Chapter Six: Religious Traditions and Human Rights

The theme of same and different is important for understanding religious traditions and their relation to human rights. Similar to same and different in the sexual area, same and different first applies to each separate tradition and then to the relation between traditions. Similar to the area of age, same and different applies to change over time within each religious tradition. The different mixes of same and different produce unique traditions that are not necessarily in conflict with one another. However, the failure to understand uniqueness in this case has produced some of the worst conflicts in history. However bloody religious wars were in the past, they were generally localized. Today, the conflicts can have worldwide repercussions. Conversely, an understanding of the uniqueness of religious traditions can be an invaluable support of world peace and human rights.

Within Tradition and Between Traditions

Each of the major religious traditions has an intramural tension reflecting a difference of emphasis, one group insisting that the tradition is unchangeable, another group insisting on change and reform. If the tension becomes too great, the latter group intentionally or unintentionally creates a new tradition. The split does not entirely solve the problem; a tension between sameness and difference remains although now it is between traditions rather than within a tradition. Very often a new tradition fails to have staying power; traditions cannot simply be invented. In a few instances the new tradition has become one of the major religious traditions of the human race. In this chapter I select a few such developments to illustrate the importance of contemporary dialogue and the danger of severe conflict when there is not mutual understanding.

Within a religious tradition, there are forces that resist all change. Some people may be appointed or elected precisely to make sure that things remain the same. Most of the adherents of a tradition are inclined to support the sameness of the tradition over time. The stability and consistency of the tradition are what is comforting to most people. The tremendous personal support that the tradition provides in times of crises, including death, depends on a person being able to count on sameness over time. Tradition for many people means “as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end.”

The names for describing emphasis on sameness or difference are not neutral. Any names for these attitudes carry historical baggage. The most common language used is conservative and liberal, terms that are imports from the world of politics. The advantage that it is easy to pin a pre-fixed meaning to a religious group is outweighed by the danger of thinking that the religious position is understood when one has not made any serious attempt to understand either side. Even in politics it is questionable that conservative versus liberal today is very helpful. “Conservative” in today’s politics seems worlds apart from even the 1950s meaning of the term, let alone the eighteenth century meaning. “Liberal” almost reversed its meaning toward the end of the nineteenth century, shifting from opposition to government interventions to supporting programs of government help.
For religious traditions it is unclear what either conservative or liberal represents. If conservative means to conserve the past it would seem that religious traditions are by definition conservative. If liberal means to set free, then every religious tradition is concerned with liberating the person from the shackles of ordinary life so as to find a new spiritually transformed existence. Conserve and liberate, far from being opposites, are necessary allies for any religious tradition.

There are, nevertheless, sharp differences and regular debates within religious traditions. With some misgivings, I will call the emphasis on sameness “traditionalism.” There can be distinguished different degrees of traditionalism. Most people who emphasize sameness will acknowledge, if pressed, that obviously some things have to change but essential things should not. Tradition with a capital T is sometimes distinguished from traditions with a small t. The Tradition is thought to go back to the origin of the religion, perhaps to the words of the founder. In contrast, practices that have persisted over many years or centuries are traditions in a sense but do not have the same status as original texts and rituals.

Traditionalism at its worst means an unwillingness to admit the need to interpret texts. This attitude is sometimes called being literal-minded. But a genuine appreciation of the literal meaning of a text involves understanding the historical and literary context. Some people who are called traditionalist do not actually know the literal meaning of the texts they quote. There is an impressive and voluminous scholarship on the Jewish and Christian Bibles and the Qur’an. Scholars who spend years studying these texts – to get at their literal meaning – are sometimes accused of undermining the tradition whereas they are usually giving the tradition a firmer anchor in history.

The contrast to traditionalism within religions I call intellectualism, an emphasis upon difference. The term intellectualism is intended to be neutral but it no doubt has positive connotations for some people and a negative meaning for other people. The use of the intellect in religion is unavoidable; the question is whether it is given primacy. Intellect should, in Martin Buber’s metaphor, “play first violin but not conductor.”

People with a strong intellectual bent are impatient with rituals which by their nature are resistant to change. Rituals do need examination and they may need some changing but the change usually has to be gradual over decades or centuries. Although the intellectualist may seem to be undermining the tradition in being critical of external forms, the aim of genuine reform is to draw upon richer strands of the tradition that may simplify the external rituals but not destroy them. The intellectualist who opposes traditionalism may be more of a friend to tradition than is the traditionalist.

The problem for the person advocating religious change is the standard by which to evaluate possible changes. That standard may seem obvious on the basis of scholarly inquiry into the past but the past has to be related to the present. A Christian scholar who has a detailed knowledge of the New Testament does not by that fact know how to reform today’s church. In today’s world a reformer might look to other religious traditions for some guidance. That was almost never true in the past and even today an ideal from a
different religious tradition is of limited help. The main basis for change has to be internal to the tradition. Then the question is who has the widest and deepest sense of the whole tradition. The scholar is likely to assume that he or she is in the best position to represent the whole tradition. In practice, the person who is a devout practitioner may sometimes have a great insight to the tradition.

The non-religious world offers to religious traditions a variety of standards for judgments of what is good or bad. Sometimes, the secular world offers attitudes and practices against which the religious tradition defines itself. Conflict with a dominant culture can be a positive experience for many religious sub-cultures. However, if one is talking about modern secular world, a total contradiction with the surrounding culture is probably impossible and would not be healthy.

At times the religious group may agree with aspects of the contemporary culture, especially if the group can argue that some of the values of the secular world are echoes of religious virtues. There might be a case for arguing that dignity, justice, responsibility or care are not inventions of secular ethics but are at least in part echoes of religious belief. A religious tradition should not be expected to conform as a whole to the standards set by the contemporary secular world. But some of those standards can be used to correct what are now perceived to be obvious biases and intolerances within the tradition, for example, the attitude toward women.

Where a religious tradition would lose its way is if it simply tried to adjust itself to current attitudes. The dialectic of same and different in a religious tradition dissolves if there is no tension at all with the world beyond it. An attempt to conform to the present would be both unsuccessful in the attempt and destructive of the values represented by the tradition.

One of the major religious events of the twentieth century was the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church. Because of this Church’s age, size and resistance to change it was a fascinating case study of institutional change. In announcing this meeting that was to last for three years, Pope John XXIII used what was a shocking term, one that has continued to be used since then as a summary of the Council’s intent. The Pope described his purpose as aggiornamento, which is usually translated as bringing up to date. For the Pope, the term simply meant opening a widow to get some fresh air inside the church; the seventy-nine year old Pope was too steeped in Catholic Church tradition to envision a hurricane of change.

Neither the Pope nor any bishops wanted simply to be up to date with the contemporary world. Pope John, for example, had written encyclicals denouncing war and severely criticizing capitalism. At the beginning of the twentieth century one of the Pope’s predecessors had condemned “modernism” as the source of all heresies. “Modern” is a word that means up to date, that is, the present fashion as opposed to attitudes of the past. The Roman Catholic Church was not about to embrace all things modern but some bishops, and more often their young advisors, thought that there were positive features in the present world which the Church could incorporate.
In recent times there has been a peculiar debate within the Roman Catholic Church as to whether the Council was “an event.” That may hardly seem to be debatable but those denying that it was an event mean that nothing much new happened. They maintain that there has been a smooth continuity of all the essential beliefs and practices. The people defending the Council as an event are forced into an awkward position of arguing for discontinuity, for a historic break with the past. The problem here is the image of history as a line that is either continuous or discontinuous. A tradition cannot fit within the image of a line which allows for only one kind of change, that is, a break in the line. Tradition is more like a storehouse with a constant cycling and recycling of its material.

Some religious traditions may seem determined to make no adjustments to present attitudes. But unless they are willing to withdraw to a desert or a mountain top, a religious group has to find a way to function in the modern world. It has to decide whether a piece of technology (for example, a loudspeaker at a worship service or a website for information) can be used without the culture of technology distorting the tradition. No tradition has the answer here because this is not a problem with a solution but a continuing tension to be lived with.

The outside world usually sees the internal struggle of a religious tradition as one between liberal thinkers who have cast off most but not all of their religious beliefs and the orthodox who stubbornly refuse to face up to a changing world. The secular embrace of those who are perceived to be liberal religious reformers can be detrimental to the cause of reform. The dialectic of same and different has to be played out within the tradition itself. The reformers who argue for change are trying to show that the tradition as a whole can bear the interpretation that they are advocating. The debate within a tradition can be a respectful disagreement; one’s opponents in debate have to be accepted not as the enemy but as one’s co-religionists who are equally loyal to the tradition.

