

Religious Diversity, Interreligious Dialogue, and Alternative Religious Futures: Challenges for an Interdependent World*

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Abstract

This article covers many topics relating to the development and evolution of religions, their interactions (both negative and positive) with each other, and the challenge of finding unity amidst the diversity of the world's many cultural and religious traditions in our increasingly interdependent world. Topics covered include: religion as a force for war or peace; a spectrum of possible perspectives within all religions; changing male-female images of divinity in different religions over time; mythology as a link between our outer lives in the world and the inner life of the spirit; principles for conducting interreligious dialogue, areas of common ground between religions; seven alternative scenarios on the future of religions and their interactions; and final conclusions.

Keywords: introduction to religion, war and peace, interreligious dialogue

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"Our generation has arrived at the threshold of a new era in human history: the birth of a global community. Modern communications, trade and international relations, as well as the security and environmental dilemmas we all face, make us increasingly interdependent. No one can live in isolation. Thus, whether we like it or not, our vast and diverse human family must finally learn to live together. Individually and collectively we must assume a greater sense of Universal Responsibility."

—The XIVth Dalai Lama

*"No peace among the nations without peace among the religions.
No peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions."*

—Hans Kuhn

Introduction to Religion, War and Peace, and Interreligious Dialogue

While much has been written about violence and conflict in the name, at least, of religion (Appleby, 1994; Armstrong, 2001a; Galtung, 1990; Lawrence, 1995; Reychler, 1997)—including the events of September 11th, 2001, it is important to note that much positive interreligious, interfaith, and intermonastic dialogue is also occurring between peoples from different spiritual-religious traditions in the world. It is not an accident that as the world becomes more interdependent, some people feel threatened, while other people from different religions reach out to try to understand each other more and to find areas of common ground. Various interfaith organizations exist, which have issued declarations on common principles for an interdependent world. One positive effect of the events of September 11, 2001, is that increasing interfaith dialogue is also occurring—a positive development, along (unfortunately) with increasing acts of violence, often against innocent people, as well. Nonetheless, interfaith dialogue is becoming a true social movement by forward thinking people from around the world who realize that it is an essential component for a more peaceful and increasingly interdependent world.

Spectrum of Possible Perspectives within any Religion

Within any religion, a spectrum of possible perspectives is possible, including: mysticism, organized religion, and fundamentalism or extremism (Smoker & Groff, 1996) All religions in recorded history began by someone having mystical experiences defined as "a direct experience of ultimate reality" (Carmody & Carmody, 1996) This experience transcends the five senses and learning from one's culture, including one's religion, and provides a direct experience of the presence of God or spirit in some way. Such individuals later try to share their experiences—and the wisdom about life and its meaning and purpose that they have gained from these experiences—with others, who eventually suggest the formation of a religion around the teachings of that enlightened person. Once religions are formed, the teachings of the "founder" (who usually did not start out to found a new religion) become the foundation of scripture

for that religion, and these teachings are passed down from one generation to the next and become part of social learning and culture. When these teachings are dogmatically interpreted by others later or when they lead to extremist behavior, such as violence against others in the name of their religion, they can be called by some "fundamentalist" or especially "extremist" versions of that religion. People sometimes call the mystical aspects of all religions their "esoteric" part (which not everyone is spiritually ready for), with the socially learned part (that gives guidance for everyday life) the "exoteric" part of any religion. In the extreme, learned religion can become dogmatic. It is important to note that ALL religions can potentially contain all of these perspectives (Smoker & Groff, 1996).

MYSTICAL/SPIRITUAL TRADITIONS	ORGANIZED RELIGION AND BELIEFS	FUNDAMENTALISM OR EXTREMISM
(Direct Inner experience)	(Part of Social learning and culture)	My dogma/beliefs are right and yours are wrong; also social learning and culture)

Figure 1. Spectrum of potential perspectives within any religion

While there are no doubt exceptions, in general mystics from all religions can recognize and respect each other, since they are coming from a common focus on a direct inner experience of ultimate reality, spirit, or the divine, not from differences in socially-learned beliefs, which organized religions have often stressed more—especially in the West. Nonetheless, there is some debate about whether mystics from all religions are experiencing the SAME thing or whether their mystical experiences are mediated through their cultures or learning (Carmody & Carmody, 1996) To the extent that more literal, fundamentalist, or extremist versions of any religion tend to believe that only one interpretation of their scriptures is true, which is THEIR interpretation, this view tends to omit the possibility of truth coming from other religions, or indeed, from other perspectives within their own religion. This has led some people to claim that the world needs not only interreligious dialogue, but also intrareligious dialogue—between different sects and denominations within the same religion.

How Different Denominations Emerge within the Same Religion over Time

As noted above, new religions emerge around the teachings of someone who has had direct mystical experiences of the divine, which they subsequently share with others. These teachings become the foundation for the scriptures or "holy books" of that religion. Over time, others in that religious tradition (who may not have had the same mystical experiences as the original founder) may seek to interpret the meaning of those original teachings and scriptures in new or different ways, or stress different

aspects of the original teachings as most important, which can eventually lead to splits in a religion.

