

Lecture 18:
The Moral(s) of It All

My plan in this final lecture is to do what I can to sum up the whole semester. This is obviously a tall order, and I can't possibly even begin to review all the details. What I *can* do, however, is to remind you of certain general patterns—some of the larger, defining features of the world's religions—which may help you retain at least a few of the most important points you've learned. A year from now most of you aren't going to remember the difference between *yogas* and *yugas*, or between Sufis and Sunnis, or between a *shaykh* and a *shaman*, and you'll have probably forgotten what the Five Precepts are for the Buddhists, what the Five Constant Relationships are for Confucians, and what the Five Pillars are for the Muslims. I suppose a cynic might say that there was therefore no reason to learn these various terms in the first place, but that's actually quite false. The act of committing such things to your memory, even when you aren't always able to retrieve them later, has the effect of strengthening your mental muscles for other tasks, and it gives a certain texture and range to your thinking that will serve you in good stead for the rest of your life. This is the whole point of a liberal education. In any case there's no question of my trying to produce a comprehensive list of all the facts we've covered. What I wish to do instead is to highlight just a few of the most important principles, and then I'll end the lecture, as the fables and fairytales often do, with some morals—some of the lessons I think we can, and should, bring away from our comparative study of the world's religions.

Let me begin by reminding you of my basic approach in this course and reviewing some of the assumptions I've brought to both my written lectures and my YouTube presentations. As I explained at the outset, my interest in religion is philosophical and theological, not psychological, sociological, or historical, and it's for this reason that I've approached the traditions, not as the products of economic, institutional, or cultural forces, but as constellations of God-given truths and paths to salvation—"paths of return". While it's certainly possible to study the religions by looking merely *at* them, as if they were the effects of terrestrial causes—as do the primitivists, functionalists, and fideists whom we spoke about at the very start of the course—it's always seemed to me wiser (as well as more objective and honest) to begin instead by taking the religions seriously on their own

terms, and this means that until and unless we've proven them mistaken, we're obliged to accept their celestial or superhuman origins. I might point out that this philosophical approach is closely related to my exclusively "positive" focus—my focus (in other words) on the truth and beauty of the world's traditions. There's no denying the fact that religions can and do have a distinctively negative side. As I admitted in my opening YouTube presentation, religious conviction has often brought out the worst in people, and we're seeing plenty of that in our day. I've chosen instead, however, to emphasize what is *good* about religion: the way it can enhance our view of Reality and the spiritual fruit it has yielded in the great saints. Plenty of bad music and bad art have been produced through the centuries, but one expects that a music or art appreciation course will focus instead on the masterpieces. The same thing has been true here, in what might be labeled (I suppose) our "religion appreciation" course.

Another very important assumption has to do with the relationship between religion and science. I spoke in my introductory lectures about the tension between these two dimensions of life, and I explained that this tension has resulted in large part from the common, but hugely mistaken, idea that modern science is the only sure path to knowledge. Virtually all of us have been conditioned by modern education to think that the ordinary world of the senses is the only world we can ever be certain about, and we've been told again and again (from pre-school on!) that claims not grounded in the verdict of those senses must be false. But this is clearly illogical. For the assertion that all our knowledge should be based on the senses is not itself based upon anything that ever came from the senses. Science may well have given us one very valuable, and very powerful, way of understanding *some* things—though even this is debatable—but this is no reason for assuming that *other* ways are impossible or that other things are not real.

