

Universal Religious Beliefs

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Researching universal religious beliefs has been interesting and challenging. Thank you for this topic. I am no theologian, nor a scholar of religion by any stretch of the imagination. As a matter of fact, I started my research for this paper by reading a DK book called *Religions of the World*. Quickly, I realized the breadth of the topic and the depth of study many have made of religion.

So... is there anything universal about world religious beliefs? Every person who steps out in the night and looks up at the starry sky is awestruck. Each of us has been moved by the beauty of nature or the miracle of birth. We wonder who are we? What is the source of our lives? Most believe there is a universal religious impulse for all humankind. All conscious beings seek a connection to the transcendent. We wish to find meaning for life, to understand who created the universe and beyond, to find permanence, joy and protection from suffering, to believe in something beyond ourselves.

So it was with early man. Some say the beginning of the consideration of such questions corresponds to the evolution of Homo sapiens, as much as 200,000 years ago and certainly 60,000 years ago when humans began talking to one another. The search for meaning in life and the emergence of the Homo Sapiens' mind are thought to have happened concurrently. Religious rituals and practices are understood to have been part of the earliest tribal life.

Joseph Campbell writes in his *Power of Myth*, a book of his famous conversations with journalist Bill Moyers, that before written history, people used myths as "humanity's universal method of seeking the transcendental," or for striving for spiritual satisfaction.

There is “a wide spectrum of myths from throughout history (Japanese, Native American, Egyptian, Mayan, and many more) to illustrate humankind’s eternal quest to grasp the mysteries of creation.” (Campbell, p 51) Humankind’s “one great story,” from the evolution of human consciousness, from ancient myths, from prehistoric hunters, to the Fertile Crescent, to the classical world, to our modern times, the great religions of our world have developed and been informed by these myths.

And so the myths were an early attempt to talk about what can’t be known. The best or biggest things can’t be told. They transcend thought. The myths were metaphors for what is transcendent, says Campbell, conceived to help mankind understand what is beyond understanding.

According to Robert Segal, Chair of Religious Studies at the University of Aberdeen, anthropologists believe religion is needed by people. Religion is a human, not a divine creation made by people in order to make contact with God or the Deity. Humans don’t merely want to make contact, they need to do so. Humans, say many anthropologists, come into the world with a need for food, for love, and also they come into the world with a need for God. It is innate, and religion rises to fulfill the need. Religion provides shape to man’s perceptions of the universe and gives meaning to frightening events like the loss of a loved one or understanding of natural happenings.

One can classify the great religions of the modern world in many ways. Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism have been traditionally studied. Also many comparative religion classes include Jainism, Shinto, Sikhism, Taoism, Baha’i, Zoroastrianism, and even New Age. There are approximately 2.2 billion Christians in the world, 1.6 billion Muslims, 1 billion Hindus, 394 million Chinese traditionalists, 376 million Buddhists, and about 15 million Jews

according to the Pew Research Center. Many religions, such as Jainism, Taoism, or Bah'ai, even though their number of practitioners is small, are quite influential.

Karen Armstrong, in her book, *The Great Transformation*, refers to the Axial Age, a term coined by German philosopher, Karl Jaspers. During the Axial Age, a period from about 900 BCE to 200 BCE, the traditions that nourish our spiritual life even today leapt forward simultaneously in four distinct areas of the world. Confucianism and Taoism in China, Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism in India, philosophical rationalism in Greece, and the Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, had their foundations in the Middle East.

The foundations of Judaism lie in the covenants between God and Abraham in about 1900 BCE and between God and Moses about 500 years later during the Exodus of the Jews from Egypt under the guidance of Moses. Still in the middle centuries of the first millennium BCE, the canonical texts of the Hebrew Scriptures were compiled. As well, the philosophical writing of Plato and Aristotle, the Analects of Confucius, the Bhagavad Gita, and the teachings of Buddha all came down to us in the period of just a few centuries. In Palestine in the 7th and 8th centuries BCE prophets such as Isaiah, Elijah and Jeremiah were active and Hebrew Bible was woven into being, Confucius was born in China in approximately 551 BCE, and Plato and Aristotle were at work in Greece during the 4th century BCE. In India the Gautama Buddha was born in 623 BCE, and though the origins of Hinduism come from considerably older Indian traditions, the Upanishads which are the core of Indian philosophy were composed from 800 to 400 BCE. Shortly thereafter, Jesus lived and Christian teachings were recorded, and finally Muhammad was born in about 570 CE and lived until 632. During his life he recorded the holy book of Islam, the Quran, as dictated to him by the Angel Gabriel over two decades or more.

