



AN ORIENTATION TO THE LANDSCAPE

[SUMMARY]

Jesus Brand Spirituality is a new and, we hope, refreshing approach to Christian spirituality. Today, we'll begin by describing a "one step closer" approach to learning more about the spirituality that Jesus forged. Next, we'll do a quick overview of some of the different approaches to faith that may have shaped your perspectives on the religion that bears his name. *(Note: please read chapters 1 & 2 in Jesus Brand Spirituality for background on this class session.)*

[WHAT IS SPIRITUALITY, ANYWAY?]

First, let's define our terms. Spirituality is a subset of a much bigger field that we call "religion."



While “religion” has gotten a bad name lately, the word itself simply has to do with **connections**. It's derived from the Latin root, *ligio*, which is the root for "ligament" (a form of connective tissue). Religion is about our connection to God, to each other, and to the world we live in. Religion is also about our connection with the ultimate or transcendent realities that may or may not be rooted beyond the known world. Whether we like to admit it or not, we humans are naturally, and irrepressibly, religious.

Phyllis Tickle, the founding Religion Editor for Publisher's Weekly, describes religion as a rope made up of three cords.

- The first of the three cords represents **corporeality**. Corporeality refers to the symbols, rituals, liturgies, buildings, churches, boards, organizational structures and so on that make up any religion.
- The second of the three cords represents **morality**. Morality is the aspect of religion that seeks to answer the question, "How should we then live?"
- The third of the three cords represents our concern in this class: **spirituality**. Spirituality can be understood as living a life informed and infused by spirit.

The concept of “spirit” is worth exploring along the way to understanding spirituality.

Albert Einstein talked about "the fire in the equations." You can reduce the way the world works to some pretty amazing equations, like $E = MC^2$, but Einstein knew there was something else going on. Something wonderful, mysterious, intangible.

Einstein's expression for that mysterious *something* was based on the experience of one of his predecessors, a great scientist named August Kekule. Kekule was vexed by the problem of a compound with 6 carbon and 6 Hydrogen atoms: benzene. How was it structured? One evening Kekule had a kind of vision: "I turned in my chair to the fire and dozed...again the atoms were gamboling before my eyes...long rows sometimes more closely fitted together all twining and twisting in snakelike motion. But look! What was that? One of the snakes has seized onto its

own tail and the form whirled mockingly before my eyes. As if by a flash of lightning I awoke and this time also I spent the rest of the night in working out the consequences of the hypothesis."

Spirit. The fire in the equations.

"God is Spirit," Jesus told the woman from Samaria, "and his worshipers must worship in Spirit and in truth."¹

Spirit has to do with touching God.

This class is not a generic approach to spirituality, but a "brand name" approach to spirituality. Hence the title of this class: Jesus Brand Spirituality. It's about living a life informed and infused by the Holy Spirit. A life informed and infused by God, as Jesus himself understood and represented God.

[A "ONE STEP CLOSER" APPROACH]

Having clarified our terms, we can clarify our approach to Jesus brand spirituality in this class.

To borrow a phrase from a U2 song², we're going to take a "one step closer" approach to Jesus brand spirituality. That is to say, we're going to assume that we all come from different places, with different ideas and different experiences that pertain to the question of spirituality. While we want to provide a good overview of the basics of Jesus brand spirituality, it is understood that *each of us is simply looking to take "one step closer" along this spiritual path.* We're concerned about the most important step, which is always, simply, the **next** one.

In other words, we'd like to provide you with breathing room. Don't expect that we'll be mapping out all the essential beliefs of Christianity and then inviting you – or worse, pressuring you – to accept them as a complete package, to swallow them whole, so to speak.

¹ John 4:24

² The phrase "one step closer to knowing" is the haunting title of a song from the album *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb* by U2.

Most of us simply don't approach spirituality like that. We approach spirituality as a journey, or to use a less over-used word, a **pilgrimage**.

