

HIS HOLINESS

THE
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LAMA

TOWARD A TRUE
KINSHIP OF FAITHS

HOW THE WORLD'S RELIGIONS
CAN COME TOGETHER

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THE PROBLEM
OF
EXCLUSIVISM

The Challenge of "Other" Religions

For many religious people, accepting the legitimacy of other faith traditions poses a serious challenge. To accept that other religions are legitimate may seem to compromise the integrity of one's own faith, since it entails the admission of different but efficacious spiritual paths. A devout Buddhist might feel that acceptance of other spiritual paths as valid suggests the existence of ways other than of the Buddha toward the attainment of enlightenment. A Muslim might feel that acceptance of other traditions as legitimate would require relinquishing the belief that God's revelation to the Prophet, as recorded in the Qur'an, represents the final revelation of the highest truth. In the same vein, a Christian might feel that accepting the legitimacy of other religions would entail compromising the key belief that it is only through Jesus Christ that the way to God is

found. So the encounter with an entirely different faith, which one can neither avoid nor explain away, poses a serious challenge to deep assumptions.

This raises these critical questions:

- Can a single-pointed commitment to one's own faith coexist with acceptance of other religions as legitimate?
- Is religious pluralism impossible from the perspective of a devout person who is strongly and deeply committed to his or her own faith tradition?

Yet without the emergence of a genuine spirit of religious pluralism, there is no hope for the development of harmony based on true inter-religious understanding.

Historically, religions have gone to great lengths, even waging wars, to impose their version of what they deem to be the one true way. Even within their own fold, religions have harshly penalized those heterodox or heretical voices that the tradition took as undermining the integrity of the inviolable truths that the specific faith represents. The entire ethos of missionary activity—that is, the focus on bringing about active conversion of people from other faiths or no faiths—is grounded in the ideal of bringing the “one true way” to those whose eyes remain unopened. In a sense, one might even say that there is an altruistic motive underlying this drive to convert others to one's own faith.

Given this history and, more important, given the perception of conflict that many religious people feel between maintaining the integrity of their own faith and the acceptance of pluralism, is the emergence of genuine inter-religious harmony based on mutual understanding possible at all? Scholars of religion speak of three different ways in which a follower of a particular faith tradition may

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relate to the existence of other faith traditions. One is a straightforward *exclusivism*, a position that one's own religion is the only true religion and that rejects, as it were by default, the legitimacy of other faith traditions. This is the standpoint adopted most often by the adherents of the religious traditions. Another position is *inclusivism*, whereby one accords a kind of partial validity to other faith traditions but maintains that their teachings are somehow contained within one's own faith tradition—a position historically characterized by some Christian responses to Judaism and Islam's relation to both Judaism and Christianity. Though more tolerant than the first position, this second standpoint ultimately suggests the redundancy of other faith traditions. Finally, there is *pluralism*, which accords validity to all faith traditions.

True Acceptance of the "Other's" Reality

It is understandable, given the seemingly irreconcilable conflict between commitment to one's own faith and a true embracing of religious pluralism, that many people feel that genuine inter-religious understanding and harmony requires the acceptance of some kind of ultimate unity of all religions. Citing the metaphor of multiple rivers all converging into the great ocean, some suggest that the world's faith traditions, with their distinct doctrinal beliefs, and practices all ultimately lead to the same place. For instance, that place may be union with the Godhead, regardless of however differently this Godhead may be referred to—Jehovah, God, Ishvara, Allah, and so on.

My own view is different. The possibility of genuine inter-religious understanding and harmony should not be, and need not

be, contingent upon proving the ultimate oneness of all religions. The problem with such an approach is that it demands a precondition that remains impossible for the majority of adherents of the world's great religions. In fact recognition of diversity among the world's faiths is not only essential but also the first step toward creating deeper understanding of each other. True understanding of the "other" must proceed from a genuine recognition of and respect for the other's reality. It must proceed from a state of mind where the urge to reduce the other into one's own framework is no longer the dominant mode of thinking.