I've not tried to defend this supra-scientific or super-naturalist standpoint, but that's not because such a defense is impossible. It's simply a question of doing one thing at a time. Arguing for the existence of God or the reality of the spiritual world is a big enough project in itself, something best left to contexts other than an introduction to the world's religions. (If you're interested in hearing the arguments, consider taking my Religious Studies 412, "Faith, Doubt, and God".) About all I can do in this closing lecture is to ask a favor. As you think back on this course in the future, I would ask that you try to remember

(if nothing else) that there was at least one professor who was truly convinced of the existence of higher worlds, who really believed in revelation and prophecy, and who saw no reason to doubt such things as the *yogi*'s indifference to pain, the Sufi's visions, or the *shaman*'s healings—a professor, in short, who was not at all bashful about affirming the value and truth of traditional religion. This fact doesn't really prove anything, of course, but in lieu of providing a proof, maybe in the meantime I can at least be useful to you all as a specimen! As C. S. Lewis once said of himself in regard to a similar question, "Use your specimens while you can. There aren't going to be many more dinosaurs."

One final presupposition that I've brought to our studies should also be mentioned: namely, my perennialist conviction that the religions we've studied are all paths leading up the same mountain to God, each of them a unique embodiment or formulation of a single transcendent Truth. As you know, the perennialist understanding of religion is meant to follow a sort of middle way between two extremes. At one extreme is the idea that only one religion is true and that all the other traditions are either useless or dangerous. I called this "indiscriminate exclusivism" (Lecture 2). But then there's a second extreme, a completely opposite viewpoint, which says on the contrary that all religious claims without exception are valid, even those of the cults and fanatical sects. This way of looking at things is "indiscriminate inclusivism", a position that fails to acknowledge any qualitative difference between the great world religions, on the one hand, and the claims of any given madmen in some asylum who thinks he's Jesus Christ, on the other. Perennialism is opposed in principle to both these extremes—though in practice its proponents are much more sympathetic with the exclusivist stance. If they had to choose the "lesser evil", perennialists would prefer the exclusivism of the most partisan of exoteric believers, even those who are firmly convinced that the adherents of other traditions are all bound for hell, over the easy-going, mushy-minded tolerance of those who believe that anything goes and who end up confusing saving Truth with some of its most diabolical distortions.

Now of course the obvious question the perennialist must face at some point has to do with criteria: How are we to distinguish the true from the false? It's one thing to claim that some religions are true and salvific and others are not, but how precisely can you tell the difference? How can you decide which are correct and which aren't? It's easy enough for the indiscriminate exclusivist to deal with this question. She simply replies by

identifying the Truth with one very specific set of symbolic or verbal expressions. If she's a Christian, she's going to say that anyone practicing a true religion must by definition be following Jesus Christ, who is *the* Truth—as well as the Way and the Life (see John 14:6); everything else she will regard as necessarily false. Or if the exclusivist is a Muslim, he'll identify the Truth with the Holy Qur'an, the only perfect revelation, dismissing all competing scriptures, like the Bible, as in some way fundamentally flawed. If you're a perennialist, however, the matter isn't so simple. As you study the religions, you're obliged to focus your attention not so much on what they say as on what they mean—in other words not so much on their external or formal expressions but rather on their internal and supra-formal intentions. To refer once again to C. S. Lewis's way of making this point: You have to look *along* the religions and not simply *at* them. (To review what Lewis said, take a look back at “Meditation in a Toolshed” in the introductory section of *A Book of Saints*.) Here of course we return to what should by now be a familiar distinction between the exoteric and the esoteric sides of religion. One of my guiding aims throughout the term has been to assist you in coming to grips with both of these aspects of the specific traditions we've studied. I wanted to introduce you to the fundamental doctrines and practices that make them all distinctive and different, but I also wanted to help you in penetrating through those doctrines and practices in order to uncover some common principles and methods.

It's not at all easy (I readily admit!) to say exactly why Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, or the Crow Indian religion is a saving expression of Truth—even *if*, for the sake of the argument, you're willing to concede that they are. Nevertheless, having studied them for many years and having gotten to know a few of their followers, I come away sensing very strongly that these religions share a common something, a distinctive mark or style or tone, which sets them apart from the counterfeits and the crazies. An essential part of discerning that “mark”, appreciating that “style”, and tuning in to that “tone” has to do—for me at least—with discovering their “fruits” of transformation or sanctity. This of course is where the words of Christ that I cite on the syllabus come in: “By their fruits ye shall know them” (Matthew 7:20). I think it might be useful to quote the rest of the passage from which this line is taken. It comes as you may know from the Sermon on the Mount, and here's what we find: “Beware of false prophets,” says Jesus, “who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous

wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? So, every sound tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears evil fruit.... Thus you will know them by their fruits.” Christ then concludes by very sternly adding, “Not every one who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’, shall enter into the Kingdom of Heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in Heaven” (Matthew 7:15-21).

