

Chapter 3

The First Exodus of Christian Community

Jesus did not intend to start a new religion. He saw himself as leading a Jewish revitalization movement. He saw himself worshiping the same God as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the same God as Moses and the Prophets. While he made a controversial critique of the religious establishment of his day, this same bold Spirit can be seen in every major prophet of Israel as well as in such persons as the Buddha and Lao Tzu. While Jesus seems to reject the Jewish law as practiced in his time, he actually supported the law of Moses in its essence. He never questioned the notion that Israel was the people of God: he called his disciples and followers to be the people of God in a renewed sense. Strange as this may seem to many contemporary, conservative Christians, Jesus was from birth to death an utterly faithful Jew.

1. The Jewishness of Primitive Christianity

Beginning with the ministry of Paul and other preachers of the “good news” to the Gentile world, Christianity, as a religion, began to separate from Judaism. Yet for his entire life, Paul saw himself as a Jew, indeed, as the true continuation of the Hebrew heritage. The Christianity which Paul was helping to create was, in his mind, nothing more than true Judaism. To be “in Christ” was to be a true Jew. To be “in Christ” was to act like Abraham acted. The established Jewish religion, according to Paul, was not acting out of Abraham’s faith. It was not acting as Abraham did, but out of a legalistic and boastful holiness which Paul saw as a violation of the entire Jewish heritage.

So when did Christianity separate from Judaism and become a separate religion? We can say, fairly conclusively, that after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 C.E., both religions changed into forms that made their differences as religions more clearly defined. Up until that time, and perhaps for two more decades, Christianity was simply a “new way” of being Jewish. A vigorous theological discussion was taking place about the meaning of being Jewish, but this dialogue was taking place within a Hebraic culture whose basic traditions were assumed and well known by all the participants in these sometimes stormy debates.

But after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, the symbolic center of the Jewish nation and culture, the more conserving members of the Jewish people began to define the boundaries of Judaism more specifically in order to maintain the survival of Jewish religion and culture as they became an increasingly dispersed religious group within a more hostile Gentile environment. This made the Christian way of being Jewish a less tolerable ingredient within the newly forming Judaism. Christians were now deeply involved with Gentiles and with the Gentile culture. Their converts had, in large measure, come from uncircumcised Gentiles who were, though part of synagogue life and Hebrew culture, not ethnic Jews nor had they become Jews by being circumcised. They had become Jews by attraction to the ethical and social intensities of the Jewish heritage and then had become, in their minds, “true Jews” through their conversion to the Christ way. These Christ-way Jews were willing to accommodate more with Gentile culture than those elements of Jewish practice who were committed to pulling away for the sake of cultural survival.

Out of this struggle two religions emerged, both of which were quite different from the more pluralistic Hebrew culture in which the Christian breakthrough had been born.

We who count ourselves as descendants of the Christian wing of this split, find it difficult to imagine what being a Christian was like when the Christian community was still fully Jewish. What did Paul’s words *koinonia* (fellowship) or *ekklesia* (gathering) point to in terms of active religious practice? Christians were not a formal church organization in the modern or medieval sense. Christians were part of the wider synagogue life. Jewish religious folk met on the Sabbath (which in our terms meant Friday night and all day Saturday until sunset). At these weekly gatherings, the entire Torah was read once each year from rolling scrolls. The Torah is comprised of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, and was known, at that time, as the five books of Moses. The Jewish liturgical year was anchored in the specific texts that were read, year after year, on the same sabbath. In ritual elaboration of these Torah texts, Jewish people participated in regular annual festivals--Passover, Pentecost (Shavuot), Ninth of Ab, New Year (Rosh Hashanah), Atonement (Yom Kippur), Tabernacles (Sukkot), Dedication (Hanukkah), and Purim. Christians also participated in these festivals. And each sabbath they heard someone read the assigned Torah text. They also listened to other readings from the prophets, the psalms, and other writings. This was the back-

bone, so to speak, of their religious practice. Then on the first day of the week (which probably meant Saturday night), Christians apparently met again as a gathering of the Christ-way. At these meetings they listened to preachers like Paul and others who interpreted the entire Jewish heritage through the Jesus Christ lens.

The Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong in his book *Liberating the Gospels* (subtitled: *Reading the Gospels through Jewish Eyes*), gives us an accessible presentation of the elaborate scholarship of Michael G. Goulder on the formation of the gospels Mark, Matthew, and Luke-Acts. While all scholars do not support Goulder's thesis, I find Spong's presentation of his views very convincing.¹

Goulder's thesis is that these Gospels came into being as liturgical material to be read each week in conjunction with the Torah reading for that week. Mark's Gospel, he suggests, was written to be read from Rash Hashanah (New Year) in the fall until just after Passover in the Spring. Each segment of Mark is an interpretation through the Jesus Christ lens of the Torah passage read that week. Matthew's Gospel and Luke's Gospel are each longer than Mark because they were written to correspond with Torah passages throughout the entire year.

So, according to this analysis, these three books were not written to be biographies of Jesus or to pull together scattered bits of Christian writing. They were written for training new converts and nurturing the Christian community week after week, year after year, in an ordered liturgical practice. The concerns of these writers were theological: they were doing heritage interpretation and giving inclusive meaning within their community to personal, social, and cosmological existence. They were interpreting Jesus in the light of the Hebrew scriptures and they were interpreting the Hebrew scriptures in the light of Jesus, seen as the Christ.

Not only does this perspective give us a means for better understanding the literary genius of these three gospel writers, but it firmly grounds the extent to which primitive Christianity was a Jewish religion. Mark, Matthew, and Luke-Acts were probably written between 70 and 95 C.E. They came into being toward the end of an intensely Jewish period in Christian formation.

The Fourth Gospel, which bears the name of John, was probably written around 100 C.E. It is a unique form of literature, quite different from the

first three gospels. Most importantly, the fourth gospel was written for people less familiar with Jewish heritage and more conversant with the issues of Greco-Roman culture. For example, in this gospel we find phrases like these: "Jews and Samaritans, it should be noted, do not use vessels in common" or "It was near the time of the Passover, the great Jewish festival." Mark, Matthew, and Luke had no need to make such explanations to the people for whom they were writing.

In the first chapter of the Gospel of John, we encounter that strange Greek term "logos" usually translated "Word." To the Greek thinker, "logos" meant something like "the meaning of it all." This was a term for that comprehensive or ultimate truth often sought by members of the Greek culture. John starts off his gospel with the claim that this cosmic logos became flesh in Jesus and furthermore in the flesh of those who received Jesus as their Truth. In other words, "The meaning of it all," according to the Gospel of John, can be embodied in a human reality which is standing right before you. Later in this gospel, John's completely fictitious and flamboyant Jesus states that those who eat his fleshly body will live eternally. Many of those standing by said, "This is more than we can stomach!" (6.60) Perhaps a more colloquial translation would read "Yuk, this makes us want to vomit." Clearly, John is making a direct assault on Greek dualism. The author of the fourth gospel is writing this wild drama to clarify that human holiness or authenticity symbolized by "Jesus Christ" is not a spiritual or mental reality existing on some non-material "plane." Jesus Christ is a Truth in which Spirit and matter join. In this sense, the Fourth Gospel has a Hebrew way of looking at things, yet its message is being articulated to a community of Christians and/or potential Christians who have grown up with Greek questions and Greek answers informing and fogging their religious minds.

The fourth Gospel might be said to mark the beginning of the Greco-Roman or Gentile period of doing Christian theology. As this trend became established, Christianity became a separate religion from Judaism. Nevertheless, it carried its Hebrew roots with it. This new religious practice retained the Old Testament writings as scripture. Its practitioners continued to call themselves the people of God and spoke of themselves as a new Israel having a new covenant with the same God.

First century Christians even claimed that the Jesus Christ happening was a New Exodus. So understood, Christianity can be viewed as a

¹ For a fuller view of this thesis, I highly recommend John Shelby Spong's book, *Liberating the Gospels* (HarperSan Francisco: 1996).

universalized Judaism, a Judaism with greater religious flexibility, a Judaism more open to religious innovation and less committed to religious conservation.