As I said earlier, humans had been around for tens and tens of thousands of years but during a few short centuries, there was a remarkable spiritual flowering. If one thinks of mankind's existence on Earth as a timeline of a full day, all of these developments occurred in just seconds before midnight. Before these few centuries, religions were based mainly on external rituals and often sacrifice, both animal and human. Because times were particularly harsh and turbulent - warfare, disease and famine were rampant - religious response was simple. Early men and women sought protection from violence and starvation. People turned to powers or gods who might provide safety and food if they were pleased by men. Divine status was given to rulers who could keep them safe from attack and slavery.

Some religious historians propose that during the first millennium BCE a new awareness occurred throughout the world. Perhaps due to technological advances in agriculture and in writing, transportation by horseback in many places, travel in military campaigns, and a growth of cities, mankind needed to cooperate, to get along, and to self-monitor. Admittedly, no one is quite certain why, but without doubt, in widely distant areas of the world, with no communication among them, a new moral way of thinking about the self caused people to try to understand the answers to the riddles of the human condition in a newly spiritual way.

The quest to find meaning and purpose in one's life expressed itself according to the culture of each area as all religions do. "(When) a religion – possibly more of a nascent of proto religion – is formed ...it can never be separated entirely from its context. Just as surely as one of the functions of religion is to inform, counsel and temper the society in which it exists, just so surely is every religion informed and colored by its hosting society." (Phyllis Tickle, *Emergence Christianity*)

In China Confucianism, Taoism, in India Hinduism, Buddhism, and others, in the eastern Mediterranean, Judaism, Christianity and Islam arose from traditions and practices of each area. But the search for ways to live peacefully together became more and more necessary, and ways of cooperating and living harmoniously together evolved everywhere.

In addition to satisfying questions about the source of the creation around us and answering the many troubling mysteries of the human condition beyond our limited comprehension, religions provide an orderly framework for their practitioners to live in their daily lives. Surely, each faith has some utility in helping us live together well. All of the religions provide a way for men and women to make decisions about what is right and wrong. Religions are useful to control people's behavior. Believers are urged to do right in the eyes of God or suffer retribution.

The founders of the world's religions were often mystics or spirit persons, people who had revelatory or enlightenment experiences. The Greek term "theotokos," meaning "God-bearer," has been historically used to indicate Mary the mother of Jesus. But many of the religions have a God-bearer who is the spirit person or spirit pioneer. All the religions developed from the teachings of such a sage or God-bearer: Confucius, The Buddha, Jesus, The Prophet Muhammad, Moses, among others. (Linda Groff, International Journal of Peace Studies) The prophets, inspired proclaimers of the will of God, spoke the divine truth to others as it had been revealed to them, not necessarily trying to establish a religion at the time. These religious leaders or spiritualists were almost always ridiculed and persecuted by the established community. But when enough people listened to the new ways preached by the diviners or sages, a religion did come to be established. The great prophets of world religions provided a basis for how virtuous men and women should live.

Over the past two thousand years as our world religions have grown and matured, there have developed sacred books or collections of teachings and stories. The sacred writings provide a guide for our actions. Some believe the writings to be literally true and others say the stories are not historically true, but whether they are factual events or symbolic ones, they still provide a model way to live. Many of the sacred books concern themselves with daily life – how to act towards one another, what punishments are to be given for various infractions, as well as how to conduct our spiritual lives.

In all the world the yearning for answers is the same. People in every culture wonder where we come from, for example, so there is a creation story. Listen to the similarities.

In the Hebrew Bible in Genesis 1: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters, and God said, ‘Let there be light.’”

And from the Pima Indians in the southwest of the United States: “In the beginning there was only darkness everywhere, darkness and water. And the darkness gathered thick in places, crowding together and then separating, crowding and separating.”

And from the Hindu Upanishads: “In the beginning there was only the great self, reflected in the form of a person. Reflecting, it found nothing but itself, and its first word was, ‘This am I.’”

One of the most universal of the religious beliefs about living together is the belief in living according to the Golden Rule. Listen to the words from several of the holy books.

Confucianism: “What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others.” Analects 15:23

Islam: “None of you truly believes until he wishes for his brothers what he wishes for himself. “ (Number 13 of Imam Al-Nawari’s Forty Hadiths)

Judaism: “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” Leviticus 19:18
And, “What is hateful to you, do not to your fellow man. This is the law; all the rest is commentary.” Talmud, Shabbat 31a.

