FREE FROM RELIGION

An Invitation to Deeper Spirituality, Unconditional Love, and Genuine Freedom



GIL HODGES

FREE FROM RELIGION

Embracing Spiritual Maturity and Unconditional Love

by

Gil Hodges

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Acknowledgments

No meaningful work is ever created in isolation. While these pages carry my voice, they were shaped, strengthened, and sustained by people whose presence made this book possible.

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Each of you, in different ways, has contributed to the formation of the me, the man who wrote these pages.

This book carries your influence within it.

To the Carriers of Freedom

And now, to those who read these words and choose to share them.

You are the true heroes.

A book sitting on a shelf changes very little. A message carried by living hearts transforms worlds.

If you pass this forward — if you recommend it, gift it, share it, speak about it, or simply live it — you become part of something far larger than paper and ink. You become like leaves in autumn, released into the wind, carried into places you may never see. Each leaf does not control where it lands. It simply lets go and trusts the current.

My intention is to make this book as inexpensive and accessible as possible — even free whenever I can — because freedom should not be gated by cost. It should move. It should circulate. It should spread.

If these pages help untether even one person from fear-based programming…
If they help someone rediscover unconditional love…
If they restore someone's courage to choose consciously and live awake…

Then the work continues through you.

The ones who carry freedom forward are the ones who expand it.

With gratitude,

~ Gil

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Foreword

By a Friend Who Has Walked This Road

I have known Gil Hodges for a long time. Long enough to have watched him before the breakthrough. Long enough to remember the version of him that still carried the weight.

I say that not to embarrass him—he would be the first to tell you about it himself. That is one of the things that has always set him apart. He does not perform authenticity. He lives it. And because of that, I can say with complete honesty that what you are holding in your hands is not a book written from theory. It is a book written from scar tissue that healed into something beautiful.

I remember conversations with Gil during the years when he was still wrestling his way out of the systems that had shaped him. He wasn't angry—that's what surprised me. Most people who leave rigid religious structures carry a kind of bitterness that colors everything they say afterward. Not Gil. What I saw in him was more like a man who had been holding his breath for years and was just beginning to exhale. There was relief. There was wonder. And there was this irrepressible need to turn around and wave everyone else toward the same open air.

That's who wrote this book.

Before you go any further: This is not a comfortable read if you are still deeply invested in the system it examines. It will ask things of you. It will hold a mirror up to ideas you may have accepted without ever choosing them. It will invite you to question whether what you were handed as a child was actually — or simply "installed."

That word, "installed," is one Gil uses often. The first time I heard him say it, I sat with it for days. Because the more I thought about it, the more I recognized it in my own life. The beliefs I held with such certainty. The fear underneath them that I had never examined. The invisible agreements I had made with systems and authorities I had never actually consented to following. None of it was chosen. It was absorbed. And there is a profound difference between the two.

Gil has spent years mapping the distance between those two things—between what we absorb and what we actually choose—and this book is the clearest expression of that map I have ever seen from him.

What I admire most is what he "doesn't" do here. He doesn't tear down and leave you in the rubble. He doesn't replace one rigid system with another one wearing different clothes. He doesn't pretend he has all the answers, or that his path is the only one worth walking. What he does instead is something far more

rare: he points toward freedom and trusts you to walk toward it yourself. He believes in your capacity to choose. Deeply and without reservation.

The great teachers across history—Jesus, Buddha, Rumi, the mystics of every tradition—they all pointed beyond the institution, beyond the rule, beyond the performance, toward something living and real and impossibly intimate. Gil belongs to that lineage of those who refuse to let the map become the territory. Who insist that the finger pointing at the moon is not the moon itself.

I have watched this man sit with people in their darkest moments of spiritual disorientation—people who had lost their entire framework and didn't know what was left—and I have seen him help them find something more solid underneath the rubble than anything they had before. Not a new set of rules. Not a new authority to submit to. But themselves. Their own knowing. Their own connection to something vast and unconditionally loving.

That is the gift he is trying to give you in these pages.

You may not agree with everything here. That's fine—Gil would tell you the same thing. He is not asking for your agreement. He is asking for your honesty. With yourself. About what you truly believe when no one is watching, when the performance is off, when you are alone with your own soul in the quiet.

What's there? What do you actually know?

That question is where this book begins.

I have walked long enough beside this man to tell you: what he found on the other side of his own programming is real. The freedom is real. The love is real. And it has nothing to do with belonging to the right group, saying the right words, or earning what was never conditional to begin with.

Read this slowly. Sit with the places that make you uncomfortable. Those are usually the places where something important is waiting.

You picked this book up for a reason.

Trust that.

Written with deep respect for the journey, and for the courage it takes to begin one.

— author, anonymous

I believe my words to be worth the value they carry. A name drop is not necessary.

Introduction

There was a time in my life when I knew something was deeply wrong—not with me, necessarily, but with the system I had been handed and told was truth. I had followed the rules. I had shown up. I had performed. And yet, somewhere beneath the performance, a quiet voice kept asking questions that no one around me seemed willing to entertain. Questions like: Is this it? Is this what a real encounter with the Divine looks like—this rigid, rule-bound, fear-soaked system? Is spiritual freedom actually possible, or is that just a phrase people use in worship songs?

What I discovered on the other side of those questions changed everything. Not just my theology—my entire experience of being alive. I found that true spirituality is not about belonging to the right club, following the right rulebook, or convincing yourself that your particular tradition has the corner on truth. It is about one thing: inner transformation anchored in unconditional love.

This book is an invitation. I am not writing it from a place of bitterness toward religion or cynicism about God. Quite the opposite. I am writing from a place of peace. A place of rest. You might even call it arrival—though not quite as consistent as I would like. But having walked through years of spiritual

programming, having done the hard work of untethering myself from so many of the systems built more on ego and control than on genuine encounter with the Divine, and having found on the other side something so luminous and liberating that I cannot keep it to myself.

I want to be clear who this is for. This is not written primarily for people who are settled and satisfied inside a religious tradition. This is for the seeker. The one who senses there is more. The one who has been hurt by religion but has not lost the ache for something real. The one who has stepped away from the system but wonders if they stepped away from God at the same time. This is for you. And I want you to know—you did not lose God when you left the box. You may have gotten closer.

Throughout this journey together, we will examine some of the most important questions a searching person may ask:

How does the human ego corrupt spiritual movements and turn pathways of freedom into cages of control? What happens to us when religious programming is installed in childhood and never examined? What does it actually mean that the Divine is unconditional love—and how does that truth dismantle the fear-based agreements most religious systems depend on? Why does the arrogance of exclusivity—the belief that one tradition alone holds

all truth—stunt spiritual growth rather than advance it? And what does mature, untethered spirituality actually look like in daily life?

These are not merely philosophical questions. They are the questions that, when answered from the soul rather than from ego or programming, have the power to set a person genuinely free.

I have drawn from history, psychology, neuroscience, and the wisdom of multiple spiritual traditions to illuminate this path. Along the way you will hear from teachers like Jesus, the Buddha, Rumi, and others who each, in their own way, were calling people out of religious confinement and into the spacious freedom of authentic love. My own voice will be present too—not as someone who has everything figured out, but as someone who has walked this road and wants to share what I have found.

The French philosopher Blaise Pascal once observed that all of humanity's problems stem from the inability to sit quietly in a room alone. What he was identifying, I believe, is our fundamental restlessness—the ego's constant need for external validation, external definition, external authority to tell us who we are. Religion, at its worst, has exploited that restlessness rather than resolved it. At its best, it has pointed people toward the only authority that can actually answer the deepest questions: the voice of the Combined Cosmos, the presence of the Divine within.

> *"All of humanity's problems stem from the inability to sit quietly in a room alone."*
>
> **— Blaise Pascal**

That is where we are going. So let us begin—not by tearing religion down, but by understanding clearly what we are being set free from, so we can embrace with full conscious awareness what we are being set free into.

