

Timeless Wisdom: The Intersection of Religions

Richard D. Bowers

An interesting question comes up regarding interfaith and interspiritual fellowships—what to talk about! One of my core beliefs is there is more in common among the world’s religions than differences that separate them (which of course would provide one answer for what to talk about). Of course, when I walk into any particular church it’s the *differences* that I notice—even among church “near-relatives.” Does this church have a band? A choir? Perhaps no obvious music? Is the “minister” dressed in robes or is she (or he) casually dressed? What, if any, religious icons decorate the walls? The list goes on and on. Yet again, I would like to believe that even with all this apparent diversity there is more in common than we might think. My answer to “what to talk about” is my view of what we have in common, what I call *Timeless Wisdom*.¹

The Existential Problem. I am not the first person to notice that many traditional churches have a lot of empty pews. I am also not the first to notice that some churches, for example many Evangelical and Catholic, are doing great.² Why do some churches have empty pews and others seem to be bursting at the seams? Obviously many have tried to answer this question—certainly the leaders of the churches with emptying pews.... My answer is the growing churches all have concrete messages that are the basis for their existence. These concrete messages directly answer the general existential³ questions of “What is the meaning of life?” or “Why am I here?”

I recently discovered an interesting book edited by Rabbi Rami Shapiro.⁴ It includes a section where the various contributors identify the existential problem addressed by each of the major world religions. An existential problem is a fundamental problem we as a people face. Solving this problem commonly is the key to our survival or at least our well-being. Each religion provides the solution to the existential problem it has identified. For example, for many Christians, original sin, an outcome of an interpretation of the creation story, proposes that we are inherently broken. A Christian solution for this existential problem is that we are saved by the sacrificial atonement of Jesus’ death on the cross alongside our

¹ For a discussion of what led me to this answer see *My Journal to Timeless Wisdom*.

² According to the Pew Research Center the percent of the U.S. population that identifies as Evangelical has remained fairly constant between 2007 (26.3%) and 2014 (25.4%). However, the percent of the population that identifies as Catholic has dropped by 3.1% during that timeframe but still comprises 20.8% of the U.S. population. See <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.

³ Existential means “relating to our very existence.”

⁴ Shapiro, Rami (2017). *The world wisdom Bible: A New Testament for a global spirituality*.



confession of faith (baptism). Interestingly, Judaism, with the same creation story, frames the existential problem as exile—separation from God. Following God’s laws provides a path home.

Notice also that not all existential questions/problems are fear-based. I consider the traditional concept of original sin as fear-based (i.e. I am headed to eternal suffering if I don’t accept the Good News). However, Judaism’s existential problem of separation from God provides a motivation to take action but does not occur to me as fear-based.

It seems to me the well-attended churches have a well-defined existential problem—a problem that is fundamental to its very existence—and provide a solution. For example, Evangelical churches definitionally consider the Bible to be the inerrant word of God. If it’s in the Bible it’s the truth both historically and literally—no questions asked.⁵ The fall of man as documented in the creation story is the problem; we are sinners—pure and simple. As evidenced in mankind’s long history we are unable to solve this problem by ourselves. Enter Jesus, the Son of God, and his ultimate sacrifice on the cross. All we have to do is accept this Good News and we are saved. We’re assured that none of us will go on to live the perfect life of Jesus—yet we are forgiven. From the Evangelical perspective, preachers have a Bible full of absolutely true stories and absolutely true interpretations to share and make relevant each week. It’s a powerful message.

My point is not to focus on Christianity, my point is that Evangelical churches, with full pews, clearly paint a vivid picture of **the existential problem** (as declared by church leaders) and provide **the solution**. Is there an existential problem an Interspiritual Fellowship can address? From my point of view it must be motivating but must not be fear-based.

