

Wisdom from the World's Religions

A Guide to Basic Human Questions

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Introduction

In 1971, John Lennon released *Imagine*, a song of peace in the midst of the Vietnam War. What would the world look like, he asked us to imagine, if there were no countries *to kill and die for*, if there were *no possessions* and *no need for greed or hunger*, but rather a universal *brotherhood of man*? We were also invited to *Imagine there's no heaven, it's easy if you try. No hell below us. Above us, only sky*, and ultimately *no religion too*.

These realities—countries, possessions, and religion—were imagined to be the very things that divide us, that create hatred, greed, and impoverishment. Indeed, it is not hard to find examples where patriotism, consumerism, and religious bigotry have caused considerable human suffering. According to a British poll, the belief that religion itself is divisive and causes violence was over 80 percent. In 2019, scholars representing the British Psychological Society, in an attempt to make sense of widely divergent results from modern studies, noted that “the literature is clearly a hodgepodge.”¹ But the assumptions about religions and violence is widespread in Europe and the United States. In fact, the belief that religion divides and harms is so common, it would not be unusual to see defenders of religion accepting it as fact and trying to explain it away, such as by saying that moderates

are not violent—only fanatics are. But what if the belief is fundamentally false?

Some of the most up-to-date studies on religion in America are correlated in Robert Putnam and David Campbell's *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*.² Among their findings was a high correlation between religious observance and what they call "good neighborliness." They found that religiously observant Americans volunteer more, are more civically active, and are more generous with their time and money, and that this is true for secular causes as well as religious ones. They also found a high correlation between religious observance and religious tolerance. Among the most religiously dedicated, 89 percent believe that members of other religions can go to heaven. In other words, the more religious you are, the more likely you are to be particularly sympathetic to religious others.

But can we go further? Can religions actually *unite* us in some ways? Could we go beyond mere acceptance and tolerance to seeing other religions as repositories of wisdom that we ourselves could use? I believe that exposure to other religions and their deep insights into the spiritual condition of humanity can be a boon for all of us, even if one is purely secular and even atheistic. When I was interviewing for my job at the University of Toledo, a secular state school, I taught a class as an example of the kind of teacher I would be. In my presentation, I shared a version of a bodhisattva vow to the class. *Bodhisattva* means "enlightened being," and the vow to become one has everything to do with service to others. The very reason one wants to be enlightened is to use that enlightenment solely for the purpose of helping release others from their suffering. This is what I shared:

The bodhisattva resolves: I take upon myself the burden of all suffering. . . . At all costs I must bear the burdens of all living beings. . . . All beings I must set free. . . . I must not cheat all beings out of my store of merit. . . . It

is surely better that I alone should be in pain than that all these should fall into the states of woe . . . and with this my own body I must experience, for the sake of all beings, the whole mass of all painful feelings. . . . In reward for all this righteousness that I have won by my works . . . may I be balm to the sick, their healer and servitor . . . may I be in the famine of the ages' end their drink and meat; may I become an unailing store for the poor.³

Attending the lecture was the chair of my department, a philosopher who is an atheist. He later told me that he was so inspired by the heroism of the bodhisattva vow that he was teary-eyed the rest of the class period. What would life look like if everyone were this humbly devoted to service? If one shared one's own good karma with others that they may flourish and took on the bad karma of others, personally enduring their pain, to free them from future suffering? *Imagine*, John Lennon asked us in 1971. Maybe insights from other religions would help us imagine our lives differently, having been exposed to a very different vision of humanity and spiritual pursuits. Certainly, it would encourage a deeper respect and even honor for those who have embraced other paths.

One might be concerned by such a project, particularly if one is decidedly religious. A devout Muslim, for example, believes the Qur'an represents the fullness of revelation and that the Prophet Muhammad is the singular example of faithfulness. The teachings of the Qur'an and the examples and sayings of the Prophet make for the surest expression of how to live an authentic spiritual life. Likewise, a Christian holds that Jesus himself is the absolute expression of the divine. St. Paul writes, "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. . . . For in him, all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things" (Col 1:15–20). One

might argue that if I have the fullest revelation, even if other religions have interesting beliefs or practices, those beliefs can only be less than the fullness I already have.