Hinduism: “This is the sum of duty: do not do to others what would cause pain if done unto you.” Mahabharata 5:1517

Christianity: “And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise.” Luke 6:31

Buddhism: “Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.” Udana-Varga 5:18

And, “...a state that is not pleasing or delightful to me, how could I inflict that upon another?” Samyutta Nikaya v. 353

Certainly this belief in the Golden Rule is universal in all the great religions of today.

Another one of the beliefs expressed universally in the great faiths is that of selflessness, the control of one’s ego.

Confucius said, “Real knowledge is to know the extent of one’s ignorance.” And, “See without judging or adding our label.” “One should maintain a healthy practice of selflessness both in actions themselves and in the proper example set for one’s brothers.”

From Islam comes, “The key to happiness in Islam and in life is in selflessness. In fact, selfishness and unhappiness are proportionately related.”

Judaism: “Don’t try to get even. Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Hinduism instructs: “They are forever free who renounce all selfish desires and break away from the ego-cage of “I,” “me,” “mine” to be united with the Lord. This is the supreme state. Attain to this and pass from death to immortality.”

And the Christian is told “Love your neighbor the same as you love yourself.” Mark 12:31

The Buddhist teachings say “... lifetimes of ignorance have brought us to identify the whole of our being with ego.ego and its grasping are at the root of all our suffering.”

All the religions are riddled with ritual. We celebrate each important event in our lives: birth, coming of age, marriage, and finally death. We celebrate spring and harvest, the solstice. Ritual and celebration have surrounded each event from the earliest days of mythological religions to the modern traditions of our times. Rituals are symbolic actions using symbolic objects. Rituals are separated from the secular. They are performed in a sacred space, such as a church, temple, or mosque, or even at a shrine in the corner of a room. We repeat a ritual at a specific time – a holiday, a funeral, a wedding. Rituals feel good and all find comfort in them. Often they are performed in a group of fellow believers and make us feel that we are together doing something right. All religions have ritual for the big, strongly emotional events of life. They comfort us.

Consider the wedding traditions of the various faiths. The Chinese red wedding dress, the lanterns with names of ancestors of the bride and groom decorating them, and the serving of tea to the parents. The huppa in the Jewish wedding ritual, symbolizing the new home, established with open sides to represent hospitality. Consider the sacraments in the Roman Catholic faith, including baptism and confirmation, or Bar and Bat Mitzvah, the coming of age ceremonies establishing the young person as a full-fledged member of Judaism.

Each religion has important ritual surrounding death. It is especially important in dealing with the sorrow and fear felt when one among us dies. Humans universally turn to their faith for comfort and meaning. The congregation offers support and nourishment, both literally and figuratively, in such times of need. Rituals help us return our lives to order from chaos. A good example of looking for comfort and order in a time of chaos was the ritual and ceremony performed for the country after John Kennedy was assassinated. Our nation gathered together around the television in search of well-being in the face of tragedy. Rituals of all the religions bring solace and comfort when events we cannot comprehend occur.

The three great Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam share a belief in monotheism. The One True God who appeared to the Iron Age sheikh, Abram, later called Abraham, made a covenant with Abraham and his descendants. The God of Abraham is believed to be an all-powerful creator, an interactive force in the lives of believers. The divergent names, Yahweh, Elohim, God the Father, or Allah, are sometimes troublesome because many Jews, Christians and Muslims believe they are worshipping different gods, however the words are simply translations, language to language, and most writers consider them all to be the one God of Abraham.

The Asian religions, with the exception of some forms of Hinduism, are not monotheistic, in that God does not occupy a central position. Buddhism and Confucianism are essentially polytheistic. In Hinduism, the principle, Brahman, distinct from Brahmin, connotes the highest Universal Principle, the Ultimate Reality in the universe. Brahman is everywhere, inside each living being and there exists a connected spiritual oneness, but the Eastern religions do not have an interactive God as the Abrahamic religions do.

It is interesting that the original mystics or spirit-bearers can understand and share the core of each other's beliefs, appreciating the spiritual forces operating in each of us. But after the religions become codified and interpreted through writings by followers, and different cultural organizations grow and are passed down through generations, there is an evolution of disagreement and strife among the followers. When the spiritual learning is forgotten and cultural beliefs and practices mature further, misunderstandings develop. Soon enough, conflicting truth claims and dogmatic insistence on the rightness of one specific path to God take hold and fundamentalism arises. At that point it becomes more and more difficult to see the good in the beliefs of others.

