

What is Religion?

Part IV of *The Enigma of Consciousness*

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Introduction to Part Four

“Religion” has become in some circles a synonym for superstition, or at least a suspicion of weak-mindedness. To others “religion” does indeed mean a means of escape from the real matters of living or at least the tragic parts of living. To still others “my religion” is a sort of virtue or status that is a sort of bigotry with respect to almost every other religious identity. To all these groups of people recovering the word “religion” as a pointer to something dead serious, profoundly real, and even necessary to optimal living may be a hard sell.

Nevertheless, this very sell is my task in this Part Four of the *Enigma of Consciousness*. To do this I will have to clear some rubbish out of the way in order to provide space for a vision of religion that is subversive to the norm, but meaningful to the seeker of a fully realistic life. Perhaps there is nothing more to say except, “Let us begin.”

Chapter 17

The Death of Mythic Space and the Redefinition of Religion

Perhaps, the most important historical development in the last 200 years was not the splitting of the atom or the invention of the internal combustion engine or the spread of the computer chip, but the advent of a new religious mode. The old religious mode used the two-story metaphor of heaven above and earth below. What many of us now see more clearly than earlier generations is that this was a metaphor, not a literal truth. This metaphor became difficult for people to use. We can now see it as a temporal human invention that can be replaced; indeed, it is being replaced. But I am getting ahead of my story.

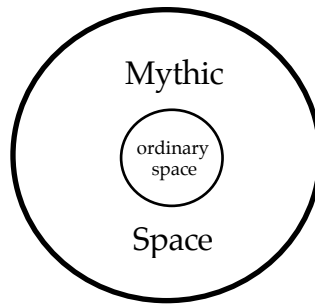
Let us be sure we are clear what this old metaphor was and how it was used in the heyday of its cultural aliveness. Let us picture in our minds what I will call “mythic space” as a top rectangle over a bottom rectangle we will call “ordinary (or sensory experienced) space.”



In the top space are angels and devils, gods and goddesses, perhaps one main God or Goddess, as well as fairies, gremlins, and the list goes on. This very old metaphor has died, even though millions of people still use it, take it literally or somewhat literally, use it to support their hope of everlasting life, and in the worst case use it to support their tyrannical rulership, their demeaning of women, their devastation of the Earth, their greed, and their meanness. To be charitable, some religious folk simply do not know how to talk about the profound matters of their lives without resorting to a use of this metaphor or to some subtle form of it, like dividing spirit from matter.

The current state of decay of this very old metaphor was not always the cultural situation. For thousands of years this metaphor was a taken-for-granted part of cultural life virtually everywhere. A form of this metaphor occurred even in precivilization societies in which the classical up-and-down form of this metaphor had not yet been invented. I am assuming that the dawn of civilization and the dawn of hierarchical thinking were one and the same dawning.

Let us imagine a pre-civilization society in which the male ownership of children had not yet been invented. All humans could see then was the wonder of new human life emerging from the womb of woman. Such people used this ordinary experience as a metaphor for Reality as a whole. They envisioned the story of the whole cosmos as a great womb from which all ordinary things emerged. They also viewed this same cosmic womb as a great tomb into which all things returned. Between womb and tomb we humans dwell in the arms of this cosmic Mother whose breasts feed us. We are her children. We owe everything to her. We return to her in our deaths. The myth of the Great Goddess was born. Perhaps the following chart can indicate a sense of this very ancient form of the two-realm metaphor:



Rather than being “above,” mythic space in these early societies “surrounds us.” Likely, these very old cultures did not have words for “mythic space” or even “metaphor.” They simply housed this basic image in their minds and used this image to talk about their lives. When we civilized people first encountered the Aborigines of Australia, these very interesting people, whose culture was pre-agricultural as well as precivilizational, were talking about “dreamtime and ordinary time.” They saw themselves traveling from ordinary time into a trance type reality (dreamtime), and then returning. This ordinary time/dreamtime image of Reality is a form of the two-realm metaphor.

So how old is this two-realm metaphor? There is evidence for the presence of the Great Goddess myth reaching back at least 25,000 years. Perhaps the Old Religious Mode is 100,000 years old. I am asking us to stretch our imaginations back that far in order to underline how astonishing it is for a metaphor that old to die. Most of us now live in a culture whose members no longer honestly believe in the presence of a mythic world of gods and goddesses, or Goddess or God or devils and angels or gremlins and fairies. That once taken-for-granted realm of reality is no longer taken for granted.

All gods and goddesses are GONE. Everything we have meant by religion is GONE. In that sense, religion is GONE, gone forever. Indeed, myth as we once understood myth is GONE.

But that is not the most amazing part of what has happened to us. In the midst of this down-to-Earth world, a realm of Wonder has burned through. And another religious metaphor has appeared that has taken the place of the older one. This new metaphor enables our minds to translate the religious insights of the past into meaningful articulations of that same awareness in our lives today.

The New Religious Mode

So what does this replacement for the two-story metaphor look like? Let me be clear that I am describing something that is already in history. My description of it can surely be improved. My names for it can be changed, but what I am describing is not something I am simply making up. This new metaphor is something that has been emerging in our common societies for at least 200 years. The new religious mode emerged in the wake of the scientific and Enlightenment critique of the old religious metaphor and came into full expression with such writers as Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. I will not dialogue with this long history, but I want to acknowledge that I am working in its wake.

I am also working in the wake of the most illuminating person that I have known personally, my mentor for 24 years, Joseph W. Mathews. He first named the replacement for the old religious mode “**the advent of the secular religious.**” In a talk called “the secular revolution,” he spelled out the manner in which the ancient two-story metaphorical thinking is being replaced by living in one and only one realm of reality. In that talk he also noted how the imagery of angels and demons was being replaced by imagery about historically unfolding relationships. Later, Mathews claimed

that we had stumbled upon an even deeper perception of the secular religious revolution. He called this insight the discovery of “*the other world in the midst of this world.*”¹ He illustrated how in the midst of our ordinary, everyday living we were experiencing the burning through of the same profound *states of being* that were written about in the classical writings using the old two-story way of talking. Mathews gave the illustration of a piece of paper, representing our lives, having a lighted match beneath it. First the paper begins to brown, and then it flames. A state of profound being is like that; it browns and flames the ordinary paper of our everyday lives. This is not supernatural imagery. But even in this image, a trace of the heavenly realm remains: the burning match is being pictured as a sort of second story in this visualization. But if we tell this story right, we are admitting that we are telling a story. There is no literal match. All we experience is the burning through of the depth dimension of this one Reality. And this burning through needs no mountaintop or sacred building; it burns through the ordinary, familiar aspects of our lives. A new sort of polarity is being imaged. No angels and devils are assumed. No divine person is needed. We know that those mental pictures are poetry about an experience that takes place in this one and only realm.

Yet a new sort of polarity does remain: (1) the ordinary and (2) the depth of the ordinary. But “depth” in this sentence does not mean another realm. It means an intensification of this one realm. The extraordinary is the intensification of the ordinary, and the ordinary in its deepest nature is extraordinary. Using this newer poetry we can see with our own one-story eyes what earlier humans were talking about with their two-story poetry of natural and supernatural. We can grant our ancestors the wisdom of using their poetry to talk about their depth experience. But now we have a new poetry – a new polarity of (1) the ordinary and (2) the extraordinary depth of the ordinary.

Here is another poetic image that has become part of this conversation. Transcendence (the old mode) is being replaced by transparency (the new mode). The meaning here is that our everyday lives can become transparent, “glass” to the profound dimensions of Reality. What previously was opaque becomes illuminated with light, not from some other realm but from the true nature of this one and only realm.

Translating from the Old Religious Mode to the New Religious Mode

Here is an example of how a very old text can be translated into this new religious mode. Moses, so the story goes (Exodus 3), saw an ordinary bush burn with an ethereal flame. But he did not have our secular religious metaphor to think with. His mind appropriated this experience as a Divine Being speaking to him. He attempted to find a name for this Divine Being, but all his two-story mind could fathom was that this “Divinity” had no name comprehensible to the human. Some unfathomable I AM THAT I AM was speaking to him in imperatives that his consciousness was already brooding upon. He heard speech that said, “Let my people go.”

Even though we cannot see ourselves talking with Divine Beings anymore (except in a poetic manner), we can grasp what Moses was talking about when he tells us about his talk with WE DON’T KNOW HIS NAME.² In our own ordinary life, among our

¹ A lecture on this topic, “The Recovery of the Other World,” appears in a book of Joe Mathews’ talks, *Bending History* (John Epps: editor, Resurgence Publishing: 2005) I count this talk one of the most important talks in that book.

² Please note that it does not matter that this story about Moses has been elaborated by later generations. Using mere historical empirical thinking, it is difficult to prove that Moses even existed. But in our

own “bushes,” we can also experience an ordinary part of our lives burning with surprising heat. Like Moses, we may have felt called to some atypical task of living in which we surprised ourselves with our own daring that we may have resisted, but did the task anyway. We may still count such moments as the most important events of our lives. This important, ancient story is not diminished by stripping it of its two-story language. Indeed, its essential meaning only becomes clear to us when we see it in the light of our recently dawned one-realm, transparency mode of understanding.

I will demonstrate a more involved example of metaphorical translation from the Old Religious Mode to the New Religious Mode, using this story from *Luke 9: 28-36*:

About eight days after these sayings (about the son of man coming in his glory), Jesus took Peter and James and John and went off with them to the hillside to pray. And then, while he was praying, the whole appearance of his face changed and his clothes became white and dazzling. And two men were talking with Jesus. They were Moses and Elijah -- revealed in heavenly splendor, and their talk was about the way he must take and the end he must fulfill in Jerusalem. But Peter and his companions had been overcome by sleep, and it was as they struggled into wakefulness that they saw the glory of Jesus and the two men standing with him. Just as they were parting from him, Peter said to Jesus,

“Master, it is wonderful for us to be here! Let us put up three shelters – one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

But he did not know what he was saying. While he was speaking a cloud overshadowed them and awe swept over them as it enveloped them. A voice came out of the cloud saying,

“This is my Son, my chosen! Listen to him!”

And while the voice was speaking, *they found there was no one there at all but Jesus*. The disciples were reduced to silence, and in those days never breathed a word to anyone of what they had seen.

First of all, to translate this wonderful poetry we have to notice that it was written years after the crucifixion. The whole thing is fiction -- not a word of it is actual history except for the names of the people. “They never breathed a word to anyone of what they had seen” was an admission by the storyteller that he or she was making it up. The truth of this story only happened to resurrected persons after the horror of the crucifixion became a door for them into the deeps of life.

The teller of this tale knows that “there was no one there at all but Jesus.” All the rest of the story is told in a sort of dream imagery. The dazzle of Jesus’ garments is something seen only by transformed people who see the dazzle of Jesus along with the dazzle of Moses (first author of the law) and the dazzle of Elijah (grandfather of the prophets). We can translate this dazzle as an experience of awe, a dread and fascination moment that is mysterious, that requires courage, and that in the end redirects our lives.

No tape recorder would have picked up the voice from the cloud. In fact the cloud itself is a symbol used to indicate the heavenly source of the message. And “heaven” is also a symbol for what we would call the realm of Mystery that penetrates every ordinary moment, if we have accessed our capacity to notice such things. And what did

memory the Moses figure, whether literary or empirical, still lives as a source of insight into the way WE-DON’T-KNOW-HIS-NAME interacts with humans.

this dream-world “voice” say? It said to pay attention to Jesus, for he is revealing the nature of the Mysterious EVERY-THING-NESS/NO-THING-NESS, by which Moses and Elijah were also dazzled.

The disciples were reduced to silence. There were literally no words for what they, in this story, were experiencing. They were experiencing the resurrection, that rebirth on the other side of having all their illusions crucified in an event so shaking of the foundations of their lives that they never got over it. Only when this shaking of the foundations is complete, does the dazzle appear. Only when all our illusions are exposed for what they are and we have died to all our egoistic projections upon Reality, does the dazzle of Reality appear.

Peter’s first response was to build some booths or altars at this place. In other words he wanted to invent some religion. Peter did not know what he was saying; he only knew that he was experiencing FINAL THINGS, appropriate for marking this place with some sort of humanly invented religious something. The story begins with the words “they (the disciples) were struggling into wakefulness.” This is a story about what it is like for us today, here and now, to struggle into wakefulness of our true being.

Such a commentary is an example of what it means to translate an old double-deck story like this into a single-realm story that calls forth Awe from the profound depths of our own lives today.

