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Religions Share Enduring Values

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"Do all religions ultimately share the same values?" The key word here is "ultimately." The question therefore invites a prospective (forward-looking) rather than a retrospective (backward-looking) response.

So, yes, all world religions ultimately share the same values (Claim) if and when religious leaders seek and agree on common ground for the common good (Limits), as demonstrated at the 2010 World Religions Summit in the final communiqué of the conference, "A Time for Inspired Leadership and Action" (Evidence), assuming that religious leaders speak with some authority and consensus among them is a good thing (Assumptions). Even if interfaith alliances are exceptional, they are likely to become the norm, now that the precedent has been set for future summits of world's religious leaders (Rebuttal).

This is a complete argument based on the present writer's "CLEAR Argument Paradigm," an argument model adapting the work of British philosopher Stephen Toulmin used to assist students in writing their own arguments. "CLEAR" stands for the six elements in Toulmin's argument-mapping, but reduced to these five components: Claim (Position), Limits (Qualifier), Evidence (Reasons, Grounds), Assumptions (Warrants and Backing), and Rebuttal (to objections).

Claim

"Do all religions ultimately share the same values?" The answer (i.e., claim) depends on what the question is asking. Note the verb is "do . . . share." If this question were simply, "Do all religions share the same values?", then a "yes" answer would be contrary to fact. That religions disagree is painfully obvious. Religions, throughout history, have had internal as well as external conflicts. Schisms are classic instances of religious friction turned fractious. If a single religious community cannot maintain its unity, then how can two or more religions do so?

But this is not what the original question is asking. "Do all religions ultimately share the same values?" contains the adverb, "ultimately." Adverbs modify verbs. "Ultimately" puts a futuristic spin on the verb, "do share." "Ultimately" not only modifies "do share," but affects the question as well. Here, "ultimately" asks not about here-and-now actuality, but it-can-happen futurity. So, our first answer to the question, as stated, is: "Yes, religions [will] ultimately share the same values," subject to the right (i.e., ripe) conditions.

Entire agreement can be absolute or relative. In absolute terms, rarely do any two societal entities—especially religions—agree entirely in material, constitution, properties, qualities, or meaning. Relatively speaking, however, there may be an argument that religions quintessentially share some values that are the same, or similar. Consider this statement by Shoghi Effendi from the Baha'i Faith, commonly regarded as the world's youngest independent world religion today:

The fundamental principle enunciated by Baha'u'llah, the followers of His Faith firmly believe, is that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is a continuous and progressive process, that all the great religions of the world are divine in origin, that their basic principles are in complete harmony, that their aims and purposes are one and the same, that their teachings are but facets of one truth, that their functions are complementary, that they differ only in the nonessential aspects of their doctrines, and that their missions represent successive stages in the spiritual evolution of human society.^[1]

Here, the principle of the "oneness of religion"—a distinctive of the Baha'i Faith, whose aim is to unify the world and whose claim is that the Baha'i principles of unity can and will ultimately do so—contains a key insight for the purposes of

Enduring Question

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our argument. It should be stated that the statement by Shoghi Effendi, who led the Baha'i world from 1921 to 1957, is considered authoritative. It should also be noted that, according to the Baha'i perspective, Buddhism originally was a religion that was "divine in origin." Given the nontheistic nature of contemporary Buddhism, this statement may seem odd, indeed. In addressing the problem, Baha'i authors have cited a remarkable early discourse by the Buddha, who states, in the last chapter (Pataligama) of the Udana, the following, from F. L. Woodward's 1935 translation: "Monks, there is a not-born, a not-become, a not-made, a not-compounded. Monks, if that not-born, not-become, not-made, not-compounded were not, there would be apparent no escape from this here that is born, become, made, compounded."^[2] Although the traditional Buddhist understanding is that this passage refers to Nirvana, the Buddha's statement, nonetheless, asserts the existence of an Absolute that somehow precedes phenomenal, or finite, existence.

According to Shoghi Effendi's statement, religions ultimately (or quintessentially) share the same values in the following ways: (1) religious values are relative, not absolute; (2) religious values, as taught by each succeeding religion, are progressive in nature; (3) religious values, as taught by the great religions of the world, are divine in origin; (4) religious values, as basic principles, are in complete harmony; (5) the aims and purposes of religious values are one and the same; (6) religious values are facets of one overarching truth; (7) the functions of religious values are complementary; (8) religious values differ only in the nonessential aspects; (9) religious values, as promulgated throughout religious history, represent successive developmental stages in the spiritual evolution of human society. "Nonessential" aspects refer to those elements of a particular religion that are not central to the fundamental doctrinal, ritual, ethical, artistic, mystical or social requirements (using the present writer's "DREAMS" paradigm) of the religion.