Chapter 1

The Ego Behind Religious Rules and Control

Every major spiritual tradition in human history began as a revolution against the status quo. Jesus turned the religious establishment of his day upside down, dining with the outcasts and confronting the power structures with a radical message of grace. The Buddha walked away from both extreme asceticism and palace comfort to seek a middle way of genuine awakening, explicitly rejecting the priestly hierarchies of his day. Muhammad challenged the tribal pride and social stratification of seventh-century Arabia with a message of unity and submission to the one Divine. Moses confronted the empire. Guru Nanak broke down the walls between Hinduism and Islam. These were not institutional men. They were liberators.

And then a strange thing happened to each of their movements. The very freedom they proclaimed became a new set of chains.

The structures, doctrines, and hierarchies that emerged after each of these teachers were gone were not inherently evil. Some of them served important functions—creating community, preserving teachings, offering belonging to searching people. But over generations, something dark crept in. The living, breathing encounter with the Divine that these teachers embodied was gradually replaced by a

system designed not to transform the heart but to manage behavior. Religion did not begin as a cage. It became one—and the mechanism of that transformation is something I want us to look at clearly.

That mechanism is the human ego.

Understanding How the Ego Hijacks Spiritual Space

The ego, as Carl Jung described it, is the center of our conscious identity—the part of us that says "I am this, not that." In its healthy function, the ego provides us with a sense of self. But the ego has a shadow side that craves certainty, superiority, and control. Eckhart Tolle, in his foundational work on the nature of ego-based consciousness, describes the ego as a false self that depends on defining itself over and against others—it needs an "us" and a "them," a right and a wrong, an in-group and an out-group to feel real and significant.

When ego takes the driver's seat in spiritual matters, it does not seek truth—it seeks validation. It does not want liberation—it wants power. The psychologist Abraham Maslow, in his hierarchy of human needs, identified the need for esteem and power as fundamental drivers of human behavior. In religious contexts, these drives do not disappear; they put on robes and claim divine authority.[1]

I have witnessed this across traditions. The minister who runs a congregation like a personal kingdom, where questioning is treated as rebellion. The guru who demands absolute surrender and systematically isolates disciples from outside perspectives. The imam whose interpretation of scripture is the only interpretation, any deviation from which is treated as apostasy. The differences in language and liturgy are vast. The psychological dynamic is identical.

Here is the beautiful and liberating truth in recognizing this: it is not about the religion itself. Every tradition carries genuine wisdom, genuine pathways to the Divine. The corruption is not in the wisdom—it is in what the human ego does with the wisdom when it gets its hands on institutional power.

The Ego's Need for Certainty

One of the most important things I have come to understand about rigid religious systems is what function they serve psychologically for the people inside them. They provide the illusion of certainty in a world that is fundamentally uncertain. The ego cannot tolerate mystery. It cannot sit with the sacred unknown. It needs clear answers, clean categories, and a definitive list of who is righteous and who is not.

Think about how this plays out. The fundamentalist of any tradition is not primarily motivated by love for God. He is motivated by the relief that comes from

knowing—or believing he knows—exactly where the lines are drawn. The ones who are saved. The ones who are lost. The correct doctrine. The incorrect doctrine. Every line drawn is another moment of ego-relief, another temporary escape from the anxiety of not-knowing.

Research from the field of terror management theory, developed by social psychologists Jeff Greenberg, Sheldon Solomon, and Tom Pyszczynski, demonstrates that human beings cope with the awareness of their own mortality largely through cultural worldviews that offer a sense of order, meaning, and symbolic immortality. Religious systems, they found, are among the most powerful of these worldview-structures. When those structures are challenged, the psychological threat is severe—which is why people will defend their religious ego-constructs with such ferocity.[2]

This is not a character indictment. It is human nature. But conscious awareness of this dynamic is the first step toward freedom. When I understand that my need to have the "right" doctrine is more about ego-protection than spiritual truth, I become able to loosen my grip. I become able to ask, genuinely: What is actually true? What actually leads toward love? What actually produces transformation?

As I often say to the people I work with: the question "Am I right?" is the ego's question. The question "Am

I loving?" is the soul's question. Organized religion has consistently answered the first at the expense of the second.

> *"The question "Am I right?" is the ego's question. The question "Am I loving?" is the spirit's question."*
>
> **— Gil Hodges**

Collective Ego: When Groups Bond Through Superiority

The dynamic does not stop at the individual level. Entire communities can be captured by collective ego—what I call an ego alliance. Groups bond around shared pride in "their truth" to the exclusion of others, and the religious context provides a particularly potent form of this bonding because it is wrapped in the language of the sacred.

I have seen this in every tradition: the evangelical church absolutely certain they alone hold the gospel; the Islamic community that has decided their school of jurisprudence is the only valid one; the Buddhist sangha that has subtly elevated itself to a higher plane of enlightenment than everyone else. The specific content varies. The structure is the same.

Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, in his landmark research on moral psychology, found that religious group identity activates some of the strongest in-group loyalty and out-group prejudice observed in

human behavior. The "sacred" framing of religious beliefs makes them far more resistant to rational examination than ordinary beliefs—people will fight harder for a theological proposition than for a political one because the theological proposition feels like it touches the divine itself.[3]

The need to belong is not the problem. Belonging is beautiful. Community is a gift. But when the ego distorts belonging into superiority, when community becomes contingent on conformity, when asking real questions makes you a suspect rather than a seeker—that is the moment that belonging has become a cage. And here is the hard truth I have had to sit with: most of the agreements I made with religious systems in my life were not agreements I made consciously. They were programmed into me before I had the tools to evaluate them.

The Neuroscience of Religious Conformity

Psychologist Pascal Boyer, in his research on the cognitive science of religion, found that religious beliefs are typically transmitted through social networks—particularly families and communities—rather than through personal examination of evidence. Children, he demonstrated, are extraordinarily susceptible to absorbing the worldview of the adults they depend on. By the time most of us reach adolescence, we have already

internalized a complete framework of who God is, what God wants, and what spiritual reality looks like—a framework we did not choose.[4]

The conformity runs even deeper than that. Neuroscience has demonstrated that social belonging activates the brain's reward circuits—the same pathways involved in physical pleasure. Conforming to our group literally feels good, on a neurological level. Diverging from it activates threat responses. This is not weakness. It is evolutionary survival wiring. But it means that most people's religious beliefs are held for reasons that have nothing to do with truth—they are held because belonging to the group feels safe, and questioning threatens that safety.

When I first understood this clearly, it was not discouraging—it was liberating. Because if the programming was installed by social pressure and neurological reward, rather than by genuine spiritual encounter, then it can be examined. It can be questioned. It can be untethered, piece by piece, until what remains is not what I was told to believe, but what I actually, in the deepest place within me, know to be true.

When Rules Replace Relationship

The ultimate cost of ego-driven religion is this: it produces compliance instead of transformation. It

builds performers instead of seekers. It creates elaborate systems of behavior management and calls it holiness.

Joseph Campbell, who spent his life studying myth and spiritual tradition across cultures, observed that the function of genuine religion is to open people to the transcendent—to crack open the ego's defenses so that something deeper can emerge. When religion instead becomes a vehicle for ego reinforcement, it has, in his words, become mythology mistaken for fact—a system of symbols that were once meant to point beyond themselves, now worshipped as ends in themselves.

I have come to understand this from the inside out. I spent years inside systems where the rules were the point—where my compliance was treated as evidence of my spiritual health, and my questions were treated as evidence of my spiritual weakness. The day I began to untether from those agreements was the day my actual spiritual life began.

The problem is not spirituality. The problem is not faith. The problem is what the human ego does with spiritual power when it is not held in check by genuine humility and love. The same fire that warms a home can burn it down. The same pathways meant to carry people toward the Divine can be weaponized to keep people under control.

