

Session 4

The Communal Quality of Christian Practice

The human species is intensely communal; much that is regarded as essential to humanness depends upon social interaction. A human child raised by animals may be denied ever realizing his or her potential for the human quality of consciousness, for language, for art, and for religion. Human beings access their Spirit essence, their power as fully realized beings only in communities of others who are so dedicated.

While it may seem at times that some great soul, some great Spirit teacher, has arrived from nowhere, this is not so. Community with others has been the actual history of each profoundly realized Spirit person. Jesus, for instance, was nurtured in a synagogue where he learned Scriptures, and was baptized by John the Baptist. The New Testament only hints at this early development, but it is an affirmation of the humanity of Jesus to see him as a member of a community, the Mosaic community. He arose in that community and spoke and acted to enhance it. He created community and gave his blessing and power to that community.

Spirit persons enrich the Spirit communities in which they participate. Spirit communities come into being through the lived lives of Spirit persons. And then other Spirit persons come into being through the efficacy of those Spirit communities.

Each journeyer into Spirit realization needs community to nurture that journey. And each of us needs a community with whom to share our realizations. These needs are profound. So what is Spirit community? How does Spirit community relate to religion? How does Spirit community relate to solitary practice and the solitary realization of Spirit?

Spirit Community and Religious Practice

A Spirit community is something more than a group of Spirit individuals. It is first of all an intimacy of relationships. It is a complex of I-Thou relations in which each "I" knows that every other person is also an "I" peering back. The term "Thou" in an I-Thou relation means recognizing the conscious awareness in the other. Otherwise we have "I-it" relations; the others are mere objects in our ego-constructed universe.

A Spirit community cannot exist without means of communication; so a Spirit community includes participation in common fabrics of language, art, and other cultural symbols. A Spirit community also has some sort of commonality of political and economic structuring. In other words a Spirit community is not only an experience of Spirit intimacy; it is also a religion with a common language and social fabrics.

Most of us have been so deeply burned by sick religion that we have aversion to the very word "religion" and to any group practice that looks like religion. We might as well admit this from the outset. Such aversion is understandable, but it blocks our understanding of Spirit community and of society as a whole. Religion is as much a part of every human society as the economy or education. We don't reject having an economy because we experience a bad economy. Similarly, we err to reject religion as a whole because we experience so much bad religion. Like economic processes, religious processes are an essential part of social life.

Furthermore, to say that religion is an essential part of human society is to say that religion is a down-to-Earth sort of thing, right alongside language, art, food, housing, and sewage disposal. Religion is not Spirit. Religion is not Holy -- religion is a finite, temporal, sociological fabric capable of vast perversions, just like economic processes or political processes. There is no true religion, final religion, or absolute religion, just as there is no absolute sewage disposal. There are good sewage disposal systems and bad

sewage disposal systems. And there is good religion and bad religion, healthy religion and sick religion.

Healthy religion fulfills a need in every human society: 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 education, life styles, economics, and political ordering. Religion, both healthy and sick, is always going on in each society. Religion is healthy when it is an outgrowth of our Human Essence or Spirit Being. Good religion emerges from the intimate life of a Spirit community. The practice of a sick religion cannot be properly called "Spirit community," for what makes sick religion sick is its suppression of Spirit -- the Spirit of Trust, Love, and Freedom.

Nevertheless, a Spirit community never exists in the heavenly clouds, purified of all Earth-bound religious structure but is always embodied as some form of relatively healthy religion. Spirit community always appears in some sort of religious container. This remains true even though it is also true that Spirit and Spirit community cannot be perfectly housed in any religious container. Spirit always splashes out beyond the containers that humans devise for it.

Christian Religious Practice

We must again remember that Spirit community is not limited to a Christian religious practice. Many forms of non-Christian religion have also been outgrowths of genuine Spirit community. Furthermore, religions are not separated from one another; they influence one another deeply. In their creative stages, all religions learn extensively from other religions. New Testament scholars have made clear how much the New Testament writers incorporated from the religious ferment around them. In North America today, creative Christians are learning from Buddhists and creative Buddhists are learning from Christians. This exchange of insights and practices is possible because all healthy religions are attempts to express and explore the very same Spirit nature of humanity. Our religious languages, methods, emphases, and practices differ widely, but Spirit is Spirit wherever and however it appears.

Every healthy religion is constantly creating itself anew. I emphasize the Christian dialogue with Buddhism because Buddhism has been recovering and teaching contemplative methods that are deeply needed in contemporary U.S. culture. North American Christianity is also learning from other heritages: Taoism, Hinduism, mystical Islam, contemplative Judaism, Earth-affirming tribal and pagan heritages, and so on. Healthy religion is not a tight box, but a process of creative formation that reaches anywhere and everywhere for whatever it needs to accomplish its task of Spirit expression and nurture.

Each Spirit journeyer needs healthy religion. And every human society needs the fruits of healthy religion. Healthy religion is a liveliness essential to the optimal liveliness of the planet as a whole.