The analogy suggested by this passage can be very easily applied to our explorations in this course. Religions are like trees, and the people who believe them and follow them are like the fruits of those trees. If one finds among these believers and followers at least a few people whose lives are exemplary—people who are “doing the will of my Father in Heaven” and who thus seem like good fruits—isn’t it reasonable to think that the trees from which they have sprung might be good trees and thus that their religions might be true? This is for me the most compelling reason for adopting the perennialist position. I myself came to the conviction that there must be “many paths to the summit” (to refer to the essay by Ananda Coomaraswamy that we read at the start of the course) at least in part because of the apparent evidence of sanctity that can be found among the adherents of the religions we’ve studied. There’s a saying of an early Christian Church Father, Saint Gregory of Nyssa (330-395 A.D.), which is pertinent here. “There is no other way truly to speak of God than to live in Him. He alone knows God who allows himself to be transmuted into Him.” Given this Christian insight as my basic premise, it seems to me clear that there simply must be more than one way to know God. For in figures like the Hindu swami Ramdas, and the Zen master Soko Morinaga, and the Muslim *shaykh* Ahmad Al-Alawi, and the American Indian *shaman* Thomas Yellowtail, we’re dealing with people who have at least begun the process of being “transmuted” or transformed into God. And the lives of such people can’t help but tell us something in turn about the religions they practice, for are “grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles”?

Do remember, however, that when we say that there are many paths up the mountain—that each of the traditions we’ve studied is a saving expression of Truth, revealed by God Himself as a “noble” path of liberation—we *don’t* mean that these religions are simply clones of each other or that their parts are somehow interchangeable. The perennialist is not so blind as to miss the obvious multiplicity of dogmas and rites among the world’s religions, and he certainly has no intention of advocating a syncretistic

combination of forms for the sake of creating some new religion. The perennialist affirms instead what the Swiss philosopher Frithjof Schuon calls a “transcendent unity of religions”. Only insofar as they all converge beyond this world and in God—in what Schuon called the “divine stratosphere”, not the “human atmosphere”—can we speak of a unity among the world’s spiritual traditions. For outwardly or exoterically, at the level of their doctrines and methods, there remain very significant and very important differences, and I’ve done my best—perennialist though I am!—to accentuate these differences throughout the course. Affirming an inward unity or unanimity among religions in no way requires a scholar to ignore these many variations and nuances, and it’s therefore not my intention to suggest that Hindus, Buddhists, Confucians, Taoists, Jews, Christians, Muslims, and Native Americans should simply put aside their differences or pretend their religions are exactly the same. Nor do I believe—this would be even worse—that they should alter their convictions so as to render them more compatible with the others’ perspectives.

As a quick reminder of some of the most important exoteric differences between the religions, I’ve put together a sequence of diagrams that help to sum up some of the traditions’ most distinctive ideas, and I’ll show you these as part of my YouTube presentation. I’ve concentrated, to be precise, on the great variety we’ve noted in their Conceptions of the Divine, Pictures of the Human Self, Views of the World in relation to God, and Understandings of Time, as well as in the Exemplary Human States that they strive to attain and the Central Figures to whom they look for authority.