Many people dismiss ancient stories like these because they are so imbedded in two-story language. Metaphorical translation is the answer to rediscovering the “juice” in our ancient religious texts and memories. And this metaphorical translation process applies not only to biblical stories and other Western stories and teachings but also to Hindu and Buddhist stories and teachings; to the two-realm stories from ancient Australia, Africa, and America; and indeed to the religious forms from every place and generation of those thousands of years that were culturally characterized by the two-story religious mode. Students of Christianity must do metaphorical translation in order to correctly understand a fifth century Augustine; a twelfth century Aquinas; a fifteenth century Luther, Calvin, Teresa of Avila, and John of the Cross; an eighteenth century Wesley and Edwards. Even recent theologians like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and H. Richard Niebuhr had one foot in the two-story metaphors of the past. Nevertheless, all these luminaries were talking about our profound humanness, doing so in the language of the Old Religious Mode. The core meaning of most of the religious expressions of humanity are hidden from us until we see that the old metaphors they used are not essential to what they were saying. We can point to the same core experiences by employing our transparency, one-realm, mode of interpretation.

The place where many people are most reluctant to give up their two-story metaphors has to do with “life after death.” Reincarnation, immortality of soul, and the resurrection of the body have been the two-story metaphors most used to talk about life-after-death. For our sanity we need to be blunt with ourselves that these three stories are metaphors, not literal biological or psychological processes. But the metaphors have meaning; they point to something. They point to the realization that our essential consciousness is an enigma that does not fit into the laws of physics that we normally accept. We can actually experience ourselves watching from that deep well of consciousness the processes of our physical bodies. We know or can know that we are an “I Am” that can view this “I Am” in a calm and curious way. We quite naturally ask the question, “What then becomes of this “I Am” after the conclusion of our historical presence and the apparent eclipse of consciousness that personal death entails? The reincarnation heritages theorize that we continue our incomplete journeys

toward full realization in yet another physical body. The immortality of the soul heritages theorize that we go to a nonphysical or spiritual realm for reward, continuing purification, or perhaps a punishing experience of no hope. The resurrection of the dead heritages theorize that a future life will be embodied, differently, but in a new physical creation given by the same power that created and is creating the current creation.

The literalization of these three stories renders them unbelievable to increasing numbers of us. And the use of these stories to threaten and control a population of people is now seen as insidious. Nevertheless, we are left with a witness to something profound in all three of these stories: human life is deeper and more wondrous than the ordinary eye can see. In this one life we can experience ourselves killed and resurrected many times. In this one life we can know that we are somehow related to the Eternal in the everyday processes of our lives. In this one life we can know that we are part of a “realization journey” that preceded our birth and will continue after our death.

The Redefinition of Religion

The death of the two-story or transcendence metaphor is also the death of most of our old images of what we point to with the word “religion.” If religion is not about gods and goddesses, God or Goddess, what is it about? If religion is not about preparing for life after death, what is it about?

As the etymology of the word indicates “Re-ligion” is about reconnecting. It is about reconnecting with something from which we have become disconnected, namely our essential “I Am.” Religion is about accessing an experience of our profound humanness. It is about restoring us to our true nature from the myriad of substitutes we have invented to take the place of that true nature. Religion is about Great Thinks that call forth awareness of our true nature, including Great Feels of our true nature and Great Resolves to live that true nature.

Religion is a practice. It is not something we think: it is something we do. Some thinking will be part of that doing, but religion is a doing, a practice, a practice of meditation, a practice of prayer, a practice of contemplation, a practice of ritual, a practice of service, a practice of devotional reading, a practice of dance, and so forth. I will look at these many practices in detail in Chapter 19, but for now I am dwelling on the basic definition of religion as practice and what this means.

A core truth about religious practice is revealed in the short conversation that some student had with his meditation teacher:

Student: Does meditation cause enlightenment?

Teacher: No, enlightenment is an accident: it happens or it doesn't happen.
Meditation makes you more accident prone.

This understanding applies to every sort of religions practice. Accessing our essential being, our “I Am” quality, comes to us on its own terms in its own way, and in its own good time. We do not cause it by our religious practices.

There is a wonderful story at the end of the movie “Little Big Man.” The old Indian chief takes Little Big Man with him up to the top of a hill to ritualize the old chief's death. The old chief goes through an elaborate ritual and lays down expecting to be taken up in death. The clouds merely drizzle rain on him. After a time the old chief get up and tells Little Big Man, “Sometimes the magic works, and sometimes it doesn't.” And they walk back down the hill to live a bit longer.

I have had experiences of this grand lesson while preaching sermons to a local congregation. Sometimes the magic works and sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes the

sermon grips people, releases them, and sends them out the back door in a buzz of refreshment. And sometimes a sermon just lies there on the ground with rain drizzling on it. This could have to do with the quality of the sermon, or the quality of the delivery, or the receptivity of the hearers, but none of these considerations provide a full explanation. Enlightenment, healing, the resurgence of profound humanness is a gift, a mysterious happening that happens or it doesn't happen.

We have sometimes called religion a means of grace, but this "grace" must not be understood as some sort of dependable magic. Religion simply makes us more accident prone to accidents of realization that we cannot control.

Another way to approach this truth is to notice in our own experience that religion is created by human beings, while profound humanness is given by mysterious Reality. Our profound humanness is a gift, and only when we see this giftedness can we accept it and resolve to live it. Nevertheless, religion is an important part of human society. Religion is as important and as widely present as education, healthcare, farming, housing construction, and waste disposal. Religion, in some form or another, tends to arise in every culture. If what is commonly called "religion" is absent, something else takes its place. Members of communist societies often claim they do not need religion, but communism itself functions as a religion for many people in those cultures. And communism is not an entirely dysfunctional religion as some would claim. Quite valid is the realization within communist thought that the course of history must be understood and obeyed and that humans can take responsibility for participating in directing that history. Such themes are shared by the great prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures. The dysfunctional aspects of the communist "religion" reside in not seeing deeply enough into the wonder of history. I will not elaborate further on this topic; I only want to point out that every society develops some sort of religion or quasi-religion – some way of connecting to the deep matters of life. If a society makes that Eternal connection poorly or has no religious processes that perform the service of making that connection, then that society will eventually become a form of madness and disintegrate.

* * * * *

Here is a summary of the redefinition of religion that appears on this side of the death of mythic space: Religion is a practice, a symbol-using practice along with languages and the arts. Religion is a symbol-using practice that provides a means for us to become more accident prone to the accidents of realizing our profound humanness.

Chapter 18

The Origin of Religion, A Speculative Story

Any discussion of the origin of religion is a speculation, a piece of poetic fiction. My aim here is not to explore with scientific carefulness the probable historical facts, but to further explore the nature of religion through contemplative imagination.

In my speculation, the origin of religion precedes language and art. Indeed, it is the very first dawning of the consciousness of being consciousness. The origin of religion precedes the evolution of the human brain to its current size. The origin of religion took place on the same day as that great dawning that makes our species qualitatively different from other forms of mammalian life.

Here is my piece of fiction about that grand day. A small tribe of hominids, perhaps 500,000 years ago, were walking across the African Savannah, when a deeply valued member of their group suddenly died. Everything that gave enduring unity to their group seemed to unravel. They gathered around the dead body. One of the women began moving in a sort of rhythmic way, a sort of dance, a sort of (dare we say) ritual. One or two others copied her. This very simple ritual implanted itself in the memory of this group. It came to be repeated when others died. Doing this ritual called to consciousness the experience of loss of a valued member. What was new here was not death itself, but the ritualizing of the deep experience of death. The ritual was new. This ritual was the existence of a mental form that stood for something, that allowed a certain distance from that something and from the feelings that went with that something. It allowed a reflection upon that something. It was the dawn of a new form of mental entity – the symbol.

Before that dawning this species of animal life had gotten by, like all smart apes, dogs, cats, zebras, and elephants get by, with images, not symbols. Images are multi-sensory mental reruns of previous experiences. The image-mode of intelligence is very powerful, but it is not capable of reflection upon the experience of experience itself. Image-intelligence is intensely practical for survival, food, affection, sex, danger avoidance, and so on. But a ritual is something different than an imaginal rerun of multi-sensory experiences. That first ritual had no practical use whatsoever. It allowed reflection upon experience. It allowed consciousness to be conscious of being conscious. It allowed or began to allow the awareness that each of us is going to die, that each of us has been born, that each of us was or could be conscious about birth and death. As this sort of reflection evolved, it enabled the raising of questions. Perhaps the word “why” was the first human word. Then again, perhaps “why?” is too sophisticated a word to be first. Perhaps that first word was just “WAAEEEE” as a sort of curious pointer to the overwhelming MYSTERY OF IT ALL.

The initial rituals of this new awareness became more useful as these new mental forms (and their attending consciousness) expanded from simple rituals to art forms and then to language. With the dawn of art, the simple rituals could be elaborated with icons. With the dawn of language the simple rituals could be elaborated with stories or myths. I imagine this development took hundreds of generations. It survived because it came to be an advantage for survival, a tool useful for group bonding or for an aid to teamwork. It may also have survived because it made existing more fun, experiences more interesting, living more conscious. As pointed out in Part One, consciousness has an inward propensity to become more conscious. Also, it may have survived because such consciousness was a sexual draw and maybe help in child rearing.

This is my story about the origin of religion. Don't take it too literally. The meaning of my story is that the practice of religion is basic to human culture. Religion is the foundation beneath language and art. And religion-art-language is the foundation of human culture as a whole. Culture is the foundation beneath politics and economics. Religion is thus the rock upon which the human form of society rests. A sick religion spawns a sick society. A healthy religion spawns a healthy society. This understanding is needed to counter the crass notion that economics is the prime driver of human affairs. Economics is a driver in the historical process of humanity, but it alone does not explain the origin, development, and historical transitions of our species. Economics does not explain the wild adventures taken by our species into the often costly deepening of our consciousness of consciousness.

Being religious and being human is one and the same adventure. Humans have intensely explored being human and being religious for at least a hundred thousand years. There have been many huge turning points in our religious and social history. We are currently engaged in another huge turning point in our awareness of consciousness and in the religious forms that nurture this expanded consciousness. We are beginning to see the elemental nature of religion and to build our new societies accordingly. We are beginning to know that an open, honest, affirming relation to the MYSTERY-OF-IT-ALL is the solid ground on which new cultures, polities, and economies can be built. We are beginning to know that our ever-busy languaging and art-form-producing minds can separate us from our true and glorious lives. To heal from our falling into horrific forms of depravity and despair and to maintain ourselves in our deepest actuality and glory, our cultures need solid roots in illuminating rituals, icons, and stories that access profound humanness. When healthy, these humanly invented but deeply rooted symbolic forms can enable our consciousness to be conscious of our consciousness and thereby be conscious of the GROUND of BEING that posits us as conscious beings.

Chapter 19

Religion as Practice

Religion is too often misunderstood as a collection of thoughts. Religion is a practice; it is something we do. It is something we do in order that our awareness of the Deep Self and the Awesome Wholeness of Reality may be more vivid. Our awareness of Reality is not caused by our religious practices. Rather, religious practices make the dawning of this awareness more likely.

