RE-LIGO

INTRODUCTION

Four persons, a Persian, an Arab, a Turk and a Greek, were traveling together and received a present of a dirhem. The Persian said he would buy "angur" with it, the Arab said he would buy "inab", while the Turk and the Greek were for buying "uzum" and "astaphil", respectively. Now all of these words mean one and the same thing, viz., "grapes"; but, owing to their ignorance of each other's language, they fancied they each wanted to buy something different, and accordingly a violent quarrel arose between them. At last a wise man who knew all their languages came up and explained to them that they were wishing for one and the same thing.¹ (Rumi)

My final interview for the tenure-track position at DCCC included a teaching demonstration: I had fifteen minutes to define ‘religion’. After fifteen years of graduate work and a dissertation, this should have been an easy task, but the sheer vastness of the word made it difficult to outline. I looked around and found dozens of definitions of religion from respectable sources, such as

"[A religion is] any system of thought and action shared by a group which gives the individual a framework of orientation and an object of devotion"² (Erich Fromm)

Or

"…a set of symbolic forms and acts which relate man to the ultimate conditions of his existence"³ (Robert Bellah)

And even

"… the sight of the oppressed creature. It is the opium of the people"⁴

None of these satisfied me until I considered the etymological roots of the word itself. Religion is a word of Latin origin, made up of the prefix ‘re’ meaning ‘again’, and the verb ‘ligo’, meaning ‘to bind, to tie, to connect together’. Religion literally means to bind together again, to reconnect.
To reconnect with what? The goal of all religious paths is, or at least should be, to reconnect us with 1) the transcendental and awe-aspiring 2) with our fellow beings 3) with our own true self.

1) Religious instructions usually focus on transcendental truths and virtues rather than ordinary human experience. By showing us the ‘big picture’, a religion hopes to give us a less self-centered, more universal perspective where we may rise above the daily pull of desires and preoccupation. Religion helps us discriminate between the vital and the trivial, it opens a door so that we can peek at the ultimate nature of things. The only risk of such discovery is that everything else may pale in comparison.

2) The goal of religion is to reconnect us with our fellow human beings beyond ethnic, linguist, cultural or racial boundaries. As Thich Nhath Hanh eloquently stated “We are here to awaken from the illusion of separateness”. Love, compassion and empathy are the expressions of the wisdom of the most influential personalities of human history, from Jesus to the Buddha, from the seers of the Upanishads to the prophets of Israel. Religions teach us how to gain such wisdom and finally live in peace.

3) Religions help us become whole again. We have the tendency to separate the body from the mind, the mind from the spirit, the conscious from the unconscious, but the result is a schizophrenic being unable to find the desirable balance for a fulfilling life. Being primarily concerned with actions, religion may be the force that gets us out of bed in the morning to perform tasks we never dreamed possible. Its study and practice can uplift the mind out of its self-created hell, sometimes adding ideas and sometimes just dropping concepts we no longer need. Finally, religion opens our hearts and reveals our innate goodness, our true humanity.

Many people think that religion is something you do in your spare time, something to occupy Sunday mornings, a tedious routine that has lost its connection with real life. Far from it, religion can be the greatest adventure of our lives: it is the reunification of all aspects of our being, the spiritual evolution that will propel us into a world we can barely imagine beyond selfishness and death.

Although religion means to reconnect, historically it has done quite the opposite; it has divided us, produced irrational behavior and fueled conflict. How do religious people justify the horrors carried out by their religion? Are there ethical or spiritual values in some religion that are inherently opposed to another, therefore barring the possibility of coexistence? In order to answer these questions, I compared the teachings of the original founders of the five major religions, and the result was most revealing: although each religion differs sharply at its normative, esoteric level – in its doctrines, myths, rituals and experiences – on the esoteric level there is a strikingly unity of experience. At the deepest level, all legitimate religions eventually transcend dogma and ritual to merge on the fundamental oneness of existence. Religious dogma
may be in conflict, but religious experience is in perfect convergence. With this discovery I found both the goal and the method of my teaching.