There is another problem: If two claims about reality contradict each other, then at best only one of them could be right. So entertaining religious claims that contradict my religion could compromise it with falsehoods (presuming mine is right). And there is still another problem: Religious claims are not islands unto themselves, but are part of a web of understanding of the nature of the universe, the human condition, and the Divine. Taking a given claim or insight out of its context, as though that context did not matter, can undermine the integrity of that religion or one's own. It can even lead to the problem of syncretism, the amalgamation of different religions into one. This amounts to metaphysical mush.

This book is decidedly opposed to syncretism, which ultimately fails to respect religious traditions in themselves. I have been studying religions of the world for thirty years, particularly Christian and Buddhist traditions, and see large problems in blurring differences or making all-too-easy equivalences where they should not be made. I tell my students, "A great way to insult a Buddhist is to tell them: 'I know what you mean by Nirvana; it's what we call heaven.'" A Buddhist ought to think: "You've just co-opted my religion and shoved it into yours!"

None of these pitfalls has to be one's fate. With prudence, exposure to the wisdom and experience of religious others can expand our minds and hearts. We can actually become more spiritually mature in our own religion. We can learn to apply the insights we encounter in ways that do not undermine what we believe but may help us see ourselves differently and engage our lives more fully.

Here is an example I have used many times. Much of Buddhist thought is concentrated on the quality of one's consciousness and what proceeds from it. As the Buddha taught:

All phenomena are preceded by the mind, created by the mind, and have the mind as their master. If one speaks or acts from a corrupted mind, suffering follows as a cartwheel follows the ox's foot. . . . All phenomena are preceded by the mind, created by the mind, and have the mind as their master. If one speaks or acts from a pure mind, happiness follows as a never-departing shadow.⁴

Buddhism particularly emphasizes that life is dissatisfying because we have a grasping, craving mind. To the degree that we grasp and crave, we are suffering, even if we are not directly aware of this. We are our own worst enemies. Another saying of the Buddha: "Whatever an enemy would do to an enemy, a hater to one hated, worse than that is the harm a wrongly directed mind can do to oneself."⁵ Taking the Buddha's teachings seriously, let us consider a famous parable given by Jesus:

Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." But the tax-collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "God be merciful to me, a sinner!" I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted. (Lk 18:10–14)

It is obvious that Jesus contrasts here the posture of pride with that of humility and challenges his hearers to embrace the latter. A Buddhist sensibility, however, invites an additional analysis, that is, it sees that the Pharisee is suffering—not only will his ego-inflated

pride condition a wretched afterlife, it also creates suffering in the moment. Of course, the Pharisee does not realize his situation, and his delusion makes him all the more tragic.

Buddhist awareness of the burden of a toxic mind does not stop here. Without deep mindfulness, such as that fostered by Buddhism, the reader can easily and unwittingly take on the very mental state of the Pharisee. One can proudly imagine oneself superior for not being like that judgmental Pharisee, whom one is of course now judging! Buddhist wisdom constantly brings us back to the quality of our own minds and the relationship we have with our experience. What is our mental state as we appropriate the insights of the parable?

One could go further here. Buddhism insists that our thoughts, like everything else, are ultimately empty of any permanent substance. One might be tempted to see one's own judgmentalism as something to condemn oneself with: I'm just like the Pharisee! Given Buddhism's regular practice of mindfulness, however, we realize that we do not have to identify with those thoughts. They arise and dissipate on their own. Thus, we realize we do not have to judge either the Pharisee or ourselves. Rather, we find an invitation to embrace the parable more fully and to cultivate compassion toward all who suffer delusion—the Pharisee, ourselves, everyone. In short, Buddhism does not hinder our understanding of the parable, but lets us appropriate its message more deeply.

Throughout this book, I intend to provide wisdom, insight, and inspiration drawn from various religious traditions, from the great Abrahamic traditions to Native American to Hindu and Buddhist thought to the Daoist understanding of wise living. In doing so, I hope to show how one's own religious categories might be enlarged or even reimaged. One does not have to believe each and every claim made here, some of which may directly challenge one's own religious sensibilities (not that this is a bad thing). But we can use these insights to better understand both ourselves and others. Pondering religious wisdom that has fed millions for millennia can only help us appreciate and be inspired by other paths.

