

PARALLEL AND DIVERGENT CONCEPTS IN WORLD RELIGIONS
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The study of world religions is full of surprises. Just think of translating spiritual concepts from one language to another. In one West African language the word "joy" means, literally, "song in the body." In the language of the Sioux Indians there is no word for "damn"--or any other swear word. To express "Be not afraid" in one tongue of Central Africa, we would have to say, in effect, "Do not shiver in your liver." The term "prophet" amounts to "God's town crier." And the Mexican Cuicatec language puts the concept worship in a phrase that means "wag one's tail before God."¹

I. Hinduism

There are three great strands of tradition in Hinduism--primitive magic, the philosophy of Brahmanism, and the Salem gospel.

The deepest level of magic in Hinduism pertains to their view of Sanscrit, the language in which their sacred books are written. English is meaningful at the level of the single word; Greek is meaningful at the level of each syllable; Sanscrit is meaningful at the level of the phoneme--the individual sound. If I say AUM, the A is the primal sound of creation, and the M is the sound of the dissolution of finite reality. The vibrations of Sanscrit are supposed in orthodox Hinduism to be vibrations that produce cosmic effects. Therefore if one can combine vibrations knowingly, one can "do magic." Mantras and chants are nearly universal in Hinduism.

¹ Mario Pei, The Story of Language, in the chapter, "Religion and Language."

The second strand of Hindu tradition is the philosophy of Brahamanism. The Vedanta Society is a good representative of this view. For the Brahmanist, the purpose of religion is liberation . . . by knowledge of one's identity with Brahman, the non-personal Absolute.

It is very important for us to realize that the philosophy of Brahmanism is not merely built on speculation if by speculation we mean intellectualizing with no basis in experience. There is a specific experience that gives rise to this philosophy, an experience that it is the job of speculation to interpret. This experience is called transcendental consciousness by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. No language can describe it, although it is pointed to by the phrase "eternal bliss consciousness." It is not the experience of any object. Therefore no change is phenomenal; therefore it is called eternal--outside time. It may occur as a momentary surprise during meditation or remain throughout the whole of one's waking, sleeping, and dreaming life. Brahmanism says that this is the experience of Absolute reality, and that to realize this as one's true identity is salvation. That is the speculation.

The Bhagavad Gita--"the New Testament of Hinduism"--contains some passages that prolong the philosophy of Brahmanism²:

This is the fixation that is Brahmanic Having attained it he is not confused. Abiding in it even at the time of death, he goes to Brahman-nirvana.

Chapter 2.72

When he abandons desires . . . finding contentment by himself in the self alone, then he is called of stabilized mind.

Chapter 2.55

² The translation and interpretation by Franklin Edgerton (Harvard University Press) will aid the student of The URANTIA Book to distinguish the strands of Hindu tradition.

But the Gita also preserves fragments of the Melchizedek gospel. Indeed, this book is to be interpreted as the incomplete overcoming of Brahmanism by the teaching of devotion to the personal God.

Those who constantly follow by teaching, such men, full of faith . . . are freed from the effect of action.
Chapter 3.31

Even if you are the worst of sinners, you shall cross over all evil by the boat of knowledge.
Chapter 4.36

The man unknowing and without faith, his soul full of doubt, perishes. Not is this world, nor the next, nor bliss, for him whose soul is full of doubt.
Chapter 4.40

Whoever reveres Me with faith I hold to be the most unified.
Chapter 4.45

Now remark that the Gita offers a synthesis of the impersonal phase of Deity reality and the personality of Deity! Krishna, the divine revealer, speaks of

. . . the beginningless Brahman, ruled by Me
Chapter 13.9

For I am the foundation of Brahman, the immortal and imperishable, and of the eternal right, and of absolute bliss.
Chapter 13.29

None of the other scriptures of the world recognize the existence of an impersonal Absolute and its subordination to Deity personality.

To my knowledge, no other scripture of a major world religion recognizes the existence of an impersonal Absolute and its subordination to Deity personality.