To prove my point and to introduce the comparative methodology of this textbook, I have compiled a short list of principles that are shared by all major religions. We can start a meaningful dialogue right here.

**The Golden Rule**

You shall love your neighbor as yourself. *Judaism and Christianity. Bible, Leviticus 19.18*

Whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them. *Christianity. Bible, Matthew 7.12*

Not one of you is a believer until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself. *Islam. Forty Hadith of an-Nawawi 13*

One should not behave towards others in a way which is disagreeable to oneself. This is the essence of morality. All other activities are due to selfish desire. *Hinduism. Mahabharata, Anusasana Parva 113.8*

Comparing oneself to others in such terms as "Just as I am so are they, just as they are so am I," he should neither kill nor cause others to kill. *Buddhism. Sutta Nipata 705*

**Love/Compassion toward others**

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. *Christianity. John 13:34-35*

The world stands upon three things: upon the Law, upon worship, and upon showing kindness. *Judaism. Mishnah, Abot 1.2*

God enjoins justice, kindness, and charity to one's kindred, and forbids indecency, abomination, and oppression. He admonishes you so that you may take heed. *Islam. Qur'an 16.90*

What sort of religion can it be without compassion? You need to show compassion to all living beings. Compassion is the root of all religious faiths. *Hinduism. Basavanna, Vachana 247*

As a mother with her own life guards the life of her own child, let all-embracing embracing thoughts for all that lives be thine. *Buddhism. Khuddaka Patha, Metta Sutta*

**Selflessness/selfless service**

The best of men are those who are useful to others. *Islam. Hadith of Bukhari*

He who prays for his fellowman, while he himself has the same need, will be answered first. *Judaism. Talmud, Baba Kamma 92a*
Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. *Christianity. Philippians 2.3-4*

Strive constantly to serve the welfare of the world; by devotion to selfless work one attains the supreme goal in life. Do your work with the welfare of others always in mind. *Hinduism. Bhagavad Gita*

As a mother with her own life guards the life of her own child, let all-embracing thoughts for all that live be thine. *Buddhism. Khuddaka Patha, Metta Sutta*

**Control of the mind**

When a man lacks discrimination and his mind is uncontrolled, his senses are unmanageable, like the restive horses of a charioteer. But when a man has discrimination and his mind is controlled, his senses, like the well-broken horses of a charioteer, lightly obey the rein. *Hinduism. Katha Upanishad 1.3.3-6*

The Prophet declared, "We have returned from the lesser holy war (al jihad al-asghar) to the greater holy war (al jihad al-akbar)." They asked, "O Prophet of God, which is the greater war?" He replied, "Struggle against the lower self." *Islam. Hadith*

Though one should conquer a million men on the battlefield, yet he, indeed, is the noblest victor who has conquered himself. *Buddhism. Dhammapada 103*

He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city. *Judaism and Christianity. Proverbs 16.32*

**Judge not**

Happy is the person who finds fault with himself instead of finding fault with others. *Islam, Hadith*

He who sees others’ faults is ever irritable – his corruptions grow. *Buddhism, Dhammapada. 252-53*

Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your eye? *Christianity. Matthew 7:2*

**Harkening to the divine/truth**

Neglect not study of the Vedas. *Hinduism. Taittiriya Upanishad 1.11.1*

O how I love thy law! It is my meditation all the day. *Judaism and Christianity. Psalm 119.97*

I am leaving you a trust. So long as you cling to it you can’t go wrong. That is the rope God has extended from heaven to earth. *Islam. Hadith of Darimi 1*

Know that he who reads and recites the Law-flower Sutra— that man has adorned himself with the adornment of the Buddha, and so is carried by the Tathagata on his shoulder. *Buddhism. Lotus Sutra 10*
On the other hand, it would be disrespectful and naïve to assert that all religions are the same and that is not the intention of this book. Quite the opposite, the purpose here is to celebrate the richness of human diversity.