To begin, whether we like it or not, the existence of other religions is an undeniable fact. It is also undeniable that the teachings of the great religions provide great benefits to their adherents. Even the Buddha failed to turn the entire population of central India into Buddhists, let alone the entire world. Hinduism, too, failed to convince a significant proportion of the population of the Indian subcontinent of the primacy of the Vedic way to *moksha* (salvation). Similarly for Christians, Jesus did not convert the entire population of the holy land into his followers—nor did he try to. From the point of view of Islam, even after the Prophet's appearance in the world, the presence of Jews and Christians remained an inalienable part of the landscape of the Middle East.

It is impossible for the 6 billion human inhabitants of our planet to all follow the same religion. First, the diversity of mental dispositions, spiritual inclinations, and different kinds of conditioning has always been a basic feature of human society, and one set of spiritual teachings would simply not serve everyone. Second, given the long history of the religions—in some cases, stretching over thousands of years—they have evolved in a complex human geography adapted to specific cultural sensibilities and environments, giving rise to differ-

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ent habits of mind. Such things cannot be changed overnight, nor is it desirable that they be. So creating a single religion for the world, whether a new one or one of the old ones, is simply unfeasible.

Especially in today's globalized world, where not only nation to nation but even continent to continent our fates are deeply intertwined, the acceptance of the reality of other faiths is critical for the sake of peace and human happiness. Furthermore, because of modern communication, tourism, and the global economy, the world's religions are in daily contact with one another. The era when a particular faith could exist in the comfort of isolation is gone forever. Given this new reality of our world, the only alternative left to religious pluralism is an increasing sense of division and conflict. So, in brief, the standpoint of religious exclusivism represents a perspective that is not in accord with reality.

From the point of view of a religious person who seeks to live his or her life according to the dictates of a sound ethical way of life, it becomes especially incumbent upon us to accord deep reverence to all faith traditions. In the past these traditions have provided inspiration, meaning, and ethical guidance to millions of people. Today, too, despite tremendous advances in the field of material development and human knowledge, these faith traditions continue to provide solace to millions of our fellow human beings. And in the foreseeable future, these traditions will continue to be a source of deep spiritual inspiration to millions.

Regardless of how one may feel about the specific doctrines of other faith traditions, this fact alone—their service to millions of fellow human beings—makes them worthy of our deep respect. Their profound benefit to others is really the ultimate reason each of us, believers and nonbelievers alike, must accord deep respect to the world's great faith traditions. For a believer, a key element here is to

be truly sincere about the values of compassion that are at the heart of one's own faith tradition. For the ultimate reason to accord respect to other religions is to see that they, too, engender the beautiful qualities of the human heart and foster compassion and loving kindness—exactly the qualities one is striving to attain through one's own faith.

Interestingly, when it comes to actual spiritual practices, which I consider to be the essence of these religious teachings, as opposed to metaphysical or theological formulations, there is profound convergence across all traditions. All carry the message of love, compassion, and universal brotherhood and sisterhood. Based on these virtues, all teach forgiveness, forbearance, contentment, simplicity of life, and self-discipline.

Three Key Aspects of a Faith Tradition

In addressing the question of the plurality of religion, personally I find it helpful to draw a distinction between what can be seen as three key aspects of a religion: (1) ethical teachings, (2) doctrines or metaphysics; and (3) cultural specifics, such as attitudes to images. The first aspect pertains to the practitioner's daily life, whereby he or she needs to live according to the dictates of an ethics based on compassionate consideration of others' welfare. Essentially, this provides a guideline to the devout on how to live according to the spiritual ideals one espouses within the context of a society. In contrast, the second aspect of religion pertains primarily to its understanding of the ultimate truth, which is inevitably related to what happens to the believer in the afterlife. It is this second aspect that provides the

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rationale for the teaching on ethics and religious practice that makes up the first aspect. The third aspect, which is often bound up with cultural and historical circumstances, determines how believers may behave at a given place and time.

