

Chapter 1

Loving God and Neighbor

Central to the essence of Christianity is the theme of loving God and neighbor.

The purpose of the Church is to increase among human beings the love of God and neighbor.

H. Richard Niebuhr

The Way of Life is this: You shalt love first the Lord, your Creator, and secondly your neighbor as yourself. The Didache

“What is your reading of the Scriptures?” He replied, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” “That is the right answer,” said Jesus, “Do that and you will live.

Luke 10:26-28

The meaning of “human authenticity,” (or “Holy Spirit”) is elaborated in the Christian religious tradition as love for God and neighbor. The essence of Holy Spirit or human authenticity can also be expressed through probing the Christian concepts of faith, hope, and freedom; but as Paul said, “The greatest of these is love.”

Yet few Christians realize the full power of the words: “loving,” “God,” and “neighbor.” Why? Because most Christians today have lost, almost entirely, any understanding of what the word “God” is pointing to in our actual, everyday human experience.

Further, many Christians today have reduced the meaning of the word “neighbor” to mean only those very few human persons with whom we prefer to associate. We have excluded alien races, religions, and cultures as well as our personal enemies from our “realm of loving.” We have also assumed that “neighbor” means only human individuals. Are not human social wholes--like Canada, the United States, Mexico, and Haiti--also our neighbors? Is not the Earth itself our neighbor? And are not the non-human, living beings that populate this Earth our neighbors? Such questions challenge the commonly accepted notions of the proper object of Christian love.

Thirdly, Christians today have become confused about the meaning of the word “love”--the meaning of that “Spirit love” which loves God

and neighbor. We may be aware that such love is something different from romance or sexual union or familial bonds, but the full strangeness of Christian love has not yet dawned on most Christian-identified persons nor on most students of the Christian heritage.

1. Who is my Neighbor?

But the man, wanting to justify himself, continued, “But who is my neighbor?” Luke 10:29

In answer to this question, Jesus tells a story of a man who was beaten and robbed and left by the roadside to die. Two prominent leaders of the home society avert their eyes to this man’s need and pass by on the other side of the road. Then a foreigner, a Samaritan, stops, administers his best treatment for the man’s wounds, takes him to an inn, gives him food and lodging, and even instructs the inn keeper to provide for his further needs, promising to pay for them when he returns. “Now which of these three,” Jesus asks his questioner, “seems to you to have been a neighbor to the bandits’ victim.” The questioner had no difficulty figuring that out. So Jesus said, “Then you go and do the same.”

There is something outlandish about this familiar story. Each of us pass by people in dire need every day. We don’t stop. We don’t spend our precious money on their practical needs. Furthermore, if a Samaritan, this member of an alien culture, this Communist, this Buddhist or Hindu or Moslem or something, was capable of actually giving love, what does this imply for those of us who claim to be the people of God?

The question “Who is my neighbor?” can also raise the companion question: “Who is being a neighbor to me?” Millions, billions of people serve me in very practical ways every day. The social commonality of my county, state, and nation serve me and make my life possible. Foreign societies produce some of the food I eat, make most of the clothes I wear, and serve me by showing me the flaws and unrealized possibilities of my own society. Even personal enemies serve me. They often challenge me to make my most profound responses to life. The whole planet Earth serves me. The microbes serve me. The air, the soil, the plants, the animals, all serve me. The sun serves me. The huge planet Jupiter clears from my solar system some of the comets and asteroids that might crash into my home planet. The story of the neighborly Samaritan drops me into this cosmos of neighboring beings and asks me to go and also be a neighbor to all my companion beings.

Søren Kierkegaard, with his characteristic humor, once remarked that the word “enemy” is the opposite of “friend,” but that the word “neighbor” has no opposite. Everyone is our neighbor. Even our best friend or our lover is also our neighbor, and as our neighbor, these persons with whom we most prefer to be are just like everyone else--one more neighbor. Kierkegaard goes on to say that you can lose a friend or a lover, but you can never lose your neighbor. If you do lose a particular neighbor, there is another neighbor right there to take the place of the neighbor you lost. You are never without your neighbor, because your neighbor is the first person you see.