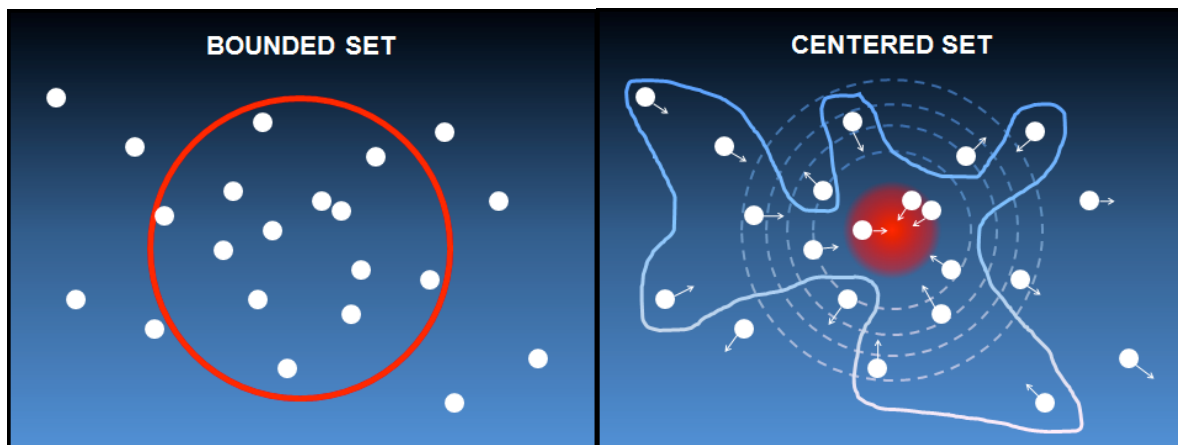
The Bible talks about life as a pilgrimage. The whole book is a kind of travel story. Abraham was a traveling man. On a journey to a promised land. The people of Israel were a pilgrim people: from bondage in Egypt, through wilderness, into a land of promise. But even then, hungry for something even more: a heavenly home. **Jesus** was a man on the move and disciples were called "followers."

So this is important: we're on a pilgrimage.

Pilgrims are people who come from all over the map to a common destination--a sacred place or city. The route each person takes, the time it takes to get there – it all varies a great deal, depending on factors too numerous to mention.

Think of Jesus as the treasure buried in the **field** of **religion**. Those of us participating in this class are like pilgrims in search of treasure. We come from as many different places as there are places from which to come. And we're each concerned for *one thing and one thing only*: **taking that one step closer to knowing the treasure we seek.**

To borrow some language from the field of sociology, we'll be taking a "centered set" rather than a "bounded set" approach to spirituality.



Many churches or religious groups take a bounded set approach. In a bounded set group, the boundaries that determine whether a person is in the group or outside the group are clear. There are clear rules or identifying markers or beliefs that must be adhered to or signified or accepted in order to belong. In bounded set groups, it's often difficult to get in; sometimes it's also difficult to get out.

By contrast, in a "centered set" group, individuals sort themselves by their relationship to the center. Who is "inside" and who is "outside" is less clear. The most important thing isn't even "how close" or "how far away" you are; *the most important thing is "which way you are facing."*

When it comes to spirituality, many of us don't respond well to a bounded set approach. We're more like cats than we are like cattle. If we're thirsty, we'll be drawn to a pail of milk placed in the center of a large field, but please, don't try to herd us, or fence us in.

If you're that kind of person, this is the class for you.

[DIMENSIONS OF SPIRITUALITY]

In following class sessions, we'll be talking about Jesus brand spirituality in four different dimensions: **Active**, **Contemplative**, **Biblical**, and **Communal**. Think of these as the *doing*, *being*, *learning*, and *relating* dimensions of spirituality.

We're using the term "dimensions" on purpose, because the four dimensions of Jesus brand spirituality are like the four dimensions of space-time: they can be described as distinct (height, depth, width, and time), but the reality is that they are hopelessly **interconnected**. So think of the dimensions of spirituality as interconnected like that, and not like four steps in a pre-determined path, or four spiritual laws that can be mastered.