Once this distinction is drawn, the question of how to deal with the challenge posed for the devout by the plurality of religion assumes a different form. For example, on the level of ethical teachings, as I have shown in greater detail in the chapter on compassion, there is undeniably a great convergence of the world's great religions. The central message of all these religions is love, compassion, and universal brotherhood and sisterhood. Their presentations may be different—for example, a theistic tradition may admonish its followers to "love thy neighbor" as the wish of God, while a nontheistic tradition may say that, given the law of cause and effect, if one does not wish ill for oneself one should then refrain from doing ill to others. But on this level, the purpose of all religions remains the same: to contribute to the betterment of humanity, to create a more compassionate and responsible human being. Not only are the ethical teachings of the religions essentially the same, the fruits of love and compassion are the same as well. For example, just as Mother Theresa of Calcutta was a product of Christianity's great teachings on compassion, so too a great soul like Mahatma Gandhi (who demonstrated the power of nonviolence as an effective political means) was primarily a product of India's great religion, Hinduism.

Now, on the metaphysical and cultural levels—our second and third aspects of a religion—clearly there are differences among the religions, some of which are in fact quite fundamental. In the cultural domain, time and historical context may even cause significant differences within a given religion, as in the relatively recent espousal of women priests in the Anglican Church or in the differences between Buddhism in its traditional homelands—for instance,

Thailand, Sri Lanka, Japan, and Tibet. But the fundamental arena of difference lies in the second—doctrinal or metaphysical—aspect. For where a religion's doctrines play an active role, the distinctness of the faith traditions becomes most pronounced.

To begin with, even on the basic question of what happens in the afterlife, as well as the origins of the universe, there is much divergence. There is also a difference in the way in which the notion of well-being in this afterlife is defined. Lastly, there are differences in the method—the “path” in the Buddhist language—on how to realize this future well-being. Given these differences, it is no surprise that there are fundamental differences in the conception of what constitutes ultimate truth. Any attempt to find convergence on this doctrinal and metaphysical level is like the well-known Tibetan proverb, “trying to attach a yak's head on a sheep's body.” The question, then, becomes what is the purpose of these different doctrinal and philosophical views? Here, I find a historical model from my own Buddhist tradition to be most helpful.

A Buddhist Hermeneutical Principle

Divergence of doctrinal and philosophical standpoints has always been an important part of Buddhism's own self-understanding. Soon after the Buddha's passing away, his followers evolved into distinct schools, each espousing somewhat different doctrinal and philosophical standpoints. Each of these teachings are based on the words of the Buddha, which means that one and the same teacher taught divergent—in some cases, in fact, contradictory—views of reality to his followers. For example, although the standard Buddhist

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doctrinal standpoint rejects the notion of an independent self, there is also a *sutra* where the Buddha states that the physical and mental constituents of a person are the burden while the person is the bearer of that burden, thus suggesting the presence of an agent independent of the physical and mental elements that make up a person's existence.

Similarly, there is a statement by the Buddha that karmic actions and their fruits exist, while in general the self that is thought to be the agent of the action and the experiencer of the fruits of the karmic action does not exist. There are also statements in which the Buddha rejects the reality of the external material world but affirms the existence of the world of consciousness. Finally, there are scriptures that reject any notion of the substantial existence of things, both material and mental. Here, then, the Buddha teaches all things to be empty of any substantial reality and that they exist only within the context of interrelated events of cause and effect. In technical Buddhist language, all conditioned things are impermanent and all things and events are dependently originated, thus lacking any objectively identifiable essence that defines their real existence.

Since all of these divergent, even contradictory, teachings were taught by the same teacher, does this mean that the Buddha himself was confused when it came to defining the ultimate nature of reality? Or, does this mean that the Buddha deliberately wished to create confusion in the minds of his followers? Clearly, for a devout Buddhist, both of these alternatives remain unacceptable. Furthermore, the fully awakened Buddha is, for the Buddhists, the embodiment of compassion for all things living—"a great friend even to those who are unacquainted," as a classical text puts it. So, how then are the followers of the Buddha to understand his divergent teachings? This is where the role of hermeneutics comes in.