As the intercultural communication field notes, there is a difference between factually describing behavior/words vs. interpreting the meaning of or reasons for behavior/words versus evaluating or judging the behavior/words of someone from another culture or religion as good or bad—including their scriptures (see, for example, Groff, 2005a, Part I). In short, different people can interpret the same behavior, words, or in this case scriptures, differently, finding different meanings in the same scriptural texts.

If these interpretations differ too much from each other over time, a split can occur within a religious tradition leading to the emergence of different denominations within that religion—something that has often happened to religions that have existed for any length of time. Times also change and religions, like all aspects of life, must respond to a changing world. Two issues today that are facing religions worldwide, and could threaten to split some religions (or some denominations within a given religion) even further—if not worked out through dialogue and understanding—concern the role of both women and gays in congregations and especially the priesthood of different religions worldwide. These are obviously unresolved issues that are unfolding.

Evolution in Images of Divinity within Different Religions

It is interesting that religions have evolved over time in terms of how they portray divinity. One can look at the following broad periods in the evolution of religions—all of which forms of religion and spirituality still coexist in different parts of the world today. These periods, and the forms in which divinity was or is portrayed in each, follow¹.

Prehistory: The earth-based religions: shamanism and the goddess

Paleolithic era, old stone age, or hunting and gathering era

During this period of prehistory—variously called the Paleolithic, Hunting and Gathering period, or Old Stone Age—there were not yet any settled communities or writing, so spiritual traditions were passed down orally. Shamanism was the dominant form of spirituality. Certain persons were called to be shamans, who were able to go into altered states of consciousness, where they could contact their ancestors and gain wisdom to bring back to their people. The earth was also seen as the great mother goddess, and everything in nature was seen to be alive with nature spirits in everything. Shamanism exists today in areas of Siberia, Korea, Africa, etc. Native American traditions, as well as Shintoism in Japan, all share certain characteristics in common with such earth-based religions that see everything in nature as being alive and inspirited. Indigenous peoples also had, and still have, different animals as spirit guides for each individual, believing animals can be our teachers. Spiritual wisdom was passed down through oral traditions and via cave and rock paintings and drawings.

Neolithic era: New stone age, and the beginning of settled agricultural communities and villages

The first major technological revolution for early humans was the invention or discovery of agriculture, i.e., the realization that one could plant a seed and it would grow, enabling people for the first time to create settled agricultural communities and villages. The Goddess form of religion arose, in which the fertility of the earth was seen as parallel to the fertility of the female, leading to the veneration of the goddess as the dominant image of divinity, since they all birthed or brought forth new life. Various goddesses arose, were venerated, and became the object of different artifacts found later in places like Crete, Malta, and Old Europe, as documented in the work of Anthropologist Marija Gimbutas (Gimbutas, 1989, 1991, & 2003). There was also a certain mystery associated with the birth of new life from the earth and from women, since the role of men in procreation may not yet have been known (Stone, 1978). Spiritual wisdom was passed down orally and via temple drawings and artifacts.

Recorded history: The rise of the "great religions" of ancient and modern times

The rise of ancient civilizations and the great religions of antiquity

Following the rise of settled agricultural villages and smaller communities, the great civilizations of antiquity arose (sometimes rather quickly, as in Ancient Egypt), including in Sumer/ Mesopotamia (now Iraq), Ancient Egypt, the Indus Valley (now NW India/Pakistan), Ancient China, and later Mesoamerica and Peru. These civilizations emerged largely around great waterways or rivers, and included the rise of ancient empires, the conquering of other peoples who were often made into slaves (with their surplus production, beyond what was needed for their survival, taken over by the conquering power). These civilizations also saw the rise of writing (partly to keep track of the harvest), astronomy (the study of the stars as these indicated changing seasons and one's place in the cosmos), great engineering projects, and religions.

These religions included both male gods and female goddesses, showing an honoring of both the male and female principle in their images of divinity, along with their offspring, creating a trinity principle. Behind a diversity of gods and goddesses, there was also usually the idea emerging or implicit of One God, with the different gods and goddesses representing, in effect, different attributes of the One God. In Ancient Egypt, for example, every temple had its own god and goddess and their offspring or child, showing equality between the male and female principle, as well as an honoring of the trinity principle. In the Indus Valley and later in India, one has more a male god (or his later incarnation) along with his female consort (not quite as equal) (see also Dumézil, 1952, and 1986, on the Trinitarian nature of Indo-Aryan religions and cultures, for an interesting comparison).

Other religions also emerged later in the East out of Hinduism, including Buddhism (which later spread over most of Asia, and has now spread to North America and Europe), Jainism, and Sikhism, while in China Confucianism and Taoism emerged.

The real transition from veneration of gods and goddesses to just gods seems to have occurred, as one example, in Ancient Greece, where over time the relative equality between gods and goddesses in temples gave way to dominance of the male god over the receding female goddess, which then paved the way for the emergence of Western religions.

