

What I Have Learned from Other Religions

James S. Wolfe

I have taught university courses in world religions and the sociology of religion for forty years as well as participated in the Association for Humanist Sociology. Outside the classroom I have availed myself of many opportunities to become more acquainted first hand with various religions. My research in the sociology of religion led me to examine three Protestant churches in the San Francisco Bay Area for the degree to which they adopted counter-cultural values, including dialogical pluralism.¹ My findings appeared in *The New Religious Consciousness* (edited by Charles Y. Glock and Robert N. Bellah: now out of print). After 9/11, I gave myself a crash course in Islam and joined with friends from the Islamic Society of North America in nearby Plainfield, Indiana, in condemning both the appalling acts of murder committed on 9/11 and the ensuing Islamophobia. I try to live up to the first precept of the Vietnamese Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh: "Be open to receive others' viewpoints to learn throughout your entire life."

In this article, I note the heart of Christianity, my initial religion, and examine what I have learned from Judaism, Islam, primal religions, Taoism, Buddhism, and humanism, focusing on two features distinctive to each religion (though not unparalleled in others).

Christianity

Christianity is my starter and bedrock religion. It puts a special emphasis on love and forgiveness. The Hebrew Bible contains commands to love God and neighbor, but Christianity gathers them in one spot and makes everything scriptural (law and prophets) subordinate to them. According to Paul the apostle, love fulfills the Law. "God is love" appears in 1 John, and the Sermon on the Mount contains the unique imperative "love your enemy."

Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr calls forgiveness the crown of Christian ethics.² Jesus says we should forgive without limit (seventy times seven), and he is portrayed on the cross asking God to forgive those who have crucified him. Jesus was a resister to the Roman empire, which executed

him with the indictment sign reading "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews."

Judaism

Jesus and his disciples spirited a reform movement within Judaism, and even after the split between Judaism and Christianity, Christians retained the Hebrew Bible as their Old Testament scripture, taking as their own the saga of a God who leads his people from slavery in Egypt to freedom in a promised land followed by kingship, exile, and return.

Prophets confronted kings who broke God's Law, and they excoriated the rich for trampling the poor. They contended that God was not hoodwinked by ritual piety. "Take away from me the noise of your solemn assemblies. To the melodies of your harps I will not listen," says God through the voice of Isaiah. "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream," Amos exclaims.

A commitment to social justice and *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) is the most salient point I learn from Judaism followed by open-mindedness to fresh thoughts. Jewish philosopher Martin Buber writes:

Religion as risk is the nourishing stream of the arteries.

Religion which believes in religion is the vein's blood, which ceases to circulate.

Revelation will tolerate no perfect tense, but man with the arts of his craze for security props it up to perfectness.³

Islam

Muhammad did not seek to proclaim a new god, but to bring the God of Jews and Christians to the Arabs. He called God *Al-Lah*, the God, the one and only God. Although some twisted forms of Islam today are intolerant, promoting an archaic civil religion that demonizes the West,⁴ it was quite the opposite in the original Islam of Muhammad. He said there was no need to convert "people of the book," Jews and Christians who believe in the same God as Muslims.⁵

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Islam honors all of the prophets, especially the major prophets Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. There is a chapter in the Qur'an devoted to Jesus' mother. One of Muhammad's uncles was a Christian, and several Jewish tribes were part of the *umma*, the political community that Muhammad headed. While one Jewish tribe betrayed him by siding with his enemies, it was exterminated for treason, not because it was Jewish; the other loyal Jewish tribes were fully accepted.

Islam is summarized in its five pillars. The first pillar is belief that there is no God but Allah and that Muhammad is his spokesperson; the second is public prayer five times a day; the third is *zakat*, charity for the poor; the fourth is fasting during Ramadan; the fifth is the *hajj*, the recommended pilgrimage to Mecca.

