

From *Dreaming the Dark*, by Starhawk

We are all longing to go home to some place we have never been — a place half-remembered and half-envisioned we can only catch glimpses of from time to time. Community.

Somewhere, there are people to whom we can speak with passion without having the words catch in our throats. Somewhere a circle of hands will open to receive us, eyes will light up as we enter, voices will celebrate with us whenever we come into our own power.

Community means strength that joins our strength to do the work that needs to be done. Arms to hold us when we falter. A circle of healing. A circle of friends. Someplace where we can be free.<sup>1</sup>

*I Call That Church Free*, by James Luther Adams

I call that church free which enters into covenant with the ultimate source of existence, that sustaining and transforming power not made with human hands. It binds together families and generations, protecting against the idolatry of any human claim to absolute truth or authority. This covenant is the charter and responsibility and joy of worship in the face of death, as well as life.

I call that church free which brings individuals into a caring, trusting fellowship, that protects and nourishes their integrity and spiritual freedom, that yearns to belong to the church universal. It is open to insight and conscience from every source; it bursts through rigid tradition, giving rise to new and living language, to new and broader fellowship. It is a pilgrim church, a servant church, on an adventure of the spirit.

The goal is the prophethood and priesthood of all believers, the one for the liberty of prophesying, the other for the ministry of healing. It aims to find unity in diversity under the promptings of the spirit “that bloweth where it listeth ... and maketh all things new.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex and Politics*, 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), p. 92.

<sup>2</sup> James Luther Adams, “I Call That Church Free,” as printed in *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), No. 591.

I've probably mentioned how growing up as an Iowa farm boy meant spending my summers walking bean fields, cutting out corn and pulling button weeds. My favorite days were those when I walked our fields by myself, just me and 40 acres of wide-open spaces. I could walk under the great big open sky, wielding my hoe with deadly accuracy, and dream. My thoughts were as unlimited as the sky. Everything seemed possible, and the only limitation was my own imagination — and I've got a pretty good imagination. I was free.

These experiences are at the core of my sense of what it means to be spiritual, to connect with the dirt through my dreams, intimately part of this universe. Those times of walking in that freedom, my mind going where it would, my experiences mine to interpret and to live, relate to James Luther Adams' thoughts expressed in *I Call That Church Free*. Adams, the leading Unitarian theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, sought to describe another way of being "church" than might have been considered orthodox. Influenced by his participation with the German people of the Confessing Church as they resisted the Nazis, Adams saw an important role for the church in leading people toward liberation, as individuals and as societies.

Adams uses the word *church* as 1950s shorthand for a religious community. This community he describes is organized around practicing a way of being in the world rather than believing there is a correct doctrine or belief. It's a community based on the covenant that we have with Adams' unnamed and unnamable ultimate source of existence. We use metaphors such as God, Brahman or nature, Gaia or interbeing, the interconnected web of existence — all to try to capture this awareness that we are part of something that's more than us. Adams saw a role for communities in tapping into that sustaining and transforming power that we experience in those moments and harnessing that power to make the world a place of freedom and caring.

But too often the development from experience to religious community does something to that transforming power. When it becomes the foundation of absolute truth, that power serves not to protect us from idolatry but instead becomes the basis for it. Instead of fostering freedom and caring, it creates fear and domination. What happens on the way from that experience of the ultimate source of existence to the creation of communities that seek to harness its power? It's in seeking to understand this that I have come to realize a fundamental distinction between the institutions that are formed and the experiences themselves.

I have to admit that, for most of my life, I never really understood when someone would say, "I'm spiritual but not religious." For me, the terms were synonymous. My religious identity was just an expression of my spiritual connections. But recent encounters with institutional religion, both in academic study and in the "real world," have led me to an appreciation of the difference and a deeper understanding of the type of religion people are referring to. I know that, for others, the word *spiritual* is totally foreign — they can't imagine having a spiritual experience of any kind. I hope you will all stick with me as I try to describe what I mean and why this matters.