The rise of western civilizations and western monotheistic "religions of the book"

Even later, one had the rise of Western civilizations and then religions, including Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Bahai. These religions all emerged out of the Middle East and are all "religions of the book," based on the scriptures or original teachings of their founders, and based on a monotheistic belief in One God, who came to be portrayed as "God the Father." Worship shifted from prayers and offerings to different gods and/or goddesses to one unified God—who was omnipotent (all powerful), omnipresent (an immediate presence in all things), and omniscient (all knowing), and behind all creation (Meagher, O'Brien, & Aherne, Eds., 1979, pp. 2600-2601). This unified view of divinity was a very significant development in acknowledging the oneness of all creation and oneness behind this creation. Nonetheless, these monotheistic religions, honoring One God, came to portray that God as "God the Father," which coincided with the emergence of patriarchal social values and institutions in Western civilization².

The post modern age today

The patriarchal values and institutions, that have characterized the emergence of Western civilizations and religions (above), are only now—in the late 20th and early 21st century—beginning to break down, to be replaced slowly by a greater equality between men and women in the priesthood and clergy of various religions (an unfolding process which is not complete). While some followers of the goddess religion have seen the reemergence of the goddess being tied today, as it was in the past, to a real partnership between men and women as their vision for the future (see, for example, Eisler, 1987), others have seen divinity increasingly portrayed as the divine union of male and female (again the theme of the unity and transcendence of opposites as a common key to the spiritual journey). The latter perspective honors both the male and female principle as coequal parts of a greater whole—a divinity that is ultimately beyond all efforts by humans to describe this greatest of all mysteries of life.

Humans will continue to seek different ways to describe the indescribable, i.e., divinity, and one modern effort to honor both the male and female principles (representing all opposites) behind creation is "Dear Mother/Father God" (as used in the Church of Religious Science). This is one more effort—however incomplete—to describe a presence and mystery that transcends all polar opposites and is basically indescribable. Ultimately, this presence can only be experienced directly.

In summary, people have continued to describe divinity as either male or female or both, at different times and in different locations, and this imagery has no doubt reflected deeper values existing in the culture of the time, including a desire by people to have some kind of personal relationship with divinity through imagery that they can more easily relate to.

Joseph Campbell and "The Power of Mythology": To Link Our Outer Lives in the World with the Inner Life of the Spirit

(See Campbell, 1949, 1974, 1988 & 1990; Lobell, Larsen & Larsen, 1993)

Joseph Campbell devoted his life to the study of the different mythologies of the world, finding what he called a common monomyth in all cultures, which he called the "hero's journey." (Campbell, 1988 & 1949 earlier.) Not everyone is ready to immediately delve into an inner spiritual life directly, so mythology can act as a bridge or link between one's outer life in the world and the inner life of the spirit. Mythology also provides, via mythological stories, a different allegorical or metaphorical kind of truth, versus a factual type of truth. Campbell also noted that Western culture, with its scientific/ rational focus, had lost touch with this mythological type of truth and needed to reconnect with it, if people were to be able to find deeper meaning and guidance for life that mythological types of stories can provide.

The hero's journey typically has three to five stages (sometimes expanded to twelve stages) that one passes through. (Sometimes the first three stages of the five-stage version of the journey are combined into one stage.) These five stages are: 1) First, one must have nothing holding one to one's current situation in life. In short, one must be restless and seeking something different in life, which requires leaving the comfort, familiarity, and security of one's current situation, to embark on a journey of discovery to find some deeper truth about one's life. 2) One must then find a mentor or teacher to help guide one on one's journey as one leaves one's familiar life behind. 3) One must then find a jumping off place into the unknown—often with the help of one's mentor. 4) One must then be tested in the unknown, to find out who one really is. 5) Finally, if one is able to pass the tests in the unknown, then one can return home to share the wisdom one had gained on one's journey with others.

While Campbell saw a common monomyth, which he called the "hero's journey," in the myths of all cultures, he also saw these myths evolving through several significant, different periods, which correlate with the periods covered in the previous section on "Evolution in Images of Divinity Within Different Religions." These periods, and the nature of the mythologies that emerged in each period, include:

Hunting and Gathering Period: The Way of the Animal Powers

Early Agricultural Period: The Way of the Seeded Earth

Rise of Ancient Civilizations: The Way of the Celestial Lights.

Rise of Western Civilization and the Modern World: The Way of Man (including losing touch with the power of myth as science and rationality took over).

While the hero's journey had similar characteristics in all cultures--in terms of the stages one goes through, there was one significant difference between the hero's journey in Eastern vs. Western cultures. In the East, it is common for an apprentice to find a master or guru and follow in the steps and pathway established by one's teacher. In the West, because a strong sense of individual identity is more common, each person typically finds a jumping off place into the unknown at a place and time of his/her own choosing. This Western path is best represented by King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, where each knight enters the forest or unknown at a place of his own choosing, thus having to find his own pathway into the unknown, where he will be tested (Campbell, 1969, 1974 & 1988)³.

Campbell notes that the hero's journey myth must be adapted and updated for each new age, so the myth remains relevant to the times and to people's lives. George

Lucas, who produced the *Star Wars Trilogy* and *Prequel*, was good friends with Joseph Campbell and based his script on the hero's journey, making *Star Wars* one attempt to create a mythology for the space age. Other recent blockbuster books and films involving a hero's journey type of story (whether influenced by Campbell or not) include *The Lord of the Rings*, and the *Harry Potter* books and films, as well as much science fiction⁴.