So while Christianity, as a religious practice, eventually made its exodus from the religious practices of Judaism, this Christian exodus claimed to be a reassertion of the Spirit essence of the original Exodus from Egypt. Christianity viewed its new exodus as an exodus from the body of sinful humanity into the body of Christ. Such language may sound “spiritual” to us and thus seem to us to be the opposite of a sociological exodus from Egypt with its quite practical invention of a new society in the wilderness. But the contribution of Moses was not understood by early Jews or early Christians to be merely a sociological innovation; his contribution was seen as a deeply Spiritual breakthrough. Egypt became a symbol (for Moses and for those who revered Moses) of human life conducted in an unjust and unspiritual manner. The religious innovations of Moses for his communal experiment in the desert were based on a new Spirit: obedience to that Almighty which grants freedom, rather than obedience to a human civilization which imposes slavery. So understood, the first Exodus was a Spirit reality. Moses, like Jesus, was leading an exodus from sin toward Human Authenticity. Furthermore, Jesus, like Moses, was creating religious community. Jesus and the early church were far more sociological in their concerns than is often seen by individualistic contemporary Christians.

The major prophets of Israel also emphasized the Spirit essence of the Exodus. A true Israelite, according to them, was not a matter of birth and social conditioning. Being a true Israelite was a matter of obedience to the Wholeness of Being as that Wholeness was still operative in the course of historical events. The true Israelites were those who obeyed God, those who adapted themselves to what God was doing in the actual course of events. The true Israel obeyed the principles of Mosaic justice because doing otherwise was becoming just like the other nations of the world. The prophets saw and saw correctly that their kings and aristocracies were recreating the same Egypt-wise society from which Moses had led their ancestors. How could Israel fulfill its destiny of being a blessing to the whole world if Israel was indistinguishable from that world?

The Babylonian destruction of the Jerusalem temple and the forcing of a large portion of the population into Babylonian Exile provoked the

“prophetic impetus” within Israel to clarify still further the essence of being Israel. An unknown prophet whose writings appear as the later chapters of Isaiah made it clear that the true Israel was a suffering servant. Israel’s task was to bring realism to the peoples of the Earth no matter what the cost. So this was the fuller meaning of all of Israel’s suffering. Israel had indeed sinned and had paid a price in suffering for that sin, but Israel had by now “paid double for its sins.” All that “extra suffering” came because Israel was being and doing its calling to be Israel. This prophet went on to call Israel to pick up its broken bodies and discouraged spirits and accept the opportunities now being offered them to return to their homeland and do the hard work of rebuilding a fresh presence of servant peoplehood amidst the other peoples of the world. When we contemplate the words of this prophet and the actions of this prophetic movement, we can still feel, if we are sensitive, the Spirit courage, the Awe, the trust, the freedom, and the compassion that was present in this movement.

Jesus was a manifestation of this prophetic Spirit. After his death he was viewed, in the eyes of his followers, as the suffering servant. He was, in this sense, the true Israel who was calling others to join him in being the suffering servant people on behalf of the whole Earth. Jesus, like Moses, had initiated an exodus of servant peoplehood and had thereby further illuminated the meaning of the Mosaic exodus.

If we use the imagery of the transfiguration story, Jesus dazzled with the same dazzle as Moses and the prophets. And perhaps we bigotry-prone Christians would be well advised to also view the transfiguration story the other way around: Moses and the prophets dazzled with the same dazzle as Jesus. They too were offspring of the Living God. They too were virgin born. They too participated in that transfiguration which was also a resurrection of their bodily life into a living presence in the remembering community. They too departed from the fallen life of Adam and Eve and joined in the life of the Authentic Human who must live life in this fallen world as a suffering servant. They too have “ascended” (metaphorically speaking) and live on forever as part of that quality of essential living that forever judges the quick and the dead.

In other words, Moses and the prophets and their loyal followers were all “in Christ.” I repeat, “in Christ” is not a “religious” category meaning “in a religious congregation who remembers Jesus.” “In Christ” is a “spiritual” category, and it includes everyone who embodies authentic Spirit.

If Christians were to understand fully that Moses and the prophets are “in Christ,” this would spell the end of Christian bigotry toward Jewish people. We might come to realize that good Christian religion and good Jewish religion are not opposing realities but complementary realities. Christianity, at its best, is a universalization of the best of Judaism. And Judaism, at its best, is a reminder to both Jews and Christians (and everyone else) that universal Spirit must always take on concrete religious form, must create community and fight for a place on Earth for that community to exist so that it can be a community of service for all peoples. This feisty persistence of Jewish concreteness is needed right now by those millions of individualistic modern Christians who think we can be Christian in some universalized abstract way which avoids the hard work of building Christian religious community, a religious community which properly serves the times in which we live with the full glories of the Christian breakthrough. I want to turn now to a further exploration of this subject of Christian religion building in the early centuries and now.

2. The Contentless Trinity and Christian Religious Content

“Spiritually speaking,” the Exodus from classical Judaism began with Jesus, even though “religiously speaking,” Christians remained Jews until late in the first century. Paul also led a sort of exodus from Judaism, for he was clear that Gentiles (which meant non-Jews) were experiencing the Spirit of Christ without becoming Jews in their cultic practices. Dealing with this issue required Paul to do some of his hardest thinking. Abandoning circumcision and other Jewish cultic practices was viewed as outlandish by many leaders of the early Christian movement, probably including Peter himself. Within the wider community of the Christ-way, this controversy came to a focus in the very practical issues of whether Gentile Christians needed to be circumcised and follow Jewish dietary laws. Paul vigorously defended the Gentile Christians from having to undergo such requirements. The important thing, Paul claimed, was neither circumcision nor uncircumcision, but the new Spirit which was being experienced “in Christ.”

The full radicality of Paul’s conclusions has been overlooked by most modern Christians. Most Christians today assume that Paul’s innovations meant that Jewishness was being rejected and Christianity, as a religious practice, was being put in its place. But the truth Paul was affirming went much deeper than that. Paul was saying that Spirit

is the important reality and that **religion of any kind is secondary**. Spirit is the authenticator of any religious practice. In order for Spirit or Awe to be lived in a practical way, it must be embodied in some form of religious practice; nevertheless, even those fresh religious embodiments remains secondary to the Awe they embody.

So the exodus being made from classical Judaism was not simply an exodus from Hebrew culture in favor of Greek culture and/or a more Gentile way of doing things. Rather, the Christian exodus was an exodus from every human culture and from the tendency of every human culture to take itself too seriously. The essence of the Christian proclamation and the Christian way of living was an exodus from all human culture into the life of the Spirit, a life of Awe, a life which each culture only partially expresses. The Spirit life is a life which no culture can ever fully express. The Spirit life can never be reduced to Hebrew or Greek culture--nor to any modern or future culture. The Spirit life can transform culture, making it more adequate as an expression of Spirit, but this transformation process never arrives at a culture which is synonymous with Spirit.

Though all good religion is an expression of Spirit, all religion is also a cultural phenomena. Each historical religious development is a part of some culture. Therefore, the concepts of Spirit and religion must always be kept separate in our minds and then related to each other in the proper manner. Primitive Christianity, being a genuine Spirit breakloose, was an exodus from all human culture, and therefore from all religion. Seeing this is key for understanding Christianity’s religious flexibility. The Christian community did not panic over the huge changes it undertook in moving from being a Jewish religion to being a Gentile religion. Why? Because the primitive Christian community contained within its consciousness the awareness that all religion was secondary to Spirit.

We do not see the glory of second and third century Christian living and thinking when we view those Gentile Christian religion-builders as inventors of the sort of thinking we see taking place today in our doctrinally-defensive Christian religious bodies. When we are trapped in some modern commitment to Christian doctrine or in some modern rebellion from Christian doctrine, we do not see how astonishingly innovative these early centuries of Christian formation actually were. Our modern doctrinalism did not exist at that time. When Christian theologizing moved out of its more Jewish modes of thought and into its more Greek modes of thought, this was a drastic shift in

doctrinal formation. What was going on there? How could they have been so flexible? Modern Christians tend to cling onto doctrinal formations that are 1000's of years old even when those formations are cryptic to them and do not actually influence their lives very much. But these second and third century Christians were willing to undertake vast doctrinal changes with relative equanimity even though they were extremely passionate about both the Hebrew and Greek phases of their religious practices. Why? How were such passion and such flexibility both possible?

To meaningfully answer this question, we must become clear that these early Christian thinkers were *talking about their actual lives* and that we modern Christians are, for the most part, talking about our religions and our religious securities.

