

An Outsider Perspective of the Human Predicament in Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism

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Abstract

While most religious traditions emerged from discrete contexts, major world religions have been brought into new forms of contact, calling forth broadminded reciprocity in social discourse. How well do Christians (including readers of *Global Missiology*) understand basic ideas of Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, the three world religions that have increasing salience in contemporary affairs alongside Christianity? This paper, developed with rudimentary resources from insiders of these religions, explores the question of the core human predicament, to which essential teachings of these religions are addressed. Granted, the theologies of these religions would present much more complex understandings, but here we begin to see the outlines that frame primary beliefs and practices of followers. In Islam, humanity's core problem is separation from Allah, resulting in Allah's displeasure and possibility of judgment on the final day. Balance is established by a healthy fear of Allah. In Buddhism the human problem is delusions that come from worldly attachments, leading to the cycle of *kamma* and *samsara*. Salvation begins with right understanding followed by renunciation of all desire. In Hinduism the human problem lies in the fixed status of *moksa*, where a human being is pulled into perpetual struggle between the higher and lower self. *Moksa* is made immutable by the caste system. Salvation or eventual bliss issues out of the unity of the self, known as *atman*, and the ultimate reality, known as the *brahman* through a path of renunciation from all attachment. Note that while the unfamiliar, non-English words have been italicized, their meanings are implied within the text, therefore no extra glossary is independently proffered.

Key words: human predicament; salvation; fear; desire; renunciation; caste system; flaw of the excluded middle; Islam; Hinduism; Buddhism; world religions;

Introduction

Religion is a universal human phenomenon. In an age when cultural diversity and religious pluralism are prominent features of contemporary life, it is imperative that we seek to understand other religions in their own terms. Although every religious system is a complex system of beliefs relating to a transcendent "Other" (God or ultimate reality) and practices of belonging, organization and propagation, the main frameworks of the great world religions are received from certain historical eras and particular founders. Subsequent generations may interpret the received codes, creeds and cults, and modify structures of organization for changing times, yet by and large religions arrive into the present time shaped into fully self-sufficient, apparently rational or mystical explanations about reality and humanity's relation to that reality. It helps to understand the core ideas of the religions in their seminal origins. In this paper, I explore, for readers who consider themselves largely unfamiliar with Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism, one basic feature, the question of the human predicament as understood by the insiders of each these three religions.

Islam

The Arabic word *Islam* means “submission.” A Muslim is one who has expressed unconditional surrender to the will of Allah. Houben writes that Islam is much more than a religion; it is a way of life that encompasses all areas of human activity, private and public, theological and political alike (Houben 2003).

According to prominent Muslim scholar Harun Yahya, Islam dates back to the creation of the world, but Muhammad was the last and the greatest of a series of prophets who were sent to lead mankind out of darkness to light (Yahya 2002: Kin Loc 13-14). This framework is stated in the Qur’an:

Mankind! Admonition has come to you from your Lord and also healing for what is in the breasts and guidance and mercy for the unbelievers (Qur’an Surah Yunus 57).

Will they not ponder the Qur’an? If it had been from other than Allah, they would have found many inconsistencies in it (Surat Nisa 82).

Orthodox Islam acknowledges that Allah had sent earlier messengers, called *Nabis’* or *rasuls* in Arabic, to Judaism and Christianity; devout Muslims respect the prophets of these religions. These prophets were reformers sent by God to correct the ways of wayward peoples. They were considered sinless both in their deeds and their words (Maulana 2011: Kin Loc 195). However, the Qur’an says their messages were distorted by the recipients, which is why it was necessary that God send the last prophet, Muhammad.

The Religion before Allah is Islam (submission to His Will): Nor did the People of the Book [Christians and Jews] dissent there from except through envy of each other, after knowledge had come to them. But if any deny the signs of Allah, Allah is swift in calling them to account (Qur’an, Surah Al-I Imran 3:19).

The Qur’an

Muslims regard Islam as the confirmation and completion of what is accurate in Judaism and Christianity; apparently the Qur’an confirms the truth of earlier revelations and clearly spells out the revelation, which comes from the sustainer of all the worlds. If anyone desires a religion other than Islam (submission to Allah), such a person will not be accepted; and in the hereafter this person will be in the ranks of those who have lost all spiritual good. The Qur’an challenges other faiths that would dispute its authenticity to produce a book that has merit like the Qur’an, implying that it is impossible for any other religious book to match the merits of the Qur’an.