Unfortunately, violence has not been eliminated from the human saga in space either (as seen in *Star Wars*), indicating that somehow we need to find other kinds of hero figures beyond just the military hero or warrior—if we want to find alternatives to violence in the future⁵. It is important to remember that we can also battle poverty, injustice, oppression, unequal opportunity, senseless violence, AND one's own inner demons, so that one can also develop inner mastery. In short, there are many noble battles to engage in that do not require physical violence and the killing of innocent life. With the destructive power that exists with modern weapons systems of all types—nuclear, chemical, biological, and conventional—it is imperative that we humans find other ways to resolve our conflicts, short of violence, which if used, could destroy us all. This is one of the greatest challenges facing the future evolution of humanity today.

Principles of interreligious dialogue as an alternative to debate

Today, as all the cultures and religions of the world increasingly interact, interreligious dialogue is emerging as an important global movement to bring people together from different spiritual-religious traditions. A number of principles have also emerged concerning how to positively conduct interreligious/interfaith dialogue (in contrast with debate), which include (see Beversluis, 2000⁶; Groff, 2007 and earlier articles by L. Groff in Bibliography that deal with religion):

Be open and willing to listen without judgment to the spiritual journeys, views, and experiences of people from other religions as opposed to debating which religion is right or wrong, which inhibits real listening, learning, and dialogue in such situations.

Do not try to convert anyone from his or her religion to yours. This goes against the whole importance of respecting people's diverse religions and being open to learning about them.

Do not try to create one world religion, but respect the diversity of traditions.

Let people from each religion speak for themselves, from their own experience, about what it means to practice that religion.

Allow the possibility of some common spirituality that underlies all the diversity of religions through which that spirituality expresses itself.

Realize that one can enrich one's own spiritual-religious life by being open to learning from other traditions without having to leave one's own tradition.

Realize that human beings—throughout prerecorded time and recorded history, in different cultures and civilizations around the world—have sought to reflect on the deeper meaning and purpose of life, to honor the unknown and mysterious, and to connect to something spiritual and eternal beyond this transient material world and life. This search for deeper meaning and connection unites us all.

The key difference between dialogue versus debate is that in dialogue (between individuals from different religions, cultures, or civilizations), one focuses on listening and creating understanding of, and respect for, the other person's experiences and perspectives, though not necessarily agreement, while in debate, one tries to make the other person wrong so that you can be right, one seldom listens, and one seeks to win at the other party's expense.

In an interdependent world, with the destructive powers of modern weaponry and technology, it is clear that dialogue, listening, and nonviolence are the only sane responses for dealing with diversity. Dialogue also allows for common ground, as well as love and respect, to emerge, along with a greater appreciation of differences, including what each culture, civilization, and religion can uniquely contribute to the world, for the benefit of all humanity today. The current state of an ongoing battle between terrorists and antiterrorists (however defined) indicates just how far we still need to come, if this goal is ever to be achieved.

Finding areas of common ground amongst the world's religions

Through interfaith dialogue, people from different religions are discovering that the world's religions do indeed share certain areas of common interest. This includes support for the golden rule (to treat others as one would like to be treated), peace (which all religions say they support), finding the light within, and love/compassion as a key to the spiritual life⁷. Many interfaith organizations have also emerged, including the Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions (where modern interreligious dialogue emerged in 1893), the World Conference on Religion and Peace, United Religions Initiative, and several UNESCO Conferences on "Contributions of Religions to a Culture of Peace." These interfaith organizations have all issued declarations of common principles that their members, from all different religions, support. Some have also hypothesized that we are entering a Second Axial Age of the world's religions, where when people from different religions meet, they focus more on finding areas of common ground than on stressing their differences, as in the First Axial Age⁸.

Seven scenarios on alternative futures of religions and their interactions

Having looked at aspects of the past and present evolution of religions and their interactions with each other, what will the future of religions look like in our increasingly interdependent world? Seven different scenarios follow, which outline different initial conditions and assumptions that, if they occurred, could each lead to a different sequence of events as a result.

Fear reigns, and conflict, violence, and warfare dominate the world

This worst case scenario is premised on fear continuing to dominate the world, which political actors and leaders perpetuate and use to keep the world divided and at war with each other. This includes using fear of people's religious differences to divide people, with certain religious leaders reinforcing this trend. This creates continuing tension and the unhealthy siphoning of the resources of nations and people from life-enhancing activities to military purposes and warfare. The possibility of religious ter-