Before we decide, however, that the Indian subcontinent is popularly prepared for the Fifth Epochal Revelation, we would do well to pause over some facts of the present situation. (1) The class most interested in religion in India today is the middle

class, and they are the most rigid and least interested in religious innovations. (2) The group in the U.S. most typical of Indian Hinduism is the Hare Krishna chanters. While their philosophy of religion is in many ways close to that of The URANTIA Book, they are burdened with their own style of fundamentalism (consciousness of group superiority and stringent requirements on the way of living of converts). (3) Much tension exists today between Hindus and Christians. Any day now the Indian Parliament could pass the so-called Religious Freedom Bill of 1978. This bill has got the Christians very worried. It would tremendously curtail missionary activity. There is some history of the suppression of the tiny Christian minority by the Hindu majority (forget not the years of British rule)--from discrimination in employment to violence in the streets at festival time. The Christians, famed for their hospitals and soup kitchens, have sometimes required those seeking continued material help to convert to Christianity as a condition of receiving further aid. Nonchristians allege this practice as the main provocation for the Religious Freedom Bill. (4) The Brahma Somaj movement, a truly Jesusonian religion, begun in the nineteenth century as a bridge between Christianity and Hinduism, remains small and does not appear to be growing.

There is very much spiritual seeking among Hindus, and, as Sri Ramakrishna has written, "He finds who seeks him; he who with intense longing weeps for God has found God."³ Let us rejoice

³ The World Bible, Ballou, ed., p. 163.

in the powerful seeds of spiritual awakening from the Vedas:

Spirit! Confirmed in your friendship
We have no fear, O Lord of Might!

Rig-Veda I.11⁴

When Men of the Word, companions, worship,
In their hearts refining flashes of insight,
Then some become fully conscious of knowledge,
While others go away mouthing empty words.

Rig-Veda I.50

All the friends rejoice for their Glorious Friend
At the end of the journey, reaching fulfillment,
For he brings nourishment, and removes their guilt,
And he is prepared to act courageously.

Rig-Veda X.71

⁴ Hymns from the Rig-Veda, Jean LeMée, translator.

II. Buddhism

As I come to Asia and Buddhism I would insert a word about China. What will happen to religion in the Peoples Republic of China?

On the one hand, sociologically speaking, Maoism is already is realigion. Ninian Smart writes of Maoism,

It has doctrines, namely Marxism as mediated by Mao; myth, such as the story of the Long March and the dialectic of history; ethics, namely its Red puritanism and evaluation of different elements in human society; the rituals of rallies and little red book-waving; experiences of conversion and exaltation; and the institutions of party and cadres. Further, the anarchist elements in Mao's thought echo Taoist themes, and Mao's anti-Confucianism replaced the Confucian ethic with a new mode of education. Marxist eschatology draws on sentiments earlier expressed in Buddhist devotionalism.⁵

Note, furthermore, that in the teachings of Marx, there are two ways to destroy religion; one is to persecute it to death, the other is to let it die by attrition--simply restructure the economy so that satisfactory human relationships are possible and religion will no longer be necessary. Sometimes the communists use the approach of malevolent neglect.

A number of years ago, the Chinese religious groups, crumbling under spiritual decay and inter-sect dissension, were obliged to organize themselves for the purpose of reporting to the Party leaders and for the purpose of giving the Party someone to blame if trouble were to arise. Religious movements have been at the root of most Chinese revolutions. The Party wanted to control them better, and so forced them to organize. The nationalist sentiment of their leaders even moved them to provide funds for reconstructing historic temples!

⁵ "Understanding Religious Experience" in Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis, Steven T. Katz, ed (Oxford University Press, 1978)

The more classical Buddhist tradition, popular in Southeast Asia, is Theravada, literally, "the way of the elders." (The other term denoting this group, "Hinayana," "the lesser vehicle," has pejorative connotations.) Theravada emphasizes that there is no enduring personality and that all existence--at least before enlightenment--involves suffering. It is too easy for Westerners to misunderstand this teaching of dukka--suffering. The fact of the impermanence of finite joys is dukka; pain and loneliness and disease and ~~daying~~ are dukka; any feeling of being somehow not quite right is dukka; this manifests the nonsubstantiality of pre-enlightened life. Theravada~~s~~ scriptures typically offer a psychology of virtue, and here is a sample from the Dhammapadam:

Let a man overcome anger by love, let him overcome evil by good, let him overcome the greedy by liberality, the liar by truth.