So no, the perennialist idea is *not* that we should paint over the differences. At the same time, however, I believe enough has been said for you to realize—even if you’re not a perennialist—that despite their wide external variation, the major religions do have a great deal in common internally or esoterically: notably, their unanimous interest in Truth, or the comprehension of God; in Virtue, or conformation to God; in Beauty, or the configuration of God; and in Prayer, or concentration on God (see Lecture 2). So the question becomes, I suppose: what exactly are we supposed to do with this unanimity or commonality? If the point of perennialism is not to abandon or neglect the differences, what difference do the similarities make? Perhaps you’re prepared to accept the idea that there may be more than one saving religion, and yet you may still be wondering what would

be gained by this admission. If the unity of the great religions is to be realized only at a level where it will no longer be an issue—in the “divine stratosphere”—then what exactly is the point in proclaiming that unity, especially if it risks being confused in some quarters with relativism or syncretism? In other words, why should anyone be interested in affirming the commonality of the world’s religions if their differences and divisions are going to remain with us anyway?

A number of answers could be given to these very important questions. One simple response—and the only one I’ll attempt to elaborate here—is the fact that there is “strength in numbers”. In my opinion we’re living at a time when spiritual alliances between serious people who practice different religions are going to become of increasing significance. I certainly don’t mean for us to ignore or forget the misunderstandings, animosity, and outright cruelty and violence which have often characterized the relationships between the world’s religions and which (sadly enough) show no sign of going away anytime soon. Nevertheless, it seems obvious to me that many people who take their faith seriously and who are sincerely engaged in its practice may find themselves more and more drawn into a kind of fellowship with the faithful of other religions—while at the same time becoming more and more aware of an increasing alienation and enmity between themselves and the less serious or nominal members of their own traditions.

With this in mind, I would like to propose, in bringing things to a close, that there are three important lessons or morals to be drawn from the inward or esoteric unity of the world’s religions—three ways, in other words, that serious believers from different religions can be of help to each other. Each of these lessons has to do with something the traditions all share, but something that is at the same time denied or rejected by the modern world. To do them justice, each of these lessons would require a complete lecture, in fact a whole series of lectures. All I can really do now is to mention these morals. And since I can’t even begin to say everything, I’ll say very little and leave it to you to pursue the matter further in your own reflections.

Moral Number One: The Reality of Miracles.

As we’ve emphasized throughout the semester, the world’s religions are alike in believing that the terrestrial world of the empirical senses is not the only world but merely

one of several levels or dimensions of Reality. The religions are also alike in believing that these higher levels operate according to laws that are not at all bound by the limits of matter—laws accounting for certain effects in our world that call into question the “laws of science”. To put the point more directly and forcefully, all the religions believe in miracles—in the possible invasion of the world as we know it by supernatural powers and agencies. One has only to think of such things as the parting of the Red Sea in the Jewish Exodus or Muhammad’s *miraj* or Yellowtail’s shamanic healings—or perhaps even the Zen master archer’s splitting of the shaft of an arrow, which I described in Lecture 10—to realize that there’s more to Reality than we ordinarily think, “more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy” to quote Shakespeare again (*Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 5). And one has only to consider such figures as the Hindu *jivan-mukta* or the hidden *imam* of Islam or the Taoist “immortals” to see that there’s considerably more to being fully human than the anthropologists and other scientists of our own day admit.

I believe this is an especially important lesson for contemporary Christians, who are often surrounded by skeptics, many of them (ironically) clergy and theologians of various ranks—as well as professors of religious studies!—who try to persuade them that miracles are mere superstitions. There is, for example a whole host of Biblical scholars today who claim that the New Testament stories about Jesus’s birth from a Virgin and His resurrection from the dead are simply ancient myths or legends, with no grounding in fact. And the unwary Christian student or layman can easily be misled into thinking that a belief in miracles is therefore only for the mentally challenged. In the face of such silliness, it seems to me that an alliance with believers from the other religions can prove most valuable.

Moral Number Two: The Primacy of Truth.