For Muslims, Allah’s last message is contained in the Qur’an, the only holy book to have survived completely intact. It has 114 *surahs*, or chapters, containing over six thousand *ayahs* or verses. The *surahs* were not arranged according to the sequence of revelation or historical development (they are not like the Bible); they were arranged according to the prophet’s instructions. To avow the authority of the Qur’an, Muslim scholars insist that at every stage, the revelation was immediately recorded in writing, or committed to memory by the Prophet’s companions who recorded it later. The Qur’an is under the protection of Allah, therefore it cannot be distorted by people. This protection is stated in Surat al-Hijr 9: “It is we who have sent down the reminder (the message) and we who will preserve it.” The Qur’an is the only standard

by which to distinguish right from wrong, and for this reason it is also called the *Furqan*, that is, “discrimination,” as it says in Surah Al Imran 4: “He has sent down the *Furqan*, the standard by which to discern the true from false” (Yahya 2002: Kin Loc 37-40).

Yahya teaches that Muslims can only fully understand and apply the Qur’an into real life with the help of the *Sunnah*. The *Sunnah* reveals the Prophet’s entire life and wisdom, so it is considered his living interpretation of the Qur’an, though some parts of it are subsequent interpretations by great Islamic scholars. Moreover, the best practice and example of the Prophet is the second authority for Muslims after the Qur’an. The word *Hadith* means statement or talk (narration or tradition), the reliably transmitted report of what the Prophet said, did or approved. *Sunnah* is also living in the same methods and ways the Prophet lived, in behavior and treatment of people. The importance of *Hadith* is that many times the Qur’an gives the general principle of an order, but to understand the order clearly in its fullest sense *Hadith* is required. Imam al-Bukhari, considered one of the most illustrious Imams who compiled a concise collection of authentic *Hadith* of the Prophet, is said to have affirmed the worth of the *Sunnah* when he said, “The best talk (speech) is Allah's Book, and the best way (*Sunnah*) is the way of Muhammad” (Yahya 2002: Kin Loc 57–58).

Human predicament: separation from Allah

Scholar of World Christianity Andrew Walls points out that much misunderstanding between Christians and Muslims arises from the assumption that the Qur’an is for Muslims what the Bible is for Christians. It would be truer to say that the Qur’an is for Muslims what Christ is for Christians. According to Muslims, the divine word, the Qur’an, is forever fixed in heaven, in Arabic, the language of original revelation. For Christians, Christ is the divine Word, infinitely translatable into local cultures through missionary work, thus the Bible is translatable into every language on earth (Walls 2002:29).

Recognizing the weight of the Qur’an and the *Sunnah* is vital to understanding Islam’s view of the human predicament. Yahya and Topbas both teach that the essence of Islam is to know of the existence of Allah, and to understand that there is no god but Allah (Yahya 2002: Kin Loc 69-70; Topbas 2003: Kindle Loc 130, 236–238, 244). The foundation of Islamic faith is belief in the unity of God who alone is worthy to be worshiped. The Qur’an states this in Surat al-Baqara: “Your God is One God. There is no god but Him, the All-Merciful, the Most Merciful”; and, Surat al-Muminun 91: “Allah has no son and there is no other god accompanying him.” The oneness of Allah is further emphasized in Surat al-Ikhlās 1-4: “Say, He is Allah, Absolute Oneness, Allah, the everlasting sustainer of all. He has not given birth and was not born. And no one is comparable to him.”

Humans’ predicament is separation from Allah, bringing about Allah’s displeasure and setting up man for the Day of Judgment (Yahya 2011: Kin Loc 57). The Day of Judgment is the final day of life on earth and the beginning of eternal life. The ones who believe in Allah will be hosted in paradise and unbelievers will be driven to hell. Surat Al Baqara 112 states, “All who submit themselves completely to Allah and are good-doers will find their reward with their Lord. They will feel no fear and know no sorrow.” Those who do not heed to Allah, the day of punishment will reach them.