The most dynamic Buddhist sect in Japan today is Nichiren Shosku, known more widely by the name of its political arm, Soka Gakkai. Listen to the words of the 13th century teacher, Nichiren, who has helped inspire this movement:

If you desire to attain Buddhahood immediately, lay down the banner of pride, cast away the club of resentment, and trust yourselves to the unique Truth. . . . When you fall into an abyss and someone has lowered a rope to pull you out, should you hesitate to grasp the rope because you doubt the power of the helper? Has not Buddha declared, "I alone am the protector and savior"? There is the power! Is it not taught that faith is the only entrance [to salvation]? There is the rope! . . . Our hearts ache and our sleeves are wet [with tears] until we see face to face the tender figure of the One, who says to us, "I am thy Father." At this thought our hearts beat, even as when we behold the brilliant clouds in the evening sky or the pale moonlight of the fast-falling night. . . . Should any season be passed without thinking of the compassionate promise, "Constantly I am thinking of you"? Should any month or day be spent without revering the teaching that there is none who cannot attain Buddhahood?⁶

⁶ The Buddhist Tradition, Theodore Bary, ed., p. 349

Nichiren taught that the Lotus Sutra was THE scripture to be relied on for salvation. Here is a passage from its chapter on tactfulness:

The Buddha addressed Sariputra: "The buddha-tathagatas teach only bodhisattvas. Whatever they do is always for one purpose, that is, to take the Buddha-knowledge and reveal it to all living beings. Sariputra! The Tathagata, by means of the One Buddha-vehicle, preaches to all living beings the Law; there is no other vehicle, neither a second nor a third. Sariputra! The laws of all the buddhas in the universe also are like this. Sariputra! The buddhas in times past, by infinite numberless tactful ways and with various reasoning and parabolic expressions, expounded the laws for the sake of all living beings. All these laws are for the One Buddha-vehicle, (so that) all those living beings, who have heard the Law from the buddhas, might all finally obtain perfect knowledge.

[Suspicious, crooked, and faithless in mind,] men such as these can hardly be saved. For this reason, Sariputra, I set up a tactful way for them, proclaiming the way to end sufferings, revealing it through nirvana. Though I proclaim nirvana, yet it is not real extinction.

If any, (even) with distracted mind, enter a stupa or temple and cry but once Nama Buddha, they have attained the Buddha-way.⁷

> Soka Gakkai is arising in the ruins of postwar secularism. <
When Japan attacked the United States, it knew it was tackling the greatest material power in the world, but it had confidence that the concentration of its supermaterial energy would prevail. Military defeat brought about a depression of confidence in the proclamation of anything super-material.

Soka Gakkai retains a materialistic interest in its praying and unlike other Buddhist sects (1) attracts large numbers of young people, (2) goes forth aggressively in search of converts, and (3) is exclusivistic and requires converts to cleanse their homes of any competing devotional object or practice.

A partial sociological explanation for their success is that

⁷ The Three Fold Lotus Sutra, Bunno, Kato, et al., trans., (New York, 1975), pp. 60, 66, and 69. Tathagata=perfected; Sariputra=a great disciple; bodhisattvas postpone heavenly attainment for service ministry.

they alone have responded to the social isolation of the masses of Japanese who have migrated from the rural areas to the city. Soka Gakkai has ministered to this group in need.

Here are two poems by a 10th century Japanese devotee of Amida Buddha. The Amidists have very much of the Salem gospel, and they continue in Japan today.

He never fails
to reach the Lotus Land of Bliss
Who calls
If only once
The name of Amida.

A far, far distant land
Is Paradise,
I've heard them say;
But it can be reached
By those who want to go.⁸

⁸ Kuya, in The Buddhist Tradition, Bary ed.

III. Islam

The word Islam connotes peace and denotes submission, namely to the will of God. This religion welled up in the Arabian peninsula in the 7th century AD long before oil. Muslims are known for their concept of holy war, for assigning inferior status to women and permitting polygamy, and for prohibiting pork and alcohol. They are known for their mystics, the sufis, who absorb themselves in identification with God and for their legalism, as in the pious scholar who would not eat a watermelon because he could not determine from scripture how the Prophet would have done so. There never has been a tradition of separation between mosque and state in Islam, and specific political commitments are normal for their religious leaders.

