

## **Between Dogmatism and Relativism**

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“Religion” comes from the Latin *re* and *ligare* and literally means “that which binds together.” The various religions have certainly done the work of binding folks together in our world—into bands, tribes, congregations, denominations, sects, political forces, nations, and cross-national bodies. Despite often rancorous disagreements between and even within various religions, much of human identity across history has been caught up in religious cultures, practices, and habits, if not in religious beliefs. And since religions often are predominant sources and caretakers of values in cultures, religions have significant influence in shaping how peoples ought to live, the fundamental focus of ethics.

For many, no doubt the vast majority, of people on earth, religion has a central role in defining what it is to be human, for individuals as well as for groups. Many embrace the religious traditions of their upbringing; others reject tradition for reform or a wider exploration of spirituality, and increasing numbers identify more with the secular than the sacred. Still, religion is a powerful influence on most aspects of human life and history. While every religion makes its claim to promoting peace, all are appropriated in the service of war. It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to find a major global conflict where religion has no crucial part among the unions and divisions in contention.

One feature of religious identification is the strength with which it is held. Self-proclaimed practitioners of any faith embrace it to varying degrees and interpret its requirements more or less rigidly. For some, the faith is so central to their identity they cannot think of themselves aside from their religion. Some cannot think of their religion except as the one and only true religion. Only their religion can put humans right with the divine; every other

religion is at best mistaken, at worst a force of evil tempting the righteous away from the one true way to live and to believe. Should religious conflict arise it is easily settled from this perspective: "I am right; anyone who disagrees with me is wrong." For the purpose of this essay, such religious belief will be called "dogmatism."

The ever expanding availability of modern communication and transportation has brought people with disparate ways of life, cultural practices, and beliefs into increasing contact with one another. Migration and global conflicts of the past century have resulted in increasing numbers of immigrants as well as refugees uprooted from their homelands; they are relocating in foreign lands as they attempt to make new lives for themselves and their families or simply to survive. Such upheaval results in more frequent contact among people with very different perspectives, values, and practices. Such cross-cultural contact can be met with the dogmatism described earlier, but it needn't be. For many, being confronted with significant differences can provoke a "live and let live" outlook. After all, we might have been born elsewhere, and if we had been, no doubt we would behave, and perhaps believe, quite differently. We might have another cuisine, another form of dress, another set of cultural practices, another religion. And surely others take their religions no less seriously than we take ours.

Such reflections often lead to a way of handling religious conflict very differently from the dogmatic. Rather than rigid insistence on one's own view, a broad acceptance of difference is embraced. "I'm right, and if we disagree, you're right too, from your point of view." I'll call this perspective "relativism." Instead of imposing their outlook on everyone else, relativists see no problem with allowing and accepting variety. Live and let live; to each her or his own.

Clearly, religion is not something about which there is universal agreement. Dogmatists have the courage of their convictions but may be mistaken about having the one and only true position, and they often provoke contentious conflict with their insistence. Relativists avoid the confrontation and conflict of dogmatism but they give up their claim to absolute truth in doing so. Often we feel trapped between dogmatism and relativism when it comes to religion. And often our feelings are exploited to force us one way or another, frequently to serve political ends. Our era is replete with examples of wedge issues being used to drive us to one camp or another and force polarization of public opinion, issues such as the definition of marriage, taxation, and patriotism. Awareness of such manipulation of believers has led

some to sweeping rejections of religion altogether in favor of secularism. Everyone begins to look bad.

In what follows, I will reflect on this common understanding of religious belief and practice, this characterizing of religious folks into mostly dogmatists plus a minority of relativists. My interest is in finding a way between dogmatism and relativism, in finding a third way to understand and even embrace religion, a way that avoids the problems of both dogmatism and relativism.