rorists getting nuclear weapons just compounds the dangers and the threat to peace. The increasing competition for world oil, whose global production will peak in coming years, despite increasing demand for oil from countries like China and India, keeps outside great powers intervening in the Middle East, which remains a danger zone for the world. The ongoing instability and violence in countries like Afghanistan and Iraq (which are in potential, if not actual internal civil wars), and Lebanon, along with outside intervention or even invasion of such countries, makes these countries continuing breeding grounds for terrorists, which both keeps foreign troops there, as well as increases demands of local populations for those foreign troops to leave, since their presence does not seem to have notably improved the everyday lives and security of people or their opportunities for development. The unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict also keeps tensions high, which often erupt into violence and incursions into each other's territories. Religion gives people something to hold onto in very difficult times, but does not help bring people together, and indeed is used as a justification to continue violence and bloodshed between peoples. Tension between Sunni and Shiite Muslims continues, as well as within each group, and between Israel and its Arab, predominantly Muslim neighbors. More relatively 'stable' Middle Eastern countries, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan, also remain targets of Islamist terrorists, such as Bin Laden and his offshoots, since they are perceived as cooperating with Western powers. Recent efforts for greater democracy in countries like Pakistan, which has nuclear weapons, raise other issues of safely transforming governments. The dangers of World War III emerging in the Middle East remain an ongoing threat to world peace.

An ongoing battle between the forces of moderation versus extremism as the world becomes more interdependent

This more probable, mixed case scenario—at least in the shorter run—is premised on a continuing battle between the forces of moderation versus extremism in the world, with each side using religion to justify—rightly or wrongly—their positions. Underlying extremist views is fear of a changing world, which their followers do not relate to or see how they will fit into this world. These fears exist in developed, as well as developing countries. Real global education and development efforts become necessary to turn the tide of extremism and cynicism into more moderate views, where people everywhere are able to see that an increasingly interdependent world can indeed improve their everyday lives, not just the lives of elites in their countries, or corporate coffers. People then begin to see that interacting with peoples from diverse cultures and religions can be a positive experience that enriches their lives, while still maintaining their own spiritual-religious traditions and even enriching them through dialogue with peoples of other traditions. Before people can really be open to intercultural and interreligious dialogue, however, they must see that their lives will benefit from this. Ongoing global poverty and lack of education and job opportunities continues to provide breeding grounds for terrorists. Thus educational and antipoverty, development efforts must go hand in hand with interfaith efforts. This transition will take real commitment, effort, and time, by many forward-thinking people, governments, NGOs, and international organizations. The interfaith dialogue movement is

still relatively young and many people are not aware of its existence, let alone experiencing its benefits. To bring the world together in the 21st century, interfaith efforts must be combined with educational efforts and development programs, so that people can experience directly the benefits of an interdependent world in their own lives.

Interreligious dialogue and development efforts create greater understanding between the world's diverse peoples

This better case scenario is premised on increasing numbers of political and religious leaders and people around the world realizing that increasing interdependence requires that we all reframe how we relate to each other, including to the diversity of the world's cultures and religions, and that such intercultural and interreligious efforts must be linked with development efforts and education—in both developing and developed countries. Cultural and religious education helps people realize that humans everywhere have common spiritual aspirations and needs for meaning, even though many different paths exist for expressing those needs. Efforts are made to recognize where people of different faiths have areas of common ground, based on their different scriptures, including support for the golden rule (to treat others as one would like to be treated), peace (which religions all say they support), seeing the spiritual light potentially awakened in all people, plus love and compassion (which connect all people and are at the core of all religions). People begin to realize that these common principles, in all religions, need to be applied not only to their own cultural or religious group, but also to humanity as a whole⁹.

More moderate religious leaders gain the upper hand and help people work through their fears about people from different cultures and faiths. Interreligious dialogue takes off as a necessary global movement that can create greater understanding and bring people closer together, while still honoring their diverse cultural and spiritual-religious paths. People discover that they can enrich their own spiritual-religious traditions via interacting with peoples from other traditions. It becomes increasingly unacceptable for political leaders to go to war or initiate conflict in the name of religion. This is reinforced by public pressure on governments in different countries to create Departments/ Ministries of Peace to counter excess influence both of the "military-industrial complex" (which former U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower warned about) and of Departments/ Ministries of War and Defense on the foreign policies of countries¹⁰. Global interdependence, based on both the unity and diversity of the world's cultures and religions, becomes an accepted framework for living life in the 21st century.

This worldview is coupled with increasing assistance by more developed countries and international organizations to help developing countries meet the needs of their own populations—including for education, jobs, development, and even greater democratic participation within their own societies, where people begin to see real hope for their futures, instead of dangers, in an interdependent world. Domestic needs of people in more developed countries are also addressed, where outsourcing of jobs by corporations is squeezing the middle class—the cornerstone of a democracy. Reducing war and military budgets of both developed and developing countries helps free up funds and resources to aid this process. Excessive global competition for

Middle Eastern oil—which furthers outside intervention in such countries, destabilizing their societies—is alleviated by a global commitment to develop alternative, especially renewable, energy resources globally, based on local resources, which creates new industries and jobs for people. As people's opportunities in life increase, so does their hope for the future, and with that their openness to dialogue with people of other cultures and religions on how we might all help each other in creating a better world future for current and future generations.