Recognizing this does not mean abandoning the journey. It means undertaking the journey with our eyes open—with conscious awareness of the programming we carry, and the courage to choose something different.

Which brings us to the question that lies at the heart of this entire conversation: How did that programming get installed in the first place? And what does it actually look like to walk free of it?

Chapter 2

From Childhood Programming to Spiritual Awakening

Almost no one chooses their first religion. It is chosen for us—by the family we are born into, the community that surrounds us, the teachers and clergy who shape our earliest understanding of the world. This is not a criticism; it is simply the nature of human development. Children need frameworks. They need stories and structures that help them make sense of existence before they have the cognitive capacity to examine existence for themselves.

The challenge is not that we receive those frameworks in childhood. The challenge is when we carry them unchanged into adulthood and never examine whether they are actually true, whether they actually lead toward love, whether they reflect genuine encounter with the Divine or simply the agreements of the community we happened to be born into.

I call this process programming—not to demean it, but to describe it accurately. When I say programming, I mean the set of beliefs, agreements, and identity structures that were installed in us before we had the conscious awareness to evaluate them. And I mean this in a very literal, neurological sense.

The Architecture of the Child's Mind

Swiss developmental psychologist Jean Piaget, whose foundational research on cognitive development remains among the most influential in modern psychology, demonstrated that children under approximately eleven or twelve years old operate primarily in what he called the "concrete operational" stage—they process information in literal, black-and-white terms and have not yet developed the capacity for abstract reasoning, nuance, or hypothetical thinking. Children in this stage need clear categories: good and bad, safe and dangerous, right and wrong. This is not a developmental flaw—it is precisely the cognitive architecture appropriate for a dependent, developing human being who needs clear guidance to survive.[5]

But here is what this means for religious formation: every theological idea, every claim about God's nature, every moral framework, every picture of who is saved and who is not—all of it is processed through that concrete, binary, literal-minded architecture. The child does not receive nuance. The child receives "God loves you if you obey and punishes you if you don't." The child receives "our group is right and the others are lost." The child receives "these rules are absolute and questioning them is dangerous."

A child cannot help but internalize these messages as literal truth. Their brain is not equipped to do

otherwise. And by the time that child reaches adolescence, those internalized agreements have become the foundational operating system through which all subsequent experience is processed.

The question is: what happens next?

The Sacred Transition—When the Soul's Voice Speaks

Something extraordinary happens in the human being around the time of adolescence. Every major spiritual tradition in the world has noticed it, though they describe it differently.

In the Jewish mystical tradition of Kabbalah, there is a teaching that until the age of thirteen for boys and twelve for girls, a person's consciousness is primarily identified with the physical body and its immediate needs and pleasures. At the time of Bar or Bat Mitzvah, something awakens—a new dimension of awareness described as the "nefesh ha-elokit," the divine soul, which begins to make its voice heard for the first time. The young person is now considered responsible for their own relationship with the Divine not merely as a cultural convention, but because a genuine inner shift in consciousness has occurred.[6]

Islamic tradition recognizes a parallel threshold—"bulugh," the onset of religious maturity at puberty—when the young person becomes accountable before God, not as a child following rules handed to them by

adults, but as a self-aware individual capable of conscious choice. Many Indigenous traditions across every inhabited continent have recognized a similar threshold through rites of passage and vision quests, acknowledging that the adolescent crossing carries within them the possibility of direct spiritual encounter that the young child could not yet access.

What is being recognized in all of these traditions is a neurological and spiritual reality: the developing human being reaches a threshold at which genuine conscious awareness becomes possible. The soul begins to speak. And in that moment, a choice presents itself that many people never fully realize they have: the choice to continue living inside the programming installed in childhood, or to begin the deeper work of conscious spiritual inquiry.

This is the crossroads I am pointing toward. Not a rejection of everything that came before—but a transformation of it. An internalization. A movement from living under a belief system because someone told you to, toward inhabiting a spirituality because you have actually examined it and found it to be true.

Spiritual Arrested Development

Here is the painful reality: most religious systems do not facilitate this transition. They celebrate it

symbolically—the Bar Mitzvah, Confirmation, the coming-of-age ceremony—and then expect the young adult to continue operating within the same framework of unquestioned obedience that governed their childhood. The rite of passage becomes a performance rather than an actual threshold into spiritual self-determination.

The result is what I call spiritual arrested development. The person grows up physically, intellectually, professionally—and remains, in their spiritual life, a child waiting for external authority to tell them what to believe and how to behave. They bring the same black-and-white thinking, the same fear of divine punishment, the same dependence on group approval that served them at age seven—into their adult encounters with complexity, suffering, moral ambiguity, and mystery.

I have seen this pattern across every tradition, in every kind of person. The brilliant executive who is reduced to a frightened child the moment their pastor questions their theology. The mature, accomplished woman who has never once asked whether the God she was handed as a child is actually the God she would choose as an adult. The man in his fifties who is still living under spiritual agreements he made before he was old enough to know what an agreement was.

This is not intelligence failure. It is consciousness failure—and it is, in large part, manufactured by systems that have a vested interest in keeping people spiritually dependent.

As the apostle Paul recognized in one of the most spiritually mature statements in any tradition: "When I was a child, I spoke and thought and reasoned as a child. But when I became an adult, I set aside the things of childhood." (1 Corinthians 13:11) The tragedy is that most religious institutions preach this verse without applying it to themselves—without asking whether their own doctrine and practice reflects the thinking of adults or the thinking of children who needed things simple, certain, and safe.

> *"When I was a child, I spoke and thought and reasoned as a child. But when I became an adult, I set aside the things of childhood."*
>
> **— 1 Corinthians 13:11**

The Journey I Discovered—Conscious Awareness as the Pathway

The pathway out of spiritual arrested development is not rebellion. It is not cynicism. It is conscious awareness—the willingness to look honestly at the agreements you carry, to examine them in the light of love and truth, and to release the ones that were installed by fear rather than discovered through genuine encounter.

This process of untethering is not easy. The agreements of childhood are held in place not just by habit but by neurological programming, by the threat of losing community belonging, and by the ego's deep resistance to uncertainty. Letting go of a belief that has defined your entire sense of self and spiritual safety is one of the most disorienting experiences a human being can undertake.

But it is also one of the most liberating.

The spiritual maturity I am describing is not a destination you arrive at once and permanently. It is a practice. It is the ongoing willingness to hold your beliefs lightly enough to let truth refine them. It is the movement from asking "What does my tradition say I must believe?" to asking "What is actually true? What resonates with the deepest knowing within me? What leads toward greater love—in me, and in the people I encounter?"

You move from unconscious agreement to conscious choice.

You move from external authority to internal guidance—while remaining genuinely open to wisdom from many sources.

You move from fear-based compliance to love-based authenticity.

This is spiritual maturity. This is the awakening that sets us free. And at the center of that awakening lies a discovery so simple and so radical that it undoes every fear-based religious agreement at its root.

It is the discovery that the Divine is unconditional love.

Chapter 3

Unconditional Love vs. Conditional Religion

Everything changes when you finally understand this: the Divine is not keeping score.

I do not mean that reality has no consequences, or that choices do not matter. I mean something far more specific and far more revolutionary than that. I mean that the love of Source—God, Ultimate Reality, the Divine Presence, whatever name carries meaning for you—does not operate the way human institutions operate. It does not expand when you perform correctly and contract when you fail. It does not grant access to those who hold the right doctrines and withdraw from those who ask the wrong questions. It does not have a minimum compliance threshold below which you fall out of grace.

It is unconditional. Period.

This is not a comforting platitude. It is a statement about the actual nature of the Divine that carries enormous implications for every religious system ever constructed. If the love of Source is genuinely unconditional, then every theology built on fear of losing that love—on earning approval, on performance, on compliance—is not a pathway to the Divine. It is a human construct, a projection of human ego and anxiety onto the face of the sacred.

