

Chapter 21

The Need for Spirit Community

The human species is an intensely communal species. A human child raised by animals may be denied ever realizing her potential for the human quality of consciousness, for language, for art, and for religion. Similarly, only in Spirit communities do Spirit persons come into being. It may seem at times that some great soul, some great Spirit teacher, has arrived from nowhere. But this is not so. Communion with many others has been the actual history of each profoundly realized Spirit person. Then these persons enrich the Spirit communities in which they participate. Spirit communities come into being through the lived lives of Spirit persons. And Spirit persons come into being through the efficacy of Spirit communities.

Each journeyer into Spirit realization needs community to nurture his journey. And each of us needs a community with whom to share our realizations. These needs are so profound that their description seems out of reach. But here, at least, are a few clarifications:

Spirit Community and Religious Practice

A Spirit community is something more than a group of Spirit individuals. A Spirit community includes cultural fabrics as well as political and economic structures. A Spirit community is a religion. Almost all of us have been burned by sick religion; we may have been burned to the extent that we have aversion to the very word “religion,” and to any practice that looks like religion. Such aversion is understandable, but it blocks our understanding of this topic. Religion is as much a part of every human society as economics or education. We don’t reject economics as a whole because we experience bad economics. Similarly, we err to reject religion as a whole because we experiences so much bad religion. Like economics, religion is an essential part of social life.

To say that religion is an essential part of human society is to say that religion is a very down-to-Earth sort of thing, right alongside language, art, food, housing, and sewage disposal. Religion is not Spirit. Religious is not holy. Religion is a finite, temporal, sociological fabric capable of vast perversions, just like economics or politics. There is no true religion, final religion, or absolute religion. There is just good religion and bad religion, healthy religion and sick religion.

Healthy religion fulfills a function needed in every human society – the function of expressing Spirit and nurturing singular humans in their Spirit journey. Healthy religion also infuses Spirit into the arts and languages of the whole society as well as into the modes of education, life styles, economics, and political ordering. Religion, both healthy and sick, is always going on in each society. Sick religion cannot be properly called “Spirit community,” for what makes sick religion sick is its suppression of Spirit. Healthy religion is healthy when it is an outgrowth of Spirit community. And Spirit community never exists in the heavenly clouds, purified of all Earth-bound religious structure. Spirit community is always embodied as some form of relatively healthy religion. Spirit community always appears in some sort of religious container

Christian Religious Practice

And we must again remember that Spirit community is not limited to a Christian religious practice. There are many forms of non-Christian religion that have been outgrowths of genuine Spirit community. Furthermore, religions are not separated

from one another: in their creative stages religions learn from one another extensively. This is possible because all healthy religions are attempting to express and explore the very same Spirit nature of humanity. Our religious languages, methods, and practices differ widely, but Spirit is Spirit wherever and however it appears.

Every healthy religion is in a constant process of creating itself anew. For example, in the United States during the last century, healthy Christian communities have been learning extensively from healthy Buddhist communities. I mention Buddhism because it has been recovering and teaching contemplative methods that are deeply needed in this particular U.S. culture. Christianity is also learning from many other heritages: Taoism, Hinduism, existential Judaism, mystical Islam, Earth-affirming tribal and pagan heritages, and so on. Healthy religion is not a box, but a process of creative formation that reaches anywhere and everywhere for whatever it needs to accomplish its task of Spirit nurture.

Healthy religion is needed by each individual Spirit journeyer. And the fruits of healthy religion are needed by every human society. Healthy religion is a liveliness that is essential to the optimal liveliness of the planet as a whole.

In this book I have been focusing on Christian heritage and Christian language, and in the remaining chapters I will be focusing on Christian religious community. One of the most confusing topics in Christian heritage is the recurring insistence that there is no Spirit realization outside of Christian community, outside of being grafted onto the Body of Christ. In order to understand this claim properly, we have to understand that the term "Christ" points beyond Jesus and his followers to a universal dynamic of the cosmos. Anyone, anywhere, practicing whatever religion, is part of the body of Christ if they are living in genuine Spirit community. Only in that sense is it true that there is no Spirit realization outside of Christ. In a competent Christian theology, the Body of Christ means everyone who is manifesting the Spirit Essence of being human.

This universal understanding of the essential nature of Christian community does not mean, however, that the Christian religion and practicing a Christian religion is unimportant. Choosing a religious practice is like choosing a place to live. You cannot live in every place; you have to cook your food and sleep your body in some specific spot. So it is with religious practice. Any long-standing religious heritage has boundless riches hidden in its seemingly cryptic history. You might deeply study several of religious heritages, but each one is almost inexhaustible. Few of us can claim to have mastered even one. And no one needs to practice more than one religion in a daily, weekly, yearly, communal way. So as a practical matter, we find ourselves choosing a religious practice just as we find ourselves choosing a place to live.

If that religion is Christianity, we find ourselves in an era of thoroughgoing reconstruction of Christian practice. Practicing good Christian religion will include active participation in Spirit community. Practicing good Christian religion will include basic themes that have been central to this book. The true gifts of the Christian breakthrough have been difficult to recover, because these gifts have been buried in so many perversions. But these core gifts exist, and that are different from the gifts of Buddhism and other great heritages. For example, good Christian practice maintains a profound and creative balance between solitary life and social justice, between healing the individual and communal nurture, between transrational experience and thoughtful action. In part, it is because of this creative balance, that I have made Christianity my religious home. The following chapters explore these topics further.