

**The
Vine
and the
Branches**

**How to Spiritually Connect in a
Challenging World**

By Bryan Holmes and Maggie McSpedon

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*** EXCERPT ***

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The Vine and the Branches: How to Spiritually Connect in a Challenging World

Bryan Holmes and Maggie McSpedon

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All profits from the sale of this book will go to charities that help enable spiritual connections. Details are on Bryan Holmes's author website, including ways to help.

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Preface

“I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.”

John 15:6 (Holy Bible, New King James Version)

Spirituality, the idea of being connected spiritually to God and to others, is a timeless concept in most cultures. People have felt that they have some sort of existence outside of their corporeal selves, and that they have a connection to those around them and to some sort of higher consciousness. Many have also understood that this spiritual life is eternal and should be the main focus while living on earth. However, life in today’s world is mainly focused on bodily existence. To its detriment, modern society has neglected and negated spirituality. Many people now feel disconnected from one another and from any notion of a higher being or God. Until all of us begin to truly understand our spiritual selves and how we interconnect spiritually, we will be lost in our quest to solve society’s problems or our own.

This book is an attempt to examine many of the social ills that plague society today, to analyze them, and to provide solutions in the context of spirituality. It is not a typical self-help book, but rather a call for self-examination and spiritual renewal through the help of other people and God. A major impetus for the book was the

tragic shooting in December 2012 at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, less than twenty miles from where the authors live. As the news story unfolded over the past year, it became obvious that the shooter, Adam Lanza, had become isolated from society. Given the horrific nature of his crime, we cannot believe he felt any spiritual connection with God or with other people. Yet the news never mentioned anything concerning his spirituality. The story quickly devolved into a politically charged debate over gun control and mental health treatment. As terrible as this crime was, it was soon followed by other shootings and acts of violence. Our society was missing the true cause of all these crimes, and in so doing, was further promoting the lie that humankind can exist without spirituality.

On a positive note, the need for spirituality was very evident after the Newtown tragedy among the families of the victims, the survivors, first responders, and others in the community. Religious leaders of various faiths also served heroically to help these people. Many people gave moving testimony of their spiritual faith and how it helped them through this crisis. The spiritual connections they had were crucially important. Nevertheless, the mainstream media and other public commentators have never explicitly compared the demonstrated power of spiritual connections among these survivors to the spiritual vacuum of the perpetrator. While nobody knows exactly what Adam Lanza's spiritual state was at the time of his crime, his actions point to a complete absence of spiritual connections.

Historically, in many different cultures, spiritual disconnection, especially from God, has been identified as the source of evil and criminal behavior. The idea of Satan, an angel who transgressed against God, is the ultimate example of such disconnect. Despite this consistent view of evil and its source, we don't discuss it publicly through the media or in our social institutions. Why? It may be due to a misguided notion that any discussion of spirituality will somehow discriminate against one group or another. While the authors do not advocate for some sort of national spiritual policy, we do think that spirituality should be discussed openly in public forums. More importantly, each person must individually acknowledge his or her spiritual self and the need for spiritual connections with one another and with God. Until each of us does this, we will continue misdiagnosing the fundamental reasons for social calamities, and we will continue to struggle with them.

Many people feel driven to understand their spirituality. Albert Schweitzer, the theologian and missionary, wrote, "From the very beginning [of my youth] I was convinced that all thought is really concerned with the great problem of how man can attain to the spiritual union with infinite Being."¹ He felt compelled to understand the way he could spiritually connect with God. For any of us, the first step is self-examination. A placard reads, "Man know thyself," above an ancient church in Methwold, England. The point is that until a person looks within and makes an honest self-assessment, he or she cannot really understand his or her spiritual state. If this self-assessment shows a spiritual void, then the next

step is to seek spiritual connection with God and with others. Every faith provides a way to do this.

Our main point in this book is that our modern world essentially promotes an existence lacking in any spirituality. Whatever spiritual connections we make are either ignored or attacked by the world around us. Insidiously, we have come to accept this state of being as normal. Historically, most cultures would consider it abnormal. We hope that in reading this book, you may discover normalcy, the existence of your spiritual self, and venture outside yourself to form spiritual connections. There is no single path to follow. With God's help and the support of those around you, you should tread the path best suited to you.

This book is the creation of two people, Bryan Holmes and Maggie McSpedon. Bryan was the instigator and primary author, and Maggie was a major contributor, content editor, creative consultant, and sounding-board. At every step of the way, we worked together, as we both share a similar view of spirituality. In places where only one of us is making a point, we put *Bryan* or *Maggie* at the beginning of the entry to indicate who is speaking, and we indicate the end of the entry using *~End~*. Otherwise, this book is the work of both of us.