This book will be broken up into large questions or issues that are themselves divided into two exemplars. In chapter 1, we address the very nature of God using Hindu ideas of *Brahman* and the Christian claims about God as Trinity. In chapter 2, we consider what is called “theological anthropology,” that is, how humans are understood from a theological perspective. Here we will draw on the Islamic perspective on the simultaneously exalted position humans are placed in as well as the extraordinarily humble posture they must have. Then we will look into the enigmatic teachings of Buddhism, which hold that there is in fact no intrinsic self and yet that very *no self* is capable of attaining enlightenment. Chapter 3 investigates possibilities of finding and serving God. We will consider different *yogas* from the Hindu tradition and explore how they can be mutually supportive, drawing from the teachings of the Bhagavad-Gita. Then we will return to Islamic sources and their “Five Pillars of Islam.” These represent a very concrete way to find and serve God that is surprisingly many layered and potentially extremely transformative. In chapter 4, we will consider how one might skillfully live as a religious person. This chapter will be entirely devoted to the Jewish tradition, but under two forms. First, we will look at the standard Jewish understanding of following God’s *Torah* (guidance or law) and the sacred deeds and commandments (*mitzvot*) that go with this. Then we will see how the Hasidic community endeavors to infuse daily life with a kind of mystical ecstasy.

Chapter 5 explores the possibility of rethinking how the universe works and how we might live profoundly in these different worldviews. First, we will consider the Daoist tradition and its way of working with the relationships and energies around us. Next, we will look into the Buddhist expression of a bodhisattva’s life and why Nirvana is by definition a way of service and compassion. In chapter 6, we investigate how we might cultivate a life of spiritual balance. Here we are led to a Jewish understanding that life ought to be robustly embraced and that one can hold together both selfless and self-interested concerns. Balance

is understood quite differently for Buddhists, and we will look at a form of Buddhist meditation that unites love, compassion, joy, and equanimity to collectively live wholesomely in this world and the next. Chapter 7 considers how one might imagine living more harmoniously in the natural world. In the context of global warming, we will hear from the Christian tradition's understanding of caring for the world, particularly as it is reflected in the writing of Pope Francis. Next, we will look at three examples of Native American spirituality, all of which see the world as a spiritually united reality. Here, there is no relationship *with* the natural world. We *are* the natural world.

Chapter 8 asks us to think about how we might “see” God. As God is beyond the visual or conceptual possibilities of humans, can it still be possible to *see* the Divine? Here we will exclusively consider the Christian tradition, which makes a bold and unique claim: to see Jesus is to see God. Chapter 9 investigates the process of death and what is beyond death. We will see how Tibetan Buddhism imagines the *bardo* or “between” state from dying to rebirth and the practices Tibetan Buddhists engage in to prepare for this potent moment. We will also look at strikingly similar proclamations in many religions that understand the end game to be union with God. Our final chapter (10) returns to the question of the plurality of religions and what to make of them. There are no easy answers here, but we will consider responsible ways of thinking about this question. The second part of the chapter describes qualities of spiritual maturity that seem “to cross the spiritual imaginations of many world religions.

A final word regarding sources. Where I have drawn on insights from others, I have been attentive to citing these sources. In only a few cases have I provided my own translation of primary texts. Typically, I have relied on trusted translations by experts, some of whom do not cite a specific manuscript they are relying on, and thus neither do I. In the bibliography, I cite the direct translations I am using, and only use specific endnotes when these sources vary. For the Bible I am relying on the New

Revised Standard Version (NRSV). Mostly, I have striven to limit my endnotes so as not to burden the reader. This book is intended to be less a work of critical, independent scholarship on specific texts and their interpretations and more an opportunity to appreciate the breadth and depth of our fellow spiritual travelers from around the world.

Notes

1. Jesse Singal, “Does Religion Really Cause Violence?” *BPS Research Digest*, May 10, 2019, <https://digest.bps.org.uk/2019/05/10/does-religion-really-cause-violence-a-new-review-suggests-any-link-is-far-from-straight-forward/>.

2. Robert Putman and David Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010).

3. E. A. Burtt, ed., *The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha: Early Discourses, the Dhammapada, and Later Basic Writings* (New York: New American Library, 2000), 109–18.

4. *Dhammapada*, 1–2. Translation is mine.

5. *Dhammapada*, 42. Translation is mine.