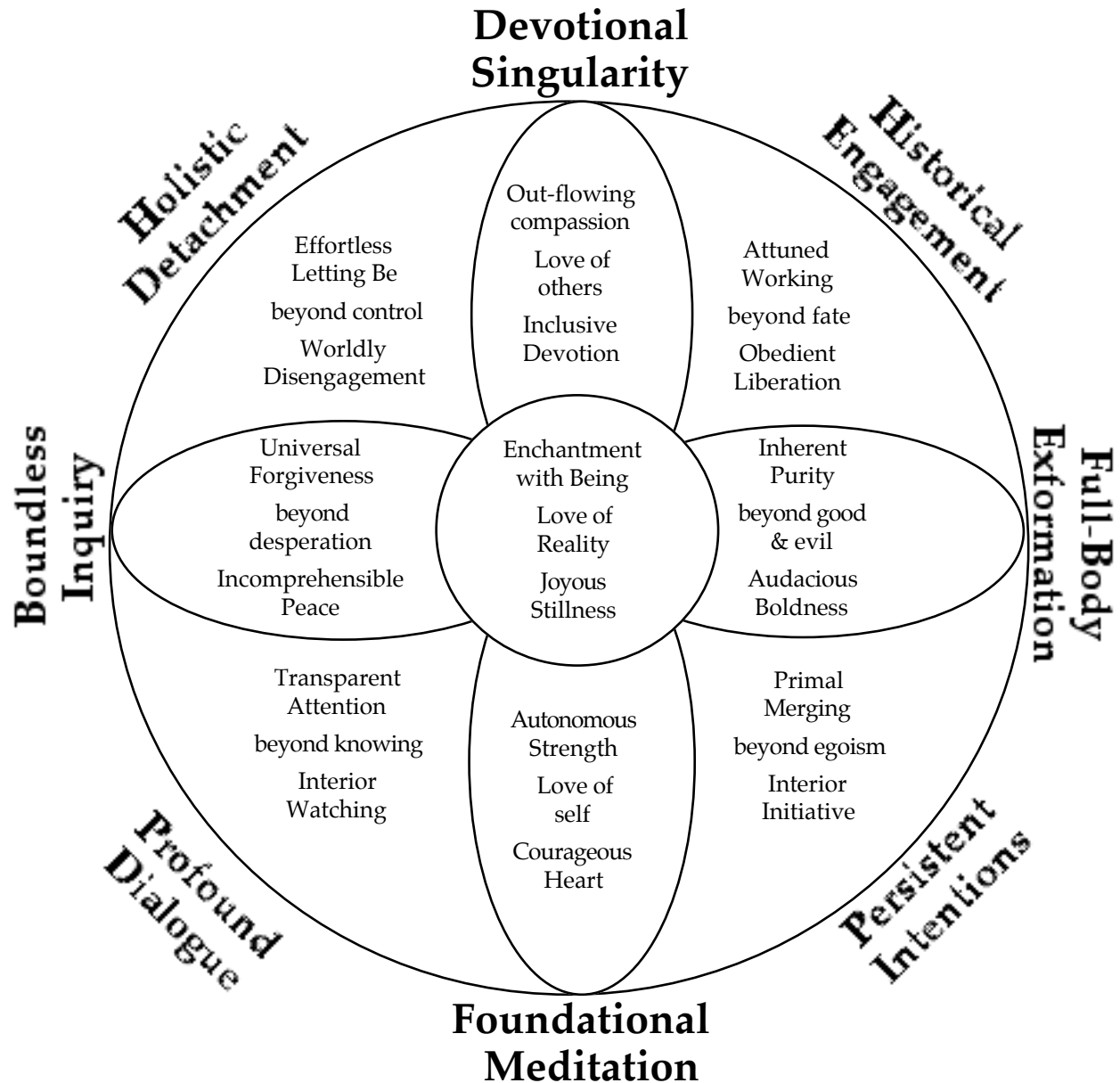
Religion is also too often misunderstood as a set of ideas brought into our minds from some long-established heritage. But a religious heritage is not furnishings for the mind only. A religious heritage is about doing – doing a daily, weekly, yearly practice of specific activities. We use our minds of course, but it is the doing of the practice, not the thinking about it, that makes it effective religion. For some philosophers of religion the following statement would be a big paradigm shift: *religion is a practice before it is a set of accompanying thoughts*. We might say, “Worship precedes theology.” Or, “Ritual, icon, and myth precede religious theoretics.” Our theology can purify our worship. Our religious theoretics can enrich our religious practices, but the action of doing religion precedes enriching our practice with thinking about it. We might put it this way: doing theology is a religious practice. Once we see the primacy of practice, then we can also see that the practice of thinking about our religious practice is part of the practice. Religious thinking need not be scorned. Indeed, it takes a practice of thoughtfulness to practice a religion well. But practicing, not thinking, is the essence of being religious.

So what do we mean by “religious practice”? We mean things like sitting in silence for twenty minutes or an hour. We mean things like reading a good book that provokes Spirit awareness. (I will use the word “Spirit” with a capital “S” to mean the profound humanness explored in earlier chapters, the Awe, the numinous, the qualities of the “I Am.”) By “religious practice” I mean things like praying passionate requests or passionate intentions in the face of onrushing challenges. Religious practice can also mean dancing, singing, or performing some ritual observance or pageant. Religious practice can mean sitting in a circle of peers and sharing the glories, tragedies, remorse, guilt, and fears of our daily lives. Religious practice can mean listening to good words about our welcome home to Reality, a welcome that Reality is always ready to offer. Religious practice can mean listening to prepared talks from those who have in some way accredited themselves to us as persons of Spirit awareness. As we will discuss later, our engagements in history, our washing dishes, our building community life may also be viewed as religious practices. Religious practice can mean many things, including reading these words about religious practice.

And here is an important sub-point about seeing religion as practice: religion is not something you wait around to have happen to you. Religion is something you do. Religion is something that human beings organize, pay for, and spend time doing. Religion is a part of the practice of being social beings, including the coming apart from other people for solitary practices.

Thinking about religion is important; it may even play a big role in giving ourselves permission to do religion. But religion as religion begins with doing, action, performing, engaging in the seeming silliness of standing, sitting, kneeling, dancing, chanting, drumming, meditating, reading, dialoging, journaling, vowing, singing, ritualizing, socializing, engaging and more. Theological study and reflection are part of our religious action. Ethical thinking and practical love of neighbor, society, and planet Earth are also part of religious practice. Nevertheless, when we retreat into our minds from “religion as practice,” we retreat from the very essence of religion.

So what are the basic practices of religion? How do these basic practices of religion relate to the nine aspects of the "I Am" described in Chapter 14. The following chart associates nine basic types of religious practice with the nine aspects of the "I Am."



With each of the large bolded words add the modifiers:

The Practice of _____

Corresponding with the center Circle associate:

The Practice of Visionary Trance

I will begin my descriptions of these types of religious practices with the bottom three, which I will call the "solitary practices." These are the religious practices that we

do alone. Every long-standing religious heritage has developed solitary religious practices.

Solitary Practices

There are three distinguishable types of solitary religious practice. I am calling them “Profound Dialogue,” “Foundational Meditation,” and “Persistent Intentions.” Some Christian groups have called these “Meditation, Contemplation, and Prayer.” The first, *Profound Dialogue*, has to do with developing an *inner council* of persons with whom to dialogue. The second, *Foundation Meditation*, is about what we might also call *contemplative consciousness*, the practice of “viewing” the dynamics of consciousness with a concentrated focus on consciousness itself. And the third, *Persistent Intentions*, has to do with *petitioning Reality*, initiating our interior programming with respect to Reality and the many realities that we confront.

Profound Dialogue

The practice of “*Profound Dialogue*” includes what we have called devotional reading, meditation on Scriptures and other “sacred” texts, and interactions with “saintly” persons both personally known and known through their writings and/or art. Dialogue is a helpful name for this arena of religious practice, because the key to this practice is hearing deeply the voices of other persons and speaking back to them. We all tend to have an interior council of “great people” with whom we dialogue: a parent, a teacher, an author, an artist, an activist, a personal friend, a person in the distant past, a contemporary, and many others. As a solitary religious practice, *Profound Dialogue* means bringing those “great people” to mind through reading or remembering their words – hearing their voices, their music, their poetry – seeing their paintings, their sculpture, their architecture. These people are “great” because we have found them inspiring, evoking Awe within us, assisting us to access our “I Am” greatness.

While all the voices that have spoken to us have taken up a place in our memory and tend to talk to us more or less all the time, *Profound Dialogue* begins when we take charge of this interior council of “great voices.” We can seat these speakers as we want them seated. Some of them are on the front row of our circle of council members. We consult them first or most often. Others we have seated further back. We consult them with reservations or infrequently. We can order our interior council in accord with various subjects or topics or ways of aiding us. This is our council, our creation, our interpretations of our personal history of being inspired. It is also our future resources for further inspiration. We have the power to listen or not, accept what they say or not, correct them, enrich them, or shut them up. This religious practice is dialogue! We are not passive pawns of our inspiring voices, nor are we closed to what these voices have to share with us. In a practice of dialogue, we go to these “great people” willingly and actively for the enrichment of our lives. We may disagree with them, fight with them, and even unseat them from our interior council.

Profound Dialogue makes us “accident prone” to experience that aspect of the “I Am” described in Chapter 14 as *Transparent Attention* – an interior watching that unites mind with Being in a form of knowing that is more profound than our customary forms of information gathering and knowledge mastering.

Foundational Meditation

The second of these three overarching arenas of solitary religious practice, I am calling “*Foundational Meditation*.” In Christian heritage this arena is often called

“contemplation.” But I am honoring the Buddhists who call this practice “meditation.” As a collection of religious practitioners, the Buddhists stand out as our planet’s chief experts on meditation practice. Whatever name we call it, meditation distinguishes itself as a pre-rational, post-rational, or transrational practice. In this practice we are not thinking or dialoguing, we are simply noticing. And this noticing is not a mental sort of noticing, but a concentration of our consciousness upon the activities of aliveness as we experience them in our inner being. For example, in the elemental teachings of most Buddhist practitioners, we are advised to begin by noticing our breathing. This is not a mental game; it is a discipline of concentration on an aspect of our aliveness that is always taking place. In-breath and out-breath, air moving across our upper lip, the rise and fall of the abdomen, these are the sorts of noticing that Buddhist meditation practices emphasize. If thoughts arise, we are advised not to resist those thoughts, but simply notice them, and allow them to come and go rather than engage in them or let them carry us away from our concentration on the immediate aliveness of breathing. Faithfully maintained over periods of time, this practice creates an awareness of how we are aware of our living in the actual here and now. It teaches us that this aware consciousness can be present no matter what programs of thought or projects of action may also be there. It teaches us that we have intentional power over our thoughts and actions rather than being the victim of whatever stories we have habituated or whatever reactionary behaviors we are obsessing. And *Foundational Meditation* is a practice that prepares us for noticing our “I Am” essence. We are not in control of the enlightenment journey that accompanies meditation practice; the enlightenment journey unfolds in its own way, unique to our own psyche.

The practice of meditation can be most associated with that aspect of the “I Am” that I describe as *Autonomous Strength*, as the *courageous heart* of true love of self. Buddhist meditation or Christian contemplative practices do not exhaust what I mean by *Foundational Meditation*. Many of the yoga practices of Hinduism qualify as *Foundational Meditation*. The Orient has given us Qi Gong, Tai Chi, and other forms of bodily movement that can be viewed as contemplative activity. Islamic Sufi chanting and dance traditions can likewise be viewed as practices of *Foundational Meditation*. Any practice that focuses consciousness upon our conscious experience can be called *Foundational Meditation*. All types of *Foundational Meditation* make us “accident prone” to experience an “accident” of that aspect of the “I Am” described in Chapter 14 as *Autonomous Strength*, the courageous heart of love for our own “true self.”

Persistent Intentions

The third of these three arenas of solitary religious practice, I am calling “*Persistent Intentions*.” In Christian heritage this arena is often called “prayer.” The term “prayer,” however, needs to be cleansed of its perverse usages. We need a wider and more secular category to be sure that the general quality of this practice is understood. *Persistent Intentions* means taking an active relationship with the Awesome Wholeness that Awes us. Yes, this interior action changes things, but it does not radiate out as a spooky influence that finds its way to some Majestic Controller or to some other person’s psyche. *Persistent Intentions* means our initiative, our freedom operating in our own being. Awakening and employing this capacity in our solitary time does make a difference in the way we live our lives, and thereby it makes a difference in the course of history. Such historical effects can be understood without any spooky or magical explanations. The Christian community has come up with at least four types or aspects of prayer: confession, gratitude, petition, and intercession. Describing these four

aspects of prayer is a useful means for illuminating the universality of this basic dynamic of solitary practice, a dynamic that is recognized in virtually all religions.

Confession as an aspect of solitary practice means owning up to some reality in our behavior, our attitude toward life, our feelings, our thoughts, whatever. It means admitting the ways these bits of living are escapes from the "I Am." Confession is an important initiative on the part of our consciousness because it is a beginning toward being where we are in our living, rather than pretending to be where we are not.

Gratitude as an aspect of solitary practice means choosing the Reality we are being given instead of the unreality we might desire to substitute for the given Reality. In so far as the given Reality always includes forgiveness and the option of a fresh start in our living, we may experience grateful feelings for this welcome release from self-incrimination, self-underestimation, or self-victimization. But whether we have grateful feelings or not, the practice of gratitude is restorative to our solid here-and-now openness toward life. Life, openly lived, does provide its joys and exuberance, but the practice of gratitude does not mean forcing such states of feeling. Gratitude is an intention that allows our real lives to produce whatever feelings and potentials life naturally produces.

