

Lecture 2: Six Perspectives, Four Commonalities

As you'll remember, the focus of my previous lecture, broadly speaking, was on the relationship between religion and science. I defined "science", in its modern sense, as *an empirical means of knowing the material world*. Because of its exclusive stress on what we can know through our five natural senses, and because of its characteristic assumption that the world of physical matter is the only reality, science is often in tension with religious belief and practice. And the reason for this (I said) is that the religions all tell us that the material world is *not* the only thing which exists and that there are spiritual ways of knowing which *transcend* what we can see, hear, taste, touch, and smell.

Unfortunately, as I explained, many contemporary scholars of religion have themselves accepted the scientific assumptions of our time, and their approach to their subject is therefore often strictly external. I called them the *looking-at scholars*, and I divided them into three basic categories: the primitivists, the functionalists, and the fideists. In contrast with their approach, I ended Lecture 1 by speaking on behalf of a very different kind of exploration, one that tries to take religious teachings seriously on their own terms by getting inside and *looking-along* them. Of course, once you begin to enter into something like a religion, you soon discover that there are various levels of involvement or levels of participation, and it was with this fact in mind that I called your attention in my YouTube lecture to four such levels, which I labeled *belief*, *faith*, *experience*, and *transformation*, each of which takes the religious person into a deeper, more intimate relationship with God. Many of us, of course, never go further than the first couple of levels: We may *believe* in God, because we have heard other people talk about Him; and we may take the further step of placing our *faith* in God, perhaps because we have noticed certain things in our lives that seem to imply His existence. But most of us would probably not say that we've had a direct *experience* of God—that we've known Him as certainly as we know the world around us—and still fewer people would claim to have been *transformed* by that knowledge into the very likeness of God. And yet the mystics and sages of the world's religions are such people precisely, and they're unanimous in teaching that it's possible for us, too, to enter into these deepest of levels. We'll be looking very carefully throughout this course at how they say this can be done.

Today, however—in this last of my “overview” lectures—I want to shift gears just a bit and talk, still in general terms, about another set of issues that is equally important for the contemporary student of the world’s religions. You can’t engage in religious studies (as I told you last time) without at some point pondering the conflicts between religion and modern science; but you also can’t study the religions without at some point pondering their conflicts with each other. As we proceed with our tour of the major traditions, we’re going to encounter considerable variation in both beliefs and practices, and it’s therefore important for each of you to begin developing some sort of interpretive structure to make sense of the differences. What are we supposed to make of the apparently contradictory claims that we’re going to discuss? When it comes to God, for example, Judaism insists there is only one God, Hinduism allows for the existence of many millions of gods, and Buddhism declares the question of God to be moot—a distraction (at best) from the serious business of following an authentic spiritual path. Or take their views of salvation: According to Islam, salvation comes through submission and strict obedience to the revealed law of Allah (the Muslim name for God); for Christianity, it’s based on faith in the saving power of God’s Son, Jesus Christ, and adherence to His commandments; while in Taoism, it consists in reposing in the *Tao*, the mysterious source of God Himself, and in realizing we’re “saved” already. Who’s right and who’s wrong? What sense are we to make of this extraordinary variety?

When it comes to taking stock of such differences, there are several positions or perspectives a person may adopt concerning the competing truth-claims of the world’s religions. Notice that I’m now using the word in the plural: “religions” with an “s” on the end. Understood in the singular, as the relationship between any given human being and whatever he believes to be supremely important, religion is naturally going to differ from person to person, and the contradictions between people’s religious beliefs will be as easy to explain as the differences in their tastes for food or music. But when we’re talking about *religions-in-the-plural*—that is, particular sets of beliefs and practices that are intended to bring us into union with the Supreme Reality—the variety of teachings becomes considerably more interesting, and also more problematic. Since the religions all *claim* they’re describing nothing less than the highest Truth, what are we to do when they describe it in opposing or contradictory ways?

There are, I suggest, six things you may do, corresponding to six possible perspectives on the world’s religions. To explain and distinguish these perspectives, I want to make use of a

metaphor that's often employed in such discussions, that of a mountain. As you should know from your assigned reading in *A Book of Saints*, this is the metaphor used by the author of the second article, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, in his discussion of "Paths That Lead to the Same Summit". The summit or mountaintop in the article is meant to signify God, of course, and the various paths up the mountain correspond to the different religions. Other scholars, wishing to make much the same point, have compared the religions to the dialects of a single language, to the colors of the spectrum, and to the radii of a circle. But for now at least, I'll stick to the image of a mountain.

1. The first position you could take is that of *Atheism*. The atheist is the person who denies the existence of God, someone like the primitivists Marx, Freud, and Dawkins, whom I referred to last time. For this person, none of the religions is true; all of them are equally false; and hence their particular oppositions and conflicts are simply variations on the same nonsensical theme. In fact, it's precisely the oppositions and apparent contradictions between religious traditions that are often the cause of the atheist's objections to religion in the first place. All these religious people *say* they know the truth, the atheist complains, but all of them say *different* things. So the atheist concludes, not without reason, that religion must be merely the creation of man and that the mountain is nothing but a mirage—an optical illusion caused, perhaps, by a large and strikingly shaped cloud bank on the horizon.