The tension between sameness and difference in a religious tradition gives each major tradition a uniqueness. As usual with the distinctly human meaning of uniqueness, the traditions are not simply different from one another. They differ in the manner and degree that they are open to otherness. As is true of human beings, no religious tradition is totally unique. Each tradition rightly sees itself as highly unique; the temptation is to mistake that for total uniqueness. A totally unique tradition would have achieved universality; but at best any historical tradition can only embody a pointer toward universality. It does so not by abandoning its particularity but by digging deeper into that particularity. The lifeblood of any tradition is a set of stories and practices that can always be mined for a deeper meaning.

In his book *Living Religions and a World Faith*, William Ernest Hocking states that religion is based on two postulates: it must be universal and it must be particular. These two postulates are usually thought to be incompatible. Hocking agrees that no existing religion successfully combines them but each religion in its particularity can point toward universality. “No religion could present itself as the completion of other faiths until it had gone through the labor of understanding those faiths. And this labor no religion has as yet
more than begun.” That statement by Hocking in 1938 remains true today; the labor of understanding has hardly begun. What has changed in the interim is that the major religious traditions confront one another to an unprecedented degree. The choice is no longer between understanding and indifference. The choice now is between mutual understanding and serious conflict. The entire world has a stake in each religion affirming its uniqueness in a way that leaves room for the uniqueness of other traditions.

A start toward understanding a different tradition is the willingness to admit that some of the religious terms that one has always assumed to be one’s own are in fact no one’s possession but are used by people with differing religious commitments. The dividing line is “between those whose religious commitment is inclusive, because they give themselves to the truth, and those whose religious commitment is exclusive because they think of the truth as something of which one takes possession.” Especially in religious matters no one possesses the truth. Meister Eckhart, the greatest of Christian mystics, used to say that religious statements, even when true, leave out more reality than they can include.

In a dialogue between secular and religious attitudes, as well as a dialogue between religious traditions, one’s religious interlocutor may seem at first to be saying preposterous things. Throughout most of history that is the point when dialogue ended. Except for unusual cases when an individual scholar or a mystic crossed over to look at the world from a different vantage point, religious traditions cherished their self-containment. Between religious traditions there was no wish on either side to be contaminated. And between a religious world and a secular world, there was a gap that could only be broached by switching sides. From the religious side that meant conversion to the faith; from the secular side, it meant coming to one’s senses.

A gradual softening has been occurring for about a century. A real conversation could hardly be said to have existed until the second half of the twentieth century. There is still a widespread attitude among secular scholars that a religious tradition can only be understood with the tools of western enlightenment. But for serious conversation there has to be a basic respect for one’s partner in conversation. Before one can pronounce judgment on a whole way of life, one has to make an effort to understand it on its own terms. “In the case of a religion, this means that one must have some skill in how to use its language and practice its way of life before the propositional meaning of its affirmations become determined enough to be rejected.” One has to try to understand what it is like to be a religious believer rather than start with the question: Why do these people believe these falsehoods?

Between religious traditions the gap of understanding can be just as wide and in some ways more hostile than the gap between the secular and religious. The religious believer may dismiss the secular critic simply as an unbeliever. In contrast, the relation between religious traditions involves passionate belief on both sides; what is at stake is the meaning of one’s whole life and perhaps a future life as well. Men have killed for less than that; and unfortunately the conflicts between religious traditions have in fact led to some of the bloodiest wars in history.
The question before the world today is whether there are resources within the major religious traditions so that the members, without renouncing their passionate commitment to the truth as they see it, can contribute to a human tradition which is still taking shape. Before anyone can arrive at a final judgment of whether or not religious traditions can provide support for a human tradition on which to base human rights, there are multiple conversations that have to go much further than they currently have.

Even to name the participants in a dialogue of religious traditions has its problems. Fairly clear examples are Jewish, Christian, Muslim or Buddhist. However, within each of those traditions are differences that may look minor to an outsider but can seem to an insider to constitute a separate tradition. Can it be unequivocally said that there is a Christian tradition? Or is it more accurate to speak of a Lutheran, Anglican, Orthodox and dozens of other traditions within the scope of Christianity? Are orthodox and reform Jews separate traditions? These days even orthodox Jews have a sharp division within their ranks. Something similar applies to Shiite and Sunni Muslims or Theravada and Mahayana forms of Buddhism.

There are no agreed upon umpires to rule where one tradition stops and another begins. One can only make a fallible judgment that there are enough common bonds among people identified as Muslim or Jewish or Buddhist to say that the name refers to a tradition. What is suggested by this issue, however, is that a conversation between, for example, Christians and Jews, always has subplots of what is happening among Christians and among Jews. The serious conversation between Christians and Jews could not get going until there was conversation between Protestant and Roman Catholic Christians. And that conversation was preceded by one among differing groups of Protestants.

Religion

Before tracing the progress in dialogue between religious traditions, one should note that there is complexity not only in the term tradition but in the meaning of religious. The term religion, similar to many other words in the English language, has two nearly opposite meanings. When that fact is not recognized, the two meanings become the source of endless confusion and sometimes heated conflict. “Religion” is a word of Latin origin. The Christian Church absorbed several of the religious terms that the Romans used, such as devotion, piety and religion itself. The Christians baptized these term by giving them new meanings.

Augustine of Hippo was the single most influential thinker in shaping the Christian theology that was to follow. Augustine wrote a book called *On True Religion*. It is not a book claiming that Christianity is the true religion as opposed to other religions. Instead, it is about true religion that “has never ceased to exist from the origin of the human race.” Since the coming of Christ “men began to call Christian the true religion which already existed beforehand.”14 “Religion” referred to genuine practices of worship. In Augustine’s time the life of the monk became the most dramatic following of the way of Christ and the practice of religion. The monk was said to “enter religion.” and henceforth
to live the “religious life.” To this day in the Roman Catholic Church the “religious life” means the lives of monks and nuns.

For a thousand years religion referred to a set of practices that every individual is obliged to perform and is found in its purest form in a monastery. Thomas Aquinas, a member of the Order of Preachers, relied on Cicero’s definition of religion as “offering service and ceremonial rites to the superior nature that men call divine.” Thomas treats religion under the virtue of justice, as the debt which humans owe to God. Thomas was open to learning from Jewish and Muslim scholars but he could not have entertained the idea that they represented alternate religions. There could only be one set of practices that were (true) religion. The Christian way was the culmination of history, and the gospel of Jesus Christ laid out the path to follow for every human being. The Christian Church was the instrument for the spread of true religion.

Toward the end of the Middle Ages there was the beginning of a use of language that could suggest that true religion exists in other forms than what was recognized in official Christendom. Marsilio Ficino published On Christian Religion in 1474. It is not a book about the Christian religion as opposed to other religions. The title refers to the Christ-oriented nature of human religiousness: “Every religion has something good in it; as long as it is directed toward God, the creator of all things, it is a true Christian religion.” The most daring thinker of the fifteenth century was Nicholas of Cusa. He starts from the inexactness of all human knowledge. In referring to the “one religion” he means “the unattainable truth about God…of which all existing belief systems are but shadowy reflections.”

Tragically, however, when the sixteenth-century Reformation began, the competition was for the one true religion. Martin Luther and John Calvin, as much as their Roman Catholic counterparts, assumed that only one set of practices was true Christian religion. Leaders on both sides somehow squared killing heretics with the Christian message of love. Religious warfare is likely to be the bloodiest when it is between two groups that share most of the same beliefs but each group sees the other as a corrupting force from within what is shared. A disloyal brother is treated as demonic.

The first great step in intra-Christian tolerance is signaled by a reference to “Catholic and Protestant religions” in the 1560s. This usage was short-lived. By the early seventeenth century, Catholic and Protestant became variations on the Christian religion. The Roman Catholic Church never wavered in its claim to be “the one true church established by Christ.” Protestants protested against this Catholic intolerance but most Protestant groups were not models of tolerance themselves.

The important implication of reference to “Catholic and Protestant religions” was that the term religion was utterly changed in meaning. Instead of religion being the true worship of God, “religion” was now available as a term to describe a people or an institution. Hugo Grotius’ On the Truth of (the) Christian Religion in 1622 no longer refers to Christian religion as true worship but rather that “the Christian religion teaches the true worship of God.” As Catholic and Protestant were being folded into a single religion
called “Christianity,” there was now a language that recognized Jews and Muslims as having a share in the term religion(s). How far to extend “religion” was a problem then and remains a topic of some debate. Hindus, for example, obviously engage in practices that fit under the earlier meaning of religion but Hinduism does not seem to be “a religion.” The same can be said of other traditional ways that arose in Asia. The Christian control of the term religion for more than a millennium remains a shadow in all of its subsequent uses.

