

Chapter 20

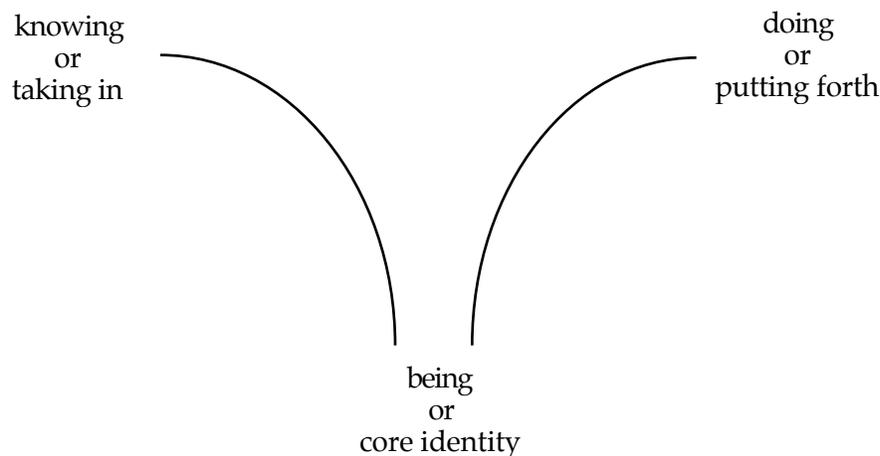
Religion as Social Process

Religion is rooted in practice, but it is not limited to practice. In addition to practice, a religion develops a religious theoretics (in some religions it is called “theology,” in others “teachings”). Religious theoretics does not take the place of religious practice; it supports practice, perhaps criticizes practice and recreates it. Studying theology together can even be viewed as a practice. The relationship between practice and theoretics is a close one, but practice remains the core aspect, the being aspect, the essence of religion. Theoretics is the knowing aspect of religion. We need to know the meaning of our religious language and we need to know how to use and lead our various practices. Theoretics plays a supporting role to practice, but an important role.

