SPIRIT, SOUL, BODY
Spirit, Soul, Body

Toward an Integral Christian Spirituality

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Introduction

In 1992 I heard Fr. Bede Griffiths speak in the chapter room of the monastic community I was just joining, New Camaldoli Hermitage in Big Sur, California. It was his last trip to the United States; he died the following spring at his beloved Saccidananda Ashram, Shantivanam, on the banks of the River Kauvery in South India. There were two themes from that one-hour talk that struck me then and have stayed with me ever since, indeed, that set the course for the whole of my monastic life, spirituality, study, and work. The first theme, “The Universal Call to Contemplation,” was the topic and subtitle of my first book, Prayer in the Cave of the Heart. The second theme is the topic of this book: the spirit, soul, and body anthropology. I have been called upon and fortunate enough to lead many retreats these past years, and almost every one of them has had one of these two themes or both as its title.

This second theme has been particularly fascinating to me for years. As the famous dictum has it, lex orandi lex credendi—the law of praying is the law of believing. How we understand ourselves is going to affect how we approach God (or Ultimate Reality, if you will). What we understand our goal and our end to be is going to affect how we live our lives. I have explored this from many angles and from the perspective of many traditions.

In some sense this has always been the easier of the two themes since it is so eminently practical. Thus, the second part of this book, in which I lay out a practical approach to spirituality, almost wrote itself from the numerous talks, articles, and
conferences I have given on it. But the first chapters of this book, in which I attempt to lay out the philosophical framework and background—be forewarned!—are denser and will require some dedication on the part of the reader. I have been tempted to say one could skip right to the later chapters, but I think that the journey there will be much richer if you wade through the river of wisdom that flows from the great spiritual traditions and human history in the evolution of consciousness, presented in the first part of the book. Besides which, I didn’t think I could put this all in writing without laying out the philosophical framework and background upon which this anthropology is based, what problem it is addressing, and particularly how Fr. Bede came to his way of thinking. As with many other things contained in his writing, Bede often alluded to and assumed readers’ foreknowledge of broad concepts. I have taken it upon myself to explore some of those broader concepts in detail, particularly the work of Sri Aurobindo Ghose (1872–1950) and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955), as much for myself as for my reader, to assure myself that my own conclusions were justified. If I have succeeded, these initial chapters should provide a good vocabulary with which to discuss the practical applications suggested in the second part of the book.

All of this philosophical framework and background comes down to practical application. That is, the “why” is immediately followed by the “what.” The subtitle of this present book carries the weight of that: Toward an Integral Christian Spirituality. Anyone familiar with the work of Sri Aurobindo or the American philosopher Ken Wilber (b. 1949) will recognize the use of the word “integral.” In Sanskrit, Aurobindo calls his Integral Yoga *purna yoga*, which could be translated as “full yoga.” Like Ken Wilber after him, Aurobindo thought that the whole person needed to be involved in the spiritual life, the whole person is what/who is meant to be transformed in the spiritual life, so that no aspect of one’s being is left behind. This is the conclusion that Fr. Bede came to as well, and that is the purpose of this book, to encourage a new spirituality that honors and incorporates every aspect of being human. As well, I want to bring a Christian voice to an exciting conversation about spirituality that is going on beyond
the walls of our churches, believing not only that we have a lot to learn but that we also have something remarkable to offer the conversation as well, if we could shift our focus ever so slightly.

It almost goes without saying that I will quote Fr. Bede often in the pages ahead, with deep respect and gratitude, as our wisdom guide on this journey. But I especially dedicate and address this work to the young folks with whom I have been surrounded these past years, who gave me such hope and inspired me to continue my work as well as my own inner journey.

I end this brief introduction and begin this book with the phrase from St. Paul’s letter to the Corinthians that was so enticing to Teilhard, and sums up our end as well: God will be all in all (1 Cor 15:28).
Part 1
As we study theology and spirituality, we find out along the way that for the most part all of our theological and philosophical questions, including and maybe especially our questions about spirituality and the spiritual life, are usually also (or really) anthropological questions. For example, we are not just asking who God is, or what Absolute Reality is; we are also asking, “Who am I?” and wondering how those two things go together: “What is Absolute Reality, and how should I live my life?” Who we think we are and where we think we are heading (Absolute Reality) is going to determine very practically the way we live each day, and the praxis of our spiritual life.