We can now present the second of our two answers to the enduring question: "Do all religions ultimately share the same values?": Yes, all world religions ultimately share the same values (Claim) except in nonessential aspects and subject to historical contexts (Limits), as demonstrated, inter alia, by the presence of the Golden Rule in each religion (Evidence), assuming that similarities of the various religious formulations of Golden Rule are self-evident and outweigh their differences (Assumptions). Even if the Golden Rule is weak evidence (since arguably it is neither central to, nor characteristic of, contemporary religious practices), the Golden Rule can still be theoretically invoked by the world's religious leaders as a basis for actual interfaith concord (Rebuttal).

The Golden Rule is privileged as a salient religious value. It is certainly not the only value common to most, if not all, the world major religions. Such values as justice, mercy, compassion, love, and virtues such as beneficence, charity, truthfulness, trustworthiness, integrity, courtesy, wisdom, knowledge, piety, detachment, and other aspects of good character, and action-oriented values such as work, service to others, self-sacrifice, philanthropy, defense of others, liberating the oppressed, and creating a just society are among some of the prominent values that come to mind. Since space does not permit a comparative survey of the presence of these values among the world religions, we limit ourselves to the ethic of the Golden Rule, as a case in point. The Golden Rule is simply taken as an exemplar of a salient religious value shared by world religions.

Limits

Our claim is that all world religions ultimately share the same values (Claim) if and when religious leaders seek and agree on common ground for the common good (Limits). The primary condition for interfaith accord is common cause among religious leaders. The limits, or qualifiers, to the second answer is that all world religions ultimately share the same values (Claim) except in nonessential aspects and subject to historical contexts (Limits).

Evidence

Our claim that faiths can find common ground in shared values has no shortage of reasons and evidence, not the least of which is the fact that religious leaders today increasingly recognize the need to do so. Take the 2010 World Religions Summit, for instance. Representing the Aboriginal, Baha'i, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Shinto and Sikh religious traditions, some 80 religious leaders issued a statement, "A Time for Inspired Leadership and Action," which states, in part:

We, 80 senior leaders of the world's religions and faith-based organizations together with 13 youth delegates, from more than 20 countries representing Aboriginal, Baha'i, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Shinto, and Sikh religious traditions, have convened in Winnipeg, Manitoba on the eve of Canada hosting expanded global summits.

In our diverse faith traditions we have rich histories and powerful dreams for ending poverty, caring for the Earth and being peace-builders. We acknowledge our own shortcomings and inadequacies, we commit to continuing these life-giving actions in the service of the common good

From our shared values we call on leaders to take courageous and concrete actions:

to meet the immediate needs of the most vulnerable while simultaneously making structural changes to close the unacceptable growing gap between rich and poor; to prioritize long-term environmental sustainability and halt the harmful acceleration of climate change caused by us, while addressing its impacts on the poor; and to work for peace and remove factors that feed cycles of violent conflict and costly militarism.

A common tenet in faith traditions is that we should treat others as we would have them treat us. This "golden rule" is a basic human principle that cuts across cultures and faith traditions, and calls us to a collective standard of mutual care.^[3]

Note the emphasis on "our shared values" in "service of the common good." Here, the Golden Rule is described as a "common tenet in faith traditions." What evidence is there for religious leaders finding "shared values" in "service of the common good"? What further evidence points to invoking the Golden Rule as common ground to establish "a collective standard of mutual care"? Religious leaders at various world summits prior to 2010 have appealed to shared values (including the Golden Rule) as well, as a couple of examples illustrate:

- "Interreligious dialogue should respect the shared values found within all great religious traditions and embodied within the Universal Declaration of Human Rights."^[4]
- "By promoting the practice of the spiritual values shared by all religious traditions . . ."^[5]

These and similar statements (i.e., The Berlin Declaration on Interreligious Dialogue; World Council of Religious Leaders Charter, etc.) formulated by such high-profile summits of religious leaders may seem more like assertions than arguments. It is true that the religious leaders' reasoning behind these claims is not explicitly articulated. However, such statements are anchored in the sacred Scriptures of the respective religions (as instantiated below) and, in that sense, the text speak for themselves.

Progressive religious leaders, with a global perspective, often see the need for interfaith alliances to reach a common cause for the commonweal. In arguing that religions do, or can, share the same values, religious leaders have invoked the Golden Rule, which captures the essence of reciprocity. These leaders often promote the notion that the Golden Rule, a moral maxim of altruism, is taught by all world religions.