What we have not yet understood about this tradition, however, is the meaning of Islamic monotheism (and most of what I say applies to Judaism as well). Ask a Muslim what he believes, and 9 times out of 10 you will get this reply: "There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet." The alert student of The URANTIA Book will recognize here the heritage of Melchizedek's teaching, and he will be delighted to discover that salvation in Islam is seen as the reward of faith--albeit a faith that is to be put into practice in some definite, suggested ways. What the alert student might not understand at first is that the proclamation of the one God is intended to deny the divinity of Christ as much as it is intended to deny every obvious and subtle form of polytheism and idolatry.

The Qur'an says that Allah has neither father nor mother, neither brother nor sister, neither son nor daughter. The original

point of this is obvious when we consider the polytheistic climate into which the prophet Mohammed burst long ago. For Muslims today, the point of insisting on the unity of God is that (1) God needs no helpers in creation; (2) the universe is not run by a committee but directed by a single will with a unified purpose; (3) no being, invisible or visible, powerful or lowly, can act independently of God. I have yet to meet the Muslim who can grasp that what I believe about Jesus is compatible with the essential thrust of their teaching of the one God.

Muslims assume when they hear Christians or near-Christians speak of God as Father that one means the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is, therefore, difficult for a student of our book to avoid bringing up the issue of the nature of Jesus when speaking about the Father with Muslims, but there is hope in the following story : I was invited to dinner with other Muslims at the home of a student from Saudi Arabia. At dinner his wife, an American convert to Islam, said to me, "Don't you think it spoils the unity of God to think of him having a son?" Referring to her husband, I said, "Do you think the unity of Bakr is spoiled if he has a son?" There was silence all around the table, and no one made an objection.

Muslims think that Christians think that God quasi-physically impregnated Mary. They insist that Allah is not a Father. Mary was a virgin, they say, but she became pregnant merely by divine command. God says, "Be!" and a thing is.

Jesus is portrayed as a prophet of Islam, more ascetic and militant than we see him. He did not die on the cross--a similar looking man was substituted for him. Jesus was taken directly

to heaven without passing through death. He will have a role to play on the Last Day, the Day of Judgment. Jesus was God's messenger to his specific time and place. This is in contrast to Mohammed, whose prophethood is declared to be universally valid for all time.

Muslims have one more association with the word Father applied to God that I consider most important for us to understand. Once after a class in which I had occasion to speak of the Father, a student came up and asked, "What picture of God do you have in your mind?" I tried to come up with a helpful answer, but could only say, "I really don't have a picture in my mind at all." He said, "Oh, we were told that Westerners think of God like an old man with a beard, and when you referred to Allah as Father I thought that's what you meant." I said, "When I call God Father I mean to indicate God's sourceness, personality, and intimacy." He advised, "You should definitely explain that when you use this word." To him the word Father sounded anthropomorphic.

Islam teaches a God of justice to be feared and a God of mercy and compassion to be loved. It teaches the brotherhood of man, but especially the brotherhood of followers of Islam. Salvation is for all who have faith in the teachings of a Holy Book such as the Torah or the Gospel.

Dr. Ali Shari'ati was the leader of a group of Islamic liberals in Iran before the revolution. Here is an excerpt from one of his lectures On the Sociology of Islam:

It is by means of his will that man attains superiority over all other creatures in the world. He is the only being able to act counter to his own instinctual nature, something no animal or plant can do. For example, you

will never encounter an animal voluntarily engaging in a two-day fast, or a plant committing suicide out of grief. Plants and animals can neither render great services nor commit treachery. It is not possible for them to act in a way different from that in which they have been created. It is only man who can rebel against the way in which he was created, who can defy even his spiritual or bodily needs, and act against the dictates of goodness and virtue. He can act either in accordance with his intelligence or in opposition to it. He is free to be good or to be evil, to resemble mud or to resemble God. Will is, then, the greatest property of man, and the affinity between God and man is apparent from this fact.