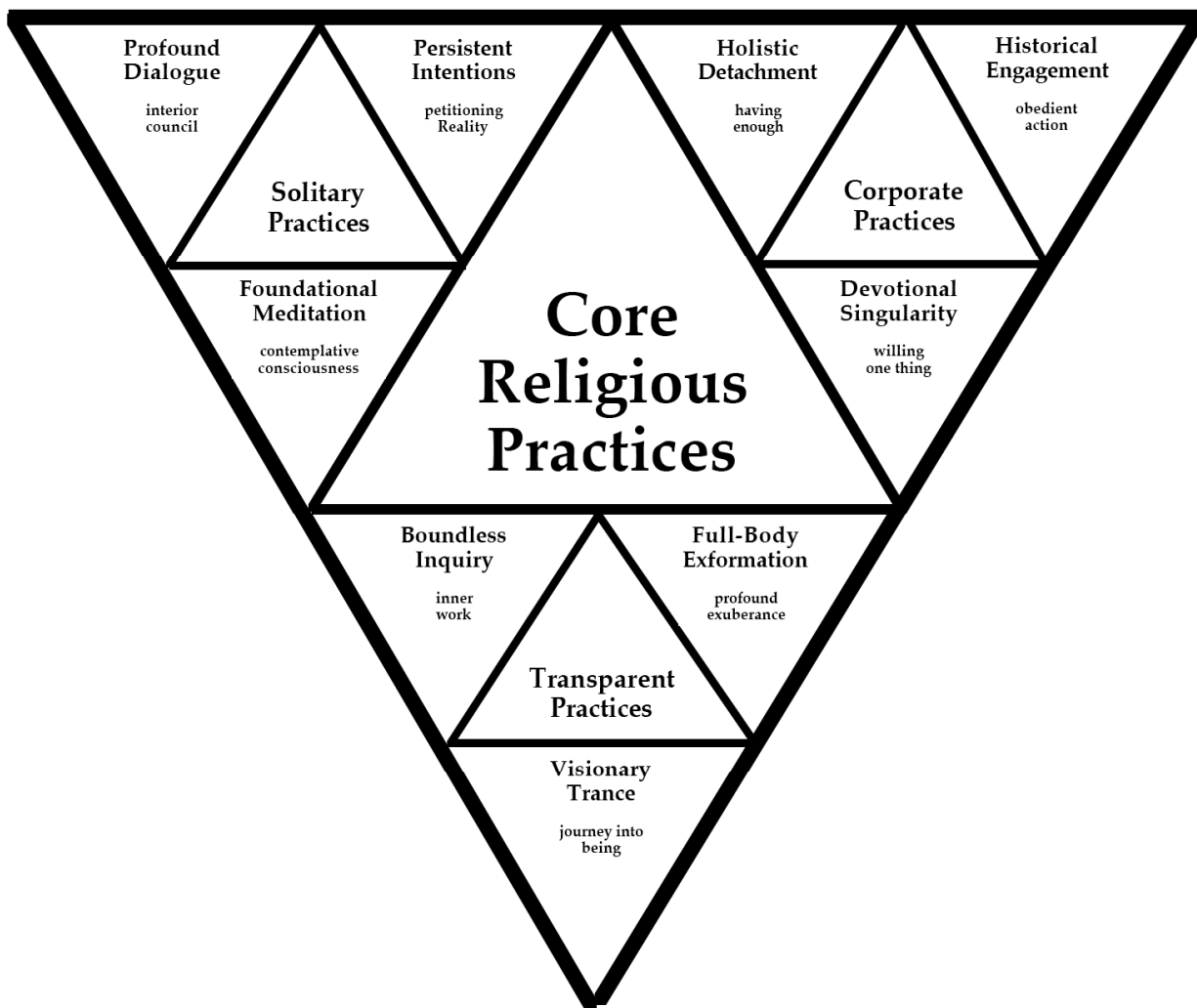
Petition as an aspect of solitary practice means choosing what to intend relative to augmentations for our own existence. Where do we want to go in our life journey? What do we want to have as states of being or worldly opportunities? Petitionary prayer is a courageous thing because we do not always receive exactly what we ask for, or what we thought we were asking for, or what we thought having our request would actually mean. A petition puts our life out there to be disappointed or surprised or amazed beyond all expectations. Petition is a powerful practice, it readies us to receive a future which contains that for which we are asking. Petitionary prayer programs our psyche to pursue opportunities as they present themselves. Petition is a powerful thing: it changes history. But petitionary prayer is not a magical means of controlling the future. Our petitions seldom work out exactly as we expect. History is a surprise, a surprise that can be intensely disappointing as well as overwhelmingly gracious.

Intercession as an aspect of solitary practice means choosing what to intend with regard to other people, social systems, ecosystems, and the planet as whole. To intercede means to stand between a value and the threat to that value. To intercede means to put our body, our wealth, our reputation, our very being in the breach of creating solutions that handle the threats to what we value. Intercessory prayer is a solitary practice that is intending our being. Intercession is not asking some divine being to do something for someone. Intercession means requesting with our whole body that the trends of Reality change on behalf of some specific value that concerns us. In making a solitary intercession we do not need to have a clear plan about how this change in history can happen or what our role is in making this change. We can intercede for something that may be impossible. An intercessory prayer is simply the programming of our psyche in a specific direction. We set up our own being to be on the lookout for insights and opportunities that pertain to the value that is the topic of our intercession.

All four of these types of prayer are *Persistent Intentions*. And all four types of *Persistent Intentions* make us "accident prone" to experience an "accident" of that aspect of the "I Am" described in Chapter 14 as *Primal Merging* with our own essential freedom.

Following is a triangular chart of what I will call *Core Religious Practices*. These are the same religious practices listed on the previous chart, but now in a triangular array that shows something more about the relationships between these nine arenas of

religious practice. In particular, the chart groups together three groups of practices: *Solitary Practices*, *Corporate Practices*, and *Transparent Practices*.



In addition to the *solitary practices* already described, the above chart pictures three *corporate practices* and three *transparent practices*. Can we be confident that these nine practices encompass all religious practices? No, we can't. I am simply drawing my model of what I have observed about religious practices. Such a model is little more than a teaching tool, hopefully a thoughtful one. In any case, the model is just a model, and any model can be improved. We may want to include more practices or to see these relationships differently. So bear with me as I describe what I am calling "Corporate Practices."

Corporate Practices

By "corporate" I mean practices that are done together with other people rather than done alone. This includes practices that would go on in the life of a religious order as well as practices that characterize a worship service, an intimate circle, a study group, and so on. I am not going to examine the details of the wide variety of corporate religious practices. I am suggesting a typology of three major arenas of corporate practices. Our "life together" can be a practice that calls forth profound humanness.

The monastic orders of Christianity came up with these three categories: Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience. Properly interpreted, I find these to be useful categories, but for this chapter I want to use categories that have a wider reference – categories that can include non-Christian and non-monastic communal applications. My three categories will be *Holistic Detachment*, *Devotional Singularity*, and *Historical Engagement*.

These categories can also point to inner states of being. But I will emphasize how these three categories can point to religious practices. I will use these categories to point to three types of vows (or promises) made to a group of religious practitioners. Members of such groups make vows to live lives of *Holistic Detachment*, *Devotional Singularity*, and *Historical Engagement*. In order to do this, the group may write a covenant and create rules that spell out how these practices are to be done by their particular group. For example, the rules might be as simple as: come to a weekly meeting on time and be prepared. In a more extensive practice, the rules might include selling all your possessions, living together in the same buildings, wearing a monastic garb, doing a share of the daily work of the group, and relying on the group for your lifelong subsistence. In the next three sections I will be describing group practices as well as indicating the inner states of being that these practices can help us access.

Holistic Detachment

Holistic Detachment is rooted in a vow made to live simply and carry out a life of simplicity in order to access detachment from the general culture of neediness for more, and more, and still more. (Are we all more-ticians? e. e. cummings) *Holistic Detachment* need not mean a strict asceticism, but it does include a commitment to a style of “enough already.” Food, shelter, health can all be affirmed while still manifesting a style of living that renounces the obsessive consumerism and frantic climbing of economic and status ladders into the stratospheres of self-indulgent delusion. This vow or promise to live a simple style of life typically includes a commitment to live beyond the common obsessions: sex, emotional love, acceptance by others, status, celebrity, family ties, partners, friends, social expectations, philosophical systems, states of peacefulness, and more. All these ties are valuable in limited ways, but they are not infinitely valuable. A vow of *Holistic Detachment* is a promise to live in a loose relation to all these “limited” values and thereby remain open to the change of and the inevitable negations of such values. Indeed, *Holistic Detachment* means being open to death itself. Life is a factor of indescribable value, but *Holistic Detachment* includes a willingness to lay down our lives (time, treasure and bodies) for the causes and persons that call upon us for our service. This style of living opposes the common style of thoughtlessly backing into the grave. We can intend our deaths. *Holistic Detachment* includes living our deaths, expending our deaths along with all other aspects of our living.

The practice of *Holistic Detachment* implies communities to whom we vow our vows of simplicity and who assist us to fulfill those vows, rescue us from our failures, pronounce our forgiveness, and challenge us to continue in the life style of *Holistic Detachment*. Maintaining the religious communities in which such vows are made and practiced is part of the religious practice of *Holistic Detachment*. Humans are communal beings. We seldom manifest our profound humanness entirely alone. Solitude is a sacred practice, but communal practice is no less sacred. *Holistic Detachment* is a communal practice of belonging to a community of people who practice detachment and thereby conduct a fresh relationship with the entire community of humankind. Indeed, this practice can lead us into as a fresh and open relationship with the entire community of Earth beings and with the Earth itself.

The practice of *Holistic Detachment* can make us more “accident prone” to experience an “accident” of that aspect of the “I Am” described in Chapter 14 as *Effortless Letting Be* – letting our finitude and our aliveness and our possibilities be what they are.

Devotional Singularity

This communal practice has to do with the disciplined use of the images and symbols, stories and pictures with which we nurture our lives. Every religious community has a religious culture in which its members are educated and with which they are cared for in the depths of their beings. If *Holistic Detachment* is the “economics” of corporate religious practice, then *Devotional Singularity* is the “culture” of corporate religious practice. *Historical Engagement* will be described as the “politics” of corporate religious practice.

The essence of *Devotional Singularity* is not easy to state, for it is more than being familiar with a tradition; it is finding a heartfelt devotion to the states of being alive that a specific religious tradition is capable of accessing and nurturing. The very idea of committing to a specific religious tradition is threatening to many people, for they have been burned by so many experiences of perverse religious community. Nevertheless, it is necessary to select or create some sort of religious community in order to have a religious culture whose images, symbols, stories, and icons can form a disciplined nurture. In order to wholeheartedly commit ourselves to such a discipline, it is crucial for us to understand the state of being that *Devotional Singularity* is aiming for.

Søren Kierkegaard wrote a book he called *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing*. His core insight was this: we do not will one thing when our core devotion is less than the Whole of Reality. Our devotion to finite causes always ends up duplicitous: we are willing two or more things instead of one. Our only purity of devotion is to will the Whole of Reality. Then all the smaller realities take their relative places within that wholeness of devotion. I will not attempt to summarize Kierkegaard’s intricate development of this topic. I merely want to indicate that the state of being we aim for with *Devotional Singularity* is happening when we are willing one thing, when we are willing devotion to all the actualities and possibilities that confront us.

Here is a story from the New Testament that helps us to get a feel of the state of being that the practice of Devotional Singularity aims for.

Jesus came to a village and a woman called Martha welcomed him to her house. She had a sister by the name of Mary who settled down at the Lord’s feet and was listening to what he said. But Martha was very worried about her elaborate preparations and she burst in saying, “Lord, don’t you *mind* that my sister has left me to do everything myself? Tell her to get up and help me!”

But the Lord answered her, “Martha, my dear, you are worried and bothered about providing so many things. Only a few things are really needed, perhaps only one. Mary has chosen the best part and you must not tear it away from her.”³

There is nothing wrong with the thousand and one finite causes with which life is filled, and Martha was just doing some of them. We need to be thankful for the many Marthas that are doing the many things that make our lives possible including our times of religious practice. But for Martha or Mary or you or I to be scattered in our devotion among the many things of temporal life is to miss what Mary has chosen –

³ Luke 10:38-42 J. B. Phillips translation

namely, the purity of heart that wills one thing. Martha is anxious and troubled about many things. One thing is needed. The Martha in each of us may cry out, "Oh for the glorious tranquility of willing one thing with all my heart and all my mind and all my strength." Mary is focusing upon a Devotional Singularity that must not be interrupted. Rather, such a practice needs to be enabled for both Mary and Martha. Mary is just one more Martha who has chosen to practice what needs to be practiced to become a tranquil person in the midst of her own busy round of living.