As is usually the case with radically different meanings of a word, the second meaning of religion did not entirely replace the first. The second meaning is capable of encompassing the first but not vice-versa. That means that a religion such as Christianity contains practices of Christian religion but much else besides that can hardly be called religious. It may scandalize some people that the Christian religion inescapably includes politics and economics as well as moral and artistic elements. Reformers are often intent on purifying their religion of any extraneous influences but if “a religion” is at all successful in spreading beyond a small group it will include more than religion. Some individuals will come to occupy offices of authority and the group is on the way to becoming an institution.

That does not mean reform of a religion is impossible or undesirable. But “re-form” can only change the form of the organization not get rid of the form. This fact may be frustrating to radical reformers within “a religion” but it is the basis of hope for other insiders and for most outsiders. Genuine reform of a religious tradition has a wide scope of possibilities for changing the relation of its religion to its political and economic elements. A religion or a coalition of religions could change from a force for violence to a supporter of peace, from an obstacle to human rights to being a main supporter.

Any inter-religious dialogue and cooperation requires patience because the movement is bound to be slow. Each religious tradition has its own distinctive language that has to be examined word by word. When two religions share the same term, that fact can be the basis of mutual understanding. It can also be the cause of conflict because the sharing is almost never mutual. One group intentionally or not takes over a word from a group that had previously exercised exclusive control. The older religion is understandably resentful of what it considers a theft of its heritage. The younger religion is either oblivious of the problem or thinks that the older religion should be grateful that its language has been extended beyond its previously limited setting.

Every religion considers itself unique, not an assemblage of pieces that can be interchanged with other religions. It conceives of itself as the bearer of an ultimate truth about human life. When conflicts arise, the tendency is to turn inward and put up stronger walls to defend its particularity. The crucial need is to build trust between two groups so that differences do not mean one of them has to be destroyed for the other to flourish. A conversation about sameness and difference can lead each group to look more deeply into its own tradition to find a more universalistic reading of the whole tradition.
Within every religious tradition there can be found an acknowledgment that it is not yet the final truth. Of course, that aspect of the tradition does not get as much emphasis as the claim to be true religion. The problem is a tendency to fill in the gap between a true universality and an intended universality. By taking over all the best words, one group does not leave other groups a place to breathe. It is not necessarily intolerant for Christians to claim that “Christ is the way” provided that they admit both that many Christians do not perfectly follow that way and that other religions might have a different name than Christians do for pointing toward the universal.

The secular meaning of religious tolerance is most often built on the assumption that when the outer trappings are stripped away, every religion is “essentially” the same. The modern project of tolerance was signified by the invention of the terms deism/theism. The two terms were at first interchangeable. By the eighteenth century, deism had acquired the status of “a religion.” It owed its origin to a stripped down Christianity in which a “supreme being” gave a fillip to the universe and then withdrew to the heavens, appearing again only when the individual “met his maker.”

Deism was never a serious competitor to religious traditions with their profusion of details about daily practice and feelings. Deism was the first of many attempts to find an ideology that would replace “traditional” religion. It was based on “the belief that nothing of unique value is embedded in tradition or history.” The substitutes have usually been devised by philosophical or scientific thinkers who did not have much of a feel for the actual practice of religion.

Theism went a very different route from deism. Instead of fighting traditional religions it embraced them. Whereas deism was based exclusively on reason and therefore excluded all claims to a divine revelation, “theism” became a generic term for religions that were thought to have an intelligible core. Each of the traditional religions was allowed to add its own distinctive message from god or gods on the condition that this message be kept private and not interfere in society’s politics. The term faith took on new prominence as an individual choice situated in the mind next to reason. The believer and the nonbeliever could cooperate because of the agreement that reason was the guide for public policies, while faith is a private affair.

The term revelation also acquired an importance that it had not previously had. The Latin derived “revelation” is a translation of the Greek “apocalypse.” The idea of apocalypse/revelation was of a final judgment at the end of time. Early in its history, Christianity domesticated the idea of revelation to mean church teaching that came directly from God. But the Christian churches have never succeeded in completely controlling revelation/apocalypse as the announcement of the end of time. In theism, each of the traditional religions was allowed a claim not to “divine revelation” but to have its own revelation, a Christian revelation for Christians, a Jewish revelation for Jews, a Muslim revelation for Muslims. Thus, Christian faith was directed to a “Christian revelation,” a term that did not exist before the sixteenth century.
To the extent that the religions accepted their private space with its private beliefs, they could get along with secular governments. Religions could also avoid wars between themselves. But it also meant that neither a single religion nor a group of religions could effectively support public policies. In the 1960s and 1970s there began a worldwide movement to “deprivatize” religion. Some of the world’s major religions began to challenge the privatized and marginal role that was assigned to religion. A striking example in the United States was the resurfacing of evangelical religion which after the Scopes trial in 1925 the (northern) news media had declared dead. At the time of Jimmy Carter’s election in 1976 the news media were astounded to discover that there were tens of millions of citizens who called themselves born-again Christians. During the 1970s the Roman Catholic Church with a new found confidence in its American credentials also entered more aggressively into the political arena. The fact that human rights became an issue at the time of religion’s refusal to remain private is more than a coincidence. Religion as a public factor will either be an obstacle to human rights or an important ally in the movement for human rights.

Religious Education

If religion and religions can go either way in relation to human rights, then education for an understanding of religion is an imperative. The sad fact is that in no part of the world can one find what can qualify as “religious education.” The term is occasionally used by some groups but the comprehensiveness which is needed for an adequate religious education is lacking.

Religious education, like the rest of education, begins at birth. Parents convey an attitude to religion, especially through their own example, which infants and small children assimilate. Long before the child can exercise its own reason it has simple but profound reactions to the universe in which it finds itself. Open-minded parents today might wish to let the child develop with a neutral attitude to religion until the child can decide on its own. But the best that the parents can do is simply to be honest and not try creating an artificial world either of beliefs or no beliefs. Most young children experience the death of someone they know. When a small child asks where grandma has gone, the response should be in whatever terms make sense to the parent and which does not close off explorations of belief by the child at a later time.

The practice of a person’s religion and the existence of a plurality of religions present an unusual challenge to the human intellect. Religion as an academic subject should be postponed at least until senior high school and the university. Consider as a parallel to religion the place of psychology in education. A child is immersed in psychology from earliest childhood and it is important that adult teachers have some familiarity with the academic field of psychology, but we do not offer courses comparing Freud and Jung in the third grade. Concepts for understanding religion and religions are at least as complicated as those in psychology.

A comprehensive religious education would deal with both meanings of religion, that is, the practice religion and the study of religions. A religious community is the proper
setting for educating members in the particular practices and beliefs of the group. In contrast, a public or state school is the proper setting for the teaching and study of religion, that is, for examining the phenomenon of religion as it exists in a variety of institutions. Unfortunately, the country is nowhere close to sorting out the issue. A comment by one Supreme Court Justice that distinguished “teach religion” and “teach about religion” quickly became unshakeable orthodoxy but it simply confused the issue. Courses in state schools did not need permission to teach about religion; history, sociology or psychology cannot avoid referring to religion and religions. But equating “teach religion” with teaching a Christian, Jew or Muslim on how to practice the Christian, Jewish or Muslim way of life makes no sense. 24

It is not surprising that until recently the possibility and the need for religious education were not evident. Each religious group did its own intramural education through immersing its members in the practice of the religion. Reflection on those practices and the history of the group produced teaching or doctrine. Whether or not a teaching conflicted with the teaching of other groups was irrelevant or unknown. The teaching sometimes was implicitly hostile to a closely related group. When the two groups on occasion were forced to confront one another, the resulting conflict could be passionate and bloody.

From the eighteenth century onward in the West it was assumed that religion was on the way to completely disappearing. The irony is that this assumption reached a culmination in the 1960s when it was declared that “god is dead” and that “secularity” had replaced all remnants of the sacred. Many social scientists were caught by surprise when religion erupted all over the world in the 1970s. Some of these religious groups were new but many others were traditional groups that had been quietly waiting for the right circumstances.

The term religious education would not have been coined except for the recognition of a need to understand other religions than one’s own. It is not the “first language” of any religious group but it is a needed second language for talking to other religious groups. Of course, a full blown language could not come into existence at one moment or be produced by one religious group. The term religious education was first used by Unitarians in the United States toward the end of the nineteenth century. That is not surprising in that Unitarians think of themselves as the forward edge in the unifying of all religions. Thomas Jefferson thought that the whole country would be Unitarian but he did not reckon with the strength of evangelical Protestantism. Unitarianism, while remaining a small group, has nudged the larger religions toward understanding and cooperation. 25

The term religious education came into general use with the founding of the Religious Education Association in 1903. The founders of the organization were largely motivated by the liberal Protestantism of the day and were looking for a replacement for the Sunday School which had carried the burden of Protestant education in the nineteenth century. However, the new organization was open to Catholics and Jews, as well as to Protestants of every denomination. The admirable ideal of the REA was to bring a religious dimension to education and an educational dimension to religion. The aim was to
professionalize the education in churches and to bring professional religious educators into the state schools. More than a century after the founding of the Religious Education Association, the United States lacks any concerted efforts at religious education in its state schools or in other public venues where widespread religious dialogue might occur.