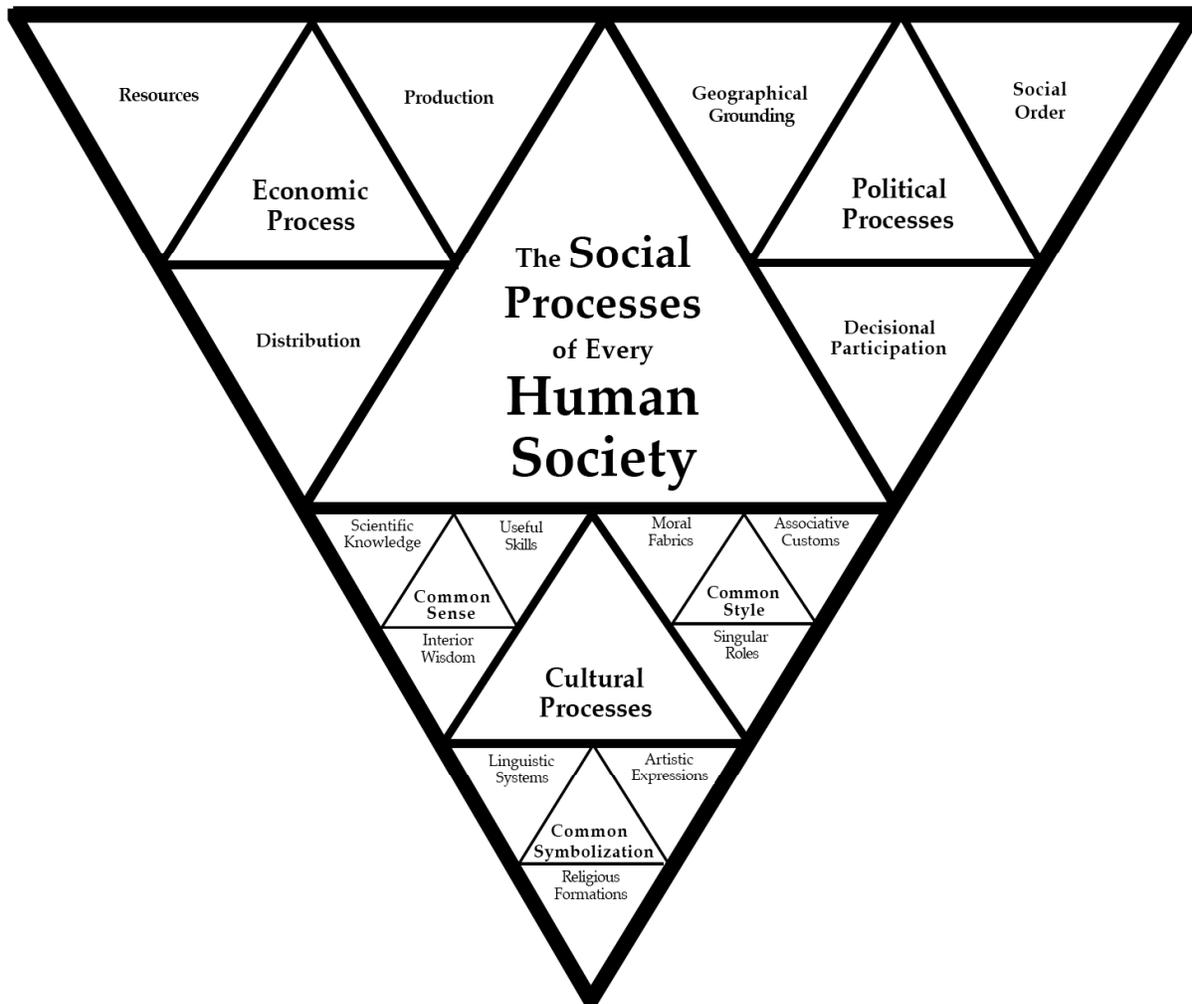
In addition to practice and theoretics every religion develops religious bodies – social organizations that house the practices and the theoretics. These bodies have all the elements of any social body: economic processes, political processes, and cultural processes. Religious bodies are cultural institutions, but like all cultural institutions they have political and economic processes that make them viable as functioning bodies. By political processes for a religious body I mean things like membership structures, the basic covenant and rules, the leadership designs, decision-making processes, foreign relations with other bodies, and the overall missional patterns for engaging the world at large. By economic processes I mean how teachers or leaders are paid or not; how shrines, temples, and meeting places are built and cared for; and how to handle the other expenses that emerge from being a particular social body. Membership dues, sale of products, and support from the general society may figure in. In other words, all the worldly aspects of being a functioning group have a place in the definition of “religion.”

Religion is a social process along with waste disposal, healthcare, education, life styles, political systems, economic systems, and so on. The chart on the next page is a picture of the essential social processes that comprise any whole society. I have broken down the cultural processes to show where the social process of *Religious Formation* shows up in relation to every other social process.

In the logic of the following chart, the economic side of this triangular map of social processes has to do with taking in the Earth for your society, the more political side has to do with putting forth choices and actions, and the more cultural side has to do with the identity of the people for whom resources are taken in and by whom human effort is put forth. In each set of three triangles the upper left triangle is the taking in aspect of that whole. The upper right triangle is the putting forth aspect of that whole. The lower triangle in that set of three is the identity that glues the set of three together.



In the following mode of organizing the social processes, *taking in* is associated with *knowing* for knowing is a way of taking in reality. *Putting forth* is associated with doing for putting forth implies initiative. Core identity is associated with being, for identity means the grasp and expression of some “we” who know and do. It will take some practice with this method of organization and some intuitive familiarity with the essence of each social process to fully catch on to this organizational method. So if this mode of social thinking is new to you, simply contemplate this model for a while realizing that it is just a model and all models can be improved.