Before we get into the four dimensions of Jesus brand spirituality (over the next four sessions), let's take an eagle's eye view of the vast landscape called religion, beginning with the world's religions and then moving quickly to the religious traditions of Christianity.

[YOU ARE HERE: FINDING YOURSELF ON THE RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE]

Here's a question every pilgrim might find it useful to answer: **Where are you?**

Whether or not we have a settled religious identity, we all have a collective religious history, even if a distant one. Our view of God is shaped by our religious history, so it's worth locating ourselves on the map, so to speak. A pilgrimage always begins where we are.

This is not a class in comparative religions, but we'd like to place Christianity within the broader context of the world religions, using this quadrant graphic.

WORLD RELIGION QUADRANT



See Jesus Brand Spirituality (pp. 19-20) for a brief description of this quadrant.

Now let's consider Christianity using the same graphic device. (For a brief summary of the pilgrimage that Christianity itself has been on, giving shape to the current landscape, see pp. 20-24 of Jesus Brand Spirituality.)

CHRISTIANITY QUADRANT



See Jesus Brand Spirituality (pp. 25-26) for details on each quadrant.

The *liturgical* quadrant represents those church communions for whom the proper and faith-filled celebration of the liturgy is of central importance.

The *social justice* quadrant includes churches that preach what used to be called the “social gospel” for its emphasis on social justice; central is concern to redress injustices like racism, sexism, and poverty.

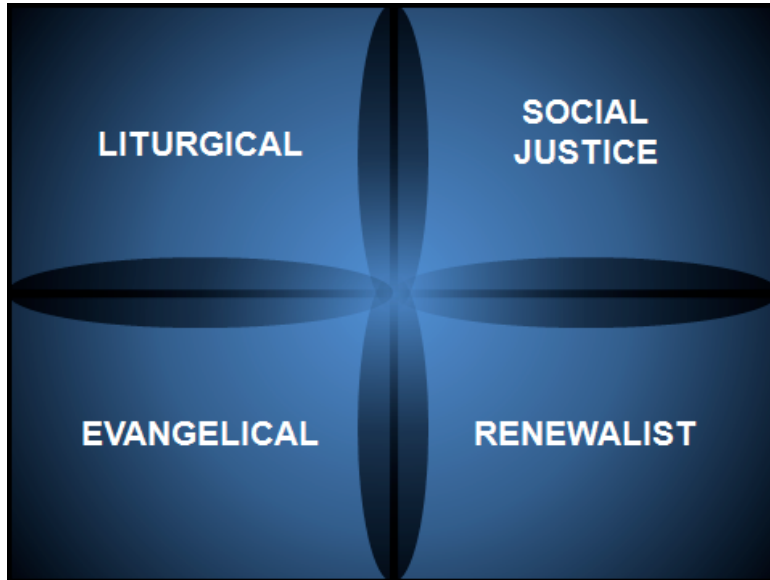
The *evangelical* quadrant represents those for whom the Bible, the “born again” conversion experience, and the preaching of the gospel are central identifiers.

The *renewalist* quadrant is marked by a renewed interest in experience.

If you're like many people from a Christian background of any kind, you can probably trace your family history or your significant spiritual influences using this quadrant as a kind of map of the religious landscape.

[Speaker: briefly share your own background here in light of the quadrant.]

BORDER BLENDING



One of the exciting developments in Christianity over the past century or so is a big increase in what might be called "border blending."

People from different Christian traditions are learning from each other. Evangelicals are gaining a new concern for social justice issues like care for the environment, or a concern to end the global slave trade, or alleviating poverty. People from the Social Justice traditions are learning from Pentecostals, whose growth in the developing world has been dramatic in recent decades. People from the Renewalist tradition are gaining a new appreciation for prayer practices that are found in the Liturgical traditions, like prayer at intervals through the day, or practicing silence and solitude as a way to connect with God.