Consequently, fear of Allah is the antidote to this separation and making a Muslim right with Allah. Yahya instructs that the true balance of Islamic life is established by having a healthy fear of Allah as well as a sincere hope in Allah's infinite mercy. As one of the essential attributes of a Muslim, the word fear, *khashyat*, expresses overwhelming respect (Yahya 2002: Kin Loc 815–819). Fear is intended to make a believer attain a deeper faith, conduct him or herself responsibly and nurture dedication towards the values of the Qur'an. This is captured in Surat al-Anfal 29: "You who believe! If you have fear of Allah, He will give you a criterion (by which to judge right and wrong) and erase your bad actions from you and forgive you." Only those that fear Allah take heed of the warnings, as it says in Surah Ya Sin 11: "You can only warn those who act on the reminder and fear of the All-Merciful in the unseen. Give them the good news of forgiveness and a generous reward." Humanity must strive hard to feel a more profound fear of Allah, as stated in Surat az-Zumar 11: "I am commanded to worship Allah, making my religion sincerely His." This fear will help avoid evil, so humanity can please Allah. Muhammad stated in a *Hadith* that Allah's pleasure must always be held above man's pleasure:

Whoever seeks Allah's pleasure at the expense of men's displeasure, will win Allah's pleasure and Allah will cause men to be pleased with him. And whoever seeks to please men at the expense of Allah's displeasure, will win the displeasure of Allah and Allah will cause men to be displeased with him (Yahya 2011a).

As an ultimate expression of sincere fear, Allah's good pleasure is earned by sincerely practicing the five pillars, namely declaring the *Shahada* or testimony of faith and observing the practices of *salat*, *zakat*, *swaum* and *hajj* (Yahya 2002). *Shahada* or testimony of faith says, "There is no god but God (Allah) and Muhammad is the Messenger (Prophet) of God". *Salat*, prayer, performed five times a day is a direct link with Allah. *Zakat* is giving a specified percentage of property to needy people, which purifies one's possessions. *Swawm*, a fast from dawn to dusk is abstaining from food, drink and sexual relations during the month of Ramadan for self-purification. *Hajj*, a pilgrimage visit to Mecca is expected of every Muslim who is physically and financially able.

To do charitable deeds is demanded by Allah with sincere faith, which entails performing acts of worship at definite times, and conducting oneself correctly throughout one's lifetime. The Qur'an states this in Sura al-An'am 162:

Say, 'My prayers and my rites, my living and my dying are all for Allah alone, the Lord of all the worlds.' Prayer is also urged in Surat ar-Ra'd 22: 'Those who hare steadfast in seeking the face of their Lord and perform prayer and give from the provision we have given them, secretly and openly, stave off evil with good. It is they who will have the ultimate abode.'

Prayer performed five times daily – morning, noon, afternoon, evening and night – keeps believers' consciences alive, establishing a powerful spiritual bond with Allah. Prayer is also how Muslims receive protection from *Iblis*, the sworn enemy of mankind. He and his legion of *jinns* strive to divert mankind by keeping man from the truth of the religion of Allah. Believers are taught to say a prayer from Surat an-Nas 1-6 to protect them from the danger of *Iblis*.

Buddhism

Siddhartha Gautama was born to a high-caste Indian family in the sixth century B.C. A life of indulgence in youth amidst great suffering around him led him to asceticism and despair before he received a life changing experience and became the Buddha, the Enlightened One. He set out to preach but did not write his teachings down. Subsequently his teachings were recreated in the form of sermons or *sutras* (Thera 1995: Kin Loc 19-24). After his death, the *arahats* (Worthy Ones) taught the *dhamma* and *vinaya*, the core teaching of Buddha's thought. At about 83 B.C. the essence of the Buddha's teaching, *tipitaka*, was penned down into a voluminous book estimated to be about eleven times the size of the Bible. The *tipitaka* consists of three baskets: The Basket of Discipline *vinaya pitaka*, the Basket of Discourses, *sutta pitaka*, and the Basket of Ultimate Doctrine *abhidhamma pitaka*. There are several other discourses which deal with the material and moral progress of followers.

