework of ideas, readers can miss a great deal of interest and value. If this book meets its objective, it will help readers by offering a road map to Le Clézio’s concerns and his provisional conclusions about faith, reality, and ethics.

Le Clézio is a post-Christian writer partly in the sense that like many Europeans, he no longer thinks of Christianity as an important living religion or makes use of its symbols. He is post-Christian also in a deeper sense, because he makes almost no reference to that faith at all. His examination of his father’s life, *L’Africain*, describes how he and his brother were required to say prayers and to worship in his father’s Catholic tradition. Le Clézio’s works, however, are notably barren of any references to Christianity, except for an offhand comment about it being a religion for grocers and an odd description of a Christmas celebration on board a drifting yacht in the Sargasso Sea. He is post-colonial, and he is global in the sense that he draws his inspiration from a very wide range of sources and traditions. What other writer takes seriously the paradoxes of Parmenides of Elea? How many other writers outside the Native American traditions turn to Aztec and other Amerindian cultures and their religions for wisdom about society, the environment, and religion?

At the same time, Le Clézio is a spiritual explorer. He has apparently chosen three or perhaps four spiritual and cultural traditions
that he believes to have value, and he has worked to create a philosophical perspective that blends them into a not-quite coherent whole. One of those traditions is the idea that monotheism originated in central Africa. The others are Parmenides’ philosophy, Islamic Sufism, and Meso-American religion as it appears in the Hopi, Aztec and Olmec cultures.

Other critics have ably examined Le Clézio’s place in the French literary tradition and the French writers who have formed him. Outside the French tradition, he has been touched by a truly extraordinary set of influences, extraordinary because of the cultures and historical periods from which they come and because Le Clézio is strikingly original in his attempt to create a spirituality and a philosophy from these eclectic sources. As a few critics have noted, his early work makes frequent reference to Parmenides, the Pre-Socratic philosopher from Elea who propounded a challenging set of paradoxes about the ultimate nature of reality. Parmenides’ shadow hangs in one way or another over much of his work. A specific Sufi tradition from Iran, one that touched the lives of the Berbers of North Africa, is central to his thinking. At times, he seems to make use of a doctrine like Karma, though he does not refer specifically to classic Hindu religious or literary texts. Often, when his characters’ religious experiences are not specifically influenced by Sufism or by Parmenides, they are portrayed in terms that will be familiar to any student of William James or Evelyn Underhill. Finally, Le Clézio has made a sustained effort to incorporate elements of Amerindian or Meso-American culture and philosophy into his worldview. Understanding these sources and their integration brings new richness to the experience of reading his work.

Chapter 1, Spirituality and Moral Action, explores the current critical understanding of Le Clézio’s spirituality and argues that Karl Jaspers’ theistic existentialism, specifically his idea of “The Comprehensive,” is a more useful framework for understanding that spirituality than ideas found in the works of Rudolf Otto or Mircea Eliade, philosophers upon whom other critics have drawn in their assessments. This chapter also examines the relationship between religious and moral views in a group of Le Clézio’s novels including Étoile errante, Onitsha, Ritournelle de la Faim, and Ourania. Jaspers’ perspective,
like those of Eliade and Otto, is useful because it helps to put Parmenides’ thinking into terms that are more familiar for Western religious discourse. Parmenides himself evokes a muse, and it is difficult to know whether his reports about his mystical experience constitute a genuine report of his experience or homage to a literary convention.

Chapter 2, The Eleatic Challenge, looks specifically at Le Clézio’s use of Parmenides’ concept of Being, starting with his first novel, *Le procès-verbal*, and continuing to the recent novel *Révolutions*. Other novels and essays examined in the chapter include *Le chercheur d’or*, *L’inconnu sur la terre*, and *Le livre des fuites*.

Chapter 3, The Aphasic Hero, asks why many of Le Clézio’s characters seldom or never speak. Often his characters are solitary, and often the narration focuses on what the characters experience as they move through the natural world rather than what they think or what they learn in conversation with other people. Le Clézio is also fascinated by silence, troubled by the limited ability of human language to express complex thoughts, and drawn to a form of Sufism in which teaching is done wordlessly. Works studied in this chapter include *L’inconnu sur la terre*, *Peuple du Ciel*, *Désert*, *Le livre des fuites*, *L’extase matérielle*, and *Gens des nuages*. Many recent critics frame this emptiness in terms of an encounter with a void; the emptiness however is teeming with emergent being.