Clearly the question, “Who is my neighbor?” carries us into deep water. And the water is still deeper. There is no neighbor who is not connected to our experience of God. In fact, “God-and-neighbor” can be seen as a hyphenated phrase. We never experience one without the other. If this tree is my neighbor, I do not confront the tree over here and God over there. No, God, we might say, is standing behind the tree. When I confront the tree, I confront God as well. **God stands behind each person, each microbe, each society, each planet, as its Source, as its Sustainer, as its Limiter and, in the end, as its Tomb.**

The author of the Fourth Gospel also wrote three New Testament letters. Here is a remarkable insight contained in the first of those letters:

We love because [God] loves us first. But if [you] say, “I love God,” while hating [your neighbor] you are a liar. If [you] do not love the [neighbor] whom [you] have seen, it cannot be that [you] love God whom [you] have not seen.

1 John 4:19-20

So if human individuals, human societies, and the natural world are the neighbors whom we have seen, what is meant by this unseen God who figures so prominently in the ontological and ethical thinking of the Bible?

2. Loving the Infinite Neighbor

One of the most helpful ways to approach the biblical symbol “God” is through this metaphor: “the Infinite Neighbor.” Something stands behind, underneath, over, or around, every neighbor. Something was the Source of every finite neighbor. Something is sustaining every neighbor. Something is limiting every neighbor. Something is insisting that every neighbor must some day pass away. This Something is unseen, because finite eyes can

only see finite things. But the eyes of Awe, our Spirit eyes, see the unseen standing there behind every neighbor. The eyes of Awe, Spirit eyes, see that our action of loving this invisible God and our action of loving each and every visible neighbor is one and the same action.

The Infinite Void

“We come from a dark abyss and we end in a dark abyss and we call the luminous interval life.”¹ This saying of Kazantzakis might be applied to every star, to every planet, to every living being, to every human being. This is the nature of all finite realities: to come into being and to pass away. A living human being stands in the midst of livingness with the awareness necessary to gaze into the Abyss from which he or she has come and into the Abyss toward which he or she is going. Indeed the actual situation of human life is like walking on a plank suspended in mid air over a bottomless pit. We are not walking from one hole in the landscape to another hole in landscape. Rather, an Infinite Hole surrounds the entire landscape. So birth is a Dark Abyss, and death is a Dark Abyss and the same Dark Abyss surrounds us each step of our walk from birth to death.

Carlos Castaneda, in his *Journey to Ixtlan*, has his Native American guru, Don Juan, explain that Death walks with us every step of our lives.² “Death can be seen over our left shoulder,” he says. “If we turn our head quickly, we can, perhaps, see Death.” In this story, the character Carlos recalls the time when he went hunting and caught a white falcon in the sights of his rifle. He realized that this bird’s destiny was in his hands, and then he did not pull the trigger. Don Juan then makes this analogy: Death is always there over our left shoulder with a loaded rifle pointed at our head and Death’s finger is always on the trigger. The trigger can be pulled at any moment. The Dark Abyss, the Infinite Void walks with us every step of the way from birth to death.

The Infinite Fullness

The proper object of worship for an authentic human being, according to the biblical perspective, is not only the Infinite Void but also the Infinite Fullness. When we confront one finite tree, one finite human being, one finite planet, we confront at the same time the Wholeness of Being. Each

¹ Nikos Kazantzakis, *Saviors of God* (New York: Simon Schuster, 1960) page 43

² Carlos Castaneda, *Journey to Ixtlan* (New York: Simon Schuster, 1972) page 51-57

neighbor exists in a matrix of existing beings that connects to the entire cosmos of billions of swirling galaxies departing rapidly from one another in an ever expanding space-time of almost unimaginable vastness. Each neighbor also exists in a matrix of existing beings that reach into infinitesimal smallness--cells, molecules, atoms, and subatomic interactions. This Fullness, which is grasped in only a fragmentary way by the finite minds of human beings, sustains us, connects us to everything, and presents us with unimaginable possibilities, possibilities still to be conceived of, much less explored and realized.

We can experience this Fullness just as much, but not a bit more, than the Void. Fullness and Void are two aspects of one and the same experience of the Infinite Neighbor. And as we confront each and every finite neighbor, we confront this Fullness and this Void. If we do not love this Fullness and this Void, we do not love each and every finite neighbor. And if we do not love each and every finite neighbor, we do not love this Fullness and this Void. This is a crucial part of the Christian truth about God, about neighbors, and about Spirit love. And such a truth is not true for Christians only. It is simply the truth.