I am most impressed with Islam seeing God as benevolent and requiring us to be kind as well. Many religions talk about being good to the poor but find ways to avoid living it out. Christians quote Jesus' saying, "the poor are always with you" without its sequel "do good to them whenever you can." In some Islamic countries, *zakat* is a wealth tax of 2.5 percent.

Primal Religions

Primal religions encompass a great variety of indigenous or ancient-derived nature-oriented approaches.⁶ I will single out three examples: the sustainable way of life of African Bushmen, ManKind Project use of American Indian rituals, and celebrating winter solstice with gratitude for the sun's abiding and increasing warmth and light.

Some of the earliest people we know about, as represented by today's Bushmen in the Kalahari Desert,⁷ were gentle and egalitarian. War had not yet been invented, and older children taught younger ones to resolve conflicts. When an antelope was killed and brought back to the clan, everyone got a relatively equal portion to eat. When the antelope and tubers in an area thinned, the nomadic clansmen would move on, and nature recovered.

American Indians identify with natural elements, seeing the water in the rivers coursing through themselves and respecting earth as their mother. On weekends of the ManKind Project (mkp.org), my buddies and I live in the woods, call in energy from seven directions,^a and have sweat lodges based on Indian models (with permission from Indians). In the purification and renewal ceremony in the sweat lodge, we say "all my relations" to affirm our connection to all living beings, especially all humans and animals.

a. Native Americans recognize seven directions: north, south, east, west, up, down, and inside.

Honoring the cycle of the seasons observed by our ancestors, local Unitarian churches host an annual inter-faith winter solstice singing ritual celebrating rootedness in earth and welcoming light returning as well as anticipating Persephone's release from the underworld to bring back spring.

Coupled with the environmental movement and efforts to reduce global warming and save rain forests, from these three forms of primal religion I learn closeness to nature and protection for Mother Earth.

Taoism

In China, Confucianism reinforced a system of subordinations: son to father, younger brother to older, wife to husband, youngsters to elders, and all subjects to the emperor. As presented in the Tao Te Ching, a collection of eighty-one poems from around 500 BCE, Taoism repudiates such artificial society in favor of imitating nature.

The Tao is the source of all that is. Everything comes from it and returns to it. It is an unnamable mystery no one can pinpoint, yet prolific in its progeny. It accomplishes great things but does not seek recognition. The Tao is like a river running naturally to the sea.

Those who follow Tao act as if not acting, effortlessly. They do not compete or contend. No fight: no blame. They go through life like empty boats; if someone collides with them, there is no one to curse. They do not puff themselves up. If someone can burst your bubble, you must have been inflated. Those who follow the Tao take from the rich and give to the poor; they know when enough is enough and when to lead from behind, not seeking to force and control but to model and inspire. They empty their minds of desires and thoughts and ambitions and thus find inner peace. They humbly polish their mirrors so those who meet them do not see them but see themselves in their light.

The hero of the Tao Te Ching is water. Water is the weakest thing in the world; when you step in water, it steps aside. Yet water penetrates rocks, freezes, breaks them apart. The rigid branch breaks in the wind; the flexible branch bends. Those who follow the Tao practice inner peace and find strength in apparent weakness.

Buddhism

Siddhartha Gautama is called Buddha, the Enlightened One. Contrary to the Hindu endorsement of ordinary life with mystical religion as a supplement late in life, the Buddha abandoned family and job in a quest for insight and organized followers as world-renouncing monks and nuns. Buddha taught that (1) life is full of suffering, (2)

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the source of suffering is craving, (3) the solution is non-striving, and (4) to mitigate suffering there is an Eightfold Path running from right knowledge and intent to right mindfulness and meditation.⁸ When we refuse to accept life with its limitations, when we cling to others, when we seek to get ahead, when we try to shore ourselves up by accumulating things, we increase our suffering. When we embrace death and illness and loss and simplicity and live in the present and pay attention to what happens, stopping to smell the roses, life blossoms before our eyes. Giving up the illusion of a separated self, we realize that we are connected to everything that is and feel compassion for all living beings.