Why isn’t Love the answer? I think love, along with compassion, forgiveness, etc., *is* the answer. But it is an answer to a question that hasn’t been asked; it is the answer to many questions that have been perhaps assumed but not clearly asked. As documented by Bishop John Shelby Spong⁶, many traditional churches (“liberal” in his terminology), are transitioning to the Bible stories as metaphor and not necessarily as absolute history. Two interrelated problems result from this. First, liberal churches have either completely or practically “set aside” the existential problem of original sin. For example, Bishop Spong has written “The Biblical story of the perfect and finished creation from which human beings fell into sin is pre-Darwinian mythology and post-Darwinian nonsense.” And further, “The view of the cross as the sacrifice for the sins of the world is a barbarian idea based on primitive concepts of God and must be dismissed.”⁷ Certainly many liberal church leaders do not state this as adamantly as Bishop Spong. However, from my experience the idea of original sin is dramatically deemphasized in many churches. From the perspective of liberal churches, giving up the fear-based notion of original sin may have been the right thing to do but the unintended consequence is a reduced motivation to attend the church. If I

⁵ For example, see the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* at http://library.dts.edu/Pages/TL/Special/ICBI_1.pdf.

⁶ Spong, J. S. (1991). *Rescuing the bible from fundamentalism: A bishop rethinks the meaning of scripture*. New York: Harper Collins.

⁷ Spong, J. S. (1998). *A call for a new reformation*. Retrieved July 25, 2017 from <https://www.westarinstitute.org/resources/the-fourth-r/a-call-for-a-new-reformation/>

don't fear eternal suffering, why go to church—what does it offer? Which leads to the other problem. Metaphors (in Bible terminology, parables), are not concrete—the message can be in the “eye of the beholder.” Even within the Bible there is a lack of understanding of Jesus' parables by the apostles themselves (e.g. Mark 4:13,33). If the Bible vividly illustrates that the apostles themselves had trouble understanding Jesus' parables, how can preachers argue they absolutely know Jesus' intent? Compare this to the “absolute truth” being taught in Evangelical churches. Is teaching a possible interpretation of Jesus' message regarding love, forgiveness, faith, and more enough? Is this message by itself enough to “fill the pews?” Apparently not.

It seems to me mainline churches don't overtly address the existential dilemma—“What's the meaning of life?” The Evangelical churches do address this question. And they are growing.

What is a Unifying Question? Perhaps we cannot all agree on the one single existential problem but perhaps there is a problem that is one of the existential problems we all face. This may lead to a useful intersection or commonality across religions. Many have recognized that there are common *teachings* across religions. For example, consider the many expressions of the Golden Rule⁸:

- “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” —Matt. 7:12 NRSV
- “Treat others as you treat yourself.” —Mahābhārata Shānti-Parva 167:9 (Hindu)
- “That which you hate to be done to you, do not do to another.” —ancient Egyptian goddess Ma'at
- “Do not do to others what you know has hurt yourself” —Tamil tradition
- “What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow: this is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation; go and learn.” — Rabbi Hillel
- “As you would have people do to you, do to them; and what you dislike to be done to you, don't do to them.” —Muhammad (from the hadith)
-

Or consider the many expressions of the importance of love and compassion:

- “Love and Compassion are the true religions to me. But to develop this, we do not need to believe in any religion.”⁹ — Dalai Lama XIV
- “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”¹⁰ — Leviticus 19:18 and Mark 12:31
- “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” —Matthew 5:44
- “The reward of goodness is nothing but goodness.” —Al Quran 55:61

⁸ For other examples see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden_Rule.

⁹ For other examples see <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/search?q=Dalai+Lama+compassion>.

¹⁰ Some may remember that Jesus actually says “Love God” is the greatest commandment (in response to a question regarding the “best” commandment): “Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:29-31 NRSV). Jesus, in saying this, is reflecting the teachings of Old Testament (Jewish Scripture) of Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18.

