

PATHS UP THE MOUNTAINS

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Marcus Borg opens his book, "The Heart of Christianity," with the following words: "The Christianity of my childhood had a clear and compelling reason: it was the only way to salvation. To put it bluntly, one risked going to hell if one wasn't a Christian. The stakes were high. It is difficult to imagine a more powerful sanction and persuasive motive."

Yup! That was me in my pre-teens in a Dutch Reformed Church. The Presbyterianism of my teenage years expanded my horizons through a youth group that made it a point to become familiar with the basics of the other enduring religions. This program included visits to other houses of worship and the chance to talk with their leadership.

At various times in our twenties, I was an elder on the Board of our Presbyterian Church as head of Strategy and Planning and then head of Christian Education. The former position seemed to demand logical, rational thought whereas the latter suggested logic and rational thought be occasionally set aside. Neither Shirley nor I bought into all of the "I believe" recitations that were part of the Presbyterian ritual so we just gave certain phrases a pass.

The Sunday school was doing a good job of teaching the children the Biblical stories and their value as moral examples but we struggled with asking the children to believe the stretches of logic that came from early Judaic / Christian writings and selected, enhanced, and redacted by various groups of theologian / politicians on the way through the centuries. Our efforts, especially among the high school kids that Shirley and I team taught, were more in the direction of using the good Christian foundation in preparing them for life's important decisions of doing a good job of choosing a spouse, selecting a career in which they could be happy, and generally planning a life that they wished as opposed to a life of happenstance. This was a church of a hundred or so with a sufficiently long history that the older kids recognized that some adult parishioners whose life path looked more like that described by a pin ball machine where the ball thunks into a hole at the bottom at the end of the game.

A change of ministers from a progressive explorer to one who stated he would rather be a Baptist preacher and believed the world was created in 4000 B.C. (although he didn't have a date certain) just happened to coincide with a request from GM that Shirley and I spend a few years in Europe. We found this relocation a timely opportunity for reconsideration of our religious affiliation.

It's doubtful that I ever believed my particular Christian path, of the 30,000 or more Christian sects, was the only path to -- wherever;-- nor do a majority of Christians in North America report that perspective. Most of North America and much of the world reportedly accepts there are a number of ways up the mountain. Though there is more

than one reason, a primary one is our growing awareness of religious pluralism. We know about other religions in various ways, from the more progressive religious education courses where I had my first exposure, from college opportunities, and even television series, but increasingly through personal acquaintance with people from other religions. Of course, this is happening in Europe and other parts of the world as well, but I will focus on the North American context.

Borg offers several building blocks that go into the demographic reality of religious pluralism; a way of seeing religions since the Enlightenment; an understanding of their similarities and differences; and the role of religion in our spiritual life. The generous taxpayers of Oregon have funded Marcus Borg through his professorship at Oregon State University allowing him much more time than I to assemble well organized thoughts on religious pluralism, so I'll be using some of his words to augment my writings with hopes that you will not discount mine merely because they are pro bono.

In the last 40 years, we have become the most religiously diverse nation in the world. Diana Eck, a professor at Harvard and director of the Pluralism project, agrees. In *A New Religious America*, Eck describes the growing presence of religions other than Christianity and Judaism in the U.S.

The key event that sparked this growth was the Immigration Act of 1965, which opened up immigration to people from nations outside of Europe. The result was a dramatic increase in the number of immigrants from Asia, the Middle East, and to a lesser extent Africa. Together with their children born in the U.S. since 1965, they have made religious pluralism a fact of life for us today. Eck's statistics include the following:

There are approximately six million Muslim Americans. There are as many Muslim Americans as Presbyterians and Episcopalians combined, two of the historically most influential Protestant denominations. There are about as many Muslim Americans as Jewish Americans.

There are four million Buddhist Americans, the majority are immigrants but many are American converts. There are more Buddhists in the U.S. than either Presbyterians or Episcopalians.

There are about a million Hindus and about 300,000 Sikhs which outnumber the United Church of Christ or the Christian Church – Disciples of Christ.

Moreover, the phenomenon of religious diversity is not confined to major metropolitan areas. People of religions other than Christianity and Judaism are now found in regional cities and rural areas as well. Eck writes, "This is an astonishing new reality. We have never been here before." Fifty years ago, a book on religious diversity was subtitled, "Protestant, Catholic, and Jew."

A poll designed, in part, to measure acceptance of religious diversity, reports a major change of attitudes within the U.S.:

Should Christians seek to convert people of other faiths or leave them alone? 22% said "convert", but 71% said leave them alone.

To the statement "All religions have elements of truth," 78 % said yes.

To the statement "My religion is the only true religion," only 17 % said yes.

The poll indicates that most have let go of the notion that only one religion is the true religion.

The fact of religious pluralism in our society creates an imperative to understand other religions and the people who practice them. Understanding other religions is no longer primarily an intellectual interest in religions we've heard of but might not encounter, but an immensely practical need. The imperative has been underlined and made more urgent by the events of Sept 11, 2001.