The formation of second and third century thinking about the Christian Trinity is a case in point. We modern literalistic and doctrinaire Christians assume that these ancient foreparents were talking about God in heaven, when they were actually talking about their experience of God, here on Earth. Greek metaphysics, literally understood, is talking about God in heaven, but, in those early centuries, metaphysical thinking meant something very personal to those who were using this mode of thinking. To them, discussion about the Trinity was not abstract gibberish about a threefold Supreme Being off in heaven. To them, doing metaphysical thinking meant laying foundations for their practical ethical living.

How can we genuinely feel our way into what it was like for these second and third century living people? Let me attempt, in very simplified terms, to open a window into this distant past. As the Christian community began living its life more and more within Greco-Roman culture, it did not entirely forget its Hebrew roots: rather those roots were reinterpreted for the purpose of answering the spiritual and ethical questions of the Greco-Roman world in which they now lived. But the Christian community was also in tension with that Greek culture, just as it had been in tension with classical Judaism.

Much earlier, Paul had been aware of this dual tension when he coined these words: "For the Jews ask for miraculous proofs and the Greeks an intellectual panacea, but all we preach is Christ crucified--a stumbling block to the Jews and sheer nonsense to the Gentiles, . . ." (1 Corinthians 1:22-23) In the early third century, the Christian theologian Tertullian expressed this tension with Greek culture by celebrating the fact that the

Christian faith was "absurd" to the Greek mind. Yet Tertullian deeply affirmed Greek thoughtfulness. He was expressing, I believe, something we still struggle with to this day. We want a religion that makes sense of life, and good religion never makes sense of life: it only makes Awe.

The most noble aspect of the Greco-Roman culture was its continuing commitment to that profound thoughtfulness about human existence which took on lasting formulations with Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, who lived between 470 and 322 B.C.E. This thoughtfulness about life was divided into two modes of thinking: physics and metaphysics. Physics, in that day, meant all thinking that pertained to the material or crassly ordinary components of living. The suffix "meta" means "before," so "metaphysics" meant "before" physics. This "before" pointed to that part of thoughtfulness which dealt with those more profound matters that physics (all the empirical sciences) could not handle. The purpose of metaphysical thoughtfulness was very personal and practical, namely to provide a foundation in basic values for ethical living.

In the modern world we view metaphysical thinking as highly abstract, and because of our scientific-minded critique of metaphysics, we may view metaphysics as irrational and irrelevant. We may see, quite correctly, that metaphysical thought is not empirical thought but a kind of poetry. And we may be inclined to dismiss poetry as a very weak vehicle of truth compared to science.

Doctrinaire Christians, on the other hand, tend to see the metaphysical statements of second and third century Christian theology in literal, scientific terms. That is, they tend to view all talk about God the Father in heaven as if there really is a heaven and a male God who lives there. They tend to view all talk about God the Son (in heaven or on earth) as talk about an actual dual-being wholly God and wholly human. They tend to view all talk about God the Holy Spirit (from heaven and/or in us) as if some ethereal wind or fire did literally descend from heaven and enter our crass bodily beings.

At the end of the previous chapter, I suggested that the Triune experience of God, as developed in Christian heritage, might be summarized as: *The Awesome, the Awed Ones, and the Awe itself*. This contemporary way of stating the triune experience of God can help us understand what, in personal terms, second and third century Christian thinkers were grappling with in their strange metaphysical statements.

Suppose we accept the view that the Holy Spirit in Christian tradition, though pictured as a “person” or “face,” actually pointed to nothing more nor less than **trust**, **freedom**, and **love**--qualities that can be seen as states of Awe--states of being in living relationship with that Infinite All-powerful Oneness which confronts us in each and every moment of our actual living. Such Awe is turned loose within us by our ongoing encounters with the Awesome Infinite Neighbor. The Holy Spirit (that is, Awe) is that Spirit which breaks loose within us when we encounter this Almighty Otherness (that is, the Awesome). The Awe and the Awesome (Holy Spirit and Almighty) are two aspects of one experience.

Ancient Christianity located a **third face** of the experience of God right here in this passing “flesh” as the apostle Paul usually calls it. In other words, “Awed flesh” provides us an image for seeing more clearly how Jesus, viewed as the Christ, was seen as one third of the human experience of God.

What would it mean to say that the “flesh” is gathered up into the experience of God and made fully **the third part** of this sacred experience? Here is one clue for grasping why this notion has proved important: I remain in the flesh of my finite body while I am experiencing both the Almighty Awesomeness without and the Awe of Spirit within. The experience of the Awesome and the Awe is happening right along with my experience of the finite states of my inner selfhood and my experience of being confronted by all my finite neighbors. Here, in the flesh, and nowhere else, is where I experience both “God-the-Holy-Spirit,” and “God-the-Almighty.” I do not actually go off into some mystical realm to experience God and then return to my ordinary life. No, I never leave my ordinary life. I am bound to it. My consciousness cannot leave it either. Any dreams or trances or mystical states I may experience in the midst of my living are not literal journeys away from my ordinary life. Extraordinary states of consciousness are nothing more glamorous than extra-ordinarily passionate illuminations of my ordinary life carried out by my ordinary human consciousness. I never leave ordinary existence, and I do not return to my ordinary existence because I have never left it. Rather than talk about leaving and returning, the best of Trinitarian theology describes the Christian experience of God as having my ordinary life illuminated, healed, redeemed, or sanctified. Without going anywhere, my ordinary life is flooded with the Awe of Holy Spirit and confronted with the presence of that Awe-producing, Final, ongoing Almightyness. And, without going anywhere, my ordinary life is healed of its spiritual sickness.

And what is spiritual sickness? Spiritual sickness or “sin” is not finitude, but being estranged from Awed finitude. Finitude, from this perspective, should not be understood as a negative category. Sin is unawed finitude--finite states of consciousness which exclude Awe. And “Holiness,” in the Christian sense, is not an escape from finitude. Holiness is plain old finitude that is filled with Awe.

Restored humanity is Awed humanity. So, strange as it may seem to those of us who have set the Christian Trinity aside as baffling nonsense, this threefold description of the experience of God can be recovered in this very simple fashion: **the Awesome, the Awed, and the Awe itself**.

Obviously, these three dynamics go together as aspects of one experience. When Tertullian brought into Christian theology this view of the Christian God as three persons in one substance, he was not describing heavenly society, he was giving symbolic form to a profound threefoldedness in his own experience. Whether we use fresh terms like “the Awesome, the Awed, and the Awe” or the traditional language of Christianity, we must remember that our symbolic language is never what is most important. All religious language is just a finger pointing to the moon. The moon is what is important. And in this example “the moon” means these three ongoing life-dynamics that characterize our actual three-faced experience of G-G-God.

And here is an important corollary of this triune picture. It is humanity which has a capacity for Awe, but humanity is part of the natural world. Indeed, humanity is the natural world in its capacity for Awe. So The Awed One means more than Jesus, more than the Church, more than humanity. The Awed One means the entire natural cosmos, for the cosmos is being Awed whenever any part of humanity is Awed. The entire realm of finitude is being Awed when the Awesome creates Awe within humanity. Not only does humanity encounter the Awesome through the natural world, but the natural world, operating within humanity, is itself gathered up in the human experience of Awe and the Awesome. These insights provide us grounds for asserting that “the holy” or “the sacred” includes every natural being and every natural event. Without humanity, no Awe is experienced, but when humanity experiences Awe, the whole of nature is gathered up into the experience. Christians need look no further than this for a Christian foundation for an ecological ethics that challenges the degradation and devastation of nature proceeding almost unchecked in our human-centered and Spirit-fleeing culture.

So, holding these images in mind, I want to probe more deeply into the fuller meanings of Jesus Christ seen as the second “face” of the ever present threefoldedness of each and every human experience of God. All three faces of the one experience of God are further elaborated in the triangular chart on the facing page.

The name in the center of this chart, “The Human Experience of God,” is the name for the entire chart. The three names in the centers of the three next smaller triangles are the names for each of the three thirds of this whole, The Awesome, The Awed, and Awe itself. Similarly, the next nine triangles are three sets of three subparts of those three main parts. And finally, the 27 smallest triangles are subparts of the nine. Obviously, this chart is a product of the human mind--a temporal chart both in its organization and in its specific titles. Nevertheless, this chart (imperfect though it may be) can (like the concept of the Trinity itself) assist our order-hungry human minds to think more clearly about the human experience of the ineffable mystery of God.

