

WHAT ONE CAN LEARN FROM WORLD RELIGIONS  
Marc Mullinax – August 20, 2017 – UUFH

**Reading:** a word about what religion is: from Hyppolyte Taine, *L'Ancien Régime* (1875 France)

*Religion by its nature is a metaphysical poem married to faith. In this way, it is effective and popular; for to be felt, religion must put on a body. There must be rite, legend, ceremony, if it is to talk to the men, women and children, the simple, every person, for the human mind itself needs ideas expressed in pictures. Through visible form religion can throw its great weight upon the conscience, to be a counterweight to natural egotism, cool the mad impulse to animal passion, guide the will to self-sacrifice and devotion, direct people to give themselves wholly to the service of truth or of others, make ascetics and martyrs, sisters of charity and missionaries. In every society religion is a precious and natural organ. People need it to think of the infinite and live well; if it suddenly failed, they would feel a great sad void in their soul and would hurt each other the more. You would try in vain to snatch it from them. Hands which attempted it would touch no more than the envelope; it will grow again like flesh after a bloody operation. Its roots are too deep to be pulled up.*

So, Moses, Jesus, Lao Tzu, Mohammad, a shaman & Gandhi walk into a bar. ... I don't know how to finish this joke, which is my point... A lot to chew this morning. I don't know WHAT I was thinking when Ron asked me for a title! So much to consider! Let's start by raising hands if you have had significant experiences with these major faiths (& I'll go through them one-by-one): Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Judaism, & Taoism. While there are more, I would like to discuss with you these faiths and their instructional values for us. I shall employ three terms or metaphors: *imagination, languages, and water*.

1. First, imagination. What is religion, but imagination? Gods, angels, demons, explanations for evil and eclipses, prayer ... Organized religion is always acts of the collective and individual imaginations. Why? Because religions traffic in ultimate truths, like the existence of an afterlife, or God is love. Such truths cannot be scientifically verified, but

only imagined. Religions' truths are best grasped symbolically.

Language, art, poetry – these are the paintbrushes the imagination uses to portray the un-portray-able. So the power of a faith is expressed imaginatively, with poets and artists as our priests talking about places like heaven or paradise or hell, the soul, and imagining what it would be like to please the divine. But these are each/everyone products of the imagination. But through this imaginative process, we get comforted and assured that in this sometimes-dangerous world, [Bob Marley] *every little thing's ... going to be all right*.

So to be religious is to engage in acts of the imagination. Want proof? For the next 15 seconds, pray. ... Now, reflect on what you just did: Where did your prayer “go”, who “heard” it, and what’s supposed to happen now?

Imagination can go two ways, however. Because our imagination must be fed! Religion is – or should be – an imaginative force for good against other imagination products, like racism, devils and the like. We have recently witnessed what religion-inspired forces of hate, and division, giving privilege to one group, or color of skin, or class, can do. Both good and bad religions use the imagination to articulate their truths and to recruit. An imagined allegiance to a swastika is functionally no different from an imagined allegiance to a cross. As Abraham Lincoln so wisely phrased it: *Both [sides] read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other.... The prayers of both could not be answered.*

2. Let me change metaphors, from religion-as-imagination to religion-as-spiritual languages. How many of you in the room are bilingual? Trilingual? More? You know how speaking more languages enables you to understand more, because you know that many concepts do not translate from Spanish to Chinese. However, if you know both Spanish and Chinese, you can think two different ways, and take two neural routes to the same conclusion. Simultaneously.

Since our cave-dwelling days, we have imagined something is behind the lightning, or inside the woolly mammoth, flowing in that wild river, or embedded in that odd rock formation, and we have built respect and reverence for these “somethings”. We have “imagined” it prudent to get on the good side of these “somethings.” Using the best language-skills we can, in smallish groupings, we have imaginatively, if clumsily, called and called on these somethings or energies as “God.” Religions are languages we use to speak of and speak with the divine ones that we imagine inhabit the earth, the animal, the human being, or the sky. Our imagination must be tended!

Religion, as imagined language, about imagined powers, explains and fixes. Religions are like a song that a people sing over and over. And whether it is the national anthem, *Amazing Grace*, *We Shall Overcome* or *Dixie*, our imagined identities get massaged, we connect with others who follow this religion’s god, and we are supported and empowered when we gather with like-minded and like-hearted people who sing from the same imagination-produced songbook as we.

So religion produces an imaginative landscape of language about imaginative forces that helps us negotiate life, and join social justice movements, and connect with people of like heart & mind.

Another thing I have learned is that while I am not yet everything I say, or wish, or imagine myself to be, I can be.

All religions help in this. They first show us what is good and right - a standard - and then show us where we have missed that mark. Which is good news. We want our hearts to grow as large as they are meant to. We want to be the person we keep dreaming of becoming. Knowing what hinders us on this earth is good, and religions help. They say: *Trust in God more. Meditate and still your anxious brain. See yourself as part of all things, not disconnected. Fill your day with prayers, and less evil will be able to sneak in. Practice, practice, practice. Make good habits, and life will be better.*

Even if your lifespan is shortened, or disease, war or crime visit, you will be better for the practice.