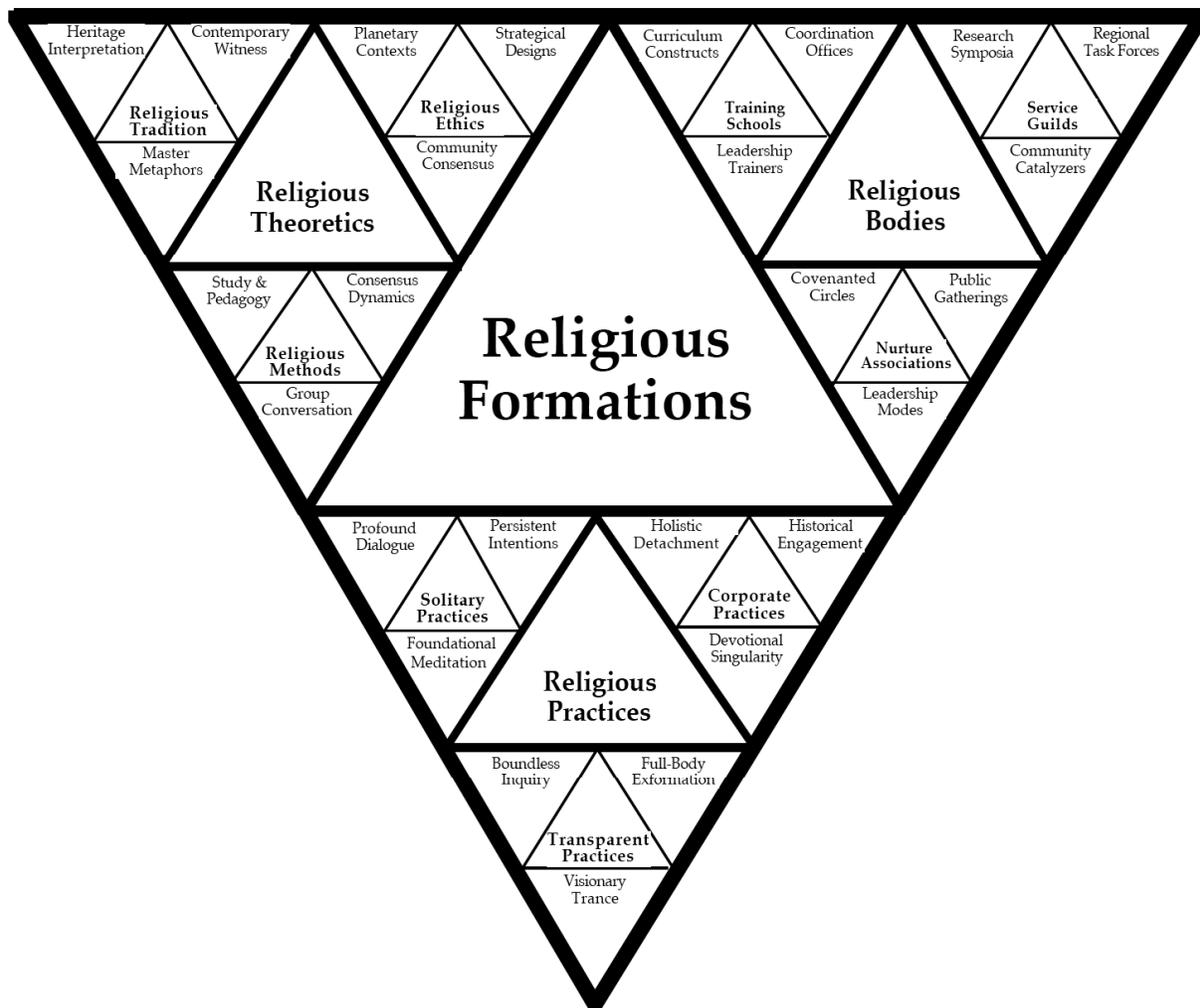


The social processes called “*Religious Formations*” is pictured in this chart as the core identity of the *Common Symbolization* processes which are the core identity of the *Cultural Processes* which are the core identity of all the social processes. This understanding is not commonly held in sociologies of both Capitalist and Marxist origins. In both of these camps of thought, the economic processes are thought to be the primary element of a society, while the political and cultural processes are thought to be subsidiary. In fact, classical Marxists typically viewed the cultural processes as merely a rationalization for the economic organization of the society. From the Marxist point of view the truth values for a cultural revolution are chosen on the basis of what is expedient to support economic vision and strategy. The idea that the cultural processes provide the core identity of a society and thus also the core revolutionary component in social change is not the traditional Marxist view. Within classical Marxist

ideology the notion that the social processes I am calling *Religion Formations* play a revolutionary role would be “heresy.” Nevertheless, many current Marxist thinkers are coming to a deeper appreciation of the revolutionary role of culture and religion. Alain Badiou is a vivid example of this in his book *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*.

