

Searching for the Common Thread within Religions

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In conversations about religion and the manyness of religions, one often hears, in general as well as scholarly discussions, remarks about what all the religions have in common. It is generally taken for granted that despite the evident, often flamboyant, diversity of religions, there is something that they all share, or something that holds them together in what even scrupulous historians of religions call "family resemblances." The image of a "common thread" (or threads) is often used to suggest that if we look closely and carefully enough, we will find something that is understood to have a unifying quality.

But when it comes to stating more precisely just what that common thread is--or even where we can find it or how we can search for it--conversations usually become vague or contradictory. In the reflections that follow, I will review why such conversations about the common thread within all religions bog down, why the search for such a common thread can be frustrating, even futile, I will first review what I think are failed attempts at locating that common thread and how those failed attempts have led many people to give up the search for what is common to all religions.

Then, in the second and principal part of my reflections, I will outline how the search for what the religions have in common is being renewed today. I will show that the search, as complex and frustrating as it is, is also very important and rewarding, especially in light of the discussions on globalization in this issue of ReVision.

Frustrated Attempts to Find the Common Thread: The Religious Attempt

One effort to determine the common thread within all the religions comes from the various religions themselves. You can find representatives within most religious communities--usually religious leaders or theologians--who claim that what is common in all the other religions is what is found primarily, originally, most clearly, and definitively in their own. In other words, they argue that what they have, what was given first of all to them, is also to be detected, if one looks carefully enough, in other religions. You might say that that is an effort on the part of religious persons to be big-hearted, generous, and to share with others what was given to them.

Since the turn of the century, Christians have felt pressured to recognize the value of other religions and to define what is common to all of them. They have talked about the "cosmic Christ" or the "anonymous Christ" who is present in all the other religions. What is common to all religions is the saving presence of Christ or of Christ's Spirit. Christ, though present clearly and fully in Christianity, is not limited to Christianity; he is active, in camouflaged ways, throughout the "cosmos," especially in the religions of the world. It is Christ who gives the other religions their value. That view was elaborated creatively and persuasively by Karl Rahner. He spoke about Buddhists and Hindus and Muslims as "anonymous Christians" (Rahner 1966, 1974; Ecumenical Review 1964).

But other religions have come up with similar efforts to identify what the faiths have in common. Muslims tell us that all people are born Muslims--born to find their true happiness in submitting

themselves fully to Allah's will, even though they may not have heard of Allah through the prophet Mohammed. Buddhists talk about the inherent Buddha-nature in all people, which Gautama discovered under the bodhi tree but which is there from the beginning in all. And Hindus see the one Supreme Brahman as that which is sought after by all religions. The mountain top to which, according to Hindus, all the different religious paths lead is the Tat Ekam, "That One Reality," which is spoken about most clearly in the Upanishads.

In one sense, such efforts by religious people to find the common thread are noble and generous. They seek to affirm the value of other religions. But in the end they fail, for they end up defining the value of other religions on their own terms; "You are of value insofar as you are like me." As the anonymous Christ, the common thread ends up being a Christian thread. If Buddhahood is the common thread, then other religions are valuable only insofar as they agree with the Buddhist understanding of enlightenment and human nature. So it seems that the common thread that is discovered by the individual religions is a thread that is stitched into the other religions, not really discovered within them. Such religious attempts to find the common thread lead to what scholars call "inclusivism"; you are nice to people of other religions, but you end up including, or fencing, them into your own backyard (see Race 1983; Knitter 1985).

The Mystical Attempt

Mystics or scholars of mysticism claim that mystical experience is the ladder on which one can descend below the surface of one's own religion to find the underground current that feeds all religions. Mystics, therefore--and not priests or rabbis or ayatollahs or theologians--are our guides to the treasured common thread. Experts such as the psychologist Abraham Maslow and the comparative religionist Huston Smith assert that when you listen to the songs of the mystics from the different religions you hear harmony, despite the different instruments and different voices (Maslow 1990; Smith 1976). From the perspective of the mystics, therefore, the common thread is discovered as an experience whose pure voice is heard at the heart of each religion, despite the external cacophony of differing doctrines and rituals. It is an experience that has the same characteristics no matter whether the mystic follows Jesus or Buddha or Muhammad: an experience of unity and connectedness with all that is; a sense of both transcending and discovering the self; a feeling of concern and compassion for all persons; and a deep peace that does not break under the weight of suffering and apparent evil. Here we have the "essence," the inner heart of all religions. That is why mystics embrace when theologians or dignitaries from differing religions may bicker. The mystics are bearers of the common thread.