While authored by Christians, this book in no way condemns other religions or beliefs. Rather, it affirms the existence of a common sense of spirituality among people of every faith. This book is also not promoting any particular form of politics or economics, but only offering criticism of the prevalent systems and

indicating how they have hurt our spiritual existence. The fact that we are now in a new economic age, the information society², drives many of the social changes that cause enormous disruptions in our lives and severe fractures in our spirituality. Secular humanism and materialism are the fundamental philosophies of Western society that deny spirituality while guiding almost all major scholarly research and public discussion. Government-sponsored socialism in various forms is also a viable force in our global society and has had a hugely negative effect on spirituality. Finally, materialism and the economic force of our information society have accelerated globalization and urbanization, two major trends that stymie the development of our spiritual connections.

The evidence that these various political and economic systems have hurt the human condition is manifest, especially in the widespread discontent and violence we see around the world. Nevertheless, this book is not a call for political action to overthrow these systems. Instead, it is a call for each person to look within, acknowledge his or her need for spirituality, and begin to connect spiritually with others and with God. This is humanity's most important task. If every person made this effort, imagine the effect on every aspect of society.

Entangled and Connected

Understanding Spiritual Connections

The basic need for interaction is and always has been a part of human beings' nature. However, it is the effectiveness of these interactions that needs to be examined. *Spiritual connection* implies a religious aspect, but what is a "connection" and what does it entail? Is there any sort of connection we can measure or observe? There is a scientific basis for believing that all things, and therefore people, are linked, though the essence of these connections is still not fully understood.

Quantum physics shows that atomic particles can display a mysterious form of connection called *entanglement*. For instance, when two quantum entangled electrons are separated and the spin of one is altered, the other electron's spin will mirror the change, even though there is no measurable connection between them. Fritjof Capra, in *The Web of Life*, summarizes this revolution in scientific thought that quantum physics caused:

The subatomic particles have no meaning as isolated entities but can be understood only as interconnections, or

correlations, among various processes of observation and measurement. In other words, subatomic particles are not “things,” but interconnections among things, and so on. In quantum theory we never end up with any “things;” we always deal with interconnections. This is how quantum physics shows that we cannot decompose the world into independently existing elementary units. As we shift our attention from macroscopic objects to atoms and subatomic particles, nature does not show us any isolated building blocks, but rather appears as a complex web of relationships among the various parts of a unified whole.³

We see that matter, at its most fundamental form, is connected. While the mechanics of this connection are unknown, the effects are observable. If matter, of which everything is made, is interconnected, would it be reasonable to assume this interconnectedness extends to things made of matter, including humans? We do not have good empirical proof of human interconnections, but we also lack a full comprehension of the human brain and the mind’s relation to it. Therefore, we must acknowledge the possibility that human connections occur in a realm that is currently outside our ability to observe it.

In *The Hidden Connections*, Capra explains that the word *spirit* has come down to us from many languages and cultures as meaning *breath of life*.⁴ He suggests that the concept of spirituality can be explained by considering that all life is interconnected:

Spirit—the breath of life—is what we have in common with all living beings. It nourishes us and keeps us alive...It is evident that this notion of spirituality is consistent with the notion of the embodied mind that is now being developed in

cognitive science. Spiritual experience is an experience of aliveness of mind and body as a unity. Moreover, this experience of unity transcends not only the separation of mind and body, but also the separation of self and world. The central awareness in these spiritual moments is a profound sense of oneness with all, a sense of belonging to the universe as a whole. This sense of oneness with the natural world is fully borne out by the new scientific conception of life.⁵

We can also see how nature is interconnected in the study of ecology. Experience has taught us that when we affect our natural environment through pollution or species endangerment, severe consequences ensue. We are often surprised by the results of our actions, which frequently exhibit previously undiscovered connections. For instance, some species of large game fish, such as tuna, now contain dangerously high levels of mercury. Yet tuna do not consume mercury directly. They acquire it through the consumption of smaller fish, which consume the microorganisms that absorb mercury. This mercury is present in the water as a result of human wastes. This domino effect is a recurring theme in nature. Despite our vast research, there are millions of chain reactions still undiscovered in every facet of the environment.

The interconnections of the natural world are viewed spiritually by many faiths. In an introductory essay to the book, *Seeing God Everywhere: Essays on Nature and the Sacred (Perennial Philosophy)*, Satish Kumar describes the Hindu view, also shared by many other religions, “The god is not outside the world but the world is an embodiment of the divine. There is no

separation, no division, no duality and no fragmentation. Everything is connected to everything else and the existence of one is dependent on the existence of the other.”⁶ All creation is connected to one another and to the Creator.