The Total Demand

To associate words like “love,” “worship,” and “God” with this Infinite Fullness and this Infinite Void involves us in an ethical imperative, an imperative that is rooted in Something Beyond our own finite selves and all our rational thoughts, passionate feelings, and established patterns of willing. Our action is required by Something Beyond our own finite selves. Our action is summoned by this Fullness and this Void. Obligation or duty of an Infinite sort grasps our existence and calls us to unconditional obedience.

I have already mentioned that the obligation to love includes every neighbor, not just the neighbors whom we prefer. I have suggested that this inclusiveness extends beyond the human species to every living being, yes and to the rocks and elements and energies of the physical cosmos. Each of these finite realities is being a neighbor to us. I want now to explore what it means for each of us to experience being called by the Infinite Neighbor to be a neighbor in return to each and every existing being.

First of all, how is there time or substance or energy to love all these neighbors? And who do we love first and how and why? Such questions bring us to consider a crucial quality of this Total Demand, the demand to be freedom--the demand to intend, out of a boundless abyss of freedom, a

free deed. It is normal in modern culture to speak of freedom as a good thing, but the freedom we often mean is some relief from external restraint, some license to do whatever we want to do. But Spirit freedom, the deep freedom demanded by the Total Demand is the sort of freedom from which we often flee. We may prefer to be a victim who cannot be expected to do anything about anything significant. We may prefer to blame others for our situation or for the situation of the world at large. The deep freedom demanded by the Total Demand is the freedom to respond creatively to each and every situation in the understanding that this situation and all its neighboring beings comprise my one and only life, a life in which I am being loved by an Infinite Neighbor who requires only this: my response of love in return.

“The requirement to love” may sound like a contradiction, for how can love be required and still be love? And Spirit love means freedom, something buoyantly outgoing, not some duty or some requirement. So the requirement of love is a paradox--an inescapable paradox that operates within the action of loving God and neighbor. Such action is buoyantly free and yet, at the same time, required. Freely loving God and neighbor is my true self, my authentic self which I may buoyantly be. And, at the same time, being my authentic, buoyant self is required, required by the Infinite, required over against all the protestations of my finite ego. For to be my authentic self is to die to my finite ego and to be raised up into an unending process of finite ego reconstruction.

3. Spirit Love and the Infinite Expansion of the Self

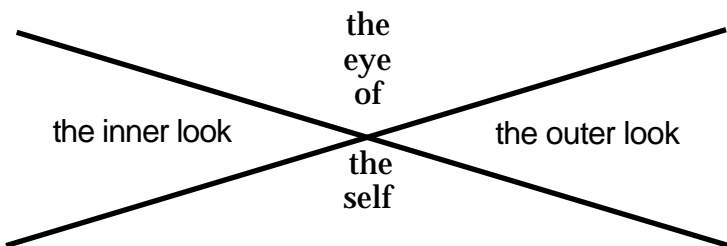
Perhaps Spirit loving begins with realizing that I am not the only self-aware being in the universe. I confront other human beings who are also there as self-aware beings. And these neighboring beings not only enrich my life with their services, their insights, and their practical supports for my creativity, they also place limits on my life. They possess a perspective different from mine, a perspective which asks me, perhaps, to abandon or to deepen my own perspective. They are not always helping me with my projects; they may be part of the resistance against which my projects must work. Each other human being limits me as well as sustains me. To seriously confront another human being and to seriously affirm that person as a person means that I must die to the naive egoism that wishes to be unlimited by other self-aware beings. Such a death, however, is an expansion of my selfhood.

The Intimate Self

However disquieting the limitations of other persons may be upon my wishes and my energy, these neighbors are beings who expand my sense of myself. If I refuse to open myself and take in my neighbors, I am opting for a reduced self. I am limiting the scope of my own selfhood to the realm of my own interior whims, desires and thoughts. When I take other persons into my life, I become a “bigger” me. Many children learn to do this quite trustingly. Too soon, most adults cease being this wholesome quality of children.

Nevertheless, I have become the particular “me” which I now am through forging the many neighbor-relationships that are part of my life history. I am a relationship with my parents and/or my first caretakers. I am a relationship with siblings, friends, teachers, mates, best friends, enemies. These persons not only comprise my outer world, they also occupy my inner world as dialogues that go on all the time. I am a swirl of dialogues with the persons who have made up my life. This swirl of dialogues has given me the chance to create a perspective of my own. When I have discovered my freedom to do this and thus have distinguished myself from the surrounding herd, I have become an individual self.