Paradoxical as it may seem, the practice of *Devotional Singularity* can assist us to access the profound humanness aspect of *Out-flowing Compassion*. When we sit at the feet of profound humanness long enough, we learn to act from an inward authenticity that includes *Out-flowing Compassion* toward others.

Historical Engagement

Typically, we do not think of historical engagement as a religious practice. But many of us have had experiences that witness to why and how social engagement can be religious. Walking down the main streets of Jackson, Mississippi with a crowd of white and black citizens in the 1960s was for me a religious experience. It was not the walking that made it a religious experience, though walking can certainly be good for us. It was not the revolutionary thoughts in my head that made it a religious experience. It was the engagement with people on their porches watching us go by. It was the engagement with the conservative establishment of Jackson, Mississippi, dramatized in their police forces. It was the "we" feeling within that specific group of people walking and thereby tangling with the actual forces of history in that time and place. This engagement was the source of our Awe. This engagement was an encounter with the Awesome Upagaintness that one might, with a specific brand of theology, call "God." This engagement was a request to the power that posits us to give us a better world.

There are many ways to be historically engaged. Sitting at my computer writing this book can be experienced as historical engagement, in so far as I genuinely feel that I am engaging the religious communities of the planet with insights that can matter in the broad course of events for my generation. Much of our historical engagement takes place in quite simple ways: stuffing envelopes for a mailing that matters, staffing a booth at a county fair, facilitating a meeting of an ecological planning council, attending a hearing about not licensing a coal-fired power plant. What makes any of these activities *Historical Engagement* is that history is being actually engaged. History is being understood as a pliable flowing that human effort can redirect. And such engagement directly involves or indirectly implies a group of people with whom we are engaged in solidarity and communion. Surely, all this can be viewed as religious practice.

Not all religions emphasize *Historical Engagement* as a religious practice. The best of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam do emphasize *Historical Engagement*. And we can view the life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi as an example of engaged Hinduism. And we find many folk today who explain their religious practice as an engaged Buddhism. It is becoming meaningful for many people to view *Historical Engagement* as a religious practice right alongside solitary meditation, devotional ritual, and so forth. *Historical Engagement* takes its place alongside *Holistic Detachment* and *Devotional Singularity* as a *Corporate Practice* of religion.

The practice of *Historical Engagement* can assist us to be accident prone to the "I Am" aspect of *Attuned Working*. Rather than being forever preoccupied with trying not to miss out on something, we can be wholehearted focusing on real historical imperatives and thereby experience the satisfying adventure of relevant action.

Transparent Practices

The solitary practices and the corporate practices are the most obvious of the religious practices. They seem to have “substance” to them. The *Solitaries* have the substance of our psychological life, and the *Corporates* have the substance of group participation and historical relations. The practices that I am calling “*Transparent Practices*” are not so directly grounded in obvious “substance.” The *Transparent Practices*, though being practices that involve our minds and bodies, are practices that focus exclusively upon the “I Am” enigma of profound consciousness. The transparent practice on the left side or knowing side of the chart, I am calling *Boundless Inquiry*. The transparent practice on the right side or doing side of the chart, I am calling *Full-Body Exformation*. And the transparent practice in the center of the first chart and at the bottom of the second, I am calling *Visionary Trance*.

Boundless Inquiry

“Inquiry” is a word that has been carried into new levels of meaning by A. H. Almaas, by many Buddhist teachers, by many forms of depth therapy, and popularized by innovative celebrities such as Byron Katie, Gangaji and Eli Jaxon-Bear. All these innovators encourage us to use our minds to work beyond our thoughts into conscious inquiry about consciousness itself.

Perhaps many of us have discovered something about *Boundless Inquiry* through doing a practice we have called “journaling.” As a religious practice, journaling is a step beyond diary keeping, but like diary keeping, journaling is reflecting upon and recording insights about our own lives. If diary keeping means recording memorable events, journaling goes a step further into inquiring into our real experiences of lasting truth about our lives. Such inquiry can be called “Boundless” because it is not bounded by the philosophical or religious teachings that have influenced us so far in our lives. *Boundless Inquiry* is a process of self-discovery in which the self itself is both the discoverer and the discovered. We inquire into our own being with the disciplined openness that we expect of a good physicist inquiring into the structure of the atom or the patterns of gravity.

Boundless Inquiry is, however, different from empirical science. It is operating within the contemplative approach to truth. It is even a purification of the contemplative approach by the invention of methods for making the contemplative approach more effective in dodging our illusions and limited ideas and thereby opening ourselves to the convincing truth that arises from within our own inner lives.

Boundless Inquiry can be a solitary method, but it is actually more effective when conducted with the aid of teachers who can assist us to track our own experience more accurately. This brief description of the wide spectrum of practices is, of course, sketchy, for without direct experiences of doing “inquiry” into our own life and coming up with revelations that matter to us, this entire category can seem opaque. To make this category of religious practice “transparent,” we will have to do the inquiry.

The practice of *Boundless Inquiry* can assist us to be accident prone to the “I Am” aspect of *Universal Forgiveness*. Rather than being preoccupied with promoting our last best ideas and defending them from Reality, we can journey deeper through inquiry into the surprising details within our own consciousness and thereby have a fresh taste of the abiding treasure of being welcomed home to Reality.

Full-Body Exformation

The “doing” aspect of *Transparent Practice* I am calling “*Full-Body Exformation*.” I have had three teachers who have contributed most to my grasp of this religious practice and its effectiveness. The first was a meditation dance teacher named Dunya. She is a retired professional dancer who has combined her dance experience with a Sufi mystical sensibility and a selection of fabulous Arabic-oriented music. What I learned from her was that I could move my body from the feelings evoked by the music in my body rather than moving my body from the ideas or habits that I had in my mind. The experience was one of consciousness and body movement without the “control of what we might call “mental will.” We spend so much of our time driving our bodies around with our mental will that we do not often slow down to realize the direct connections between consciousness and body. Such improvised dance movement can lead to aspects of our being that we do not often access through other practices.

Two other helpful teachers of *Full-Body Exformation* are Cynthia Winton-Henry and Phil Porter. These two innovators created the term “Exformation” which I am using in my title for this category of religious practice. By “exformation” they mean experiencing the opposite of what we normally mean by “information.” We take *in* so much information we can become chock full. We need to “*exform*” – put the inner into outward expression. Specifically, this practice includes both bodily movements and innovative talking. Phil and Cynthia are founders of a movement they call “Interplay.” They have created scores of exercises that enable people to “exform” effectively and imaginatively.

One of my favorite exercises they call “Dance-Talk-Three.” In groups of three or more, each person performs for the others a brief improvised dance and then talks about something going on in their lives. (No advanced thought about this is necessary, just exform whatever comes to mind.) Then that person does a second short dance movement and another brief talk session. Then he or she dances a third time; then talks a third time. Each person does this three-part process while the others witness. This exercise moves the participants beyond needless secretiveness and comfort zones and gives them an experience of sharing their lives instead of holding them in. I call this a religious practice even though it is done in a secular context. Some of the Awe of living is accessed no other way than through some form of full-body exforming.

The practice of *Full Body Exformation* can assist us to be accident prone to the “I Am” aspect of *Inherent Purity*. Rather than being preoccupied with doing the right thing and knowing for sure what the right thing is, we can find our truly good life by honestly sharing in active ways what is actually happening to us.

Visionary Trance

Of all the nine types of religious practice, *Visionary Trance* can seem the most kooky to many people. Actually, all religious practices tend to manifest what some think of as kooky elements, but with visionary trance we are observing practices that move us into a full departure from our mental sensibilities. *Visionary Trance* is a practice that is very old. It was perhaps the favorite religious practice led by the shaman in very early tribal life. In more recent times we also see instances of Visionary Trance in the practices of Pentecostals, Holy Rollers, Shakers, early Quakers, as well as in Sufi twirling, Hindu chanting, and much else. When encountering both recent and ancient forms of this practice, many people have typically dismissed such practices as ignorant superstition. We need, however, to find a plausible explanation for the continuation of such practices for thousands of years. What is the validity so many have experienced in these

practices? Perhaps we skeptics have opened ourselves to a number of practices that can be included in this category. For example, practices that promote ecstatic, mind-blowing laughter might seem OK to us. To “lose oneself in laughter” is a sort of trance. A certain kind of songfest can also be trancelike. Some songs are written to promote trance. Ecstatic drumming and dancing is another trancelike practice. Those who have experimented with dream interpretation and waking dreaming are touching into this arena. Yes, even the use of certain drugs has been an exploration into trance. However uncomfortable we highly-mental members of society may feel about exploring *Visionary Trance*, we can perhaps begin to appreciate this tradition of practice by simply noticing that all direct consciousness of the enigma of consciousness is a sort of trance in which the mind is somewhat set aside even though the mind may help express and interpret these trancelike experiences of our raw consciousness.

Ancient shamans typically understood themselves as enabling their youth or adult “clients” to take a “trip” away from their familiar thoughts and patterns of living into an “other world” of conscious experiences from which the “client” was then enabled to return and report, and then with help from the shaman learn something of value for the pursuit of their ordinary lives.

Many of us have been on religious retreats of such length that a similar departure-and-return experience was had. We found a new context in basic consciousness about our lives during such a “trip.” Afterward, we returned to our ordinary lives with a challenge to integrate the trancelike trip into the quality of our ordinary living. This is the essence of the practice of *Visionary Trance*: to go away for a time from our ordinary thoughts, patterns, anxieties, distresses, despairs, apathies, etc., and then return to our ordinary lives with a fresh ability to be our being in a more transparent, victorious, and effective fashion. Perhaps we can see why this religious practice can be associated with accessing that central aspect of the “I Am” that I have named “*Enchantment with Being*.”

The practice of *Visionary Trance* can assist us to be accident prone to the “I Am” aspect of *Enchantment with Being*. Rather than being preoccupied with avoiding conflict and making everybody happy, we can rediscover our profound intensity through making trips into the unusual frontiers of Reality.

* * * * *

My aim in writing this chapter has not been to wrap up the immense topic of religious practice, but to spread out and intensify our imagination about what “religious practice” includes. Obviously, religious practice includes more than what has been mentioned here. Each of these arenas of practice is a deep well of possibility. And it is likewise plausible that there may be still unmentioned arenas of religious practice. But to this insight I cling: religion is practice, practice, practice, practice, before is it anything else.

Chapter 20

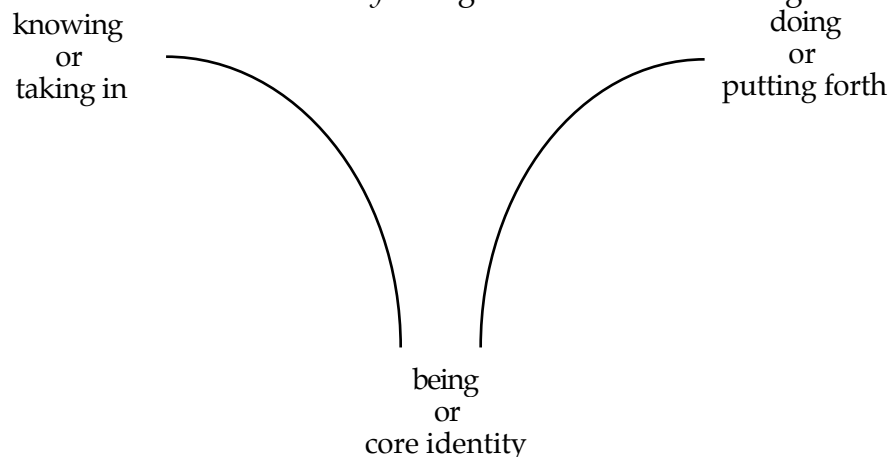
Religion as Social Process

Religion is rooted in practice, but it is not limited to practice. In addition to practice, a religion develops a religious theoretics (in some religions it is called “theology,” in others “teachings”). Religious theoretics does not take the place of religious practice; it supports practice, perhaps criticizes practice and recreates it. Studying theology together can even be viewed as a practice. The relationship between practice and theoretics is a close one, but practice remains the core aspect, the being aspect, the essence of religion. Theoretics is the knowing aspect of religion. We need to know the meaning of our religious language and we need to know how to use and lead our various practices. Theoretics plays a supporting role to practice, but an important role.