Or are they? There are many students of mysticism--I must admit, they are, for the most part, scholars rather than mystics themselves--who sound a warning (Katz 1979). The common thread provided by mysticism may be more tenuous than one thinks---certainly too tenuous to stitch the real differences among the religions into any kind of workable unity. There are greater differences among the mystics than first meet the noncritical, overeager eye because, as most contemporary philosophers of mysticism remind us, there is no such thing as a pure mystical experience. By that they mean that mystical experiences do not take place in a cultural or linguistic vacuum. Even mystical experiences, we are told, are "socially constructed." That means, they are "packaged" by the mystic's culture, religion, and historical location. And those

cultural or linguistic wrappings can make for startling, even apparently contradictory, differences between the expression and the content of the mystical experience.

That is why mystics from the Asia religions tend to be monistic; differences between the mystic's self and the Ultimate Self blend into one. Christian and Jewish mystics generally insist on maintaining a real distinction between the self and the Ultimate; and they understand the Ultimate to be, in some sense, personal. So-called nature mystics do not want to speak about a God at all, as they plunge into the pantheistic cosmic process. Some mystics see no value in our material, finite world; others insist on finding God within the world. Along the same lines, there are mystics, generally from the East, who see no reality or purpose to history; for others, usually from the Abrahamic religions, history is moving, or sometimes stumbling, toward a final stage (Katz 1983; Bishop 1995).

In the light of such objections or caveats, I think we have to be extremely cautious about finding our common thread among the mystics. I trust that there is an experiential depth within all religions where each begins to touch the other. But it seems to me that the thread provided by the mystics is too thin, or too hard to find, to provide the connections by which the vastly differing religions of the world can begin to fashion new bonds of unity. By itself, mysticism, it seems, cannot provide a strong enough common thread.

The Philosophical Attempt

Though many in the last group of explorers searching for the common thread within all religions are theologians, I describe their quest as philosophical, for they do not want to be prejudiced by any individual religion or any specific mysticism. They seek a place outside the particular religions where they can survey them all, a place that can be called philosophical in that it attempts to make general statements, based on human intelligence about observations available to all. The "school of pluralism" wants to avoid the "inclusivism" of the religious attempt mentioned earlier, which ended by defining the common thread according to one's own religious stipulations. The pluralist approach, standing outside all the religions, affirms the real pluralism of religions. Religions are different from one another, and they are valid in their differences. So the pluralists want to affirm religious diversity. But they are also intent on finding the common thread. Within the diversity of religions, according to the pluralist perspective, there is something that makes them all valid and good (see Hick and Knitter 1986). But what is it?

The pluralists use a variety of terms, all of which they think can apply to all the religions. Some pluralists, like John Hick in his early days, refer to the common thread within all religions simply as "God," urging their fellow Christians to recognize that just as the planets revolve around the sun rather than the Earth, so the religions revolve around God and not around Christ (Hick 1993). But Hick later realized that the term God is still too Christian or too Jewish and would not be recognized by Buddhists; so Hick now refers to that which is common to all religions as Reality (Hick 1989). Other general terms used by pluralists to indicate the common thread in all religions are the Transcendent, the Absolute, the Great Mystery. Those terms, one can say with the Buddhists, are meant to be not definitions but indicators; they are not the moon itself but fingers pointing to the moon. The pluralist effort to find the common thread seems to be the most promising.

But once again, there are serious warnings that the pluralist approach is fabricating rather than discovering the common thread. The problem has to do with the neutral standpoint that the pluralists are seeking outside all the religions. I believe with the critics that it is impossible to see all religions at once, that in order to stand, we have to stand someplace, on something. That means within a particular cultural, historical, and religious context. To try to find a place outside of all the religions where one can see all the religions at once is like trying to find a place to stand outside of this world. When you look at all the religions, you are always looking at them from one of them, whether you realize it or not. Therefore, when the pluralists speak of Reality or the Transcendent or the Great Mystery, they are working with their own particular, historical, cultural, and religious understanding of those terms.

So contrary to their intentions, the pluralists are subject to the same pitfall as those with a religious approach. They end up defining the common thread according to their own criteria; but this time, the criteria are not religious but philosophical. The common thread turns out not to be very common at all; in fact, it turns out to be "my" thread. And I end up imposing it on, rather than discovering it within, the other religions.