When I have become a self, I can, in my daily experience, be aware that I am an “eye” of selfhood behind my physical eyes. This eye of the self looks inwardly and outwardly.



I want to make sure that you understand the very simple experience I am pointing to with this diagram. Close your biological eyes and “look” inward. See the thoughts, feelings, dialogues, etc., that go on inside your being. Who is doing this seeing? The eye of the self. Now open your biological eyes and look outwardly. See the humans, the other living beings, the inanimate forms around you. Who, behind your biological eyes, is doing this looking? The eye of the self.

Just as biological eyes cannot see themselves unless they look in a mirror, so the eye of the self does not see itself directly. The self cannot see itself except in the mirrors it can find in the realm

of its outward looking or in the realm of its inward looking. Our individual neighbors give us feedback on who we are. Our inner feelings, thoughts, dialogues, choices, and resolves also inform us. If we had no neighbors in our lives, we would have no sense of who we are. If we had no inwardness in which we could process responses to our neighbors, we would also have no sense of who we are. Each self, your self or my self, is intimately connected with its individual neighbors. We might view our capacity for aloneness as our capacity for self-aware and self-initiated relationships with our neighbors. Our capacity for solitude becomes greater as we become more aware of the world of beings that are our neighbors. And if you or I have become a person with an enormous capacity for solitude, this capacity need not be viewed as the opposite of connections with our outward neighbors. Rather, our most profound solitude is also our most profound capacity for self-aware relationships with the beings that are outwardly our neighbors.

The Social Self

Not only individual humans but also whole human societies are our neighbors. The United States is my neighbor. Mexico is my neighbor. Canada is my neighbor. Every society on the planet is my neighbor. Every sub-culture is my neighbor--Polish and Hispanic, youth and elders, old-timers and newcomers. Every race of human beings is my neighbor. Every religious group is my neighbor. Every economic, political, and cultural part of every human society is my neighbor.

A society is a different sort of neighbor than a singular human being. A society is more than just people; a society is a commonality of social forms: economic systems, political formats, languages, customs, moralities, wisdoms, skills, styles of life, religions, and more. Such social forms are created through time by those who live within them. A social commonality is not just human beings, but a humanly invented array of social forms that are being practiced as an ongoing activity by the humans that comprise this commonality.

All the social commonalities which we encounter in our lives are being neighbors to us. Our own society gives us our language, our artistic sensibilities, our mathematics, our science, our human wisdoms, our economy, our polity. Our own society provides us forms for thinking and formats for living. Without some sort of social commonality, we would be totally unconscious of our specifically human capabilities. Try to imagine what your life would be like without the

art forms and languages with which you think and communicate. Our society not only nurtures us in our human potentials, it defends us (or attempts to defend us) from harm by other persons and by alien societies. Experiencing a social commonality is different from experiencing another human being in a one-to-one relationship. We do not have personal intimacy with Brazil or with the United States. When we encounter a society, our own or another, we face a commonality of social forms.

Not only our own society, but other societies function as our neighbors. They may help sustain our society. They may also limit and criticize our society. They may question the adequacy of our society by simply being a different way of doing society and thus showing us that our own society is not the only way society can be done. Alien societies may limit us by taking our economic resources, or by flooding us with immigrants, or by restraining our activities, or even by conducting warfare against us.

Societies other than our own also enrich us by helping us find our freedom from the herd mentalities of our own society. Alien societies bring us ways of living we would never have known if our experience had been limited to our native society.

Societies, our own and others, are our neighbors. These social commonalities give us a larger self than we would have if intimate one-to-one relationships were the whole of our experience.

The Ecological Self

In addition to human individuals and human societies, our neighbors include every species of plant and animal life, also fungal life and microbial life. The Earth as a whole is our neighbor. The Earth's living systems and its inanimate systems are neighbors to us. Earth's moon and the other planets, moons, and asteroids in our solar system are our neighbors. The sun is our neighbor. All the stars and gas clouds in our galaxy are our neighbors. The other galaxies are our neighbors. The entire cosmos--moving in its expanding vastness into ever new and unrepeatably futures is our neighbor.

Our nonhuman living neighbors benefit us, make our life possible, sustain it, enrich it. They also limit our lives. Every species of life applies pressures upon us. In order to live, we are required to resist them, avoid them, escape them, or compromise with them. In the end, the worms

and the microbes eat and turn our flesh into their own form of livingness. Yet these same beings enable all life to flourish; they enable the life that feeds us.

