What Do the World's Religions have in Common?

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Religious conflict is all over the news; people kill each other in the name of religion, we are fighting real wars with real bullets against forces which use religion as a rallying cry, much of the political conflict in this country is fueled by religion. We are constantly thrust against the differences between religions.

That is why I was intrigued when one of you asked me to preach on what the world's religions had in common. It is not a task for which I feel qualified. I have had courses in comparative religion, but certainly don't consider myself any kind of expert. And my first reaction to the topic was, well that would make an interesting lecture, but how will it preach? What is the connection to how we live our lives or what we are doing here in the Meeting House?

But as I thought about it, it is profoundly connected. In the first place, a common ground of the world's religions is, increasingly, the United States. Harvard's Diana Eck tracks the prevalence and diversity of the world's religions in the United States in her Pluralism Project.

A recent update to the website[1] lists these traditions in the greater Boston area alone: Afro -Caribbean, Bahai, Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Native American, Paganism, Shinto, Sikhism, Taoism, Zoroastrianism and a number of others. There are about 6 million Muslims in the United States, about equal to the number of Jews. Altogether, there are about 17 million among us, over 6 percent of the population, who embrace religious traditions other than Christianity. So one common ground among the World's religions is, increasingly, the United States.

But there is a more immediate and intimate common ground: your hearths, your breakfast tables, your beds. Many couples are drawn to Unitarian Universalist churches because they marry from different faith traditions, and they find here common ground. The tension between faiths is often an undercurrent in our families, and it often surfaces at times of ritual significance such as child baptism, weddings and funerals. We may have shifted our allegiance to Unitarian Universalism from the faith of our childhood, but that faith is still in there somewhere, controlling the way we see the world.

My colleague Peter Richardson has written a very helpful essay about the 200-year history of involvement and influence on Unitarians and Universalists and UUs of world religions, particularly those of India and China. The essay is a lecture in the Minns series in 2005, titled "From Unsectarian Sect to Multifaith

[1] http://www.pluralism.org/wrgb/traditions

Faith.[2]" It stretches from Joseph Priestly publishing a book on world religions in 1799 to Emerson's reading of Vedic texts, Theodore Parker's quest for Absolute Religion, Nineteenth Century hymns such as the ones we sung by William Channing Gannett, and the one we will sing by Samuel Longfellow, large scholarly studies of world religion by Samuel Johnson and James Freeman Clarke, and the ideal of a Universal Religion which was a strong motivating force behind the remarkable assembly called the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago in 1893. Richardson shows that in the Twentieth Century, the Unitarian movement witnessed the rise of humanism and world religions were prominent in two experimental churches in Boston, the Community Church of Boston founded in 1920, and the Charles Street Meeting House in 1949. Ken Patton of the Meeting House was an avowed internationalist and listed among his holy men Chinese figures such as Chuang Tzu and Mo Tse.

Ken Patton may have been the high-water mark of this kind of incorporation of world religions into UU worship, but Peter Richardson himself moved the marker forward a little in 1984 by proposing on the floor of General Assembly the language that became the third source of inspiration listed in the principles and purposes, "Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life."

So there is a long and deep association of world religions with this religious movement. I want to drink from those wells more in our worship here. While I am deeply involved with questions of Jesus and his teachings, I have never felt that Jesus had any kind of lock on wisdom.

But I was an anthropology major in college, and as I look at the involvement of our denomination with world religions, I wander if we aren't sometimes a bit smug.

Isaiah Berlin wrote a famous essay called *The Hedgehog and the Fox* in which he states that there are two ways of looking at the world, based on the folk wisdom that the fox knows many things, the hedgehog knows one big thing. If we are foxes, we see the trees and maybe miss the forest: we get fascinated by the details. Hedgehogs, on the other hand, tend to see the forest and miss the trees.

When a fox looks at something as complex as world religions, he or she emphasizes the divergences, the many forms of doctrine, of worship, of authority, how religions are always dividing into warring factions, falling out over this or that point. The hedgehog tries to look for unity behind the multiplicity of forms, to see that though light may come through many windows in the cathedral, it is still coming from the same source outside.

I am basically a hedgehog, and I know that the failings of hedgehogs is that we take shortcuts. Hedgehogs are always saying they have found ultimate

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[2]Chapter Four in *Exploring Unitarian Universalist Identity*, 2006 Red Barn Publishing Rockland ME.

truth when what they are looking at is their own reflection in the bottom of the well. We should be suspicious of anyone who says I have found universals in religion and by the way, they look just like the principles we're already promoting over at my church.

