

Library Full of Doors

Assembling a sampler of representative studies worthy of this book's subtitle, *How the Human Family Meets Its Spiritual Needs*, requires hard choices leading to sins of omission, an occupational hazard for theologians. Teaching world religions at Unity Institute® and Seminary often feels like leading students into a vast library full of doors. Each portal represents a major faith group: *Baha'i, Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Hinduism, Neo-paganism, Shinto, Sikhism, Tribal-Indigenous Religions, Voodoo, Zoroastrianism*—an endless parade of faiths and practices.

Step inside and what do you find? Another room of doors! Each new doorway leads to antechambers of subgroups, denominations, and schisms of the faith marked on the outer entrance. The floor upon which we stand merely represents religious traditions *today*. Think about the levels below and above, the history and potential of each faith.

Open the Christian door, for example. Inside you will find another hall with doors leading everywhere—from the snake-handling euphoria of extreme Pentecostalism to majestic rhythms of incense-cloaked Russian Orthodox worship; Quaker Silent Meeting to boisterous melodies of African-American Baptist churches. In what bizarre chemistry of faith does a Lutheran and a Jehovah's Witness share common DNA? Yet they all claim to be Christians. Who is qualified to say they are not? Every Christian group traces its family tree back to Jesus Christ and the disciples, but that was apparently the last time we all belonged to the same household. Some find this lack of continuity disturbing. For example, take the following quote from a website of a conservative church in Pennsylvania:

The New Testament condemns religious division. Christ prayed for the unity of his disciples (John 11) so that the world might believe the Father had sent him into the world. Religious division (denominationalism) is contrary to his will and defeats his purpose.⁷

Others consider the subdivisions in religious thinking as natural, even healthy. Certainly, as best-selling author and biblical scholar Bart Ehrman has demonstrated in his book *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew*, Christianity has never been monolithic. Variability in doctrine and ritual dates to the period immediately after the death of Jesus. Some of the differences were so extreme that modern Christians often have difficulty accepting the variations that did not prevail as a legitimate part of the historic Church.

The wide diversity of early Christianity may be seen above all in the theological beliefs embraced by people who understood themselves to be followers of Jesus. In the second and third centuries there were, of course, Christians who believed in one God. But there were others who insisted that there were two. Some said there were 30. Others claimed there were 365 ... there were Christians who believed that Jesus' death brought about the salvation of the world. There were other Christians who thought that Jesus' death had nothing to do with the salvation of the world. There were yet other Christians who said that Jesus never died.⁸

Multiplicity in thought and practice exists in every religious tradition on Earth, but Christianity in the United States has taken the art of diversity to a new zenith. American *denominationalism* is the new orthodoxy.

The practice of denominationalism came into being in the 18th century during the Evangelical Revival, but the idea started with the Puritans. The whole idea of denominationalism is a reaction to sectarianism. Sectarianism is exclusive, meaning that each sect of a religion believes that its way is the right way and that no other way is acceptable. Denominationalism as a concept is more inclusive, because it espouses that one particular Christian group is really just a part of a bigger religious community—the Christian Church. Denominationalism means that each subgroup is accepted and acknowledged, and no one group can represent the entirety of Christianity.⁹

Gathering as equals who are not the same, we can learn from one another by beginning with words like, “*Here’s what works for me ...*” then listening with an open mind as they reciprocate. We do not need to agree on theology to get along. Besides, that will not happen in this lifetime—probably not in the lifetime of our species. We do need to disagree agreeably, which is a basic ingredient for peace in a pluralistic world.

What Am I Doing in Prayer?

Without aiming to agree on everything, let’s begin our look at *The Many Faces of Prayer* with the most basic question: What am I doing in prayer? More specifically, to Whom (or what) am I praying? The power of the mountain, a river god, an honored ancestor, the Patron Saint of Editors (there is one—St. John Bosco¹⁰), or the solitary Creator of the cosmos, or maybe the divinity within me? Am I *communicating* with a Presence and Power beyond myself—engaging in an *I-Thou* relationship with my Higher Power—or *reflecting* upon something deep in my consciousness? Can prayer be both, or neither? What kind of link could exist between my apparently limited lifespan and the divine? For that matter, what is

the divine anyway? How does my cultural worldview, which I inherited at birth, affect my method of prayer?

All of the following rhetorical questions represent religious worldviews *currently held* by religious traditions on this planet:

- If I am the creation of a Supreme Being, totally mortal without a shred of divinity, how will my prayer be different than if I see myself as a localized expression of God-energy?
- If many gods and goddesses roam the world, blessing and cursing at their discretion, what kind of religious duties will I create in my vigorous attempt to avoid offending while actively pleasing those whimsical divinities?
- How is my prayer affected if not all gods are good? What if the supernatural world includes malicious deities, evil spirits, or mischievous demigods who take delight in bringing chaos and ruin upon mortals?
- What if there is an ongoing struggle between the forces of good and evil, a celestial civil war in which humans are bystanders who nevertheless take collateral damage? How do I pray in a cosmic combat zone?
- How will I approach an All-Powerful Supreme Being, an Ethical God who punishes wrong and rewards the right?
- Or what if the Cosmos itself is divine, yet containing lesser components such as falling stars, tigers, human beings, major and minor gods and goddesses, heavens and hells? What kind of prayer evolves in that spiritual ecosystem?

Culture, history, geography, and longstanding tradition powerfully shape every child's worldview. Slightly different shades of belief bring significantly different results. A Roman Catholic monotheist might pray to a Saint or the Blessed Virgin Mary, which a Baptist or Methodist monotheist is not likely to do. Muslims pray facing Mecca; Mormons do not.

