

Session 7

The Why, How, and What of CRC Study

The religious practice of study has ancient roots in the entire Abrahamic wing of religious development. Judaism and Christianity are religions of the book. Islam also is rooted in the oral readings of the Koran as well as the ancient biblical texts. All three of these Western religions expanded the scope of their study to the history, philosophies, sciences, and literature of their times. All three incorporated the fruits of this study into their theological and ethical teachings.

In the Christendom of the Western Middle Ages, study was reserved for the priests, intelligentsia, and aristocracy. The masses of ordinary people did not study; most did not read. They attended the mass. They viewed art. They were read to and told stories, but they did not study. With the help of the printing press and translations of the Bible, and with massive efforts to increase literacy, the Reformation brought study into the lives of ordinary Christian people. This popularization of study helped make the exercise of critical thinking a part of the lives of ordinary people in the West. The richness of our contemporary freedoms emerged from this widespread participation in study. Our positive steps in social justice – from public education to women’s liberation and racial justice – are outgrowths of a studying people.

The Why of CRC Study

For these reasons, we assume that study is essential for responsible participation in a vital Christian practice in the 21st Century. Along with simple ritual, depth sharing, song, dance, and other intimate interactions, study plays a strong role in the Christian Resurgence Circles. We devote time to depth study in our CRC meetings almost every week. We do this to enable each member of a CRC to **think for himself or herself** about Christian theology, spirit practice, religious innovation, and social ethics.

The creation of this CRC Network grew out of a Christian renewal movement that included serious theological and secular study. Joseph W. Mathews was a primary source of inspiration for our Network of Circles. Mathews was an avid student, teacher, and innovator of study methods. He emphasized teaching people how to study and passed on to us a wealth of study methods to use and pass along to future generations. These methods are part of the CRC Network’s distinctive identity within the larger Christian resurgence movement. Rooted in existentialist theological sensibilities, these methods assist us to personally experience the greatness of this heritage.

The How of CRC Study

Most practitioners of Christianity today read magazines, instruction booklets, maps, road signs, TV verbiage, and e-mails, and visit web sites, but in a whole year they may not read one good novel or devotional book or forward-looking book on social change or theology. Even if they do, they likely scan rather than study that book.

Scanning has its place, but when we merely scan written material, we tend to seek support for what we already believe. Joe Mathews left us methods that assist us to dialogue respectfully with an author – seeing that author as a real person with whom we can interact. These methods give us questions to ask about the structure of an author’s text as well as questions that seek the human experiences pointed to by the author’s words. When we engage authors in that way, they have the potential of becoming ongoing voices of our interior dialogue, allowing us to widen our horizons and deepen our vision into what is real.

Mathews also encouraged us to postpone criticism of a document until we have

developed a data-informed understanding of what is being said in that document. We understand that we are not merely viewing words on a page but listening to another human being who may challenge or unsettle our preconceived notions. So first, we seek the truth that “the human being who wrote the study paper” has for us, and only then do we speak back to that author about truth not included, about the author’s illusions, or questions needing further exploration. Critical thinking in relation to an author’s thought is part of good study. Critical thinking means integrating the author’s contribution into our own sense of what is true. But mistimed critical thinking may mean that we avoid hearing what an author has to say to us, especially when it is new or unsettling.

Mathews gave us a method of study derived from the scholarly study of the structure of New Testament writings. He called it “charting.” This method is about more than the mechanical process of numbering paragraphs and drawing a horizontal picture of the written material. Charting is about how the human mind works in appropriating written material. Charting entails seeing the wholes and the parts and the relationships between them. When we study a paragraph, the sentences are the parts of that whole. If the author is thinking and not simply free associating, he or she has put those sentences in a sequence that best unfolds the overall thought of that paragraph. Seeing the relationship between sentences and the relationship of the sentences to the whole paragraph is charting.

Charting is a method for focusing attention on the written material. It enables listening to the writer and entering into creative dialogue. At its best, charting is a means of spirit inquiry, for it calls upon us to ask deep questions and to ferret out fresh truth about our own existence. If in at least an intuitive manner we have not charted a piece of written material, we have not truly studied it. Charting helps us ask clear questions that ground in our own experience the insights and poetry of the author. Charting with pencil and paper is a means of making such inward thinking overt.

Leading a study of written material effectively also includes charting. To lead a study session effectively, the teacher needs to understand what the author is saying in the document well enough to illuminate for the group its core insights and the insights that need grounding questions. Presenting a simple chart with a bit of explanation, the leader shares with the group his or her experience of creative dialogue with the author. With such a picture in front of us, the grounding in our own life experience is based on the actual content of the material. This picture is most effective when it is presented on a marker board or other vertical surface in full view of the group. This board sits in the circle with the group. It is as if the author were sitting in the circle. The study leader’s role is to orchestrate a conversation between the mind, heart, and soul of that author and the minds, hearts, and souls of the attending group.

The What of Study

Finally, we must consider what we study in our CRCs. Here are four guidelines for choosing study material:

1. Materials that offer the best that we can locate of: (a) **Christian theology**, (b) guidance for the **Spirit journey**, (c) **Christian Community**, and (d) **Spirit-inspired social ethics**.
2. Materials that can be broken into portions small enough for each lesson to be mastered and deeply grounded in fifty minutes or less.
3. Materials that are well-written and directed toward the general reader rather than simply the academic community.
4. Materials that relate to our particular project in Christian community.