While the United States was losing ground in establishing a meaning for religious education, the United Kingdom gave a legal meaning to the term religious education in its Education Act of 1944. Like the founders of the Religious Education Association in the United States, the forward-looking men who composed the law in England were aware that the existing range of religions in the country was narrow but they recognized that the future of the U.K. might be religiously more diverse. They correctly sensed that religious education should include practice and study. At the time, a religious ceremony at the beginning of the school day was much more feasible in the U.K. than in the U.S. In the U.K. both the religious ceremony and the study of religion focused on the Christian nature of the country.

The situation in the U.K. rather suddenly changed with the emigration of large numbers of Asians and Africans from countries of the former empire. If religious education were to exist in practice, it had to be open to a wide range of religions. In the 1960s, especially through the leadership of John Hull at the University of Birmingham, a curriculum more deserving of the name religious education emerged, not without controversy. Since then the British have generally led the way in giving substance to the term religious education. The men and women working in this area struggle against a good amount of ignorance and prejudice. They cannot carry the whole burden of establishing an effective religious education. In the past decade, British religious educators have joined with some of their continental colleagues to raise the issues of religious education in the Council of Europe and beyond. Their resources are very limited for what is now urgently needed in the whole world.

**Christian and Jewish Relations**

The study of religion in general can never produce more than generalities which will not prevent misunderstandings and conflicts between actual religions. It is necessary to discuss particular religions in detail. To understand religion one must understand religions. No one is a master of all religions but it is a help to look at two religions for understanding each of them. For the hope that religions might converge in a support of human rights, the relation between Christian and Jewish religions is a good starting point. These two siblings have been linked for two millennia. The third sibling, Islam, will be discussed below to complete the picture of three traditions that trace their origin to a single individual known as Abraham, Avraham or Ibrahim.

A visitor from another planet examining Jewish and Christian religions would find them very similar. They agree in their basic outlook and most of their teaching. The visitor would be puzzled at the terrible conflict that has characterized the relation between Jews and Christians throughout the centuries. Jews and Christians have badly understood each other; their misunderstandings only worsen the rest of the world’s misunderstanding of
both religions. Any group that claims that God spoke to them and that they hold the key to all human history are likely to be looked upon as arrogant and dangerous. The modern world looks skeptically at all exclusivisms and holds equality to be the highest ideal. If Jews and Christians would stop fighting each other, they could concentrate on clarifying the logic that each of them embodies and they could cooperate in their common mission of striving for a just world.

In the last half century there has been amazing progress in overcoming the enmity of centuries and in beginning the long road toward mutual understanding. The patient work of a few Jewish and Christian scholars has spread tolerance if not yet comprehension within their respective communities. The key moment on the Christian side was the change of attitude represented by the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s that reflected the change in Protestant-Catholic relations. Many Jews were not thrilled at the way the discussion of Judaism went during the Vatican Council but the conclusion was clear: a thorough repudiation of the “Christ killer” tradition and a recognition of Judaism as a way of salvation that does not need Christian proselytizing.29 That was the needed beginning. Christian theology, however, is saturated with assumptions that are implicitly anti-Jewish. It will take many decades of conversations before Christians can recognize what bothers Jews about Christian theology.

Jews, for reasons of survival, have usually had a better understanding of Christianity than the understanding of Jews by Christians. Christians have assumed that they had a knowledge of Judaism because they are familiar with what Christians call the Old Testament. Jews have to make a special effort to acquire a knowledge of the Christians’ New Testament; they are likely to have an attitude to Christianity that is based on the experience of how Christians practice their religion. The two groups find it difficult to see how similar is the logic of their belief: a particular group singled out by divine election to be a model for humanity by listening to and living according to divine instruction. Each has tended to see the other as narrow-minded and exclusivist in contrast to the all-embracing outlook of their own group.

Emil Fackenheim, a thoughtful Jewish philosopher, could write: “Judaism is ‘universalistic’ for it teaches that the righteous of all nations enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Christianity is ‘particularistic’ for it bars from the Kingdom all unsaved non-Christians, no matter how great their righteousness.”30 The best one can say of this accusation is that it is a simple reversal of what Christians have said of Jews. No doubt one can find Christians who think that all non-Christians go to hell. But from the earliest years of Christianity it has been rather obvious that an all-loving God and a condemnation of the righteous do not go together. “Christ-church-sacraments” were believed necessary for those who heard the truth but God must have other ways for those who do not have that opportunity.31

This extraordinary route to salvation was not well articulated especially when it was supposed that the Christian movement would soon spread to the whole world. It took a long while before it became clear that “light to the nations” was a better description of the church than “the ark of salvation.” Any thoughtful Christian can now see that the
Christian Church, on the basis of its own doctrine, is the extraordinary route. The Christian Church is necessarily a particular human institution. No church or religion is catholic or universal. Roman Catholics sometimes forget to use the adjective before catholic. The Christian Church in all of its branches aspires to universality while it has to recognize that an earthly church is an imperfect reflection of a heavenly church (or “kingdom of God”).

It is ironic that a Jew would accuse Christianity of being particularistic because the more obvious failing of the church was that in separating itself from its Jewish roots it lost its particular grounding and saw itself as universal. Without a sure particularity, the claim to universality only results in generality, that is, conceptual abstractions rather than a reality unlimited by time and space. This movement away from the particular was not a one-time failing. The temptation to think that one is speaking of every human being when in fact one is only talking about a abstract humanity regularly occurs. Fortunately for the church, reforms have been possible which, as Martin Buber pointed out, always include a return to the Jewish roots of Christianity. That return mainly consists in returning to the teachings of the Jew, Jesus of Nazareth. Today’s genuine Christian-Jewish dialogue, perhaps for the first time in history, holds the possibility of a Christian reform like none previously, although there are no guarantees of success.

A Christian reform that would finally establish a particular religious body that points toward universality, while in dialogue with other religious bodies that point to the universal, is important to the cause of human rights. The literature on human rights tends to be strongly anti-church, which may be understandable, but without religious support human rights loses what could be a great ally. Perhaps as important, the Enlightenment as a basis of human rights is misunderstood unless there is recognition of what secular philosophy borrowed from the post-reformation period of Christianity.

In the late Middle Ages, “true Christian religion” referred not to “a religion” but to particular ritual and moral practices. When the Christian Church lost its control of the term religion, the pointing toward universality could have been given a boost. At the time, however, Christians and Jews (as well as Muslims), instead of presenting a united front in the cause of dignity, justice and peace saw themselves as deadly competitors. In reaction, secular philosophy tried to leave behind religious squabbles and affirm universal principles of humanity. Secular philosophy has overtones of a religion of humanity and the literature on human rights tends to secular sermons. Church sermons are bearable so long as they are directed to a community of people who profess the same beliefs. Secular sermons that profess not to need a community of believers can be banal and ineffective discourse.

I use as an example of the preaching of secular sermons Richard Rorty’s later writing. Rorty was both a supporter of human rights and an aggressive opponent of church doctrine, as he understood it. He identified Christianity with everything he was opposed to, such as metaphysics, natural law, and objective truth. He accurately pinpointed the Christian temptation to claim to speak in universal terms. However, in proposing that human rights should start from sympathy with the suffering Rorty was more in league
with Christian belief than he realized but his view of Christianity as a variation on Plato and Kant leaves out most of the story.

Rorty writes that “for Christians, sanctity is not achieved as long as obligation is felt more strongly to one child of God than to another; invidious contrasts are to be avoided on principle.” He is right about invidious contrasts but distinctions among children of God are clearly recognized in the New Testament and by Christians. The parables of Jesus are unvaryingly about particular people who need help. Nowhere in the Bible does it say to love humanity or to love individuals without noticing their age, sex, or nationality.

The summary of Jesus’ teaching, which he took from the Hebrew Bible, is “love your neighbor as yourself” which is the test of any profession to love God. When asked, “who is my neighbor?” Jesus responds with parables that are clear: my neighbor is whoever is in need and can be helped by my actions. Dietrich Bonhoeffer pointed out that Nietzsche was actually close to the spirit of the Christian gospel in writing: “Do I advise you to love your neighbor? I advise you rather to shun your neighbor and to love who is furthest from you.” Bonhoeffer comments that “my neighbor may well be the one who is furthest from me.”