As we begin this text, we have to put right out front the issue of, or the problem of, dualism. Or shall I say “dualisms”? Because I note that there are two different though related ways that the term “dualism” is used. The first concerns the relationship of the individual to the whole, the Absolute to the relative, the One to the many, the Creator to the created, God to creation, the Subject to the object, the aham (I or Self) to the idam (the objective world of “this”). These “dualists” maintain that there is an abiding distinction between the two (hence, “dual”), while others say that God and creation are “not two.” “Non-duality” is the best
translation of *advaita*, the Sanskrit word that has worked its way into the lexicon of many a modern Western spiritual seeker. The prophetic traditions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—tend toward this dualism, always maintaining a distinction and distance between the Creator and the created. There are plentiful examples of this dualism in the so-called mystical traditions of Asia as well. We shall wrestle with (and not even dare to try to solve) this tension at length. The second dualism is that of flesh versus spirit-soul-consciousness. There are some (many, even) who are very comfortable stating a firm belief in the nonduality of individual self and the Divine, and yet still fall into the trap of this other, insidious dualism, that may have far more serious negative implications for our practical lives on earth than the first more ephemeral one. Stated simply, the problem I see is that having overcome the first dualism in having discovered and claimed our identity-union-communion with the Divine (Self/self, Spirit/spirit, God/individual soul), our religious traditions and tendencies often still fall into the trap of the second dualism—thinking that the soul or spirit is good and real, whereas the body and matter are bad, or at least illusory. The practical, often subtle and insidious ramifications of this dualism are everywhere. We will begin by grappling with this second dualism.

**Mistrust of the Body**

Cultures in the West have inherited a kind of mistrust of the body, and by extension, matter in general, that we can never quite shake no matter how far we try to distance ourselves from Christianity. Of course, there are countless anecdotes about Christians (is it especially Catholics?) being so uptight about anything dealing with the body and bodily functions, and especially a deadly silence around anything dealing with sexuality. Such reticence could be viewed as a kind of “noble shame,” but practically speaking, it has led to an enormous amount of oppression, suppression, and repression, instead of a healthy sublimation. And what we learn from psychology is that any kind of oppression, suppression, or repression ultimately leads to some kind of obsession; and obsession leads to compulsivity,
and compulsivity leads to shame, and shame leads to oppression, suppression, repression, and the cycle goes on and on, the gift that keeps on giving.

As the Italian philosopher Marco Vannini explains, “It is essential for us human beings to have an experience of sexuality,” for example—and I want to expand that to say that we need to have an experience of our erotic-physical self or simply of our corporeal existence—in its deepest reality, because without such an experience our physical self remains something unclear. And whatever is not brought to the light actually becomes a tie, a bond. As a matter of fact, there could really be no better place to talk about the human body than in the context of spirituality because, quoting Vannini again, “One also does not, indeed cannot, even have true knowledge of soul and body without experience of the spirit.”

We only have to remember the pessimism of Greek philosophy regarding the body to understand where we come from. According to the Greeks, “Life is destined to death; since the body (soma) is a tomb (sema), salvation can only consist in being freed of it through evasion. One thinks of the contrast between the Greek belief in the immortality of the soul and the Christian faith in the resurrection of bodies.”

Unfortunately, it is the pessimistic “body-as-tomb” view that finds its way immediately into the anthropology that most of us have inherited instead of the “Christian optimism,” even (especially!) among the early Christian writers. The late theologian of Eastern Christianity Tomas Spidlik gives a list of the most famous Greek invectives. It starts out with the ancient Orphic formula soma–sema: “The body (soma) is a tomb (sema) for the soul.” And from that the earliest writers of Christianity riff on: Clement of Alexandria says that we must “free the soul from the fetters of the flesh,” or as Gregory Nazianzen writes, “from its bond (desmos) with a corpse,” because the body is like mire where the soul can only befoul and defile itself. Gregory of Nyssa taught that “the body is a stranger to the soul” and an ugly mask, so we should “free ourself from the body” and “lay down this burden.” Basil wrote that we should “take care of the soul” and never mind about the rest. The monks are just as
pessimistic. Palladius, the great monastic chronicler, records the sayings of Macarius the Great that we should despise, mistreat, and kill the body: “It kills me I kill it.” Antony the Great likewise says of the body, “It flays me I flay it.” And John Climacus says that the body is an ungrateful and insidious friend of whom we should be suspicious.3

