

Good Christian Religion as a Social Project

**How to view the Jesus Christ happening
as the central illumination of my life
without becoming a bigot.**

Gene W. Marshall

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Prologue

This book is the third in a series of short books. The first two I entitled:

(1) *The Birth, and Rebirth, and Rebirth, and Rebirth. . . of Spirit*

*some reflections upon the origins and survival possibilities
of the last remaining upright-walking primates*

(2) *Great Thinks, Great Feels, and Great Resolves*

Some Reflections on the Essence of Religious Experience

These first two books dealt with Spirit and religion in a broad inter-religious manner. I sought to show that every religion, including my own, is finite and thus fragmentary in its expression of Spirit. Now in this book, I want to deal head-on with my own religion, Christianity. I did not hide my Christian identity in the above books, but I de-emphasized it for the sake of focusing on Spirit and religion as something which is simply basic to every human existence.

Now I want to talk about my commitment to being a Christian, to being a member of this particular, finite, religious heritage and its current and future religious practices. I want to talk about how I am seeking to choose this identity in a manner that does not denigrate all the other religious heritages which have served humanity on this planet. At the same time, I want to tell why I am choosing to be a Christian rather than something else. Many other people who have been raised Christians are now abandoning Christianity for some Eastern practice of religion, or some recent "New Age" religion, or some other recovery or invention of religion.

In choosing to be a Christian, I am not making a blanket rejection of those other options. I am empathetic with anyone who is following the urge to find a Spirit practice which is meaningful for them. Earlier in my life, I took a zig-zag course between these two extremes: (1) participating with disgruntlement in forms of Christianity I knew were obsolete or bad religion by my criteria and (2) opening myself to non-Christian forms of religion or to forms of Christian understanding and practice that were so different from the inherited Christian practices that most people would call them "un-Christian."

I now see, more clearly than I once did, why I zig and why I zag. I zig out to find meaning in radical forms of Christianity or other religious expressions because Christianity in all its inherited forms is obsolete and incapable of providing the Spirit nurture I need. I zag back to some sort of participation in the long, rich, complex traditions of the Christian religion

because many elements of this heritage have broken through to me--spoken to me in ways that have healed my life and kept me going on my Spirit journey.

Though I have remained a Christian, I can understand why many people have rejected the Christianity they have known. I understand when people have been so hurt by Christian religion that even suggesting to them that they might become some renewed form of Christian can be nauseous to them. I also understand why persons of Christian background might leave their childhood religion, then have frustrating experiences with shallow or oppressive substitutes, and end up coming back to their traditional religion and simply tolerating its still obnoxious features. All this zig and zag is a witness to the far-reaching complexity of what is happening within Christian religions and other religious traditions as well.

In the first two books of this series, I have defined what I mean by "Spirit" and what I mean by "religion" and how we can distinguish "good religion" from "bad religion." I will not do those tasks over again in this book; I will simply assume those definitions as part of my operating context. In this book, I will focus on envisioning "good Christian religion" and why I am committed to such religion.

Good Christian Religion

"Good Christian religion" may sound like an arrogant phrase, but what I mean by that phrase is a form of religion that acknowledges that good can be found in every religious tradition, including the Christian one. When I say that I am a Christian-identified person, I mean that I identify with those who first honored Jesus with the enigmatic title "Christ." I also mean that I identify with Jesus himself, both in his critique of the religion of his time and in his honoring of Moses and the prophets.

"Identifying with Jesus" has not always been seen as a positive thing. Some consider such identification a thing for lunatics along with identifying with Napoleon and other superlative

figures. Others regard Jesus as such a high and mighty being that an identification with him by a mere human being is considered blasphemous. But I see Jesus as a human being, a human being who embodies that awesome potentiality resident in every human being. I grew up within a rather naive form of Christian liberalism, one which taught me that I should make Jesus my example, but which had watered down the picture of Jesus to a meek and mild illustrator of the herd morality of the middle classes. When I actually read the New Testament seriously, I began to discover in Jesus an exemplar of very tough love, a person of incredible trust in the goodness of life, and an actor of wild, bold, confrontational freedom. Simply reading the New Testament smashed the images presupposed by my Sunday school teachers.

“Let love be genuine” was the title of a Youth-Sunday sermon I gave while still a student in college. I was clear then, and have become much clearer since, that being called to be a follower of Jesus is a profound challenge.

With the term “bad religion,” I am pointing to a larger reality than the most obvious forms of crass moralism, bigotry, doctrinairism, sentimentality, and escapism. Bad religion is any religion that pulls back from living an Awe-filled life in all its fullness. If we use the definition of good and bad religion articulated in the second book of this series, then about 90 percent of all religion, including Christian religion, is bad religion. I have not arrived at that 90 percent figure by any sort of statistical analysis: it is just my intuitive estimate based on my personal experience. I feel the same way about economics and politics, about 90 percent is bad economics and bad politics. My critical view is, in part, derived from the fact that I expect all religious, economic, and political behavior to follow Jesus in letting love be genuine.

I appreciate writers like Wendell Berry who, in a talk given at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, said that organized Christianity’s “idea of a Christian economy is no more or less than the industrial economy--which is an economy firmly founded on the seven deadly sins and the breaking of all ten of the Ten Commandments.”¹

I acknowledge that our practical choices in the real world are often ambiguous; but, in my view, we are not excused, thereby, for our bad religion, bad economics, or bad politics. People who excuse themselves by saying that they are only being human are avoiding a deeper truth: being

truly human would mean practicing good religion, good economics, and good politics.

