

# Similarities and Differences in Religious Thought

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This past September, when I was visiting with my siblings, after not being together for 8 years, we had a lot of catching up to do. My brother, the Catholic priest, was reading an article from a large box of memorabilia my sister had saved over the years. I had been a part of a large gathering in Chicago, of religious leaders from all over the world in 1993, called the Parliament of World's Religions. I had been interviewed in the Kenosha, Wisconsin newspaper as I had been a part of a workshop on religious diversity. My brother laughed out loud as he read my words of describing a woman I had met and been fascinated by, who had described herself as a Jewish Hindu Witch.

The rest of the family had a good laugh too. I sat there rather stunned. Why was that funny I demanded. They all looked at me like I had two heads. "Because it is impossible and ludicrous," they answered. Indeed, I thought. And any more ludicrous than any of the beliefs that any of the religions of our world espouses to, I had to ask. And in the awkward moments of silence that followed, I knew we were on shaky ground and needing to move on to something else. Because, there were some roads as a family, we were just not going to be able to travel, I realized suddenly. And this is where my time spent with this UU church has helped me so immensely. Why couldn't this person be a Jewish Hindu Witch if she so desired? Who am I or anyone for that matter to claim religious superiority and judge her inadequate simply because her beliefs do not fit my own? And yet we do this a thousand times a day, a week, a year with every news cast or newspaper article that just may prick our sensibilities and let's face it, no sensibilities get pricked more than the ones that open us up religiously.

The study of the world's religions has become increasingly important in our modern world. With technology growing faster than most of us care to keep up with, the frequency many of us have had to travel all over the world, and the world's varied backgrounds becoming more known. Religions and thoughts are converging in places they never would or could have even 10 years ago. There are a plethora of events happening in our world that have to do solely with religion and faith. And almost each day I am reminded that my background in this UU church has given me a way of understanding these events in more depth, than let's say those who have buried themselves in one faith system and have refused to look at any other way to believe. And I want each of you to also have a working knowledge of these 10 of the largest religious systems in our world.

As I go through a quick overview of some of these religions, I beg you to keep our Jewish Hindu Witch in mind. Whether you admire her, or feel sorry for her, blame her or feel some anger towards her – how you feel about her declaration of faith is important.

We love definitions in our society. But the problem with definitions and defining ourselves too narrowly is that we may close our minds to the fact that we may evolve into new definitions. And there is always the problem of seeing the interpretations we claim as our own as the positive, correct way to be, and every other choice is then seen as negative or inferior. That's why I like our Unitarian Universalist names because they are broad and inclusive and cause

people to stare at us with open mouths, which of course gives us a chance to elaborate at what this name means. But the name can also be troublesome because as humans we want desperately to belong to something that will distinguish us from someone or something else, and here we are being so all inclusive. But the UU name also keeps us honest to the myriad of possibilities out there in the religious realm.

Why must people constantly harp on the fact that they are spiritual and not religious? I am bored to tears with this new elitism that seems to be sweeping our churches. It is ok, better than ok to be religious. It, the word religious has a marvelous meaning, from the Latin root religio, or to bind back that which has been broken. Wow. Has anything, your heart, a relationships, your life ever been broken and you went about the task of mending it? Well, you were religious. I decided a long time ago I was not going to let anyone take away the power of these words in my life. I am religious as often as I can find the strength to do so. I am binding and mending and sewing and repairing my life every day, I am religious and if you are doing this mending also, so are you.

When people ask me who I am religiously, I first want to say I am human, but later I let my UUism do the talking. But there are times, in the quiet times in my head I do yearn for some hook upon which I could hang my religious hat. But as I pondered, the hook was not the image I had imagined would work for me, rather it was the wheel. In the center of the wheel is the hub, and I imagine there is only the brilliant blue of an empty sky. In the Hindu tradition, the wheel is a symbol of human spiritual experience.

Each of the spokes is uniquely shaped and decorated and each symbolizes one of the world's religious paths. The rim of the wheel represents the most superficial level of involvement in and understanding of one's own tradition. But it is also where there is the most possibility or openness to diversity. The hub is the center from which each spoke emerges and in a crazy way the point at which they all come together. It represents the common source and deepest level of each tradition. It is the point of unity and the source of promise. Each individual person gets to say what that center unifying principle might be. And don't let others tell you you can't, because the task is too large for one person, or impossible, or not supposed to be touched by the ordinary person. You are the prophet, you are the priest, you are the one, you are the divine. Look into the wheel and declare what you see, what you know that could pull all the beliefs of our world together.

As the seeker grows in understanding, he or she moves along one of the spokes, from the gigantic rim to the unimaginably small hub at the center. At the rim, the distance which separates the spokes is tremendous and yet, as the spokes converge on the center of the hub, their separation vanishes. As I stand on the outer end, say of the Taoist spoke and graze across at my Buddhist counterparts, I cannot begin to understand her beliefs and practices. From that vantage point, her faith seems strange, if not bizarre. And yet, as I begin to move along my own spoke, slowly at first and then with more confidence, the distance which had separated us begins to diminish.