The Golden Rule, invoked by the Aboriginal, Baha'i, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Shinto, and Sikh religious leaders in the 2010 World Religions Summit, is gaining ground as a means for reaching common ground. On what evidence?

Baha'i Faith

Blessed is he who preferreth his brother before himself.
—Baha'u'llah^[6]

O kings of the earth! . . . Do not rob them [the people] to rear palaces for yourselves; nay rather choose for them that which ye choose for yourselves. Thus We unfold to your eyes that which profiteth you, if ye but perceive. Your people are your treasures By them ye rule, by their means ye subsist, by their aid ye conquer.
—Baha'u'llah^[7]

Buddhism

On traversing all directions with the mind
One finds no one dearer than oneself.
Likewise everyone holds himself most dear,
Hence one who loves himself should not harm another.
—The Buddha, "Raja Sutta."^[8]

Christianity

Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets.

—Jesus Christ, Matthew 7:12[9]

Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

—Jesus Christ, Matthew 22:39–40[10]

Confucianism

Zigong asked: "Is there a single word such that one could practise it throughout one's life?" The Master said: "Reciprocity [shu] perhaps? Do not inflict on others what you yourself would not wish done to you."

—Confucius, Analects 15.24[11]

Hinduism

I shall tell thee what constitutes the highest good of a human being He who regards all creatures as his own self, and behaves towards them as his own self, laying aside the rod of chastisement and completely subjugating his wrath, succeeds in attainment to happiness. The very deities who are desirous of a fixed abode become stupefied in ascertaining the track of that person who constitutes himself the soul of all creatures and looks upon him all as his own self, for such a person leaves no track behind. One should never do to another what one regards as injurious to one's own self. This in brief is the rule of righteousness.

—Mahabharata 13.113.6–9[12]

Islam

Whoever wishes to be delivered from the fire and enter the garden should die with faith in Allah and the Last Day and should treat the people as he wishes to be treated by them.

—Sahih Muslim Muhammad[13]

None of you [truly] believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself.

—An-Nawawi[14]

Judaism

Thou shalt not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: I am the LORD.

—Torah, Leviticus 19:18[15]

Rabbi Hillel said: "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation; go and learn."

—Babylonian Talmud[16]

Zoroastrianism

That character is best, one who does not do to another that which is

not good for himself.
—Aturpat-i Emetan[17]

Assumptions

What are the assumptions (i.e., Toulmin's "warrants") and authority (i.e., Toulmin's "backing") that connect our evidence (i.e., Toulmin's "data"/"grounds") to our claims? Our first assumption—"assuming that religious leaders speak with some authority and consensus among them is a good thing"—may be conceded without challenge. Our second assumption—assuming that similarities of the various religious formulations of Golden Rule are self-evident and outweigh their differences—find support, with exceptions, among a wide array of academics and religious leaders. For instance, on November 12, 2009, academic Karen Armstrong launched her "Charter for Compassion," which begins: "The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves." [18] In this manifesto, Armstrong urges and what she elsewhere calls "ethical alchemy."

Rebuttal

(1) Even if interfaith alliances are exceptional, they are likely to become the norm, now that the precedent has been set for future summits of world's religious leaders; and (2) even if the Golden Rule is weak evidence (since arguably it is neither central to, nor characteristic of, contemporary religious practices), the Golden Rule can still be theoretically invoked by the world's religious leaders as a basis for actual interfaith concord (Rebuttal).

A leading critic of appeal to the Golden Rule as a significant similarity among religions is Jacob Neusner, who states, as a general thesis, that "a proposition that is shared among several religious systems will not play a major role in the construction of any particular religious system." [19] That argument can be turned on its head, to wit: A proposition that is shared among several religious systems will play a major role in the construction of an interfaith alliance.

In support of this principle, it is easy to see how prominently the Golden Rule has been invoked in the summits of religious leaders to date. The Golden Rule is a proposition already shared among the several religious systems represented as such summit meetings, and has already been centrally invoked in joint statements that emerged from such conferences. This trend is likely to continue. It is highly likely, moreover, that as this trend continues, greater common ground—beyond simply evoking the Golden Rule itself—will be found to justify common cause for the commonweal. As the present writer has stated in *Paradise and Paradigm*: "For specialists in the academic study of religion, comparison is the basis for generalizable principles on the nature of religion." [20] Religious leaders who are engaged in earnest interfaith dialogue, will necessarily exchange ideas and, in the process, "compare" those ideas. From such dialogue, certain conclusions regarding what is universal to all world religions are likely to emerge with increasing clarity and moral force.