## **Problems**

The problems of dogmatism are readily apparent. Given the wide variety of religious perspectives on earth, how can one justifiably insist on one's own interpretation of one's own religion as the best, the only true religion? Human beings are, after all, fallible mortal beings. We might be mistaken in our insistence on the one true religion. Sure, we may claim revelation or another infallible source for our dogmatic view, but others have equal claim to their dogmatic views and one absolute truth doesn't seem to accommodate the disparate variety of dogmatic religious claims available. Without a means of resolving dogmatic conflicts to the satisfaction of each of the various dogmatists, dogmatism leaves the conflicting views at a standoff. Insistence on any single view is not a resolution, nor is imposing any view by force (as has been all too common in human history).

Relativism is not without its problems either. On the surface it seems to avoid the difficulties of dogmatism by accepting any and all religious views as equally true, none having any more claim to authority than any other. But this is the logical equivalent of saying that in religious matters there is no truth, hardly satisfying to those who identify with the religious traditions that form their identities as persons and members of communities.

As an undergraduate philosophy student years ago I was struck by the following fragment from the pre-Socratic thinker Xenophanes (c. 576-480 BCE):

If oxen and horses and lions had hands and were able to draw with their hands and do the same things as humans, horses would draw the shapes of gods to look like horses and oxen to look like oxen, and each would make the gods' bodies have the same shape as they themselves had.

It reminded me of a wonderful scene in a popular film at the time, *The Planet of the Apes*, where the injured protagonist (played by Charlton Heston) is on the run to avoid capture in a world where humans have the status of apes and apes have the status of humans. The scene I have in mind is where Heston's character dashes through a religious service and an orangutan is preaching to a congregation of orangutans about "god creating us in his own image." In the ape-dominated world of the film, there is a clear "racial" hierarchy among orangutans, chimpanzees, and gorillas, so we have several simultaneous and rather blunt parodies of our sophisticated, modern world. Religion, for all its ideals, is often a source of animosity, conflict, hatred, and violence. As a budding philosopher, I was fascinated that an ancient thinker could make a controversial observation and that two-and-a-half millennia later the same observation could still stir controversy.

In *The Power of Myth* Joseph Campbell takes a broad and wide-open look at a big question facing humans always and everywhere: How are we to live?<sup>[1]</sup> For Campbell, human beings as far back as we have evidence seem to have expressed their sense of life in stories. Such stories often are the bases of sacred texts and of oral traditions. What scholars have come to call "myths," the fundamental stories of any people in any culture, tend to address the maturation of individual members of the group—from birth and infant dependency through childhood and adolescence to adulthood—with all the challenges, joys, dangers, and sorrows of life, ending, of course, in death, grief, and speculation about what may lie beyond. Such stories typically relate individuals to their groups and groups to nature and the cosmos. They express awe and wonder at life, offer visions of nature and the order of things, teach how life should be lived, and validate the society from which they come. The stories are products of realizations that members of the community have had as its members. They thus express more group wisdom than individual insight; they reflect shared values and shared vision, and are passed on through generations.

Campbell suggests that scholars call such stories "myths" because they are not to be taken literally. Rather, they express patterns that situate individuals within their cultures, helping community members accept the realities of their lives, and guiding them in negotiating the difficulties they face. Myths are not superstitions or magical solutions to the problems of life; if they were, they would just be poor science. Myths are not science at all and not attempts at science; the goal of a culture's basic stories is not facts or knowledge but wisdom, serving as a guide to good judgment. It is important to note that for Campbell there

are no negative connotations in calling these foundational stories “myths.” In Campbell’s sense of the term, the major religions of the world are themselves myths based on other myths. And Campbell has no higher compliment for a story than calling it “myth,” because that speaks to the power and influence of the story as an expression of the best judgment of a culture and as a guide to members of the culture.