Suddenly, it is clear that our paths are convergent, as they share a common center. Just as the wagon wheel needs the circle, the rim and the hub to move, so the symbolic wheel, the human

spiritual machine, and yes religious heritage requires diversity, the beliefs, the pageantry and the variety of the outer circle as well as the ways that we are united for this old world to turn as each of us thinks it needs to. But remember, it is convergence, the inclining to a center that makes a wheel a wheel. As Mark Twain reminded us, “Life does not consist mainly or even largely of facts and happenings. It consists mainly of the storm of thoughts that are forever blowing through one’s mind.”

As much as we would love to believe all religions say the same thing, they do not say the same things about the same issues like; the meaning of life, what happens to us after we die, and what or who is divine. We may wish that all religions said the same thing, but the truth of the matter is that even though the hub of the wheel brings all religious thought to one major point, like do unto others as you would wish them to do to you, or love is the answer, religions are very diverse and often rigorous in their ways of being religious. And they are not the same.

### **Humanism**

Organized as a religious movement and accepted into the UU tradition in 1933, Humanism is a philosophy for people who want to think for themselves. There are no areas of thought that a Humanist is afraid to challenge and explore. It is a philosophy focused upon human ways of comprehending truth. They make no claims to possess or have access to supposed divine knowledge. It is a thought of reason and science in the pursuit of knowledge of the world. It is interested in the here and now. Humanist ethics is solely interested with meeting human needs and answering human problems for both the individual and society and devotes no attention to the satisfaction of the desires of supposed supernatural entities. Humanists love life. They take responsibility for their own lives and relish the adventure of being part of new discoveries, seeking new knowledge, exploring new options.

### **Christianity**

In the last census, there were over 500 separate and distinct forms of Christianity in the US alone. From Roman Catholics, to Baptists to Fundamentalist Pentecostals encompassing more than 2.1 billion people on our planet. The belief that Jesus was crucified, died and risen is central and indispensable to all forms of Christianity, as the sacrament of communion is the sharing of his body and blood. The Catholic church has 7 sacraments, Protestants only 2, baptism and holy communion. Some say the Bible is the inherent word of God, written by God and cannot be changed for all eternity, and others say it is a historical book of a certain time and place and should be read as such. To all Christians, no matter their differences, the world is the place God has assigned to his free creation and time is opportunity to fulfill God’s law and will for the world, within the context of Christ’s life, death and resurrection, as told in the scriptures.

### **Taoism**

The word Tao translates from the Chinese as “the way”. A Taoist axiom reads, “The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao. Free from desire, you realize the mystery. Caught in desire, you see only the manifestations.” The term Taoist denotes as much of an attitude about life as a person. Lao Tzu, the legendary founder of the Tao, his name meaning Old gentleman, about 500 BCE it is told, wrote his book, the Tao te Ching, dropped it at the foot of the gatekeeper of a town in China, hopped upon a bull and rode off into the sunset, never to be heard from again. There are no Taoist churches, no Taoist monks or priests or centers of Taoist practice. Rather it is a frame

of mind. The Tao is said to be older than God. Central to Taoism is the wu-wei principle, or the idea of taking as little action as possible in any situation. There is already a flow, an energy to all situations and as all situations hold within them their opposites, wait for the spontaneous transformation of things. To a Taoist, all unnatural forced effort must finally and always fail. In other words to be happy, all gotta do is, act naturally.

### **Buddhism**

At the same time as Taoism was coming into the world, so was Buddhism but only from India instead of China. Siddhartha Gautama or the Buddha, tried asceticism and found it too limiting, as was the luxury of his princely castle, lastly he found enlightenment was realized in the middle way or the concept of a rational life. It is a religion of infinite compassion. Buddhism grew out of Hinduism and from that vantage point it must be remembered. Its Four noble truths are; Everyone and everything in existence suffers. Suffering is caused by selfishness, greed and desires. Selfishness, greed and desire can be stopped. They can be stopped by following eight steps; right belief, right purpose, right speech, right conduct, right vocation, right effort, right thought and right meditation. Avoid all extremes of human behavior and the Buddha assures us we will find enlightenment of our own.

### **Hinduism**

In Hindu circles it is said, where there is much, there is always room for more. Thus Hinduism has been best known for its ability to assimilate itself into new forms of thought and practice. From Hinduism have come the Sikhs and the Jains. Their sacred scriptures include the Vedas, and the Bhagavad Gita. Hindus work, worship, pray and seek well-being in this world and the next for their families and friends by trying to reduce the amount of bad karma in their lives. As Hindu could be revolving on the wheel of life for millions of lifetimes, they know that once a being reaches the human form they are closer to enlightenment than coming back in any other form. There are 330,000,000 gods and goddess in the Hindu tradition with Brahma the supreme life force of all.

