

Introduction: What is a Spirit-based Ethics?

The term “ethics” points to rational reflection on the topic of appropriate guidelines for human behavior. There is no such thing as Christian ethics, Hindu ethics, Jewish ethics, Buddhist ethics, or Muslim ethics. There is just ethics. And there are two kinds of ethics: (1) ethics that emerge from our Essential Humanity or Spirit and (2) ethics that ignore or deny the existence or relevance of Spirit.¹ I want to begin by clarifying what I mean by this.

When operating at their best, Christians, Hindus, Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, and other religious groups are all doing the same thing as they create ethics for their communities. They are attempting to design guidelines for action that are based on Essential Humanity or Spirit. Such guidelines are both rooted in the “Everlasting Depth of Spirit” and adapted to the times and culture in which this human action is to take place. Designing such guidelines is what I mean by a Spirit-based ethics.

Thus, a Spirit-based ethics has an interreligious quality. For example, ethical guidelines that are valid for contemporary Christians are also valid for other religious groups that see religion as an expression of Spirit or Essential Humanity. Of course, many Christians and others do not design their ethics as an expression of Spirit. Instead, they attempt to derive their ethics from their scriptures or traditions or from some theological system of beliefs. An ethics so derived is not a valid Spirit-based ethics. But if Christians have, through an interior appropriation of their heritage, discovered Spirit for themselves, an ethics based on that Spirit discovery is not only valid for Christians, but for all humanity.

In other words, we might say that designing an ethics based on Essential Humanity or Spirit is a secular enterprise. It does not presuppose any religious practice or any religious system of beliefs. And it does not presuppose laws, principles, or moralities that derive from a particular heritage. It only presupposes Spirit which is universal to all humanity.

A Spirit-based ethics is very different from a religion-based or a principle-based ethics. Most people doing ethics begin with principles which they then apply to situations. These principles may be assumed by one’s culture, derived from a religious tradition, or devised by some process of reasoning. A Spirit-based ethics does not begin with principles of any sort. A Spirit-based ethics begins with states of Awe. Awe is sometimes called “wonder” or “reverence” – reverence for the wholeness of reality; reverence for the cosmos; reverence for every process, every being, every human being.

Awe is always part of every situation. Each situation comes complete with its own Awe. Awe is the depth of the living situation. So living in Awe means living in the situation and its potentialities. It means engaging that situation and its potentialities in a profound and relevant manner. A Spirit-based ethics asks how living our given states of Awe resolves into action within the situations in which we are acting and in which we must act in some manner.

In a Spirit-based ethics one is not trying to be a righteous person nor to rid the situation of evil. Spirit responsibility simply means living the Awe that is present in the situation and thus being a creative person within that situation and its potentialities.

Spirit-based ethics begins with questions about the indicative. What is here? What is so? What is possible? Imperatives flow from the indicative like water from a faucet. There is no need to have a pep rally that rouses our motivation. As water pressure is present in a faucet,

¹ The terms “Spirit” and “Essential Humanity” will be defined and illustrated in Part One of this book. These terms have also been extensively clarified in the the two previous books in this series: *The Call of the Awe* and *When Awed Ones Gather*.

motivation is present in the Awe. All that is required is to turn on the faucet. We do not have to provide the water pressure. Awe is the water pressure. Awe is the motivation. Awe is the guidance. And Awe is the freedom and creativity to act on that motivation and follow that guidance.

Understanding these assertions requires a clear understanding of our actual experiences of Awe. So I will begin this book with some additional reflections on the topic of Awe. These reflections will build on the discussions of Awe in the first two books of this trilogy of books. In *The Call of the Awe* I defined Awe and religion and illustrated how Awe enables us to renew our religious heritages and conduct a constructive dialogue among them. In *When Awed Ones Gather* I explored the practical issues of creating a religious community based on Awe. Now in this book I will illustrate how Awe provides the foundation for a fully realistic ethics.

In **Part One** I will summarize what I am pointing to with this word “Awe” and explore how the various states of Awe comprise our Essential Humanity. This Essential Humanity is the bedrock upon which we can build our vision of an appropriate society for our times.

In **Part Two** I will explore how social existence as well as personal existence is essential to realistic human living. I will share a model of what is essential in every past, present, and future society. I will define what I mean by economic, cultural, and political processes.

In **Part Three** I will explore how the manifest forms of humanity’s essential social processes are in historical transition. I will explore what it means to envision and build social structures that are appropriate for the times in which we live.

In **Parts Four, Five, and Six** I will explore many of the major aspects of the vast transitions that are now taking place and are required of us in the future. I will illustrate how our economic, cultural, and political processes can become expressions rather than suppressions of essential society and essential humanity that are appropriate for these times.

Then in **Part Seven** I will illustrate how living our essential humanity within our given historical situation manifests as a perpetual transformation of our inherited social forms toward the appropriate society envisioned in part three. I will discuss what sorts of things need to be done toward the beginning of a social transformation process and what sorts of things need to be done toward the end of a social transformation process. I will discuss how we can perpetually develop hopeful strategies that can win meaningful victories in the ongoing, ever-changing challenges of our actual history.

This book can be understood as an inquiry that moves toward what we might call “a Spirit sociology.” I have been impressed with the work of A. H. Almaas and his colleagues. Their work might be characterized as “a Spirit psychology.” The following analogy is helpful in defining my concerns in *A Spirit-based Ethics*. Just as Almaas affirms the best of modern psychology and then enriches and deepens it with an awareness of the Essential Person, so I propose to affirm the best of modern sociology and then enrich and deepen it with an awareness of Essential Humanity. Just as psychological understanding and personal therapy are incomplete without a consideration of Spirit, so sociological understanding and social transformation are incomplete without a consideration of Spirit.

If we use the word “religious” to point to any practice that expresses Spirit, then this book is a religious book. But it is also a secular book, for it seeks to be universal in its appeal, applicable to anyone of any religion or lack of religion. I am committed to my Christian practice and I invite other Christian-identified persons to read this book as an enrichment of ethical thinking that is rooted in Christian heritage. At the same time, I invite persons of any background to join me in these considerations which I believe apply to all human beings. The ethical guidelines most needed in our times are rooted in Human Essence and thus applicable for everyone. This thesis will be elaborated throughout the book.

Part One

**The Presupposition
of Essential Humanity**