In chapter one of this book, I gave some illustrative grounding to the terms “Void,” “Fullness,” and “Total Demand.” I also gave some illustrative grounding to the terms “Trust,” “Love,” and “Freedom.” (For more illustrative grounding, see chapter 1 of my book *Great Thinks, Great Feels and Great Resolves*.) I now want to do some illustrative grounding for the right hand third of this chart: the part entitled “The Awed.” Notice that this third triangle is also entitled “The Authentic Human,” and “The Trusting Off-spring.” We could also call this third of the chart “Jesus Christ.”

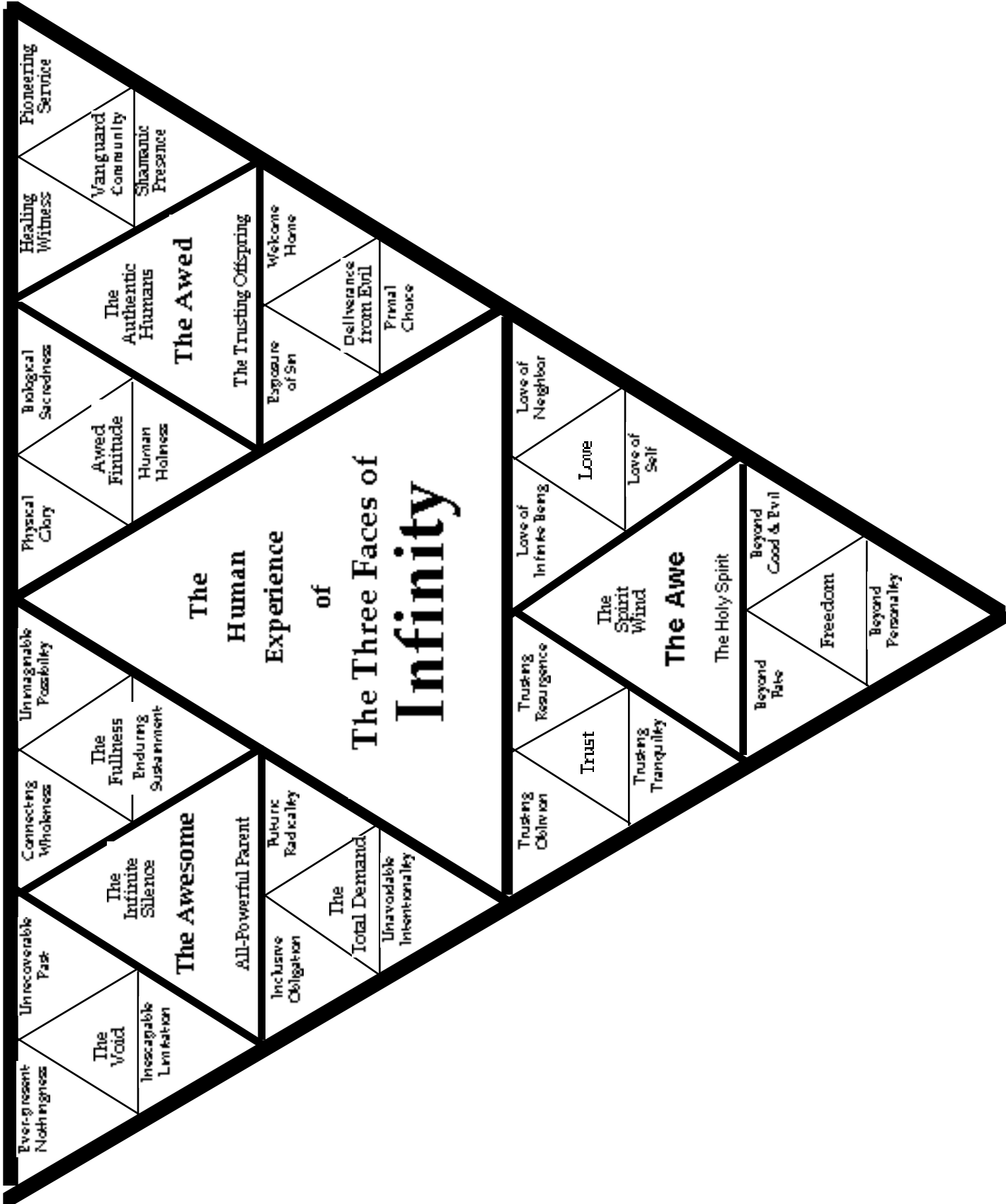
The **upper left third** of “The Awed” triangle points to Jesus Christ as the healing event, as the deliverance from Satan’s power. The healing event can be described as this threefold process: (1) being made aware of our estrangement (or sin) and its essence as despair, (2) being made aware of our welcome home to the Reality we have been despairing over, and (3) making that primal choice to accept this acceptance of us in spite of our despairing lives and thus enter into trust rather than into the flight and rebellion that always leads to despair. I have discussed this healing dynamic rather thoroughly in chapter 3 of *Great Thinks, Great Feels, and Great Resolves*.

The **lower third** of the “The Awed” triangle points to Jesus Christ as the sanctified human, as the Awed finite person, as that part of the cosmos which is capable of Awe and is open to being Awed. The entire physical sphere is taken into this

sanctification. All rocks, mountains, planets, stars, galaxies, are holy beings. Holy also are all molecules, elements, sub-atomic wave/particles, all laws of energy exchange, and any other aspect of the physical sphere which we humans have named or might one day name. Similarly, the entire biological sphere is included in human sanctification--every species, the whole ecology of life on this planet. Our origin as one of the upright-walking primates is totally affirmed. Our animal life, our animal consciousness, our birthing and dying, all these are sacred parts of our Jesus-Christ-being.

Not only our animal consciousness, but also our uniquely human consciousness is fully sacred. The most important uniqueness of human consciousness is our capacity for Awe--our capacity to be aware of the Awe-ing of our lives which is being done to us by the Infinite Neighbor. Another uniqueness of human consciousness is our manner of rational thinking that makes all Awe and human culture possible. This rationality is also sacred. To refuse to be a thinking person is to refuse to be a human being and to rebel against God. When someone tells me they are not into thinking right now, that they only want to feel or do or be, I know that some kind of escape from human living is going on. Thinking as well as feeling and doing and being is a holy aspect of being Authentically Human. If our thinking minds or our feeling bodies lead us astray from our Awe-filled lives, the fault lies not with our natural minds or bodies, but in our willfulness to be something else than finite beings who are Awed by the Infinite Neighbor.

Finally, the **top right third** of “The Awed” triangle points to Jesus Christ as the servant who is sent into this existing world of humanity, a “world” which is still in the power of “Satan,” still estranged from being finitude Awed by the Infinite, still doomed to a final destiny of despair, still asleep to the Spirit wonders of human living, still bound in egoisms that eclipse freedom, compassion, and trust. This servant is a suffering servant because the sinful world rejects his or her authenticity and the service of that world which flows from being Human Authenticity.



Suffering is a part of life for all people, but the suffering servant bears added suffering because of this role of service. I am not talking about something we do not all know about. If Martin Luther King Jr. is viewed as a suffering servant (and I so view him), then his opposition from the mainstream society and his death at the hands of a bigoted assassin are examples of the extra suffering I am pointing to. The experiences of Gandhi, a Hindu, or Malcolm X, a Moslem, also dramatize this extra suffering. We are talking about a dynamic of life that is present whenever anyone, anywhere attempts to move the general community into a deeper mode of living. As one alternative health revolutionary put it: "At first they ignore you, then they fight you, then when you finally win the day, they claim that they initiated the whole change."

The suffering servant does not always get killed, but each day of his or her service, the suffering servant bears the burden of serving people who resist being served. The suffering servant does not wait to be asked to do his or her service, but serves people in spite of the fact they have not asked to be served and do not know how to ask, or who to ask, or what to ask for. Some will not realize they have been served or who has served them. And some will actively resist the service to the point of harming the servant.

These perpetually present conditions in our actual human history mean that the authentic human being, the authentic servant, may suffer sufferings which no one else on earth even notices or understands. This is what I mean in my chart by the term "unmitigated aloneness." African-American Christians on the North American continent caught the feel of unmitigated aloneness in a song which contained these words: "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen, nobody knows but Jesus." Herein is part of the power of the Jesus Christ symbology: Jesus does know about the suffering of the suffering servant. His teachings may, therefore, come as companionship and comfort to those who suffer the suffering of unmitigated aloneness: "Blessed are you when *the world* misunderstands you, persecutes you, and says all manner of evil against you." The blessing here is not the suffering itself but your participation in authenticity which, in this world, brings such unmerited suffering.