Bryan: I have felt this interconnection with nature many times as I have hiked in the mountains, swum in the ocean, or canoed on a quiet lake. Spending time in the outdoors has been critically important to me and to my well-being. Feeling the sun in my face, breathing fresh air, or feeling the flow of water over me have all made me feel close to God. Many have described a similar feeling. I recently reread *The Outermost House* by Henry Beston. He lived for a year in a small shack on the dunes of Cape Cod, less than fifty miles from where I grew up. In 1928, he wrote, “The world today is sick to its thin blood for lack of elemental things, for fire before the hands, for water welling from the earth, for air, for the dear earth itself underfoot.”⁷ Despite his austere environment, he goes on to describe the wondrous year he spent by the sea. While he does not profess any religion, he clearly felt a spiritual renewal by being close to nature. I think many of us would love to have such an experience. ~End~

If one believes in a God who created the world, it is logical to assume that everything was created with a purpose. As the Psalmist says, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.”⁸ The apostle Paul discusses this idea at the start of his letter to the church in Rome, “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—His eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has

been made, so that men are without excuse.”⁹ In other words, the world around us was created in a way that would teach us, so our ability to discern the interconnected nature of our surroundings shows the importance of interconnections. If God created these interconnections, then it follows that God is communicating their importance.

Bryan: I have often observed something in nature and felt that God was communicating to me through what I saw. As a beekeeper, I am always amazed at how bees organize themselves and accomplish relatively enormous tasks. While each bee can only carry a fraction of an ounce of nectar from a flower back to the hive, the entire colony of bees can produce up to one hundred pounds of honey in a few weeks from the countless drops of nectar brought in. The bees do this work by flying miles away from the hive and finding their way back so as to get nectar from many sources. Other bees work inside the hive to dehydrate the nectar and cap the honey in comb cells. Somehow, the bees are communicating to do all this work. They appear to be in perfect harmony. Yet scientists have little idea how a bee communicates or navigates, as it is an insect with very little for a brain. My feeling is that God is using bees to show us the importance of social interconnections toward accomplishing goals for the common good. *~End~*

How should we interconnect? Humans are social creatures. The most popular websites today are social networks. Yet we find that many social connections are not only unsatisfying, but often destructive. The cyber-bullying of a social outcast. The dysfunctional marriage of a couple. The victimization of an

individual by a crime. They all are negative connections. What is their common thread? How can we eliminate this destructiveness?

A social connection is defined as the mixing of people, and it can have good or bad outcomes. Truly positive social connections require that each person take a charitable interest in others. Each must overcome his or her selfish tendencies and instead focus on common priorities. Successfully married couples understand this concept. Marriage is a compromise of one's selfish interests for the sake of the marriage and the family. This type of social connection is satisfying and productive. But is there a more fundamental process at work? The strongest social connections are spiritual. They foster a bond between people and with God; they are based on compassion and empathy.

Bryan: As a teacher, I try to connect with my students from the start of the school year. I learned early on that this was a crucial first step in order to be an effective teacher. I don't always succeed, but when I do, the results are dramatic. For one thing, I have had consistently well behaved classes where the students get to work. For another, I have had many students with whom I have developed an appropriate, but close relationship, and who went on to achieve brilliant success. These positive outcomes did not happen because I was so good at presenting the material or managing the classroom. Instead, they happened because the students trusted me, and knew I cared about them, so they poured all their effort into learning. Many of them have stayed in contact with me. Such connections are far more valuable to me than any teaching award or salary increase. I think any teacher reading this would agree. *~End~*

Chapter 2

From Adam to Jesus

Background on Christian Thought

Humankind has mental, physical, social, and spiritual dimensions. From the beginning of known history, we have felt a spiritual connection with God, nature, and one another. Each culture has developed its spiritual view differently, but there are many commonalities. Faith in God is basically a spiritual connection with an omnipresent being who is benignly connected to all consciousness for eternity. Some people find this idea foolish and incomprehensible. Others are inspired to connect with God, sometimes against great opposition, and for reasons unclear to us. Yet all major faiths espouse the same notion: spiritual connections with people and with God are the most important and fulfilling goals of one's life.

The Judeo-Christian view is that God created humankind to be an independently thinking creature with a free will and with an innate spiritual connection to God. The story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden tells us that they walked and talked with God.¹⁰ However, the Bible then explains that humankind rebelled against God, so God banished humans to a life of hardship and toil.¹¹

Worse, the spiritual connection between God and humans was severed, as God can only be spiritually connected with those who seek Him, are harmonious with Him, and obedient to Him. The Bible defines the new disconnected condition of humankind as *sin*.¹² From that point forward, all humankind has been sinful, and it is up to each individual to personally find God. Christians believe we must first acknowledge our need for God and His love for us, demonstrated by His Son's sacrifice on our behalf, in order for us to be one with God.