Later, Buddha's movement split into two philosophical camps known today as *Theravada* and *Mahayana*. The Theravada Buddhists—found primarily in Southeast Asia, Sri Lanka, and Burma—venerate the early writings of Buddhism, known as the *Pali Canon*, and practice the philosophy of the Buddha rather than enlarging upon it with speculative commentaries. The Mahayana Buddhists—found primarily in East Asia—created a vast new literature of complex theologies influenced by other philosophies in those regions (Thera 1995). Chinese *Ch'an* Buddhism and Japanese *Zen* Buddhism grew out of *Mahayana*. Japanese *Zen* is paradoxical, exhibiting a strong polemical element against traditional ethical forms, against conformist rules, writings and prescriptions. The *Zen* ideal of spiritual freedom in certain cases even leads to iconoclasm and lawlessness. “Let go your hold” is one of those *Zen* commands, meaning to abandon all support, detach from all ties internally and externally (Hoover 1980: Kin Loc 259-272; Suzuki 1994; Evola 1995:116). In China, pure Chinese rational naturalism based on Taoism, which was interested in seeking union with the world, met Buddhist Indian abstraction, which was interested in ignoring the world and the result was *Ch'an* Buddhism.

The dhamma (dharma)

Traditional Buddhism is not a system of faith and worship, and it has no creeds, rites or demands for allegiance to a supernatural being. The Buddha does not wash away the impurities of others. The Buddha is neither an incarnation of a god nor a savior who freely saves others by His personal salvation. As teacher, he instructs and leaves his disciples directly responsible for their purification. Furthermore, the Buddha does not claim the monopoly of Buddhahood since it is not the prerogative of any specially graced person; anyone can aspire to be a Buddha (Thera 1995: Kin Loc 201-202).

Goddard, a Buddhist scholar, describes *Dhamma* as the teaching that has come to be popularly known as Buddhism (Goddard and Dolnick 2008: Kin Loc 73-76, 270-272). The *Dhamma* is the doctrine of reality. The *Dhamma* is the non-aggressive, moral and philosophical system that advocates a golden rule to guide disciples through pure living and pure thinking to gain supreme wisdom and deliverance from evil. It is a means of deliverance from suffering and is deliverance itself. It lies hidden from the ignorant eyes of men till an Enlightened One—a Buddha—realizes and compassionately reveals it to the world. Scientifically interpreted the *Dhamma* may be called the law of cause and effect. *Dhammakaya*, the noble wisdom of the *Dhamma*, is to be studied, practiced, and above all realized. Gyatso, another distinguished Buddhist scholar, attributes a sort of divinity status to the *Dhamma* when he says it means

“protection.” By practicing Buddha’s teachings, living beings are permanently protected from suffering (Gyatso 2011: Kin Loc 104). Gyatso is a teacher and observer of the Kadampa tradition of Buddhism. He points out there are different forms of Buddhism such as Zen and Theravada. All are different aspects of Buddha’s teaching, but all are equally precious.

Samsara and kamma (karma)

Accordingly, the human dilemma in Buddhism is two-fold: *samsara* and *kamma*. It is *kamma*, or the law of moral causation, which explains the totally ill-balanced world that we live in and the sorry condition of mankind. The Buddha taught that “every living being has *kamma* as its own, its inheritance, its cause, its kinsman, its refuge. *Kamma* is that which differentiates all living beings into low and high states” (Goddard and Dolnick 2008: Kin Loc 377-449). *Kamma* constitutes the law of good and evil; good gets good, evil gets evil (Kunst 1968:269). Kunst has this view that *kamma* forbids one to hurt other beings and encourages one to serve other. A good act performed vis-à-vis others is a factor contributing to one’s self deliverance. Our present mental, intellectual, moral and temperamental differences are mainly due to our own actions and tendencies, both past and present in a continuative and retributive principle.

However, there seems to be inherent contradiction in this teaching on *kamma*. It says in one sense we are the result of what we were, and we will be the result of what we are. In another sense, we are not totally the result of what we were, and we will not absolutely be the result of what we are. Goddard explains that *kamma* is therefore a law unto itself, but it does not thereby follow that there should be a law-giver, just as gravity needs no law-giver. Similarly, *kamma* is neither fate nor predestination imposed upon us by some mysterious unknown power to which we must helplessly submit ourselves. Actually, however, this reasoning is self-contradicting. Either there is an external power or principle that determines the *kamma* or people should really be certain that, by their actions, they can divert the course of *kamma*.