Inanimate beings also benefit us and limit us. Where would we be without the light and heat of the sun? Yet the sun is dangerous, hot, violently radiant: to survive, we must keep our distance. A rock may be beautiful or useful, but it can also stub my toe or fall upon my head. Every inanimate being, just like every animate being, limits us. All neighbors limit us as well as sustain us and enrich us. Each natural being is our neighbor, caring for us. Each natural being requires responses from us, choices about how we are going to be neighbor or refuse to be neighbor to all these natural beings.

So what does it mean to love all these neighbors? What does it mean to love their limiting of us as well as their sustaining and enriching us? By stretching our understanding of what we mean by "neighbors," we also stretch our understanding of what we mean by "love." And this stretching of the scope of our neighbors moves us closer to a clear understanding of what the Christian heritage has been pointing to with the term "Spirit Self"--that self which does indeed love God-and-neighbor.

The Spirit Self

When we consider loving the Infinite Neighbor--that Void, Fullness, and Total Demand which I described above, we find ourselves living the "Final Expansion" of selfhood. This Spirit Self which loves God and each and every neighbor is a different sort of self than the intimate self, the social self, or even the ecological self.

In our scientific efforts to picture the origin and development of the entire cosmos, we have brought ourselves, professional scientist and amateur scientist alike, to many experiences of the Awesome Wholeness of Being. When I was growing up, I was taught to picture the universe as a great clock, a machine dependably moving through its cycles of motion. But on this side of the Einsteinian revolution in physics, a new picture has emerged. Space is no longer a static, infinite extension in three directions. Space is conceived as a bounded reality, like the surface of a sphere. If we can imagine this sphere to be expanding, then the amount of space on its surface is expanding. This is the picture current physics asks us to envision: all the galaxies of the cosmos are moving away from each other in an

expanding three dimensional space that is of finite amount.

And if we were to run time backwards, all the galaxies would be observed to recede to a single point. So there was a time in the past when all space was reduced to a single point. This was the time when time began, when space began. This spaceless, timeless point in space-time is called the Big Bang. One micro-instant after the Big Bang, when the entire cosmos was still tiny, everything was very hot. Can we picture all the energy of all the present galaxies being contained in one cubic centimeter of space? It was very, very, very hot.

Such a hot moment has not existed since. Nor has any era of the cosmic expansion been repeated. Each era is a new and unrepeatable cosmic reality providing the foundation upon which the next era then emerges. This picture is very different from the picture of a cosmic clock which goes round and round in ever repeating cycles. Perhaps an experience of Awe has seeped into your consciousness as you have contemplated this vast, expanding cosmos. Perhaps you are encountering what we might call "The Awesome" as you visualize such a picture of the overallness of which you are a part.

I find my Awe-filling wonder further deepened by the realization that the human species is capable of having awareness of this entire cosmic development. One might say that we, the human species, are the cosmos manifesting its capacity to be aware of itself and to celebrate its entire existence. This awareness, this capacity for awareness, is an aspect of the cosmos dwelling in me. As I contemplate this capacity, I can experience myself entering an interior state of Awe while I, at the same time, experience outwardly the objective Awesomeness of the cosmos.

Now I want to suggest that such moments of Awe can be understood as experiences of the Final Expansion of human selfhood. In relating to the Infinite Neighbor, we find ourselves in states of selfhood that partake of the Infinite. That which can relate to the Infinite partakes of the Infinite. The Final Expansion of human selfhood is a relationship with the Infinite. I am not talking about something occult or unusual. I am not talking about peak experiences or the climax of some mystical path. I am talking about an everyday experience. Whenever we are in Awe we are relating to the Awesome, to the Infinite. Awe is the breath of the Infinite flowing within our finite states of selfhood. And Awe is being experienced every time our current states of selfhood die and

every time our deep freedom manages to create some new aspect of our finite selfhood. As our finite ego experiences birth & death & birth & death & birth & death, we are being made aware of the Infinite Reality that requires of us this flux.

This awareness of our Infinite relatedness is an experience of a Selfhood which is not synonymous with our finite thinking, feeling, and willing. It is an experience of Great Thinks, Great Feels, and Great Resolves acting through our ordinary thinking, feeling, and resolving. Whenever we are in Awe, we have discovered Spirit. We have discovered Human Authenticity as a capacity for relationship to the Infinite. We have discovered, in Christian language, the Holy Spirit.