Following are some study suggestions for each of the four categories of study material noted in Guideline one:

Christian Theology

Rudolf Bultmann's *Jesus Christ and Mythology* is a classic introduction to the metaphorical translation of biblical literature into metaphors that grip the actual experience of human existence today. This 85-page book can be studied in ten sessions.

H. Richard Niebuhr's *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* is perhaps the best book on a relevant use of the word "God" – a devotional use that connects us to the ancient Jewish and Christian breakthroughs in religious practice.

Paul Tillich's first book of sermons, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, is a classic witness that should always be included in a basic list of accessible, inspiring study material.

The first seven chapters of **The Call of the Awe: Recovering Christian Profundity in an Interreligious Era** contains my most accessible and best introduction to existential theology for our times. I wrote it especially for this kind of study and I recommend ten 7 to 12-page selections from these seven chapters. The other chapters could be used for a more advanced course on interreligious dialogue. Study outlines are available for both courses.

Spirit Journey

Pema Chodron's *Taking the Leap: Freeing Ourselves from Old Habits and Fears* is a splendidly accessible and profound introduction to the ongoing journey of Spirit maturity. Chodron is an American Buddhist nun in the lineage of renowned master Chogyam Trungpa.

A. H. Almaas's *Essence: The Diamond Approach to Inner Realization* is a careful delineation of the nature of the Spirit Journey. I recommend the first two chapters, a grounded definition of Essence and an exploration of Essence in relation to Mind, Heart, Body, Energy, Personality, Void, and Substance. Almaas, who grew up in a Kuwaiti Sufi tradition, is a master innovator joining psychological savvy with Spirit experience.

The first five chapters of my **Jacob's Dream: A Christian Inquiry into Spirit Realization** provide a basic foundation for the sanctification journey within Christian practice. Again, I wrote this book with CRC study in mind. Chapters 6-14 provide material for a ten-session course on Spirit and the Enneagram. Chapters 15-19 provide a ten-session course on the three basic journeys of Spirit.

Sandra Maitri's *The Spiritual Dimension of the Enneagram: Nine Faces of the Soul* provides another course on Spirit and the Enneagram. I recommend chapters one through ten.

Christian Community

This essay on study plus nine other essays have been grouped into a ten-session course: *The Next Christianity: An Action in Religious Invention*. I recommend these ten essays as first priority for studying Christian Community.

I also recommend Chapters 20 to 25 in my book *Jacob's Dream: A Christian Inquiry into Spirit Realization* for a ten-session course on the theological underpinning for

Christian Community. A ten-session outline is available for this course.

Douglas John Hall's *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity* is a blunt announcement and documentation that every form of Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant manifestation is passing away, to be replaced by something yet to be formed. This book has encouraged my writing on this topic. Hall is Professor Emeritus of Christian Theology at McGill University.

for a Methodist view of Christian Community

Elaine A. Heath and Scott T. Kisker coauthored: *Longing for Spring: A New Vision for Wesleyan Community*, a 104-page book that calls for a New Monasticism operating alongside the death of denominationalism. Heath is professor of Evangelism at Perkins School of Theology in Dallas, Texas and Kisker is professor of Evangelism and Wesley Studies at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C.

for a Roman Catholic view of Christian Community

Virginia Hoffman's *Birthing a Living Church* provides a basic critique of the Roman Catholic Parish and the birth of small-group, post-clericalized explorations. Although elementary, it is radical in its implications.

Spirit-inspired Social Ethics

Arundhati Roy's *An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire* is 118 pages of splendidly radical and colorful wordsmithing by this postcolonial feminist ecologist from India. If Social Ethics has been a bore for you, this is a good place to begin again.

Thomas Berry's *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* remains a classic statement of Spirit-based ecological thought. Selections from this book would make an excellent 10-session course.

David Korten's *The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community* is, among all his great books, the most complete statement of his superbly progressive vision. For a ten-session course, small selections from this 359-page book will be necessary.

Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* is one of her best books and we need her penetrating insights. Again, these 587 pages need to be broken down into small selections for a 10-session course.

Robert Reich's *Supercapitalism: The Transformation of Business, Democracy, and Everyday Life* is a gripping history of the last hundred years and the challenge we face to recover our citizen power. From its 225 pages a course could be constructed to move us beyond consuming and investing to citizen responsibility.

Peter Block's *Community: The Structure of Belonging* spells out basic shifts in attitude and methods for assembling people in local communities to maximize progressive change. From this book a useful 10-session course can be created on how each CRC can make a difference in its local place.

For a course on feminism, I recommend, from among the many great books available, this anthology by Judith Plant: *Healing the Wounds*. It includes essays by 28 women, including Petra Kelly, Susan Griffin, Vanadana Shiva, Starhawk, Charlene Spretnak, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Dolores LaChappelle, Ursula Le Guin, and Joanna Macy.

For a course on race, I recommend James H. Cone's *Risks of Faith: The Emergence of a Black Theology of Liberation*. Cone reviews the contributions of both Martin Luther

King Jr. and Malcolm X and looks through the U.S. racial drama to its Spirit dimension.

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Many more accessible and profound books are available in all four of these categories. The list above is a carefully selected sample. Many books on these topics, although profound, are not useful for small-group study by non-scholars. Still other books are accessible for small-group study but not profound enough to justify the study time. We recommend competent scholarship and rich content, and we also emphasize accessible materials that each member can grasp and apply to his or her own living.