Some have dismissed all this talk about "suffering servanthood" as masochistic. But the suffering servant is not a masochist. Suffering the wrath of the sinful world is never wished for, it is only preferred to inauthenticity and despair. So while the suffering servant may speak of himself or

herself as a person of sorrows, it is, paradoxically, also true that the suffering servant experiences himself or herself as a person of unspeakable joy.

To summarize, "The Awed Human" includes these three dynamics: (1) the deliverance from evil--from an existence twisted out of its natural state of being fully Awed, (2) the victorious being of Awed finitude, and (3) the suffering servanthood of being an Awe-bringer to a world fleeing from Awe.

Finally, as the triangular diagram depicts, "The Awed Human" is one third of the complete picture of the human experience of God. The Awesome and the Awe itself complete the triune picture. As we contemplate this triangle of interlocking dynamics, we can discern more and more clearly how the whole triangle describes just one experience, all the aspects of which tend to blur together. The Holy Spirit is sometimes called the Spirit of Christ and sometimes called the Spirit of God. Theological arguments have been conducted about whether the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Almighty or from the good news brought to us by the Awed Human. In my view, all the dynamics of the entire triangle proceed from each other.

I have used or alluded to Christian language throughout my discussion of this triangle, but Christian language is not necessary to talk about any of these aspects of the human experience of God. For some, this may be the most controversial issue in my entire presentation of Christianity. Nevertheless, I stand by it: each of the aspects of this triangle has been talked about, is being talked about, and will be talked about by persons who identify with non-Christian religions and philosophies. Furthermore, these persons do not need to use any Christian language to describe their experiences. Even more important is this underlying truth: the human experience of God, as described in this triangle, is not reserved for Christian-identified persons only. It may be true that some non-Christian religions, or parts of their constituencies, have avoided various parts of this triangle. But this is also true of many Christian religions or parts of their constituencies. Whether Christian or non-Christian, every religious expression is fragmentary. My triangle is itself a religious expression and is, I am sure, fragmentary in ways that I do not myself yet see. Nevertheless, my purpose in using this triangular image is to point beyond this image toward those ENDURING DYNAMICS that evaluate all our fragmentary religious expressions.

I am now ready to restate this exceedingly profound religious awareness: ***All three of these aspects or "faces" of the human experience of God***

are, in the first instance, without religious content. The human experience of “Final Reality” is contentless, culturally and religiously speaking. Any attempt we make to give religious expression (that is, religious content) to this CONTENTLESSNESS will be fragmentary. Religious content, of any kind, can become a substitute for the CONTENTLESSNESS to which all valid religious content points. So the Christian Trinity, understood as Enduring Reality rather than as Christian dogma, is culturally and religiously contentless. And because this triune experience is religiously contentless, it is just as valid for Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, or any other religion as it is for Christianity. For example, the Hindu concept of “Brahman” points toward the same reality as the Christian concept of “The Almighty.” And the Hindu concept of “Atman” points toward the same reality as the Christian concept of “The Holy Spirit.” So if we wish to talk about the Trinity with people of Hindu heritage, we can begin talking about those experiences which aware Hindus are pointing to with their own terms.

The Trinity, in other words, is simply the WAY LIFE IS. Christianity, in all of its past or future forms, is only a fragmentary expression of the WAY LIFE IS. And we Christians, if we are true to ourselves and the best of our own heritage, will never again resort to the sort of bigotry that asserts that Christian-identified people and their religious practices have a corner on the WAY IT IS. The Jesus-character who speaks in the wild drama of the Fourth Gospel says, “I have sheep who are not of this fold.” No matter how we define the Christian fold or any other fold, Jesus (meaning the Authentic Human) has sheep who are not of this fold.

The Creation of Christian Religious Content

So if this Trinity which ancient Christianity formulated is, in its essential meaning, religiously contentless, why was it necessary for those early Christian people to create Christian religious content? And why is it still necessary for those of us who see ourselves as Christian-identified persons to form Christian religious content today?

This question returns us to some further consideration of that basic paradox that can be found in all human religion. Religion, as I have defined religion in all three of these short books, is the social process of giving finite symbolic form to Spirit, where Spirit means our relationship to the Infinite. So the paradox is this: (1) Spirit must be given symbolic form in order to hold Spirit in our consciousness and to live it, and yet (2) no symbolic forms (which are finite) can, with finality,

hold Spirit (which is a relationship with the Infinite).

Contemporary Christians have often spoken of primitive Christianity as if it were one single religion, one group of people who basically thought the same thoughts and practiced the same religious practices. But our recent and careful historical and literary study of the New Testament writings reveals that this was not the case. The theology or religious thinking of Jesus was not the same as that of Paul. Over two decades separated the teachings of Jesus from the letters of Paul. In those two decades, many “Jesus movements” evolved, each doing slightly different religious thinking and each being amazingly innovative in their religious thought and practices. Some of these innovations were later considered inappropriate to be included in the New Testament canon. The Gospel of Thomas, which was discovered in an old earthenware jar in 1945 is one example of such excluded writings. Though this gospel contains some sayings that were quite probably original sayings of Jesus, it interprets Jesus’ teachings differently than the New Testament Gospels. The Gospel of Thomas pictures Jesus as a Jewish wisdom teacher with leanings toward the kind of other-worldliness which was rejected by those Jesus groups who formed the New Testament. The Gospel of Thomas is not classical Gnosticism, but it is critical of those Jesus-movements that were more committed to Old Testament “down-to-Earth-ness.” At the other extreme from The Gospel of Thomas were Jesus-movements who were firmly identified with classical Judaism, circumcision and all. These religious tendencies were also excluded from the canonical New Testament consensus.

But the New Testament canon still included a very wide diversity of thinking. Matthew, Mark, and Luke, though similar in many ways, are each the product of quite different religious thinking. And the gospel of John is vastly different from the other gospels, as well as from Paul and from the teachings of Jesus. What was the unity that made it possible to consider all these diverse religious writings as one tradition? No answer to this question is possible if we attempt to understand Christianity as an intellectual philosophy, or a worldview, or a collection of correct beliefs. Unity cannot be found on the strictly intellectual level. In order to perceive the unity of the New Testament, we have to see all these various religious innovations as Great Thoughts which express the same Awe-experiences. The Gospel of Thomas and other writings were rejected because they did not express fully or accurately the Awe-experiences that constituted this underlying unity. In other words, the excluded writings expressed a different “spirit.” The included writings had the same

“Spirit.” The New Testament canonizers may have made some mistakes, but clearly this was their intent. A diversity of theologies was no problem for them, but a diversity in elemental Spirit reality was a problem for them. They found that the Holy Spirit could be expressed through quite different intellectual conceptualities. At the same time, the same Holy Spirit could exclude other religious inventions, finding them to be a lopsided expression of Spirit or an expression of evil spirit.

We need to give the New Testament canonizers their due. For example, in excluding works like the Gospel of Thomas or the works of Marcion, these canonizers were excluding religion that focused on illuminating individual persons with “light” from another world, religion that rejected the importance of this natural world and the dynamics of social history. The Holy Spirit with which they were filled found such religion to be a withdrawal from the full picture of living those states of freedom, trust and love which are, in the symbolic exemplar, Jesus Christ, fully embodied in the flesh of the human condition.

So why is this discussion of Contentlessness and religious content so important? If we are Christian-identified people, today we are facing the necessity of giving some fresh religious formation to the Holy Spirit of Christian heritage. Just as the Jesus movements of the first century were doing some wildly innovative religious creativity to express the Awe that had struck them, so we who experience that same Awe today also confront the task of giving that Awe some fresh religious expression. And this means creating religious form or content. In order to do this competently, we have to be clear that Awe precedes religious form and that our actual Awe-experiences are the touch stones that tell us which religious forms are adequate.

So the first step toward creating good Christian religion for our era is to peel the scales off our Spirit eyes and see the Contentless Trinity that underlies the Spirit unity of the New Testament. Only then we can begin to understand the task that is before us, the task of creating, in appropriate finite religious content, a fresh expression of the Contentless Trinity. And I need to repeat that my term “Contentless Trinity” does not point to an intellectual dogma, or even to my elaborate triangular chart, but to the actual threefold experience of being the Awed Ones who confront the Awesome and are filled with Awe. When this living experience has become our daily food, then we are ready to confront the daunting task of giving fresh Christian religious content to the same Spirit

that was given Christian religious content almost 2000 years ago.