### **Muslim**

The word "Islam" means *submission*, and the word "Muslim" means *one who submits*. Islam is the youngest of the world's religions, having been founded around 600 CE. One of the fastest-growing and largest major world religion, Islam embraces 1.5 billion people. It is the dominant religion of many Third World nations like the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. There is only one God called *Allah*. Mohammed is Allah's prophet, is all one needs to say in order to become a Muslim. They believe all other faiths also worship Allah only call him by different names.

There are five pillars or beliefs in Islam...

The Creed. The creed is very simple. "There is no God except Allah. Muhammad is his prophet." Prayer. Prayer is central to Muslim religious practice. Muslims pray five times a day; dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset and nightfall. Muslims pray in mosques or wherever they are. The prayers are based on the Quran and said in Arabic, although personal petitions are said in the vernacular.

**Fasting.** During the full month Ramadan, Muslims fast from dawn until sundown as a means of purification and as a way of identifying themselves with the hungry of the world. The Muslim calendar is based on a lunar year. Often Ramadan begins toward the end of November.

**Purifying Tax or (Zakat).** Muslims believe that all things belong to Allah and that possessions are a trust given to people. The “Purifying Tax” is a way of exercising detachment from things as well as a way of providing for the poor. It is similar to the concept of stewardship or tithing in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

**Pilgrimage.** The journey to Mecca is required once in a lifetime, if it is possible. Mecca is in Saudi Arabia.

### **Judaism**

Starting with Abraham 2,000 years before the common era, the Jews have created a religion in the revelation of a personal God named Yahweh, who called from his people righteousness, justice and absolute loyalty to their God. Ever waiting for God to come among them on earth, their ethnic and cultural heritage is involved in sacred rites to enact the ways in history God has loved them and has taken care of them. As in the celebration of the Passover, in encouragement to visit the sacred city of Jerusalem and lastly in being faithful to the words of the Hebrew Bible. Jews have given the world a marvelous set of gifts, the greatest is this permission to enter the very essence of God. Many God’s of the ancient world were aloof, distant, cold and unfriendly. This idea of a God who cared for the people was an unique expression of a deity. Another gift was humor when dealing with God, both God’s humor and the ability of humans being able to actually laugh at God. For example when Sara, Abraham’s wife who is 80 some years old is told by an angel that she will conceive and have a child, she laughs out loud and looks up at the heavens and laughs at God again. She is not struck dead, or hurt in anyway. These stories seem to be set up to let us know, this deity has a sense of humor, and is also able to be laughed at, as well as obeyed. Sara does conceive in her old age and does bear a son, Isaac. So, who had the last laugh?

### **Atheism**

Atheists want us to remember that their beliefs are a religion too. They remind us that one does not have to believe in a Supreme Being to find comfort, support, courage and insight in a worship service or in life. One does not have to affirm a belief in a deity to feel awe, inspiration or mystery in life. One does not have to maintain belief in an almighty in order to be humble and believe in the existence of things unseen and higher than oneself. One does not have to worship a God to be motivated by the good, the true and beautiful in life all around us.

### **Naturalistic Mystic or Neo-Pagan**

This group seeks to bring together and reconstruct the nature oriented indigenous European religions. They use folk lore, anthropology, 3<sup>rd</sup> world nature worship practices and their own individual creativity to conjure magic and cast their circles. To them the divine and nature are not separate, rather they and the world are in an interconnected web of creation. Their great claim is that paganism is one of the oldest systems of religious beliefs known to humanity. Three fundamental principles are; the belief that everything is filled with life and consciousness, the

belief that the divinity will manifest in a multiplicity of ways, and the belief that each of us is a part of the rituals of the sun and the moon and the earth, that doesn't just reside under us, but is in us and is us.

Do not be fooled into believing that just because these are all religions, that everyone believes the same thing or even looks at life, salvation, death or in the same way. And to say so, only diminishes the real power and truth each of these religions have had on individuals who follow them and the world. Religion is about being moved out from a sense of thinking only of me, to thinking in broader terms. Religion reminds us of love and compassion and trying to be the best people we can be. It pushes us and moves us to be kind, be brave, be aware that there are truths, realities and beauties everywhere we look. And, in a way, learning to experience the other side in a faith dialogue, with other faith systems, offers a vital preparation of the real task which confronts every human; the task of recognizing that the diversity which animates one's own life story, is the same diversity that makes the world such a wonderful place to live. Definitions need not be sealed in stone. We are all riding the sacred wheel of life, evolving as we go. And as our Jewish Hindu Witch can teach us, diversity in life as well as faith, can be the spice of life. Hang on to your own faith, because with it, it is quite a ride. **God**