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 part of the Body of Christ. To understand this claim, we have to understand that the term "Christ" points beyond Jesus and his followers to a universal dynamic of the cosmos. If they are living in genuine Spirit community, anyone, anywhere, practicing whatever religion, is part of the body of Christ. 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 practicing a specific religion (Christian or otherwise) is unimportant. Choosing a religious practice is like choosing a place to live. We cannot live in every place; we have to cook our food and sleep our body somewhere. So it is

with our religious practice. We cannot practice every religion. We might study many religious heritages, but each long-standing religious heritage is almost inexhaustible. Few of us can claim to have mastered even one. Deep experiential knowledge of more than two is extremely rare. 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 having to choose a religious practice just as we find ourselves having to choose a place to live. We can change our religious practice just as we can change where we live, but a long-term grounding in some religious tradition is as wholesome and beneficial as grounding in a particular geographical home.

Nevertheless, many of us remain homeless in both geography and religion, living somewhere on planet Earth without taking that place seriously as a home for which we are responsible and that nurtures us essentially. Similarly, we skip from one religious practice to another without ever boring into a deep relationship with any of them.

Even if we do choose to “live” in one religious home, why choose Christianity? Indeed, choosing a Christian practice can seem frightening, for Christianity is undergoing a major transition in which this heritage is being rescued from many complex perversions. While the true gifts of the Christian breakthrough are recoverable, who am I to attempt the recovery? Why not simply choose a religious practice that someone else has already recovered?

In spite of these very real questions and difficulties, recovering the core gifts of the Christian breakthrough is important. These gifts are different from the core gifts of other great heritages. Just as Christians can learn from other heritages, so others can learn from Christianity. Christian practice, at its best, maintains a creative balance between solitary devotion and communal nurture, between individual healing and social transformation, between contemplative stillness and social engagement. Such a balanced approach to being alive is beneficial not only to Christian practitioners but also to the practitioners of other religions who may learn from such a revitalized Christian practice, just as a revitalized Christian practice will respectfully learn from other revitalized traditions.

Christianity is a Communal Religion.

All religions are communal, but Judaism and Christianity are more communal in their basic emphasis and metaphors than Hinduism and Buddhism. Ancient Judaism and Christianity were considerably more communal than they are practiced today.

Ancient Hebrew culture was based on a montage of communal metaphors: delivery from Egypt, the wandering wilderness tribe, the tribal federation, the divinely “called” nation selected to lead other nations in Spirit realism.

Christianity, likewise, was rooted in communal metaphors: the new Israel, membership in the Kingdom of God, participation in a new humanity (a new Adam), and, most striking of all, being the living organs or limbs of the Resurrected Body of Christ. The solitary person was affirmed in Christian heritage but not as an isolated entity. The solitary person was challenged to choose between: (1) being a slave in the fallen society of Satan or (2) being a freed citizen in the commonwealth of Almighty God.

In their religious practices, the disciples did not go off by themselves and be individual Christians. They formed a close-knit group. They met together; they thought together; they prayed together. The first Christians gave great emphasis to communal life.

The story of Pentecost is an interesting metaphorical expression of the importance of communal life in the origins of Christianity. In this story the Holy Spirit did not descend upon individuals who were off alone somewhere. The Holy Spirit descended

upon a large group of people speaking different languages. When the fire of the Spirit burned that day, the result was this: the diverse group could hear each other through all the barriers of language and culture. The Pentecost story is almost the reverse of the Tower of Babel story. In the Babel story, humanity was building their own kingdom with a common language, only to be scattered into many cultures speaking different languages. In the Pentecost story people were moved from this divisive babble of culturally separating languages into a communication of Spirit universal to all humans and created by none of them.

Early Christian communities understood themselves to be the first fruits of a historical restoration of the entire human family. Jesus was “written up” as a portrait of a new humanity. This did not mean a new species of biological life, but our essential humanity restored. Jesus was seen as the Second Adam, the Adam who resisted temptation rather than fell into it. This small out-of-the-way group of Christ-way Jews experienced themselves as a beginning of restoration for all humanity. All humans were potentially members of this communal Body of Christ.

If we do not share this strongly sociological view of being a Christian, we are practicing an impoverished Christianity. Today this impoverishment is widespread in Christian groups as well as in Western culture generally. We live in an era of individualistic overemphasis. Conservative Christians want to save individual souls for their heavenly reward, while liberal Christians tend to focus on psychological well-being, personal morality, and individual vocation. The sociological intensity of Spirit community, the vision of responsibility for the Spirit healing, and the structuring of justice for the whole of humankind have been largely lost in this modern swamp of individualism.

At its best our individualism was a revolt against collectivistic tyranny; ironically, our retreat into individualism leaves open the door for collectivism to rule the planet. Oppressive leaders come to power when too many individuals have lost their sense of communal responsibility. Strong democracies with responsive leadership come into being when people are talking together and acting together in an aware and responsive manner in a majority of local communities. A restored Christianity could assist humanity in recovering the courage to be with one another in rebuilding community.

