

Lesson 10

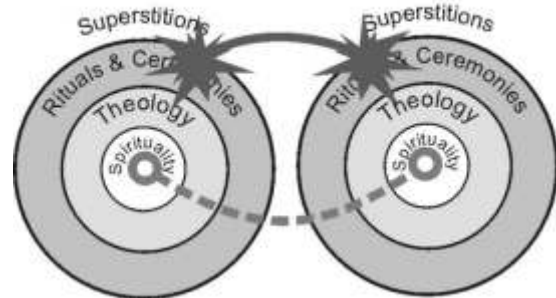
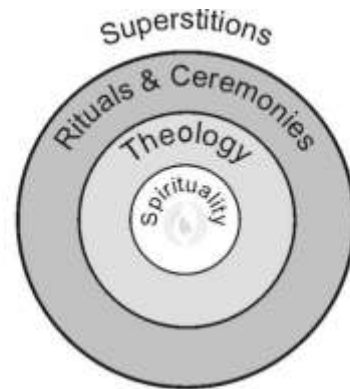
UNITY OF RELIGIONS

Vicente Hao Chin, Jr.
from *The Process of Self-Transformation*

The study of spiritual consciousness and mysticism makes evident that there are several important layers in every religion:

- The outermost layer consists of the *rituals and ceremonies* of a religion. These are obviously superficial in nature and do not represent the heart of a religion. These rituals frequently change.
- The next layer is the theology of a religion, consisting of the set of *beliefs or doctrines* of each religion. These too are often subject to change. Catholicism, for example, has changed its dogmas in the course of centuries. It has modified its view about the belief that the earth is the center of the universe or that there is no salvation outside the church.
- The innermost layer is spirituality, or the *mystical or spiritual aspect* of a religion. In this layer, there has been hardly any change in the essence of spirituality in the past several thousand years. Spirituality is experiential, and each generation of spiritual seekers tends to validate what has been previously discovered or realized. Mysticism is the heart of every religion. It's the flame that keeps a religion alive and makes it survive disastrous mistakes that theologies and rituals may make.

This explanation can be represented by a series of concentric circles, as in the accompanying figure. The outermost circle are rituals and ceremonies. The next circle is the theology. The third circle is spirituality, or the mystical core of religions. This third circle consists of many



Levels of Religion

subcircles, such as gnosis or esotericism and the different degrees of mystical attainment.

Outside these three layers or circles, we find the superstitious beliefs that accrue around every religious tradition.

When religious adherents focus mainly on the rituals or the theology of their own religion or those of others, they have a tendency to regard each other with suspicion, with separateness and even with hostility. The religious

violence that we see in the world is the result of living the religious life on those two outer levels. In Ireland, we see the strange phenomenon of Catholics and Protestants, both Christians, bombing and killing each other. In the Islamic world, we see Shi'ites and Sunnis killing each other. How people of the same religion can be so divided that they turn and kill each other is indeed an astonishing phenomenon. What seems equally astonishing is that many people take this for granted as if it is nothing to feel strange about. A visitor from outer space studying humanity will surely find the human species a curious one.

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But among the mystics of the great religious traditions, we don't find such enmity, suspicion, separatism and hostility. The Vedantists, the yogis, the Sufis, the contemplative Buddhists, the Christian mystics, the Jewish Kabbalists — they see more things that unite them than things that separate them.

Thomas Merton, the well-known Trappist monk who has written best-selling books on the spiritual life, was one of those who delved into the essence of the spirituality of various religions and compared them. In a book entitled *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, he asked the question whether a Catholic can practice Zen and remain

a Catholic. He answered with a definite yes. Zen, to him, is an experience and not a dogma. It is not different from the spiritual experience of a Catholic or a Protestant.¹

A Catholic nun from Canada, Sister Elaine MacInnes, wrote a book entitled *Teaching Zen to Christians*.² She considers herself a disciple of the Zen *roshi* Yamada Koun while remaining a Catholic nun. She established the first Zen center in the Philippines and taught numerous nuns, priests and laypeople the practice of Zen meditation. How can a Catholic nun — a disciple of Christ — be at the same time be a disciple of a Zen Buddhist *roshi*? This is possible only if we see the essence of Zen spirituality as being no different from Christian spirituality.

Hazrat Inayat Khan, the Sufi teacher who popularized Islamic mysticism to the West, stresses the essential unity of the spiritual experience among the different traditions. He in fact declared, "No one can be a mystic and call himself a Christian mystic, a Jewish mystic or a Mohammedan mystic. For what is mysticism? Mysticism is something which erases from one's mind all idea of separateness, and if a person claims to be this mystic or that mystic he is not a mystic; he is only playing with a name."³

Mahatma Gandhi, when asked what his religion was, said that he was a Hindu, a Muslim, a Jew, a Christian and a Buddhist.