Spirit love is part of the Holy Spirit. Spirit love is that love which loves God-and-neighbor. Such love is a state of Awe. Spirit love is not the only state of Awe. Our finitude, when experienced fully, is experienced as a state of Awe. Our elemental freedom is a state of Awe. The freedom to detach ourselves from our old personalities can be called "the Awe of oblivion". The freedom to engage ourselves in being a new personality we have never been before can be called "the Awe of resurgence." The freedom to be tranquil with this never-ending process of oblivion and resurgence, we might call "the Awe of trust" or "faith." New Testament Christianity probed very deeply into this theme of trust. "Faith," as Jesus and his earliest followers used this term, means trusting that God loves us--that is, trusting that the Void, Fullness, and Total Demand of the Infinite Neighbor is always working for our highest good, our best selfhood, our most wondrous happiness.

Furthermore, the New Testament is filled with stories and teachings about forgiveness. A big part of the meaning of "trusting God's love for us" is trusting that God forgives us, welcomes us home to our true Reality after our departures into all our "far countries" of estrangement, illusion, and rebellion. When I am trusting in the ongoing affirmation and forgiveness of the Infinite Neighbor, I participate in a state of consciousness in which I really do experience myself as loved by the "Determiner of my Destiny." When that ever-present, inescapable Reality which is always moving towards me is seen by me as the love of God, such *love for me* awakens and nurtures within me my response of *love towards God*. My ongoing responses now become Spirit love for the Infinite Neighbor and for all the finite neighbors the Infinite Neighbor is giving me. Spirit love is my response, but this response is made possible within me by God's love towards me, and by the

fact that I was created to be Spirit love in the first place. These are basic New Testament teachings; but more than that, they are descriptions of the way living within the Awe-dimension of human existence actually works.

The relation of God's forgiveness to the emergence of Spirit love is pictured in one of the stories about Jesus in the New Testament. Jesus is a lunch guest in the home of a religious leader when a woman known to be a harlot comes into the room and begins washing Jesus' feet with her tears and wiping them with her hair. (Though this picture may look like another instance of womanly subservience to a male overlord, this was not its meaning in the mind of this woman, nor of Jesus, nor of the pharisee.) The pharisee cringes at this woman's behavior, believing that Jesus should be aware of what sort of woman is touching him.

But Jesus said to his host, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Speak on, Teacher," he said. "Two men were in debt to a money lender: one owed him five hundred silver pieces and the other fifty. As neither had anything to pay with, he let them both off. Now, which will love him most?" Simon replied, "I should think the one that was let off most." "You are right," said Jesus. Then turning to the woman, he said to Simon, "You see this woman? I came to your house: you provided no water for my feet; but this woman has made my feet wet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss; but she has been kissing my feet ever since I came in. You did not anoint my head with oil; but she has anointed my feet with myrrh. And so, I tell you, her great love proves that her many sins have been forgiven; where little has been forgiven, little love is shown."

(Luke 7:40-47, The New English translation)

Simon, we can suppose, was indeed a righteous man by the standards of his religious culture. And Jesus does not despise this. His sayings simply probe beneath such righteousness to a deeper sense of what true righteousness is. If Simon had seen the egoism and estrangement in his disgust for this unrighteous woman, he would have experienced more to be forgiven of and he would have had more love toward God, others, and the messenger, Jesus, who pronounced and embodied trust in God's forgiveness.

Concerning the woman, it is clear that it was not her love that brought her forgiveness. It was the other way around. Her experience of being forgiven turned loose the fountains of Spirit love in her life. She focuses her love on Jesus because he was the one through whom she became aware

