150

<http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/willis_e_elliott/2010/07/religions_are_irreconcilable_people_are_not.html>

**Religions are irreconcilable, people are not**

*Are all religions the same? The Dalai Lama, who just celebrated his 75th birthday, often refers to the 'oneness' of all religions, the idea that all religions preach the same message of love, tolerance and compassion. Historians Karen Armstrong and Huston Smith agree that major faiths are more alike than not. But in his new book "God is not One," religion scholar and On Faith panelist Steve Prothero says views by the Dalai Lama, Armstrong and Smith that all religions "are different paths to the same mountain" isuntrue, disrespectful and dangerous. Who's right? Why?*

In our solar system, all the planets are the same only in that they all orbit the same sun. Only in this narrow, *functional*sense are all religions the same: they all reverence reality ("the great Whatever," as a current blogger puts it). Since religiousness is a characteristic of our species, any "all religions" generalization reduces down to "all human beings."  
1  
In contrast to our only hominid competitors, the Neanderthals, we human beings - with the biosphere's most complex brains/mouths/hands - clumped together to achieve our purposes. And since our consciousness includes both memory and foresight, each *clump*(clan/tribe/nation/empire/culture/religion) has an implicit self-consciousness which is maintained and enriched by another power characteristic of our species, namely, narrative: each clump's story-tellers tell us who "we" are in relation to all else we experience and imagine as meanings and mysteries.  
2  
Evolution is a continuum of *interacting life/culture/religion*. With all human powers, clumps compete and cooperate in meeting human needs and wants as human flesh flows through the generations from birth to death to new birth.  
3  
The "self" of any clump is as unique as the self of any human being: selves are formed by the same processes of SENSE-MAKING. Each self, collective or individual, is an evolving STORY. A religion is a lived world-story with reverence at its heart. And no matter its opinion of "religion," *every world-story is religious*.  
4  
So, *how are we to live?* With reverence in the world-story of our birth or choice, and in defense of the freedom to choose. With respect for every human being in our common struggle to make sense of personal experience and of all else. With eagerness to cooperate with all who are eager to achieve truly human ends on this fragile planet. And with a humble boldness in sharing with others what we believe, what sense we have been able to "make of it all," what we are convinced has been given/disclosed/revealed to us.  
5  
In teaching "The World's Great Religions" at the University of Hawaii, I was privileged to have in class devotees of all these religions. I loved them all - all my students, not all their religions. I explained that every religion is *exclusive*: each religion is the heart of a world-story that leaves nothing out, nothing that could be used in any other world story: each religion is a unique way of seeing-and-living in the world, as unique as the human clump which was its source. Respect for these religions is an aspect of respect for human life, for each human being. But each human being has both an *appreciative* and a *critical*capacity, and should use both in evaluating all religions: the failure to use one is as wrong as the failure to use the other.  
6  
We earn the right to be critical (of differences) by being appreciative (of similarities). Mel Yosso used this principle to create minimalist dramas of human interaction, to serve as common ground for interfaith-intercultural conversation: "Transculture: Universal Heritage: 65 Timeless Allegories," to which I wrote the introduction. On Manhattan, we had many joyful sessions in which persons of very different outlooks on life could *witness to their particularities on the ground of our common humanity*.  
7  
But even if one grants (as I do not) that "major faiths are more alike than not," so what? *What's to be done about the "not"?*Delete it, says Martha Woodroof of Faith Unboxed: scratch the stories that "explain" God: just "experience" God. / Not so naïve are the Dalai Lama (a committed Buddhist), Karen Armstrong (committed to religion study in the library), and Huston Smith (a committed Christian). But in my view, all three deal too lightly with the "not."  
8  
In an "On Faith" comment yesterday, I wrote this: "Our differences are precisely what we must face as we live out our convictions; and it's *a dangerous romanticism* to believe that the deep differences can be shelved in the interest of 'one world'." Steve Prothero is correct.  
9  
As for my own witness, I am a broad-minded, liberal, progressive, Bible-believing, born-again *Christian*. We "discover" from below: God has not only "revealed" from above but in Jesus became one of us, to reconcile us to God and help us love God, ourselves, one another, our neighbor, and even our enemy.

