

GOD IS NOT ONE: DIFFERENCES MATTER

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God is not one. Differences matter. Different religions may converge on ethics. Many, not all, have the Golden Rule. But on everything else they differ: nature of Godhead, nature of man, goal of life, heaven and hell.

There is however a contrary view, popular especially among modern-day Hindu gurus in India. “All religions in basic principles are the same. One can reach the mountain peak by taking one of the several paths. The paths are different, the peak is the same.” Mahatma Gandhi used the tree analogy. The branches are different, the root is the same. A popular hymn sung at Gandhi Ashrams declared “*Ishwar Allah Tere Naam.*” God is one, names are different. At their core, different religions seek the same goal.

In accordance with the sameness doctrine, Hindu places of worship sometimes display symbols of many different religions. Swami Sacchidananda’s **Lotus Shrine** in Yogaville, Virginia, is dedicated to all major religions. Displayed in the Lotus Shrine are the Hindu Om, the Buddhist Dharma Chakra, the Muslim Crescent, the Jewish Star of David, and the Christian Cross. The Vedanta Society temple in Boston does the same—it displays religious icons of all major religions. Roy Eugene Davis’ Yoga Center in Lakemont, Georgia, also displays symbols of all major world religions. Roy Davis is a follower of Parmahansa Yogananda.

The sameness doctrine is also now substantially accepted in the West--prevalent especially among media gurus, religious liberals and professors at elite universities. Political leaders also pay homage at the “sameness” temple. After the massacre of 13 servicemen at Fort Hood in 2009 by Major Nidal Hasan, President Obama said this: “All religions are the same in that they seek peace. No religion condones the death of innocent civilians.”

For many years, I used to parrot the sameness line myself. Then I woke up.

We do not say that all economic ideologies or that all political systems are the same. “All religions are one” mantra springs from the need to stop killing that originates in the name of religion. But the faith in the unity of religions is just that: faith. We pretend that all religions make up one big, happy family. The sentiment is misleading, and untrue. “We have followed scholars and sages down the rabbit hole into a fantasy world in which all gods are one,” writes Professor Stephen Prothero in his book, *God is Not One: the Eight Rival Religions that Run the World—and Why their Differences Matter*, 2010 (pp 2-3).

Hindu Defeat. This sameness philosophy among Hindus likely arose from a sense of defeat. Muslims ruled the Indian subcontinent for some 500 years, 1201-1707 approximately. Only Hindus are found chanting “*Ishwar Allah tere Naam*”—i.e., Ishwar and Allah are God’s different names. No devout Muslim

would accept Islam's equality with Hinduism. That would be a heresy. Different religions may have similar ethical teachings to some extent, but on everything else they differ.

Note the following important differences among world's major religions. Emphasis is given on differences among Christianity (2.3 billion), Islam (1.3 billion) and Hinduism (about 1.0 billion).

- **Nature of Godhead.** The Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam worship a single Deity in Heaven (usually a male figure). Christians invoke "Our Father, who art in Heaven." Muslims recite: "La Ilaha Ill Allah--" there is no god but Allah. In contrast, Hindus worship God as "One Reality and One Consciousness." The ultimate Reality in Hinduism is called Brahman (to grow, to expand). The One Reality is beyond number, count and gender. Because Hindus worship the One Reality in many male and female forms, it is mis-characterized as "polytheistic." Buddhists are silent with respect to the nature of Godhead.
- **Nature of Man.** In Christianity, man is born in sin. Sin is inherited through Adam, the progenitor of human race. Adam disobeyed God's commandment not to eat of the tree of knowledge. Because of this transgression, Adam and his descendants were cursed in perpetuity. Because men are born in sin, therefore they need a Savior, Jesus Christ.

The doctrine of "original sin" is absent in Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Shintoism and also in various native traditions, to my knowledge. Hindus worship the presence of God within. Man is not a fallen being, but forgetful of his divine origin. Swami Vivekananda used to say: "You are not sheep but lions. Rise to your divine potential." Lord Buddha sought an answer to the riddle of suffering, not salvation from sin. The title "Buddha" means "the Enlightened One," not a Savior.

- **The Goal of Life.** Christians seek Heaven in afterlife. Muslims also seek Heaven. Muslim Heaven is lush green with crystal clear lakes and fruited gardens, the opposite of Saudi sands. Buddhists seek Nirvana, a state of peace. Hindus seek Moksha. Moksha is commonly defined as liberation from the cycle of birth and death. But Sri Aurobindo, the 20th century Indian sage, defined Moksha differently: "The pessimists have made Moksha synonymous with annihilation or dissolution, but its true meaning is freedom. He who is free from bondage, is free, is mukta." Moksha is freedom from confinement, from narrowness, from suffering. The goal of life is not release from life, but a fulfilled life, even a divine life on earth.
- **Heresy and apostasy.** Deuteronomy in the Old Testament prescribes death for several sins: adultery, heresy, apostasy, taking Lord's name in vain. Jews and Christians gave up stoning women for adultery many centuries ago. In Islam, heresy, apostasy and adultery continue to be capital crimes. Women have been stoned to death for the presumed crime of adultery. A Nigerian Islamic court in 2002 condemned a woman to be stoned to death for the charge of adultery; later freed under international pressure. Hindus and Buddhists have no binding doctrines and therefore no crime of heresy or apostasy. There are no "Thou shalt nots" in the Bhagavad Gita, the Hindu scripture.