If taken seriously, loving my neighbor can put strains on family and tribal relations. Jesus demanded the nearly impossible: “Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you.” Anyone who claims to be following Jesus of Nazareth has to reckon with a demand not to profess love of humanity but to act in support of those who are suffering, especially the stranger and someone who has been named an enemy. Rorty argued that the basis of human rights is “solidarity,” which he described as “the ability to see more and more traditional differences (of tribe, religion, race, customs and the like) as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation – the ability to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of ‘us’.” The Christian movement began as the attempt to expand the “us” to include everyone; the test of whether it is going in the right direction is its attending to the poor, the oppressed and the stranger.

To outside observers the Jewish problem with being particularistic seems obvious. The phrase “chosen people” points to the claim of difference by one small group. The belief of Jews is that God spoke to us and we are God’s partner in mending the world. How can Jews claim to be “universalistic” in their beliefs? Here is a place where the double meaning of “uniqueness” comes into play. Uniqueness can mean either difference based on a process of increasing exclusiveness or difference based on a process of increasing inclusiveness. The history of ancient Israel shows a tension between these two claims to uniqueness.

The Hebrew Bible is a strange kind of epic in which the people repeatedly fail to understand their great vocation. The community under threat turns inward and asserts that “our god” will save us. The prophets of ancient Israel (as well as their modern successors) continually have to remind the people that God is the God of the universe.
One way that they do so is by suddenly reversing the language of “the people” and “the nations.” At the most crucial moment when God parts the sea and allows the Jews to escape from the Egyptian soldiers who are drowned, the angels in heaven begin to sing. But God says: “Stop your singing; do you not know that my people are dying.”\(^37\) In the prophetic tradition, prayer is first for the Jews but not as opposed to the nations. “I beseech thee that thou mayest redeem Israel. And if you willest it not, redeem the gentiles.”\(^38\)

Throughout all of history the question for Jews has been whether to separate the community from the rest of humankind or whether to identify the Jewish community with all of God’s people. Jewish life “proves” its claim by devotion to the cause of justice for all humankind. It is not a coincidence that so many leaders in the movement for political, economic and human rights have been Jews.

The Jews did not come to belief in (one) God by reasoning about being and unity.\(^39\) The belief came from digging deeper into the community’s experience and concluding that “our God” is not our possession but the God of all. Starting with Moses the belief moved forward and backward. Abraham was in the back story, then Noah, and finally Adam. At each step a wider view of humanity was correlated with a more unified view of creation. The Book of Genesis is the end not the beginning of the story wherein God spoke to the other animals and said: Let us make man in our own image. God started with one man Adam, the earthling, who already included woman.\(^40\) The Talmud asks: “Why was only a single man created?” The answer: “to teach you that for him who destroys one man, it is regarded as if he had destroyed all men, and that for him who saves one man, it is regarded as though he had saved all men.”\(^41\)

Jewish religion at its best is thus a story of the uniqueness of each human being who potentially includes all human beings and all creation. “The divine sovereign stamps the image of the first man on each human being, and yet each human being is unique. When we are fully present to one another in dialogue our unique selves are revealed in the divine image.”\(^42\) This belief has been severely tested through the endless crises of the Jewish people. The community’s struggle is to make sense of suffering, vocation and justice. It started with Moses, who according to the Talmud, “pleaded with the Lord to reveal the final truth. The Lord replied: ‘There are no pre-existent final truths in doctrine or law. The truth is the considered judgment of the majority of authoritative interpreters in every generation.’”\(^43\) Later, when two schools of interpretation appealed to God to settle their debate, God replied: “The opinion of these and the opinion of those are both the words of the Living God.”\(^44\) It is difficult to be a Jewish heretic.

Jews and Christians should be able to agree that the “messianic age” is still to come and its achievement depends in part on the struggle for human justice. Both Jewish and Christian traditions are clear in their belief that every human being is created by God and therefore has a divine stamp deserving of respect. Jews and Christians subscribe to the same basis of ethics: a love of one neighbor that is rooted in the love of God. Today’s world in which one can hardly avoid knowing of the needs of people all over the world makes much clearer what the love of neighbor can demand.
Although it is important to emphasize the sameness in Jewish and Christian traditions as a basis for their cooperation, it is equally important not to collapse their difference. A younger tradition always has a tendency to absorb most of the previous tradition and thereby assume a new unity. In this case, the terrible conflicts and persecutions throughout many centuries would seem to make obvious that the reality is two traditions not one. That reality notwithstanding, some people at the end of the nineteenth century came up with a peculiar name for a single tradition: “Judeo-Christian.” The Jewish contribution is reduced to a modifying of Christian.

This adjective is nearly always used before the term tradition; rarely does anyone refer to Judeo-Christian religion. The invention of the term was not the result of religious interest. It was an attempt to abstract some ideas related to the success of Western countries in dominating men and nature. The people who coined the term Judeo-Christian did not seem to know much about either Jewish tradition or Christian tradition. A detailed knowledge of the two religions was not thought necessary for the origin of ideas about the autonomy of man and the rise of modern science.45

The term Judeo-Christian did not have a wide use until the Second World War. It had had some favor on the political left for indicating a tolerant if not ecumenical outlook. Hitler produced by reaction a wider use of the term; his assault on the Jews was interpreted by some Christians as an attack on “Christian civilization.”46 Since World War II the term Judeo-Christian has shifted to the right and is now often attached to the word morality by people who believe that the civilized world is collapsing. The objection to the term Judeo-Christian is that it obstructs a needed dialogue between Jews and Christians. That dialogue might lead to greater understanding of both sameness and difference in the two traditions.

Jesus of Nazareth in the three synoptic gospels speaks of his coming to his own people; his message, however, had wider implications. His followers, including the author of the fourth gospel and Paul, saw the universal possibilities in the “following of Christ.” The Christian message was one that called for hope and love. The first Christian communities tried to embody the message by living simply according to the gospel. The early church succeeded by a combination of “social security” and brilliant speculation about the universe. The poor, widows and children were cared for both economically and by having a meaning to their lives.47

Like the Jews, Christians did not speculate about a being called God. Instead, they worked out an extraordinarily complex understanding of the divine and human that cannot be subsumed under a generic term such as monotheism. They were sometimes attacked for having three gods which can be suggested by both their rhetoric and practice. They began with their relation to a more than human Jesus and his relation to his father in heaven. They eventually devised a language of relations within God or, as some of the Greek fathers of the church said, a God whose nature is communion.48 In inventing or refashioning terms for the Christ and for God they produced new ways to talk about the human, especially the distinction between “person” as who one is and “nature” as what one is.
Starting with the New Testament itself, a picture was drawn by Christian thinkers that brought the length and breadth of the world into a unity. In Augustine’s words, “God created man as one individual… that in this way the unity of human society and the bonds of human sympathy be more emphatically brought home to man.” All men meet again in the “Second Adam” who provides a restart for a wayward human race. All of history and the entire universe are centered on this “story of salvation.” The unborn, the living and the dead are swept up into a grand unity. The humans are not at the top of the world; they are rather far down in the hierarchy of spiritual beings but God for whatever mysterious reasons is lenient with them. Death was said to come into the world through sin; death was now overcome as will be shown at the last judgment. It need hardly be added that not all Christians have such a comprehensive understanding of their own religion. One might wonder whether the Christian religion was too complicated for its own good. Learning the details of the Christian religion can be a daunting task but this basic orientation needs to be conveyed to every Christian.

The possibility of the Christian Church joining with Judaism and other religions to support human rights depends on its understanding that creation-revelation-redemption is a process that occurs in the present. This belief can be found within its own Christian tradition but probably will not be without Jewish help. It is only by attentiveness to the world about us and by respect for all forms of life does one arrive at knowledge of the creator. Thomas Aquinas argued strenuously that “an error about creation is reflected in a false opinion about God.” Thomas pointed out that a doctrine of creation did not require that the world have a beginning. Creation refers to the continuous dependence of the creature on divine power. Divine creativity is expressed through “secondary causes” that have their own genuine power. This belief provided support for the rise of science and technology in the West and is fully compatible with the idea of human rights.

Muslim and Christian Relations

A second relation between particular religious traditions that can be revealing of both religions is the one between Christians and Muslims. It might be more logical to comment on the relation between Muslims and Jews because Islam and Judaism are structurally very similar. Their approaches to God have more in common than does either of them with the Christian religion. My reason for choosing Christian-Muslim relations is the threat to world peace that is implied by a conflict between these two religions. Conversely, progress in their mutual understanding would give support to human rights in every part of the world. As noted above, the relation between any two of the three religions that go back to Abraham always has the shadow of the third in the background.

A good reason for Christians to study Islam is to find out how Jews feel when they are placed within a Christian understanding of history. The Christian-Muslim relation reverses the Christian role; the younger sibling becomes the older one. Would Christians like to be included in a “Christeo-Muslim tradition?” A Christian is likely to be irritated if a Muslim tries to explain to the Christian the true meaning of the gospel or by the claim
that “the Qur’an, while affirming the truth of all previous revelations, itself comprises all truth for the whole of mankind for all time.”