Critics may say that comparing religions is like comparing apples and oranges. This is true if we maintain a strict adherence to dogmatic beliefs, thus making dialogue impossible, but if we maintain an open mind, we may realize that apples and oranges are all just fruit.

The world has become so small that we do not have the luxury to ignore other people’s faith or believe that one system may be appropriate for everyone while denying the legitimacy of all others. We are inextricably interconnected and once we are willing to look closer, we will find that human insight is universally present in all religious traditions. This is the message of all the mystics, seers and prophets of humankind.

The goal of this book is not to create religious hybrids or plunge all traditions in relativism but rather to shine the light of understanding and tolerance where there is now conflict and begin the necessary dialogue that may lead us toward peaceful coexistence.

I have set out on this daunting task out of disappointment with the typical textbook on world religions. One after the other, these textbooks attempt to organize the different sets of beliefs into overly simplified headings – monotheism or monism, saviorist or pelagian, ethical or mystical, East or West - but no religion fits neatly into any of these definitions. I cannot completely avoid the ubiquitous definitions and various ‘-isms’ that are part of our language nor gloss over the historical and cultural backgrounds that gave rise to certain beliefs, but I can choose to focus on the goal of pluralism, on cooperation rather than competition.

I have listed below Panikkar’s “Rules of the Game”, a set of directives that must be kept in mind when attempting to achieve a meaningful inter-religious dialogue.

1. **It must be free from particular apologetics.** The Christian, Hindu or Buddhist must not approach the dialogue with the a priori idea of defending one's own tradition over or against the other.

2. **It must be free from general apologetics.** Those involved in interfaith dialogue should not see their task in terms of defending religion in general against the non-religious or anti-religious attitudes of secular society. This would turn the religious encounter into an ideological movement as well as being simplistic in its rejection of modern secular consciousness.
3. **One must face the challenge of conversion.** To be involved in religious encounter is a challenge and a risk. The truly religious person is not a fanatic who has all the answers but a pilgrim who is always open to the experience of grace and truth. One may lose one's life or even lose faith in one's own tradition--but one may also be born again and one's own tradition transformed.

4. **The historical dimension is necessary but not sufficient.** All religions risk limiting themselves to particular, historical interpretations which quickly become truncated ideologies. Religious encounter is a meeting of religious persons who carry both the power and the burden of their own religious traditions; yet they also carry the power and the burden of reinterpreting that tradition anew not breaking with past history, but carrying it forward in imaginative ways. Religious persons like all others belong to history; they also change history through responding to life's contemporary challenges.

5. **It is not just a congress of philosophy.** Religious encounter is a meeting of persons, not simply the meeting of minds. This does not deny the place of philosophy including the possible comparison of various religious systems. Nonetheless, doctrinal comparisons must be genuinely dialogical, that is, taking into account the reality of profoundly diverse worldviews. Much damage has been done by well intentioned Western scholars who assume that only Western philosophy has appropriate categories for understanding the world's religions. If anything, Eastern philosophy has a more sophisticated system for appropriating religious truth.

6. **It is not only a theological symposium.** Theologians have an important role, but religious encounter is not primarily concerned with theological systems of thought. Theologies emanate from a particular experience, revelation or event that is ipso facto specific to the particular religious tradition in question. Theologies are primarily concerned with religious beliefs; religious encounter is concerned with religious persons in their entirety. The meeting of persons is not at the level of belief, but at the level of faith in a truth that transcends beliefs, doctrines and theological systems.

7. **It is not merely an ecclesiastical endeavour.** Admitting that official encounter among representatives of the world's religious traditions is
today an inescapable duty, these must be seen as separate to and independent of the religious encounter of ordinary religious believers. The former will be primarily concerned, as they must, with the preservation of their own traditions in a religiously pluralistic world. The latter will be freer to try new ways and risk new solutions . . . and to be genuinely open to the multireligious experience.