Let me tell you what happened when this truth broke through for me personally. I was sitting with a question I could no longer avoid: "If I stopped performing—if I stopped following all the rules, stopped showing up in all the right ways, stopped maintaining all the right agreements—would God stop loving me?" And the answer that came from the deepest place within me was: No. And in that no was a freedom I had been searching for my entire life. Another way this has been expressed in the deepest levels of being, is the realization that in life… all of life… I really don't have to DO anything. I can just BE, and the world will not fall apart, and I will be ok… Still loved without conditions.

> *"I really don't have to DO anything. I can just BE, and the world will not fall apart, and I will be ok… Still loved without conditions."*
>
> **— Gil Hodges**

The Stunning Contrast

To understand how revolutionary the concept of unconditional love actually is, we have to look clearly at what most human love—including most religious love—actually does.

Human love in its unexamined form is transactional. We love people when they please us, agree with us, behave the way we expect, belong to our group. When those conditions change, our love changes. This is the

model most of us were raised with, and it is, not coincidentally, the model most religious systems have projected onto God.

Think about the mechanics of fear-based religion. The message, sometimes explicit and often implicit, is: God will love and accept you if you believe the correct things, perform the correct rituals, belong to the correct tradition, and maintain the correct moral standards. Fall short on any of these conditions, and God's love is—at minimum—diminished, and at maximum, replaced by wrath.

The result of this theology is not spirituality. The result is anxiety. Am I good enough? Have I sinned too much? Do I have enough faith? Am I in the right tradition? What if I have doubts? What if I cannot stop this behavior? What if I was born into the wrong religion?

This is what conditional religion produces: performing, striving, anxious human beings who relate to the Divine the same way they relate to a demanding employer—always trying to avoid punishment and earn approval, never fully at rest, never fully loved.

This is not God. This is human ego masquerading in religious piety… Using sacred language to control and manipulate.

What the Great Teachers Actually Said

When we go back to the actual teachings of the great spiritual figures—not their institutionalized, theologized, systematized versions, but the raw teaching itself—we find a remarkably consistent message about the nature of divine love.

Jesus, in the parable of the prodigal son, painted one of the most radical pictures of unconditional love in human history. A son who has squandered everything, who has humiliated his family and violated every cultural and religious norm, comes home expecting to be received as a hired servant. Instead, his father sees him while he is still far off—still covered in the mess of his poor choices—and runs to meet him. No conditions. No punishment. No "we need to talk about what you have done." Just embrace, and celebration, and restoration. The father in that story is not performing generosity. He is revealing the nature of the Divine.

The Buddha, in the Metta Sutta, taught a practice of loving-kindness that extends without exception to all beings—including enemies, including those who cause harm, including the undeserving and the ungrateful. The Metta Sutta instructs the practitioner to cultivate love as a mother loves her only child, willing to give her life for that child's wellbeing. This boundless quality of love—what the tradition calls "appamana metta," immeasurable loving-kindness—

is the Buddhist approximation of what I mean by unconditional.

In the Islamic tradition, the Qur'an's repeated opening formula foregrounds mercy and compassion, "Bismillah ar-Rahman ar-Rahim"—"In the name of God, the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful." And the Prophet Muhammad taught, as recorded in both Sahih Bukhari and Sahih Muslim: "When Allah decreed the Creation, He wrote in His Book with Him above the Throne: My mercy prevails over My wrath." The very architecture of the Qur'an is an announcement that compassion and mercy are the primary attributes of the Divine—not wrath, not judgment, not exclusion.[7]

The great Sufi mystic Rumi wrote: "Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it." This single line contains an entire theology. Rumi is not saying that love is something we must earn or achieve. He is saying that love is already the reality—our work is to remove the programming, the fear, the agreements that prevent us from receiving it.

> *"Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it."*
>
> **— Rumi**

The pattern across traditions is unmistakable. The genuine teachers were not pointing toward a conditional, performance-monitoring Divine. They were pointing toward an unconditional Love that is the ground of all existence.

The Human Element in Sacred Texts

If unconditional love is the message of the genuine teachers, then we have to ask an honest question: why do so many sacred texts also contain portrayals of a wrathful, exclusive, condition-setting God?

The answer requires us to do something that takes real courage: acknowledge that sacred texts were written by human beings, and that human beings—even inspired, genuinely seeking human beings—carry the limitations, fears, biases, and power dynamics of their historical moment.

The biblical canon as we know it did not descend from heaven fully formed. The process by which the early church determined which texts were authoritative was complex, contested, and unfolded over several centuries. The Councils of Hippo (393 AD) and

Carthage (397 AD) formalized what had been a long-running theological conversation—and the criteria for inclusion were influenced not only by genuine spiritual discernment but by debates about institutional authority and theological orthodoxy.[8]

This is not a cynical observation. It is a historical one. And the same human element is present in every tradition's sacred literature—the hadith collections of Islam, compiled by human scholars generations after the Prophet; the vast library of Hindu scriptures, accumulated over thousands of years and containing genuine contradictions; the various Buddhist canons, which sometimes conflict with each other on fundamental questions.

The point is not that these texts are worthless. Many of them carry profound wisdom and genuine spiritual insight. The point is that we must bring discernment to them—and the criterion for that discernment, I have come to believe, is love. Any portrayal of the Divine that is inconsistent with unconditional love should be held loosely and examined carefully, because it may reflect the fears and projections of the humans who wrote it, rather than the actual nature of Source.

This is what I call using love as the lens. Rather than building a theology on the harshest, most fear-inducing passages of any sacred text, we build on the highest revelation of divine character available to us—

which in every tradition points toward unconditional, inexhaustible love.

What This Means for You Right Now

Let me be as direct as I know how to be. If you are reading this and carrying fear that God has withdrawn love from you because of something you have done, something you believe, something you cannot stop, something you were born in or with—I want you to hear this:

> *"You are loved. Right now. Exactly as you are. Not after you change. Not after you perform correctly. Not after you sort out your theology. Right now!"*
>
> **— Gil Hodges**

This is not sentiment. This is the testimony of every genuine spiritual teacher who has ever lived. It is the testimony of the mystics across every tradition. And it is, if you allow yourself to sit with it, the testimony of the deepest knowing within you.

The fear that conditional religion generates is not a neutral side effect. Fear keeps people compliant. Fear keeps people dependent. Fear keeps people returning to the system that promises to protect them from divine punishment—a punishment that, if the genuine teachers are to be believed, was never coming in the first place.

When you internalize—really internalize, not just intellectually accept but feel it in your body and your soul—that the love of Source is unconditional, a profound shift happens. You stop performing. You stop trying to earn what you already have. You stop being afraid of a God who was constructed by human ego, and you begin to relate to the actual Divine. And in that relationship, something extraordinary becomes possible: you begin to love others the way you have been loved—without conditions, without performance requirements, without in-groups and out-groups.

As Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist teacher and peace activist, wrote: "The most precious gift we can offer anyone is our attention. When mindfulness embraces those we love, they will bloom like flowers." The same is true of unconditional love—when it is offered without conditions, people do not become lazy or irresponsible. They bloom.

> *"The most precious gift we can offer anyone is our attention. When mindfulness embraces those we love, they will bloom like flowers."*
>
> **— Thich Nhat Hanh**

Unconditional Love Is Not Unlimited Tolerance

I want to address a misunderstanding directly, because it comes up every time I teach on unconditional love. Unconditional love does not mean

unconditional tolerance of every action. It does not mean there are no consequences. It does not mean that healthy boundaries are abandoned.

Think of a loving parent watching a child run toward the street. The parent does not withdraw love in that moment and issue a punishment. The parent moves toward the child with urgency and redirects them—not because love has been suspended, but precisely because love is fully operative. The correction flows from love, not from love's absence.