The principle invoked by Buddhists in attempting to interpret the Buddha's conflicting teachings has to do with the understanding that what the Buddha taught is contingent on the needs of a given context and its potential for efficacy. In a sense, the Buddha, as teacher, did not have free reign on what to teach. His teaching, the Dharma, was a cure for the ailments of the spirit, aimed to awaken it to its highest perfection; therefore, it demanded adjustment to the specific context in which it was being taught. In a sense, the Dharma is a medicine whose effectiveness can be judged only in relation to the treatment of an illness. Since there are so many diverse mental dispositions, or spiritual and philosophical inclinations, among human beings, there should be equally corresponding numbers of teachings. The idea that there should be only one teaching—a kind of panacea that is valid for all beings—from this point of view is untenable.

For some, the idea that this very life has been created by God is deeply inspiring and also most powerful in providing a spiritual anchor; while for others, the notion of an all-powerful creator is troubling and even untenable. For some, the idea that what we are today is the result of our own past karma and what we will become is determined by how we live today is appealing and beneficial, while others find the idea of future lives and previous births incomprehensible. In fact, if the Buddha were to teach the doctrine of no-self to someone whose mental disposition is such that he or she is likely to understand this in nihilistic terms—as denying the very existence of a person, who is responsible for his or her intentional actions—not only would this be most unskillful on the Buddha's part but, more important, the teaching would be harmful for that person. In

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fact, to give the teaching of emptiness to someone whose mind is not ready for it is a direct infraction of one of the bodhisattva precepts.

In the case of prescribing medicine, a skilled physician will take into account the specific physical constitution of the patient, his age, fitness, proneness to negative reactions to certain substances, and so on. Depending on this, the physician will prescribe the medicine. Even with respect to one and the same patient, a skilled physician needs to be sensitive to how the patient responds to the dose, as well as different compositions of the medicine, so he can adjust both the dose and the composition as the patient progresses along the path of healing. In the same manner, a skilled spiritual teacher adapts his or her teachings, always maintaining deep sensitivity to the specific needs of a given situation. Therefore, a Buddhist cannot say, when relating to the Buddha's teaching, "this is the best teaching," as if one can make such evaluations independent of the specific contexts.

I often speak of a "supermarket of religions." Just as a supermarket rightly takes pride in its rich and diverse resources of food commodities for sale, in the same manner the world of religions can take pride in its rich diversity of teachings. Now, as for the question of why some people find certain religious teachings more appealing and effective than others, while different individuals have a negative reaction to the same teaching, from the Buddhist and classical Indian religious and philosophical points of view, it has largely to do with the person's own conditioning, including his or her karma. From a theistic perspective, it is a matter of God's mysterious workings. This is, in fact, the key reason I personally advise people to stay within their own traditional faith.

Personally, I find this hermeneutic principle most helpful when relating to the question of other religions, for it explains the value and richness of the great diversity of religions. Each religion, because of a

long historical development that involved the experiences of so many generations, has its own beauty, logic, and uniqueness. Most important, this diversity enables the world's religions to serve such a vast number of human beings. In contrast, if there were only one historical religion, not only would the world be impoverished, especially in relation to its spiritual resources and imagination, but also that religion would fail to serve the needs of many people.

Seen from this angle, the diversity of religion becomes not an awkward problem; rather, it becomes an adornment of the human spirit and its long history. It is something to be celebrated rather than bemoaned. Understood thus, the urge to convert others to one's own faith loses its force. In its place arises a genuine acceptance of the reality of other faith traditions. Then, instead of seeing others as an aberration, or at worst as a threat, one can relate to others out of a sense of deep appreciation for their profound contributions to the world.

The Problem of Fundamentalism

Now, one possible response that a faith tradition can make in the face of the plurality of faiths, which is an inescapable fact of the contemporary world, is to embrace fundamentalism. This is, in fact, what many followers of religion have chosen to do. At its heart, fundamentalism is a reaction to a perceived threat to the integrity of one's own religious tradition. Just as we see fundamentalism in the Abrahamic religions, we also see fundamentalism in Asian religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism.