What results from all the efforts to find a common thread--the religious, the mystical, the philosophical--is that the real differences between the religions are lost, or not taken seriously. In the effort to find the universal, common thread, the differing threads of the various religions are overlooked. Many scholars as well as many religious people insist that to neglect differences in an effort to find the common is, in the end, to destroy, or at least water down, the identity of the various religions. To insist that we must find what we have in common is to place in danger our differing identities, and that is why many people today are giving up the search for the common thread among religions.

The Abandoned Search for the Common Thread

We are supposed to be living in a postmodern age, one that is wary of universals, or common threads, not because they are bad in themselves but because they almost inevitably suppress diversity and individual differences. That attitude often comes in expressions of extreme multiculturalism. In fact, the position I am trying to describe could well be termed multireligionism.

But the roots of that postmodern perspective run deeper than just the fear of losing diversity. Postmodernism rests on a realization that I find hard to deny and which we have already heard in some of the criticisms of the search for the common thread: Everything we experience and know and claim to be true is filtered through our social-cultural context. We cannot, as it were, look at reality with the naked eye; reality, like the universe, is too complex to really see without a cultural telescope.

But the postmoderns not only point out that we need telescopes to see ourselves, the world, and the Transcendent; they also force us to face two other facts: (a) each of the telescopes is limited; each enables us to see something, but that something is only a part of the universe of truth and reality and (b) there are many telescopes throughout the world and history--and they are all different, sometimes very different.

And that is why people with a postmodern consciousness raise a serious objection to any kind of search for common threads within the religions; they warn that looking for the common thread among all the religions is like looking for the one telescope by which we can see the entire religious universe--the one telescope that all the religions of the world would be able to use. Such a telescope, they insist, does not and cannot exist. To try to find or construct such a telescope is to commit what Jews and Christians would call the sin of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1-9). It would be the idolatrous effort to construct a religious telescope that would be able to reach into all the heavens and embrace the entirety of God's truth; it would be to construct a religious language that all peoples would have to speak--a religious language that "says it all" about God. Any human construct that claims to communicate all of God's truth is an idol. But furthermore, such a telescope or language that all peoples would be able to use would, like the Tower of Babel, create a unity that destroys the diverse religious languages that are also part of God's creation. "E pluribus unum," we say: Out of the many, one. But if the one telescope, or the one common thread, destroys or maims the many in its determination to create unity, then it becomes an idol that not only takes God's place but demands human sacrifice.

So for the postmodernists, diversity, or manyness, is the fundamental and most fruitful fact of God's creation. That is why they reject any efforts to find a common or universal thread within the diversity of religions. A thread that was truly common to all the religions could come only at the price of suppressing or neglecting the diversity of religions. And that is why postmodernists make a clear choice for diversity and difference and why they warn against all attempts to find the common thread that will finally weave the religions together. For this reason, S. Mark Heim, of postmodern proclivities, recently published a book on the religions called *Salvations*. He claims that as there are different religions, there are different salvations sought after in each of them. Salvation for the Buddhist is very different from what it is for the Christian or Muslim (Heim 1995). *Vive la difference!*

Postmodernist theologians recognize the need for the religions of the world to live together, and that means that they must talk with each other (Placher 1989 and Griffiths 1991). But the purpose of such interreligious engagement is to respect each other's differences, not to overcome them. Postmodernists come together not to look for the common thread within all of us but to learn about and respect how different our threads really are. From this postmodern perspective, then, religions do not come together to dialogue; dialogue means that two or more parties learn from each other with the willingness, even eagerness, to be changed or transformed through the encounter. For postmodernists, religions talk to each other to exchange information that will lead to mutual tolerance of each other. Postmodernists propose a kind of "good neighbor policy" for the religions: Let us be good neighbors to each other, talk a bit over our fences, help each other out here and there, but let us stay in our own backyards. To try to do more, will inevitably mean that we lose our different identities (with the rich and powerful neighbors taking advantage of the poorer neighbors).