2. Going to the very opposite end of the spectrum from atheism, there is a second point of view, one I call *Indiscriminate Inclusivism*. You know of course what it means to be indiscriminate, let's say in the area of food or clothes. The indiscriminate person is willing to eat anything or wear anything and isn't at all fussy about looks and taste. So also here, but in this case, of course, we're talking about religions. The indiscriminate inclusivist is the person who's prepared to accept the claims of *all* religions without exception; he includes them all in his spiritual diet, as it were, for all religions, he says, are equally true. All of them lead up the mountain to God.

3. Thirdly, there is the perspective of *Indiscriminate Exclusivism*. I use this phrase to characterize the point of view of a person who accepts only *one* of the world's religions and who rejects or excludes all the others. Only one religion, she believes—her own—is true; all others are utterly false. One and only one path leads to the top of the mountain, while all the others lead their followers away from God into the desert or "outer darkness". To put the point even more bluntly: a single religion alone leads to Heaven; everybody else is going to hell. One of the biggest religious dilemmas in the world today is that many Christians believe that Christianity is the only way to be

saved while many Muslims believe that Islam is the only (or at least the best) way to be saved: Obviously this is a recipe for problems!

4. Fourth comes the perspective that I call *Syncretism*. As you may know, a syncretist is someone who likes to collect bits and pieces of things from myriad and disparate sources and who then puts them all together into his own unique and idiosyncratic synthesis. When it comes to the subject of this class, religious studies, syncretism refers to the belief that all religions are *partially* true and that the *full* truth can be gained only as a result of their combination. No path leads all the way to the summit, but by following successively or simultaneously several different paths from differing angles, the summit may be glimpsed in a sort of kaleidoscopic way and then exhibited in a sort of collage of “spiritual photographs”.

5. Next is the perspective I label *Discriminate Exclusivism*. Perhaps you can guess what this means. To be discriminating is to be particular; it means neither accepting everything nor rejecting everything, but making informed choices based on good reasons. Like the other exclusivist of the *indiscriminate* sort, this person believes only one religion is completely true, but rather than throwing all the others out as completely erroneous, he’s prepared to discriminate and to recognize and honor partial truths where he finds them. According to this view, only one path leads all the way to the summit, but other paths may still point us in the right direction; only one’s own religion is perfect, but other faiths are not without certain glimpses of truth.

6. Finally, there is the perspective of *Perennialism*. This is the point of view represented by the author of the article, Coomaraswamy. It’s called “perennialism” by analogy with a perennial flower, that is, one that continues to sprout and bloom every year from the same root. The perennialist idea is that there’s one Divine Source of all Truth and that this Source has repeatedly revealed itself to mankind, repeatedly “blossoming forth” into history, though each time in a somewhat different form, the differing forms or “flowers” being none other than the world’s major religions. Unlike the syncretist, the perennialist believes that each of these religions is completely (not partially) true; on the other hand, unlike the indiscriminate inclusivist, she does not believe every religion is true, but claims instead that some religions may be false and misleading. For perennialism, some religions are true and can save their adherents, while others are false and perhaps even dangerous. Some paths go all the way to the summit, some simply circle aimlessly around the base of the mountain, while others lead away toward the desert.

I strongly recommend that you give some careful thought to these distinctions and that as the course unfolds you test these options in light of what you're learning about each of the religions we study. As you learn about the teachings of Hindus, Buddhists, Confucians, Taoists, Jews, Muslims, Christians, and American Indians, ask yourself whether it makes the best sense to be an atheist, an indiscriminate inclusivist, an indiscriminate exclusivist, a syncretist, a discriminate exclusivist, or a perennialist. I should tell you right here at the start—in the interest of “truth in advertising”!—that I myself favor perennialism; this is the perspective that makes the best sense to me. But I don't at all mean to suggest that you can't disagree with me. Getting an “A” in this class in no way depends on your accepting everything I tell you! All that's required is that you listen carefully, think deeply, and show clearly that you have understood certain claims. What you *believe* is entirely up to you.

With this assurance in place, I would like to say a bit more about perennialism before concluding this lecture—not in an attempt to “convert” you, but simply to clarify the approach I'll be taking, and to give you something to “think against” if you decide you must adopt one of the other approaches. It's particularly important that I introduce you to one of the most important, and characteristic, of perennialist ideas, namely, the distinction often made by perennialist writers (like Coomaraswamy) between the *exoteric* and the *esoteric* dimensions of religion. The word “exoteric” in this context refers to the “outward” or “external” form of religious teachings and practices—in other words, to those things we see more or less at first glance when we view the “surface” features of a religion; the exoteric dimension is in this sense related to what we've called the “looking-at” approach, though as you'll discover they're not exactly identical. On the other hand, the word “esoteric” refers to the “inward” or “internal” aspects of a religious tradition—to things that are hidden from the view of outsiders and that perhaps even some of the religion's own adherents have not yet understood; as you can see, there are similarities between the esoteric dimension and the “looking-along” attitude, though again they're not exactly the same.