So let us inquire further into how the history of social change is impacted by how a society formulates its basic relations with Reality – that is, its Religious Formations. A religious formation need not be an opium that numbs the psyche to social responsibility; it can be a core source of revolutionary fervor. Marx is correct that most religion, both in our century and much earlier, has been an opiate. Marx says somewhere that “the critique of religion is the foundation of all critique.” Such statements bring into focus how “bad” religion is a powerful factor. “Good” religion can also be viewed as a powerful social force in the opposite direction from an opiate. Though the classical Marxist view of religion as incomplete, the Marxist critique of decayed religion has played a role and can still play a role in the renewal of the religious aspect of social existence.

I turn next to a breakdown of the social process of *Religious Formulations* into 27 subsidiary processes. The following chart is the small triangle at the very bottom of the previous chart, broken down by the same organizational method into my current picture of the 27 subparts of the social process of *Religious Formations*:



In the last chapter I discussed the *Religious Practices* third of the above chart. I will comment now on the *Religious Theoretics* third and the *Religious Bodies* third of this whole triangle. Perhaps I should warn the reader that many of you may find this chapter one of the most disagreeable chapters in the book. Why? Because many of us in our culture have come to yearn for a “spirituality” that is devoid of institutional embodiment. It is hard for many of us to accept the challenging fact that a vital religious practice is needed for our Spirit maturity, and that a religion with cultural, political, and economic processes is needed to house that vital religious practice and its theoretic underpinnings. So bear with me as I comment on each small triangle in the upper two thirds of the above chart. Such a detailed look at what is entailed in renewing an old religion or inventing a new one, may call to your consciousness old hurts you have endured from bad religions and current fears about forging a good religion or belonging to it.

Religious Theoretics

Every religious community does some thinking and forges some teachings. (1) Those teachings form an ongoing heritage that needs to be interpreted for each generation. (2) Methods have to be devised for studying those teachings and conducting life together in the “culture” of that religious community. And (3) the question of right action or ethics comes up for still further thinking and guideline creation.

(1) Religious Tradition

Below are three paragraphs – one on each of the three subparts of *Religious Tradition* in the triangular chart above. The teachings of a religious community gather over time and become heritage. This heritage may become cryptic or at least need stretching for the next generation.

1a. Heritage Interpretation

Typically a religious community wishes to both honor the truth in its founding breakthrough and speak relevantly to the contemporary experiences of the humans within its influence. In times of rapid change, the work of heritage interpretation can become controversial. Part of the community hangs on to past formulations of the heritage and part of the community reaches forward for more relevant ways of understanding the heritage. Both directions can lead to “bad religion.” The backward lookers can become rigid in ways that turn old teachings into convictions that are contrary to the original fire of that religion. Similarly, the forward lookers can lose contact with the original fire by becoming accommodated to currently popular escapes from Reality. The challenge in *Heritage Interpretation* is to remain true to the essence of the heritage while also making contact with contemporary humans. For example, Christians interpreting the Virgin Birth of Jesus go in all three of these directions. The backward lookers insist that the Virgin Birth was a literal biological event proving Jesus’ special standing. The forward lookers give the Virgin Birth a very shallow meaning or ignore it all together as an ancient superstition. The Virgin Birth heritage is being genuinely recovered only when we see ourselves as capable of a “Virgin Birth” – that each of us can join Jesus in finding our true parentage in Eternity rather than in our earthly parents.

1b. Master Metaphors

The meaningful interrelation of all long-standing religious traditions has become

unusually challenging because of the huge changes in human culture in the last couple of centuries. As spelled out in Chapter 17 we are experiencing a shift in a master metaphor, the shift from double-deck transcendence to one-realm transparency. For example, when Jews, Christians and Muslims read about the call of Isaiah in Isaiah 6, they cannot grasp the meaning of the angels with six wings and the shaking of the foundations of the temple unless they can work their minds loose from that two story-mythology into a realization that the author of this passage was talking about a shaking of the foundations of his own life and how we do not confront Eternity directly but through a cloud of Awe that hides the Awesome with its “flapping wings.” Isaiah knew that this extreme poetry was about his personal life, but for us the meaning of this old poetry can be accessed only through a use of the transparency mode of interpretation.