The Search Renewed: Different Threads with a Common Pattern

I have reviewed the efforts to search for the common thread that I believe do not work. I have also explored the reasons why many today are abandoning the search as not only useless, but dangerous. I think there is much to be learned from both camps. The postmodernists are right

when they tell us that the stubborn and rich reality of religious diversity is here to stay; therefore there is no such thing as a common thread that will weave them all together in a neat unity. And yet, I think the postmodernists are deeply and dangerously wrong if they give up the search for something that will enable a greater unity of religions than now exists. The merit of those who are searching for that common thread is that they are animated by a desire to achieve greater interreligious unity. We need such unity. We have to be more than just good neighbors to each other (although that certainly is better than being bad neighbors, as is the case in Northern Ireland and India and the Middle East!). The religious neighbors of the world have to come together in new ways because our common neighborhood is in such great danger.

As I look around the "neighborhood" of the world in which all of the religions are living, I see much pain and great dangers. If our human species is going to do something to address those problems the religions of the world are going to have to work together, act together, cooperate as never before--and here I come to the heart of this essay.

I suggest that we begin that process not by looking for something within the religions (the elusive common thread) but for something that exists outside of the religions; something that all of them cannot ignore; something that stirs them, unsettles them, challenges them; something that calls for a response from each of them--a common set of problems. That common concern or common set of challenges would be the pattern or design used to fashion the uniquely woven threads of the religions into a new garment of interreligious unity. Such unity would not be a new world religion but a new kind of "community of communities," which would be held together and nourished by the common task that all of them are committed to.

The common task or the common design can be found in a reality that many in the so-called First World countries try to hide from: the sufferings and the dangers that rack and threaten our species and our Earth. I am referring to the spectrum of human and ecological suffering that is due, for the most part, to the way some human beings exploitatively and selfishly treat other human beings, other living species, and the Earth itself, which include the following: The human suffering due to extreme poverty, the kind of poverty that murders people with the weapons of starvation, inadequate medical care, and homelessness: We know that today one out of four or five members of the human family live in a form of poverty that either kills or severely maims.

The suffering that results from violence, including military violence: All too often that kind of violence is related to poverty; the exploiters use violence to maintain the status quo, the exploited, to change it. Or, it may be the violence of our American inner cities--racial violence, domestic violence--which so often results from the frustration of those caught in poverty and joblessness.

A form of suffering that threatens us all whether we live in Harlem or Beverly Hills: the suffering of the Earth that results from the violent, greedy exploitation of the resources and life-sustaining capacities of this planet. In the atmosphere, in the rain forests, in the depletion of nonrenewable energies, in lost topsoil, in diminishing diversity of species, in the ozone--we are destroying the Mother who gives us life.

Global Responsibility as the Pattern for a New Kind of Interreligious Dialogue

In describing the forms of human suffering, I believe I am describing something that will be universally recognized by all of the religions. By that I mean not just that eco-human suffering is an objective reality that people of differing faiths will recognize as threatening the well-being of millions, perhaps all of us. Such suffering is also, I believe, a subjective reality that will stir similar responses in members of all the religions, no matter what their particular beliefs about God, the soul, or afterlife. Broadly speaking, that response will be along the lines of what the Catholic theologian Edward Schillebeeckx describes as a "negative experience of contrast": Faced with such suffering, religious persons will spontaneously and resolutely say "No!" They will feel, and feel strongly, that something must be done. They will feel moved or called to reach out, to do something, to alleviate or remove such suffering. I am claiming that persons in whatever religion who are taking their religion and spiritual lives seriously, and who have felt what Jesus called Abba or Buddha called enlightenment or what the seers of the Upanishads termed moksha, will feel "claimed" or challenged by such specters of suffering; they will not remain indifferent. Their way of responding to this suffering and to its challenge may, and will, differ. Their explanations as to the root cause of such suffering may also differ markedly. But they will all seek to respond, to offer some kind of a remedy or means of dealing with such suffering.

I am not claiming that all people in all religions will feel this spontaneous no in the face of the eco-human suffering of poverty, violence, and environmental devastation. But I am asserting, on the basis of what I see happening in all the major religious families of the Earth today, that there will be many followers within all of the religious traditions who feel claimed and challenged by the specter of suffering. In this article I hope to appeal to those religious people who are not searching for a common thread but are discovering and responding to common ethical responsibilities.