Therefore, sometime in our ancient past, humankind entered a spiritual void where humans suddenly found themselves outside of God's presence. This spiritual void was the source of much evil in the world. As Paul explains:

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done.¹³

Humankind committed evil acts and self-centered worship in place of devoting itself to God and following His laws. Many struggled to regain the spiritual connection that had been lost. Early in the Bible, we see that Adam's grandson, Enosh is born and that "at that time, men began to call on the name of the Lord."¹⁴ From that point, the Bible begins to introduce people who periodically

connect with God and begin to reveal a true understanding of God to humankind. Christ presented the ultimate revelation.

An important point in the Christian view of spirituality is that while God has professed His unconditional love, each person must undergo an act of contrition before connecting with Him. God does not force Himself upon us, and He does not reject anyone. However, He discriminates in the way in which He connects, requiring us to acknowledge our need for Him. He also mandates that we form relationships with one another. Our modern society thwarts spiritual connections by interfering in how people connect with God and with one another. Our humanistic and materialistic official policies deny God. Our information-based economy thrives on change and fluid employment, destabilizing our personal lives and breaking up interpersonal relationships. The social flaws evident in our world today can be attributed to this interference.

The Bible gives guidance on how to connect spiritually with God and with one another, namely by loving God and loving one another. From the Old Testament, we have, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”¹⁵ Later on, Moses advises the Hebrew nation, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.”¹⁶ The word *love* in these passages is from the Hebrew word, *awhab*, meaning basic affection.¹⁷ However, in the New Testament, Jesus quotes these passages to show that they are the key to spiritual connections:

And behold, a certain lawyer stood up and tested Him [Jesus], saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the law? What is

your reading of it?” So he answered and said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” And He said to him, “You have answered rightly; do this and you will live.”¹⁸

Eternal life really means an eternal connection with God, or a spiritual life. The word *love* here is from the Greek, *agape*, meaning social or moral love.¹⁹ The King James Bible used to use the word *charity* to translate *agape*. A modern rendition would be *compassion*. In other words, it is not love in the romantic sense, but in a charitable, moral, and empathetic sense. Yet Jesus knew that this lawyer and every other person on earth were incapable of sustaining this position consistently through their own actions. What was needed was a connection with God that would enable them to begin to love in a godly way and to build and strengthen the spiritual connection they had with God and with others. Jesus came to earth to reconcile humankind with God and to enable this spiritual connection for all people. He made possible the correlation between a moral compass and a relationship with God, which is recognized by most ancient civilizations.

We needed this reconciliation, as God had broken off His connection with humankind when we rebelled against Him. Violence ensued upon the earth to the point that God had to wipe out all life with a great flood, except for Noah, his family, and some animals. Noah’s descendants generally failed to connect with God, except for a few righteous people. God eventually chose a man, Abram, later known as Abraham, to father a race of chosen people, the Israelites. They were the descendants of Abraham’s grandson,

Jacob, or Israel. God gave this chosen people specific instructions on how they could connect with Him. God allowed a select few, the priests, to enter into His presence inside a tabernacle (a specially prepared tent and later a temple), designated by God as a holy place. There, the priests could intervene on behalf of the people through special rituals handed down by God.

Then, according to the Bible, God sent His son, Jesus Christ, to save all humankind, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”²⁰ Believing in Jesus goes farther than simply acknowledging His existence. It means believing in the saving power of His sacrifice on the cross. For in this act, Jesus took our sins onto Himself, suffered in our place to atone for these sins, and reconciled us with God. In other words, the fundamental tenet of Christian doctrine states that we must first believe in God and acknowledge our need for Him, then accept His gift to us: our salvation from sin through the sacrifice of his son, Jesus Christ.

Jesus explains this situation through various analogies and stories. He says to his disciples,

I am the vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit...Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me.²¹

One cannot effectively spread the word of God without first establishing his or her own connection with God through Jesus.

Living branches that bear fruit have the sap of the vine flowing into them, as fruitful believers have the spirit of God flowing into them.

Bryan: I became a Christian when I was around ten years old while listening to a Billy Graham crusade on television. I cannot explain why, but as I listened to Graham say that I only had to acknowledge my need for God and for Jesus, I prayed for God to accept me then and there. I had no prior religious upbringing, and I wasn't even in the same room as the television. It was down the hall! However, from that point on, I began to build a relationship with God, and I believe today that God's spirit has helped me and guided me through good and bad times. I have also felt the power of prayer when others have prayed for me. It is difficult to describe, but I would say it is a sense of serenity that most indicates God's spiritual presence. *~End~*

What is God's will? To love God and those around us. Jesus makes it clear that to love God means to follow His direction in life and ignore our own desires. Jesus says, "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love."²² Essentially, to love God is to obey God. A spiritual connection with God requires us to obey His commandments. God's commandments represent the ultimate truth, the absolute standard of right and wrong. We are to uphold this standard, not debase it or modify it to our own liking. Yet, many problems today stem from a relativistic view of right and wrong, leading to moral chaos in which there is no standard of behavior.