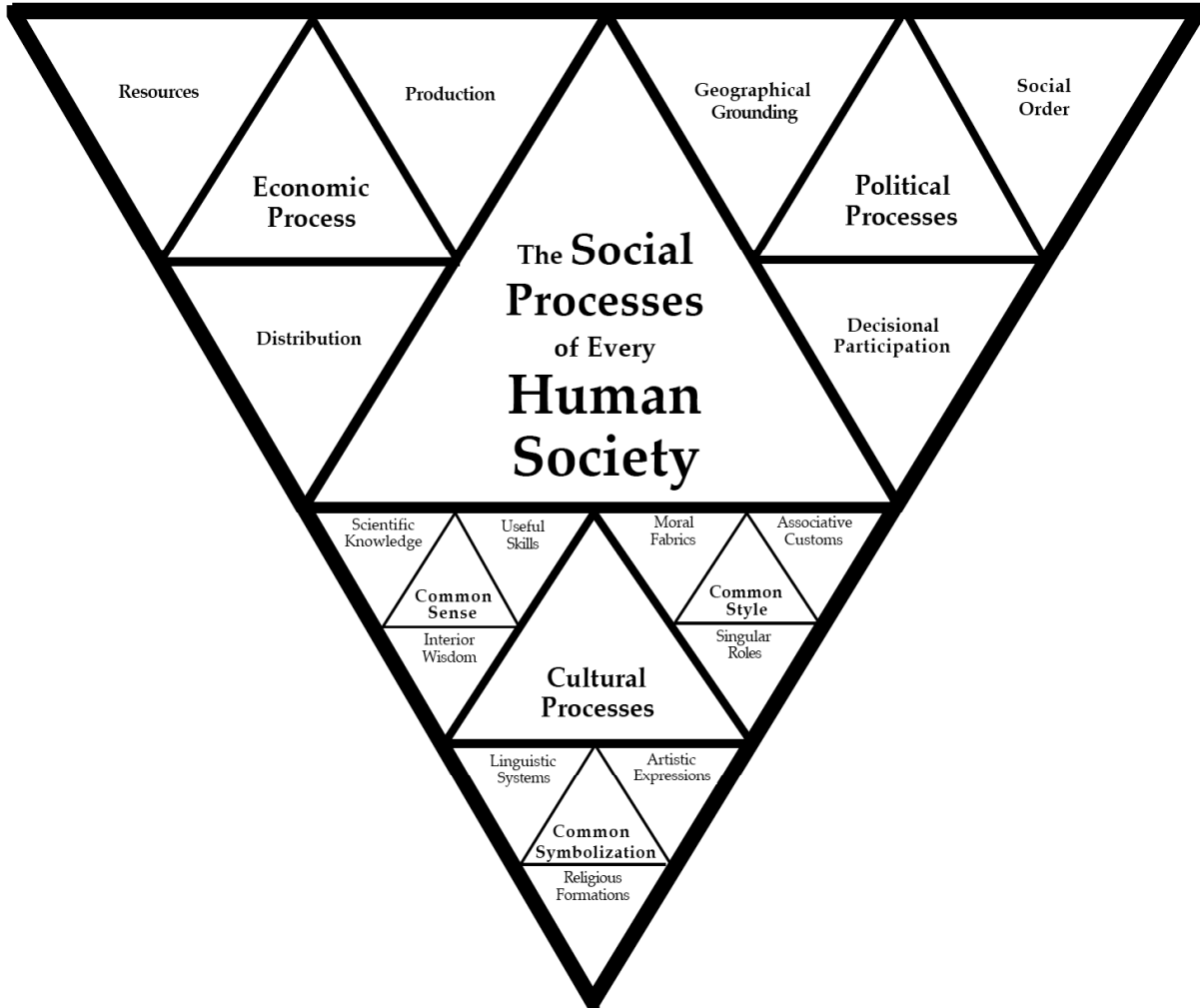
In addition to practice and theoretics every religion develops religious bodies – social organizations that house the practices and the theoretics. These bodies have all the elements of any social body: economic processes, political processes, and cultural processes. Religious bodies are cultural institutions, but like all cultural institutions they have political and economic processes that make them viable as functioning bodies. By political processes for a religious body I mean things like membership structures, the basic covenant and rules, the leadership designs, decision-making processes, foreign relations with other bodies, and the overall missional patterns for engaging the world at large. By economic processes I mean how teachers or leaders are paid or not; how shrines, temples, and meeting places are built and cared for; and how to handle the other expenses that emerge from being a particular social body. Membership dues, sale of products, and support from the general society may figure in. In other words, all the worldly aspects of being a functioning group have a place in the definition of “religion.”

Religion is a social process along with waste disposal, healthcare, education, life styles, political systems, economic systems, and so on. The chart on the next page is a picture of the essential social processes that comprise any whole society. I have broken down the cultural processes to show where the social process of *Religious Formation* shows up in relation to every other social process.

In the logic of the following chart, the economic side of this triangular map of social processes has to do with taking in the Earth for your society, the more political side has to do with putting forth choices and actions, and the more cultural side has to do with the identity of the people for whom resources are taken in and by whom human effort is put forth. In each set of three triangles the upper left triangle is the *taking-in* aspect of that whole. The upper right triangle is the *putting-forth* aspect of that whole. The lower triangle in that set of three is the *identity* that glues the set of three together.



In the following mode of organizing the social processes, *taking in* is associated with *knowing* for knowing is a way of taking in reality. *Putting forth* is associated with doing for putting forth implies initiative. Core identity is associated with being, for identity means the grasp and expression of some “we” who know and do. It will take some practice with this method of organization and some intuitive familiarity with the essence of each social process to fully catch on to this organizational method. So if this mode of social thinking is new to you, simply contemplate this model for a while realizing that it is just a model and all models can be improved.

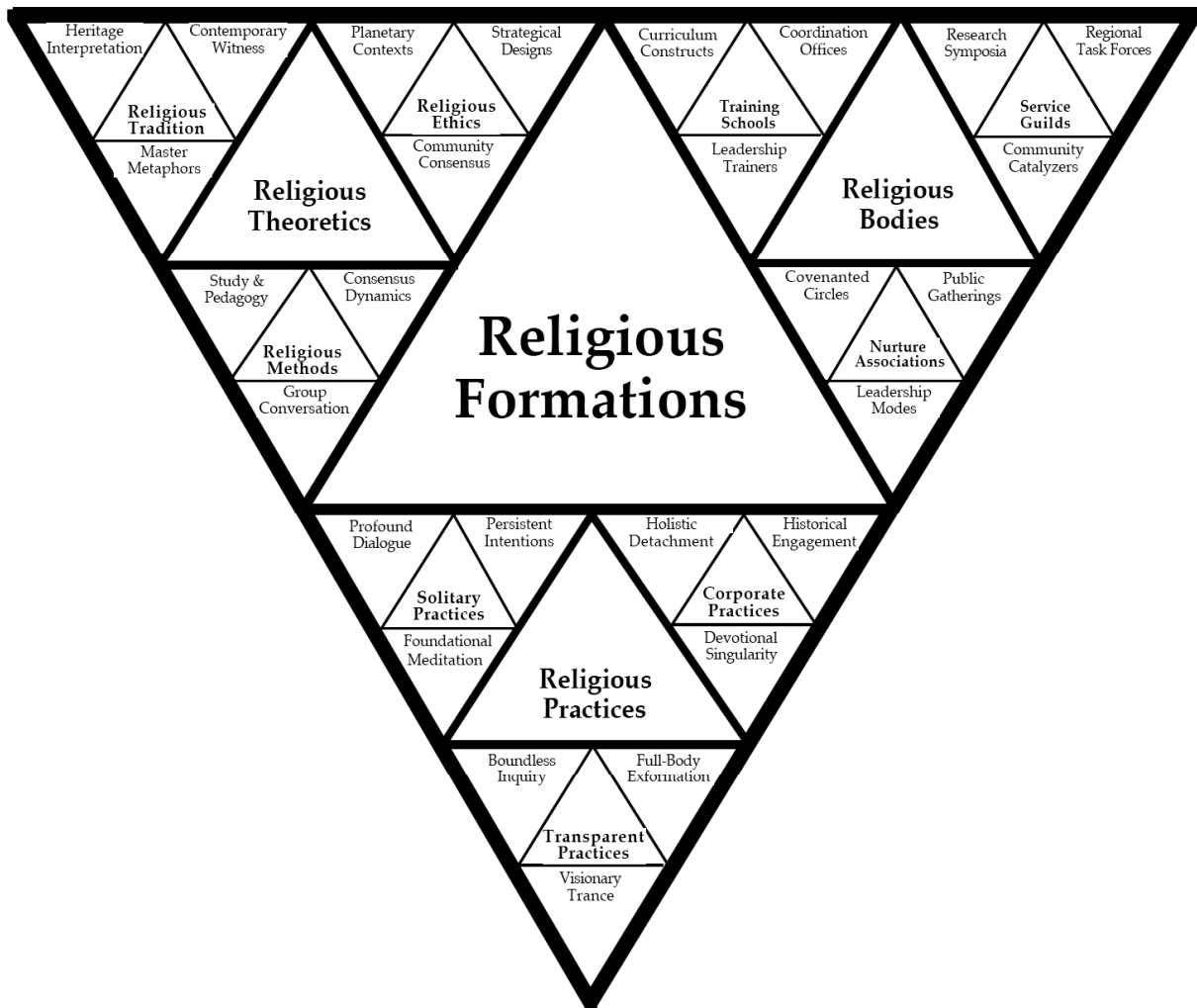


The social processes called “*Religious Formations*” is pictured in this chart as the core identity of the *Common Symbolization* processes which are the core identity of the *Cultural Processes* which are the core identity of all the social processes. This understanding is not commonly held in sociologies of both Capitalist and Marxist origins. In both of these camps of thought, the economic processes are thought to be the primary element of a society, while the political and cultural processes are thought to be subsidiary. In fact, classical Marxists typically viewed the cultural processes as merely a rationalization for the economic organization of the society. From the Marxist point of view, the values for a cultural revolution are chosen on the basis of what is expedient to

support economic vision and strategy. The traditional Marxist view does not include the idea that the cultural processes provide the core identity of a society, and thus also a core revolutionary component in social change. Nevertheless, many current Marxist thinkers are coming to a deeper appreciation of the revolutionary role of culture and religion. Alain Badiou is a vivid example of this in his book *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*.

So let us inquire further into how the history of social change is impacted by how a society formulates its basic relations with Reality – that is, its Religious Formations. A religious formation need not be opium that numbs the psyche to social responsibility; it can be a core source of revolutionary fervor. Marx is correct that most religion, both in our century and much earlier, has been an opiate. Marx says somewhere that “the critique of religion is the foundation of all critique.” Such statements bring into focus how “bad religion” is a powerful factor. “Good religion” can also be viewed as a powerful social force in the opposite direction from an opiate. Though the classical Marxist view of religion as incomplete, the Marxist critique of decayed religion has played a role and can still play a role in the renewal of the religious aspect of social existence.

I turn next to a breakdown of the social process of *Religious Formulations* into 27 subsidiary processes. The following chart is the small triangle at the very bottom of the previous chart, broken down by the same organizational method into my current picture of the 27 subparts of the social process of *Religious Formations*:



In the last chapter I discussed the *Religious Practices* third of the above chart. I will comment now on the *Religious Theoretics* third and the *Religious Bodies* third of this whole triangle. Perhaps I should warn the reader that many of you may find this chapter one of the most disagreeable chapters in the book. Why? Because many of us in our culture have come to yearn for a “spirituality” that is devoid of institutional embodiment. It is hard for many of us to accept the challenging fact that a vital religious practice is needed for our Spirit maturity, and that a religion with cultural, political, and economic processes is needed to house that vital religious practice and its theoretic underpinnings. So bear with me as I comment on each small triangle in the upper two thirds of the above chart. Such a detailed look at what is entailed in renewing an old religion or inventing a new one, may call to your consciousness old hurts you have endured from bad religions and current fears about forging a good religion or belonging to one.

Religious Theoretics

Every religious community does some thinking and forges some teachings. (1) Those teachings form an ongoing heritage that needs to be interpreted for each generation. (2) Methods have to be devised for studying those teachings and conducting life together in the “culture” of that religious community. And (3) the

question of right action or ethics comes up for still further thinking and guideline creation.

(1) Religious Tradition

Below are three paragraphs – one on each of the three subparts of *Religious Tradition* in the triangular chart above. The teachings of a religious community gather over time and become heritage. This heritage may become cryptic or at least need stretching for the next generation.