The source of human problems is delusions in our minds, delusions that come from attachments. The root of attachment is self-grasping ignorance about the way things exist. This binds us to the cycle of the impure life, *samsara*. The rope of *samsara* means no one has permanent liberation; everyone has to continually experience the sufferings of sickness, ageing, death, and uncontrolled rebirth in life after life without end. The only way to be free of the futile cycle is to study and practice, then ultimately to be realized in *dhamma*. But then as long as the *kammic* force exists there is *samsara* (rebirth), for beings are merely the visible manifestation of this invisible *kammic* force. It is *kamma*, rooted in ignorance and craving, that conditions rebirth in the past, present and future. The process of birth and death continues ad infinitum until this flux is transmuted to *nibbanadhatu*, the ultimate goal of Buddhists. The cycle of empirical lives to which each individual is subjected depends on the quality and quantity of the *kamma* performed and accumulated. Its quantity determines the duration of the *samsara* which may last eons and eons (Gyatso 2011: Kin Loc 148–151, 156; Goddard and Dolnick 2008: Kin Loc 186-189).

Reflecting on *kamma*’s application in the modern situation, particularly in relation to Indian philosophies, Kunst observes that *kamma* is conceived as the decisive factor in forming man’s character, conduct and indeed his physical shape in present and future lives. The concept has become a yardstick by which a person’s status and position in the community and society can be

measured (Kunst 1968: 269; Thera 1995: Kin Loc 484–491). Even within our contemporary society, it is not unusual to hear someone say, in retributive retort to a mean person, “It is *kamma* catching up.” In other words, the person is getting what they deserve as a way of nature effecting justice for the aggrieved. *Kamma* then has moved beyond Buddhist metaphysics to the moral and ethical realm that includes viewing *kammic* force as a form of self-protection. Like many other religiously motivated concepts, I think *kamma* has become instrumental to the changing times and needs of humanity. Religious ideas are employed as people think best, and who is to say the applied rationale does not work for the concerned persons?

Nibbana (nivarana)

Narada Thera teaches that the closest explanation of *nibbana* is that of a *dhamma* which is “unborn, unoriginated, uncreated and unformed,” hence it is eternal, desirable, and happy. From a metaphysical standpoint, *nibbana* is deliverance from suffering; from a psychological view, the eradication of egoism; from ethics, destruction of lust, hatred and ignorance (Thera 1995: Kin Loc 671, 679-681, 689). In what is intended as an apologia to a modern western mind seeking the easier soteriological path (as opposed to religious doctrine and rules), Gyatso teaches that we can attain *nibbana* of supreme permanent peace of mind in this life. But in a quick rejoinder he discounts the possibility of this happening, because strong human desire for worldly enjoyment and attachment would not allow disciplined practice of *dhamma* (Gyatso 2011: Kin Loc 423-427). In a sense this explanation is comparative to Christianity, as Dallas Willard points out. Although salvation is available through faith in Christ, there is no easy path for the transformation of the human person; transformation must follow a rigorous and disciplinary course of action, just as an athlete trains hard to prepare the body to win a prize (Willard 1990: 29-30).

Be that as it may, in Buddhism the highest state of happiness is *nibbana*, an idea intended to imply the highest level of spiritual enlightenment. It involves the total extinction of suffering, through the total annihilation of craving for sensual pleasures and craving for existence (Thera 1995: Kin Loc 276-286). Kunst refers to this annihilation as the absence of empirical reality (Kunst 1968). *Nibbana* is attained by practicing the *dhamma*, in following the four noble truths and the noble eight-fold path. The first noble truth is that life is frustrating, painful and miserable. Even the wealthy will one day age and die. Second, suffering has a cause, which is rooted in the human nature of grasping, clinging and wanting. Third, the cause of suffering can be ended by awakening or enlightenment in an experience that is “mind like fire unbound.” Fourth, the path that ends the suffering, leading to *nibbana*, is achieved by *vipashyana*, that is meditation using noble eightfold path, comprising right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. Out of this meditation, we develop awareness and insight into the way things really are and therefore acquire peace and cease being manipulative and complex. *Nibbana* is the final goal of the awakening, the ultimate enlightenment experience of the Buddhist. One who has experienced *nibbana* has experienced cessation of passion, aggression and ignorance (“Buddhanet Basic Buddhism Guide” 2018/2018a; Thera 1995: Kin Loc 705–709).

