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True or False: The Major Religions Are Essentially Alike

By Stephen Prothero

At least since the first petals of the counterculture bloomed across the United States in the 1960s, it has been fashionable to affirm that all religions are beautiful—and all are true. The proof text for this happy affirmation comes, appropriately enough, from the Hindu Vedas rather than the Christian Bible: "Truth is one, the sages call it by many names."

According to this multicultural form of wisdom, the world's religions are merely different paths up the same mountain. But are they? Religious people do agree that there is something wrong with this world. But they disagree as soon as they start to diagnose the problem, and diverge even more when it comes to prescriptions for the cure. Christians see sin as the human problem and salvation from sin as the religious goal. Buddhists see suffering (which, in this tradition, is not ennobling) as the problem and liberation from suffering (nirvana) as the goal. If practitioners of the world's religions are all climbing a mountain, then they are ascending very different peaks and using very different tools.

You would think that multiculturalists would warm to this fact. But instead they try to flatten out diversity by pretending that the differences between, say, Judaism and Taoism are more apparent than real. How fulsome is religious diversity if all the religions are essentially the same, and a little interfaith dialogue can talk it all away?

Whether the world's religions are more alike than different—obviously they share both differences and similarities—might appear to be an academic question. But understanding real religious diversity—the undeniable differences demarcated by

religious boundaries—is essential to understanding the powerful role that religious beliefs, practices and institutions play in the world today.

I do not believe that we are witnessing a "clash of civilizations" between Christianity and Islam. But it is a fantasy to imagine that the world's two largest faiths are in any meaningful sense the same, or that interfaith dialogue between Christians and Muslims will magically close the divide between them. Even Shia and Sunni Islam are in many respects quite distinct—a fact American officials might have learned before things in Iraq went awry if our public schools had not been treating this subject as taboo for generations.

Faith may or may not move mountains, but it is doubtless one of the prime movers in politics, both in the United States and (with the notable exception of Europe) abroad. The contest over Jerusalem and the Mideast more broadly is at least as much a religious contest as an economic or political one. Jews, Christians and Muslims believe that the one true God (or Yahweh or Allah) has given them a promissory note for their territory. Religion is also a key motivator in the civil war in Sri Lanka, which pits Sinhalese Buddhists against Hindu Tamils. Our understanding of these battlefields is not advanced by the shibboleth that "all religions are one."

Coming at the problem of religion from the angle of difference rather than similarity is scary. But the world is what it is. And both tolerance and respect are empty virtues until we actually understand whatever it is we are supposed to be tolerating or respecting.

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