

Improving the Relationships Between South Asian, Chinese, and Abrahamic Religions in a Modern Society ©

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An analysis of the South Asian, Chinese, and Abrahamic religions reveals challenges in their relationships with accepting each other's belief systems as valid practices. Our faith stems from many different beliefs, culture, and ideology. We share the same biology, but as much as we are the same, we are very different in how we think, function and react to the world. Both Immanuel Kant and King Ashoka share my beliefs of religious tolerance by the practice of moral principles, showing humanistic concern, and reverence for our differences.

There are different ways for achieving salvation or enlightenment. For us to believe that there is only one religion or one path to enlightenment hinders us as spiritual people looking for a peaceful planet. Immanuel Kant's Theological Idea expounds on "an absolutely perfect and most real being (or god)." (Encyclopedia Britannica, *Kant: Experience and Reality*). He determined that traditional efforts to confirm that God really exists are based on what we experience. Reason attempts to reach for what we can not understand. Part of improving relationships with each other is learning our cultures and practices of religions to gain understanding of what our religions are about including the history, rituals, and sacred texts. King Ashoka set forth his philosophy through his rock edicts "interpreted the Dharma as law, duty, and righteousness, elaborating it as a prohibition of the killing of men or animals, a social policy of welfare, and as admonitions to observe ethical behavior and religious tolerance." (<http://www.humanistictexts.org/asoka.htm>). Therefore, we need to have faith in what we want to believe in, but show our tolerance and respect for the faith of others. The reason why we experience intolerance is because we do not gain insight into the other religions that surround us. By judging people for believing in something different than us, we justify our hate instead of

embracing our similarities and colorful differences. We should learn our faiths in order to understand what can bring us together.

The South Asian religions of Hinduism and Buddhism are the oldest belief systems still being practiced. They are a polymorphous monotheism belief system where one God takes on many forms and names. The one divine principle (God) is called Brahman who has no gender or physical appearance. Hindu's activity is guided by dharma (social duty) which, in essence, is determined by your caste system. Kant emphasized a meaning for moral duty explaining that a person should conscientiously always do what they comprehend to be right. He suggested that morals should be universal law. The Hindu religious scripture, The Bhagavad Gita, teaches that morality is a tool used in one's journey through their life on earth toward their manifestation called Samsara (Lesson 4.3). One is born, lives, dies and then hopefully, returns to a higher caste by following their dharma. Once they have achieved their goal, they will have achieved Moksha where the soul loses its individuality to join Atman (Lesson 3.2, The Upanishadic World View). Hinduism is an open religious practice that encourages inquiry, doubt and searching. Their searching leads to their learning and understanding on how to adhere moral expectations. This morality helps them to identify with their community which in turn, encourages them to be tolerant of others. Similar in principles to Hinduism is Buddhism. There are strong lines of similarity between Buddhism and Hinduism. Where the religions differ is in the Buddhists' belief of Nirvana which means ceasing to exist and Moksha merges the individual with the universe. Buddha suggested to his followers to live in the middle path between extreme materialism and extreme asceticism. Buddhism focuses on the cessation of suffering by following the four Noble Truths (Lesson 5.2, Buddhist Behavioral Guidelines). By stopping the suffering, they will attain freedom from Samsara. Buddhists also practice dharma as a way to Nirvana. As King Ashoka wrote in the Rock Edict XI, "There is no gift like the giving of the

Dharma—friendship in Dharma, liberality in Dharma, association in Dharma.” Their practice is based on the way they live; they do not necessarily prescribe to a divine presence. Preventing the suffering and removing desire is the essence to their belief system. Prescribing to a moral duty gives great respect to religious tolerance. It appears to be inherently sewn into the Hindu and Buddhist belief. Buddha's message was a call to be a part of the universe and to work in harmony for the welfare of humankind. He did not proclaim he had chosen people and did not regard himself as a chosen one either.