To learn how to attain *nibbana*, the starting point is reasoning or understanding, *samma-ditthi*. To understand rightly means to recognize things as they really are, not as they appear to be. Clear vision leads to clear thinking, eliminating evil thoughts and developing pure thoughts.

Right thoughts lead to right speech, abstinence from falsehood and frivolous talk. Right speech is followed by right action, comprising abstinence from killing, stealing and sexual misconduct and so on. These elementary principles of regulated behavior are essential to a smooth progress along the path to *nibbana*. Ultimately, one gets to *Enlightenment*, the inner light of wisdom that is permanently free from all mistaken appearance; one becomes a wisdom being, a *Bodhissatva*, the most beautiful and the most refined course of life that has ever been presented to this ego-centric world (Gyatso 2011: Kin Loc 391-392).

Hinduism

Among scholars there is a conflict on the idea of where the umbrella term “Hinduism” came from, some arguing it was constructed—imposed as a single conceptual category on a heterogeneous collection of sects, doctrines and customs—by British scholars, missionaries and colonial administrators. Lipner talks of Hinduism as a world religion par excellence because of its numerical size of a billion adherents, as well as having a pervasive cultural, economic and political influence in India—except that a monolithic understanding belies the great diversity, dynamism and elusive beliefs and practices within the idea of “Hinduism” (Lipner 2006:91-104).

While the ideas behind Hinduism themselves go back into antiquity, the term “Hindu” originated as a cultural expression for the way of life of a geographically bounded people brought together by vagaries of nature and circumstances, whose religious phenomena were taken for granted by outsiders. Lorenzen argues that the Hindu religion as theologically and devotionally grounded in Hindu epic texts acquired a much sharper, self-conscious identity through the rivalry between Muslims and Hindus between 1200 and 1500. Hindu religion was firmly established before the British and their European framework of Christianity as a religion took root in India from the 1600s through the 1800s (Lorenzen 1999).

Hinduism has many figures behind its evolution as a religious system. One of the great influences on Hinduism is Buddha, who began as a philosopher within Hinduism. His moral reflections challenged ingrained social arrangements that framed Hinduism at that time, particularly the caste, embodying reflexivity within Hinduism itself. A second influential figure is Patanjali, revered by many Hindus. His main contribution to Hinduism was the *Yoga Sutras*, “verses on yoga,” focusing on ethical and contemplative reform. Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras* teach restraint, wise action, and morality as a path to the realization of the divine nature in the human. A third figure is known as Sankara, said to be the founder of monastic type of reflection and life within Hinduism. His monasteries opened a path for renunciation. He wrote extensive commentaries on the *Upanishads*, the philosophical thoughts of the *Vedic* era. They detail the metaphysical nature of the universe and soul. The revered sage Vyasa wrote the *Bhagavat Gita*, considered the greatest religious text. The *Gita* is part of the even bigger epic known as the *Mahabharatha*, but because of its religious content the *Gita* is considered a separate religious text. It contains the whole philosophical concept of all *Vedas* and all *Upanishads* in abridged form.

Another influence on Hinduism is Vardhamana Mahivira, who founded *Jainism*. Jainism began like Buddhism as a heterodox philosophical sect of Hinduism. It taught complete renunciation and complete non-violence, resulting in profound influence on Hinduism. Finally, another great sage said to have influenced Hinduism is known as Valmiki, who wrote the

Ramayana, one of the largest ancient poems structured as a mythical account of the struggle between a divinity, *Rama*, a demon king, *Ravana*, and a goddess, *Sita*, with many other characters accompanying them. Considered a representation of ideal relationships as well as the struggles that go into their making, it greatly shaped the ethical and cultural consciousness of Hindu people (Sheridan 2011: Kin Loc 42-44; Lal 2010; Aptaker 2016).