I also have a hedgehog's hunch that there is a convergence among the world's religions at the mystical end, that experienced yogis and Buddhist meditators and sufi dancers and Christian seers are approaching the same reality from different perspectives, that all paths come together at the top of the mountain. But since such experiences are beyond words, there is not much we have to say about them.

Lower down the mountain, if we really appreciate the diversity of the world's religions, diversity not just in belief but in practice, in organization, in language, we do not rush to translate it, to rip it out of its cultural context to serve our own ends.

So when I set out to find common elements in the world's religions, I wanted to find a foxy hedgehog, someone who would look at the details and then come up with an assessment based on those details. And I think I found her. Her name is Karen Armstrong, and she is a scholar of the history of religions. You may have read her books *A History of God* and her works on Buddha and Mohammed. Karen wrote a book in 2006 called *The Great Transformation*: *The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions*[3]. This book is a look at the Axial Age, the period between 900 and about 500 BCE in which an old order died and a new order began. The ancient world turned on its axis. The idea of the Axial Age originated with the philosopher Karl Jaspers, and Armstrong follows him, though she corrects some of the errors that he made.

Armstrong concentrates on four geographical areas in her exploration of the Axial Age: China, India, Israel and Greece. In China, she concentrates on Confucius and the Taoist writers Lao Tse and Mo Tse. In India, she discusses Zoroaster as an Aryan precursor to the Axial Age and follows through the Vedas to the appearance of the Buddha. In Israel, she concentrates on Second Isaiah and the end of the Babylonian Captivity with Cyrus the Great's accession to the throne in Persia. And in Greece, she details the Golden Age of Athens, its philosophers and dramatists.

Out of an ocean of rich material and insight, I would like to hold up three themes that Karen Armstrong finds across the cultures she examines from the Axial Age: kenosis, empathy, and the Golden Rule. She discusses others as well, but these stand out for me.

Kenosis means emptying. In Christian theology, it is associated with a particular passage in Paul's Letter to the Phillipians (2:7) where Paul says Jesus

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[3]Armstrong, Karen, *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions*, New York: Alfred Knopf 2006

emptied himself,

taking the form of a slave,

being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form.

In other words, since Christ in orthodox theology is fully human and fully divine, Christ has to empty himself of divine attributes like omnipotence and omniscience in order to assume human form.

What Karen Armstrong means by kenosis is more general: it is a move to the interior, to abandon concern with the external forms of ritual and the external relations in order to concentrate on internal states of the spirit. In Israel, she finds this in the Axial Age prophet Amos, who carries the message from Yahweh, "I hate, I despise your feasts and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies." In China, kenosis consisted of the honoring and elevating of the legendary rulers Yao and Shun, who ruled by charisma alone, without resort to force of arms. In India, kenosis was the development of a new class of ascetics called the renouncers, who took self-sacrifice to a new level. And in Greece, kenosis consisted in a scene at the end of the Iliad, where Achilles has reconciliation with his enemy Priam. Kenosis, Armstrong is saying, is the inward point.

A related development is that of empathy. Michael Hennesey, who taught me Buddhism at Harvard, used to say that the basis of all religions is the recognition that the other is in some sense "like me." In our early infancy, our consciousness divides the world between the subjective and the objective, between the inner world of our minds and the exterior world of other objects and people, and we live the rest of our lives with this separation. Empathy attempts to bridge this divide, it says that the joys and sufferings experienced by the other person is like the joy and the suffering that I experience.

Armstrong finds empathy arising in the Axial Age. In China, Confucius preached the importance of shu, a likening to oneself: "The Way was nothing but a dedicated, ceaseless effort to nourish the holiness of others, who in return would bring out the sanctity inherent in you.[4]" In Israel, she finds empathy in four poems embedded in the unnamed prophet we call Second Isaiah. The book of Isaiah, the longest of the books of the prophets in the Hebrew Bible, has long been known to divide in two. The first part purports to have been written before the Babylonian captivity, and the second part afterward. Second Isaiah is basically a paean to a Yahweh who will crush his enemies, but embedded in the victory poem are four poems about a suffering servant. This servant is despised and rejected. He offers no resistance to those who strike him, but turns the other cheek. Eventually Yahweh would vindicate him and the people would realize that "ours were the sufferings he bore, ours the sorrows he carried... He was punished

[4]Armstrong, p. 208.

for our faults, crushed for our sins.[5]" You can see where this is heading: these empathy themes of second Isaiah are echoed in Paul's descriptions of Jesus and ultimately get enshrined int the Gospel accounts. Jesus was not part of the Axial Age, but was in many ways a flowering of seeds planted then.