Meditation, prayer, and spirituality become accepted globally as important components of inner peace and health and healing

This better case scenario is premised on the continuing growth of a trend, already occurring, which recognizes the important role of meditation, prayer, and spirituality in the health and healing of individuals, organizations, and even nations¹¹. (Inayatullah, n.d.) Evidence for this trend, and interest in the role of spirituality in health and healing, can be seen in various ways. The U.S. Government's National Institute of Health (NIH) has established a section on Alternative Healing. The Institute of Noetic Sciences (IONS) in San Francisco has published an edited book on *Consciousness and Healing* (Schlitz, Amorox, & Micozzi, Eds., 2004). Larry Dossey, a medical doctor from Houston, Texas, has written books on the power of prayer, and non-local connections between people, in healing (Dossey, 1997a, 1997b & 2000), though a later study called this relationship into question. Daniel Benor, M.D., has a book summarizing research in many areas on the relationship between spirituality, religion, and healing.¹² (Benor, 2006, especially Chapter 12.)

There is also a great interest amongst the general public in alternative, holistic, preventative approaches to health and healing, influencing hospitals to add such non-Western approaches to their traditionally Western medical models—especially in the treatment of life-threatening diseases, such as cancer. Such "integral medicine" thus combines the best of Eastern and Western medical models and practices. See also the extensive work of Ken Wilber on creating an integral model that can be applied to any subject area, including "integral medicine" (Wilber, 2003-2004). Tied to this is also the emergence of energy medicine (Benor, 2004; Institute of Noetic Sciences, 2006). When one sees everything as matter, things are seen as separate from each other, but as Albert Einstein noted, matter is just concentrated energy ($E=MC^2$), and when one sees the body as an energy flow system, then everything is interconnected, not separate, leading to different approaches for treating the body, such as acupuncture. The spiritual/mystical path is also one of perceiving and experiencing the interconnectedness of all life and creation.

This scenario treats the whole person and sees people taking increasing responsibility for their own health and healing, while demanding more integral medical models from doctors and hospitals. This helps cut spiraling medical costs, making such approaches also popular with hospitals. This trend recognizes the positive role of spirituality and finding inner peace in people's busy lives, and provides a positive basis for bringing people together across all their diverse cultural-religious traditions.

Humanity discovers the unity and oneness behind all seeming opposites as the basic mystical path in all religions

This longer term, best case scenario is premised on people across all spiritual-religious traditions beginning to genuinely recognize that the deepest spiritual path within all religions is the one that surrenders to, honors, and finally experiences the true interdependence and oneness of ALL creation—what some have called "cosmic consciousness," (Bucke, 1901) with all creation being an emanation from the same ultimate source—however one labels that source. This is really the mystical path within all spiritual-religious traditions, which is also how all religions began, i.e., by someone who had direct inner, spiritual/ mystical experiences (beyond the normal five senses) of this basic oneness, which transformed their life, leading them to share their experiences, as best they could, with others, who often then sought to form a new religion based on the teachings of that enlightened spiritual teacher.

That most religions, at their spiritual core, honor this basic, fundamental oneness behind all the outer seeming diversity and opposites of this material world, can be seen in the following symbols from different world religions, each representing, in different ways, this deeper unity and transcendence of opposites (Smoker & Groff, 1996, pp. 20-22).

These symbols follow in Figure 2, along with a brief interpretation of their meaning.

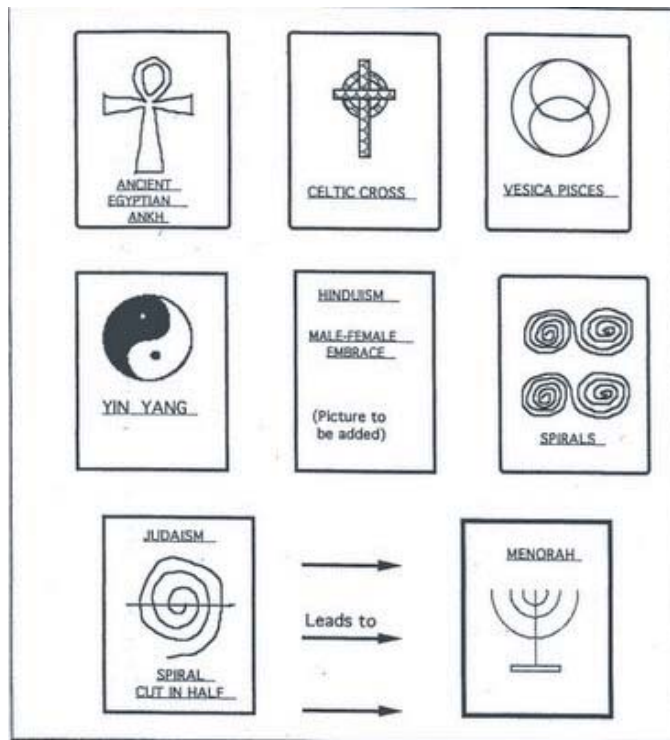


Figure 2. Spiritual symbols from different spiritual-religious traditions each representing the unity or transcendence of opposites as the deepest spiritual path

Ancient Egyptian ankh. Represents the path to immortality and eternal life via the unity of opposites, symbolized by the two halves of the Ankh: the top, circular part representing the female principle, and the bottom straight part representing the male principle. Also represents the union of Lower Egypt (Delta in the north) and Upper Egypt (rest of the Nile River that flows north).