In this light we can understand why someone like American philosopher Sam Keen would write in his book To a Dancing God that neither the Christian culture nor the secular culture, in which he had been jointly nurtured, ever gave him adequate categories to interpret the warmth and grace which pervade his body. Nor did secularism or Christianity ever teach him how to interpret the sacred in the voice of the body and the language of the senses. “In the same measure that Christian theology has failed to help me realize the carnality of grace,” he wrote, “ secular ideology has failed to provide me categories for understanding the grace of carnality. . . .” In spite of the denials of sophisticated theologians, Christianity has never been able to escape “that ancient and perennial dualism,” which he says is equally manifest in Platonism, Gnosticism, and schizophrenia, which speaks of the flesh as being of lesser dignity than the spirit and the senses inferior to the mind. In recent times there has been a resurgence of the Hebrew idea of the psychosomatic unity of the human person, and gradually “a modicum of celebration of the senses has infiltrated the church.” However, as Keen reminds us, “in spite of these minor steps forward there remains a deep-seated suspicion of the carnal enthroned in the Christian understanding of history and salvation. Nothing less than a major theological revolution will allow Christianity to escape from the heresy of Gnosticism.”4

A contemporary Catholic theologian, Louis-Marie Chauvet, expresses it in similar terms. In spite of a more positive view of matter, because it was created by God, and in spite of a more positive view of the bodily condition of human beings because it has been assumed by the Word of God itself in Jesus, even Christianity “has never fully cast away this suspicion of the sensible.”5 But it is not just Christianity. On a practical level, I have found that this issue—what we call “dualism”—comes up
in almost every tradition I have studied, all the way from the ascetical overexuberance of Hindu devotees to the teachings of great Advaitin saints, such as Ramana Maharshi. At first glance, it seems right to many people who are trying to be “more spiritual”—body bad, soul good! Cast off the body to free the soul. Here is an example from the Dhammapada, the early Pali text of Buddhism.

Look at the body adorned,
A mass of wounds, draped upon a heap of bones,
A sickly thing, this subject of sensual thoughts!
Neither permanent nor enduring!
The body wears out,
A news of disease,
Fragile, disintegrating,
Ending in death.6

Bernie Clark put it very plainly in his book on Yin Yoga, saying that very few Yoga teachers realize that Samkhya philosophy and thus the Classical Yoga of Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras are also dualistic philosophies. In them the dynamic is between purusha and prakriti, with purusha as the soul, pure consciousness, and prakriti as that which is created. Purusha does not create prakriti, although it is responsible for prakriti becoming animated and alive. But, according to Samkhya, this union of the two was a horrible mistake, an unfortunate marriage that never should have happened. So, as Clark explains, “Samkhya and Classical Yoga are not about union. The yoga of the Yoga Sutra is about getting a divorce, as quickly as possible.”7 (He does not eschew Yoga altogether, of course. It is for this reason that he espouses a return to a type of Tantric Yoga that he and others refer to as “Yin Yoga.”) This is also one of the major themes of Sri Aurobindo’s Integral Yoga. Warning about an incipient dualism, he wrote that in the past the body was regarded by spiritual seekers as an obstacle, “as something to be overcome and discarded” rather “than as an instrument of spiritual perfection and a field of the spiritual change.” But, he writes, “if a divine life is possible on earth, then this self-exceeding (i.e., perfection of the body) must also be possible.”8
Enlightened Dualism

I have noticed how often people around me flippantly say that “we are not our bodies.” I am not sure that that is completely accurate, or at least it presents us with a slippery slope toward a whole new kind of dualism. Sam Keen writes that we have to be careful of being seduced by the dualism implicit in the language that encourages us to speak of “having a body,” as if the possessor and the possessed were different entities, what I’ve come to call an “enlightened dualism.” All human knowledge, all human value and aspiration are stamped with the mark of the body. Keen says that the insight we gain from existential philosophy into the incarnate nature of human existence could be stated like this: “Our body is our bridge to and model of the world; therefore, how we are in our body so will we be in the world.”

This is very important! Keen further states, “As I trust or mistrust the rhythm of my body, so I trust or mistrust my total world. If we lose the self we lose the other; if we lose the body we lose the world. Thus the danger of not loving one’s body. Love of both neighbor and cosmos rests upon love of self.” He also explains that as we are in the world, so will we be in that mystery that founds, sustains, and engulfs the known world: “But even more, the sacred rests upon the carnal.” There is a correlation between our attitudes toward our body, our social and material context, and our absolute context.