This is the picture I hold of a universe that teaches through natural consequences—a reality so thoroughly infused with cause and effect that our choices genuinely matter, and we learn from them. But the learning comes from the wisdom built into reality, not from the wrath of a Divine who has stopped loving us. The fear of "God will torture you forever if you get this wrong" is not divine pedagogy. It is a control mechanism—effective at generating compliance, useless at producing genuine transformation.

Genuine transformation comes from love. Always. It comes from the security of knowing you are accepted, and from the freedom that security provides to grow, to change, to become more fully yourself. This is what unconditional love actually does in a human life. It does not license anything. It liberates everything.

The Hallmark of Genuine Spirituality

I want to close this chapter with a simple test that I have come to use for evaluating any belief, any teaching, any spiritual practice, any religious claim. I ask: Does this lead me toward loving more unconditionally—loving Source, loving myself, loving others—or does it lead me toward fear, performance, exclusion, or superiority?

If the answer is the latter, I hold it loosely. Not because I am dismissing the tradition it comes from, but because I have come to trust that the genuine Divine will always be found in the direction of love—and that anything that moves away from love, no matter how ancient or authoritative its source, is carrying more human projection than divine revelation.

This is the freedom I found. This is the untethering I am inviting you into. Not an abandonment of the sacred—a deeper embrace of it.

And it leads directly to one of the most important questions in this entire conversation: If the Divine loves everyone unconditionally, then what do we do with the claim that only one religion has the truth? That question is where we go next.

Chapter 4

The Arrogance of Exclusivity

There is a belief so deeply embedded in many religious traditions that most of their adherents have never examined it—a belief so normalized within those communities that it is treated not as a claim requiring evidence but as an obvious fact. The belief is this: our religion is the only true one. Every other path is, at best, incomplete, and at worst, leading people to destruction.

I want to sit with this claim for a moment, because I think when we look at it with honest eyes, we discover that it reveals far more about the ego's needs than about the nature of the Divine.

Think about what this claim requires. It requires that of the thousands of spiritual traditions that have arisen across human history—each of them representing humanity's deepest searching, each of them producing genuine transformation in real human lives, each of them carrying wisdom hard-won through generations of sincere seeking—only one happened to get it exactly right. And it requires that the billions of human beings who, through no choice of their own, were born into different traditions, are spiritually inferior or simply lost.

Does that sound like the picture of Divine unconditional love? Or does it sound like the ego of a particular human community, wrapped in divine authority?

The Historical Record

The sociologist of religion Huston Smith, who spent a lifetime studying the world's major wisdom traditions, observed that every great tradition has produced unmistakable fruit: genuine transformation of human character, genuine mystical encounter with the transcendent, genuine movement toward compassion, wisdom, and love. He argued, as he wrote in "The World's Religions," that the mountains of God are many, and different peoples have climbed different mountains—but the sky they reach is the same sky.[9]

> *"The mountains of God are many, and different peoples have climbed different mountains—but the sky they reach is the same sky."*
>
> **— Huston Smith**

I am not arguing for a flat relativism that says all religious claims are equally valid or that no tradition has anything unique to offer. I am arguing against the specific claim that only one tradition has access to the Divine. That claim has historically served one primary function: it has provided the in-group with theological

justification for treating the out-group as less than fully human.

The history of religious exclusivism is not a history of spiritual triumph. It is a history of harm. The Crusades—launched under the banner of Christian exclusivity, producing centuries of violence and mutual atrocity. The systematic oppression of lower castes in South Asia under the justification that their birth into those castes was divinely ordained. The Inquisition. Sectarian warfare. The use of sacred texts to justify slavery. The condemnation of people for their gender, their sexuality, their ethnicity—all of it wrapped in the language of divine authority, all of it ultimately traceable to the ego's need to be right at the expense of others' humanity.

I am not saying religion caused these things. I am saying that the specific claim of exclusive divine access provided the ideological architecture for them. When you believe your group alone has the truth, then anything done in defense of that truth can be justified.

What Exclusivity Does to the Individual Soul

Beyond the historical record, I want to name what exclusivist religion does to the individual person who lives inside it. It stunts them.

Here is what I mean. Every genuine wisdom tradition carries real light—real insight into the nature of

reality, real pathways for transformation, real ways of understanding human suffering and human flourishing. When you have decided in advance that all wisdom must come through your tradition, you have cut yourself off from the vast majority of the light available to you. You are living in one room of a mansion with all the doors locked from the outside.

I have encountered this across my years of spiritual work: the person who has dismissed Buddhism entirely because it is "not Christian," and who therefore remains oblivious to what the Buddhist understanding of suffering and the nature of mind could unlock in their own journey. The person who treats Islamic mysticism as foreign territory, and so misses what the Sufi tradition knows about divine union. The person who waves away the wisdom of Indigenous spiritual traditions as primitive, not realizing that those traditions carry some of the most sophisticated ecological and relational wisdom on the planet.

Spiritual growth requires exposure to genuine truth wherever it is found. The mature spiritual person is not threatened by wisdom from outside their own tradition—they are hungry for it. As Jesus himself taught when he commended the faith of Roman soldiers and Samaritan lepers—people outside his own religious community—the movement of the

Divine is not constrained by our institutional boundaries.

The Common Thread

What I have found, after years of studying and sitting with multiple traditions, is that the mystics and genuine seekers in every tradition are pointing in the same direction. They are not describing the same religion. They are describing the same Reality.

The Christian mystic Meister Eckhart wrote of a "ground of the soul"—the deepest stratum of human consciousness where the human and the Divine are inseparable. The Hindu Upanishads declare "Tat Tvam Asi"—You Are That—meaning the individual soul (atman) and the ultimate reality (Brahman) are, at the deepest level, one. The Sufi tradition speaks of "fana"—annihilation of the separate self in the ocean of the Divine. The Buddhist concept of sunyata—the emptiness that underlies all phenomena—points toward the same dissolution of the false boundaries that the ego constructs between self and other, between human and Divine.

These are not describing different destinations. They are describing different routes to the same country, in different languages, through different landscapes.

The ego insists that only one language is real and all the others are false. Your spirit knows better.

This does not mean every religious claim is equally valid, or that discernment is unnecessary. But the criterion for discernment is not “does this come from my tradition?” The criterion is “does this lead toward love? Does this lead toward genuine transformation? Does this dissolve the ego’s boundaries rather than reinforcing them?”

By that criterion, I have found wisdom worth treasuring in places my original programming told me were spiritually dangerous. And I have found genuine poverty of spirit in places my original programming assured me were the only source of truth.

Chapter 5

Belonging and Breaking Free

One of the most powerful forces keeping people inside systems that no longer serve them is not theology. It is belonging.

The need to belong is not a weakness. It is one of the most fundamental of human needs. We are wired for community—our nervous systems are literally co-regulated by the presence of others. Isolation is physiologically damaging. The sense that we are known, accepted, and valued by a community is among the most powerful contributors to human wellbeing at every level.

Religion understands this, often at an intuitive level, and it delivers belonging with extraordinary effectiveness. The shared rituals. The common language. The sense of being part of something larger than yourself. The community that shows up when you are sick, celebrates when you have reason to celebrate, and weeps with you when the weeping comes. These are genuine goods, and I do not want to minimize them.

But the belonging that many religious communities offer comes with a price: conformity. Belong, as long as you believe the right things. Belong, as long as you ask the right kinds of questions—or better, no

questions at all. Belong, as long as you remain what we have decided you should be.

The moment you begin to think independently, to examine the programming, to follow the soul's voice into territory the community has not pre-approved—the belonging starts to withdraw. And for many people, the fear of losing that belonging is more powerful than any theological argument. They will suppress the voice of the soul indefinitely to preserve the safety of the community.

