

Are All Religions the Same

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Q: Are all religions the same? The Dalai Lama, who just celebrated his 75th birthday, often refers to the 'oneness' of all religions, the idea that all religions preach the same message of love, tolerance and compassion. Historians Karen Armstrong and Huston Smith agree that major faiths are more alike than not. But in his new book "God is not One," religion scholar and On Faith panelist Steve Prothero says views by the Dalai Lama, Armstrong and Smith that all religions "are different paths to the same God" is untrue, disrespectful and dangerous. Who's right? Why?

I have been known to change my mind on occasion, but I am going to stick to my guns on this one.

With all due deference to Armstrong and Smith and the Dalai Lama (not to mention Gandhi and Ramakrishna and many of the great mystics), I have to insist that the world's religions differ, and differ fundamentally. They address very different problems and propose very different solutions. They affirm different truths, practice different rituals, tell different stories, follow different leaders, and maintain different institutions.

As I argued in [God is Not One](#), Christians do not go on the hajj to Mecca and Muslims do not profess their faith in the Trinity. Anyone who says otherwise is not paying attention, and anyone who says such differences do not matter is condescending. The hajj may not matter to philosophers of religious unity, but it matters to ordinary Muslims. In fact, it is one of the Five Pillars of Islam. And the Trinity matters to ordinary Christians. In fact, it provides the outline for the all-important Nicene Creed.

I know that persons of goodwill are supposed to pretend that the world's religions are different paths up the same mountain. To say otherwise is to invite religious warfare and to label yourself illiberal. But we can do better than pretend pluralism. True pluralism does not insist on remaking Islam in the image of Christianity or Christianity in the image of Islam. It recognizes the deep diversity across the great religions and inside each of them.

Whenever anyone tells me all religions are different paths up the same mountain, I ask them what stands at the peak. Not surprisingly, they tell me different things. What unites the religions is belief in God, some say. Others say the unity of God and humanity lies at the heart of each. Still others insist that the apex of all religions is compassion. So even among religious lumpers we find religious diversity.

Moreover, in every case we see thinkers unwittingly remaking other religions in their own image. Should we be surprised that the Dalai Lama, whose own religion emphasizes compassion (*karuna*) finds that virtue at the peak of the world's religions? Should we be surprised that Huston Smith, whose own religion emphasizes monotheism (albeit in Trinitarian form), finds the one God there?

But God is not one. Or to put it more carefully, the world's religions differ on matters as central as the mathematics of divinity. Many Buddhists affirm zero gods, and many Hindus affirm many. Moreover, the character of divinity varies widely from god to god. No infant would mistake Hinduism's Kali for Christianity's Christ. Why should we?

Perhaps I am missing something, but I have yet to find a view of interreligious unity that does not reek of colonialism and empire. And as long as we insist on the dogma that all religions are essentially the same we are bound to imagine that all religions are essentially like our own. This approach blinds us to the unique beauty in each religion, and prevents us from making sense of religious conflict worldwide.

Never has interreligious dialogue been more crucial than it is today. But ideologies of religious sameness impoverish and straitjacket us, turning so-called interreligious dialogue into monologue--an echo-chamber among like minded-religious liberals.

Those new atheists (Hitchens, Harris, Dawkins) who say all religions are the same and bad are wrong. So are the perennialists who say all religions are the same and good. What we need today is an approach to the world's religions that recognizes the good and the bad in each, and the differences as well as the similarities. Only then can we hope to make sense of a world in which these rival religions play such a powerful role.

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Not even all Christians follow same path

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The opinion expressed by the Dalai Lama as well as Armstrong and Smith is certainly well intended and aspirational. Unfortunately, It is at least partially wrong. We may be more alike than not, but there are competing world views. Many people have fought and died over religious differences. That is not a good thing, but it is a reality.

As a Catholic in a heavily Protestant (primarily Baptist) area, I am certainly aware of the advances that have been made in mutual respect among religions. The vibrant Catholic community that currently exists at Ole Miss often comes as a surprise to those who knew Mississippi 40 years ago or only through the movies. The truth is that all Christians here in the South have a world view that is more similar than different, but we still have a long way to go.

I have recently been involved with an international organization called [Pave the Way Foundation](#). The leaders of this organization are dedicated to knocking down barriers that separate people of faith. Through projects like an infant milk exchange - Jews in America buy formula for Palestinian babies in the Holy Land and Muslims in the United States buy formula for Jewish babies - Pave the Way is trying to

eliminate non-theological obstacles between the faiths.

I have also been involved in some interreligious dialogue projects, including two meetings with Iranian Ayatollahs and the discussions that led to the "Nashville Declaration on Theologians under Hitler." Discussions like this are important, and they might lead to important developments, but to those involved in them they often highlight the theological differences that still separate us. To deny those differences is untrue and disrespectful. In an eternal salvation kind of way, it may also be dangerous.

One thought that comes to mind for me is a couple that I know quite well. They were practicing Baptists, but after much prayer and study, they were drawn to investigate Catholicism. They signed up for the "Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults" (RCIA) classes that are offered in every (or most every) Catholic parish. At the very first meeting, the nun running the class used the example of all faiths using different paths but going up the same mountain.

This greatly upset the couple. After all, if they were already going up the same mountain, why were they bothering to take classes? And what about all the study they had already put into their journey? Was there really no difference between a Baptist, a Catholic, a Methodist, or a Jew? If that is what the Catholic Church taught, the hell with it. They quit the class and started their search all over.

After another 10 years of independent study, the family (now expanded with several children) came back to the Catholic Church. They vowed to take the RCIA class all the way through to the end. Neither the nun nor the classes had changed, but the husband explained to me that they became Catholic despite, not because of, RCIA.

The family felt that Catholicism was (and is) important to their eternal salvation. To them, the "different sides of the mountain" theory may sound nice, but it is very dangerous, because it keeps people from seeking the truth and finding the best path. It almost pushed them away from the Church to which they now entrust their eternal fate.

So, while we can and should work toward tolerance and understanding, we should not trivialize or overlook theological differences that can be very important.

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