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Broadly speaking, the fundamentalists, irrespective of their specific religious affiliation, tend to believe that the contemporary world is rife with immorality and ungodly values, and that the role of the devout is to try to bring human society back to a golden age when the world functioned according to the dictates of a moral God. In their quest for this goal, fundamentalists on the whole believe strongly that their scripture contains the totality of all the truths that are worth knowing, and that it is their responsibility to defend the truths of this scripture against the onslaught of pluralistic or secular ideas that inevitably relativize truth. An important part of the standpoint of fundamentalism is, therefore, to defend the literal truth of scripture and maintain its definitive status. For the fundamentalists, then, the commands of God as they understand them to be revealed in scripture are absolute, atemporal, and nonnegotiable.

Although fundamentalism need not necessarily lead to religious extremism, the line dividing the two remains a fine one. There is, however, one concern that underlies the fundamentalist standpoint, which pluralists need to take seriously. This is the concern that religious pluralism involves relativizing doctrinal truths. Here, if we invoke the distinction I made earlier of the three key aspects of a religion—ethics, doctrine, and culture—we can respond to this concern effectively. While allowing openness to interpretation in matters of practice and culture, which in any case pertain to guidelines for living within a society, even a religious pluralist can accept that the doctrines of his own scripture that primarily pertain to ultimate truth are definitive. In other words, one can be a religious pluralist yet maintain, for oneself, the doctrinal aspects of one's own tradition as representing the definitive truth.

*Reconciling "One Truth, One Religion" with
"Many Truths, Many Religions"*

So, with these considerations as background, how does a follower of a particular religious tradition deal with the question of the legitimacy of other religions? On the doctrinal level, this is a question of how to reconcile two seemingly conflicting perspectives that pertain to the world's religious traditions. I often characterize these two perspectives as "one truth, one religion" versus "many truths, many religions." How does a devout person reconcile the perspective of "one truth, one religion" that one's own teachings appear to proclaim with the perspective of "many truths, many religions" that the reality of the human world undeniably demands?

As many religious believers feel, I would agree that some version of exclusivism—the principle of "one truth, one religion"—lies at the heart of most of the world's great religions. Furthermore, a single-pointed commitment to one's own faith tradition demands the recognition that one's chosen faith represents the highest religious teaching. For example, for me Buddhism is the best, but this does not mean that Buddhism is the best for all. Certainly not. For millions of my fellow human beings, theistic forms of teaching represent the best path. Therefore, in the context of an individual religious practitioner, the concept of "one truth, one religion" remains most relevant. It is this that gives the power and single-pointed focus of one's religious path. At the same time, it is critical that the religious practitioner harbors no ego-centric attachment to his faith.

Once at a conference in Argentina, the well-known Chilean scientist Humberto Maturana, who incidentally was a teacher of a close scientist friend of mine, the late Francisco Varela, said that, as a scientist, he should not be attached to his field, for this would obstruct his ability to study it with objectivity. This, I think, is an important

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In the context of "many religions" in fact, where there is a perspective of "many truths, many religions" if we relate these differing contexts to the conflict between the

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insight that we in the religious world should also embrace. It means that I, as a Buddhist, must not feel ego-centric attachment to my own faith of Buddhism, for doing so obstructs me from seeing the value of other traditions.

In the context of society, however, the concept of "many truths, many religions" not only becomes relevant but also necessary. In fact, where there is more than one person, already the pluralistic perspective of "many truths, many religions" becomes critical. Thus, if we relate these two seemingly contradictory perspectives to their differing contexts of society and the individual we can see no real conflict between the two.

This still leaves unanswered the question of how we should relate to the divergent and contradictory doctrinal teachings of the religions. From the Buddhist point of view, the belief in a Transcendent God, with its emphasis on the idea of a first cause that in itself is uncaused, amounts to falling into the extreme of absolutism, a view that is understood to obstruct the attainment of enlightenment. In contrast, from the monotheistic religions' point of view, Buddhism's nonacceptance of God and divine creation amounts to falling into the extreme of nihilism, a view that is dangerously close to an amoral and materialistic view of the world.