The Psychology of Leaving

Psychologists Leon Festinger and James Carlsmith's foundational research on cognitive dissonance—the discomfort we feel when our beliefs and our behavior are in conflict—helps explain why leaving a religious community is so psychologically costly. The person who has built their entire identity, social network, and sense of meaning around a religious system experiences their departure not just as a change of belief but as the dismantling of their self. This is genuinely destabilizing, and the destabilization should not be minimized or rushed.[10]

I have walked with many people through this transition, and I want to say something to those of you who are in the middle of it: what you are experiencing is real. The grief is real. The disorientation is real. The loss of community belonging is a genuine loss, not

something to be spiritually bypassed with a quick claim that you are "freer now." You may be freer, and the grief may still be real. Both can be true.

What I also want to say is this: the belonging you will find on the other side of that grief—the belonging that is not conditioned on your compliance, the community that accepts you as you actually are rather than as they need you to be—is worth the cost of the crossing.

Spiritual Courage

There is a concept that appears in virtually every genuine spiritual tradition, though it goes by different names: the willingness to stand alone. To follow what the spirit knows even when the community disagrees. To choose truth over safety, authenticity over belonging-with-conditions.

Jesus modeled this throughout his entire ministry, ultimately to the point of his death. The Buddha left his family, his teachers, and every framework he had been given to sit under a tree and ask, from the ground up, what was actually true. Every genuine spiritual reformer in human history has had to make some version of this choice.

I am not suggesting that everyone needs to leave their religious community. That is neither necessary nor always wise. What I am suggesting is that every

person on a genuine spiritual path eventually reaches a moment where the voice of the spirit and the voice of the institution point in different directions—and in that moment, the choice you make determines whether you are living your own spiritual life or someone else's.

Real belonging—belonging that actually nourishes the soul—is not about conformity. It is about being truly known and truly accepted. If the community you are in cannot offer that without requiring your compliance on every point of doctrine, it may be offering you safety rather than belonging. And safety, purchased at the price of authenticity, is a very expensive form of poverty.

> *"Safety, purchased at the price of authenticity, is a very expensive form of poverty."*
>
> **— Gil Hodges**

Chapter 6

Spirituality as a Journey of Freedom

Here is something that took me years to fully receive: the spiritual path is not about arriving at a destination of certainty. It is about becoming comfortable with sacred mystery.

The ego despises this. The ego wants to know. It wants a list of true propositions that, once accepted, will provide permanent spiritual security. It wants the map finished, the journey completed, the questions answered. And many religious systems have accommodated this ego-desire by presenting themselves as exactly that: the final answer, the complete truth, the finished map.

But genuine spiritual maturity looks completely different. The mature spiritual person is not the one who has accumulated the most correct doctrines. The mature spiritual person is the one who has learned to hold their beliefs with open hands—genuinely willing to let truth refine them, genuinely comfortable with not knowing everything, genuinely curious about what the next layer of understanding might reveal.

Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk and contemplative theologian, wrote: “The beginning of love is to let those we love be perfectly themselves, and not to twist them to fit our own image. Otherwise we

love only the reflection of ourselves we find in them." I apply this not just to human love but to our relationship with the Divine itself. The beginning of genuine spirituality is to let the Divine be perfectly itself—not to twist it into the shape that our fear or our ego or our tradition requires.

> *"The beginning of love is to let those we love be perfectly themselves, and not to twist them to fit our own image."*
>
> **— Thomas Merton**

Letting Go as Spiritual Practice

One of the marks of spiritual maturity is the capacity to release. To release the need to be right. To release the identity built around being a member of the correct tribe. To release the agreements that were made in fear rather than in love. To release the image of God that was handed to us by people who were themselves working from fear.

This letting go is not passive. It is one of the most active and demanding things a human being can do. It requires sitting with the discomfort of uncertainty. It requires walking forward without the map fully drawn. It requires trusting—not blindly, but on the basis of genuine inner knowing—that the path leads somewhere worth going.

In my own journey, I have discovered that each time I was willing to release an agreement that was rooted in

fear rather than love, something more true took its place. Not a new doctrine to replace the old one, but a deepened relationship with the Divine—a relationship less mediated by institutional structures and more immediate, more intimate, more alive.

This is what untethering looks like in practice. Not emptiness—fullness. Not lostness—arrival. The paradox of the spiritual path is that the more you let go of, the more genuinely you receive.

Life as an Experiment in Love

I want to offer you a reframe that has been transformative in my own journey: What if the purpose of this life is not to follow the correct rules and avoid the wrong behaviors? What if it is to learn how to love?

Not love as sentiment. Not love as feeling good about people. Love as a practice—the disciplined, intentional, sometimes costly choice to extend care and regard to other human beings, to the created world, and to yourself, regardless of whether they have earned it. A love that enjoys the unenjoyable person. A love that accepts and cherishes the individual in spite of anything they have said or done. A love that truly, deeply, desires to see others to be happy and free to BE themselves as the Divine created them to be, rather than to conform to the image others want them to be.

This reframe does not eliminate moral structure. Quite the contrary—it provides a moral structure far more demanding than a list of rules, because love requires the full engagement of who you are. A list of rules can be followed by rote. Love cannot. Love requires presence. Love requires seeing the other person. Love requires choosing, again and again, to act from the deepest place within you rather than from ego-comfort or tribal loyalty.

What I have found is that this frame—life as an experiment in love—gives meaning to suffering in a way that rule-based religion cannot. Suffering is not punishment. It is curriculum. Every difficult relationship, every loss, every moment of confusion or failure is an invitation to practice loving more unconditionally. The universe is not punishing us when things are hard. It is teaching us.

> *"Suffering is not punishment. It is curriculum."*
>
> **— Gil Hodges**

The Dalai Lama, whose moral authority I deeply respect, has said that his religion is simply kindness. Not a set of doctrines, not a complex of rituals, not a membership in the correct institution—simply the daily practice of kindness toward every being encountered. This is what I mean by love as the pathway. It is available to everyone, in every moment, regardless of what tradition they carry.

“My religion is simply kindness.”

— The Dalai Lama

Chapter 7

Embracing Differences and Setting Boundaries

Unconditional love is often misunderstood, so I want to address the misunderstanding directly. Unconditional love does not mean unconditional acceptance of every behavior. It does not mean the dissolution of discernment. It does not mean allowing yourself to be harmed in the name of loving without conditions. And it does not mean pretending that all paths, all behaviors, and all choices are equally wise or equally loving.

What unconditional love means—and this is the distinction I want to land with full clarity—is that the love itself does not waver based on conditions, even when the behavior must be addressed, even when the relationship must be restructured, even when a boundary must be drawn. Love is the constant. Boundaries are how love protects itself and others so that it can continue to operate.

The Difference Between Judgment and Discernment

Religious systems often confuse judgment with discernment. Judgment says: this person is of less worth, less loved, less deserving, because of what they believe or how they live. Discernment says: this behavior leads toward harm, and I cannot participate in it or endorse it—while the person engaging in it remains fully loved and fully valued.

The ego's tendency is to collapse these two things—to treat the assessment of a behavior as a condemnation of the person. This is how religious communities end up in the business of telling people they are unloved by God because of their sexuality, their doubts, their choices, their failure to conform. The behavior (which is endlessly variable and often complex) becomes identified with the person (who is, in the deepest sense, a soul of infinite worth).

Spiritual maturity holds these two things separate. I can love you unconditionally and still tell you the truth. I can maintain my respect for your soul and still decline to endorse choices I believe are harmful. I can remain in loving relationship with you and still have limits on what I participate in. These are not contradictions. They are the architecture of a love that is wise rather than merely sentimental.

Healthy Boundaries as an Expression of Love

In my work as a spiritual healer and guide, I have sat with countless people who were taught—by religious systems, by family patterns, by cultural conditioning—that saying no is unchristian, or un-spiritual, or unloving. They were taught that genuine love means infinite availability, infinite tolerance, and the erasure of their own needs in service of others.

This teaching produces not saints but martyrs—exhausted, resentful, depleted people who have confused self-erasure with spirituality. It is not love. It is the ego performing love while quietly resenting it.