Abraham Maslow, in his book *Religions, Values, and Peak-Experiences*, wrote:

To the extent that all mystical or peak-experiences are the same in their essence and have always been the same, all religions are the same in their essence and always have been the same. They should, therefore, come to agree in principle on teaching that which is common to all of them, i.e., whatever it is that peak-experiences teach in common (whatever is *different* about these illuminations can fairly be taken to be

THE WISDOM RELIGION

By H. P. Blavatsky

The WISDOM-RELIGION was ever one, and being the last word of possible human knowledge, was, therefore, carefully preserved. It preceded by long ages the Alexandrian Theosophists, reached the modern, and will survive every other religion and philosophy.

ENQUIRER. Where and by whom was it so preserved?

THEOSOPHIST. Among Initiates of every country; among profound seekers after truth — their disciples; and in those parts of the world where such topics have always been most valued and pursued: in India, Central Asia, and Persia.

ENQUIRER. Can you give me some proofs of its esotericism?

THEOSOPHIST. The best proof you can have of the fact is that every ancient religious, or rather philosophical, cult consisted of an esoteric or secret teaching, and an exoteric (outward public) worship. Furthermore, it is a well-known fact that the MYSTERIES of the ancients comprised with every nation the “greater” (secret) and “Lesser” (public) MYSTERIES — *e.g.* in the celebrated solemnities called the *Eleusinia*, in Greece. From the Hierophants of Samothrace, Egypt, and the initiated Brahmins of the India of old, down to the later Hebrew Rabbis, all preserved, for fear of profanation, their real *bona fide* beliefs secret. The Jewish Rabbis called their secular religious series the *Mercavah* (the exterior body), “the vehicle,” or, *the covering which contains the hidden soul*. — *i.e.*, their highest secret knowledge. Not one of the ancient nations ever imparted through its priests its real philosophical secrets to the masses, but allotted to the latter only the

husks. Northern Buddhism has its “greater” and its “lesser” vehicle, known as the *Mahayana*, the esoteric, and the *Hinayana*, the exoteric, Schools. Nor can you blame them for such secrecy; for surely you would not think of feeding your flock of sheep on learned dissertations on botany instead of on grass? Pythagoras called his *Gnosis* “the knowledge of things that are,” or *e gnosis ton onton*, and preserved that knowledge for his pledged disciples only: for those who could digest such mental food and feel satisfied; and he pledged them to silence and secrecy. Occult alphabets and secret ciphers are the development of the old Egyptian *hieratic* writings, the secret of which was, in the days of old, in the possession only of the Hierogrammatists, or initiated Egyptian priests. Ammonius Saccas, as his biographers tell us, bound his pupils by oath not to divulge *his higher doctrines* except to those who had already been instructed in preliminary knowledge, and who were also bound by a pledge. Finally, do we not find the same even in early Christianity, among the Gnostics, and even in the teachings of Christ? Did he not speak to the multitudes in parables which had a two-fold meaning, and explain his reasons only to his disciples? “To you,” he says, “it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven; but unto them that are without, all these things are done in parables” (Mark iv. 11). “The Essenes of Judea and Carmel made similar distinctions, dividing their adherents into neophytes, brethren, and the *perfect*, or those initiated” (Eccl. Phil.). Examples might be brought from every country to this effect.

H. P. Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy*. Theosophical Publishing House, Adyar, Chennai, India.

Mahatma Gandhi, when asked what his religion was, said that he was a Hindu, a Muslim, a Jew, a Christian and a Buddhist.

localisms both in time and space, and are, therefore, peripheral, expendable, not essential). This something common, this something which is left over after we peel away all the localisms, all the accidents of particular languages or particular philosophies, all the ethnocentric phrasings, all those elements which are *not* common, we may call the “core-religious experience” or the “transcendent experience.”⁴

This realization about the essential unity of the world’s religions is the true and final solution to

the interreligious strife that the world has been witnessing for millennia. It is not just a wish or a hope. Interreligious harmony already exists among the mystics of all religions today. It’s only among those who see their religious life in terms of dogma and rituals and organizations that there is hostility and separation. To help in attaining religious unity, we must popularize the mystical and spiritual aspects of religions.

Notes:

- 1 Merton, Thomas, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968).
- 2 MacInnes, Elaine, *Teaching Zen to Christians* (Manila: Theosophical Publishing House, 1993).
- 3 Khan, Hazrat Inayat, *The Inner Life* (Boston: Shambhala, 1997), p. 60.
- 4 Maslow, Abraham H., *Religions, Values, and Peak-Experiences* (London: Penguin, 1976), p. 20.

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Questions for Review:

1. What are three major layers of religions?
2. What are confirmations of the essential unity of the great religions?
3. What is the wisdom religion?
4. What is Maslow’s view of religious experience?