1c. Contemporary Witness

The extent to which religious communication is conditioned by the contemporary culture is about equal to the extent that it is conditioned by the heritage. For the essence of an old religious heritage to come alive in our times that essence has to be communicated to our own lives and to the lives of others who are living in the contemporary world of sensibilities and challenges. We experience this very strongly in these times of vast and rapid change, but it has always been so. For example, among the New Testament writings the Gospel of John differs greatly from the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke. This difference is due to the fact that whoever wrote John is addressing a different time and culture. The earlier Gospels were still speaking to Hellenistic Jews, and the Gospel of John was being written near the turn of the first century for people who possessed a more thoroughly Greek-oriented mentality and who needed to have simple Hebraic matters explained to them.

(2) Religious Methods

Below are three paragraphs – one on each of the three subparts of *Religious Methods* in the chart above. Methods are a very important aspect of religious formation that has been too little explored. The power and popularity of many contemporary Buddhist movements can be credited to the thoroughness with which effective methods of meditation are being taught. Western religions would also be empowered by upgrading their religious methods.

2a. Study and Pedagogy

For most people today the study of religious writings has to overcome both an anti-intellectualism that only scans written material and an intellectualism that cannot move beyond bare ideas into personal-life experience. So teaching religion requires a study method that enables the student to grasp the author’s structure of thought rather than simply selecting agreeable bits and ignoring the overall address of the author. Secondly a good study method enables students to move from mental statements to the grounding of those statements in their life experiences. Study is not complete until we can draw on one page our picture of what a piece of writing is actually saying. And teaching is not complete until each student knows what the rational content of the material studied means in terms of his or her own life experiences. Scientific historical knowledge is important for understanding the original meaning of an ancient text, but our understanding of that text is incomplete until we have achieved a connection of the material with our own contemporary lives. This will require translating the old language and metaphors used in that ancient time into language and metaphors that is alive for us in our own time.

2b. Group Conversation

Lengthy talks can be important if they are crafted by informed teachers and made deeply relevant to our actual lives, but there is no substitute for conversation in which each person in a relatively small group is challenged to share profoundly their life experience and their edge questions. Good group conversations require good methods. For example, here is an effective method for discussing art. A painting or movie or poem or music can be powerfully reflected upon by using a group process that organizes the conversation in this order: (1) each person says something objective about what they actually saw or heard, (2) each person shares how they reacted or felt about the viewing or hearing of this piece of art, and only then (3) ask selected persons to share interpretive statements about what this artistic expression is saying to us today. Ancient writings also require special conversation methods. I have found that each style of religious writing requires a different method to discuss it effectively. Effective group conversation methods are needed for an optimal communal life among members of a relevant future religious formation.

2c. Consensus Dynamics

Methods are also needed to make group decisions and to think together as a group. To meet the challenges of our times, our next expressions of religious community need to be far more democratic than the religious practices that have characterized most religious formations in the past. So, it seems obvious to me that we need to teach a thoroughgoing means of consensus decision making. The Quakers pioneered consensus methods many decades ago. Many recent ecological and justice movements have also developed skills in consensus processing. In order to be fully relevant, religious groups will need to learn the best of these methods and use them throughout every layer of their decision-making structures. This is not easy to do. We find that the value of full participation needs to be balanced with disciplined, time-honoring, and thereby effective decision making. Also, what we do in small groups with consensus can be informal, while large groups will need a more formal ordering. However difficult all this may seem, effective consensus methods is another important topic for the optimal ordering of a vital religious formation.

(3) Religious Ethics

Below are three paragraphs – one on each of the three subparts of *Religious Ethics* in the chart above. A religious community is never entirely about the nurture of its members; it is also an active presence in the general society. *Religious Ethics* means discerning how that religious community can with integrity be a gift to the general society. And this gift is given as a group as well as through the life quality of each of its members. Religious formations are one of the social processes that comprise every society. So when we are practicing a religion, we do this not only on our own behalf but on behalf of the whole society, the whole of humanity, the whole natural planet. *Religious Ethics* are the guidelines we create for that outreach into the wide world.

3a. Planetary Contexts

An important clarification about *Religious Ethics* has happened in recent decades: our ethical guidelines do not emerge from our religious teachings or written Scriptures but from our living experience of the “I Am” in our times. It is out of the basic experience of the “I Am” of profound humanness that we envision (choose with thoughtfulness) general guidelines for the future of human life on planet Earth. In former times religious ethics did not have the awareness we now have of the whole planet, but there

was always a sense of something larger than “my village, or “my tribe” or “my civilization.” Because religious ethics begins with an awareness of the Wholeness of Being, responsibility for the whole of social and natural reality follows. When religious people do their planetary ethical thinking from the beginning point of profound humanness rather than from some specific sectarian principles, every religion tends to come up with similar guidelines. Indeed, we no longer have a Christian ethics or a Jewish ethics or a Muslim ethics or a Hindu ethics or a Buddhist ethics. We simply have ethics created by humans upon the foundation of the “I Am” experiences from a wide variety of religious groups. Religious ethics today is becoming interreligious ethics. This is a profound point to which I have devoted the whole of Part Six of this book.