Buddhism and Taoism combine in Ch'an Buddhism in China, which becomes Zen Buddhism in Japan. I especially like Zen stories, collected in "101 Zen Stories" online.⁹ There is a story of the professor so full of his knowledge that he has no room in his cup for further learning. There is the nun who funnels incense smoke so others cannot have it and blackens the nose of her Buddha statue. There is a Zen master, hearing what Jesus says about not worrying but trusting like the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, remarking that the one who speaks thus is not far from Buddhahood.


I often visit a Zen Buddhist sangha (community) that hosts a half hour of seated meditation and a half hour of walking meditation plus conversation. Each time, there is a reading aloud of the precepts of Thich Nhat Hanh, author of *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, whose teachings encourage us to be with those who suffer, help those in need, live simply, and work to prevent war. Engaged Buddhism is expressed in compassion and paying attention.

Humanism

Humanism can mean different things in different contexts. For me and many others, humanism is an outlook or system of thought attaching prime importance to human rather than divine or supernatural matters. Humanist beliefs stress the potential value and goodness of human beings, emphasize common human needs, and seek solely rational ways of solving human problems. Religious humanism is a classic example of a nontheistic religion.¹⁰

Our humanism goes all the way back to the ancient Greeks with Protagoras saying, "the human is the measure of all things" and Socrates saying, "the unexamined life is not worth living." From the Greeks we get our basic ethics: classical virtues of justice, wisdom, courage, and moderation. Open dialogue about ideas that matter as a basis for human community is a legacy of ancient Greece, though the leisure for men to philosophize rested on the work of wives and slaves, and while our science has progressed immensely since then, the Greeks pioneered a skeptical and scientific attitude.

Humanist sociologists apply their values not only to describe society but also to change it for the benefit of humanity. I joined the Association for Humanist Sociology and became its newsletter editor. I was not put off by the atheism of many of my colleagues, and colleagues found the grounding of my commitment to social justice and ecological responsibility in religion unusual but worth considering. After all, religion is important to lots of groups treated unjustly, and Martin Luther King Jr. is a hero to many humanists, who may share his vision of a beloved community in and after the struggle for civil rights and anti-racism.^b

In conclusion, I began with a Christianity centered on love and forgiveness. I have learned a lot from other religions. I learned social justice and *tikkun olam* from Judaism, kindness and concern for the poor from Islam, closeness to nature and protection for Mother Earth from primal religions, inner peace and flexible strength from Taoism, compassion and paying attention from Buddhism, and freedom of thought and building a human community from humanism. I celebrate all of these features in their unity and diversity.¹¹ 

Endnotes

1. The results of my research on this topic can be found in *The New Religious Consciousness*, Charles Y. Glock and Robert N. Bellah, eds. (University of California Press, 1976).
2. Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (Meridian Books, 1956), 201.
3. Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man* (Beacon Press, 1955), 18.
4. For types of Islamic civil religion, see Jimbo Wolfe, *Jamboroo* (self-published, 2017), 21–27.
5. See Emory C. Bogel, *Islam* (University of Texas Press, 1998), 18. Two of Muhammad's wives were Jews.
6. Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (HarperCollins, 1991), chapter 9.
7. See Linda Schneider and Arnold Silverman, *Global Sociology* (McGraw-Hill, 2012), chapter 3, entitled "Bushmen of Namibia." See also E. M. Thomas, *The Harmless People* (Knopf, 1959). Of course, not all hunting and gathering societies were as peaceful as the Bushmen.
8. Smith, 99–112.
9. 101 Zen Stories, nkanaev.github.io/zen101/en.
10. This description blends several definitions I found online.
11. I wish to thank David A. Stout for his editorial help with this article.



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b. I met Dr. King in 1967 while working for an inner city Black Baptist church in Cleveland.