Kant's pluralistic philosophy extends to the Chinese ideal of syncretism of blending Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism elements which encompasses diverse traditions although they differ in that the Chinese Tradition values the relationship between religious authority and kingship. The Chinese focus on ancestral worship (Zongjiao) particularly those of the ruling family differ from Kant's belief of separation of religion from church and state. Drawing upon Immanuel Kant's essay on Enlightenment, he believed prerequisites are necessary for the possibility for people to become enlightened. He professed that all church and state governing of its people in the manner of father dealing benevolently and intrusively with his children, should be eliminated and the people should be given the freedom to use their own intellect. (“...freedom to make *public use* of one's reason in all matters. But I hear from all sides the cry: *Do not argue!* The officer says: Do not argue but drill! The tax official: Do not argue but pay! The clergyman: Do not argue but believe! (Only one ruler in the world says: *Argue* as much as you will and about whatever you *will, but obey!*) Everywhere there are restrictions on freedom.”) However, the ruler living under the power of Tian forces their political authority to practice moral standing – “moral, wise and humane.” If he did not practice moral responsibilities, he could be taken away by Tian (Lesson 6.2 Tianming). King Ashoka wrote in the Minor Rock Edicts “Father and mother should be respected and so should elders, kindness to living beings should be made

strong and the truth should be spoken. In these ways, the Dhamma should be promoted.”

Ashoka’s philosophy mirrors Confucianism’s belief of creating “ideal harmonious relationship between individuals and society” by practicing Li (Lesson 7.1, Confucianism). Mencius during the era of Hundred Schools of Thought argued for the need for Ren (humaneness) in politics and Yi (individual judgment) not unlike Kant’s Enlightenment asking for freedom to the people. The Chinese religious sensibility centers on both the social aspect expressed as Ren and the individual shown by the awareness of Tao (the way). King Ashoka’s Edicts were concerned with the moral and spiritual welfare of his community while Kant wanted people free from restrictions. Taoism complement both of their world views with its emphasis on individual spirituality and Wuwei (Lesson 8.1, Tao). Wuwei is the concept of knowing when to take action in a spontaneous natural manner. As the *Taoteching* states, “Deters those who know too much from going too far; Practices non-action and the natural order is not disrupted.” What we can learn from the Chinese tradition and Taoist thinking is that what our neighbors gain or lose is what we gain or lose as well (Tai Shang Kan Ying P’ien). This notion is the heart of religious tolerance.

The Western Monotheistic traditions focus on the worship of one God with a monistic viewpoint unlike the Hindu understanding of Brahma and the Chinese conceptualization of Tao. Unlike the Vedas, Upanishads or Confucian and Taoist texts, the Hebrew Bible is organized in a historical chronological order with humans in the starring roles. These historical events have a timeline beginning with God creating the world and ultimately, having an end of time. The Bible begins with the story of Adam and Eve along with the concept of original sin. Kant argued that humans seek a “temporal origin to explain the source of the morally flawed propensity we find mysteriously and destructively anterior to our formulations of maxims to guide our actions.” (Mandelbrote’s *Nature and Scripture in the Abrahamic Religions*, Page 412). Thus, the three

religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – follow the perspective of Abraham who decidedly followed one God considering the original stories of human failure by not following God’s command. According to Jewish belief, Moses followed the command of God and led his enslaved people out of Egypt. He formed a Covenant with God, followed the Torah and became the leader of the Israelites. The Jewish tradition professes to choose life by taking the path of God out of respect for the halakhah. Part of the Abrahamic religions is the tradition of prophecy and revelations as God’s way of communicating with humans since God controls human destiny (Lesson 9.1, The Prophetic Tradition). Jews attempting to respond to the question of how to live by the Torah resulted in four separate groups – Essenes, Sadducees, Pharisees, and Zealots. Meanwhile, a small sect in Rome was developing its religious philosophies around the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth whose life is based on the four gospel accounts from Mark, Luke, Matthew, and John. Christians lived in fear of persecution until 313 C.E. when Emperor Constantine gave them permission to practice their religion. Constantine converted to Christianity just like King Ashoka converted to Buddhism. However, Constantine made sure that his new religion was part of his ruling policy. Ashoka’s emphasis on Buddhism’s “brotherly love” and charity is similar to the Ancient Rome Christian and good for both empires’ solidarity. Ashoka respected other religions in his kingdom just like the early Islamic caliphates but not like Constantine who demanded conversion from his people. Ashoka said, “If a man extols his own faith and disparages another because of devotion to his own and because he wants to glorify it, he seriously injures his own faith.” Even Kant proclaimed in his *What is Enlightenment*, “The newly introduced order might last until insight into the nature of these things had become so general and widely approved that through uniting their voices they could bring a proposal to the throne to take those congregations under protection which had united into a changed religious organization according to their better ideas, without however hindering others who wish to