Though I’ve not been explicit about this second moral in my lectures, it’s certainly been implied in much that you’ve read and heard about. I call it “the primacy of Truth”, and what I have in mind is the fact that for all the world’s religions Truth is more important than anything, and that in defense of that Truth (they would say) we may sometimes be required to do battle with its enemies, whether those enemies are within ourselves or in the world around us. There is perhaps no issue upon which all the religions are in more

agreement than this. But at the same time, ironically, there's no claim that produces more shock, more horror, and more incredulity on the part of many modern, or postmodern, people. As they see it, tolerance is the greatest of virtues. Now of course, true tolerance is a valuable thing. It means being patient with people whom you know to be wrong, putting up with their errors, and endeavoring to correct them with tact and courtesy. But unfortunately for lots of people today tolerance goes hand in hand with the absurd notion that there really is no truth at all, at least no absolute and universal Truth. Such people claim that all beliefs about truth are simply the products of various biographical, cultural, and economic forces. "It's all just opinion," they say, and while we may be entitled to our own opinions—they add—we need to realize that we shouldn't "impose" them on others or fight about them.

In the face of this very common and very popular rhetoric, it seems to me worth recalling how very different a viewpoint we find in the great religious traditions, where Truth is understood as absolute and non-negotiable. One has only to recall Krishna's advice to Arjuna about getting on with the battle, or the physically exhausting ordeal of the Vision Quest, or Christ's words in the Gospel that He "came not to bring peace but a sword" (Matthew 10:34), or the Muslim idea of *jihad*—however terribly abused this idea has been by pseudo-Muslim extremists—to realize how highly traditional religious people value Truth. It's valued so highly, in fact, that in certain situations they're prepared to fight and, if need be, to die for it. Even the Dalai Lama, an icon of compassion and non-violence if ever there were one, has said that if one were forced to choose between killing someone or allowing the *dharma* (that is, Buddhist doctrine) to perish, one would have to kill. Unaware of this worldwide traditional unanimity, many would-be Christians have been misled into thinking that truth is relative. Here again they stand to learn a great deal from the example of other faiths. What they will learn, among other things, is that our own contemporary "post-Christian" culture is a historical aberration. Every other culture of the world knew, and knows, that there are certain absolutes that must never be compromised.

Moral Number Three: The Consecration of Life.

Until fairly recently, visitors to the Maghreb in North Africa often supposed themselves to have stepped back in time, so completely was that culture still shaped by the

practice of Islam. One entered a world where everyone without exception was living a life in which every action was deliberately filled with spiritual significance. For the traditional Muslim is taught that how he eats, how he dresses, how he sits and walks, how he furnishes his home, and above all (as you know) how he prays is not a matter of individual preference, but a sacred act, whose value is determined by its conformity to the example (the *sunnah*) of the Prophet Muhammad (see Lecture 12). As you've seen many times throughout the semester, this same philosophy guides the life of all traditional peoples, from Hindus to Native Americans. In each and every one of these religions, we've encountered the same basic idea, namely, that human life should be consecrated to God. Here I submit is yet another case where the "post-Christian Christian"—if you'll allow me that oxymoron—can learn a very important lesson from people who still follow the ancient teachings of other faiths. I was once involved in a public debate with a local Muslim *imam*, and in contrasting our religions he made the claim (to our audience) that while Muslims pray five times every day, Christians pray only on Sundays. Now of course he was wrong about that. And yet I'm afraid it's not very surprising he would have had this perception. For in fact for many Christians today their faith *is* almost strictly a Sunday morning affair—if they even give it as much attention as that. And it seems to me they might therefore profit from the example of the other religions we've studied. Think back to the Hindu idea that each stage of our lives has a special spiritual significance, the Confucian ideal of promoting the moral force of *Te* through the cultivation of *Li* in human relationships, or the Native American openness to the celestial messages of animals and natural forms. In each religion, as it's traditionally practiced, one finds certain keys or hints as to how one can take the necessary steps toward acquiring a keener sense of the sacred and bringing it into one's day to day life.

Let me simply say in conclusion that I heartily commend that possibility to you all.

Verbum sapienti sat