Moksa, karma and samsara Hinduism

The diversity and expansiveness of the primary literature considered as sacred texts of Hinduism make it difficult to pin down Hinduism's view of the human predicament. Despite the varying degrees of authority of the genres, each is considered authoritative because each addresses itself to different purposes. Thus, Hindu literature as a whole rarely provides a straightforward answer to any question (Dhand 2002:347-372). Even with such wide-ranging Hindu diversity, scholars agree on some axiomatic thoughts.

One is that classical Hindu thought is soteriologically focused on the telos of *moksa* (Milner 1993). *Moksa* implies a merging of the divine and human identities in a person. A human being is pulled into a perpetual struggle between the higher and lower self. While the lower nature drags the human person down, he or she strives towards the realization of the ultimate *moksa* self. Realization of *moksa* is bound up in the ultimate transcendence and is enabled or inhibited by the finite nature, the realm of morality and ethics (Rao 1926:19-35). Salvation or eventual bliss issues out of recognizing the unity of the self, known as *atman*, and the ultimate reality, the *brahman*. The full grasp of this oneness of self and *brahman* requires following the path of *yoga* and renunciation of social identity to become holy and free of all attachment.

The other features that are axiomatic to Hindu philosophy are *samsara* and *karma* in their close kinship to Buddhism as discussed earlier. Most Hindus assume continuing reincarnations, *samsara*, that a person's current incarnation and experiences are at least in part a fruit of past actions, *karma*, and that release from this ongoing cycle is possible and desirable, but nevertheless unpredictable in its possibility (Milner 1993:299).

Influence of the caste system

With all the diversity and philosophical variation, it becomes clear that the overarching influence consists of the distinctions between social classes structured by the caste system, which has three distinct characteristics. First, a person's central social status is fixed; mobility across a large number of discrete social boundaries is prohibited. Second, caste position is based on inheritance and ascription—merit, moral virtue or conformity do not determine or change caste membership. Third, enormous social and individual energies are devoted to differentiating and ranking caste groups and maintaining their boundaries and identities. In the classical Hindu caste system, the society was divided into four "*varnas*," classes or categories, purely based on profession and not by birth. First were *Brahmins*—the clergy, teachers, religious authorities. *Kshatriya* were the warriors, administrators, political class. *Vaisyas* were the merchants, farmers, the business persons. The fourth class of *Shudras* was comprised of servants and labors.

Considering the caste system, I think the Hindu philosophical system evolved to respond to a felt need, namely the social restlessness, disenchantment and transience of caste divisions, including suffering and renunciation as well as wealth and privilege. These would be typical

issues generated by immutable stratifications. Such a development is quite conceivable, granted that the three key notions of *samsara*, *karma* and *moksa* can be seen as structural reversals of the caste at least from a philosophical standpoint. These categories gave the means to cope with vicissitudes of the social inequalities of caste. The repeated reincarnation of the individual in subsequent lives, *samsara*, can be seen as a near endless opportunity for social mobility, hence a structural reversal of the prohibition against mobility in the caste system is correlated with the eschatological hope offered by *samsara* and *karma*. *Samsara* premises the possibility of new opportunity in rebirth and upward mobility in a new life, while *karma* points to the day of reckoning for the evil and reward for the good, thus premising some sort of justice. Such an explanation demonstrates why, against the backdrop of the philosophical climate of his time when people had abandoned what were seen as the right values, Buddha reacted against his privileged status, adopted asceticism for a while, discarded it as untenable and devised a middle way that became hugely popular—Buddhism—thus also precipitating the reformation of the Hindu system.

This interrelatedness of key Hindu teachings is even more apparent when we consider that Hindu tradition on the whole is not anti-materialistic or averse to wealth. Hindu thought affirms wealth as one of the four legitimate goals of life within the ambit of *dharma* (Rambachan 2006). Wealth, along with pleasure (*kama*, not to be confused with *karma*), virtue (*dharma*) and liberation (*moksa*) are legitimate human goals, though various extensive philosophical thoughts offer specific guidelines to their acquisition and use. But wealth is neither an end nor a means for achieving self-value and meaning. There is in Hindu thought a finite quality to material things, which adds to their ultimately unsatisfactory character. In place of that satisfaction is an inner quest for something more meaningful and satisfying. Hindu thought says if we reflect with detachment on our experiences, we realize that wealth, power, fame and pleasure leave us unfulfilled. For the angst that cannot be assuaged by worldly gain, the Upanishad remedy is to go search for the “uncreated” (Rambachan 2006). Every human heart is in a search for what it calls “uncreated,” synonymous with the absolute or limitless, which eventually arrives at *brahman*. A *Brahmin* is one who, after examining worldly gains achieved through action, understands that the uncreated cannot be created by finite action and therefore becomes detached from worldly material and desire. The restless seeker should detach from finite efforts and achievements and with a humble heart, seek insight at the hands of a *guru* (teacher) for the answer to the restlessness, till one arrives at the *brahman* status.