Our argument is also open to the charge that, in many religions, the Golden Rule is a means to an ultimate end, and that the ultimate ends of the major religions differ profoundly. In *Paradise and Paradigm*, the present writer has advanced this thesis:

Religions have systemic characteristics, which will be analyzed in terms of overarching "paradigms." [21] . . . Paradigms can render parallels intelligible. As perspectival filters, paradigms provide a heuristic key for explaining parallels. To nuance formal similarities and to resolve conceptual differences, parallels need to be indexed to core paradigms, which are coefficients of anthropological and soteriological assumptions. The present investigation seeks to reference parallels to those controlling paradigms. [22] . . . "Parallels" yield paradoxes of commensurability resolvable by paradigm "logics" within religious systems. [23]

In other words, world religions may be thought of as systems of salvation, liberation, or harmony. The offer of salvation, liberation, or harmony is directly related to what the religion presents as the "human predicament," that is, the overarching problem facing humanity. So, to oversimplify so as to illustrate this point, the fundamental human problem in many forms of Christianity today is the problem of sin. Correspondingly, Christianity offers salvation from sin. Similarly, the fundamental problem of human existence in early Buddhism was the problem of suffering. Therefore the liberation that Buddhism offered was a way out of suffering. In the Baha'i Faith, the presenting problem of humanity is profound disunity, ranging from family relations to international relations. Thus the social salvation that the Baha'i Faith offers is unity in all social relationships, from family relations and international relations, accomplished within a wide range of principles and practices that conduce to unity among races, religions and nations.

Values that are common to world religions are both similar and different. Values may be similar to each other, but different in the way in which those values directly contribute to the overarching goal of a particular religion, i.e., its paradigm. Thus, the Golden Rule can simultaneously serve the interests of Christian salvation from sin, Buddhist liberation from suffering, and the Baha'i quest for world unity.

Another possible objection is with one of the exemplars cited above: The Baha'i Faith is among the "new religious movements" of the mid-19th through 20th centuries. Its origins are in an attempt to find "ultimate values" among the major world religions; in a way, it is a movement that comes out of an attempt to answer this entering question affirmatively. Readers may therefore perceive a tendentious aspect to the writer's use of Baha'i teachings as evidence for harmony among the more ancient world religions.

The problem with this objection is that enduring question considered in this essay is expressed in the present tense: "Do all religions ultimately share the same values?" Thus it is a contemporary question, not a historical inquiry. Religions, after all, are subject to change. Today, religions that historically relegated women to a subordinate status, may at least pay lip service to the principle of equality of men and women. Without taking a position either way, was the actor Anthony Quinn correct when he said in the movie *The Message* (1977) that men and women are equal in Islam? Historically, it could be argued that such a statement is a gross anachronism that retrospectively and retroactively introduces what really is a modern question into the medieval setting. Contemporarily, it could also be argued that there is no universal consensus among Muslims today as to the principle of the equality of men and women. Were it otherwise, we would expect to see reforms of certain contemporary Sharia laws and practices in the exercise of Islamic law.

World religions obviously should be seen within their historical contexts. But this applies not only to their origins, but to their historical development and now to their contemporary expressions, as diverse as these may be. Since the Baha'i Faith was born in modernity, its teachings, phenomenologically, may therefore be expected to be more "modern" or contemporary in its basic features.

It also stands to reason that each world religion today maybe analyzed in terms of that particular religion's "response to modernity." Thus, while teaching a course on Islam, the present writer asked students to analyze current events in the contemporary Muslim world within a sevenfold typology of "Islamic responses to modernity": (1) radical Islamism; (2) traditionalism; (3) neo-traditionalism; (4) modernism; (5) secularism; (6) postmodernism; and (7) post-Islamism. Given the phenomenon of globalism today, it is entirely within reason to expect that world religions will necessarily make some adjustments in the direction of greater tolerance, reciprocity, interfaith dialogue and cooperation, etc.

Critical readers may object that the author's use of religious leaders' statements regarding common values (that religions share and should promote) erroneously presupposes that all religions function from the top-down, with the opinions and missives and edicts and bulls, of this or that religious authority, determining what local communities of faith practice and believe. Instead, as these same critics may further object, religious practice and belief tend to be far more localized, and often at variance with, the claims of the "official" religious leaders.