8. **It is a religious encounter in faith, hope and love.** Whereas beliefs, ideologies, doctrines and theologies divide, faith unites. Hope is at once a truly human and a profoundly religious attitude, often linked to the religious notion of sacrifice: one's eschatological hope for the world and ourselves enters the heart of the dialogue overriding fear, weakness and prejudice. Love seeks truth, but it also impels us toward our fellow human beings, leading us to discover in them what is lacking in us. In faith, hope and love, one yearns for the common recognition of truth that does not obliterate the differences or mute the voices of any tradition.

9. **The primacy of intra-religious dialogue.** Before entering into an inter-religious dialogue, one must first plumb the reality of one’s own tradition. This is to say that intra-religious dialogue is primary.\(^{vi}\)

Since this textbook is for an introductory survey of world religions to be covered in one semester, I had to make difficult choices about what to include and what to leave out:

A. I chose to discuss only the five major religions, i.e. Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

B. Not all theological, philosophical or cultural aspects of each religion are dealt with completely. My hope is that this first view of other people’s religions may stimulate an appetite for farther spiritual research.

C. Not all specific rituals, sects or points of view are listed in this book, but only the most widely shared principles, with an emphasis on the values taught by each original founder or seer.
The Rabbi from Cracow

The following story is an apt metaphor of the spiritual journey in which we are about to embark. As we move with an open mind from one religion to the next, the constant work of comparison will not diminish your faith, but it will strengthen it and will give you a deeper, more holistic method to describe the human religious experience. This is an urgent activity that takes courage and an open mind.

It is a brief story, told of the Rabbi Eisik, son of Rabbi Jekel, who lived in the ghetto of Cracow, the capital of Poland. He had remained unbroken in his faith, through years of affliction, and was a pious servant of the Lord his God.

One night, as the pious and faithful Rabbi Eisik slept, he had a dream: the dream enjoined him to proceed afar, to the Bohemian capital, Prague, where he would discover a hidden treasure, buried beneath the principal bridge leading to the castle of the Bohemian king. The Rabbi was surprised and put off his going. But the dream recurred twice again. After the third call, he bravely girded his loins and set forth on the quest.

Arriving at the city of his destiny, Rabbi Eisik discovered sentries at the bridge, and these guarded it day and night; so that he did not venture to dig. He only returned every morning and loitered around until dusk, looking at the bridge, watching the sentries, studying unostentatiously the masonry and the soil. At length, the captain of the guards, struck by the old man’s persistence, approached, and gently inquired whether he had lost something or perhaps was waiting for someone to arrive. Rabbi Eisik recounted, simply and confidently, the dream that he had had, and the officer stood back and laughed.

"Really, you poor fellow!" the captain said; "Have you worn your shoes out wandering all this way only because of a dream? What sensible person would trust a dream? Why look, if I had been one to go trusting dreams, I should this very minute be doing just the opposite. I should have made such pilgrimage as this silly one of yours, only in the opposite direction, but no doubt with the same result. Let me tell you my dream."

He was a sympathetic officer, for all of his fierce mustache, and the Rabbi felt his heart warm to him. "I dreamt of a voice, "said the Bohemian, Christian officer of the guard, "and it spoke to me of Cracow, commanding me to go there and to search there for a great treasure in the house of a Jewish Rabbi whose name would be Eisik son of Jekel. The treasure was to have been discovered buried in
the dirty corner behind the stove. Eisik son of Jekel!” the captain laughed again, with brilliant eyes. “Fancy going to Cracow and pulling down the walls of every house in the ghetto, where half the men are called Eisik and the other half Jekel! Eisik son of Jekel, indeed!” And he laughed, and laughed again at the wonderful joke.

The unostentatious Rabbi listened eagerly, and then, having bowed deeply and thanked his stranger-friend, he hurried straightway back to his distant home, dug in the neglected corner of the house and discovered the treasure which put an end to his misery. With a portion of the money, he erected a prayer house that bears his name to this day. vii

“We must all learn to live together as brothers, or we will all perish together as fools”

Martin Luther King Jr.

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