1a. Heritage Interpretation

Typically a religious community wishes to both honor the truth in its founding breakthrough and speak relevantly to the contemporary experiences of the humans within its influence. In times of rapid change, the work of heritage interpretation can become controversial. Part of the community hangs on to past formulations of the heritage and part of the community reaches forward for more relevant ways of understanding the heritage. Both directions can lead to “bad religion.” The backward lookers can become rigid in ways that turn old teachings into convictions that are contrary to the original fire of that religion. Similarly, the forward lookers can lose contact with the original fire by becoming accommodated to currently popular escapes from Reality. The challenge in *Heritage Interpretation* is to remain true to the essence of the heritage while also making contact with contemporary humans. For example, Christians interpreting the Virgin Birth of Jesus go in all three of these directions. The backward lookers insist that the Virgin Birth was a literal biological event proving Jesus’ special standing. The forward lookers give the Virgin Birth a very shallow meaning or ignore it all together as an ancient superstition. The Virgin Birth heritage is being genuinely recovered only when we see ourselves as capable of a “Virgin Birth” – that each of us can join Jesus in finding our true parentage in Eternity rather than in our earthly parents.

1b. Master Metaphors

The meaningful interrelation of all long-standing religious traditions has become unusually challenging because of the huge changes in human culture in the last couple of centuries. As spelled out in Chapter 17 we are experiencing a shift in a master metaphor, the shift from double-deck transcendence to one-realm transparency. For example, when Jews, Christians and Muslims read about the call of Isaiah in Isaiah 6, they cannot grasp the meaning of the angels with six wings and the shaking of the foundations of the temple unless they can work their minds loose from that two story-mythology into a realization that the author of this passage was talking about a shaking of the foundations of his own life and how we do not confront Eternity directly but through a cloud of Awe that hides the Awesome with its “flapping wings.” Isaiah knew that this extreme poetry was about his personal life, but for us the meaning of this old poetry can be accessed only through a use of the transparency mode of interpretation.

1c. Contemporary Witness

The extent to which religious communication is conditioned by the contemporary culture is about equal to the extent that it is conditioned by the heritage. For the essence of an old religious heritage to come alive in our times that essence has to be communicated to our own lives and to the lives of others who are living in the

contemporary world of sensibilities and challenges. We experience this very strongly in these times of vast and rapid change, but it has always been so. For example, among the New Testament writings the Gospel of John differs greatly from the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke. This difference is due to the fact that whoever wrote John is addressing a different time and culture. The earlier Gospels were still speaking to Hellenistic Jews, and the Gospel of John was being written near the turn of the first century for people who possessed a more thoroughly Greek-oriented mentality and who needed to have simple Hebraic matters explained to them.

(2) Religious Methods

Below are three paragraphs – one on each of the three subparts of *Religious Methods* in the chart above. Methods are a very important aspect of religious formation that has been too little explored. The power and popularity of many contemporary Buddhist movements can be credited to the thoroughness with which effective methods of meditation are being taught. Western religions would also be empowered by upgrading their religious methods.

2a. Study and Pedagogy

For most people today the study of religious writings has to overcome both an anti-intellectualism that only scans written material and an intellectualism that cannot move beyond bare ideas into personal-life experience. So teaching religion requires a study method that enables the student to grasp the author's structure of thought rather than simply selecting agreeable bits and ignoring the overall address of the author. Secondly a good study method enables students to move from mental statements to the grounding of those statements in their life experiences. Study is not complete until we can draw on one page our picture of what a piece of writing is actually saying. And teaching is not complete until each student knows what the rational content of the material studied means in terms of his or her own life experiences. Scientific historical knowledge is important for understanding the original meaning of an ancient text, but our understanding of that text is incomplete until we have achieved a connection of the material with our own contemporary lives. This will require translating the old language and metaphors used in that ancient time into language and metaphors that is alive for us in our own time.

2b. Group Conversation

Lengthy talks can be important if they are crafted by informed teachers and made deeply relevant to our actual lives, but there is no substitute for conversation in which each person in a relatively small group is challenged to share profoundly their life experience and their edge questions. Good group conversations require good methods. For example, here is an effective method for discussing art. A painting or movie or poem or music can be powerfully reflected upon by using a group process that organizes the conversation in this order: (1) each person says something objective about what they actually saw or heard, (2) each person shares how they reacted or felt about the viewing or hearing of this piece of art, and only then (3) ask selected persons to share interpretive statements about what this artistic expression is saying to us today. Ancient writings also require special conversation methods. I have found that each style of religious writing requires a different method to discuss it effectively. Effective group conversation methods are needed for an optimal communal life among members of a relevant future religious formation.

2c. Consensus Dynamics

Methods are also needed to make group decisions and to think together as a group. To meet the challenges of our times, our next expressions of religious community need to be far more democratic than the religious practices that have characterized most religious formations in the past. So, it seems obvious to me that we need to teach a thoroughgoing means of consensus decision making. The Quakers pioneered consensus methods many decades ago. Many recent ecological and justice movements have also developed skills in consensus processing. In order to be fully relevant, religious groups will need to learn the best of these methods and use them throughout every layer of their decision-making structures. This is not easy to do. We find that the value of full participation needs to be balanced with disciplined and effective decision making. Also, what we do in small groups with consensus can be informal, while large groups will need a more formal ordering. However difficult all this may seem, effective consensus methods is another important topic for the optimal ordering of a vital religious formation.

(3) Religious Ethics

Below are three paragraphs – one on each of the three subparts of *Religious Ethics* in the chart above. A religious community is never entirely about the nurture of its members; it is also an active presence in the general society. *Religious Ethics* means discerning how that religious community can with integrity be a gift to the general society. And this gift is given as a group as well as through the life quality of each of its members. Religious formations are one of the social processes that comprise every society. So when we are practicing a religion, we do this not only on our own behalf but on behalf of the whole society, the whole of humanity, the whole natural planet. *Religious Ethics* are the guidelines we create for that outreach into the wide world.

3a. Planetary Contexts

An important clarification about *Religious Ethics* has happened in recent decades: our ethical guidelines do not emerge from our religious teachings or written Scriptures but from our living experience of the “I Am” in our times. It is out of the basic experience of the “I Am” of profound humanness that we envision (choose with thoughtfulness) general guidelines for the future of human life on planet Earth. In former times religious ethics did not have the awareness we now have of the whole planet, but there was always a sense of something larger than “my village, or “my tribe” or “my civilization.” Because religious ethics begins with an awareness of the Wholeness of Being, responsibility for the whole of social and natural reality follows. When religious people do their planetary ethical thinking from the beginning point of profound humanness rather than from some specific sectarian principles, every religion tends to come up with similar guidelines. Indeed, we no longer have a Christian ethics or a Jewish ethics or a Muslim ethics or a Hindu ethics or a Buddhist ethics. We simply have ethics created by humans upon the foundation of the “I Am” experiences from a wide variety of religious groups. Religious ethics today is becoming interreligious ethics. This is a profound point to which I have devoted the whole of Part Six of this book.

3b. Community Consensus

In our local places we begin with guidelines that are being created through the consensus building of many religious people on a planet-wide basis and for the whole

planet. Each of us who is accessing our “I Am” profundity can share in building that planetary consensus, but we are also a small part of that planet-wide league of guideline building. So we find ourselves engaged in an attitude of obedience to the ongoing consensus building that is taking place in the planetary scope of discussion. Living in our local place we build further consensus among our aware neighbors on how that emerging planetary context applies to our local place. To do this we need to train one another in consensus building, inform one another about this planet-wide consensus already in process, and initiate vision and strategies that apply to taking action in our local place. As we move out into our geographical regions (whether alone or in groups), we provide leadership among others not in the name of some religion, but in the name of the truth that we are discovering as we live the “I Am” in awareness of the planetary realities and the local realities in which we live.

3c. Strategic Designs

Strategy is an important ethical category. Understanding strategy delivers us from the crime of imposing our idealistic beliefs upon situations that we may not even understand. A love-Reality strategy begins by understanding and accepting the challenge of the given situation with all its injustices, foolishness, bad thinking, prejudiced feelings, sheer meanness, and more. Strategy is a loving interaction between what now is and what needs to be according to our planet-wide and community-wide guidelines for change. Strategy is envisioning the soft points in the current conditions where change can most likely begin and devising the actions that can move the whole in a series of appropriate steps toward the type of social structures and care for one another that our “I Am” profundity is enabling us to conceive. Obviously, the “I Am” does not provide the social specifics; we have to create those through the trial-and-error guessing that characterizes all creative activity.

Religious Bodies

The thought of creating or recreating a religious body for a next expression of religious practice will be, for many people, the most disagreeable of all the topics in this book. There is a wide spectrum of people who want to be what they call “spiritual,” but want to have nothing to do with any more religious bodies. This fear of a religious body is understandable, for having been injured, mistreated, and offended deeply by perverse religious bodies, it may be hard to believe that we need a religious body even if that religious body is an outgrowth of the “I Am” Truth. There is an illusion involved in the hope of being “spiritual” as a way of avoiding consideration of the need for a religious body. If “spiritual” means accessing the “I Am” profundity, we need a religious body within which and through which we express and share our “I Am” profundity. And we also need a religious body to assist us in completing our access of the “I Am” profundity.

(1) Training Schools

Below are three paragraphs – one on each of the three subparts of *Training Schools* in the chart above. If we look around we can see that almost every person or group of people who have accessed a bit of the “I Am” profundity have created some sort of Training School through which to share their discovery with others. They sometimes call these “workshops” or “retreats,” but whatever we call them the basic dynamic is about creating a set of group exercises that enable people to get a taste of or a furtherance of their journey into the “I Am” realization.

1a. Curriculum Constructs

When we Christians read the New Testament dramas we call “The Gospels,” we get the impression that Jesus did his teachings only once, but likely he had a set of teachings that he did over and over in village after village. There is a story in the Gospel of Luke about how he trained 70 disciples to go out two-by-two and teach his “curriculum” of core “teachings” in all the villages they could. Again and again in every age of history, curriculum constructs have come into being that were used extensively because they worked in enabling people living in that time and place to be delivered from some escape and returned to their true nature of “I Am” wonderment. Creating a curriculum for our specific time and place turns out to be an ongoing part of being a member of some group in which the “I Am” essence of human life is being recovered.

1b. Leadership Trainers

While there are circumstances in which any person might provide leadership for others with regard to realizing their true nature, the Training Schools of a vital religious formation require leadership that have not only accessed their “I Am” essence but have learned well the *Curriculum Constructs* that are making a difference in the current culture as well as become competent in the *Religious Methods* that are needed to teach those constructs in a manner that leads others toward accessing their true nature. In other words, skilled leadership is needed! Nevertheless, to be effective in the emerging cultures of our times, the formation of religious leadership needs to be done in a manner that does not establish a two-class organization. The *Leadership Trainer* in this coming era of religious formation needs to be a person set aside from a community of equals to do a task on behalf of the whole. This trainer is training others in the means of accessing their own true nature as well as in the skills for using the effective *Curriculum Constructs* and *Religious Methods* to assist still others in accessing their true nature. Such training is best done in face-to-face groups. The use of e-mail, the internet, the telephone, and the postal services have some serious limitations that go along with their advantages for easily reaching large numbers of people and the saving of transportation costs and time. But fully effective *Religious Formation* cannot be done without eye-to-eye, body-to-body communication between those who are learning and those who are leading. The less intimate means are subsidiary to the intimate means. In order to deal with the transportation costs and still have intimate associations between leaders and new members, a religious formation will need a large number of leaders and a large amount of leadership training.

1c. Coordination Offices

Coordination Offices will be required for bringing together qualified *Leadership Trainers* with an ongoing stream of learners of the vital *Curriculum Constructs* of that religious formation in its time and place. As we view this picture we are viewing how it becomes necessary for a fully developed *Religious Body* to come into being. Whether we are viewing crowds of people following an itinerant teacher walking through the villages of ancient Galilee or the more complex organizations that are typical of our 21st Century cultures, we are talking about creating religion as a social process within the other social processes of our down-to-Earth human societies. These *Coordination Offices* will require economic processes and political processes that enable and support the cultural processes that are basic to vital and continuing *Religious Formations*.

(2) Nurture Associations

Below are three paragraphs – one on each of the three subparts of *Nurture Associations* in the chart above. Not only are *Training Schools* an obvious emergence for expanding a breakthrough of “I Am” realization, also obvious is the truth that awakening persons need regular meetings with their peers. Awakening individuals enter a process of emergence that has no end. A retreat or school may occasion a fresh beginning of “new” life, but this new life is then lived daily, weekly, monthly, yearly. Daily and weekly practices of religion are implied from our experience in living the “I Am” life within our estranged cultures. Our efforts to live the “I Am” life teaches us the need for regular meetings with our peers in order to sustain this ongoing “I Am” emergence.