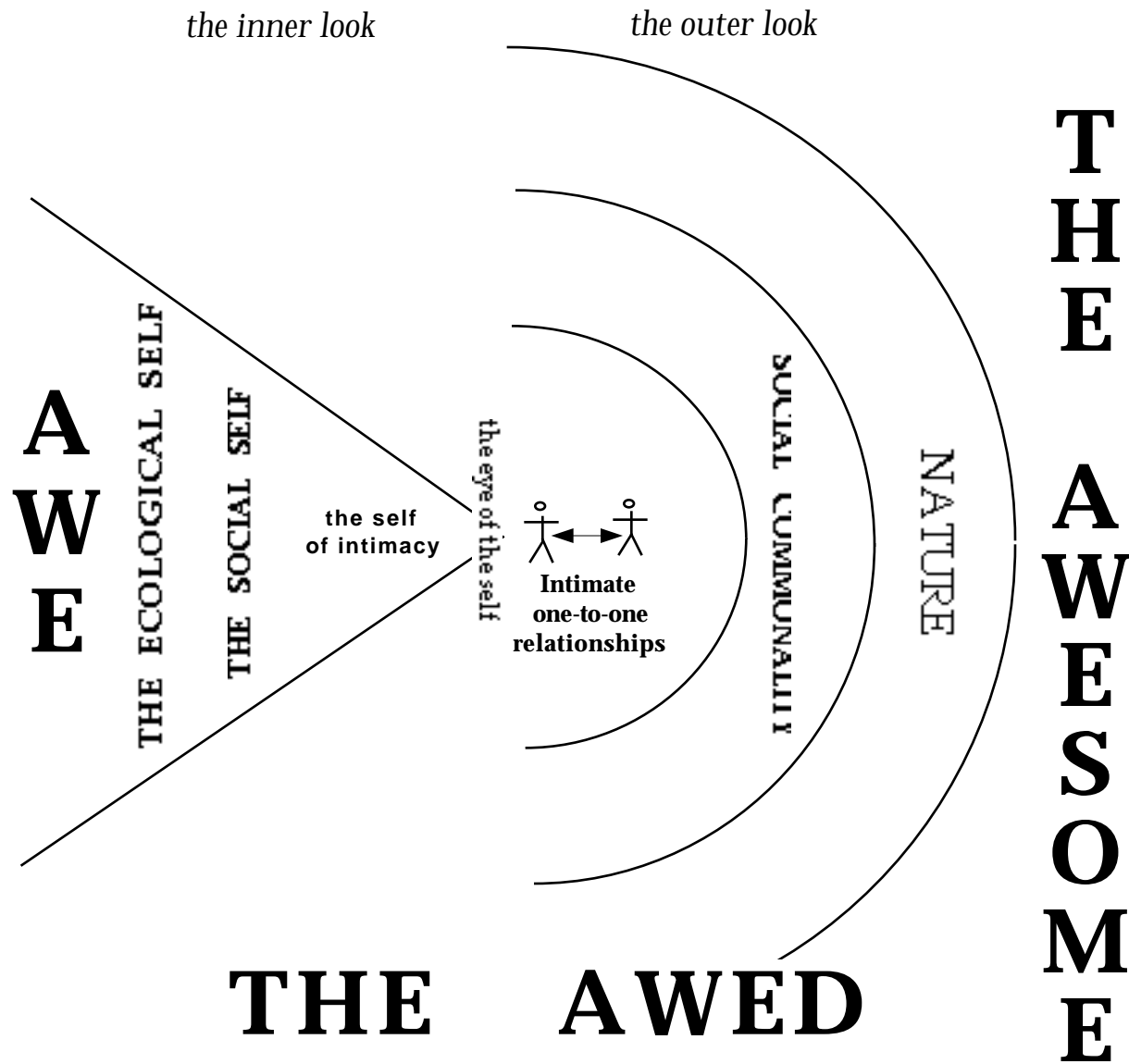
of her forgiveness. But the love of which she is now full, is not for Jesus only. This story depicts for us a forgiven woman who is now full of her own essential Spirit love for herself, for all her neighboring beings, and indeed for God.

We cannot love a God who is only judgment on our estrangements. The God Jesus pointed to was indeed the Wholeness of Being, the mysterious overallness of Reality, the source, limiter, sustainer and ender of our lives. And this God, by simply being the Reality from which we are estranged in our horrible egoisms, certainly judges us to be in the wrong. But if this were our whole perception of God, we could not love God. We cannot love that which totally rejects us. God's forgiveness is a "welcome home" to Reality. This forgiveness operates in spite of our flights to our far countries of unreality. Forgiveness is simply the truth about God. The dawning of this forgiveness in our lives and our acceptance of it restores us to the full flow of Reality. This flow includes our own deep selves, and our deep selves include Spirit love for God, the Infinite Neighbor, and for all those beings which the Infinite Neighbor gives us to be our finite neighbors.

So like faith and freedom, the love which loves God-and-neighbor is a state of Awe. Spirit love is part of the Final Expansion of human selfhood. Spirit love is not the same as emotional love, sexual love, familial love, filial love, or any form of finite connection between human beings. Spirit love is, however, a connection between human beings. Spirit love is also a connection between human beings and all non-human living beings as well as inanimate things. Basically, Spirit love is a conscious connection with that Infinite Neighbor who gives to us and takes from us each and every finite neighbor.