3 .The People of God

In order to more fully understand the nature of this task of creating good Christian religion, we must explore further this very important concept: “the People of God.” “The people of God” can live again as a Spirit category when we see clearly that it is not pointing to a religious in-group but to a quite secular dynamic within the very structure of human history. Within any human group, there can exist a sub-part who are Awed by the Awesome and filled with Awe. This sub-part can happen anywhere, anytime, in any group, in any culture, using any religious vocabulary. Such a subpart, because it is sensitive and responsive to the Awesome Infinite Neighbor, is thereby embodying the real meaning of being the people of God.

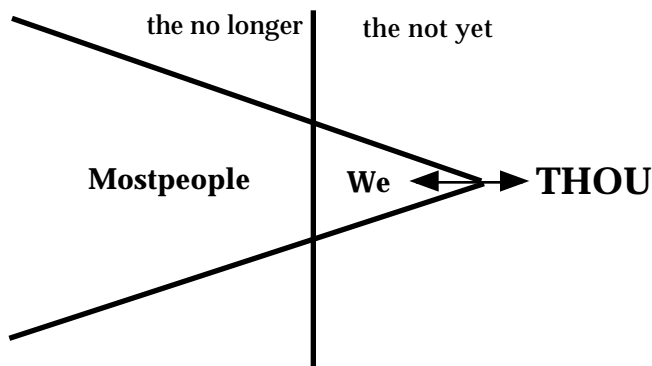
This people of God dynamic illuminates the way human history actually functions. The Awesome Wholeness of Being confronts humanity, or part of humanity, with particular challenges at particular moments of historical destiny. Those who notice this confrontation and these challenges are the Awed Ones. The Awed Ones are those who are sensitive to these challenges and are responding to them in some creative manner. For example, only a few centuries ago British slave ships were carrying millions of African slaves from Africa to the Americas. Millions of people died in the warfare of capturing slaves. Millions more died on the ships, and the millions who remained lived under constant threat of death in oppressive slavery conditions. All of this brutality was rationalized as normal economic enterprise until a small number of people began to question it. This sensitive and responsive minority led the way toward an ever expanding consensus which eventually not only stopped the slave trade but abolished the very institution of slavery in every civilization on the planet. Most of these civilizations had practiced slavery for five or six thousand years. Until this time, slavery had been the taken for granted “lowest rung” in the ordinary social hierarchy of civilization.

The abolition of slavery is a very clear example of how a small group can act on behalf of the whole to lead the whole in a new direction. Such action illustrates how human history operates whenever history proceeds in some “more realistic” direction. A small part of some human community sees the obsolescence or wickedness of existing patterns of social life, and then acts to change them. They denounce the old patterns as no longer meaningful, adequate, righteous, or sane. They formulate new

patterns to take the place of the old ones. These new patterns may later become old and perverted as well, but at the time they are proposed they are directions filled with the power to move toward more Human Authenticity and away from some inauthenticity, estrangement, despair, oppression, tyranny, injustice, wickedness, stodginess, hopelessness, meaninglessness, or any other way of describing sociological deadness or evil.

While the People of God dynamic can be shown to be a secular dynamic in all societies, the Old and New Testament writings both express a keen awareness of this dynamic. Moses and his wilderness tribes were an innovation in social realism and law-making. This small group led the nations of the Earth in the formulation of social law based on obedience to the Infinite Neighbor, the Sovereign of history. In the best thinking of the prophets of Israel, it was not one's birth into an Israelite nation that made a person a member the people of God, but obedient responses on behalf of all the nations of the Earth to actual ongoing encounters in universal history. The nation of Israel might be carrying a memory of being the people of God, but it was only being the people of God when it was leading all nations toward living the Mosaic practices of justice and social realism. Similarly, the Jesus movements saw themselves as a renewed Israel, as the People of God leading all the peoples of the Earth in being that fundamental trust, compassion, and freedom that is Human Authenticity.

But while this dynamic "the people of God" is expressed in the Bible, being "the people of God" means something more universal than being a good Jew or a good Christian. Any group, anywhere, religious or secular, is the people of God when this sort of leading of humanity into creative responding is taking place. The people of God is not a nation nor a religious group. The people of God is a dynamic within the human historical process. The following diagram is valuable for holding the universality of this dynamic in mind.



The People of God are that **We** who move out beyond **Mostpeople**, beyond **the no longer** adequate social forms into **the not yet** of the future, forging there a new dialogue with the Awesome **THOU** who confronts us in the actual progression of our ongoing history. In our time the people of God are those who are sensitive to and responding to the ecological crisis, the population crisis, the equity crisis, the oppression of women, the oppression of minority races and cultures, and so forth. We might debate long and hard on exactly what are the key challenges of our hour of history and how they are to be properly met. But my focus in this section is on the dynamic itself rather than the particular agenda which is appropriate for those who are sensitive and responsive to the historical confrontations of this moment.

In every moment of history some, not all, are Awed by the Awesome Thou and then act upon that Awe on behalf of the rest, leading the rest into a new day of Awe and realism in practical living. Those who do this are not called to special privileges, but to special responsibilities. Perhaps those of us who answer this call might say that living out these responsibilities is a privilege, for it is indeed life and life abundant. Such living is certainly not a life of despair. But those who act as the people of God are not people who are protected by God from all suffering or from their own weakness. The people of God become more acutely aware of their weaknesses, and they are subjected to additional sufferings at the hands of the unawed who do not wish to be Awed, nor to act differently, nor to undergo the changes that Awe requires. Part of the religious power of the New Testament writings is that Jesus--the New Testament's exemplar for being the People of God--goes to an undignified death in which he is rejected by all whom he sought to lead into greater aliveness. The cross is not simply a piece of Christian decor. The cross is a dynamic in the very structure of human history. No true prophet ever escaped from experiencing some sort of "added suffering." No innovator toward more truth, justice, or aliveness ever escaped opposition from those who were committed to the old lies, oppression, and deadness.

Such "heroic living on behalf of all" has been manifest, again and again, among people who were identified with the Christian heritage. But such heroic living has also been manifest among people in every religious tradition and also among those who were rejecting the religious traditions they knew. The people of God, so defined, is not Jewish religion nor Christian religion nor religion of any kind. The people of God is any group whatsoever

which is living in positive sensitivity and responsiveness to the Infinite Neighbor.

This universal and yet specific nature of the People of God dynamic cropped up within Christianity as it attempted to define itself as the Christian church. Christian thinkers became conscious of the fact that there were two very different ways of viewing the term "church." On the one hand, there was the visible church, where visible meant a specific sociological community with all its finite religious practices. On the other hand, there was a Spirit Church or Invisible Church. This Invisible Church meant Authentic Humanity walking on this Earth. It is the Truth walking in physical flesh. It is an ever abiding "communion of saints" against which no hell of despair shall ever prevail.

Now this Invisible Church has been understood by Christians to exist within the visible church as its heart, so to speak. This Invisible Truth and Life is the essence from which the visible manifestations of Christian community depart and return. The visible church is a community of sinners being healed: the Invisible Church is Health itself appearing again and again within this visible complexity. The visible church is a temporal religious body alongside other religious bodies--evolving, changing, reforming, and undergoing transformation. The visible church is, in actuality, a succession of different religions. This visible church learns from other religions, uses their insights, and in every way joins the roster of religions, being one among the many. The Invisible Church is not one among the many; it is the Living Body of Christ. It is the One and Only. It is Human Authenticity. It is the Awed Ones who are indeed filled with the Awe of Holy Spirit and are manifesting that Spirit as the Authentic Humanity indicated by the symbol "Jesus Christ."

Now this Spirit Church is invisible because its boundaries are invisible: (1) internally, within a particular visible religious body of Christians, we cannot see with full certainty who are the Spirit Church, and (2) externally, the boundaries of the Spirit Church are also invisible. We do not know with full certainty what groups and what parts of which groups are included in the Invisible Church. So, we cannot define the boundaries of the Invisible Church in any of the ways that we can and do define the boundaries of a given expression of Christian religion. No definition of church membership circumscribes the Invisible Church. No particular baptismal dogma draws the line between in and out of the Invisible Church. The Invisible Church includes people who are outside any and every particular definition of the visible church.