Christian mystic Diarmuid Ó Murchú helped me to better understand this distinction between religion and spirituality and why it's important at this moment in our universe. He asserts that the spiritual is not just a subset of religion, but foundational.<sup>3</sup> Spirituality is the experience of, the personal connection to, that something *more than*. It's highly personal and difficult to describe, kind of like love. Well, a lot like

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<sup>3</sup> Diarmuid Ó Murchú, *Reclaiming Spirituality* (Crossroad, 1998).

love. Those experiences are the bases for what become religions. Prophetic people tried to relate those experiences to others in hopes of harnessing that power to reshape society, creating more justice, peace, and harmony — the feelings they encountered in those spiritual connections.

Looking at the stories of many of those prophets, we learn what happens on the way from experience to religion. Take, for example, Siddhartha Gautama, known as the Buddha. When he reached enlightenment, he debated for a long time whether he should try to describe it to anyone. The result of his decision to teach personal liberation and societal equality achieved just those things for millions, yet his dharma (or teachings) also spawned movements that fought over what he really said, including movements supporting oppressive governments and those engaged in religious warfare with other faiths. We see both now in Sri Lanka, where hard-line Buddhist monks have formed their own political party, representing the extreme of ethnic Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism, and have joined the government as it battles a mostly Hindu and Christian minority.<sup>4</sup> Even peaceful Buddhism has had its transformative power harnessed in the service of violence.

The Buddha foresaw the potential for such conflict arising and, in his dying breath, told his followers not to become an institution but to follow their own paths. He didn't leave a written record or hierarchy of followers, hoping instead that his spiritual experience could stand on its own as a path to enlightenment. This story is not unique; it's no wonder Jesus didn't write anything down, either! What we've see happen repeatedly is the ideals of an experience becoming encoded into a religious system and an institution forming around them. It's in this institutionalization of religion that the vitality of the experience not only is lost but is often perverted, becoming a tool of oppression instead of liberation.

We can argue over the words *religion*, *spirituality*, *church*, and *religious community* — but the power this energy has in human lives both to harm and to heal is irrefutable; the power it has to shape societies is equally undeniable. This spiritual energy was at the heart of two extremely different events in human history. The first occurred on Aug. 28, 1963, when more than 250,000 people gathered in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., to rally for jobs and freedom. With the statue of the Great Emancipator as a backdrop, Martin Luther King Jr. gave one of the most memorable speeches in America's history, referred to as his *I Have a Dream* speech. Dr. King appealed both to the ideals expressed in the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights and to the values of the Holy Bible. In combining an appeal to national idealism with the prophetic voice of biblical prophets, he unified his audience around a common faith that they could change history: "With this faith," he declared, "we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day."<sup>5</sup> From accounts of that day, the energy created by King and those present changed the course of a nation.

Another moment, similar in intensity and power but with vastly different motives and outcomes, transpired in 1927. The National Socialist Party in Germany staged a rally in the image-rich, medieval capital of Nuremberg. Symbolically, Nuremberg was linked to the height of German culture and power in the world. One participant spoke of this rally as the moment when Adolf Hitler united the German people under his spiritual leadership. Hitler also had a dream, a dream rooted in his perception of the character of the German people. In articulating that dream, he, too, created a religious atmosphere and

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<sup>4</sup> Somini Singupta, "Sri Lankan Government Finds Support from Buddhist Monks," *New York Times*, 27 February 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Drew Hansen, *The Dream: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Speech that Inspired a Nation* (HarperCollins, 2003), p. 139.

spoke to the hearts of the people. He spoke of their power coming from their inner strength and of that strength being renewed as they realized the purity of their blood. He became the “redeemer” of the German Christian citizens.<sup>6</sup> Journalist and author William Shirer described how Hitler placed himself as the culminating figure in German history, one whose rule would “unify a chosen people . . . . He would make them lords of the earth.”<sup>7</sup>

Drawing a correlation between these two events, on the face of it, seems ludicrous. To even mention King’s speech and Hitler’s rally in conjunction with one another is offensive. I do so precisely because of the radically different ways in which we perceive them. The historical legacy of the two moments could not be more different. King’s speech is part of the march toward racial justice; Hitler’s led down the genocidal path to the Holocaust. Yet both events harnessed that spiritual energy, tapping into people’s ultimate sources of existence to motivate them. This is more than mob rule, it’s knowing that people have a need to connect and understanding the power. But do we use that power to build oppressive institutions or create human freedom?