Celtic Cross. Combines the traditional Christian Cross (representing Western culture based on the male principle) with the circle around it (representing the female principle and the old goddess religion). It appeared during the transition from goddess worship to Christianity, and still exists in "Celtic fringe" areas of the United Kingdom.

Vesica Pisces (pre-Christian, Celtic symbol). Represents the unity (outer circle) of opposites, represented by two inner circles, which overlap, showing the interdependence of the spiritual (upper circle) and material (lower circle) realms. In the middle, where these two circles overlap, is a fish shape—which became a symbol for Christianity. Symbol occurs at ancient Chalice Well in Glastonbury, England—the mythical "Isle of Avalon" of King Arthur legend—, which has provided healing waters at a constant temperature for 5,000 years, according to tradition.

Yin Yang symbol (Taoism). Represents the dynamic unity and interdependence of opposites, as the basis for a balanced, harmonious life. To maintain a current situation, always keep a small amount of the opposite present (Yin or Female in Yang, and Yang or Male in Yin). Eliminating the opposite entirely, to create a pure Yin or pure Yang situation, will be so out of balance that the situation will begin moving in the opposite direction—towards what you were trying to prevent. So avoid the extremes of either total yin or yang. This basic philosophical principle is embedded in the *I Ching*, or *Chinese Book of Changes*.

Male-female embrace, or union of male and female within the same body (Hinduism). Both Hindu symbols represent the union and transcendence of opposites—whether male and female couple in a voluptuous embrace (often misinterpreted by Westerners) or the god/goddess Ardhanarishvara, whose body is half male and half female. (This union and balancing of opposites contrasts with typical Western black and white thinking, which seeks to eliminate or destroy opposites as evil, rather than balancing them with good, so that they are no longer danger. The Eastern view sees these opposites as interdependent and linked within a systems context, while the Western view sees them as separate and thus discardable.)

Spirals moving in two opposite directions (ancient preliterate, prehistoric cultures and religions). Interpreted to represent the spiral of coming into life, form, and time, and the spiral of going out of life, form, and time, as a continuous and interconnected process, indicating a belief in reincarnation. Found on ancient temples to the goddess in Malta, on stone circles in England and Old Europe, and in the Andes.

Jewish menorah. According to one source, the Jewish Menorah is a spiral, which was cut in half. Further research is necessary to verify this, since this seems not to be commonly known.

These archetypal symbols—appearing in different cultures and religions in different places and at different times on this planet—should give us some confidence that a deeper spiritual truth (of the underlying unity of all opposites) lies at the core of most religions, just waiting for humanity to discover. While mystics from any religion have

always recognized the truth of our basic oneness, it will take much longer for humanity as a whole to recognize and experience this. As a transition, a worldview that honors both unity and diversity is most appropriate for our increasingly interdependent, but very diverse world, that is seeking areas of common ground that will help humanity come together and discover its basic oneness, while also honoring the many different spiritual-religious paths for expressing one's spirituality in this world.

Stages of the spiritual journey are mapped and recognized across different religions

This is a better case scenario, based on the pioneering work of Ken Wilber and his Integral Spirituality Center, on mapping stages of the spiritual journey that transcend, but are embedded in different religions, as examined in the forthcoming e-book, *The Infinite Ladder* (DiPerna & Wilson, 2008), showing how people can ascend a common spiritual ladder, no matter what their particular religious tradition happens to be. The authors identify five stages of religious orientation (magic, mythic, rational, pluralistic, and integral), two types (moderate and extremist), and how these stages unfold in four different spiritual-religious traditions (Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism).

In this scenario, broader recognition of these stages leads to more people being able to consciously embark on their own spiritual journey, along with guidance from others who have already undertaken this journey, leading to increasing numbers of conscious, spiritually-aware people in society and the world—no matter what spiritual-religious tradition they come out of—who can then link with others, from the same or other religions—to create more conscious social policies and institutions in different areas. People will finally realize that embarking on the spiritual journey itself is more important than the particular religious vehicle within which one takes this journey, and people can dialogue across religions on the best ways to promote such journeys.

On the relationship between the four better/best case scenarios above

The four above better/best case scenarios can be merged and seen as reinforcing different aspects of a deeper spirituality that connects us all and that can ultimately bring humanity much closer together, as these conditions are all increasingly recognized by the diversity of humanity. Each of these better/best case scenarios is based on somewhat different, but interrelated factors, including: interreligious dialogue as an emerging global movement today; the role of prayer, meditation, and spirituality in holistic health and healing; a recognition of the deeper unity and oneness behind all seeming opposites as the basic mystical path in all religions; and a mapping of stages of the spiritual journey as manifest through different world religions.

These better/best case scenarios are all versions of Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey for humanity (discussed earlier), where increasing numbers of people embark on an adventure to go outside their familiar comfort zones to explore other spiritual-religious-cultural traditions, and interact with people different from themselves, or go deeper into their own spiritual journey, so that with time they can discover not just their differences with others, but also what binds them together on deeper human and spiritual levels, and in the process be transformed themselves from this journey, while also transforming their society and institutions as well.