Genuine love includes the capacity to say: I love you, and I cannot continue in this relationship in its current form. I love you, and I will not allow this treatment of myself. I love you, and I disagree with this completely. The "I love you" is not diminished by the boundary. In many cases, it is the boundary that makes the love sustainable.

The practical consequence for the untethering journey is this: when you begin to examine the agreements of your religious programming, you will find some of them worthy of release and some of them worthy of keeping. The work is not to discard everything—it is to sort with discernment, keeping the wisdom and releasing the fear. A healthy boundary is not the

absence of love. It is love with the wisdom to know what it can and cannot do.

> *"A healthy boundary is not the absence of love. It is love with the wisdom to know what it can and cannot do."*
>
> **— Gil Hodges**

Chapter 8

The Ultimate Step—Selfless Love

We have been moving, through this entire journey, toward something. From understanding how ego captures spiritual systems, to recognizing the programming of childhood, to receiving the truth of unconditional love, to breaking free from exclusivity and conditional belonging, to practicing a spirituality of genuine freedom. All of it has been moving toward what I want to name in this final chapter: the highest expression of the spiritual life.

It is selfless love. Not martyrdom. Not self-erasure. Not the abandonment of your own humanity in the name of religious performance. Something far more demanding and far more beautiful than any of those things.

Selfless love is the willingness to act from a place beyond the ego's constant negotiation over "what do I get from this?" It is the choice to give, to serve, to show up—not because it is safe, or because it will be reciprocated, or because it earns you spiritual points—but because the person in front of you matters, and your love for them is not contingent on what they offer in return.

Jesus, in his most radical teaching, called this the greatest commandment: love God with everything you

have, and love your neighbor as yourself. The second part of that teaching is often missed. He said as yourself—not instead of yourself. The implication is that genuine care for your own soul is the foundation from which love of others becomes sustainable. You cannot give what you do not have. You cannot love from depletion. The love must be filled from within—from your relationship with Source—and it flows outward from there.

The Epigenetics of Love

Modern epigenetics—the science of how environmental experiences influence gene expression—has provided remarkable evidence that the quality of our relational environment literally shapes our biology. Research has shown that the signals received from our environment—including the emotional and relational quality of our primary relationships—have the capacity to upregulate or downregulate gene expression, affecting everything from immune function to cognitive capacity to emotional resilience. Love, in other words, is not merely a spiritual concept. It is a biological phenomenon with measurable physiological effects.

What this means is that selfless love—genuine care offered without conditions—has the capacity to transform not just souls but bodies. The research on compassion-based interventions shows consistent

evidence of physical healing, reduced inflammation, improved immune function, and greater psychological resilience in people both giving and receiving genuine care. The universe appears to be designed for love at every level, from the molecular to the transcendent.

Living from the Inside Out

The fully untethered person—the spiritually mature human being who has done the work of examining the programming, releasing the fear-based agreements, and stepping into a living relationship with the Divine—does not live by rules imposed from outside. They live from a place of deep internal alignment.

They know who they are. They know what they are for. They know that they are loved, completely, and that this love is the ground beneath every step they take. And from that ground, they extend love outward—not perfectly, not without failure, not without the need for ongoing growth and correction—but genuinely, freely, without the constant overhead of ego-protection and performance.

This is what Paul was describing when he wrote, in one of the most beautiful passages in all of sacred literature: “If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.” All the right doctrine, all the correct ritual, all the religious performance in the world—

without love, it is noise. With love, even the simplest life becomes a form of worship.

> *"If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal."*
>
> **— 1 Corinthians 13:1**

I have found this to be true. The most spiritually alive people I have encountered are not the ones with the most elaborate theological systems. They are the ones who carry that quality of presence—who see you when they look at you, who love you without needing anything from you, who have become so rooted in the unconditional love of Source that it overflows naturally into everything they touch.

This is the destination. Not a perfect theology, not a flawless religious practice, not certainty about every metaphysical question. A life of love—freely given, unconditionally offered, rooted in the unshakeable security of being loved first.

The Invitation

I want to close this chapter the way I began this entire book—not with a conclusion, but with an invitation.

The freedom I have been describing is not theoretical. It is available to you. Right now. Not after you have sorted out all your theology. Not after you have left the right institution or joined the right community or read

the right books. Right now, in the exact place you are standing, with the exact history you carry.

The untethering I am describing is a process, not an event. It unfolds over time, through conscious awareness and intentional choice, through sitting with discomfort and pressing through it, through the willingness to ask the hard questions and stay with them until honest answers emerge. It is not easy. But it is real. And it leads somewhere extraordinary.

It leads to a life lived from the inside out rather than the outside in. A life no longer governed by fear of divine punishment or human rejection, but animated from within by the only force powerful enough to actually transform a human being: love.

You were not born to perform religion. You were born to encounter the Divine—directly, personally, transformatively. And the Divine you will encounter, when you have cleared away the ego-constructs and fear-based programming that have obscured the view, is nothing like the distant, demanding, conditional God that many of us were handed in childhood.

The God on the other side of the programming is closer than your next breath. More loving than your most tender human relationship. More interested in your freedom than in your compliance. More invested in your flourishing than any institution has ever been.

This is what I found. This is what is waiting for you.

Go find it.

Chapter 9

Integration: From Understanding to Embodiment

A Living Pathway into Freedom

If you have come this far, something in you has already begun to shift.

This book was never meant to simply give you information. Information alone does not untether the nervous system. Information alone does not dissolve agreements that have been installed over decades. Information alone does not rewrite the epigenetic signals your body has learned to associate with fear, guilt, or separation.

Transformation happens through embodied experience.

It happens when new agreements are not merely considered—but lived.

It happens when the nervous system is given repeated evidence that it is safe to exist outside the structures of fear.

It happens when you encounter environments, relationships, and communities where love is not

conditional, where your belonging is not threatened by your growth, and where your conscious awareness is invited to expand rather than contract.

This is why community matters.

Not as an institution. Not as a hierarchy. But as a field.

Because every environment carries a field of agreements. And when you step into a field where freedom is normalized, your nervous system begins to reorganize itself accordingly.

This is not theoretical. This is biological. This is neurological. This is spiritual.

And this is exactly what my work, and the communities that have formed around it, are designed to facilitate.

The Work of Untethering: Rewriting Agreements at Every Level

Throughout this book, we explored how fear-based religious conditioning becomes embedded not just in belief systems, but in the body itself. We examined how the ego uses fear to maintain identity stability. We explored how institutional structures often reinforce conformity rather than freedom. And we saw how spiritual maturity involves moving beyond external authority and into direct conscious awareness.

But once these patterns are seen, a natural question emerges: How do you actually untether? How do you move from intellectual recognition into lived freedom?

The answer is not force. It is exposure. Exposure to new agreements. Exposure to new environments. Exposure to new experiences of safety, belonging, and direct connection with the Divine that do not require mediation, performance, or fear.

This is the purpose behind everything I offer. Not to give you something you do not already possess. But to create environments where what has always been within you can finally emerge without obstruction.

The Gathering: Direct Experience of Rest and Reconnection

Each week, people from around the world come together in what we simply call The Gathering.

This is not a sermon. It is not a performance. It is a space where the nervous system is invited to finally rest.

Through guided meditations and teachings, participants experience what it feels like to exist without striving, without earning, without needing to prove anything to anyone.

Many who attend have spent decades inside fear-based systems. They carry invisible tension they did

not even realize was present. And yet, within minutes of entering this field of rest, something begins to release. The mind quiets. The body softens. The subconscious begins to reorganize itself.

Because when the nervous system experiences safety, it naturally releases fear-based agreements. No force is required. Only permission.

You can learn more and join at: https://GilHodgesFreedom.com

Authenticity Groups: Systematically Rewriting the Internal Architecture

Awareness creates the opening. But sustained transformation requires reinforcement.