CORNER DWELLERS



At the same time, there are those who aren't very interested in learning from people outside their own tradition. We might think of them as "corner dwellers": people who assume that their church or group has a corner on the truth and that we'd all be a lot better off if everyone else simply recognized that, left their own traditions behind and joined "the one true church."

You've probably already guessed that this is not the approach we'll be taking in this class.

A MOVEMENT TOWARD THE CENTER



Over the centuries, the major Christian traditions have specialized in one or the other of the four dimensions of Jesus brand spirituality that we'll be considering: Active, Contemplative, Biblical, Communal. For example, some of the practices of contemplative prayer are buried in the "Liturgical" quadrant. And much of the concern to bring God's justice to the earth is something treasured by the "Social Justice" quadrant, while the sense of vibrant faith that makes this possible is the specialty of churches in the other quadrants. Fortunately, we don't have to restrict ourselves to any one quadrant. We can learn from them all.

For that reason, we think authentic Christianity *involves a movement from wherever we happen to be toward the center*. We bring with us on the journey whatever treasures we have from our experience thus far. And we look forward to gaining new treasures as we approach the "treasure hidden in the field" of Christianity. That treasure, of course, is Christianity's founder, Jesus of Nazareth. The closer we get to him, the closer we get to each other, and the more treasures we stumble into.

We don't expect to "get everything right" on the first pass. We're more concerned with taking one step closer to that center.

It's our sincere hope that this class will be for you an opportunity to do just that.

[DISCUSSION GROUND-RULES]

Spirituality touches on some of the most tender aspects of a person's heart. It's important, therefore, for any group discussion of the material in this book to be guided by some shared understandings in advance. Toward that end, the following ground-rules for group discussion could be discussed and agreed upon by the group (and briefly reviewed before each session); even if it seems to be a little awkward to bring it up at first, this kind of shared understanding, made explicit, will often be appreciated by the participants.

1. What's shared in the group stays in the group.

Participants need to know that the thoughts, feelings, and perspectives shared in the group setting won't be shared by others outside of the group, except with specific permission. This applies to everything shared in the group, not simply intimate personal details that might be shared.

2. No one is expected to share on any given topic; it's fine to pass.

While discussion takes a willingness on the part of group participants to speak, no one in the group should feel compelled to speak on any given issue. This freedom allows participants to relax, which leads to better discussions.

3. No unsolicited advice giving.

Good discussions require great listening. It's often a temptation to jump in with advice when participants share personal struggles. But unsolicited advice giving—even when the advice is good—will often inhibit open sharing. It's the responsibility of group members to ask for advice if they want it. Each time.

4. Take your fair share of the time.

Those who speak up easily and share freely should be encouraged to leave space for those more hesitant to speak, by not hogging the air space. Think of the group time as a pie; if there eight members of the group, each slice of the time pie is roughly 1/8 of the time allotted.

5. Be respectful of the viewpoints of others.

It is understood from the outside that each participant has unique experiences and perspectives. The point of the discussion is to share these perspectives freely, respecting different points of view, rather than attempting to arrive at a pre-determined consensus or enforce a particular point of view.

[QUESTIONS TO GUIDE DISCUSSION]

1. What are some of the impressions you have of Christianity in contemporary society that would exemplify what the book refers to as “trademark infringement on the Jesus brand.” [see p. 6]
2. Are you (or do you have a loved one who is) reluctant to pursue spirituality on the Jesus path because of negative associations with the religion that bears his name? How do you see those associations affecting you (or your loved one)?
3. How do you feel about viewing spirituality as a pilgrimage focused on taking the next step closer God? What are the advantages (and perhaps disadvantages) of this approach? [see p. 4-7]
4. Trace some of the influences that have shaped your view of faith, using either the big picture quadrant of world religions [see p. 19] or the quadrant of Christianity. [see p. 24]
5. What are some of your observations, thoughts, or experiences of what the book describes as “border blending” [p. 31-32] or “corner dwelling”? [see p. 32-33]
6. What are some of your observations, thoughts, or experiences of what the book describes as “the tug toward the center”? [see p. 33-36]