Contact is established with intelligent, extraterrestrial life, creating Initial curiosity and/or fear, leading to increasing contact and eventual interdependence

This longer term, mixed case to better case scenario sees humanity becoming a technological civilization that begins leaving its home planet and eventually encountering intelligent, extraterrestrial life in the process, with its own cultural and spiritual-religious traditions—a theme already explored in depth in various science fiction stories, including *Star Trek and Babylon 5* (Groff, 1994). This scenario assumes that over time humans organize at ever larger system levels of increasing order, complexity and diversity. Indeed, people have organized from mobile bands and tribes, to settled agricultural villages, to ancient empires, to feudalism, to nation states, and now to larger regional groupings, global interdependence, and the beginnings of human exploration of our solar system and beyond, with our Milky Way Galaxy and the universe beckoning in the longer run.

Integration at ever larger system levels, with ever more diverse intelligent extraterrestrial species, if this occurs, holds out the possibility of initial curiosity and positive exchanges and/or fear and conflict, depending on the consciousness and intentions of those involved. But over enough time, and allowing for significant interactions, overall relations can improve and finally even become integrated on a larger, extraterrestrial system level. Contact with intelligent, extraterrestrial life could also bring humanity on earth closer together. Nonetheless, one can hope that humans on earth will be able to find common ground and greater unity and interdependence with each other globally, while still honoring their diverse cultural and religious traditions, without having to wait for encounters with intelligent, extraterrestrial life for this to occur!

Conclusion

This article shows that religion has always been an important part of people's lives, providing a sense of deeper meaning and purpose to life. Religions have also had a very mixed track record historically—on whether they have been used as a force to justify conflict, violence, war, and indeed hatred of others (Smith-Christopher, 1998) or whether they have been a force for reconciliation, love, healing, and more peaceful, cooperative, nonviolent, and mutually beneficial relations that bring people together across their cultural and religious differences, which the interreligious/interfaith movement is seeking to do today. The world is currently trying to reorganize on a larger, globally interdependent systems level, while honoring both global and local needs of people, and both our unity, as well as our diversity, including of cultures and religions. Such transition periods are always difficult for some people, and require more forward thinking people to aid other people in addressing their fears about the increasing diversity they are encountering, and how their needs will still be met in this increasingly diverse and interdependent world. That is the challenge currently facing the world—including its political, economic, and religious leaders.

Despite these challenges, a number of positive spiritual developments are also occurring that can help bring humanity closer together, while also deepening people's inner spiritual journeys. In the longer run, it is also possible (as science fiction seems to be intuiting) that opportunities to encounter even greater cultural and religious

diversity may await us, as we move out into the universe and possibly encounter other intelligent, extraterrestrial beings, each with their own cultural and religious traditions. In short, the evolutionary journey is ongoing and continues. Stay tuned as it unfolds!!

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Notes

1. See Groff, 2005a & 2005b; and books by Campbell, Gimbutas, and Stone on evolution of changing male-female images of divinity over time, and on evolution of the goddess and female principle in different religions over time, as outlined below.
2. For more on Western religions in general, beyond male-female images of divinity above, see Armstrong, 1993.
3. While Eastern cultures are generally more collectivist in their identity, and Western cultures more individualistic in their identity, this has also varied somewhat from one culture, time period, and individual, to another.
4. Joseph Campbell found the hero's journey in the myths of all cultures, which he documented in his books, so it is not surprising that various writers throughout history have drawn on this universal, archetypal theme, whether predating Campbell and aware of his work or not.
5. For examples of other archetypes of hero figures, see Pearson, 1986, & Pearson, 1991.
6. See Part I for articles on different religions, and Parts II and III for declarations made by numerous interreligious organizations on principles of interfaith dialogue and principles for a more peaceful world. A few important interfaith declarations include: "Towards a Global Ethic," from the Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions; "Riva del Garda Declaration" from the World Conference on Religion and Peace; "Declaration on the Contributions of Religions to a Culture of Peace" from UNESCO; the "Earth Charter"; and the United Religions Initiative "URI Charter." Interfaith dialogue, as well as intermonastic dialogue, are both covered.
7. See Groff, 2007a, and earlier articles by L. Groff in Bibliography that deal with religion, for quotations from different religions on the golden rule and peace.

8. See Beversluis, 2000; Groff, 2007a and earlier articles by L. Groff in Bibliography that deal with religion, for elaborations.
9. See Groff, 2007a, for quotations from different religions showing support for these principles.
10. See U.S. Representative Dennis Kucinich's efforts to introduce such legislation in Congress and to encourage similar grassroots efforts in other countries.
11. Inayatullah: Advocates adding spirituality as a "fourth bottom line" for individuals, organizations, and even nations, in evaluating their annual performance, in addition to the growing acceptance of three bottom line factors, including economic prosperity/profits (the traditional bottom line factor), social justice, and environmental protection. The challenge of how to measure spirituality remains, however.
12. Benor: See Chapter 12, "Research on Physical and Emotional Correlates of Religion and Spirituality," pp. 394-409, including sections on religion and healing and their correlates.

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