Chapter 4, Mystic Children, offers an analysis of mystic visions in several of Le Clézio’s short stories and novels. Le Clézio manipulates the experience of time and space, and he attempts a fascinating synthesis of Western, Eastern, and Meso-American religious ideas. This chapter addresses *Peuple du Ciel*, *Lullaby*, *Mondo et autres histoires*, *Désert* and *L’inconnu sur la terre*. Characters in each of these stories undergo profound mystical experiences that can also be understood in terms of the frameworks described by William James, Evelyn Underhill and W.H. Auden, among others.

Chapter 5, Apocalypse or Unification?, focuses on *Le rêve mexicain* and its appreciation of Amerindian cultures, specifically Aztec culture. Is it true that the Aztecs, Olmecs and other Amerindian cultures were in the process of developing an advanced philosophy? Do their ideas about nature and cycles of catastrophes make an essential contribution to our understanding of the world? How do those ideas fit
into Le Clézio’s advocacy of monotheism, personal mystical experience, and personal moral action?

Chapter 6, A Moral World, looks at a series of Le Clézio’s short stories that seem not to draw on the philosophical framework that inspires his other work. These works present a pitiless and exacting morality that raises questions about how he conceptualizes the relationship between private moral choices and public or societal moral systems. Moreover, these works seem to invoke a moral force that balances good and evil, a force that works in a way like the Hindu doctrine of Karma. Works studied include *Le déluge, Hasard, Ourania, Poisson d’or*, and *La ronde et autres faits divers*.

Chapter 7, Two Dilemmas, concludes the book by focusing on two puzzles, one aesthetic and the other axiological or moral. The absence of dialogue, long narratives that focus on the actions of solitary characters, and occasional use of somewhat generic names such as Jeune Homme Hogan and Adam Pollo, create novels that deviate markedly from traditional norms of European literature, as found in the works of writers such as Jane Austen or Leo Tolstoy. Le Clézio began as an experimental novelist; his latest work draws its material from the life of his extended family, as he has traced his family back through several generations. Even though his work is often autobiographical, throughout his career as a writer he has shown an interest in pursuing ideas rather than in developing characters, crafting historical fiction, or creating well-made stories with complex plots, dialogue, and rich interactions among characters. At times, Le Clézio’s work seems to be poetry or essay rather than prose fiction. Viewed from the perspective of Lessing’s aesthetic treatise, *Laocoon*, what are the art forms that Le Clézio has developed and what is their excellence? Must a reader bring specific kinds of expectations and receptivities to reading his books?

Turning to the philosophical content of his work, is it possible to formulate a tentative statement of Le Clézio’s spiritual and moral positions? Moreover, has he developed anything approaching a satisfactory solution to the tension in his works between individual moral choices and societal morality, including the utter failures of morality in colonial oppression? Given the importance of female characters in his work, has he defined a specific position on feminism and women’s
rights? The conclusion also considers some salient similarities and
differences between his work and the narratives of Borges and Defoe.

Le Clézio’s Spiritual Quest may help readers appreciate what he has
accomplished and participate more fully in his search for a set of
spiritual, moral, and environmental views that may be constructive in
a world where an understanding of cultural and religious diversity is
increasingly important and where many people in the West and else-
where are turning away from traditional religions that have provided
some form of social coherence.

Because this book is aimed at readers of English, as well as those
who read Le Clézio in the original French, there are no direct quo-
tations from his work. Rather, the content of passages is characterized
and readers are directed to the relevant sections of the works them-
selves. While it is possible to excerpt Le Clézio, much of the impact of
his work depends on the cumulative effect of long passages of de-
scription, an effect that cannot be faithfully represented by any quo-
tation. The intent is to make Le Clézio’s work attractive to a larger
audience as well as to explicate philosophical aspects of his work that
have not been addressed by other critics. All citations in the text are to
the French editions of his works.