3. Metaphor change again. From imagination, to languages, and now to water. Taoism teaches that we are to be like water, which always naturally and without expenditure of energy seeks the lowest place as home. The Water Table. Down, down, down, underneath the layers, the depths & the unknown, is the Water Table, metaphorically speaking. This is our spiritual home, our millennia-old repository of our human wisdom.

Religions at their best and on their good days (and we all have bad days), sink a shaft down to that Water Table, and draw up the waters of deep, ancient, human wisdom. Each religion translates wisdom from these deep waters into words, and pours this spiritual water into differently-shaped containers: chalices, tea-cups, goblets, glasses, tumblers, grails, flasks, beakers and jugs. This is their genius. Religions are containers that can carry this water to those who thirst. What is not cool is when a religion says that the container they have crafted is more holy than the water it contains, or their water is the only water; all other water is poison and all other cups are idols. *The shape of our water container and its water are proprietary properties of our God himself, and thus if you are not drinking the well water from our containers, then you are going to ...*

But what is the essence of this water? Each religion has independently come up with a version of the golden rule. *Do unto others. Don't do to others. Before you do to others, think. See yourself in others. Reciprocity.*

Besides the Golden Rule, what else is in this water? Here now are my very selective snapshots of what I have learned from drinking from the various cups in the world's religions.

From Judaism, I have learned that we human beings contain two tendencies: the tendency to prefer or choose the bad, and the tendency to choose the good. In Hebrew: *Yetzer ha ra*, and *Yetzer ha tov*. So life is

ever a choice, a practice of becoming either good or bad. How do you know what you'll become? We take a line from the First People's story about the little boy discussing with his grandfather about the two wolves, one good and one bad, fighting a civil war within him. "Which one will win, Grandpa?" "The one you feed." This is the power of Judaism. If you want to be good, you must intend and tend it. The Talmud teaches it this way: *When you are my witnesses, then I am God. But if you do not bear witness to me, then I cannot be God.* That'll teach!! This is a deeply imaginative word of water to a thirsty world, whose imagination must be fed.

Next, Christianity, my first spiritual language, and one in which I am ordained (a ritual involving empty hands on an empty head). The first message in the Christian water vessel is that grace.

Grace: I am not the last word. We are not the last players. Hope remains even in the darkest of times, which some of you may feel these are. What we call evil does not have the final say-so. My worst action does not define me (*Take that, Prison Industrial Complex!*). Grace will have its day, and its say. Ever been forgiven? You know how cool that water is!

I have also learned from my Christian language tradition that a text can be powerful. The Bible is the most misunderstood, worst-quoted, and least-read book in the world, but it's the bestseller... Five billion copies of the Bible, and yet we still use or ignore it to teach war, enslave, and cheat. We pretty much *lawyer* our way through its difficult teachings. (Sorry, lawyers, no offense intended!) And yet, and yet, this Bible has been the most frequented text for people like Gandhi, Martin Luther and Martin Luther King, Jr., Dorothy Day, and Mother Teresa. Their understandings of the Bible has changed the world in your lifetime.

The Buddha taught me the power of interruption, which I have already shared with you a few years ago. Like a computer that's been left on too long, or a hard drive that gets hopeless fragmented and is too slow, we in our anxious living can also go on, and on, and on, thinking it's all up

to me. *Gotta get this report done! Gotta work this problem out! Too much to do!* And if you've ever been in this state, or been with someone in this state, that someone is useless. Buddha teaches that we lose contact with our original goodness when we get fragmented yet keep on like a bull in a china shop. We become dangerous to ourselves and to others, even as we pretend otherwise.

Instead, Buddha teaches, this is the very time to interrupt. You've lost your Self, your purpose, your perspective. Time to get back in touch with your true, undiminished self. Planned, intentional interruptions every day (called meditation) soften our hard places, clear our fogs, bring focus to the necessary, and point us like a compass again to our true north. The Buddha was asked, "What have you gained from meditation?" He replied, "Nothing!! However, let me tell you what I have lost: anger, anxiety, depression, insecurity, fear of old age and death."

I cannot emphasize how important this interruption-by-doing-nothing is. Indeed, all the religions have a similar spiritual technology of holy interruption: Hindus do pilgrimages, meditate and celebrate lots of holidays. Jews have Sabbath and holy days. Christians have the same, and bring in personal prayer & pilgrimages. Muslims do this best, I think. Imagine taking a break 5 times a day from your life to pray, or one month out of the year to fast, or one month out of your life to pilgrim to Mecca.