A Christian should be able to recognize this argument because it is one that Christianity has regularly employed. Whatever truths there are in other religions are included in Muslim (Christian) religion. The intention to be a universal religion is identified with actual universality. “The Qur’an is thus a universal possession and inheritance; its message is directed to the whole of mankind.” Any non-Muslim would be quick to point out that being directed to mankind and being a possession of mankind are not the same.

Islam by its claim is in a position to offend just about everyone who does not subscribe to the Qur’an. However, a text often cited is that “there shall be no compulsion in religion.” (2:257). While Muslims wish to spread the truth everywhere they claim only to be God’s instrument: “The Truth is from your Lord; wherefore let him who will, believe, and let him who will, disbelieve.” (18:30). Muslims have been fiercely opposed to any missionary work directed at Muslims but they also have a better record than Christianity in not trying to impose their religion on others. For several centuries in medieval Spain, Christians and Jews lived in relative peace under Muslim rule. Although this convivencia has sometimes been romanticized, it still provides hope that cooperation is possible.

The present conflict between Christianity and Islam is not mainly one of religious doctrines. The conflict is in large part political. Much to the surprise of Christians, Islam seemed to appear from nowhere as a political force in the world. Until the second half of the twentieth century, most Christians assumed in the words of Alexis de Tocqueville that “Islam will not be able to hold its power long in ages of enlightenment and democracy, while Christianity is destined to reign in such ages, as in all others.” The religion that was usually called Mohammedanism was thought to have disappeared in all but a few backward places. Moslems were no longer the threatening presence at the gates of Christian Europe. In the United States, Arab and Moslem, were interchangeable terms, and for some people they still are.

Islam began to appear as a political/religious force in the post-colonial era in Asia, Africa and especially the area called the Middle East. The United States and the Soviet Union wrestled for control of the rest of the world. For a while, Soviet Communism seemed destined to lead the “third world.” But the quasi-religious ideology of Marxism was outdone by the actual religious belief of millions of Muslims. In 1969, Muammar Qaddafi achieved in Libya what he called “Islamic socialism” based on Muslim law, Shari’a. In the early 1970s, western experts tended to see only nationalism and pan-Arabism in the Middle East.

In 1979, western countries looked on with puzzled disbelief when Iran turned to Ayatollah Khomeini, a national hero in exile, to lead the overthrow of the Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. The Shah’s close ties to the United States made that country the most direct opponent of the Islamic revolution. Still, people in the United States were unprepared when Iran seized U.S. hostages and goaded the U.S. with cries of “death to
America.” An ignorance of Islam by most people in the United States included most of the people in the government. It was said during this period that everyone in Washington was speed reading the Qur’an.

That situation had improved but not by much when the United States suffered its traumatic attack in 2001. Islam had finally got the attention of the United States but unfortunately the religion was identified by many people with terrorism. For a few weeks in September, 2001, it seemed that United States leaders were thinking carefully about what comes next. Then the United States decided that more might was the answer. The United States went to war not with a country but on a country or several countries for harboring terrorists. Europe took the other route by looking for a better understanding of what was moving people in the Muslim world. Its efforts at religious education, however, have been overshadowed by fear of attacks from without and fear of a growing Muslim population within Europe.56

The United States as a country proud of its religious diversity and freedom should have been better prepared than European countries for including a Muslim population and understanding Islam. From its origin in the sixteenth century, “America” was a dream of the promised land. The British American version of the dream was Protestant but eventually Catholics and Jews could fit under a biblical umbrella. Other religions have had a difficult time becoming Americanized. The presence of millions of Muslims now in the United States is the greatest challenge that freedom of religion has had to meet. The test of religious education’s future is whether Islam is accepted as a full partner. So far the progress has been halting. Politicians who exploit fear and ignorance are no help to finding peaceful cooperation.

Politics and religion (in its older sense) are inevitably mixed. The term Islam can refer both to a set of practices and to an historical-social-political institution. When Muslims say “Islam” they usually mean the first; when Christians say “Islam” they are usually looking at the second. Islam in this second sense contains people who are quite ignorant of the genuine practice of Islam. The helpful word “Islamist” has been coined to describe people who create a dangerous mixture of political ideology overlaid with a scattering of religious justification. It has been suggested that the word “Christianist” would describe a similar phenomenon within the Christian religious world. In much of the Muslim world the United States is viewed as the chief Christianist country. If a U.S. president is not aware of the religious connotations of “America,” the military exploits of the United States in defense of America take on a Christianist character.

George W. Bush, immediately after the bombings in 2001, referred to a crusade against terrorism. He was shocked at the criticism he received but at least he wisely omitted the word in his subsequent address to Congress. Bush had reason to be surprised because presidents had routinely used the term crusade to describe U.S. wars, oblivious of the connotations of the term for Jews and Muslims.57 Indeed, crusade is no longer a word that most Christians would be proud to use.58 People in the United States are surprised to find that much of the Muslim world considers the wars of the United States to be Christianist crusades. The shift from George W. Bush to Barack Obama did much to change the
image of the United States but building trust between the United States and countries that are mainly Muslim might take generations.

From its beginning, Islam was destined to clash with Christianity and to a lesser extent with Judaism. The problem was not that the Qur’an is hostile to either of those religions. On the contrary: “God has established for you the same religion enjoined on Noah, on Abraham, on Moses, and on Jesus” (42:13). What is implied by Islam invoking the God of Jews and Christians is that a radical reform is needed, especially in what Christianity has done to its Jewish heritage. Islam is not a reform of the Christian religion but its alternative to Christianity is a return to the simpler, more personal categories of Semitic religion. W. Cantwell Smith, a Christian advocate of Christian-Muslim dialogue, once asked: If Jesus were to return today, would he more easily recognize himself in Islam or in Christianity? Christians might ponder that question. Did the centuries of struggle to get a doctrine of the Christ obscure the powerful prophetic teaching of Jesus?

Muslims have no doubt that the “divinity of Christ” misconstrues Jesus and even worse it corrupts the idea of one God. “The Christians say that the Messiah is the Son of God…How they have perverted the truth” (9:30). In Christian history, as Jesus was more closely identified with God, a multitude of other mediators came to occupy the space between God and man. Not only the mother of Jesus, whom Muslims revere, but praying to saints and a profusion of statues and images were a distraction from the one and only Allah. Even the buildings of the Christians acquired the name church which originally referred to a gathering of the faithful. In Islam, the mosque is not a consecrated building and there is no priestly class to mediate between the community and the Holy One.

From the Christian point of view, Islam has placed the whole of mediation in a book. According to Islam, the Qur’an, which means recitation, is not simply a book composed by human hands; it is a text revealed by God as a reflection of a heavenly Qur’an. The great Muslim thinker, Muhammad Iqbal, writes that “as reading and reciting Koran is a dialogue with God, the true speaker of the Word, the possibilities are as infinite as is God Himself.”

Muslim belief in the Qur’an as the “word of God” makes dialogue with Christianity difficult. The Muslim characterization of Christianity as a “religion of the book” is inaccurate. Jesus, the Christ, is for Christians the “word of God,” occupying the place that the Qur’an has for Muslims. For many liberal-minded Christians, Islam is the ultimate fundamentalism which closes the mind to rational thinking. There is a paradox, however, in Islam being the source of mathematical, scientific and philosophical thinking. Many Christians are unaware or dismissive of the fact that the Christian Middle Ages depended on Muslim learning and the Arabic translations of Greek philosophy.

The acceptance of a text “literally” can be the basis of meditations that lead to brilliant insights and a healthy discipline of life. Jewish, Christian and Muslim religions are all “mortgaged to the past.” They need to find a link between texts written in the past and the problems that face them in the present. In each religion, but especially in Christianity, there are reformers who wish to eliminate texts that seem out of date. The alternative
approach is to accept the text and delve more deeply into its meaning. The modern world is impatient with this approach and tends to categorize all attention to the text as “fundamentalism.”

There is no denying that there are individuals and groups within Islam today who use texts of the Qur’an as justification for terrorist acts. What is most striking about these individuals is that they are usually home-grown in the West. They are the alienated poor in London, Amsterdam or New York who are often in rebellion against the Muslim practice of their parents. As Olivier Roy says, their distortion of Islam “thrives on the loss of cultural identity: the young radicals are indeed perfectly ‘Westernized’.”63 Political leaders in Europe and the United States are constantly surprised that terrorist youth have had the benefits of political freedom and access to western universities. A Christian-Muslim dialogue is not going to help much without other cultural changes to protect minority rights and to lessen intolerance against strangers.