Borg organizes THREE WAYS OF SEEING RELIGION

There's the absolutist understanding of religion that affirms that one's own religion is absolute and the only truth. While it may be most familiar to us in Christian form, it also exists in Jewish and Muslim forms, though historically the last two have less often seen their religion as "the only true religion." Sam Harris, in his fiery *End of Faith*, takes near violent issue with the Muslim side of this proposition, but we'll let that go for now. For absolutists, the truth of one's own religion is grounded in God's infallible revelation; God has disclosed God's will in the scriptures of that tradition as nowhere else.

The reductionist view reduces religion to a human invention. They were created by us in part out of ignorance about the way things really are, but also to serve strong psychological and social needs. This is the dominant secular understanding of religion, within both secular culture and the secular academy. The psychological and social factors that generate religions include the desire or need for:

Explanations (religion as "primitive science"); Protection from vulnerability and death; Reinforcement of the social order by giving it a divine sanction; and to give life meaning. Perhaps other desires could be included as well, such as the desire to sing and dance in praise of creation. But whatever the complete list of factors might include, the reductionist's final truth about religion is "We made it all up." Thus, for the reductionist view, the religions are all built on a mistake, for there is no God, no sacred, nothing "More".

Though the reductionist view rejects the foundational claim of the religions, reductionists can be appreciative of religion. Some admire its contributions to thought, wisdom, ethics, art, music, architecture, and so forth. Other reductionists are dismissive of religion, whether politely or contemptuously. But for both appreciative and dismissive reductionist alike, religions are all mistaken no matter how beautiful and elegant and compassionate they might be.

Much of the conflict about religion in the Christian West in modern times has been between absolutist and reductionist views of religion. Beginning in the seventeenth century, Christians felt threatened by the emergence of secularism and responded by insisting on the absolute truth of Christianity. In the nineteenth century, many Protestants began to affirm the Bible's infallibility, and the Roman Catholic Church explicitly affirmed the infallibility of papal authority. Both absolutism and reductionism are products of recent times. To many modern people, they seem like the only two options.

An alternative to the first two ways of seeing religion has been suggested that might prompt some discussion. It sees religion as sacraments of the sacred, or sacraments of the spiritual. As sacraments, the religions are not "absolute." Rather, like the bread and wine of the Eucharist, they are finite products, finite means, of mediating the spiritual.

Though not always named in this way, this way of seeing religion is shared by many scholars of religious pluralism, others within the religious academy, and increasingly within mainline churches.

Borg answers the question "why be a Christian?" by saying "why not?" If you value spirituality in your life and, if it's the religion of your particular culture, your history, go ahead and meet your spiritual needs the simplest and easiest way. That may be fine for Borg and some UU's, but it may be a too simplistic answer for many other UU's.

We like lists. So here's one. These seven statements describe this crossover spiritual/humanistic understanding of religion and the religious.

First, it sees religions as *human creations*. In this it is like the reductionist view. The scriptures, teachings, doctrines, rituals, practices, and so forth of all religions are human products. To express this widely accepted view with a phrase from Harvard theologian Gordon Kaufman, religions are "imaginative human constructions." Here "imaginative" does not mean "fanciful" or "fantasy", but "creative", filled with images that come from and address the human imagination – that faculty within us within which our images of reality reside.

Second, it affirms that religions are human constructions *in response to experiences of spirituality*. They are not simply mistaken human projections generated by psychological and social needs. Of course they have been shaped and sometimes distorted, often in very destructive ways, in order to serve human desires, but they are not ultimately built on a mistake. Religions are human products created in response to the spiritual in the particular cultures within which each came into being. Thus, for those cultures at least, the spiritual understanding of religion affirms their reality of God, the spiritual, the "more."

Third, religions are "cultural-linguistic traditions," a phrase used by Yale theologian George Lindbeck to express another widely accepted notion that refers to both the origin and function of religions. By function, it is noted that a religion that survives over time becomes a cultural-linguistic tradition in its own right, and to be part of that religion is to

live within the cultural-linguistic world created by that religion. It means to live within its scriptures, its language, its stories, its vision, its rituals, its practice – in a comprehensive sense, to live within its ethos. Extending Borg’s theme, UU’s roots are the Christian cultural-linguistic tradition, which is why most UU’s find comfort in living within the Christian-Judaic culture while not necessarily subscribing to the theological details. Borg recommends accepting, not fighting, that comfort and then getting on with our lives.

To use only a partially apt analogy, being Christian (or Muslim, or Jewish, and so forth) is a bit like being French (or Korean or Ethiopian, or so forth). Being French involves knowing French as a language, but also much more: there is a cultural ethos, a cultural-linguistic world, involved in being French. So also being Christian means living within the ethos of a Christian cultural-linguistic world.

Fourth, the enduring religions of the world are “wisdom traditions,” a phrase from Huston Smith, perhaps today’s best-known historian of religions. Wisdom and knowledge are not identical. Wisdom is more foundational. It is about the two most important questions in life: “the real” and “the way.” What is real? And what is the way – how shall we live? They articulate a vision.