The Resurrected Body of Christ

The apostle Paul referred to the Christian community as “the Body of Christ.” To Paul and his hearers this phrase meant that the events surrounding Jesus marked a change in the fundamental conditions of human life. The aliveness that was in Jesus came alive in the Christian community. Paul spoke of those motley little gatherings as being “in Christ.” For Paul resurrection was something that happened to a community of people. They were the resurrected body, not separately, but together. The resurrection myths are not about something that happened to an individual named Jesus. This resurrection was not a biological wonder, but the birth of a communal body. This understanding of resurrection has been clouded by our individualism, by our hope for the immortality of our individual egos, by our addiction to the delusion of escape from the necessity of dying to our personality habits and self image. When we speak of dying with Christ, we mean dying to individualism. What gets raised up on the other side of that death is true humanity, a communal actuality that embodies a Spirit fire upon the Earth.

This understanding of resurrection undergirds what it means to say that Jesus is the Christ. The union of the words “Jesus” and “Christ” changed the meaning of both words for those who first conceived this religious symbolism. “Christ” no longer meant the coming of a divine champion who would throw off the shackles of Rome. “Christ” now meant the coming of a divine champion who would throw off the

shackles of an inward addiction to imperial rule, of which Rome was merely one passing manifestation. The disciples were indeed rescued from Rome, but in a profoundly inward and secret way that most people could not see.

And the meaning of the word "Jesus" was also changed. The word now meant more than the appearance of an unusual prophet, a mystic teacher, a religious innovator, a social revolutionary. The word "Jesus" united with the word "Christ" meant that Jesus was not simply another individual attempt to make a difference. "Jesus" now meant a turning point in human history in which a specific ordinary person succeeded in leading the human species out of slavery to the delusions of Satan's kingdom (social life based on illusion) into the fresh open air of freedom in the Kingdom of God (the commonwealth of realism).

Some biblical scholars tend to dismiss the Christ interpretation of Jesus and seek instead the "historical Jesus" as the starting point for their "theology." This search for the historical Jesus has turned up a very thin layer of historically probable information. Our knowledge of the historical Jesus is scant compared with an aristocratic contemporary of his time, like Caesar Augustus. Nevertheless, I find that what we do know (scientifically, historically) about Jesus is valuable. The Jesus scholars have provided us with the high probability that there actually was a historical figure called "Jesus" who had qualities that make plausible the fuss that has been made about him. Yet, what we know about the historical Jesus is probable knowledge, scientific knowledge, knowledge that still needs to be interpreted for its human meaning. There is no such thing as an uninterpreted Jesus. Many scholars know this. But there are still scholars who read their contemporary ideals back into this thin layer of historical information about Jesus. This is interpretation, not an uninterpreted Jesus.

Mark, Matthew, Luke and John are indeed four quite distinct portraits and interpretations of Jesus, but they share a commonness that does not appear in the scroll attributed to Thomas. The Thomas document does not see Jesus through the lens of an ego death and Spirit birth (cross and resurrection), but through the lens of a mystic teacher of secret wisdom. This interpretation of Jesus is quite different from the interpretation contained in the "Gospels" selected for the New Testament. In spite of significant differences, the four Gospels of the New Testament agree that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah whose significance is rooted in cross and resurrection, events in which we can participate. This interpretation is the foundation of Christianity.

The Christ interpretation of Jesus was done by those who saw themselves as his resurrected body. They felt empowered to interpret and expand on what Jesus said and did because they viewed themselves as his resurrected continuation. They saw Jesus in one another. While they failed, so they admitted, to fully realize this high calling to the full stature of Christ, they saw themselves in a covenant to grow into this full stature. Their realization of this completeness was fragmentary; nevertheless, they viewed themselves to be "in Christ." They were his body. They had died with him in his crucifixion and they saw themselves as raised up with him into the essential humanity that he pioneered.

A true and complete Christian theology will reflect this deep sociological emphasis. Like each of us, Jesus was a singular person. But "Jesus as the Christ" is a new humanity, a restored humanity, a new Adam and Eve. This new Adam and Eve remain ignorant of good and evil. Being this redeemed community, we do not eat the forbidden fruit; we allow the Primal Mysterious Reality walking in our everyday garden to be our Good, our God. As we take up our membership in this true, realistic, authentic humanity, we know first hand what it means to be "in Jesus Christ." We are his resurrection, his bodily presence in history. We identify with the New Testament stories about Jesus. Using our metaphorical imagination, we can see ourselves as virgin born, walking on water, healing humanity, and rising from the dead. Finally, being "in

Christ” we can recreate Jesus’ words and his deeds for our time. This is Christian community. This is the Body of the Messiah.

We might also call this experience the communion of saints, where “saints” means those recovering from their estrangement from Mysterious Reality, recovering their own mysterious true nature of Final Trust, Spirit Love, and Complete Freedom. This sainthood is not an achievement; it is given to us with our creation; it is our essential nature. Our contribution to sainthood is simply surrendering to being who we truly are beneath all the dross that we have added.

Sainthood is a communion because the saints can look each other in the eye and see there a saint looking back. This communion is as real as blood and as mysterious as The Ultimate Overall Reality. Our realization of this communion is the prerequisite for building the new sociological forms of Christianity. And building this new form of being Christians is done for the sake of further realization of that communion.