This is why I created the Authenticity Groups. These are not support groups in the traditional sense. They are structured environments where participants learn to identify the unconscious agreements that have shaped their identity, and then consciously choose new agreements aligned with freedom.

We explore how subconscious agreements shape perception, how belief systems influence physiology and emotional patterns, how to consciously choose new pathways, how to untether from inherited programming, and how to stabilize identity beyond fear.

Participants consistently report that what once triggered anxiety, shame, or fear simply loses its power. Not because they forced themselves to believe something different. But because the underlying agreements themselves dissolved. The nervous system learned a new baseline—a baseline of freedom.

The Pearl: A Living Environment Designed for Transformation

Beyond virtual gatherings and groups, I have created a physical environment specifically designed to facilitate deep untethering.

This land, known as The Pearl, exists as a place where individuals can temporarily step outside the reinforcement loops of their previous environments. Because environments matter. Every physical location reinforces certain agreements. Most environments reinforce productivity, comparison, urgency, and performance. The Pearl reinforces presence.

Here, participants experience deep nervous system reset, freedom from constant identity reinforcement, direct reconnection with their inner awareness, the dissolution of fear-based identity structures, and the emergence of clarity, peace, and personal power.

Many who spend time here describe it as the first time in their lives they felt fully safe to simply exist. Not

perform. Not earn. Just exist. And in that safety, transformation happens naturally.

Breaking the Matrix: Conscious Participation in Your Own Freedom

My book Breaking Your Matrix expands on the principles introduced here and provides a systematic framework for identifying and dissolving subconscious programming.

You can explore it here: https://a.co/d/5nj5081

This work teaches a simple but profound truth:

> *"Choice is the switch that activates your power."*
>
> **— Gil Hodges**

Not effort. Not struggle. Choice.

When conscious awareness recognizes its freedom to choose new agreements, the entire internal structure begins to reorganize. Your nervous system changes. Your emotional baseline changes. Your perception changes. Your life changes. Not because reality changed. But because the agreements through which you perceive reality changed.

What Happens When You Follow Through

People often ask what happens when someone fully commits to this pathway. The answer is both simple and profound.

Fear loses its authority. You no longer make decisions to avoid punishment. You make decisions from alignment. The constant background anxiety that once felt normal begins to disappear. You no longer seek external approval for your existence. You experience direct connection with the Divine, not as an abstract belief, but as a lived reality. Your nervous system stabilizes in peace. Your mind becomes clear. Your sense of identity becomes untethered from fear. You begin to live from your original design rather than inherited programming.

This is not something reserved for a special few. It is the natural state that emerges when the barriers to your true nature are removed. And those barriers can be removed. Not through effort. But through conscious awareness, supportive environments, and new agreements lived consistently.

Your Next Step

Reading this book was not an accident. You encountered these words because something within you is already ready.

The only question now is whether you will reinforce the agreements of fear and limitation—or step into environments designed to support your freedom.

You do not have to do it alone. You are invited. You are welcome. And you are ready.

Visit: https://GilHodgesFreedom.com

Join The Gathering. Explore the Authenticity Groups. Step into environments where freedom is not just taught—but lived.

Because the moment you experience your true nature directly, even briefly, the old agreements begin to lose their hold. And once untethered, you never return to the prison you once believed was reality.

> *"You rise without end. And you live without limits."*

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Would you like to be informed and stay informed about events and courses as well as receive Breaking Your Matrix wisdom each week?

Sign up for the weekly newsletter: https://gilhodgesfreedom.com/about-us/#subscription

My greatest love and honor I release to each of you!

May you be blessed to discover your unique life!

Love, Gil

Endnotes

1. Abraham Maslow, Motivation and Personality (New York: Harper & Row, 1954). Maslow's hierarchy of needs identifies esteem—including the need for recognition, status, and power—as a core human motivator. His work provides foundational psychological context for understanding how these drives manifest in religious institutional settings.

2. Jeff Greenberg, Sheldon Solomon, and Tom Pyszczynski, "Terror Management Theory of Self-Esteem and Cultural Worldviews: Empirical Assessments and Conceptual Refinements," Advances in Experimental Social Psychology 29 (1997): 61–139. This research demonstrates that human beings use cultural worldviews—including religious systems—as buffers against existential anxiety, and that threats to those worldviews trigger strong defensive responses.

3. Jonathan Haidt, The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012). Haidt's research on moral psychology and the role of religion in group identity formation is among the most important contemporary treatments of how sacred beliefs function socially and psychologically.

4. Pascal Boyer, Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought (New York: Basic Books, 2001). Boyer's cognitive science of religion demonstrates that religious beliefs are transmitted primarily through social networks rather than personal examination of evidence, with families and communities serving as the primary vectors of religious formation.

5. Jean Piaget, The Psychology of Intelligence (London: Routledge, 1950). Piaget's stages of cognitive development, particularly his descriptions of the concrete operational

stage (approximately ages 7–11) and the formal operational stage (adolescence onward), provide the developmental framework for understanding how children absorb religious formation in literal, binary terms before developing the capacity for abstract and nuanced reasoning.

6. Aryeh Kaplan, The Handbook of Jewish Thought, Vol. 1 (New York: Maznaim Publishing, 1979). Rabbi Kaplan's treatment of Bar and Bat Mitzvah in the Kabbalistic tradition describes the spiritual significance of the transition, including the Kabbalistic understanding of the nefesh ha-elokit (divine soul) becoming consciously accessible at the threshold of religious maturity.

7. Sahih al-Bukhari, Hadith 3194; Sahih Muslim, Hadith 2751. This hadith qudsi (sacred narration) is among the most widely cited in Islamic theology regarding the primacy of divine mercy. Classified as Muttafaqun Alayhi—authenticity agreed upon by both Bukhari and Muslim—it represents one of the highest grades of hadith authenticity. The Qurʾanic parallel is found in Surah Al-Aʿraf 7:156: "My mercy encompasses all things."

8. The Synod of Hippo (393 AD) and the Council of Carthage (397 AD) are among the most historically documented of the early church councils. Primary source material is found in Karl Joseph von Hefele, A History of the Councils of the Church, 5 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1871–1896). For a concise modern treatment, see Bruce Metzger, The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

9. Huston Smith, The World's Religions (New York: HarperOne, 1991; originally published as The Religions of Man, 1958). Smith's comparative study of the world's major spiritual traditions remains one of the most widely read and respected in the field. His argument for the

common perennial wisdom underlying different traditions informs the discussion of exclusivity in this chapter.

10. Leon Festinger and James M. Carlsmith, "Cognitive Consequences of Forced Compliance," Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology 58, no. 2 (1959): 203–210. Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance, developed further in A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), explains the psychological cost of belief change and the resistance humans experience when core identity-forming beliefs are challenged.

About the Author

Gil Hodges is a spiritual leader, healer, and teacher whose work centers on helping people untether from fear-based religious and life programming and step into an authentic, living relationship with the Divine. Gil is based on eleven acres in Collinsville, Mississippi—a piece of land he calls The Pearl. Gil leads an online community of seekers every Sunday through The Gathering, a space designed for honest spiritual inquiry and genuine encounter with the sacred.

Gil is the host of the Gil Hodges Freedom Podcast and the author of "Living for Ultimate Impact," "Choice: The Most Powerful Thing in the Universe… Next to God," and "Breaking Your Matrix."

His journey from religious confinement to spiritual freedom is not theoretical—it is the lived experience that underlies everything he teaches. Gil writes and speaks not from the certainty of someone who has arrived, but from the freedom of someone who has found the pathway and cannot help but point others toward it.

Connect with Gil

Gil Hodges Freedom Podcast — available on You tube:
https://www.youtube.com/@GilHodgesPodcast

The Gathering — Sundays at 11:30 AM CT:
https://gilhodgesfreedom.com/the-gathering/

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