My Primary Social Project

This book is about why I count “the realization of good Christian religion” as my primary social project. I engage in other social projects: the ecological movement (especially bioregionalism), local empowerment, community arts, innovative education, and more. But I count “the realization of good Christian religion” as my primary social project because I see this task as widening the presence of a Spirit aliveness that can be the motivation and grounding for doing all the other social projects I support.

I realize that many people whom I respect deeply will not choose “the realization of good Christian religion” as their main social project. Some will participate in this project without making it their primary project. Others may participate instead in “the realization of good Buddhist religion” or some other religious project. I do not ask everyone to take my exact course. I do, however, ask for respect for what I am attempting to do from all sensitive persons of whatever religious path. And I invite those who do feel “called” to following a Christian religious path to join me in focusing intently on “the realization of good Christian religion.”

Calling “the realization of good Christian religion” a social project can be misleading, for a genuine religious practice is something more than a social project. A religious practice is an intensely personal thing, having to do with a deep happiness and truth within singular persons whatever the social implications of this may be. I cannot, with integrity, be a Christian simply in order to accomplish specific social ends. To make this point even stronger, I am actively resistant toward those who wish to use Christian heritage to promote their social causes. Such persons communicate that they do not care about the truth or untruth of Christian wisdom, but only about finding support for specific and passing issues. I am pursuing a deeper cause. I want to be and promote a form of Christianity that is itself a contribution to the social scene--a compassion, a freedom, a wisdom, a motivation that sees which social causes are crucial and then supports them--indeed, enhances them with the power of its own integrity and presence.

Nevertheless, religion-building of any sort is a social project. Religion, like economics or education, is a social reality. Christianity, in its present forms, is a social reality. I want to work toward the manifestation of fresh forms of Christian religion. These will be a new social reality. To do this task is a social project.

¹ Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community* (New York, Pantheon: 1993) page 100

There are those among us who, having become distraught with oppressive forms of religion, have proposed being “a Spirit person” who participates in no social formation of religion. I understand this inclination. I am clear that giving Spirit any sort of religious content is always an approximation. Spirit is too vast to be included within finite religious forms. Yet it is false to assume that Spirit can exist and mature in our lives without some sort of expression in finite religious forms. A Spirit person with no religion is like a “spirit” with no body. Such a being does not actually exist. If a human being is being his or her Spirit self, that person is manifesting some sort of religious practice. Perhaps most of us do not identify as “religion” each and every finite manifestation of Spirit living, but I do. If, in someone's life, Spirit is being manifest through walking in the woods and contemplating trees, then that practice is religious for that person. The Christian religion I espouse would include walking in the woods and contemplating trees, as well as some other things having to do with history and ethics and despair and healing and so on and so on. My point is that there is no escape from having some sort of religion, if one is being a Spirit self. My task in this book is to paint a picture of what good Christian religion would be and how we might socially manifest it for our own sakes, for the benefit of enumerable individuals, for the long-range social evolution of the human species, and for the wellbeing of the planetary biosphere.

The Battle with Bigotry

Perhaps the deepest trauma that swirls through the issues of being a Christian and forming good Christian religion is **Christian bigotry**. Christianity, in almost all its inherited forms, has been guilty of exorbitant claims about the Christian religion and misleading belittlements or disparagements of other religious practices.

One of the facts of our times is the growing awareness that every long-established religious tradition has dealt profoundly with our life as Spirit beings. Furthermore, if we assume that “Spirit” means a relationship with the “Infinite,” then all religious traditions, including Christian ones, are finite and thus fragmentary in their illumination of our relationship to the Infinite. No finite religion can claim to exhaust the fullness of our relationship with the Infinite. This means that all three of the following statements are true:

(1) **The fragmentariness of good Christianity overlaps with the fragmentariness of other good religions at many points.** For example the “Atman” of Hinduism and the “Holy Spirit” of Christianity can be understood to point toward

the same interior Great Selfhood of our Spirit existence.

(2) **There are fragments of good Non-Christian religions that are distinctly different from (and more than) good Christianity.** For example, the physical exercises and psychological disciplines of many Asian religions provide methods for Spirit concentration that contrast markedly with the more rational emphases of our inherited Christian religions. Likewise, the rituals of Native American religions, honoring all the various components of nature, present an enrichment challenge to standard Christian practices.

(3) **There are fragments of good Christianity that are distinctly different from (and more than) other good religions.** For example, both Judaism and Christianity place emphasis on human social history and on community life and creative justice within that history. The events of history are interpreted as a dialogue with the Eternal “Thou.” This concretely historical I--Thou dialogue is an emphasis that cannot be found, for example, in the ancient mystical religions of Asia.²

These considerations raise this question: if Christian religion is fragmentary, why is what is contained within this fragmentary religion so important that I, that anyone, would want to call themselves a Christian rather than something else?

Answering this question is one of the purposes of this book. A companion purpose is to further illuminate the essence of the Christian “experience of God.” In the light of this core experience, I want to further clarify the social task of creating “good Christian religion.”

I intend to show that “good Christian religion,” need not be bigoted. And with my very next breath, I want also to show that “good Christian religion” has its own unique gifts and is worthy of my or your religious calling. Practicing good Christian religion can contribute this unique breakthrough of Spirit wisdom to the Spirit life of the planet, a breakthrough which I perceive to be essential to the well-being of all religions, all societies, and each and every human being. Unless I can adequately illuminate the importance of these unique qualities, I cannot say to you, or to myself, why anyone, apart from the sheer inertia of childhood upbringing, would want to choose to be a Christian rather than something else.

² Such generalizations do not always apply to modern religious practices. For example, many expressions of modern Buddhism and Hinduism have been appropriating Western wisdom, even as the West has been appropriating wisdom from the East.