3b. Community Consensus

In our local places we begin with guidelines that are being created through the consensus building of many religious people on a planet-wide basis and for the whole planet. Each of us who is accessing our “I Am” profundity can share in building that planetary consensus, but we are also a small part of that planet-wide league of guideline building. So we find ourselves engaged in an attitude of obedience to the ongoing consensus building that is taking place in the planetary scope of discussion. Living in our local place we build further consensus among our aware neighbors on how that emerging planetary context applies to our local place. To do this we need to train one another in consensus building, inform one another about this planet-wide consensus already in process, and initiate vision and strategies that apply to taking action in our local place. As we move out into our geographical regions (whether alone or in groups), we provide leadership among others not in the name of some religion, but in the name of the truth that we are discovering as we live the “I Am” in awareness of the planetary realities and the local realities in which we live.

3c. Strategic Designs

Strategy is an important ethical category. Understanding strategy delivers us from the crime of imposing our idealistic beliefs upon situations that we may not even understand. A love-Reality strategy begins by understanding and accepting the challenge of the given situation with all its injustices, foolishness, bad thinking, prejudiced feelings, sheer meanness, and more. Strategy is a loving interaction between what now is and what needs to be according to our planet-wide and community-wide guidelines for change. Strategy is envisioning the soft points in the current conditions where change can most likely begin and devising the actions that can move the whole in a series of appropriate steps toward the type of social structures and care for one another that our “I Am” profundity is enabling us to conceive. Obviously, the “I Am” does not provide the social specifics, we have to create those through the trial-and-error guessing that characterizes all creative activity.

Religious Bodies

The thought of creating or recreating a religious body for a next expression of religious practice will be, for many people, the most disagreeable of all the topics in this book. There is a wide spectrum of people who want to be what they call “spiritual,” but want to have nothing to do with any more religious bodies. This fear of a religious body is understandable, for having been injured, mistreated, and offended deeply by perverse religious bodies, it may be hard to believe that we need a religious body even if that religious body is an outgrowth of the “I Am” Truth. There is an illusion involved in the hope of being “spiritual” as a way of avoiding consideration of the need for a

religious body. If “spiritual” means accessing the “I Am” profundity, we need a religious body within which and through which to express and share our “I Am” profundity. And we also need a religious body to assist us in completing our access of the “I Am” profundity.

(1) Training Schools

Below are three paragraphs – one on each of the three subparts of *Training Schools* in the chart above. If we look around we can see that almost every person or group of people who have accessed a bit of the “I Am” profundity have created some sort of Training School through which to share their discovery with others. They sometimes call these “workshops” or “retreats,” but whatever we call them the basic dynamic is about creating a set of group exercises that enable people to get a taste of or a furtherance of their journey into the “I Am” realization.

1a. Curriculum Constructs

When we Christians read the New Testament dramas we call “The Gospels,” we get the impression that Jesus did his teachings only once, but likely he had a set of teachings that he did over and over in village after village. There is a story in the Gospel of Luke about how he trained 70 disciples to go out two-by-two and teach his “curriculum” of core “teachings” in all the villages they could. Again and again in every age of history, curriculum constructs have come into being that were used extensively because they worked in enabling people living in that time and place to be delivered from some escape and returned to their true nature of “I Am” wonderment. Creating a curriculum for our specific time and place turns out to be an ongoing part of being a member of some group in which the “I Am” essence of human life is being recovered.