For it is God Who inhales into man some of His own spirit and makes of him the bearer of His Trust, and man is not merely the viceregent of God upon earth but also His relative--if the expression be permitted. The spirits of God and man both possess an excellence deriving from the possession of will. God, the only entity and being possessing an absolute will and capable of doing whatever it wishes, even in contradiction to the laws of the universe, inhales some of His spirit in man. Man can act like God, but only to a certain degree; he can act against the laws of his physiological constitution only to the extent permitted by his similarity to God. This is the aspect held in common by men and God, the cause of their affinity--free will, the freedom for man to be good or evil, to obey or rebel.

The following conclusions can be drawn with regard to the philosophy of the creation of man in Islam:

All men are not simply equal; they are brothers. The difference between equality and brotherhood is quite clear. Equality is a legal concept, while brotherhood proclaims the uniform nature and disposition of all men; all men originate from a single source, whatever their color.

Secondly, man and woman are equal. Contrary to all the philosophies of the ancient world, man and woman were created out of the same substance and material at the same time and by the same Creator. They share the same lineage, and are brothers and sisters to each other, descended from the same mother and father.⁹

For Islam to survive as a major world religion, it must evolve a liberal option. The religion has been retained intact from the times of the social structure and culture of 7th century Arabia. It cannot remain that way forever. If it shows nothing but the door to dissenters, then it will founder on the rocks of 20th and 21st century international reality. Secularism is

⁹ Published at the Mizan Press, P.O. Box 4065, Berkeley, CA 94704

already beginning to hit hard. Many Muslims who enjoy a glass of wine and who no longer pray five times a day are ceasing to regard themselves as Muslims. The sudden wealth and interaction with the West foster apostasy in many, and a defensive conservative reaction in many more. The augmented power of the Islamic peoples has revived their ambition to conquer the world. They have been making converts among every race, especially in Africa. They have four great advantages as they compete with Christianity today: (1) they have an excellent record on race. The Qur'an recognizes the equality of all peoples of whatever color; one of Mohammed's wives was black. (2) They are not associated with Western civilization, which they regard as corrupt and dying, reaping the harvest of political and economic greed. (3) Their teaching about God and Jesus is easy to understand. (4) They are doing the most vivid, powerful, clear preaching of the one God on the face of the earth today.

I would not guess whether the angels of progress are fostering the evolution of a liberal phase of Islam, but if they are, I think the program will include these priorities: (1) acceptance of the Father concept, (2) a clarified distinction of the essence of religion from ritual, (3) the gradual separation of religion from politics, since the real truth of Islam transcends national and international partisan struggle, and (4) a modified regard for the Qur'an analogous to the regard for the Bible among liberal Christians.

Let us refresh our sense of brotherhood with sincere Muslims with some quotations from the Qur'an:

Give glory to Allah morning and evening. Praise be to him in the heavens and the earth, at twilight and at noon.

We created man. We know the promptings of his soul.
We are closer to him than the vein of his neck.

As for him that desires the life to come and strives
for it with all his soul, his endeavors shall be rewarded
by Allah.

ixttxhxnnnnnxfxAtitxkxtkxnnxnnnnnnnnnntxxtkxnnxxifnix
Praise be to Allah, Lord of the Creation, the
Compassionate, the Merciful, King of the Last Judgment!
You alone we worship, and to You alone we pray for help.
Guide us to the straight path, the path of those whom You
have favoured, not of those who have incurred Your wrath,
nor of those who have gone astray.

Have we not given him two eyes, a tongue, and two lips
and shown him the two paths? Yet he would not scale
the Height. Would that you knew what the Height is!
It is the freeing of a bondsman; the feeding, in the day
of a famine, of an orphaned relation or a needy man in
distress; to have faith and to enjoin fortitude and mercy.¹⁰

¹⁰ The Koran, N.J. Dawood, trans., (Penguin edition). For a somewhat stilted translation but full of interpretative aids, see The Glorious Qur'an, translation and commentary by A. Yusuf Ali. The Suras quoted above are--in their traditional numbering (altered by Dawood)--Suras 30, 50, 17, 1 (the prayer repeated five times daily), and 90.