Scholar of Christianity in Africa Paul Gifford has argued that the powerless have often found religion as a means of altering their situation and even reversing their status in symbolic and social terms, because religion can depend on the ambiguous power of myth, symbol and ritual to mean many things at once and contain many potentialities (Gifford 1998:32). The extensive Hindu religious thought is that symbolic power for Hindu people. I think the disenchantment, whether with material pleasures or as a result of suffering, and the subsequent meaning in religious concepts, is also what explains the elusive sublime quality of Hindu sacred texts. The texts betray a comfortable merger between the material and the spartan, the mythical and the botanical, the abstract and the pictorial (Kunst 1968), hence making them appealing to inner human restlessness. Such ambiguity also explains the Hindu monistic worldview, a holism of life that rejects the western dualism that separates the natural from supernatural realities. Dualism includes what Paul Hiebert called “the flaw of the excluded middle” in western thought. This

middle is the world of unseen spirits, ghosts, ancestors and a pantheon of gods who have substantial personal histories and numerous personal attributes, and who occupy positions in complex networks among other supernatural forces that nevertheless operate alongside humans in this world and time, in all kinds of natural places (Hiebert 1982; Roberts, Chiao, and Pandey 1975).

The salient point is that behind the concepts of *dharma*, *samsara*, *moksa*, *atman* and *brahman* is an existential quest for wholeness in both a physical and spiritual sense. This is a characteristic of folk religion throughout the world. Folk religion does not make a dichotomy between physical and spiritual dimensions of life, and the most important function of overt religiosity, devotional activities and communal dimensions is to address felt needs, whether with a “this-worldly” outlook or a utopian one (Hiebert, Shaw, and Tienou 2000:76-79). Hindu religious philosophy has successfully done that. The only challenge for us today is that this philosophical system developed in a different age. Like all religious systems, including Christianity, what were once contextual codes, creeds, and values that served their purpose in specific circumstances got packaged, entrenched and passed down as systems that are sometimes incoherent to current times, apart from translation and contextualization in order to address contemporary socio-cultural and political substrata.

Conclusion

Religion is a universal human phenomenon. Today, nearly all religions have been brought into increasing contact through people movements, including migration and travel, restructuring of society through urbanization, and autonomous access to ideas through technology and formal education. This contact makes it necessary that we go the extra mile to understand other religions apart from our own. Often, discourse about interactions of peoples of different faiths presumes that people know the motivating factors behind the activities of other religions. Building on rudimentary resources of insider and religious texts, this article has attempted to understand the human predicaments as described in the considered religions. Islam sees the problem as alienation from Allah and the antidote is to fear Allah, conscientiously practice the five Muslim obligations of *shahada*, *salat*, *sauwm zakat* and *hajj*, and trust in Allah’s mercy on the Day of Judgment. Buddhism sees living beings as bound to the fate of *kamma* by the futile cycle of *samsara*, and the only way to be free is to be transmuted into *nibbana*. Hinduism teaches the need to merge the self, *atman*, and ultimate reality, *brahman*, through the path of *yoga* and renunciation of social identity, which can also bring release from the ongoing cycle of *samsara* and *karma*.

This essay is only an introduction into a vast arena of human reality. Additional writing should address itself to how these religions influence one other upon contact and interaction, how these beliefs have been structurally and ideologically transformed through historical time, and how they are responding to unprecedented rapid change under the impact of the impact of information and cultural technology. The bigger goal ought to help contemporary faith communities begin to come to terms with the reality of religious pluralism as prominent as part of today’s social interactions. Such coming to terms needs to first take the other religions seriously by seeking to understand their own claims, practices and literatures.

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