God understands that we will continually fall short in our attempt to obey His commandments. Nobody is perfect. We must also not be legalistic with one another. Instead, we should pray for the strength to do what is right and to have compassion. We should ask for forgiveness when we fail. When we have a real relationship with God, then we will naturally want to do what is right. We are not just following a set of rules, but living in a new way. As David says in Psalm 19, “The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul.”²³

Parents can see an analogous situation in the relationship with their children. When children obey, parents feel more connected to them than when the children rebel. Some families break up as teenage children become overly rebellious and disobedient, trying to live by a different standard than their parents. The biblical story of the prodigal son highlights this situation, and Jesus shows how God, the father in the story, is always ready to accept us back and connect with us after we recognize our disobedience and seek reconciliation with Him.²⁴ Yet many laws and rules in today’s society encourage children to rebel against their parents, thereby fracturing this connection between parent and child.

One example is the passage of laws allowing minors to purchase contraception without parental consent. In our home state of Connecticut, children under sixteen years old can even get an abortion without parental consent.²⁵ Such laws are humanistic, focusing on “helping” the individual, while ignoring the effects on families and the community. This type of law abrogates the parents’

authority to determine their child's behavior by allowing the child to bypass his or her parents with approval and protection from the state. As a result, parents feel compelled to watch and mistrust their children, and children feel compelled to sneak things past their parents. The end result is a deteriorated parent-child relationship.

If we consider that God has set up the parent-child relationship to teach us, then it makes sense that children will learn about obeying a higher authority by obeying their parents first. God makes it clear that children should obey their parents. "Honor your mother and father"²⁶ is number five of the Ten Commandments. At a young age, children do not understand the idea of God or His commandments, but they understand the relationship with their parents. Most children go through a rebellious phase as they begin to walk and talk, the so-called "terrible twos." If they learn that this rebelliousness is acceptable because their parents fail to discipline them, then how can they later learn to obey God? Learning to love and obey God is vital to connect with God spiritually.

"Love thy neighbor as thyself"²⁷ is the other requirement for a spiritual life. Jesus lived a life of charitable acts and kindness toward the most afflicted and outcast people, including lepers, prostitutes, and tax collectors. The same lawyer who had asked Jesus about eternal life also asked him, "And who is my neighbor?"²⁸ Jesus answered by telling the story of the good Samaritan.²⁹ A Samaritan was a religious outcast in Jewish eyes, as many people from Samaria comprised the lost tribes of Israel, displaced from the land and from the Jewish tradition. But Jesus showed how this Samaritan performed an outstanding act of charity

for the victim of a highway robbery while some Jewish leaders walked quickly past and failed to get involved. Thus, the Samaritan was the neighborly one, as exemplified by his actions.

We should do likewise, so that in loving our neighbor, we reach out to whoever needs us, not just to those who appeal to us. This type of action is the *agape*, or spiritual love that God commands. Often, today's society prevents people from helping their neighbors due to concerns with liability and mistrust. A 2013 Associated Press poll found that less than one-third of Americans trust other people in their everyday lives, compared to about half in 1972.³⁰ Many people are charitable with their time and money, but these types of activities are different from directly helping a person in need, and thus do not yield the same type of connection.

Bryan: I had a strange occurrence happen to me when living in England many years ago. I was driving back to our village with my family on a cold, rainy winter day. All of a sudden, we saw an old woman walking down a remote section of a country road with a shopping cart. We passed by her, and my wife and I felt something was wrong. I dropped off my family at home and drove back to check on the woman. When I found her and stopped, I realized immediately that she was homeless. She was covered in mud and was shivering, pushing a beat up cart filled with ragged possessions. I asked her if I could help her, and she accepted a ride, so I loaded her and her gear into my car. I tried to get her to tell me where to go, thinking she might know of a shelter nearby, but she was like a child and could not give coherent directions. I stopped at a police station and a church, but neither could help me.

Finally, after hours of driving around, I called my wife. We both agreed to take in the woman for the night. Now we were a bit wary, but our home had an attached apartment, unconnected to our living area, so we put her up in there. My wife helped her clean up, and then had her join us for dinner. The next day, I finally found a social worker who helped me move the woman into a temporary shelter. The whole incident was a unique experience for me. While I consider myself charitable, helping this woman and having her in my home was far outside my comfort zone. However, I felt that as soon as I began helping her, God was helping me. I felt His guidance throughout, and I felt His gratitude. I also felt a stronger connection to God than ever before. *~End~*

A key point in Christian belief is that a person must form spiritual connections with other people in order to spiritually connect with God. We cannot hate our neighbor and expect God to have a relationship with us. Jesus makes this clear in many parts of the Bible. From the Sermon on the Mount, He says, “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.”³¹ A person who is merciful to another person can expect God to show mercy on him or her. Further on, He advises, “Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.”³² This indicates that one must have good interpersonal relations to form a good relationship with God. Paul sums up this case in his first letter to the church at Corinth, “And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”³³ The love he

speaks of is *agape* or charity, and it is the most important quality for spiritual connection.