In the last World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1993 the majority of the discussions and presentations dealt not with explicitly religious themes such as the nature of the divine or life after death but with the practical realities of suffering due to injustice, conflict, and especially environmental havoc. It was such themes that enabled people to talk to each other--not just to tolerate each other but to search together for shared responses to shared concerns. The power of ecological and human suffering to gather the religions together in new ways can be seen in a variety of contemporary movements:

--in the worldwide effort to formulate a final draft of a Declaration of a Global Ethics, to be signed and supported by representatives of all the Earth's religious communities (Kung and Kuschel 1993; Earth Ethics 1997);

--in similar international efforts to formulate and affirm, interreligiously, an Earth Charter that will spell out the rights of the Earth and its sentient inhabitant that must be respected by all Earth-dwellers (Earth Ethics 1997);

--in the meetings around the world to established a United Religions--an organization that would provide a permanent forum for the religions of the world to discuss, analyze, and respond to the global problems facing all peoples (United Religions Initiative).

What is taking shape in that ethically oriented encounter of religions, stimulated by shared responses to common eco-human problems, is a new form of dialogue among religions--a globally responsible dialogue. As a globally responsible dialogue, it has a different starting point, a different heuristic, but it ends up with basically the same results (or even better) as have traditional forms of interreligious dialogue.

In the globally responsible dialogue that I am suggesting, people of different religions begin their religious conversations with ethics not religion. They look at the ethical needs of their shared neighborhood--the human or environmental suffering--and that is where they meet. They ask each other what they want to do together. So a globally responsible encounter of religions begins with praxis, with acting together, with commitment to resolve commonly defined problems, with the effort of talking together about how the different solutions that each religion brings can be coordinated to relieve the common problem of suffering.

Secondly, that shared concern and shared praxis provides what I called the "heuristic" for the encounter of religions. A "heuristic" is that which guides us in our efforts to understand something or someone; it is like a flashlight that helps us find our way over some obscure terrain. In a globally responsible dialogue of religions, what will enable people from different religious background and visions to understand each other's differences will be, precisely, the way they have discovered and come to know each other through their shared ethical concerns and actions. To put it simply, religious people who act together stay together. After they have struggled to overcome situations of poverty, suppression, and degradation of the environment, they will want to know more about each other's religious convictions. After I see my Buddhist friend lay his life on the line in confronting a paramilitary group that just attacked a village, I will want to learn from him what makes him tick religiously. What enabled him to act with such clarity and conviction?

So the praxis of acting together will lead religious people to talk together--to enter into religious dialogue. But it will not only lead them to talk about religious issues, it will enable them to hear and understand each other as never before. After I have seen Buddhist beliefs put into practice, I will be able to grasp them more adequately when they are put into words. A personal example for me is the way my friend Sulak Sivaraksa from Thailand enabled me to understand the Four Noble Truths after I saw how he lived and interpreted them in his efforts to help the poor and the rain forests in his country (Sivaraksa 1988). Father Aloysius Pieris, S. J. has helped his Hindu and Buddhist coworkers in Sri Lanka to understand the uniqueness of Jesus by letting them first see how his commitment to Jesus is embodied in his own preferential option for the poor. As some of Aloy's Buddhist friends then told him, "If this is who Jesus is and what he means, then we would like to receive him in Holy Communion!" (Pieris 1993).

So an ethically initiated, or globally responsible, dialogue, although it begins with ethics and with shared activity, does not end there. It will bear more explicitly religious fruits; it will call the persons who have acted together to talk together--and to pray or meditate or celebrate

together. In fact, I think that is how the mystics from different religions can identify more clearly with what they have in common beneath their differing mystical images and languages. Mystics who have compassion together and then act together in some concrete way will be able to pray and mediate together with even greater results. My experience leads me to propose that an interreligious dialogue nurtured by shared ethical praxis is somehow qualitatively different from dialogue that proceeds only through study or prayer.

What I propose contains a paradox: The problems and sufferings, which are now so evident throughout our world are also offering the religions of the world the opportunity for a new kind of dialogue--a globally responsible dialogue. And in this kind of dialogue, the motivation behind the search for a common thread is given a new direction and hope. As I have said, the problems of our Earth and of our species are not providing a common thread, but they are offering us a common pattern or design that all the religions of the world can use together to create a new cloak of religious cooperation and unity that will protect and heal our wounded, ailing Earth. In so doing, in working together to relieve the sufferings of the world, in coming to know each other and learn from each other as they go about this common task of globally responsible dialogue, the religions of the world will be helping to transform not only our world, but themselves. It is my hope that any religious person or community who truly engages in such a globally responsible dialogue with other religious communities will not remain the same; they will keep their identity yet they will be transformed. And it is also my hope, perhaps an even bolder hope--that through such a globally responsible dialogue, not only the world but also the religions themselves will be changed--and that ever greater diversity will produce ever greater unity.

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