**BY WILLIS E. ELLIOTT  |  JULY 6, 2010; 11:11 PM ET**

**Comments**

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Hrm, I missed this whole discussion, but:

*I explained that every religion is exclusive: each religion is the heart of a world-story that leaves nothing out, nothing that could be used in any other world story:*

That's simply untrue: in fact, it's the text-literalism religions which go out of their way to be incompatible with all other worldviews: in fact, most religions that are and have been on this world do and have interacted and syncretized and shared, both in concepts and stories and all the like.

Plenty of these religions are also quite capable of accepting that the neighbors may see the Gods and spirits in a different way, or have different practices. Only certain religions which (and to the extent that they) are \*self-defined\* by their exclusivism necessarily think the criteria by which some are exclusivist are even the important part: even the context in which the question is asked show this bias in a way... certainly in how you answer it, Reverend: for you, 'love, tolerance and compassion,' which is what the Dalai Lama really spoke on, are things that you believe in your own beliefs must be commanded, thus making who's doing the commanding and judging the focus of these things.

For the Dalai Lama, as a Buddhist, the actual love, tolerance, and especially compassion are themselves the important parts.

If he were to ask me as a modern Pagan this question, he'd ask, \*How\* do you go about these things?

I'd say that to me and I think most modern Pagans, our way to these things comes of direct involvement in and experience of the connections between ourselves, others, and the spirit world: seeing that we \*are\* all deeply-connected and that to harm one, we harm all. To borrow a phrase, attempting to 'perfect' desire rather than to dissolve it or subordinate it.

But in terms of things like love and compassion and tolerance, (And, really, connection, even if through the practices of Buddhism) ...certainly those goals are the same thing among each other.

There's a lot we can (and have) learned about these things from each other, not because, even, of where we are similar, but because we are \*different.\*

It's a very polytheist view, but diversity is indeed a strength: and in terms of getting along with different kinds of people and world-views, we can do better than 'tolerance:' we can love the different views of things, rather than teach ourselves to be frightened by them.

**POSTED BY: APAGANPLACE | JULY 17, 2010 10:03 AM**[**REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**](mailto:blogs@washingtonpost.com?subject=On%20Faith%20Panelists%20Blog%20%20|%20%20APaganplace%20%20|%20%20Religions%20are%20irreconcilable,%20people%20are%20not%20%20|%20%204856727&body=%0D%0D%0D%0D%0D================%0D?__mode=view%26_type=comment%26id=4856727%26blog_id=618)

"In teaching "The World's Great Religions" at the University of Hawaii, I was privileged to have in class devotees of all these religions. I loved them all - all my students, not all their religions. I explained that every religion is exclusive: each religion is the heart of a world-story that leaves nothing out, nothing that could be used in any other world story: each religion is a unique way of seeing-and-living in the world, as unique as the human clump which was its source. Respect for these religions is an aspect of respect for human life, for each human being. But each human being has both an appreciative and a critical capacity, and should use both in evaluating all religions: the failure to use one is as wrong as the failure to use the other."

Very, very well said.

**POSTED BY: WITHOUTHAVINGSEEN | JULY 10, 2010 3:45 PM**[**REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**](mailto:blogs@washingtonpost.com?subject=On%20Faith%20Panelists%20Blog%20%20|%20%20withouthavingseen%20%20|%20%20Religions%20are%20irreconcilable,%20people%20are%20not%20%20|%20%204855319&body=%0D%0D%0D%0D%0D================%0D?__mode=view%26_type=comment%26id=4855319%26blog_id=618)

TO FARNAZ

Yes, in another context, "appreciative of differences" - both their beauty & their danger. And of course critical of similarities, which may be more different upon reflection than upon the surface.

**POSTED BY: ELLIOTTWL | JULY 9, 2010 5:06 PM**[**REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**](mailto:blogs@washingtonpost.com?subject=On%20Faith%20Panelists%20Blog%20%20|%20%20elliottwl%20%20|%20%20Religions%20are%20irreconcilable,%20people%20are%20not%20%20|%20%204855217&body=%0D%0D%0D%0D%0D================%0D?__mode=view%26_type=comment%26id=4855217%26blog_id=618)

At the core all religions have one thing in common. A belief in a whole slew of unnatural phenomenon. Each slew may differ from religion to religion, in some cases even overlap. Discussing these religions and trying to make sense of them is just as fruitful and as stupid as to comparing and contrasting Shakespeare's "Merchant of Venice" against Alexander Dumas's "Count of Monte Cristo".