But, on the other hand, from the theistic religions' point of view, if one believes that the entire cosmos, including the sentient beings within it, is a creation of one all-powerful and compassionate God, the inescapable consequence is that the existence of faith traditions other than one's own are also God's creation. To deny this would imply one of two results: either one rejects God's omnipotence—that is to say, that although these other faiths are false ways, God remains incapable of stopping their emergence—or, if one maintains that although God is perfectly capable of preventing the emergence of these "false" ways, He chooses not to do so, then one rejects God's

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all-embracing compassion. The latter would imply that, for whatever reasons, God chose to exclude some—in fact, millions of His own children—and left them to follow false ways that would lead to their damnation. So the logic of monotheism, especially the standard version that attributes omnipotence, omniscience, and all-embracing compassion to God, inevitably entails recognition that the world's many religious traditions are in one way or another related to God's divine intentions for the ultimate well-being of His children. This means that, as a devout follower of God, one must accord respect, and if possible, reverence to all religions.

From the Buddhist point of view, given the tremendous diversity among sentient beings, each individual and group with a long history of inclinations and propensities, people find different ways of approach more suited to their own spiritual inclinations and thus more effective for their spiritual development. This alone is adequate ground to develop a sense of appreciation of all faith traditions. From the liberal democratic point of view too, so long as one subscribes to the ideal that each citizen of a nation must be respected in his or her own right, one is also bound by this principle to respect the faith traditions that these individuals perceive to be the basis of their understanding of who they are as persons.

Given the need for upholding the perspective of "many truths, many religions" in the context of wider society, while the dictates of one's own faith demand embracing the "one truth, one religion" perspective, I believe that a creative approach is called for here—if one wishes to uphold both of these perspectives with integrity.

One might, for instance, make a distinction between *faith* and *respect* as two distinct psychological attitudes in relation to the world's religions. Faith is associated with such psychological states as cogni-

tively oriented "beliefs" and "confidence." It is based on trust and reverence, derives its value and importance

In the context of religious pluralism, doctrinal truths—as well as the devout religious person's own religious experience—for other religious traditions is made in the form of admiration, respect, and veneration. Of these, a distinction is made between an equivalent to respect and an equivalent to reverence, fully extended to other religious traditions.

There are two basic approaches to religious traditions. The first is to respect these traditions as well as a laudable expression of faith to continue to do so. The second is a stronger, argumentative approach to religions (which can be based on one's own faith and admiration for faith, so the doctrinal differences in ways of life in the world can be reconciled, but the two approaches are parallel and praise-worthy, fostering of deep and meaningful faith, and it is certainly doable, and it

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tively oriented "belief," as well as more affectively oriented "trust" and "confidence." In contrast, respect is associated with appreciation and reverence, deriving particularly from the recognition of the values and importance of the object for which one has respect.

In the context of religion, then, faith pertains to truth—especially doctrinal truths—as proposed by one's own religion. Therefore, for a devout religious person, it becomes important to reserve faith for his or her own religion, while cultivating respect—in fact, deep reverence—for other religions. In the Sanskrit Buddhist tradition, a distinction is made between three types of faith (*shradda*): faith in the form of admiration, in the form of conviction, and in the form of emulation. Of these, admiration—the first form of faith—is effectively equivalent to respect or reverence, which as we have noted, can be fully extended to other religions.

There are two broad arguments for this idea of respect for other traditions. The first is the undeniable fact that, as mentioned earlier, these traditions have provided solace and spiritual development, as well as a laudable system of ethics, for millions of people and will continue to do so in the foreseeable future. The second, perhaps stronger, argument is that despite the doctrinal differences between religions (which cannot be bridged), just as the doctrinal teachings of my own faith admirably inform the ethical way of life of my own faith, so the doctrines of other faiths inform no less valid ethical ways of life in the other religions. The doctrines themselves cannot be reconciled, but the way they make it possible to ground strikingly parallel and praiseworthy ethical systems is a wonderful fact. This fostering of deep and active respect for other faith traditions is certainly doable, and it is how I practice myself.