So Spirit love as it operates between human beings is very different from all other forms of love. The finite forms of love, when Spirit love is not operative, become lust, jealousy, rage, possessiveness, enmeshment, codependence, and other liberty-destroying addictions. When Spirit love is present, then all the finite forms of love are healed; they become resources of warmth and energy and sensitivity. Spirit love cannot be reduced to these other forms of loving, yet Spirit love mingles with them and affirms them as authentic dynamics in human nature. Spirit love also disciplines the other forms of loving, asking the ego and its finite desires to accept appropriate limitations as well as appropriate satisfactions.

The diagram at the top of page 8 pictures how Spirit love and all the other dynamics of Awe surround the dynamics of finitude.



Awe and the Awesome are the third and first “faces” of the Christian experience of God. “The Awed” is the second “face” of the Christian experience of God. But before I grapple with that complex and controversial second “face,” I need to clarify how Awe and the Awesome take place in the rubric of history.

4. Spirit Love and the I--Thou Dialogue in Time

The subject of history provides a context for the further clarification of the Christian experience of God. The experience of God, as understood by some Asian and Western mystics, takes us out of history. In such a perspective, we can still picture ourselves as returning to history from our mystical empowerments, but the history to which we return is then frequently seen as no more than a place where all things pass away. While it is true that

human choices matter. Both the Old and the New Testament understanding of God emphasizes the fact that human choices matter. There is ethical importance to each and every specific choice. And this ethical importance is not something separate from the experience of God, but part of the experience of God.

As Martin Buber helped us to understand more deeply, the Bible emphasizes the metaphor “I--Thou” in its description of the God experience. In biblical lore, that final, outwardly Almighty ongoingness is symbolized as a “Thou” with whom “I” interact rather than as an Infinite Ocean into which I melt. In biblical lore, the symbol “it” was not chosen because an “I-it” relationship was not meant. The symbol “I-Thou” was appropriate because a personal encounter demanding ethical response was meant. An Infinite “Thou” encounters me in and through the specific events in my life, and I am being provided by this Final

Dialogue Partner with the freedom to respond. Furthermore, my response matters; that is, the next action of this Almighty Thou will be one thing rather than some other thing depending on how I respond now to the current action of this Thou. A meaningful dialogue is going on here. If I get up from my slavery and follow Moses out of Egypt, I will get one destiny. If I remain here in Egypt, I will have another destiny. If I preserve the Mosaic legal insight that all persons, kings included, are equal before these commandments intuited by Moses, I and my people will have one destiny. If I allow this Mosaic breakthrough to decay and be forgotten, I and my people will have another destiny. Yahweh waits to decide what Yahweh will do until I decide what I will do right now in the concrete choices that face me in history. In a fully elaborated Christian perspective, this emphasis on history is crucial in our understanding of what is meant by the word "God."

This "God of history" is pictured not only as the initiator of all cosmic realities, but also as an ongoing actor in the everyday specifics of natural and human history. Each being, in being a neighbor to me, does so as part of the action of the Infinite Neighbor upon my life. Friends and enemies, intimate friends, societies, and nature as a whole, come to me day by day as the content of the Infinite Neighbor's action upon my life, requiring of me specific responses to each of these contents and thereby to the Infinite Neighbor. It is not that we meet neighbors over here and God over there. No, we meet God only through meeting neighbors and we meet God nowhere else than through the neighbors that confront us. "God-and-neighbor" is one encounter, not two.

Some mystical thinkers seem to imply that God is met interiorly and not through our outward neighbors; however, this is simply not true. Our experiences of Awe or Holy Spirit are not separate from our experiences of our neighbors. Holy Spirit is simply the Awe which is occasioned in our lives by the Awe-filling events in our outward experience. The Holy Spirit is, in biblical imagery, the Spirit of the God of history. This Spirit is the Spirit which bubbles up within us as we externally meet our neighbors and our Infinite Neighbor.

So, in the biblical heritage, ethical obligation to "God-and-neighbor" is simply part of the experience of God. God acts upon us through our neighbors, and we respond to God through actions with, toward, and upon our neighbors. If we love God, we must also love our neighbors with whom God confronts us and through whom we are confronting God, the Infinite Neighbor.

All these awarenesses make history and the specific course of history a crucial subject in Christian heritage.