Bryan: Reconciling by saying sorry to someone can be tough. Yet I have found that the more I do it, the easier it gets. I have a tendency to put my foot in my mouth around people sometimes, and I end up offending them. I apologize frequently! Nevertheless, I always find that I end up in an even better relationship with the person to whom I apologized, as he or she recognizes that I did not mean any harm and that I truly care about him or her. Such reconciliation is crucial to human interactions. Our competitive modern world often puts down apologizing as something “weak,” but I say it requires real strength to show compassion when you may get hostility in return. Do it anyway, and feel the result: a strengthened spiritual connection with the other person and with God. *~End~*

This idea of love affected how Christian peoples reordered their communities. Beginning in early Christian times, people became far more charitable with one another. The Book of Acts describes early Christian communities helping and sharing with one another by pooling their resources, “Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own but they had all things in common.”³⁴ This charity was encouraged by the early church. And it was carried out in a society dominated by the pagan Roman empire, which imposed ruinous taxes on the population.

On the other hand, in the story of the rich man and the beggar, Lazarus, Jesus illustrates what the consequences are for one who does not seek spiritual connection through mercy, charity, and love. Lazarus the beggar sits outside the gate of a rich man in utter misery, but the rich man ignores him. Both men die. While Lazarus is taken up to heaven to be in the company of Abraham, the rich man is taken down to Hell. The rich man begs Abraham to let Lazarus relieve him, but Abraham says, “between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us.”³⁵ Thus, by failing to form a spiritual connection between himself and Lazarus in life, the rich man condemned himself to a permanent disconnection from God and from others in death.

Finally, establishing spiritual connections with others and with God gives us a sense of peace and well-being that cannot come from any actions taken individually. We need connections with others to thrive and survive. We need a connection with God to receive His strength and support as we face worldly challenges. As Paul explains to the early church at Phillipi:

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.³⁶

Chapter 3

Seeking Harmony

Background on Other Spiritual Beliefs

Despite significant differences, all faiths possess basic commonalities. The belief that humankind has a spiritual aspect involving God and others is common in all religions. The central tenet of Islam, Zen Buddhism, and Native American beliefs is that humankind exists in a spiritually interconnected world, and that achieving harmony with God (or universal spirituality) and all other life should be our ultimate aim. These three faiths have unanimously condemned the modern world for its lack of spirituality and its disconnected nature. We focused on these three because Bryan has some personal experience with them. They also serve as excellent examples of faiths that appear to be very different, yet show the common traits that highlight the premise of this book.

In the editor's introduction (1979) of the book, *Toward Understanding Islam*, Khurshid Ahmad explains that *Islam* is derived from two words, *salm*, which means *peace*, and *silm*, which means *submission*. The entire meaning of the word *Islam* is “a

commitment to surrender one's will to the Will of God."³⁷ He goes on to explain:

Harmonization of man's will with the Will of God leads to the harmonization of different spheres of life under an all-embracing ideal. Departmentalization of life into different water-tight compartments, religious and secular, sacred and profane, spiritual and material, is ruled out. There is unity of life and unity of the source of guidance...Each and every act becomes related to God and his guidance. Every human activity is given a transcendent dimension; it becomes sacred and meaningful and goal-centred.³⁸

Harmony and unity both imply some form of a connection. Islam believes that all humans are born in a naturally connected state with God, but some drift away from this ideal condition. Later in the book, the author, Abul A'la Mawdudi, writes, "The man who denies God is called *Kafir* (concealer) because he conceals *by his disbelief* what is inherent in his nature and embalmed in his soul."³⁹ He goes on to describe the disbeliever as a witness of all of God's creation who cannot comprehend that God is behind it. This type of person will find that "his entire existence will be unsatisfactory...and his evil activities will make life bitter for him and for all around him."⁴⁰ Disconnectedness from God results in evil behavior and is caused by ignoring the spiritual realm all around us. Yet how often is this spiritual realm discussed or pondered in our lives today? Very little for many people. Is it any wonder then that we see the increase in discontent and evil in our modern society?