2a. Covenanted Circles

Whether we call them sanghas, base communities, house churches, resurgence circles, support groups, or something else, intimate groups are springing up in almost every vital religion. Perhaps one of the reasons for such interest in small groups is that intimate associations beyond the nuclear family have to be arranged in contemporary culture where both individualism and collectivism squeeze out deep personal relations. This felt need for regular small group meetings I interpret as a sign that the next stage in *Religious Formations* needs to emphasize small intimate group associations. This need not devalue larger gatherings, but it raises questions about what those larger gatherings need to be. We also need to raise questions about what small group practice needs to be, if we are to emphasize religious formation aimed at the access of the “I Am” profundity. To begin with, the small groups of the next religious formations need to emphasize *Universal Forgiveness* (the welcome home to Reality of every person). This will tend to make the members of a small group feel safe to do open sharing of their lives. Also needed is a willingness to face fully our escapes from Reality and “enjoy” the eyes of others upon us to assist us to see those escapes and to work through the recasting of the entire round of our lives toward manifesting all aspects of our “I Am” being. In order for small group life to maintain such a commitment to depth, we will need some sort of covenant that outlines our responsibility for regular attendance, care for one another, and upfront clarity about the purpose of the group and the methods and curriculum to be used.

2b. Leadership Modes

Also needed to maintain depth in our small group life will be two or three members in each circle who have been trained in the *Training Schools*, in the *Curriculum Constructs*, and in the *Religious Methods* that each small group will need to learn and use. These small group leaders need not see themselves as the only leaders in the group, but the importance of their presence and service to the group will need to be rather explicit. The role of those leaders in anchoring the group in a religious practice that has depth will need to be carried out in a style that is neither dictatorial nor permissive. In our contemporary culture our ideas of leadership flip back and forth between encouraging our groups to do whatever their whims desire or controlling the group with an iron hand of imposition. It will be an ongoing challenge to discover how we combine (1) a respect for the autonomy and decisional participation of each person with (2) a disciplined ordering of activities that honor the agreed upon purpose of these group meetings. What is most clear is that a leadership that honors these challenges is a necessary part of our emerging patterns of religious formation.

2c. Public Gatherings

Another way that small group life can be enriched is regular associations with other small groups doing the same religious practices. These larger gatherings will need to be well organized by competent leaders and held regularly enough to be a part of the ongoing pattern of religious practice. If the *Covenantal Circles* meet weekly, the *Public Gatherings* might meet at least quarterly. The *Public Gatherings* might gather only those who are members of *Covenantal Circles* or these gatherings might also gather persons who are interested in exploring Circle life or organizing new Circles. I am attempting to describe guidelines that can apply to many different religious practices, but each set of religious practices within each culture will be different. The core point of this paragraph is that some sort of balance between *Public Gatherings* and *Covenantal Circles* will need to guide the future organization of a *Religious Body* that supports a relevant religion on planet Earth in century twenty-one.

(3) Service Guilds

Below are three paragraphs – one on each of the three subparts of *Service Guilds* in the chart above. In these next three paragraphs I will insist that in order to be a full manifestation of the “I Am” profundity, the next *Religious Bodies* will need to develop a balance between nurturing “inreach” and contributing “outreach” to the whole of humanity and planet Earth. A best-case religion is both a personal discipline and a social process that moves outwardly, taking its place of responsibility within the other social processes of the society.

3a. Research Symposia

The ethical manifestations of our “I Am” experiences will result in an ongoing process of consensus building. We can no longer accept the notion of permanent principles dropping down from a divine realm, so we are cast into the ongoing task of creating our ethical guidelines through consensus building conducted by well informed persons who are also grounded in their “I Am” being. This means organizing groups of persons who are committed to work on selected topics throughout a period of time communicating with each other regularly and meeting face-to-face at least once a year. The results of such *Research Symposia* will then be published or in some way taught to all the *Covenantal Circles* in a given Network of Religious Practice.

3b. Community Catalyzers

When we imagine several *Covenantal Circles* in the same local community, we can imagine select members from a number of those Circles taking on specific issues that arise in their local place. “*Catalyzers*” is a term meant to communicate that these Circle members do not act in the name of their Circle or their religion. Rather they join local community organizations and play creative roles within those secular groupings. Also, they may organize new secular groups. And the persons who do these sorts of things may come from “Circles” that practice different religions. For example, some members of a Buddhist Sangha may join with some members of a Christian Circle to protest some malpractice or advocate for some key change in community life. As indicated earlier, *Religious Ethics* do not derive from a religious practice, but from the “I Am” profundity that religious practices attempt to access.

3c. Regional Task Forces

If “Regional” means a wider scope of geography than local community, region-wide social responses will look different from *Community Catalyzers*. A *Regional Task Force* would need to be a rather formal organization spending the time required to research the needs of some planetary region, design an inclusive vision for that region, and create the strategies needed to make the envisioned changes. Again, members of such a task force may come from a wide range of religious practices but still be working from the same base in “I Am” realization. One of the gifts brought to social action from the presence of vital religious groups is skill in working with people and skill in avoiding burnout during the long struggles that it takes to deal with powerful opposition. Fostering hope in seemingly hopeless circumstances is a core service that effective religious formations can bring to Regional Task Forces.

Recapitulation on Religion as a Social Process

My description of these 27 subparts of my chart on *Religious Formations* has been far less than exhaustive. My aim in this chapter has been to paint a comprehensive portrait of what is involved in viewing religion as a social process within the whole pattern of essential social processes that make up a whole human society. To be religious in the deepest meaning of that term is something more than a private, psychological avocation. A “healthy” religion assists members of a society to access their true being and to live that true being for the benefit and enrichment of the entire society as well as for the well-being of the planet upon which every society depends. The election to be religious is more like a vocation than an avocation. A vital religion spawns a *calling* or life quest from which our set of finite vocations can emerge and become rewarding. And our set of finite vocations can include the finite vocation of organizing and renewing the next expression of the religion that we choose to practice.

Seeing religion as a social process provides us with essential clarity on how to reinvent vital religion. A religion is just another social process; it is not more divine than waste disposal. But if a religion is fulfilling its role as a means of accessing our true being, it is assisting us to access THAT which may be called “divine” – the Every-Thing-Ness in which all things cohere that is also the No-Thing-Ness out of which all things come and to which all things return, both of which comprise the Awesome that Awes us profoundly.

Chapter 21

The Vital Variety of Religious Practices

Because religions are created by human beings and because human beings live in numerous and very different cultures, religion takes on a huge variety of practices, beliefs, and moralities. This variety is so great that it may seem at first that little can be said that applies to all religions. And that would be true if we were looking at specific beliefs, specific practices, or specific moral guidelines. It has been my aim in Chapters 17-20 to talk about religion in general terms, nevertheless, it may seem to some readers that my description of religion as a general category excludes some of what is often called "religion."

Part of such difficulty may stem from my aim to describe universal qualities that I claim apply to all *good* religion. I have thereby implied that there is such a thing as *bad* religion, religion that functions in ways that are opposite or almost opposite to the essential functions I have described for good religion. We humans unavoidably apply criteria of good and bad to all humanly formed social processes. We speak of good education and bad education, good economics and bad economics. We assume that there are ways of evaluating these aspects of society – such as workability, justice, effectiveness, truthfulness, etc. We experience a similar need to evaluate "religion." I am assuming that credible ways exist for evaluating each specific manifestation of the essential social process I have named "*Religious Formation*." For example, I have written essays on how so much religion has fallen into intellectualism, moralism, and sentimentalism. I mean this as criticism.

Clearly, I am assuming that each and every religion can be evaluated good-better-best, or bad-worse-worst. And my criteria for this evaluation is how each particular religion corresponds with: (1) the realism of the scientific approach to truth, (2) the realism of the contemplative approach to truth (especially, does that religion attempt to express and open us to our true nature – that profound humanness that I have explored through the concept of the "I Am"?) and (3) the realism of the workability approach to truth (especially, does that religion enable us to be more prone to the "accident" of realizing our true nature?).

Nevertheless, it is still a credible possibility that I could be using *my* religion as the criteria for the judgment of all religion. It is my aim, however, to avoid using my specific form of Christian practice as the definition of all good religion. I am attempting to articulate a philosophy of religion that is broader than "my religion." I am attempting to provide my own religion with a philosophy of religion that applies to all religion. Whether I am succeeding with this intent is open for examination, but I firmly believe that such a philosophy is needed and possible. We need such a philosophy because we now live in interreligious communities, cities, nations, and planet. We must learn to think and work interreligiously. To do so we need a definition of religion that is broader than any one religion and that provides us with ways to honor all religions in their always-fragmentary means of assisting people to access their profound humanness.

With my adventures into universal statements about what religion is and what makes religion good or bad, I do not want to slip into any implication that this universality is a subtle version of my religion that I am using as criteria for the judgment of other religions. I count such a view as bigotry and view such bigotry as the source of much needless conflict and violence in the world. I am seeking criteria that are deeper than my religion, criteria that judge my religion as well as every other religion. And the word "criteria" is misleading if it means a set of rational statements. I am using the word "criteria" to indicate a baseline in human experience about

experiencing our experience of the profound roots of human consciousness. This is a pre-rational “standard” that also transcends the word ‘standard.’ Applying this experiential consciousness as our “standard” is not the same as applying a set of rational principles. I am envisioning a sort of enigmatic “un-standard standard” that we can apply intuitively, based upon our own experience of our own profound experience.

I am assuming that Buddhist practices can access the same profound humanness that Christian practices can access. These two religions (actually two groups of religions) open us to slightly different aspects of profound humanness, but it is the same “elephant” that is being touched by all the various “blind men” in the wide variety of Buddhist practices and in the wide variety of Christian practices. Whether any of these practices are good depends on whether they actually put us in touch with the “elephant” of our profound humanness. And if any of these practices are judged “bad,” it needs to be because they cloud or escape from or prevent our consciousness from touching the “elephant.” I am attempting to develop a sense of profound humanness that stands in judgment of all religious practices. Religious practices are not good or bad because they are finite human creations, for such finitude is true of all religions. The issue is whether each finite human creation of religion has the power (or even the intent) of making us more prone to the “accident” of profound humanness discovery. If you grant me the statement that good religion (true religion) is any practice that assists humans to access the “I Am” profundity of our true nature, we clearly face a vast variety of religious practices that are *good* and an even greater variety of religious practices that are *bad*.

Furthermore, each religion comes into being within an ongoing dialogue with the vast religious diversity that surrounds it. Religions quite commonly learn from one another. A huge “borrowing” is going on between Buddhism and Christianity at this moment in history. Christians are enhancing the contemplative qualities of Christianity with help from Buddhist meditation practices and theoretics. And Buddhists are enhancing the social engagement qualities of Buddhist practice with help from the ethical intensity that Buddhists are learning from the best of Christianity and Judaism.

Christians who argue that Christian ideas and ways of practice dropped down from heaven are clouding the fact that the New Testament formation period was doing wholesale borrowing from Judaism and Mediterranean Paganism, as well as from sophisticated forms of Greek religion and philosophy. Some have argued that early Christianity was so eclectic that it can claim nothing unique to itself. I believe that to be an exaggeration: I believe that the religious elements that those first Christians adopted from their surroundings were given a unique cast that flowed from the breakthrough in awareness that was initiated by Jesus’ life, death, and the resurrection taking place among the bodily lives of his followers. But however that may be, it stands as factual history that all religions take elements of religion from the planet-wide religious treasury; they take whatever assists them to enable their unique formation of religion to become what works for them as an assistance toward the maturation of the profound consciousness that they are discovering. And we do well to continue doing such interreligious swapping today.

The above insights are important for undergirding what we now call “interreligious dialogue.” We now live in a planet-wide ferment of interreligious cultures. We live on one planet, mixing the antiquities and futures of all expressions of human culture. Furthermore, this dialogue has become more than swapping ideas or moral principles. For example, many Christians now realize that to be fully engaged in interreligious dialogue, they need to meditate with the Buddhists, attend festivals with the Jews, pray head-on-the-floor with the Muslims, sit in sweat lodges with the Pagans, and so on. It is

these down-to-Earth practices that make a religion a workable religion. So the aware ones among us are already trying out practices on a planet-wide scale and adopting what works for us into our chosen religious emphasis.

The vast variety of religious practices is a vital treasury precisely because of its variety. It is understandable that the many finite approaches created by religiously creative humans have been and will continue to be various, multiple, many, and continually creative. While each of us may focus our creativity on one religious heritage, we do so within a planet-wide interreligious dialogue. In doing so we learn not only to honor more our chosen heritage but also find greater respect and cooperation among all the varieties of human religion and human society.