All religions can be misused by zealots who claim that their version of religion is the only way. I am right so you must be wrong. Many people focus on the fact that wars and conflicts are undertaken in the name of religion, and statistically studies prove the view correct. Concerns of religious beliefs are so formidable and overwhelming to believers that it is all too frequent for one to take a hard line on these life and death matters. Often it's about one's soul and the stakes are high. Some say fundamentalism is a trend in all the religions of the world today. By interpreting the beliefs of their religion in a dogmatic and literal way, believers miss many of the subtle levels of meaning and analogies with teachings from other world religions.

In her book, *Emergence Christianity*, religion writer Phyllis Tickle writes, “All the world’s religions are more or less identical in their morality, behavioral precepts and social principles. It is in their mysteries that they differ. (Tickle, p 207) And the mysteries are at the core of their beliefs. After speaking with a number of religious leaders in the area, I suggest the following core beliefs for a few. I risk interpreting them here.

The heart of Judaism and its chief contribution to religion is the doctrine of the one living God who rules the world through law and love. Actions are more important than beliefs and mankind’s love of God is only complete with the love of one’s fellow man.

Christianity’s great mystery is in the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Ghost. God sent his son Jesus to live as a man and to sacrifice himself to save mankind. A Christian is to believe in Jesus as a savior. Although Christianity certainly considers itself to be monotheistic, its belief in the Trinity and in the divinity of Jesus, causes others to question Christianity’s monotheism.

The core of Islam is obedience and submission to the will of Allah as revealed to Muhammed and written in the Quran. Muslims believe that Islam is the last and most perfect religion in that it makes known all things as they should be through the revelations of Muhammed. Muhammed is a prophet, not a divine being. The word Islam means complete submission to Allah and peace by obedience to Allah, the Arabic word for God.

Hindus believe that the Divine manifests itself in different forms and can be worshipped by different means. The Divine speaks to each individual in different ways and there exist many paths relating to the Truth. Hindus believe in rebirth or samsara, the indefinitely repeated

cycle of birth, misery, and death, and that their actions reap rewards, good or bad, in a future life or in a temporary afterlife.

The essence of Buddhism is regarding suffering – what is its cause, the path to end it and to avoid it. Buddhism is a nontheistic religion based on the teachings of Gautama Buddha, an enlightened teacher who shared his insights to help followers end their suffering through elimination of craving and ignorance. Buddhists also believe in rebirth, samsara, and the opportunity man has to achieve enlightenment or Nirvana.

Confucianism regards the ordinary activities of life, especially relationships, as a manifestation of the sacred. Our activities represent our moral nature which is based on the Divine. The Divine is not interactive with humans as in the Abrahamic religions. Humans are basically good and perfectible through personal and communal effort.

Philip Gulley, a Quaker and a Hoosier, has written a thoughtful book called *The Evolution of Faith*, in which he says despite the many differences in the world's religions, there are commonalities. There is quite a gap between the rhetoric of religions and the teachings of the world's religions on how to live our lives. As written earlier, religions are more or less identical in their morality, behavioral precepts and social principles. Ecumenical conferences of thoughtful people from different belief systems and respectful writing about how all men and women can learn to tolerate the ways of others is a hopeful yet elusive path forward in ending religious confrontation. To be sure it is imperative that we learn to be tolerant of others' beliefs in the small and globally connected world we find ourselves sharing. We are more than ever interrelated, sharing common problems, and a single global economy. Planetary destruction is a real possibility and it is imperative that we find tolerance of one another's religious beliefs.

Almost all of the world's religions in their own sacred writings and scriptures say they support peace. Finally hear these last words of several sacred texts.

“Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called sons of God,” from the New Testament.

“A Muslim is one who surrenders to the will of Allah and is an establisher of peace.”

“The whole of the Torah is for the purpose of promoting peace.”

“Peace...comes within the souls of men when they realize their relationship, their openness with the universe and all its power and when they realize that at the center of the universe dwells the Great Spirit, and this center is really everywhere, it is within each of us,” from the Sacred Pipe, by Black Elk, Lakota Holy Man.

In answer to the question of the paper, “Are There Any Universal Religious Beliefs?” my answer is indeed there are. They all share universal beliefs in their morality, behavioral teachings and social principles. Further, all mankind seeks spiritual satisfaction and a connection to the divine. “The world's major religions in the end all want the same thing, even though they were born in different places and circumstances on this planet. (Robert Muller, Assistant Secretary General of the United Nations) The more mature mankind becomes spiritually, the greater will be our wisdom in forming tolerant communities. At the heart of every one of the world religions is the offer of meaningful understanding of higher spiritual truth and living a noble and loving life.

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