In contrast, the person who believes in God has a sustaining faith and trust in Him. This person also naturally acts charitably toward others. Mawdudi explains, “This faith imparts to his heart extraordinary consolation, fills it with satisfaction and keeps it filled with hope.”⁴¹ Muslims believe that Islam is the natural faith of all humankind who have seen the Creation and believe in God as the Creator, even of those who lived before the time of the Prophet Mohammad.⁴² As in the Christian faith, compassion for one’s fellow humans is integral to the spiritual connection one has with God.

Zen Buddhism is a branch of Mahayana Buddhism, primarily found in Japan. Zen is not a religion in the Western sense, but more of a way of life, a life that must be experienced to be understood. The Japanese word for Buddhism is *shu do*, meaning *middle way*, or a way of life that is spiritually centered and balanced. In *Questions to a Zen Master*, the master explains that the middle way does not imply compromise or indecision. Instead, it is a synthesis of the spiritual and material:

The chief characteristic of European civilization is dualism. Materialism, for example, is opposed to spiritualism...but in reality the material and spiritual are one and cannot stand in opposition to each other...Spiritual is material and material becomes spiritual. Mind exists in every one of our cells and ultimately mind itself is body and the body itself is mind...*The middle way integrates everything.*⁴³

This passage expresses a view of the interconnectedness of spirituality. He goes on to say, “Our life is connected to the cosmic power and stands in a relation of interdependence with all other existences. We cannot live by ourselves...so we must not become

selfish.”⁴⁴ He also explains, “So where does the ego [our individuality] exist? It is one with the cosmos. It is not only the body, the mind, but it is God, Buddha, the fundamental cosmic force.”⁴⁵ We are one with God, and with all others, completely connected. Zen is an attempt to discard the worldly distractions around us and to perceive this interconnectedness through meditation, or *zazen*. The master eloquently reiterates this idea:

People who are ambitious and full of desire are always searching for freedom but they can't find it. They are always worried and sad, their desires keep growing and growing, and in the end they fall ill or become neurotic. *Freedom does not mean doing whatever you like.* Too much gratification of desires does not lead to freedom because human desires are limitless...To remain peaceful always, and not anxious, is best. And in that way, through *zazen*, we can regulate desires as they arise.⁴⁶

In other words, through meditation and a sense of oneness with God and all existence, one is able to find peace and discard superfluous desires. This is a return to the natural state we are in at birth, connected to the eternal consciousness. The author continues, “The ultimate dimension, in the very depths of being, the supreme dimension of life, is universal consciousness and love.”⁴⁷ As in Judeo-Christian thought, Zen teaches that the ultimate way is one of love and compassion toward others. The master states that a Zen believer must first bring tranquility to himself or herself through *zazen*, before being able to commune in harmony with others.

Native American beliefs vary by tribe, but there are two common, basic beliefs. In *Native American Religion in Early America*, Christine Leigh Heyrman describes these as the belief in an “all-powerful, all-knowing Creator or ‘Master Spirit,’” and the belief in the afterlife, or immortality, which is a period of happiness and plenty.⁴⁸ Native Americans also believe that all living creatures have spirits, and therefore that all life has to be respected. Heyrman summarizes this idea:

The most important [concept] is that Indians did not distinguish between the natural and the supernatural. On the contrary, Native Americans perceived the “material” and “spiritual” as a unified realm of being—a kind of extended kinship network. In their view, plants, animals and humans partook of divinity through their close connection with “guardian spirits,” a myriad of “supernatural” entities who imbued their “natural” kin with life and power.⁴⁹

Again, we see the key idea of spiritual interconnection between the Creator and the creation. Native Americans did not consider spirituality a separate realm. The world they lived in was both spiritual and material.

In all these faiths, Islam, Zen Buddhism, Native American religion, and the Judeo-Christian, we see the same basic idea of a spiritual connection. All express belief in a Creator God who is linked to humankind when we are in harmony with Him, with one another, and with the created world in which we live. Similarly, being in disharmony with God results in a disconnected state of unhappiness and even evil.

To disregard the central message in all these faiths is pure arrogance, as it assumes we are wiser than the countless generations of faithful people who came before us. However, that is exactly the predominant social attitude in our mainstream media and public institutions. Our society tolerates the existence of faith, but treats it as a sideshow, generally inappropriate or unworthy of consideration in public discourse. Spirituality is barred from serious consideration when it comes to news coverage, public policy, or public education. Therefore, each of us must work on our own to bring back a spiritual sense to our lives. Otherwise, we face a miserable existence as partial human beings, denying our most important attribute, our spirituality.

Conclusion

“The Lord is close to the broken hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.”

Psalm 34:18 (Holy Bible, New International Version)

All faiths assert the central importance of spiritual connections in life. Peace, contentment, and benevolence all come from firm spiritual connections with others and with God. But in our modern world, many forces hurt or break these connections. As a result, we see widespread violence, discontent, and malevolence. Ironically, most public discussion on these problems ignores any spiritual aspect and seeks solutions in the same type of humanist and materialist policies that generated the problems in the first place.