The whole world has a stake in reducing the violence that is spawned in the name of God. There are no formulas that can bring Christian and Muslim beliefs together. Nevertheless, both Christian and Muslim religions profess faith in the God of all humans. The Christian should have no problem with the Qur’an’s “We have granted honor to the children of Adam” or “Today we have enobled the human being.” (17:70). Both the New Testament and the Qur’an are concerned with kindness to the stranger and looking after the needy wayfarer (4: 37). Encounter with the other may remind each religion that its claim to universality has to be made through a transforming of the world toward justice for all. Both religions, while not having a claim to be the source of human rights, can legitimately say that their religion is consistent with and supportive of human rights.64 A cooperative effort by these religions in the direction of peace and justice is the most effective declaration of human rights.

The Abrahamic Traditions and Asian Traditions

One could continue the previous pattern by considering dialogues involving Buddhist, Hindu, Taoist, Confucian, Shinto and other traditions. In addition to the fact that such a project would require a far lengthier treatment than is possible here, there is a certain logic to considering the sameness and difference in a comparison of Semitic and Asian religions. The starkest difference would be to say that the term religion simply does not apply in the East. One can leave open that question by mainly referring to “tradition” which has less baggage than the word religion.

The word religion is in fact used of Asian traditions because there are practices that have some obvious similarity to one or more of the religions of Abraham. Most Christians are probably surprised to find that Buddhist and Catholic monks have long had a lively dialogue, a fact that calls into question the routinely applied categories of “theism” and “atheism.” There are, of course, deep differences between Buddhism and Christianity. So far there has not been dialogue between the whole of Christian tradition and the much older tradition that stems from Gautama, the Buddha. The lack of knowledge on both sides is a danger but it also means the door has not been closed to future dialogue.
The most relevant point about Asian religions is the frequent claim by outsiders that “human rights” is not a part of these traditions. However, the same would have to be said about Christian, Jewish and Muslim traditions. It is true that the term rights has a strong foothold in Christian history and it was the available language in eighteenth-century declarations. But “human rights” is twentieth-century language that is still being filled out in the twenty-first century. The cherished political rights of the West are only one test of human rights. The question is not whether the East is willing to accept a western idea of human rights but whether a cross-cultural and inter-religious dialogue might strengthen this new idea called human rights.

In the modern era, a philosophical tradition centered in Europe developed the idea of rights. This secular tradition still needs the help of deeper strands of the three Semitic religions and the still older traditions of Confucian, Taoist or Buddhist traditions. Perhaps before anyone can decide whether “human rights” are compatible with Eastern traditions, there is dialogue needed about respect for human beings in their relation to other beings.

The environmental movement, which is to be discussed in the following chapter, has brought out the fact that Eastern religions may have a wisdom that was prematurely dismissed in the western revolution that pitted “man against nature.”

The dividing line between East and West is often mistakenly thought to be the concept of uniqueness. Swami Prabhavananda writes that “a Hindu learns to respect every faith and every prophet but it is impossible for him to understand any religion that claims to be unique.” The idea of uniqueness is mostly a nineteenth-century development from within Christianity as historians and anthropologists began to compare the Christian religion with others. Christians asserted that a unique God gave a unique revelation to a unique community; and in the supremely unique moment of history God sent his “only begotten Son.” To many people no real comparisons seem possible.

Unique as an assertion of possession refers to a thing; what is mine is not yours. But as prophets in Jewish, Christian and Muslim religions regularly reminded people in positions of power, God is not a thing under anyone’s possession. The Bible and the Qur’an are not books that are possessed but are invitations and demands requiring actions. Even the Second Vatican Council acknowledged that bishops have to listen to the word spoken now before they can address the rest of the faithful. As most of Christian tradition testifies, there is no Christian revelation unique to Christian history. Christian belief is in a divine revelation that Christians interpret by their response. That language not only allows but invites other interpretations of the divine revelation.

Christian theology in recent decades has been more reserved in claims to possess a unique Christian revelation. However, the term “unique” has become more insistently used as a description of Jesus Christ. It almost seems that the many titles that were traditionally asserted of Jesus have become summed up in the claim that Jesus Christ is unique. The claim can be a stopper in inter-religious dialogue before participants have had an opportunity to explore their differences and similarities.
The uniqueness of Jesus need not be an insuperable obstacle to dialogue. Aloysius Pieris, a leader in Christian-Buddhist understanding, writes “that Jesus is unique is obvious even to Buddhists, just as Christians would hardly question the uniqueness of Gautama. Is not each of us unique? The issue is whether Jesus’ uniqueness consists of his absoluteness as conveyed by certain Christological titles.” What Pieris is referring to is that the uniqueness of a person is based on relations; the more unique the person, the greater the openness to include more relations. The problem with talk about the uniqueness of Jesus Christ is that the person of Jesus can disappear into the idea of Christ.

A similar problem arises in Christian-Hindu relations when Jesus Christ is said to be the unique divine incarnation. A standard objection to Christianity is that “a Hindu would find it easy to accept Christ as a divine incarnation and to worship him unreservedly, exactly as he worships Sri Krishna or another avatar of his choice. But he cannot accept Christ as the only Son of God. Those who insist on regarding the life and teachings of Jesus as unique are bound to have great difficulty in understanding them. Any avatar can be far better understood in the light of other great lives and teachings.” It is unlikely that Christians could accept “avatar” as a description of Jesus but the uniqueness of Jesus can best be understood in the light of other great lives and teachings. That is a basis for Christian-Hindu relations. Why Christians believe that Jesus’ life is a more unique incarnation of the divine than other great lives could be a topic of fruitful conversation between Christians and Hindus.

The main point of these examples is that any religious believer might be challenged to examine his or her beliefs when confronted by sameness and difference in another religion. As in Jewish-Christian relations or even more so Catholic-Protestant relations, the sameness that one might hope would encourage understanding and cooperation has often set off terrible conflict. Disagreements within the same family can generate passionate feelings of disloyalty. In some ways it is easier for a Catholic to talk to a Buddhist than to a Protestant or a Jew. The gap between Christians and Buddhists is simply a fact not the basis of a suspicion that one’s interlocutor is unable or unwilling to accept the obvious truth. Nonetheless, there is much work to be done so that an initial acceptance of difference is complemented by some advance in mutual understanding.

For human rights to be accepted and to flourish, a tolerance of religious differences is indispensable. Asian traditions are generally thought to be more tolerant than Jewish, Christian and Muslim religions. The language of tolerance developed in European struggles with the diversity of religions. Religious conflicts are not unknown in the East but they do not match the bloody religious wars that have afflicted Europe, North America and the Middle East. Tolerance is a western virtue because it became necessary for halting the persecution of one religious group by another. Dutch and English reformers provided relief to Europe and beyond.  

An effective tolerance cannot be based on the absence of belief or the assumption that beliefs are merely an outer coating that can be scraped off. Tolerance has to be based on respect for the beliefs of other people. Tolerance also has limits. As Karl Popper insisted, “If we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared
to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them.” Who sets those limits is a crucial political issue, and where the line is set can change over time. But groups that are intent on doing violence to other groups need to be resisted if tolerance is to endure. Tolerance is not the final virtue but it is a precondition for mutual understanding.

Western countries might learn from the more irenic traditions of the East while Asian religions might also learn from the European struggle to find an acceptable balance of the right to express one’s own religion while not offending or coercing others. Asians might feel that is not their problem, but the issue has worldwide implications today.

People do not practice a religion unless they believe that it is true. When there are no serious competitors to the religion, the truth of the religion is taken for granted. When the intramural language of a religious group is exposed to a wider audience it can sound outrageously narrow-minded. The language is mainly intended for insiders to bolster their faith. When Christian writers said that “outside the church there is no salvation,” they did not aim the teaching at non-Christians but at any Christian who might falter. In today’s world it is nearly impossible to maintain a wall between the inner language of prayer and an outer language for political interaction. The language of Catholic liturgy that is meant for Catholic practice can become a sore point in Catholic-Jewish relations. It is not an entirely new problem but one that has now become magnified. As the Lutheran scholar and bishop, Krister Stendahl, once put it: “How can we sing our song to Jesus without telling dirty stories about everyone else.”

Hinduism is often cited as the most tolerant of all religions and it is deserving of praise for its acceptance of diversity. But to the extent that “Hindu” is the name of a single religion, it asserts its own singularity. Radhakrishnan says that in Hinduism all religions are “treated generously.” A few pages later, he writes: “It is said that other scriptures sink into silence when the Vedanta appears….The Vedanta is not a religion, but religion itself in its most universal and deepest significance.” Of course he means that it is Hindus who say that the Vedanta is religion itself in its most universal significance. People who are not Hindu do not find Hindu religion to be universal.

The tendency to slide from believing that one’s religion is true to asserting or implying that it is the truth is a common human problem, not exclusively one that is Jewish, Christian, Muslim, or Hindu. A person would not be an active participant in a religion unless he or she believed it to be the best religious choice. What makes it the best for the believer includes the choice to participate in the religion and discover its many riches. Religious language is often misunderstood by outsiders as quasi-scientific statements, each of which can be investigated for its factual truth.