These qualities of the Invisible Church have been conveniently forgotten by Christian bigots who disparage non-Christian religions. When, in John's gospel (10:16), we hear John's Jesus saying, "And I have sheep that are not of this fold," we need to understand these words as addressed to every Christian religious body, past, present or future. Paul also must have startled conservative Jewish Christians with his assertion that there were Gentiles out there who had never heard of Jesus or Moses, but whom God had nevertheless blessed with his Spirit, writing the Mosaic law in their hearts, and who, in their obedience to the essence of that law, were outdoing most Jews. Such awarenesses within the Christian Bible itself support the thesis I am proposing here: the actual circumference of the People of God eludes all boundaries that can be defined by human beings.

So Christianity, as the Invisible Church, is not a religion at all. And yet Christianity is also a religion (actually many religions). Our awareness of this strange paradox is very important as we take on any project of creating good Christian religion. Why? Because: (1) it undercuts Christian bigotry; it insists that the People of God is a communion of saints that extends beyond any and every Christian in-group; (2) it provides us with a criteria--the Invisible Church--for the continuing renewal of each and every expression of visible Christian religion; and (3) it provides us with a guideline for working within secular contexts without imposing on those contexts our religious vocabularies. Let me illustrate what I mean by this third benefit.

We who are Christian-identified persons often act in a secular context such as a racial justice movement or a feminine movement or a peace movement or an economic equity movement or a full-democracy movement or an ecology movement. In these contexts we do not need to ask people to become Christians in order to ask them to make, as part of these secular movements, a fully realistic response to that Awesome Wholeness which we confront in the history of our times. We do not need to use terms like "God" or "Jesus Christ" or "Holy Spirit" to make our Christian contributions to those movements.

For example, let us suppose we are participating in an ecological movement. With great likelihood this movement already contains people who are making fully realistic responses to this historical crisis. We who are Christian-identified find comradeship among these people because they are--by virtue of their realistic responses--already the People of God. They are, from our Christian perspective, "in Christ" for they are Awed by the

Awesome and filled with the Awe of compassion, freedom, and trust insofar as these Spirit qualities relate to loving the natural Earth and protecting that “sacred community” from the devastations of humanity. As we who are Christian-identified persons take our places on the front lines of the ecology fight and suffer the rejections of the established society, we are sharing in “the cross of Christ” along with these non-Christian members of the people of God. Why can this suffering be called “the cross of Christ”? Because this is what “the cross of Christ” means: Authentic Humanity suffering the rejection of those who are not sensitive to the real challenges of their times, or who are invested in the current obsolete patterns, or who are simply unwilling to risk the ire of *Mostpeople*. But all those who do participate in this “rejection” are the “cross” of suffering for the “sin” of those on behalf of whom this service is being done.

However odd and shocking this understanding of the “cross of Christ” may seem to our ingrown Christian groups, being the people of God in the twentieth century includes sharing in the work of the various secular movements that we see as part of humanity’s realistic response to the activity of the Wholeness of Being in these times. Our participation within these secular bodies can, therefore, be seen as part of what it means for us, as Christian-identified people, to “go to church.”

But “going to church” can also mean going to a Christian-identified group which is manifesting humanity’s realistic response and which is using Christian language and religious practices to express and sustain such living. Such a group not only is the people of God but calls itself “the people of God.” Yet these people who are self-consciously intending to be people of God are only part of a larger set of persons who are also the people of God. As we rebuild Christian religion, we must not lose sight of the realization that the full meaning of the term “the people of God” is all those, of whatever religion or culture, who are realistically responding to the Infinite Neighbor. Clearly, not everyone in this larger set of persons uses the language “people of God” or “Church” or “Christian” to describe who they see themselves to be. Nevertheless, from the perspective of those of us who speak of ourselves as called to be the people of God, this larger set of people are included in our theological category, “the people of God.” And let us also not forget that we do not know with certainty who are and who are not the people of God. The borders are invisible to the eyes of every human being.

Finally, it is also true that most people (or at least most people most of the time) are not the

people of God. That is, we do not always respond to the Infinite Neighbor in trust, compassion, and freedom even though we have in the depths of our beings the capacity for such response. So let us define a still larger category: “God’s people.” “God’s people” includes every-body--those who are the people of God and those who are not the people of God. All people are God’s people in the sense that all people are loved by God. And God calls all people to be the people of God, for being the people of God is nothing more, nor less, than being the Authentic Humanity of freedom, trust, and love for which every human being is made. Yet this call to authenticity does not break through the shells of everyone. Usually, the specifics of this call breaks through to some people decades sooner than it breaks through to others. Those who respond now are the people of God and their job is to be the servants of both those who are responding and of those who are not. This activity of the people of God is part of God’s love for all God’s people. To be an embodiment of God’s love for all people is the essence of being the people of God.

4. The Tasks of Love

This love of the people of God for all God’s people takes on two basic forms: (1) **love as creation** and (2) **love as redemption**. By “redemption” I mean calling people to be the people of God or increasing among human beings the love for God and neighbor. By “creation” I mean joining with God in providing air, water, food, shelter, health, transportation, cultural richness, political participation, and whatever other finite aspects of human well-being might be defined. Similarly, finite benefits can be defined for all species of life. The wellbeing of the entire Earth system can also be defined. God’s love is already operating for all these beings and systems of beings. When the people of God are also extending love in any or all of these ways, they are doing “love as creation.” We who so love are assisting God in creating life and aliveness and wellbeing for all God’s creatures.

Love as Creation

Love as creation can be done toward one person such as a child or an adult in some physical, psychological, or sociological need. But “love as creation” is only fully understood when it is seen as including the reconstruction of the sociological fabrics. To some extent all the dimensions of wellbeing are being offered through the existing sociological fabrics to each and every member of each and every society. Yet at the same time, wellbeing is to some extent being denied by the

existing sociological fabrics to many members of each and every society. Love as creation means the unending task of improving or correcting the services operating in each and every society.

Doing social corrections takes on particular urgencies in each particular society at each given time in history. Today, for example, in that maze of social functioning called “The United States,” one of the most urgently needed corrections is to disestablish the power of wealth from the decision-making process and bestow upon every person and neighborhood of persons a fully meaningful democratic experience of decision-making. Only when this task is done, can we expect this society to cease its momentum toward untenable ecological devastation and untenable promotion of economic injustice throughout the planet. So those persons who are doing the task of building full democracy in the United States are doing love as creation, and are thereby being the people of God on behalf of all God’s people as well as on behalf of all God’s creatures.

But full democracy, however important, is only one of the key issues in our times. Perhaps creating a new partnership between the sexes is your appropriate focus. Perhaps your focus will be creating educational systems that prepare people for creative responses to our times rather than preparing them merely for economic security in the existing slots of an obsolete society. Love as creation will take on a slightly different calling, or vocational form, for each and every person. This multiplicity is part of the essence of love as creation. Yet at the same time, we are all living in one creation, on one planet, in one historical moment. “Love as creation” means a love of this wholeness as well as love done in some specific place with some specific focus. And our commitment to the wellbeing of the whole planet influences the quality of each and every specific project of our loving.

Love as Redemption

Love as redemption is different from love as creation, but it supports it. Love as redemption means increasing the number of people on Earth who love. Love as redemption focuses on the individual solitary person and focuses on the Spirit dimension of that person’s life. This need not take place in the context of practicing some Christian religion, though, of course, it might. But before looking at explicitly Christian manifestations, I want to define redemptive loving in its broadest context. Love as redemption is operative in any human interaction, course, workshop, program, pageant, play, movie, painting, writing, street

march, etc. which enables individual human beings: (1) to more fully realize the spirit sicknesses of their lives, (2) to appropriate their welcome home to reality, and thus (3) to practice trust, freedom, and love more fully.²

Such “redemptive love” can take place in the simplest of life situations. In the movie “Inside Moves,” there is a scene in which three “cripples” (one in a wheel chair, one blind, and one with two mechanical claws for hands) are sitting at a table in a bar playing cards. Another man with a disability has entered the bar and the bartender asks these three guys, “Do you need another hand?” The man with the two claws holds them up and says, “Yeah, I need two.” Everyone laughs. Apparently this old and corny joke has been pulled many times. The no-handed man says, “That gets funnier every time we do it.” Now this joke pulled on new people with disabilities coming into this bar is “redemptive love.” Why? Because it contradicts a basic attitude of estrangement which any disabled person is likely to have. That attitude might take the form of, “Oh poor me, I am a cripple, and I can’t be expected to live my life in a bold, affirmative, or joyful manner.” The no-handed man, in making a joke about his no hands, is communicating something like this: “Whatever your life circumstances may be, you are received or loved in the midst of this very life. The Overall does not have it in for you; you can lighten up and live beyond any sour-faced rut you may have fallen into. Look here, if I can live my life with no hands, you can live your life with whatever is wrong with you.” These three “crippled” comrades continue doing redemptive games with people throughout the movie. This seems to be part of their life purpose, jarring people into positions where they can make the primal choice of saying YES to life in all its awesome tragedy and wonder.