The main reason I'm telling you about this distinction right now is that it provides us with a helpful way of situating both the *exoteric differences* and the *esoteric commonalities* in the world's religions. The perennialist is fully prepared to admit (as anyone must) that exoterically—that is, in terms of the “letter” of their doctrines and rites—the world's religions are dramatically different, sometimes even contradictory, as the examples I mentioned earlier clearly demonstrate: one God in Judaism, millions of gods in Hinduism, no God in Buddhism; salvation by works,

salvation by faith, and salvation as a *fait accompli*. Nonetheless, according to the perennialist perspective, if we approach these religions esoterically, we'll be able to see that they're actually expressing the very same truths concerning the fundamental nature and structure of ultimate Reality; in spite of their seeming contradictions on the "surface", anyone who digs down beneath that surface and penetrates to the underlying meaning of their teachings will discover that they're pointing their adherents, beyond the "letter", in precisely the same "spiritual" direction.

This is a huge claim, I realize, and one that's highly controversial. I don't expect anyone to buy it yet, without having had a chance to learn something about the religions in question. So for now, in wrapping up this lecture, all I want to do is to get you thinking in rather general terms about a few key points—four points, to be precise—that may help to bring into focus what the perennialist sees as the underlying unanimity of the world's major religions, points that may help you in time to adopt an "insider's" view of your own. As we study the world's religions in this course, I'm going to suggest that you pay special attention to four "esoteric" commonalities, four essential elements or ingredients that are "inwardly" present at the heart of each tradition. These elements are *Truth*, *Virtue*, *Beauty*, and *Prayer*. Each of the religions we're going to be studying teaches its adherents the Truth; each of them promotes and inculcates Virtue; each of them reveals, and revels in, Beauty; and each of them insists upon the importance of Prayer. To put the same point in different words, all of the world's major religions include a *doctrinal* dimension, an *ethical* dimension, an *aesthetic* dimension, and a *ritual* dimension. The first of these elements, the doctrinal, is intended to serve as an expression of ultimate Truth; it's meant to explain to the religious person the way things really are. The second, the ethical or moral element, tells the person how this Truth should be applied in his day-to-day life; it gives people directions as to how to conduct themselves in a way that's consistent with the Truth. The third element, the aesthetic dimension, assists religious people in grasping the Truth concretely by portraying it artistically: in music, painting, statuary, architecture, and dance. And the fourth essential ingredient, the ritual dimension, provides a person with the means of verifying the Truth in her own personal experience; it gives her the spiritual keys she needs to deepen her "level of participation"—to go beyond being a mere believer so as to become finally transformed.

Each of these inward or esoteric aspects of the world's religions corresponds in turn to a distinct level or aspect of the human person, and it may help for you to think about what I'm saying in these terms:

Doctrine, which has to do with the Truth, is addressed to our *minds*; it gives us direction in *thinking*, and it's intended to lead to our *comprehension* of God.

Ethics, which has to do with Virtue, is addressed to our *wills*; it gives us direction in *choosing*, and it's meant to lead to our *conformation* to God.

Art, which has to do with Beauty, is addressed to our *emotions*; it gives us direction in *feeling*, and it leads us to appreciate the *configuration* of God.

Ritual or worship, which has to do with Prayer, is addressed to our *bodies*; it gives us direction in *moving* and *being*, and it leads to our *concentration* on God. (Why Prayer is related to the body may be puzzling at this point, but as we look at specific religions, I think you'll begin to see the "esoteric" logic of this connection. More on that later.)

In order to sum all this up, we might do well to go back one more time to my definition of "religions-in-the plural". Religions, I've told you, are particular sets of beliefs and practices that are intended to bring their adherents into union with God. What I've called *beliefs* and *practices* might also be referred to as *theories* and *methods*. The doctrinal Truth of religion is concerned with the dimension of theory; it provides the believer with a map of Reality, of the way things really are. As for the other three elements—Virtue, Beauty, and Prayer—they're all linked in various ways to practice or method; they provide the resources the believer needs in order to set out on his journey and actually begin moving in the direction the map indicates. Both theory and practice, or doctrine and method, are essential to all genuine religions. (I'll tell you in class a Tibetan Buddhist parable that helps to illustrate this point.) So, putting all that I've been saying together, we come up with an expanded definition of the word "religions". Religions, we can now say, are

combinations of theory and method, or of doctrine and practice, which are intended to bring the whole human being—the mind by doctrinal comprehension, the will by ethical conformation, the emotions by aesthetic configuration, and the body by ritual concentration—into union with the supreme spiritual Reality.

As I'll be trying to show you as the course unfolds, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the religions of the Native Americans, despite their many outward or exoteric differences, are all inwardly or esoterically dedicated to this common goal.