In Greece, empathy showed itself in philosophy by the reflection on the limitations of human knowledge of Parminidies, and in the classic Greek tragedies, empathy consisted of the putting of suffering onstage so that the audience could experience collective catharsis.

In India, empathy developed as ascetic spiritual leaders wrestled with the doctrine of karma, which condemned souls to an endless cycle of rebirths. One particular ascetic whom his disciples called Mahavira, or the Great Hero, meditated and fasted for two days and achieved a state called kevala, which allowed him to perceive all levels of reality simultaneously, in every dimension of time and space, as if he were a god. The state he attained was beyond the power of words to describe, but denoted a kinship with all living beings, and enforced a strict ethic of ahimsa, doing no harm. The followers of Mahvira became known as Jains[6].

Later Armstrong quotes a passage from the Bhagavad Gita on empathy

When [the devoted one] sees identity in everything,
Whether Joy or Suffering,
Through analogy with the self,
He is deemed a man of pure discipline[7]"

The third theme common to these religions, which flows from the other two, is the Golden Rule, which requires us to treat others as we would want to be treated. In February of this year, President Obama told the National Prayer Breakfast that the Golden Rule was taught by all the world's scriptures[8]. Karen

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[5]Armstrong 214, quoting Isaiah 52:13-53:5

[6] Armstrong 241

[7]Armstrong, p 376 (Bhagavad Gita 6.32, Miller Translation)

[8]"There is one law that binds all great religions together," Obama said, according to ABC News. "It is, of course, the Golden Rule – the call to love one another, to understand one another, to treat with dignity and respect those with whom we share a brief moment on this Earth."

"Instead of driving us apart, our varied beliefs can bring us together to feed the hungry and comfort the afflicted, to make peace where there is strife and rebuild

Armstrong would agree. Here is her summary:
"The Axial sages saw [the warfare and terror of their ages] and devised an education rooted in the deeper, less conscious levels of the self to help them overcome this. The fact that they all came up with such profoundly similar solutions by so many different names suggests that they had indeed discovered something important about the way human beings worked. Regardless of their theological 'beliefs' – which , as we have seen, did not much concern the sages – they all concluded that if people made a disciplined effort to reeducate themselves, they would experience an enhancement of their humanity. In one way or another, their programs were designed to eradicate the egotism that is largely responsible for our violence, and promoted the empathic spirituality of the Golden Rule. This, they found, introduced people to a different dimension of human experience. It gave them *ekstasis*, a 'stepping out' from their habitual, self-bound consciousness that enabled them to apprehend a reality that they called 'God,' *nibbana*, brahman, atman or The Way. It was not a question of discovering your belief in 'God' first, and then living a compassionate life. The practice of disciplined sympathy would itself yield intimations of transcendence.[9]"

So here is a hedgehoggy kind of conclusion: the Golden Rule is common to the world's religions, at least those which spring from the Axial age, which includes Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, Confucianism, and Judaism with its later offshoots of Christianity and Islam. The fox in me is still suspicious of this conclusion. We only reach this common element by taking the teaching of the sages as the substance of the religion. Scholars of religion like to point out that religions are all-encompassing ways of life, and the formal teachings are only a small part of them.

The New Atheists such as Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens often make this mistake, taking the scriptures for the religion. If this radical reductionism is wrong when it is done by those hostile to all religion, it is also wrong when it is done by someone as sympathetic to the religious impulse as Karen Armstrong.

There is another caveat that Armstrong herself makes: the insights of the sages of the Axial age quickly got frozen and buried by succeeding developments. This parallels what Emerson described in his Divinity School address: the primary revelations to the holy prophet in one generation get set into ritual and dogma in the next and the divine inspiration is lost, religion is reduced to a set of forms. This is why we say in our tradition that revelation is not sealed but new light is always waiting to break forth.

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what has broken, to lift up those who have fallen on hard times."
http://www.dakotavoice.com/2009/02/obama-emphasizes-common-element-among-religions-at-national-prayer-breakfast/
[9]Armstrong, p 391.

But with all these caveats, it is undeniable that some variant of the Golden Rule can be found in most of the scriptures of the world's religions. Do unto others as you would want them to do unto you. It might just be a good idea. Amen.