At other times, redemptive love is more sobering than amusing. When the rich young ruler came up to Jesus (Luke 18:18-30) and asked what he had to do to win Eternal Life, Jesus replied that he should obey the commandments. The man said he had done that since childhood and continued standing there. So Jesus, noticing (I suppose) what was blocking his Spirit living, gave him another challenge: “There is one thing you have missed. Sell all that you have and give the money away to the poor, . . . Then come follow me” (in Jesus’ homeless walk through all the impoverished towns and villages of Galilee). This was a real proposal, and the man might well have lived a glorious and happy life had he chosen to do that. For it was true then as it is still true now that “Spirit wellbeing or

² For further elaboration of these three dynamics see *Great Thinks, Great Feels, and Great Resolves*, page 28.

happiness in no way depends upon the number of your possessions” (Luke 12:15). But when this man heard Jesus’ redemptive challenge, “his heart sank, for he was a very rich man.”

Redemptive love, no matter how sincerely and skillfully it is performed, does not always succeed in redeeming. The issue of redemption finally rests with that fully-to-be-honored freedom within the individual person involved. Perhaps you remember the story about Peter seeing Jesus walking calmly on the wild and wavy waters of the lake. (The lake being alluded to in this literary creation is the lake of real life, which includes oblivion and resurgence and all other forms of Awe.) Peter, standing safely in his boat, says, “Master, if it is really you, tell me to come to you on the water.” “Come on then,” says Jesus. After that saying, I imagine there is a great pause while Jesus and the entire cosmos waited on Peter.

Peter stepped down from the boat and did walk on the water making for Jesus. But when he saw the fury of the wind, he panicked and began to sink, calling out, “Lord save me.” At once Jesus reached out his hand and caught him saying, “You little-faith! What made you lose your nerve like that?” (Matthew 14: 28-32)

To answer this question, Peter has to look within himself and experience his own deeply honored freedom. It was not the wind and waves that kept Peter from walking on the water. That is, it is never those things in our lives that panic us that keep us from walking calmly in the midst of each life-challenge. Further, it was not Jesus that made Peter lose his faith. Nor was it Jesus who made Peter have faith. Jesus was only the occasion. Peter and Peter alone did the faith or did not do the faith. That is, each of us, on our own, must trust or not trust the victorious livability of each life situation.

Though this story about walking on water is a literary creation, it is a creation made out of much actual experience with the nature of redemptive love. The picture of Jesus saying, “Come on then!” rings down through the ages and clarifies a key dynamic that is present in every action of redemptive love. When Spirit wellbeing is the intended result, a free choice must be made by the recipient of such love. There can be no intellectual, emotional, or physical manipulation. Spirit wellbeing is freedom. The redemptive lover may trick, cajole, puzzle, scold, or even ridicule, but always with the intent to give the served person his or her own freedom rather than take freedom away and bind that person into some enslavement to the lover or to the lover’s doctrine. This is what

redemptive love looks like: we live our own lives in faith, and when people say, ‘Wow, I wish I could do that,’ we say, “Come on then.” And then we wait on them to decide. We allow them to choose in that depth of their own solitude which we cannot and dare not presume to enter.

Redemptive love must never be reduced to recruiting someone for membership in a particular religious body. When modern Christians call their membership drives “evangelism,” they have substituted organizational success for providing the “good news” that heals the Spirit of human beings. Redemptive love might take place in a church. It might even take place around the issue of joining or not joining some particular community of people. But redemptive love, as a task of the people of God, must be distinguished from the subject of church membership. Redemptive love is a dynamic that can take place in every setting in human life. It can characterize the raising of children, the teaching of school, sessions with a therapist, playing cards in a bar, responding to people during and after an awakening talk on any subject, meeting with an old friend, responding to a stranger, putting on some sort of secular demonstration or program or stunt, teaching Hindu yoga or Buddhist mediation practices, conducting a sweat lodge or a sharing circle--any where and any time that the healing of individual human Spirits is occasioned.

Love as Recreating Christian Religion

I want to turn now to the subject of Christian community and Christian religious content within that community. The action of redemptive love and the action of love as creation do not need to be done in a Christian religious context. Both tasks of love are ordinary secular dynamics that can operate within the content of any historical situation. As I have defined “loving God and neighbor” and being “the people of God,” no particular religious content is required.

Nevertheless, to be the people of God at a concrete time and place in history entails taking on finite societal content. To start with, it means defining the **urgent social-change agenda** for that particular moment in history and that particular human society within which the loving person is living. For Jesus, the content of his finite social agenda included a critique of the pervading aristocratic holiness that excluded outcasts of all sorts from compassionate consideration--the poor, the dirtily diseased, the religiously and ethically immoral. Every word and every deed of Jesus’ ministry was aimed at releasing the bodies, minds, and Spirits of people from acquiescence to this

pervasive social conditioning. In order to be the people of God today, we will also have to define our own specific, urgent, social-change agenda. Surely we will have to deal with ecological devastation, with transforming the relationships between men and women, with economic injustices, and with political rearrangements. Our social change agenda will be different from the one that Jesus faced. We can learn much from Jesus about being the contentless dynamic of the People of God, but then, in order to actually be the people of God, we will have to give our own contemporary, societal content to that ever-lasting, contentless dynamic. The historical Jesus cannot tell us about our times: we will have to read the signs of our own times for ourselves.

Similarly, being the people of God as redemptive love will entail engaging ourselves in some sort of finite religious content appropriate for our times. If we are going to serve human beings in the Spirit dimension of their lives, we are going to be dealing with Awe and the Awesome. We are going to be calling human beings to join the company of the Awed Ones. This cannot be done well if we limit ourselves to the terminology of a secular world which is devoted to self-sufficient finitude. We are going to have to seriously face the fact that every human being is something more than finitude: each of us is a relationship with the Infinite. The metaphorical languages of the long-standing religions each bear witness to this Awe-relatedness. While ancient religious languages must be translated from their two-story metaphorical forms to metaphorical forms that communicate adequately to people living today, this translation must be done in such a way as to release the wisdom of those ancient traditions, not suppress them.

Christianity is one of those long-standing religious heritages that needs to be unlocked for our era. To do that is an important social task for the people of God. To do this task will be an action of redemptive love for millions of people. Some members of the people of God will take on the social task of unlocking Buddhism for our era. That is also an important task. But millions of us are deeply enmeshed in Christian heritage--in its benefits and its current perversions. If this is our fate, why not deal with it? Certainly, we do not need to be ashamed if we let others recover Buddhism while we narrow our focus to recovering good Christian religion.

The good Christian religion we will be recovering cannot claim to be the only good religion on the planet, but this does not lessen the importance of our task. I believe that the first

exodus of Christian religion from the religious practices that preceded it was quite playfully done by people who were playful because they had a confidence that issued from being filled with a profound experience of Spirit that had issued from their encounters with Jesus and with seeing him, his words, and his deeds in the light of the Christ metaphor. So we too, as we experience again that same Spirit, can playfully reinvent forms of Christian religion that work as redemptive love for millions of people in our era.

Clearly, many of those who gave Christianity its initial religious forms saw doing so as their primary task of love for the times in which they lived. We too might see giving Christianity its next religious forms as our primary task of love for the times in which we live. One way we can express to ourselves the importance of this task is to recall that good Christian religion releases trust, freedom, and love--a love which goes forth to help accomplish the urgent social-change agenda for our era. Furthermore, the task of giving Christianity its next religious forms has this additional benefit: it preserves this powerful religious heritage--this powerful healing agency--for all times to come. Each human society's social-change agenda will change and change, again and again, in the centuries to come, but the need to restore people to their authentic Spirit of trust, freedom, and love will endure as a basic need for all the generations of human beings who manage to survive upon this planet.