Too often stories designated as myths are dismissed as untrue, as if they were made to offer actual accounts of events rather than to teach group wisdom. No doubt this is so in part because myths, like any cultural product, are time- and place-bound, often expressing one set of values for the in-group and quite another for outsiders. This is a main reason for religious, cultural, and ethnic collisions: values developed and expressed at one particular time and place bump up against equally cherished values of another time and place. Group wisdom from one context may not be welcome in another, or it may not effectively transfer from context to context, or folks in one context may be content with the traditions they embrace, and they may be defensive and resistant to other stories, values, and practices competing with their own.

Religions have been so central to the cultural and personal identities of members of societies, especially of traditional societies, that attachments to religious values, practices, and beliefs can be and often are very strong. Encounters with other religions can provoke questions of one’s own religion, driven by the realization that one might have been born elsewhere, in a foreign religious context, and so one might embrace another religious tradition as fervently as one embraces one’s own. Campbell’s insights on the nature and power of myth helped me understand my own fascination with Xenophanes’ comment about religion and the controversial scene from Planet of the Apes, which still provokes defensive reactions from some religious folks: attachments to religious traditions are about values, group wisdom, but often they are entangled with and confused for factual claims. What Campbell, Xenophanes, and the film all suggest is that the deep significance of religion is in the lessons passed from generation to generation about how to live, not in the factual claims about the contexts in which those lessons were learned. The deep significance of religion is about wisdom, good judgment, not about facts or knowledge; religion is about who we are trying to be and not about absolute truth.

It might be helpful to note the etymology of “truth” at this point. The word is derived from the old English word *treowth*, which literally means “having good faith.” Truth shares its

etymology with “troth,” as in “thereto I pledge thee my troth” in a marriage ceremony, from which we derive “betrothal.” The notion is that of giving one’s word, so truth turns out to be more closely tied with ethics than one might expect. The point is that truth literally refers more to the judgment of those making truth claims than to the factual status of the claims. When we say something is true, we’re giving our word, assuring another that we’re sincere, offering our best judgment. But, of course, folks of differing views can be equally sincere in their judgments. So religious disagreements are more about matters of wisdom than matters of fact, and varieties of context can help us appreciate the differences in belief and practice.

## **A Third Way?**

Mohandas Gandhi was a moral and religious figure of a magnitude that can hardly be overstated. Gandhi’s moral vision was grounded in devotion to truth, and his central idea led him to coin a new word, satyagraha, literally “holding on to truth” or “truth force.” For Gandhi, devotion to truth excluded the use of violence because human beings are “not capable of knowing the absolute truth and therefore not competent to punish.”<sup>[2]</sup> In Gandhi’s way of thinking, devotion to truth cannot be over-emphasized. It is “the sole justification for our existence.” In fact, according to Gandhi, “it is more correct to say Truth is God than to say God is Truth.”<sup>[3]</sup>

Let me explain what I mean by religion. It is not the Hindu religion, which I certainly prize above all other religions, but the religion which transcends Hinduism, which changes one’s very nature, which binds one indissolubly to the truth within and which ever purifies. It is the permanent element in human nature which counts no cost too great in order to find full expression and which leaves the soul utterly restless until it has found itself, known as its Maker, and appreciated the true correspondence between the Maker and itself.<sup>[4]</sup>

Gandhi understood the dangers of dogmatism, recognizing that “what may appear as truth to one person will often appear as untruth to another person.” But he dissolved the threat of dogmatism by assuring us that “where there is honest effort it will be realized that what appear to be different truths are like the countless and different leaves of the same tree.”<sup>[5]</sup>

What Gandhi did was to avoid both dogmatism (insisting on one view and imposing it on everyone) and relativism (accepting all views as having equal claim and status). Rather, he asked us to do the difficult work of understanding all the various religious traditions as

variations on one theme, as expressions of the divine arising at different times and places, as attempts to capture in words and practices the wisdom to which all religious traditions aspire. Of course all of these efforts would look very different given the diverse set of contexts out of which they arise. Counseling us to avoid getting hung-up on differences, Gandhi would invite us to focus on our common aspirations for good lives. He imagines a way between or perhaps beyond dogmatism and relativism, a pluralistic alternative that leaves open the possibility of an absolute and universal truth, but at the same time admits the impossibility of humans knowing it in any final and infallible way, pointing us to the importance of collaborative and collective wisdom, not only for individuals within single cultures but at cross-cultural and international levels as well. Of course Gandhi himself was well-versed in many of the world's religious traditions, and he borrowed freely from them all in developing his vision of human moral progress.