Ó Murchú describes five shadows of religion that move us toward those oppressive institutions, away from freedom. First, fear. Religious institutions often use the revelations of Gods described as perfect and powerful; when we don’t live up to expectations, we can expect punishment in this life or the next. Fear leads to vehement adherence to an institutionalized version of truth and justification for persecution of nonbelievers. Second is escapism. The Marxist conception of religion being the opiate of the people describes religions used by those in power to pacify those they’re oppressing, allowing them to either rationalize the suffering in the world around them or wait for God to solve their problems. Three, moralism, and four, domination and control, are closely related. The claim to higher wisdom too often leads to a belief in the right to legislate and dictate acceptable behaviors. Ó Murchú points out that the hierarchal nature of most religions means that the laws don’t liberate people but set norms for individual behaviors.

And last, idolatry. The more strongly a conviction is held, the more idolatrous it becomes, Ó Murchú says. The conviction or belief becomes more important than what it stands for. And because the institution is the guardian of those beliefs, maintaining the religious institution becomes more important than the spiritual experience that led to its formation. Buddha, Jesus, Guru Nanak (who started Sikhism), and Mohammad all used their prophetic visions to begin new communities where equality improved, where justice was enlarged, and where they strived for peace. Yet, in each case, the bureaucracy of creating a religious institution over took the prophecy of the vision of peace and equality to become idolatrous distraction. That’s the meaning of the Buddhist saying, “Don’t confuse the finger for the moon.” The finger merely points at the moon; it isn’t the moon. Teachings, stories, and traditions are guides to help us understand what the prophets experienced; they are not the truth itself. When we forget the distinction is when the institution of religion supplants the spiritual experience of connection.

Theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether sees a direct comparison between the idolatry in religion in the early years of the Nazi rise to power and what’s happening in the United States today. She wrote in a recent article, “Religious language is always double-edged. It is properly used as prophetic critique that

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<sup>6</sup> Klaus P. Fischer, *Nazi Germany: A New History* (New York: Continuum, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany*, 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), p. 90.

calls for repentance. But it can be twisted into a self-sacralizing rhetoric that associates God with human projects of power.” This is the definition of idolatry. She goes on to say, “The United States has often fallen into this temptation to use religious language as idolatrous messianic nationalism. When this happens, it is the duty of the churches to challenge such language and reveal its opposition to the authentic good news of the gospel. In 1934 the German theologians of the Confessing Church disassociated themselves from a German Christianity that identified Christianity with Aryan nationalism. I believe the American churches must make a similar critique of American messianic nationalism today.”<sup>8</sup> Her call is one to be heeded by all religious communities who value freedom over the institution. Deinstitutionalizing religion, as we see, has global import but begins inside each one of us as we seek another way of being — with ourselves, with each other, and in our world.

How do we deinstitutionalize religion? Our Irish friend says, “Only by the destruction and death of formal religion can we hope to reclaim spirituality where it truly belongs.”<sup>9</sup> This call to get rid of religion is a common answer to this dilemma. However, when we look at historical movements that did away with religion, something else stepped in to replace it. People have a need to develop relationships to something more; when we eliminate the possibility of religion meeting that need, the results are often worse. Communist countries that enforced atheism elevated the state to the role of unquestionable power and leaders to the position of deities, resulting in abuses on par with any experienced in religion. Ó Murchú isn’t calling for the destruction of all religion but its deinstitutionalization, out of the hands of patriarchal, hierarchal systems and into the hands of the people who can live it once again.