Having just mentioned Muslims, I'll say the one thing most-learned from Islam than from any other faith: **Hospitality**. When I traveled as a 20-year old through Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan, my money was worthless. As a lone person and stranger in the marketplace, I was – every time – quickly snatched up, taken to a tea shop, a restaurant, a hookah joint. One does not get in the way of a Muslim practicing hospitality!

Another great thing about Islamic practice, as well as in Taoism, is a strict refusal to depict the divine. No icons. No pictures of people,

Muhammad, or God. Keep that mental space clear, that cup empty, because if you fill up people's heads with pictures of God, then they'll latch on to them. When people start grasping onto images of God they retain only those that look like them, or like men. When this happens, their God won't look like others, or women. So keep the god-image undefined. Lao Tzu says in the first verse of the *Tao Te Ching*, the *Way or Tao that can be spoken of ain't the true Way or Tao*. (my translation!) Sort of like, the water you can speak of in words is not the Water Table water that will slake my thirst. A picture of a fire does not warm. Keep the image of God loose. It prevents idolatry.

I also love Taoism's emphasis on Wu-Wei, or not doing. Want to maintain something you hate? Just fight it. Worry it, harass it, imprison it. But if you want to really make spiritual progress, don't force a river downstream faster than it's already going. Don't force a key in a sticky lock. Jiggle it instead. Don't force an argument you know you'll lose. Let the weird stay weird, and the jerks remain jerks. In due time, every fool that persists in their folly will become wise. (William Blake) (It may take a few lifetimes!) We don't need to hurry them along; as they have their own clock. (After today's service, downstairs, you will do well to call my sanity into question. "What, Mullinax? Don't resist #45? Let Black Lives not Matter? Let's talk downstairs!") But for now, you cannot hurry, or worry your way to happiness. Now, hear this. Happiness takes place in the **now**, the **here** and the **this**. Now, here, this. It's the only time and place one can live, love, do compassion, and do our good work.

What have the Hindus taught me? Hindus have the reputation of being polytheists, which our worldview says is idolatry on steroids. However, what most Westerners don't get is their polytheism is a hide-and-go-seek game that hides the world's greatest statement on Monotheism. Yes, monotheism's highest achievement is in Hinduism. Brahma is more than the name of one of the top three gods in India. It is the name for the ultimate reality underlying all ... as in Everything. Think of Brahma as the soil out of which everything grows, including the gods. The gods themselves, Hindus correctly say, are created. All the universe emerges

out of Brahma as a leaf emerges from a tree. Everything is therefore holy and divine. We're all gods, BTW! *Namaste* means exactly this: *The god-me honors and recognizes the god-you*. It's absurd to think of anything as less than a god! It's all divine, folks. How's that for a cool monotheism. One God, quadrillions of masks.

If every faith had this expansive view of God, we could end our wars tonight. Hindus give us our golden rule back to us, but on a divine platter. We are all divine already; what we do to someone else, we do to god at the same time. What an ethic! Think about that next time someone cuts you off in traffic, or you see #45 on the screen!

One more religion: still with me? It's the world's most influential religion, even if fewer and fewer people acknowledge it. Confucianism. What does this ethic teach me? "Human nature is good." This single statement overturns the #1 teaching that my own faith language has taught me since I was a baby, that *I am an original sinner*. For someone who grew up with **that** imagined story, this is a great liberation. Mencius once told a story that goes like this: "*Suppose someone suddenly sees a child about to fall into a well: anyone in such a situation would have a feeling of alarm and compassion—not because one wants to get in good with the child's parents, not because one wants fame among one's neighbors and friends, and not because one dislikes the sound of the child's cries. From this we can see that if one is without the feeling of compassion, one is not human.*" If your first, natural impulse is to sacrifice your time, skin and life on behalf of a baby, how can anyone say that there is original sin in me? What if it's original blessing?

Oh! *I've left out so much*. You Baha'is and shamans can take me to task in a few minutes. But I wanted to explain how religions are neither life sentences nor life-insurance policies.

I kept hoping a cool ending story would find me, that I could share with you. But I have failed. So, let me bumper-sticker what I have learned, and would pass on to anyone:



1. Religions are human made, custom-made responses to life's situations and contexts.
2. Religions are imaginative interrupters that accompany us, to test our thoughts and evaluate our actions.
3. They bring us joy, connection, and liberation on their good days.
4. They each have dug a well down to the human water table, and each has a particular name for the wisdom they draw up. And
5. It is good to taste all the water you can. Because religions are the ways we share our predicaments, and our ways to overcome them.

Marx says religion is an addictive opium; Freud says religion is a neurosis we mature out of, some say religion is more superstition than imagination. Still others say religion at its base is hate and prejudice. And yet, here you are, apparently unaddicted, mature, not hating, and imagining a better world together. **Oh, my, God!** Relax, enjoy the cups from which you drink.

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Closing. Imagine, taste, drink deeply from, and test the world's wisdom. So ... Shalom, Salaam, Namaste, Bows, Peace of Christ be with you, May the Lord bless your going in and your going out, and May the Force with you!