When a man says to his wife “you are the most beautiful woman in the world,” he is aware that he has not surveyed the other three billion women. His profession of love is not meant to denigrate any other woman nor is he likely to suddenly discover he is wrong. What he perceives as most beautiful includes his own experience as the one who
perceives. Over time he may cease to feel the love he once had but that is because the relation has changed not because his scientific evidence was incorrect.

For a Christian, the Christ way is the best religious path just as the Buddha nature is true religion for a Buddhist. The two are clearly different but are not contradictory. Contradictions arise from statements; the opposite of a true statement is a false statement. But the opposite of a profound truth can be another profound truth. An initial aim of ecumenical dialogue is to change contradictory statements to statements that differ in a way acceptable to both parties.

It is natural for any religious group whose intention is universality to praise people by bringing them under the umbrella of the group’s ideal. The Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner, was often criticized for the phrase “anonymous Christian” which he used as a way out of the seeming exclusivity of Christianity. Rahner said that the term was directed at the complacency of Christians, a reminder that some people who are not church goers may be better examples of following the way of Christ than those who profess to be Christians. The phrase is a “profound admission of the fact that God is greater than man and the Church.” When Rahner was asked whether he would accept being called an “anonymous Buddhist” by a Buddhist, he said he had no problem with that.73 Calling someone an “anonymous Christian” is the highest praise that Christians can formulate within the limits of Christian theology. The possible misunderstanding of what is meant is avoided by not using the inner language of Christian theology as if it were directly transferable to every religious and secular situation.

Confucian tradition holds a special place in the history of Asia as well as being a tradition that the West has long been familiar with. Unfortunately, the familiarity did not always mean a depth of understanding. Many people have a stereotype of Confucianism as a series of epigrams (perhaps learned from Charley Chan movies) or as a code of obedience. Voltaire was a great enthusiast of Confucius. Voltaire’s knowledge of Confucius was very limited but he held up Confucius as a model of theism (belief in a Supreme Being) in contrast to ritualistic religions such as Buddhism.74 Religion and morality did not become separate in the East as they did in western enlightenment. While Confucianism is often said to be a moral rather than a religious tradition, that distinction might not be intelligible to Confucius and most of his followers. Whether or not Confucianism should be called “a religion” the tradition is important for the human rights movement.

What is often the attitude of western authors toward Asian traditions, and especially Confucianism, is that these traditions should be preserved because they are culturally important. Hahm Chaibong points out that Confucians throughout history have espoused their philosophy because they thought it was ‘true’, not because it was Chinese or because it served some particularistic purpose.” There has been a tendency to oppose western liberalism’s claim to universality with the particularity of Asian cultures. But Confucianism is important because it defends values that are found in western liberalism but on its own terms. And “one needs to then go a step further by showing that Confucianism also defends and preserves important values that liberalism ignores.”75
Those values of Confucianism center on respect for the family and community in contrast to western enlightenment’s emphasis on the “autonomous individual” as the seat of value. The father as ruler of the family is not likely to find much support in western countries today but the world cannot get along without some form of family authority. Confucius said “only the wisest and the stupidest never change.” Confucian tradition did change over the centuries. What is called neo-Confucianism took on an authoritarian attitude that is not found in the earlier stratum. The contemporary Chinese government has tried to resurrect a Confucian authoritarianism for its own ends after previously denouncing the tradition. Confucius saw his work as that of criticizing rulers when they did not follow the “mandate of heaven,” not as supporting the conformity that past or present rulers of might China prefer.

The decline of ancient religious traditions would not necessarily be good news for a world that needs order, stability and rationality. The contemporary Chinese government’s invoking of neo-Confucianism results from a fear of newer religions that might be rebellious. The Falungong, for example, is a faith-healing millenarian sect that seems peaceful but the Chinese government has brutally persecuted it. In 1995 Japan, which appears to be a thoroughly secular country, experienced the effect of a utopian sect, the Aun Shinrikyo, when the group dropped a deadly sarin gas in the Tokyo subway. The United States which has the image of a secular country in control of religion regularly experiences outbursts of millenarian violence. The intellectual and political leaders never cease to be surprised that such things could happen in their country.

Conclusion

At their worst, ancient religious traditions consider their “chosenness” as proof of superiority and a license to oppress others. At their best, these traditions include the potential for reforms in the direction of dignity for all human beings. They realize that on the basis of their own doctrine “chosen people” is a stand in for human beings, the real chosen people. The test of genuine religion is the willingness to work for peace and justice in the world. Some religions go tragically astray in understanding that vocation but the solution to that problem is reform within the tradition and dialogue with other religious traditions.

As I noted earlier, the topic of religion generated such heated debate that Eleanor Roosevelt ruled out religion as a major topic in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Several delegates wanted to have explicit reference to God and religion as the basis of human rights. The Soviet Union opposed any mention of religion at all. The result was a reference to a right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Article 18) which did not face up to the conflicts inevitable in the practice of religion.

The United Nations has constantly had to come back to the issue of religion when dealing with conflicts in the world, most of which have a religious element. The UN most explicitly dealt with religion in a 1981 document, Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief. I think the length
of that title is indicative of the continuing difficulty of adequately stating the question. Communist objection that atheism was not protected was met by adding the word “whatever” before belief in the Preface and Article 1.

I argued above that the long-range solution to avoiding religious conflict and finding religious support for human rights is a religious education consisting of two parts: intelligent training in one’s own religion and a degree of understanding of other religions, especially those which are closest. Coercion of children or courses that survey all religions do not measure up to the need.

The United Nations has sponsored periodic surveys, starting in 1959, of how religion is being dealt with in education. The results have not been very encouraging. A 1998 survey of seventy-seven states found that the majority religion in most states still tries to impose its views on minority groups. There is still little attention to understanding the religion of people other than one’s own people. The United Nations deserves credit for doing such surveys. In lieu of any other organized leadership, the United Nations is for now the main religious educator in the world.

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3 Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols* (London: Routledge, 2003), 52: “In rejecting ritual forms of speech it is the ‘external’ aspect which is devalued. Probably all movements of renewal have had in common the rejection of external forms.”
4 This point is well developed in relation to Evangelical religions in the United States in Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1998), 118, 150.
6 Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris* and *Mater et Magister*
9 William Ernest Hocking, *Living Religions and a World Faith* (New York: Macmillan, 1940), 31
10 Hocking, *Living Religions*, 262
15 This usage explains why Martin Luther’s sharpest attacks were against *vita religiosa* and *hominis religiosi*.
24 The distinction was drawn by Justice Arthur Goldberg in *Abington School District v. Schempp* 374 U.S.203 1963. I have summarized the legal and educational issues in the chapter “Can Religion be Taught?” in *Speaking of Teaching* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), 121-141.
26 The main force behind the law was Archbishop William Temple
31 One of the first Christian theologians, Justin, was already formulating a Christian doctrine about the salvation of the non-Christian: “Christ is the Logos of whom every race of man are partakers, and those who, like Socrates, have lived in accordance with that Logos are Christians, even though they may have been regarded as atheists.” Quoted in Maurice Wiles, *Christian Faith* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1982), 28.
32 Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Ephesians:3:10*, lect. 3: “The true Church is the heavenly Church, which is our mother, and to which we tend; upon it our earthly church is modeled.”
36 Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, 192.
39 William Irwin, “A Common Humanity under One God” in *Judaism and Human Rights*, ed. Milton Konvitz (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 56: “Monotheism in itself may be no more than despotism in religion. The great achievement of Israel was not primarily that she asserted the oneness of the world and God, but rather the character of the God affirmed.”
40 It has to be admitted that God taking Eve from Adam’s rib leaves much to be desired from a feminist point of view. One might nonetheless credit the story as an attempt to find a way to express the diversity within unity of the human race.
52 Khan, *Islam and Human Rights*, 22; he is commenting on the Qur’an 7:59.
53 Sidney Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). Christians and Jews were “protected peoples” who were provided with freedom to practice their religion if they paid a special tax. Another hopeful experiment was in India during the late sixteenth century when there was some genuine dialogue initiated by Akbar and his son Jahangir between Portuguese Jesuits and Muslims. See Irfan Habib, *Akbar and his India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).
62 Robert Pattison, *On Literacy: The Politics of the Word from Homer to the Age of Rock* (New York: Galaxy, 1984), 71. Early Christianity was an oral religion that devalued the book. When the gospel was finally written, it was in the spoken language of the time not classical Greek.
66 At the beginning of the document on divine revelation: *Verbum Dei*, article 1.
75 Hahn Chaibong, “Confucianism and Western Rights: Conflict or Harmony,” *Responsive Community*