1b. Leadership Trainers

While there are circumstances in which any person might provide leadership for others with regard to realizing their true nature, the Training Schools of a vital religious formation require leadership that have not only accessed their “I Am” essence but have learned well the *Curriculum Constructs* that are making a difference in the current culture as well as become competent in the *Religious Methods* that are needed to teach those constructs in a manner that leads others toward accessing their true nature. In other words, skilled leadership is needed! Nevertheless, to be effective in the emerging cultures of our times, the formation of religious leadership needs to be done in a manner that does not establish a two-class organization. The *Leadership Trainer* in this coming era of religious formation needs to be a person set aside from a community of equals to do a task on behalf of the whole. This trainer is training others in the means for accessing their own true nature and also in their own skills for using the effective *Curriculum Constructs* and *Religious Methods* to assist others in accessing their true nature. Such training is best done in face-to-face groups. The use of e-mail, the internet, the telephone, and the postal services have some serious limitations that go along with their advantages for easily reaching large numbers of people and the saving of transportation costs and time. But fully effective *Religious Formation* cannot be done without eye-to-eye, body-to-body communication between those who are learning and those who are leading. The less intimate means are subsidiary to the intimate means. In order to deal with the transportation costs and still have intimate associations between leaders and new members, a religious formation will need a large number of leaders and a large amount of leadership training.

1c. Coordination Offices

Coordination Offices will be required for bringing together qualified *Leadership Trainers* with an ongoing stream of learners of the vital *Curriculum Constructs* of that religious formation in its time and place. As we view this picture we are viewing how it becomes necessary for a fully developed *Religious Body* to come into being. Whether we are viewing crowds of people following an itinerant teacher walking through the villages of ancient Galilee or the more complex organizations that are typical of our 21st Century cultures, we are talking about creating religion as a social process within the other social processes of our down-to-Earth human societies. These *Coordination Offices* will require economic processes and political processes that enable and support the cultural processes that are basic to vital and continuing *Religious Formations*.

(2) Nurture Associations

Below are three paragraphs – one on each of the three subparts of *Nurture Associations* in the chart above. Not only are *Training Schools* an obvious emergence for expanding a breakthrough of “I Am” realization, also obvious is the truth that awakening persons need regular meetings with their peers. Awakening individuals enter a process of emergence that has no end. A retreat or school may occasion a fresh beginning of “new” life, but this new life is then lived daily, weekly, monthly, yearly. Daily and weekly practices of religion are implied from our experience in living the “I Am” life within our estranged cultures. Our efforts to live the “I Am” life teaches us the need for regular meetings with our peers in order to sustain this ongoing “I Am” emergence.

2a. Covenanted Circles

Whether we call them sanghas, base communities, house churches, resurgence circles, support groups or something else, intimate groups are springing up in almost every vital religion. Perhaps one of the reasons for such interest in small groups is that intimate associations beyond the nuclear family have to be arranged in contemporary culture where both individualism and collectivism squeeze out deep personal relations. This felt need for regular small group meetings I interpret as a sign that the next stage in *Religious Formations* needs to emphasize small intimate group associations. This need not devalue larger gatherings, but it raises questions about what those larger gatherings need to be. We also need to raise questions about what small group practice needs to be, if we are to emphasize religious formation aimed at the access of the “I Am” profundity. To begin with, the small groups of the next religious formations need to emphasize *Universal Forgiveness* (the welcome home to Reality of every person). This will tend to make the members of a small group feel safe to do open sharing of their lives. Also needed is a willingness to face fully our escapes from Reality and “enjoy” the eyes of others upon us to assist us to see those escapes and to work through the recasting of the entire round of our lives toward manifesting all aspects of our “I Am” being. In order for small group life to maintain such a commitment to depth, we will need some sort of covenant that outlines our responsibility for regular attendance, care for one another, and upfront clarity about the purpose of the group and the methods and curriculum to be used.

2b. Leadership Modes

Also needed to maintain depth in our small group life will be two or three members in each circle who have been trained in the *Training Schools* in the *Curriculum Constructs* and *Religious Methods* that each small group will need to learn and use. These small

group leaders need not see themselves as the only leaders in the group, but the importance of their presence and service to the group will need to be rather explicit. The role of those leaders in anchoring the group in a religious practice that has depth will need to be carried out in a style that is neither dictatorial nor permissive. In our contemporary culture our ideas of leadership flip back and forth between encouraging our groups to do whatever their whims desire or controlling the group with an iron hand of imposition. It will be an ongoing challenge to discover how we combine (1) a respect for the autonomy and decisional participation of each person with (2) a disciplined ordering of activities that honor the agreed upon purpose of these group meetings. What is most clear is that a leadership that honors these challenges is a necessary part of our emerging patterns of religious formation.