Fifth, religions are aesthetic traditions. All of the enduring religions have values and created beauty; in music, poetry, stories, art, architecture, worship, and rituals. They see beauty as a mediator of “the real.”

Sixth, religions are communities of practice. All of them provide practical means of living the religious life: the practices of worship, meditation, deeds of compassion, and more specific spiritual practices.

Seventh, and directly connected to the sixth, religions are communities of transformation. Religions have the very practical purpose of transforming the self and the world – the transformation of the self from an old way of being to a new way of being, and the transformation of the world through compassion. These two transformations are central to all of the enduring religions.

All seven of these aspects are included in seeing religions as sacramental, as spiritual. The enduring religions share these characteristics in common. Each is a massive and magnificent sacrament of the spiritual, using a phrase from Paul in 2 Corinthians, a “treasure in earthen vessels.”

This realization helps us to understand religious pluralism, even as it also helps us understand the Christianity side of our culture. Each of the enduring religions is a mediator, an implementer, of these absolutes but not absolute itself.

Are All of the enduring Religions Thus the same?

Some say, “The religions are all the same – just different roads to the same place. It doesn’t matter what you are.” Rightly understood, the statement contains some truth. But as commonly understood, it’s too simple, especially if it is only thought of as a path to some kind of “heaven.”

1. All these religions affirm “spirituality” can be known – not known completely or exhaustively, but known in the sense of being experienced.
2. They all affirm a way, a path; and the paths are all recognizable variants of the same path, the same way. The way of the cross, the way of Lao Tzu, the way of the Buddha, the way of Islam, and the way of Judaism all speak of the same path: a path of the old identity dying and being born into a new identity, a new way of being, a resurrection.
3. They all provide practical means of undertaking the way, living the path, undergoing a spiritual journey.
4. They all extol compassion as the primary ethical virtue of life. We see this not only in their teachings, but also in the saints of the various traditions who are consistently embodiments of compassion.
5. They all contain a collection of beliefs and teachings, a mixture of doctrines and ethical guidelines. To put this point most simply, the religions are all “put into words.”

Yet they are not all the same. They’re very different, as different as the cultures and histories that shaped them. Each is a distinctive cultural-linguistic world with its own stories, rituals, practices, and ethos. Worshiping in a Hindu temple or a Jewish synagogue is a very different experience from worshiping in a Muslim mosque or a Christian church. The world is richer because of these distinctive cultural-linguistic differences.

Another term from Huston Smith is “primordial tradition” as a key concept for thinking about the differences among religions. The “primordial tradition” is a set of two core understandings underlying all the enduring religions. First is a multi-layered understanding of reality: what is real includes more than the space-time world of matter and energy. Second is a multilayered understanding of self: we are more than our bodies and brains, and open out in our depths into the sea of being that we name God, Spirit, Allah, and so on.

Most of us have heard people say “I’m spiritual, but not religious.” We know what they mean: they have a spiritual interest or sensitivity, but they’re not part of any particular religion. And the contrast often contains a value judgment as well: spirituality is “good”; religion is “bad,” or at least unnecessary. The first is seen as personal and the second as institutional, and we live in a time when many don’t think much of institutions.

In an important sense, religions are institutions. Religion is to spirituality as institutions of learning are to education. One can learn about the world, become educated, without schools, universities, and books, but it is like reinventing the wheel in every generation. Institutions of learning are the way education gets traction in history; so also religion is the way spirituality gains traction in history.

To return to the statement “The religions are all the same – just different roads to the same place,” We are now in a better position to see its truth as well as its limitations. To use the metaphor of paths going up a mountainside, the enduring religions can be considered paths up the same mountain. Envision a mountain, broad at the bottom, narrow at the top, the peak finally disappearing into air, space, emptiness, the unknowable. At the bottom, the paths are farthest apart. But as the paths lead higher, they become closer together until they converge on the mountaintop. And then, they disappear. We can think of the place to which they lead, the mountaintop, not as “heaven”, but “the spiritual,” maybe even the sacred. The religions are not primarily about the next life, not about paths to an afterlife, but to life centered in the sacred in the here and now.

Many of us, if not most of us, have been on that mountain. We may have started out on one of the enduring religion paths, likely the path of our parents. But being the more religiously adventurous sort, we have headed off through the brush and tangles as we’ve worked our way up the mountain. Occasionally, we’ve broken out of the thicket to find another path which we happily climbed with others for awhile. Along the way, we’ve chatted with our companions, maybe even argued once or twice about whether this was the best path. Questioned. After all, the famous unofficial icon of UUism is the question mark. Or maybe we just became distracted by a colorful bird or intriguing thought that led us off into the bush once again to do battle with the brambles to create a path of our own making, a path upon which we gain greater comfort and confidence. And thus we find our own way on up the mountain. One can picture the convergence of the masses at the spiritual top. There are those who have trod the relatively easy path of their forefathers out of devotion or selection of an easier way. And then there are those of us who have done a good deal of briar and bramble work. This extra exercise may have made us more muscular and healthy from the added exertion but we are also likely a bit scratched and bruised from the paths not taken. And who’s to say which value the view from the top more?