remain in the order.” Under the Pentarchy, the Christians developed Asceticism seeking an intense spiritualism in a solitary life similar to the Jewish Essenes (Lesson 11.1, The Early Church). However, Islam based its belief system on the Ummah (community) and the Prophet Muhammad. Islam’s central foundation is on the Quran along with their creed the Shahada and the practice of the Five Pillars (Lesson 12.1, Emergence of the Islamic View of Life). The three major Abrahamic religions have their own honorable faith. In a selection from the *Ashoka Rock and Pillar Edicts*, he declares “The faiths of others all deserve to be honored for one reason or another. By honoring them, one exalts one’s own faith and at the same time performs a service to the faith of others.” Ashoka’s words hold a truth to the tolerance of the Abrahamic religions because each believes in similar ethics. Whether it is Isaac or Ishmael – they are not brothers in dispute – descendants of Abraham share the same heritage and blessings.

Improved relationships and acceptance between South Asian, Chinese, and Abrahamic religions in our modern American society should be developed in order to achieve religious tolerance. It is futile to believe that we are all the same carrying the same ideology on the road to enlightenment. What a boring world! Nobody would expect a doctor to prescribe the same healing plan to each of his patients. Why would we think that subscribing to the same world view should cure our quest for answers? Even Kant and Ashoka would agree. In the poem “The Blind Men and the Elephant,” Kant’s teachings show us that each religion has its own darshana although they “rail on in utter ignorance for something they have never seen.” If we assume the basic moral principles that religions question, we will live honest lives and be dutiful in society. Isn’t that what everyone wants? This was King Ashoka’s dogma that he professed in his rock edicts.

We are different people seeking different paths to “God.” This is the very reason to celebrate and learn from each other. Scientists are exploring religious phenomena from the neuroscience

perspective. Philosopher Daniel Dennett maintained that “the questions that religions ask and attempt to answer are not unlike questions posed by scientists.” (Lesson 13). Both science and religion asks questions such as the beginning of life and the whys of life. Perhaps we should be explorers and scientists and try to live imaginatively the path of others’ views. We just might discover our own. The Dali Lama contemplated “In my view, science and Buddhism share a search for the truth and for understanding reality. By learning from science about aspects of reality where its understanding may be more advanced, I believe that Buddhism enriches its own worldview.” (Gyatso 2005) Are our religions and belief systems really vastly different from one another? The purpose of religious tolerance is to inspire unity among the many diverse faiths and traditions in the world. No matter who we are, where we are from or what we were taught to believe in, if we remain at peace with ourselves, we will be at peace with everyone else.

The anatomy of religious tolerance is to see the people behind the religions. Each of the major religions has their respective traditions of commemoration. Hindus have the divine principle known as Brahman. Buddhists have Nirvana via Buddha’s Eightfold path. The Chinese have the ideal of syncretism with the mix of Confucianism, Taosim, and Chinese Buddhism. The Jews have the covenant relationship along with the prophetic tradition. Christians have Jesus as the center of their faith. The Muslims have the Prophet Muhammad. Religion keeps us virtuous. Just as Ashoka asked for “reverence for men of all sects” (Rock Edict XII) and Kant argued that a moral life enhances a person’s desire for happiness, these observations will improve our relationships with each other in accepting our different belief systems while still maintaining our own.

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RL ST 001 Course Lectures

Lesson 4.3

Lesson 3.2, The Upanishadic World View

Lesson 5.2, Buddhist Behavioral Guidelines

Lesson 6.2 Tianming

Lesson 7.1, Confucianism

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Lesson 9.1, The Prophetic Tradition

Lesson 11.1, The Early Church

Lesson 12.1, Emergence of the Islamic View of Life

Lesson 13.

Tai Shang Kan Ying P'ien, *Treatise of the Exalted One on Response and Retribution*