When discussing the religions, I cannot get past these superstitious beliefs in the organizing documents (scriptures). Be it be the virgin birth and resurrection of Christians, Parting of the Waters and the Joshua being swallowed by a fish of Judaism, The flying horse or talking bones of Islam, or the many a superstitious beliefs of Hinduism, Jainism, & Buddhism from monster heads swallowing the moon & the Sun to the sweat (or the semen) of an ape swallowed by fish giving rise to a fully grown man. Any memes (all religions are indeed memes) that are based on all these silly theses deserve no respect and have really nothing to teach the 21st century humanity. I sincerely wish and hope that they are all relegated to the dust heap as the humanity as done with Alchemistry, Thorism, Zeusism and thousands of such other memes.

**POSTED BY: SECULAR | JULY 8, 2010 9:51 AM**[**REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**](mailto:blogs@washingtonpost.com?subject=On%20Faith%20Panelists%20Blog%20%20|%20%20Secular%20%20|%20%20Religions%20are%20irreconcilable,%20people%20are%20not%20%20|%20%204854824&body=%0D%0D%0D%0D%0D================%0D?__mode=view%26_type=comment%26id=4854824%26blog_id=618)

Rev. Elliott,

Once anyone says that his/her way is the right way,we are lost, and many people say this.  
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You say, "We earn the right to be critical (of differences) by being appreciative (of similarities)."

Can we be appreciative of differences? A hard question, harder than it may seem.

**POSTED BY: FARNAZ\_MANSOURI2 | JULY 8, 2010 3:47 AM**[**REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**](mailto:blogs@washingtonpost.com?subject=On%20Faith%20Panelists%20Blog%20%20|%20%20farnaz_mansouri2%20%20|%20%20Religions%20are%20irreconcilable,%20people%20are%20not%20%20|%20%204854764&body=%0D%0D%0D%0D%0D================%0D?__mode=view%26_type=comment%26id=4854764%26blog_id=618)

I agree that we must understand the differences. It is in that demarcation that we can critically appreciate what we are after. If I want to join a religion that says deny science and believe in one book or one man as my way to go, I want the freedom to go for it. If I want to join a religion that says take in all the evidence before you and become aware of your own personal relationship with truth, I want the freedom to go for it. If I fail to realize that I joined the Nazis, or other genocidal monster mono-ideologies, my lack of discrimination has contributed to my participation in himsa - harming of the world. Without the ability to discriminate what I want in a religion and what I don't want, I am but a money supply to those that control the religion to which I belong.

hariaum

**POSTED BY: NAVIN1 | JULY 7, 2010 5:40 PM**[**REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**](mailto:blogs@washingtonpost.com?subject=On%20Faith%20Panelists%20Blog%20%20|%20%20Navin1%20%20|%20%20Religions%20are%20irreconcilable,%20people%20are%20not%20%20|%20%204854698&body=%0D%0D%0D%0D%0D================%0D?__mode=view%26_type=comment%26id=4854698%26blog_id=618)

In an "On Faith" comment yesterday, I wrote this: "Our differences are precisely what we must face as we live out our convictions; and it's a dangerous romanticism to believe that the deep differences can be shelved in the interest of 'one world'."

- Willis E Elliot

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....but we can, if we really want to, find and work on commonalities of interests in the interest of the one and only world we inhibit rather than let our differences make this world unlivable with unresolved and perennial conflicts.

**POSTED BY: JIHADIST | JULY 7, 2010 4:21 PM**[**REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**](mailto:blogs@washingtonpost.com?subject=On%20Faith%20Panelists%20Blog%20%20|%20%20Jihadist%20%20|%20%20Religions%20are%20irreconcilable,%20people%20are%20not%20%20|%20%204854672&body=%0D%0D%0D%0D%0D================%0D?__mode=view%26_type=comment%26id=4854672%26blog_id=618)

**Ommm**mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm....

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**PEACE, PAZ, SHALOM, SALAAM, AHIMSA, ZHINGYU..**  
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**POSTED BY: GOOD-BAD-N-UGLY | JULY 7, 2010 2:13 PM**[**REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**](mailto:blogs@washingtonpost.com?subject=On%20Faith%20Panelists%20Blog%20%20|%20%20good-bad-n-ugly%20%20|%20%20Religions%20are%20irreconcilable,%20people%20are%20not%20%20|%20%204854630&body=%0D%0D%0D%0D%0D================%0D?__mode=view%26_type=comment%26id=4854630%26blog_id=618)

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