For example, in response to school shootings, lawmakers have debated and passed new gun restrictions. Impartial experts indicate that the restrictions are generally useless, although they succeed in exacerbating the controversy between the pro- and anti-gun lobbies, furthering more spiritual disconnection between people. In the end, the spiritual state of the shooter is ignored, and the next shooter comes along and surprises everyone once again. While many survivors may seek spiritual connections for help and comfort, the general attitude in society is to overlook these connections and to seek another humanist or materialist solution.

While the preindustrial world was slower-paced and more traditional, it certainly had spiritual problems. Nevertheless, the modern world has many destructive aspects, hindering spiritual connections even more. The information society is a time of accelerated change, making it more and more difficult to meet and connect with those around us. It can make us too busy to think about God. Secular humanism emphasizes our individuality, making us less willing to submit to communal goals or a higher authority, as it treats individuals as gods. Materialism emphasizes the physical world around us and encourages us to seek pleasure in the world while denying God. Socialism emphasizes the power of the state to solve all our problems, so the state replaces God, family, and community in our lives. Globalization and urbanization both emphasize commerce over all other aspects of life, so we neglect God and human connections for the pursuit of wealth. In all cases, the average person is left feeling spiritually desolate.

In response, we need to examine ourselves and our own spirituality. Then, we can begin to build spiritual connections, both with God and with those around us. No government interference or encouragement is needed or wanted in this effort. No political action or social justice movement is warranted, either. It must be one person acting upon another, with God's help. All major faiths generally support this approach. In the end, spiritual connections will give us an inner peace and contentment with life, even in our unspiritual modern society, as David describes in his twenty-third Psalm:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures;

He leads me beside the still waters.

He restores my soul;

He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil;

For You are with me;

Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil;

My cup runs over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life;

And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.⁵⁰

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Notes (for Excerpt only)

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- ¹ Schweitzer, *Indian Thought and Its Development*, vi.
 - ² Webster, *The Information Society Reader*, 1.
 - ³ Capra, *The Web of Life*, 30.
 - ⁴ See Capra, *The Hidden Connections*, 67.
 - ⁵ Capra, *The Hidden Connections*, 68.
 - ⁶ McDonald, *Serving God Everywhere*, xxi.
 - ⁷ Beston, *The Outermost House*, 8.
 - ⁸ *NIV*, Psalm 19:1.
 - ⁹ *NIV*, Romans 1:20
 - ¹⁰ See *NKJV*, Genesis 1 and 2.
 - ¹¹ See *NKJV*, Genesis 3.
 - ¹² *NKJV*, Romans 5:12.
 - ¹³ *NIV*, Romans: 1:21-23, 28
 - ¹⁴ *NIV*, Genesis 4:26.
 - ¹⁵ *NKJV*, Leviticus 19:18.
 - ¹⁶ *NKJV*, Deuteronomy 6:5.
 - ¹⁷ See Strong, *Exhaustive Concordance*.
 - ¹⁸ *NKJV*, Luke 10:25-28.
 - ¹⁹ See Strong, *Exhaustive Concordance*.
 - ²⁰ *NKJV*, John 3:16.
 - ²¹ *NKJV*, John 15:1-2,4-5.
 - ²² *NKJV*, John 15:10.
 - ²³ *NIV*, Psalm 19:7.
 - ²⁴ See *NKJV*, Luke 15:11-32.
 - ²⁵ See *Policy Manual on Health Care*, Connecticut Department of Children and Families.
 - ²⁶ *NIV*, Exodus 20:12.
 - ²⁷ *KJV*, Matthew 19:19.
 - ²⁸ *NKJV*, Luke 10:29.
 - ²⁹ See *NKJV*, Luke 10:30-37.
 - ³⁰ Associated Press poll.
 - ³¹ *NKJV*, Matthew 5:7.
 - ³² *NKJV*, Matthew 5:23-24.
 - ³³ *NKJV*, 1 Corinthians 13:13.
 - ³⁴ *NKJV*, Acts 4:32.
 - ³⁵ *NKJV*, Luke 16:26.
 - ³⁶ *NKJV*, Phillipians 4:6-7.
 - ³⁷ Mawdudi, *Towards Understanding Islam*, 11.
 - ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.
 - ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.
 - ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.
 - ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 105.
 - ⁴² *Ibid.*, see 36.

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- ⁴³ Deshimaru, *Questions to a Zen Master*, 4.
⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.
⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.
⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 27-28.
⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.
⁴⁸ See Heyrman, "Native American Religion in Early America."
⁴⁹ *Ibid.*
⁵⁰ NKJV, Psalm 23.