The great monk, theologian, and scholar Cipriano Vagaggini (1909–99) writes that the root of the defect is to be found in a contemporary anthropology that is unwittingly faulty. “Without our realizing it,” he says, “there is a survival in us of a kind of dualism resulting from an exaggeratedly spiritualistic idea” of the human person, in which “the body and its functions in human nature are scorned in favor of the soul.” Ken Wilber, in one of his early books, says it this way: “Biologically there is not the least foundation for this dissociation or radical split between the mind and the body, the psyche and the soma, the ego and the flesh, but psychologically it is epidemic.” The mind–body split and the dualism that follows from it are a fundamental perspective of Western civilization. “Even St. Francis referred
to his body as ‘poor brother ass,’” Wilber writes, “and most of us do indeed feel as if we just sort of ride around on our bodies like we would on a donkey or an ass.”

He goes on to point out that this strange boundary line between the mind and the body is not at all present at birth. But as individuals grow in years and we begin to draw up and fortify all kinds of boundaries between “self” and “not-self,” we also start to look at the body with mixed emotions. And by the time we have matured the body becomes foreign territory, almost (but never quite) as foreign as the external world itself. The boundary line is drawn between the mind and the body, and the person identifies squarely with the mind, and we come to live in our heads as if we were a miniature person in our skull, giving directions and commands to the body, which may or may not obey. And unfortunately, as Keen reminds us, how we are in our bodies is also how we will be in the world.

Let’s add one more voice to this, that of Wendell Berry, the great novelist, poet, farmer, and social critic. Berry uses similar language when he refers to “the isolation of the body.” He says that at some point “we began to assume that the life of the body should be the business of grocers and medical doctors who don’t have to take any interest in the spirit; and the life of the spirit should be the domain of churches who would have at best only a negative interest in the body.” But this isolation of the body puts it into direct conflict with everything else in creation, and “gives it a value that is destructive of every other value.” Of course, speaking of Christianity, “Nothing could be more absurd than to despise the body and yet yearn for resurrection!”

Worse, what follows on this way of thinking is that we can also make the body—usually someone else’s body—do things that both insult the mind and degrade the spirit. And then when the soul is set against the body—the soul thriving at the body’s expense—a whole spiritual economy of competition is set up. The soul lives by denying the body, and as a consequence its relation to the world is too superficial to cope with the world in any meaningful way, and suddenly we are surprised to find out that spiritual values have ceased to carry any weight, or any authority, that our spiritual values lack vigor or power or purpose in
the world. Of course, *it’s not possible to devalue the body and value the soul!* If the body is “devalued and cast out of the temple,” it does not “sulk off like a sick dog to die in the bushes.” It sets up a whole counterpart economy of its own based on a law of competition that devalues and exploits the spirit in turn. Then these two faulty economies “maintain themselves at each other’s expense, living upon each other’s losses, collaborating without cease in mutual futility and absurdity.”

The prototype of this is forcing people into slavery and then converting them, or any attempt at spreading religion by the sword or violence of any kind, which is a destruction of the body. Contempt for our own bodies inevitably leads to contempt for others’ bodies as well—of women, of laborers, of the infirm or weak, of animals and plants—and finally of the earth itself. As Keen stated, *how we are in our bodies is how we will be in the world!* If the body is set in conflict with creation itself, of which all bodies are members, then ultimately the body stressing its autonomy is at war against itself.

If this is indeed faulty, as I am suggesting, or at least only partial, how can we adjust our vision? Where do we look to find a healthy holistic spiritual anthropology and a practical spirituality that reverences the whole person? The antidote in seed form may be found in each of our traditions as they evolve and as our own consciousness evolves, and as these traditions engage in dialogue with one another. This is what we shall explore in the chapters that follow.

In what lies ahead, we shall be looking at different spiritual traditions and seeing not only if Christianity shares any common ground with them but also what they may have to teach us, some aspect of the treasure map that they have figured out in a way Christianity has not yet articulated.

Before proceeding with our discussion, I find it useful to distinguish between three concepts: the end, what theology calls the *telos*; the goal, or the *scopos*, the proximate aim; and finally the *praxis*, the Greek word for practice, from the ascetical tradition. I have found that, while I believe there is a core of wisdom that the authentic spiritual traditions share (as we shall discuss below), we do have different ways of describing the end, the *telos*. Yet
it is fascinating to me that we often have a similar vocabulary for the *scopos*, the proximate goal, and because of that we can often learn from one another’s practice—the *praxis*—because we share a common goal as well as a common humanity. This shall be important for the pages ahead.