- **The Founders.** The founders of various religions did not teach that “all religions are the same.” Four examples are given here. Jesus cursed the Pharisees and Sadducees, the Jewish scholars of the law. He called them “a den of vipers.” He cursed the money-changers; he turned over their tables in the Jerusalem Synagogue. He said that he was come “not to bring peace but sword.”

Prophet Muhammad enshrined heresy and apostasy as capital crimes. He smashed the figures of al Minat, al Luza and al Lat, the three female goddesses, worshipped popularly in Arabia. The Kaaba, once a pagan shrine, was rededicated to Allah. Islam at its beginning followed many Jewish practices like praying facing towards Jerusalem and honoring Saturday as the Sabbath. Later, the Prophet broke away from the Jews and even persecuted them. He asked his followers to pray facing towards Mecca. Friday, rather than Saturday, was prescribed as the day of prayer.

Lord Buddha went about debating religious luminaries of his day in India. Buddha broke away from certain key elements of Hinduism. Hinduism is theistic and Buddhism is silent on the nature of Godhead. Lord Buddha also violated certain social and caste rules.

In short, the founders established new religious doctrines, not old wine in new bottles.

Monotheism versus Polytheism

The three Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam are monotheistic. Hinduism and various native traditions may be regarded as polytheistic.

Monotheism insists that only a single God exists, known variously as Yahweh, the Lord or Allah. Other gods are “false” or even demonic. The Monotheistic God is jealous and wrathful. There is one God, and one correct method of worship. Those who deviate are heretics and may be punished, tortured or even killed. Polytheism in contrast is open-ended and easy going. Many roads lead to the mountain top. A person may choose any path. Violence among polytheists is not unknown, but it pales in comparison with others. Jonathan Kirsch writes:

. . . At the heart of monotheism, is the sure conviction that only a single god exists, a tendency to regard one’s own rituals and practices as the only proper way to worship the one true god. . . .

At the heart of polytheism is an open-minded and easygoing approach to religious belief and practice, a willingness to entertain the idea that there are many gods and many ways to worship them. See Jonathan Kirsch, *God Against the Gods: The History of the War between Monotheism and Polytheism* (Viking Compass, 2006, P 2).

See also my essay, titled “God Against the Gods” at: www.uwf.edu/lgoel.

A brief description of persecution of non-believers under Christianity and Islam follows.

Christianity. Crusades against Muslim occupiers of Jerusalem lasted 200 years, 1095-1292. During the Inquisition (1,200 to 1,600), it is estimated that 5 million women were tortured and killed under Church appointed boards. Simple things like talking with animals or walking alone silently in the woods could get women in trouble. Jewish and Muslim minority communities in Spain met similar ends. Millions of

Native Americans perished under the Conquistadores (Spanish conquerors of Mexico and South America). Asia and Africa fell under the rule of Western, i.e., Christian imperial powers.

Eminent scholars and journalists often condemn Christian violence that occurred through history. But when it comes to Islam, most are silent.

Islam. Islam has a long and draconian history of violence against non-Muslims. In India alone, under the Islamic imperial rule (1201-1707 approximately), some 80 million Hindus were put to the sword or perished while being transported as slaves.

The radical Islamic acts of violence have continued in the recent years. The list is a long one; partially it includes: the 9/11 destruction of the Twin Towers in NY City, London train bombings, the 2004 Madrid Train bombings, the massacres in Bali (Indonesia), the killing of small children in Beslan (Russia), the ethnic cleansing of Pandits in Kashmir, the massacres in Darfur, the 2008 Mumbai massacres(166 killed), the 2009 killing of 13 servicemen at Fort Hood, TX, the 2013 Boston Bombers, the 2016 shooting of 49 at an Orlando nightclub, the 2015 massacres of Charlie Hebdo and again in 2020 in France. This is a partial list. The violence goes on.

Political correctness rules the Western academia and the leading press. Many professors and journalists refuse to pass any judgment on Islamic extremism. The prevalent version of history is written thus: “the radicals have hijacked a great religion, a religion of peace. Islamic theology and history therefore requires little examination.” The doctrine of Jihad is interpreted with modern sensibilities as “internal struggle” (*jihad fi sabil Allah*—striving for the sake of God). But Jihad is not a modern corruption. It is a central tenet of Islam.

We patronize Islam when we say that it has no serious problems. We mislead ourselves by repeating the mantra that the problem with Islam is a few Osama bin Ladens. The first thing necessary is to open up Islamic history and doctrine to examination. This is the task of intelligentsia, especially those in the Islamic world. Once this is done, the rest will be easy. Closed ideologies masquerading as religion will fall of their own weight once the light is shone on them.

The 20th century combated and defeated a number of totalitarian ideologies: slavery, imperialism, Fascism, Nazism and Communism. Scholars were at the forefront of these battles. The rise of radical Islam, not all of Islam, is a new challenge. The intelligentsia have an important role to play.

God is not one. Religions are not the same. We can learn to respect differences without hiding these under the rug. _____

Additional Recommended Reading:

Ram Swarup, *Hindu View of Christianity and Islam*, Voice of India Press, 3rd printing, 2000. It is a short 136 p book; available free at: <https://voibooks.bitbucket.io/hvic/index.html>

Jonathan Kirsch, *God Against the Gods: The History of the War between Monotheism and Polytheism*, Viking Compass, 2006. Stephen Prothero, *God is Not One: the Eight Rival Religions that Run the World—and Why their Differences Matter*, Harper, 2010.

Bat Ye’or, “The Dhimmis: Christians and Jews under Islam,” Wikipedia.