We need to ask how we form religious communities, including this one. Starhawk’s vision of community from the reading offers a guide. Instead of a hierarchy, we have a circle, connected by the meeting of eyes and hands and the sharing of stories. We can form communities that keep spiritual experiences alive and encourage our encounters with reality. Instead of seeking to over-imbue those encounters with some pre-ordained truth, we can, as a community, ask each other to infuse the experiences of our lives with meaning.

To illustrate what I mean, let’s go back to those summer fields I walked as a boy. While I was walking beneath the wide-open skies of the bean fields, next to them were stalks of corn. By midsummer, the gravel roads on which we traveled to and from town became closed tunnels as that tall corn blocked our views. Right next to the wide-open skies where I felt such freedom, we were forced to traverse roads with such limited vision that we became more and more cautious, for good reason. People heading down the intersecting road couldn’t see us, either. The institutionalization of religion is like the perils of that growing corn. Emerging from the wide-open experience of connection are the dogmas and exclusive truths that grow up to narrow the path until freedom is lost. We grow cautious and separated from one another.

But now is the fall, and it’s time to knock those corn stalks down. Clearing out those corn stalks, which are the rigid convictions of religious certainty, allows each of us to again experience the world without feeling blocked by what others have told us to be true.

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<sup>8</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Christians Must Challenge American Messianic Nationalism: A Call to the Churches* (March 2004), as printed on the Pacific School of Religion Web site.

<sup>9</sup> Ó Murchú, p. 105.

As is true with all such projects, this work must begin within each one of us. How do we respond to the world, and how do we participate in community? As we create communities that seek to deinstitutionalize religion, what aspects inhibit freedom, and what's the basis of power in the community? Is our community based on rules or relationships? Is its power structure focused on hierarchy or a circular form of collegiality? By basing our community on relationships rather than rules, we're able to learn from each unique experience. I'm not a big fan of rules; I like to explore each opportunity based on its own merits and decide at that moment in time, considering what's best for those involved instead of trying to judge the present based on the past or to project into the future.

I don't have faith in the rule of precedent. No event is ever repeated, and when we create an analogy we create injustice for the current situation. We become rooted in fear. Fear is why we don't have on-street parking; city officials are afraid of creating a precedent. I'd have made a lousy lawyer, so it's a really good thing that I kept on driving the day I was supposed to visit law school 25 years ago. If I were a judge, my cases would take forever to try, so it's a good thing I'm not. But in our spiritual lives, we have time. We don't have to live by precedent; we instead need freedom to know that our lives have their own value.

Living in such a relational community means that we treat one another as equals, as colleagues, not in the hierarchal fashion to which we are accustomed. When this is true and we want to accomplish something, we are driven not to promote a solution as the right answer but instead to engage in connecting with the collective wisdom of the greater congregation.

I was on the phone recently talking with a department head at the Unitarian Universalist Association about a disagreement over procedure in one of its committees. The person on the other end said that one of this committee's jobs was to "protect the institution." That set off fireworks in my brain. Institutions don't exist. They are illusions that we create and give power to. And, as we've seen, that power too often becomes used for no other means than maintaining the institutions, causing the loss of human freedom and innovation, causing the rise of oppression, fear, and idolatry. Whenever I hear people wanting to define who we are based on beliefs, I hear an institutional call to exclusion.

Instead of defending the institution, defend freedom. Defend it in your life by not allowing the shackles of your past to cast shadows over your future. Defend it in our religions community by being colleagues to one another and seeking relationships instead of rules. Defend freedom in our nation by challenging the idolatrous misuse of religion in our nation's politics, both at home and abroad. I call *this* religious community free, for together we form a covenant with our ultimate sources of existence, we seek to harness that power to transform our lives and our communities. Together let us find the unity in our diversity to become a caring, trusting Fellowship, knocking down any corn stalks that might block our view of that spacious, blue sky where our imaginations lead us on.

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