2c. Public Gatherings

Another way that small group life can be enriched is regular associations with other small groups doing the same religious practices. These larger gatherings will need to be well organized by competent leaders and held regularly enough to be a part of the ongoing pattern of religious practice. If the *Covenantal Circles* meet weekly, the *Public Gatherings* might meet at least quarterly. The *Public Gatherings* might gather only those who are members of *Covenantal Circles* or these gatherings might also gather persons who are interested in exploring Circle life or organizing new Circles. I am attempting to describe guidelines that can apply to many different religious practices, but each set of religious practices within each culture will be different. The core point of this paragraph is that some sort of balance between *Public Gatherings* and *Covenantal Circles* will need to guide the future organization of a *Religious Body* that supports a relevant religion on planet Earth in century twenty-one.

(3) Service Guilds

Below are three paragraphs – one on each of the three subparts of *Service Guilds* in the chart above. In these next three paragraphs I will insist that in order to be a full manifestation of the “I Am” profundity, the next *Religious Bodies* will need to develop a balance between nurturing “inreach” and contributing “outreach” to the whole of humanity and planet Earth. A best-case religion is both a personal discipline and a social process that moves outwardly, taking its place of responsibility within the other social processes of the society.

3a. Research Symposia

The ethical manifestations of our “I Am” experiences will result in an ongoing process of consensus building. We can no longer accept the notion of permanent principles dropping down from a divine realm, so we are cast into the ongoing task of creating our ethical guidelines through consensus building conducted by well informed persons who are also grounded in their “I Am” being. This means organizing groups of persons who are committed to work on selected topics throughout a period of time communicating with each other regularly and meeting face-to-face at least once a year. The results of such *Research Symposia* will then be published or in some way taught to all the *Covenantal Circles* in a given Network of Religious Practice.

3b. Community Catalyzers

When we imagine several *Covenantal Circles* in the same local community, we can imagine select members from a number of those Circles taking on specific issues that arise in their local place. “*Catalyzers*” is a term meant to communicate that these Circle

members do not act in the name of their Circle or their religion. Rather they join local community organizations and play creative roles within those secular groupings. Also, they may organize new secular groups. And the persons who do these sorts of things may come from “Circles” that practice different religions. For example, some members of a Buddhist Sangha may join with some members of a Christian Circle to protest some malpractice or advocate for some key change in community life. As indicated earlier, *Religious Ethics* do not derive from a religious practice, but from the “I Am” profundity that religious practices attempt to access.

3c. Regional Task Forces

If “Regional” means a wider scope of geography than local community, region-wide social responses will look different from *Community Catalyzers*. A *Regional Task Force* would need to be a rather formal organization spending the time required to research the needs of some planetary region, design an inclusive vision for that region, and create the strategies needed to make the envisioned changes. Again, members of such a task force may come from a wide range of religious practices but still be working from the same base in “I Am” realization. One of the gifts brought to social action from the presence of vital religious groups is skill in working with people and skill in avoiding burnout during the long struggles that it takes to deal with powerful opposition. Fostering hope in seemingly hopeless circumstances is a core service that effective religious formations can bring to Regional Task Forces.

Recapitulation on Religion as a Social Process

My description of these 27 subparts of my chart on *Religious Formations* has been far less than exhaustive. My aim in this chapter has been to paint a comprehensive portrait of what is involved in viewing religion as a social process within the whole pattern of essential social processes that make up a whole human society. To be religious in the deepest meaning of that term is something more than a private, psychological avocation. A “healthy” religion assists members of a society to access their true being and to live that true being for the benefit and enrichment of the entire society as well as for the well-being of the planet upon which every society depends. The election to be religious is more like a vocation than an avocation. A vital religion spawns a *calling* or life quest from which our set of finite vocations can emerge and become rewarding. And our set of finite vocations can include the finite vocation of organizing and renewing the next expression of the religion that we choose to practice.

Seeing religion as a social process provides us with essential clarity on how to reinvent vital religion. A religion is just another social process; it is not more divine than waste disposal. But if a religion is fulfilling its role as a means of accessing our true being, it is assisting us to access THAT which may be called “divine” – the Every-Thing-Ness in which all things cohere that is also the No-Thing-Ness out of which all things come and to which all things return, both of which comprise the Awesome that Awes us profoundly.