## **The Challenge**

As neat and clear as Gandhi's way between or beyond dogmatism and relativism may be, his pluralistic approach to religious belief and practice is not easy. While many religious leaders are open to cooperative discussions and even multi-faith practices, most followers hold to traditional views, wary of religious differences. And, of course, numerous religious leaders call for traditional beliefs and practices, encourage fear of progressive religious thought, and even demonize the faithful in other religious traditions. Gandhi himself was depressed to the point of regarding himself a failure when Muslim and Hindu fears of the other were exploited to drive Gandhi's India into partition with the creation of Pakistan. A glance at headlines across our globe makes obvious the continuing xenophobia concerning religion and the persistent efforts to exploit religious fears to manipulate public opinion for political purposes. Understanding what ought to be done is a far cry from being able to do it.

Change is hard. Change around deeply held issues of personal and cultural identity is very hard. Still, it is not impossible. Two hundred years ago slavery was a widely accepted practice; today, it is universally condemned. One hundred years ago women's suffrage was a dream; today nations are judged in part based on whether women vote and hold office. Fifty years ago colonialism was the rule; today it is in its last throes. Dominant human values can and have changed for the better. We should expect such change to continue, and increased tolerance, acceptance, even celebration of religious difference should be among

the continuing changes.

Educators, political leaders, thoughtful religious and secular people all have the responsibility to help soften religious collisions, deepen tolerance, widen understanding, and to challenge those exacerbating religious fears, intolerance, bigotry, and hatred. All of us need to speak up for religious pluralism as a way beyond the ongoing dogmatism without falling into a vacuous religious relativism. The challenge is formidable, but the necessity clear.

I've taught at a Methodist college for more than thirty years. Shortly after my initial appointment, the seated area Bishop addressed the faculty, the only time the faculty has been addressed by the resident bishop in my tenure. Several of my colleagues rolled their eyes and settled back for a lecture on the role of faculty at a historically religious college. Bishop Wayne Clymer's comments were so brief and so memorable that I can nearly quote them verbatim: "As far as I can tell, most people either accept or reject their religion in about a sixth-grade formulation; your job is to do something about that." His call was for educators to question, challenge, and provoke students so they might deepen their reflections on religion. Gandhi's vision of religion asks all of us to do the same and to encourage such reflection in others, with a mind for increasing tolerance.

A hundred years ago who would have expected a pacifist revolution to force the British Empire to allow political independence for India? Fifty years ago who expected an articulate black minister to lead a successful nonviolent deconstruction of legal racial segregation in America? Twenty years ago who could imagine a transition from apartheid to non-racial government in South Africa by any means short of a blood bath? I don't know how we can get over religious intolerance, hatred, and their political exploitation, but I do know that we can and even that we will. Just as slavery had to end, women had to vote, colonies had to be free, racial segregation and apartheid had to be dismantled, so religious intolerance must end and religious pluralism has to flourish. I don't know how, or when, but I'm convinced it must come to pass as humanity makes moral progress. Our job is to do what we can to further movement toward the inevitable.

1. J. Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth* (New York: Doubleday, 1988).
2. M. Mohandas K. Gandhi, *Non-Violent Resistance*, edited by Bharatan Kumarappa (New York: Schocken Books, 1951, 1961), 3.



3. 3. Gandhi, 38.
4. 4. Gandhi, 109.
5. 5. Gandhi, 39.