Many Hindus believe in reincarnation and a multitude of gods and goddesses; many Buddhists believe in reincarnation and no god whatsoever.

When children grow to adulthood, they will sometimes reject the religious tradition in which they were born. Dalton Roberts—multitalented poet, philosopher, teacher, musician, songwriter, author, newspaper columnist, and formerly the highest elected official in Chattanooga, Tennessee—took this thought to its logical conclusion in his weekly *Sunday Journal* column:

After my early disenchantment with religion, I went through years of trying to not believe. I don't just mean to not believe in religion, but to not believe in anything so I could make sure I had an open mind. Yet all the time my thinking was leading me to make decisions on what I was thinking. Self-honesty finally made me see that I was always believing in something—tarot cards, fate, luck, the law of averages, science—you name it. I came to see it is *as impossible to not believe as it is not to think*.¹¹

Even disbelief comes with a hidden program running in the background. Some children, especially in Western Europe and North America today, are raised in homes without any formal religious affiliation. However, dominant religio-ethical themes provide a cultural context in our secular world, whether people are churchgoers or not. When American or British atheists reject God, they are not usually rejecting the Hindu Preserver *Vishnu*, the Māori god of the sea *Tangaroa*, or the African storm god *Shango*. Even Satanists rely upon Jewish, Christian, and Muslim mythologies for the main characters in their anti-pantheon. An urban legend illustrates this point. During the Protestant-Catholic

disturbances in Northern Ireland of the mid-20th century, a young man approaches a barricaded checkpoint and is halted by the guard.

“Catholic or Protestant?” the sentry demands.

“Atheist,” the stranger replies cockily.

The guard is not impressed. “Catholic atheist or Protestant atheist?”¹²

Preset categories of thought shape the world and influence us even when we categorically deny their existence. We grope in the dark to find answers, yet it is the questions that elude them. Those who forsake Christianity seldom abandon Jesus’ ethical mandate to love our neighbor as ourselves, return not evil with evil, treat neighbors and strangers with equal respect, show kindness to the poor and afflicted and gentleness toward children, and work for justice and equality for all people. The more we reflect on this “simple act” of prayer, the more we realize the complex assumptions and embedded theologies we bring to the process of seeking—or rejecting—communion with the divine.

Anyone who has studied the religions of humanity knows our species has displayed a high degree of creativity in meeting its spiritual needs. In his 1966 book, *Religion: An Anthropological View*, Anthony F.C. Wallace noted, “Even the so-called ‘monotheistic’ religions invariably include an elaborate pantheon.” Wallace went on to list the supernatural beings in the complex mix of historic religion and pop culture of the small American town in which he grew up. The list hit all the players—God, Jesus, the Devil, Saints, and on to minor Judeo-Christian characters—then continued with less obviously “religious” but clearly present supernatural entities—ghosts, souls in some kind of afterlife, witches, Santa Claus, and fairies, plus depersonalized supernatural forces such as superstitions. Wallace added, “Not everyone ‘believed in’ all of these

supernatural beings, at least not all at the same time ...” But the network of supernatural and supersensory phenomenon that constitutes a pantheon is much more extensive than most people credit.¹³

Other observations from the social sciences can help make sense of the complex world of religious traditions. When surveying unfamiliar territory in cross-cultural prayer studies, looking through the lens of a social science tool known as *cultural relativism* can help chart the way.

Cultural Relativism

Cultural Relativism is the view that moral or ethical systems, which vary from culture to culture, are all equally valid and no one system is really “better” than any other. This is based on the idea that there is no ultimate standard of good or evil, so every judgment about right and wrong is a product of society. Therefore, any opinion on morality or ethics is subject to the cultural perspective of each person. Ultimately, this means that no moral or ethical system can be considered the “best,” or “worst,” and no particular moral or ethical position can actually be considered “right” or “wrong.”¹⁴

The religions of humanity represent an array of beliefs and practices, some quite simple, others highly complex. Although diversity of thought is unavoidable, undue emphasis on the differences among the faiths has led to mutual excommunications, crusades, holy wars, and acts of genocide, as the critics of “organized religion” have rightly observed. The history of bigotry-based violence has driven some progressive thinkers to declare parity among world religions, summarized by a charming ditty from the Baha’i Faith:

God is one, man is one
 And all the religions are one.
 Land and sea, hill and valley
 Under the beautiful sun.
 God is one; man is one
 And all the religions agree.
 When everyone learns the three one-nesses
 We'll have world unity.¹⁵

It is politically correct, especially among today's Cultural Creatives, to identify points of unity and avoid mentioning the disagreements. Certainly, affable relations between faith groups require mutual respect, but there is a vast difference between accepting the principle of *cultural relativism*—which proclaims all truth is local—and declaring all religions proclaim the same message.¹⁶ They clearly do not, and never have. Teachers of the great faiths usually addressed specific issues endemic to their times and places. They were not abstract philosophers but practical leaders who solved existential problems and answered the everyday questions of a living community. When their successors continued the faith, they adapted its ideas and practices to new circumstances.

These differences cannot be ignored without discounting the unique contributions of all communities of faith. To affirm cultural relativism—all religions are *equal*—is not the same as pronouncing all religions the *same*. There are genuine differences in the way human communities have answered basic questions about Ultimate Concerns: life, death, eternity, and humanity's place in the Cosmos. To lump all religious traditions into one amorphous "Interfaith" heap only denigrates the rich diversity of world faiths. We come to the interfaith table as members of a culture. Dialogue begins when we recognize that theological differences have as much to teach us as similarities do.