This is a fair criticism, and raises a broader question that scholars in the academic study of religion have dealt with, which is the tension between so-called "official religion" and "popular religion." This tension will always exist, to varying degrees, partly as a function of the wide variety of cultures and social contexts in which religions must necessarily exist and to which they must also adapt in order to remain viable. Notwithstanding, there is an argument to be made for the "standard-setting" exemplarism of interfaith rhetoric among religious leaders. When stated often enough and prominently enough, such rhetoric, as would be expected, is bound to exert, to varying degrees, influence on grassroots practitioners. In other words, it will become increasingly "fashionable" to be religiously egalitarian in today's "global village."

Conclusion

If the world turns a blind eye to the values that world religions do have in common, then it does so at its own peril. In rediscovering the Golden Rule, religions can ultimately share the same values, especially if the leaders of the world's religions agree and concertedly act to reorient their own adherents, as well as world leaders, to reflect profoundly of our common humanity and on the universality of the Golden Rule, which is a paramount value shared by all religions.

Notes:

[1] Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day Is Come* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1980 rev. edn.), Preface.

[2] *Udana* 8:3, *The Minor Anthologies of the Pali Canon: Part II—Udana: Verses of Uplift, and Itivuttaka: As It Was Said*,

Translated by F. L. Woodward (Pali Text Society. London: Humphrey Milford, 1935).

- [3] "A Time for Inspired Leadership and Action Final Draft—June 23, 2010" (<http://www.faithchallengeg8.com/pdfs/2010InterfaithStatement.pdf>).
- [4] European Council of Religious Leaders, *The Berlin Declaration on Interreligious Dialogue* (March 2008).
- [5] World Council of Religious Leaders Charter (June 2002).
- [6] Baha'u'llah, "Kalimat-i-Firdawsiiyah (Words of Paradise)," *Tablets of Baha'u'llah Revealed After the Kitab-i-Aqdas* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1988), 71.
- [7] Baha'u'llah, "Tablet to Queen Victoria," *The Summons of the Lord of Hosts* (Haifa: Baha'i World Centre, 2002), 93. See also "Tablet to Napoleon III," 75; "Tablet to Nasirid-Din Shah," 137.
- [8] The Buddha, "Raja Sutta," *The Udana and the Itivuttaka: Two Classics from the Pali Canon*, Trans. John D. Ireland (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 2007), 62.
- [9] Matthew 7:12, KJV (Cf. Luke 6:31.).
- [10] Matthew 22:39–40, KJV.
- [11] Confucius, *The Analects*, Trans. Raymond Dawson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 62.
- [12] *Mahabharata* 13.113.6–9. Trans. P. C. Roy (Calcutta: Bhavata Karyalya Press, 1888–96). Quoted by Mariasusai Dhavamony, *Hindu Spirituality*, Documenta Missionalia (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1999), 192. See also *Mahabharata* 12.66.36; 12.292.
- [13] Sahih Muslim Muhammad, *Being Traditions of the Sayings and Doings of the Prophet Muhammad as Narrated by his Companions and Compiled Under the Title al-Jami-us-sahih, Volume 3* (International Islamic Publishing House, 2001), 1026 (Book 20, Number 4546).
- [14] An-Nawawi, *An-Nawawi's Forty Hadith: An Anthology of the Sayings of the Prophet Muhammad*, Trans. Ezzeddin Ibrahim and Denys Johnson-Davies (Chicago: Kazi Publications, 1995), No. 13.
- [15] Torah, Leviticus 19:18. The Tanach, Jewish Publication Society (1917).
- [16] Babylonian Talmud, tractate Shabbat 31a.
- [17] Aturpat-i Emetan, *Wisdom of the Sasanian Sages*, Persian Heritage Series 34. Trans. Shaul Shaked (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1979), 5 (Denkard VI.2). Other exemplars from world religions may be found in H. T. D. Rost, *The Golden Rule: A Universal Ethic* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1986).
- [18] "Charter for Compassion." (<http://charterforcompassion.org/share/the-charter>).
- [19] "The Golden Rule in Classical Judaism" in *The Golden Rule: The Ethics of Reciprocity in World Religions*. Ed. Jacob Neusner and Bruce D. Chilton (New York/London: Continuum, 2009), 56.
- [20] Christopher Buck, *Paradise and Paradigm* (Albany: State University of New York, 1999), 22.
- [21] *Ibid.*, 33.
- [22] *Ibid.*, 11.
- [23] See note 21 above.

About the Author

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MLA Citation

Buck, Christopher. "Religions Share Enduring Values." *World Religions: Belief, Culture, and Controversy*. ABC-CLIO, 2013. Web. 10 Jan. 2013.

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