- “Those who believe and do good deeds — the Gracious God will create love in their hearts.” — Al Quran 19:97
- “Love is the most great law that ruleth this mighty and heavenly cycle, the unique power that bindeth together the diverse elements of this material world, the supreme magnetic force that directeth the movements of the spheres in the celestial realms.” —from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (the Bahá’í Faith)
- “One of the comprehensive mitzvot of the Torah is the mitzvah of ahavat yisrael, the love for a fellow Jew, which is said to be a great principle of Torah, and the basis of the entire Torah.” —Rebbe Menachem Schneerson
- “All that you do, do only out of love!” —Sifre (Jewish study of Numbers and Deuteronomy)
-

Prayer/meditation¹¹ is also a common feature of religions¹²:

- “Now during those days he [Jesus] went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God.” —Luke 6:12
- “Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread....” —Matthew 6:9-13
- “May my meditation be pleasing to him, for I rejoice in the Lord.” —Psalm 104:34
- “Wisdom springs from meditation; without meditation wisdom wanes. Having known these two paths of progress and decline, let a man so conduct himself that his wisdom may increase.” —Buddha
- “Peace comes from within. Do not seek it without.” —Buddha
- “We need to rest in awakened attention – in the truth of each moment as it is arising.” —Rabbi Jeff Roth
- “As fragrance abides in the flower, As the reflection is within the mirror, So doth thy Lord abide within thee, Why search Him without?” —Guru Nanak (Sikh)
- “There is one Supreme Ruler, the inmost Self of all beings, who makes His one form manifold. Eternal happiness belongs to the wise, who perceive Him within themselves - not to others.” —Vedas (Hindu)
-

From my perspective, whether we start from Love/Compassion, the Golden Rule, or Prayer/Meditation, the ultimate direction of our evolving perspective of the world is an expanding sense of “I/we” and a diminishing sense of “they.” These teachings are all a reflection of our unity, which is another common religious teaching:

- “All differences in this world are of degree, and not of kind, because oneness is the secret of everything.” — Swami Vivekananda

¹¹ Both prayer and meditation are expansive concepts that can mean radically different things to different people. For my purpose I am simply using the words to mean a practice that intends to extend oneself beyond the egoic self or to be in communion with something greater than oneself.

¹² A nice collection of quotations from various spiritual paths can be found at <http://meditation.org.au/kingdomofheaven.asp>.

- “For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.” —1 Corinthians 12:13 NRSV
- “Thousands of candles can be lit from a single candle, and the life of the candle will not be shortened. Happiness never decreases by being shared.” —Buddha
- “Sentient beings are numberless; I vow to save them all.” —a Bodhisattva vow
- “All the teaching of the Prophets is one; one faith; one Divine light shining throughout the world. Now, under the banner of the oneness of humanity all people of all creeds should turn away from prejudice and become friends and believers in all the Prophets.” — ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (the Bahá’í Faith)
- “The first peace, which is the most important, is that which comes within the souls of people when they realize their relationship, their oneness, with the universe and all its powers, and when they realize that at the center of the universe dwells Wakan-Tanka, and that this center is really everywhere, it is within each of us. This is the real peace, and the others are but reflections of this. The second peace is that which is made between two individuals and the third is that which is made between two nations. But above all you should understand that there can never be peace between nations until there is known that true peace, which, as I have often said, is within the souls of men.” —Black Elk (Oglala Lakota-Sioux)
-

Is striving for Unity secular or spiritual? Both. For some this potential of unity is seen as secular and not as the absolute spiritual Truth. For example, for me the Black Lives Matter movement (with a mission statement that begins with “... all lives matter”) is working toward the equality of all by removing race hierarchies. If we are all one, how can there be domination (including race) hierarchies? If we are all one, how can some have more opportunities than others? If we are all one, how can Blacks receive almost 20% longer prison sentences than whites for similar crimes?¹³ I still enjoy Martin Luther King’s *I Have a Dream* speech where we are reminded of the unity of brotherhood: “Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood.”¹⁴ Brotherhood—we are all one family. I see many other movements in the same light—striving to actualize or manifest our inherent oneness through prison reform, LGBT+ rights, tackling homelessness, child welfare reform, healthcare reform....

What would the world of politics look like if we recognize we are all brothers and sisters and quit electing politicians who vow to “fight for you.” What would politics look like if it wasn’t framed as a battle? What would it look like if we elect politicians who vow to work together, understand the perspectives of others and work together toward win-win solutions?

The consciousness of oneness can also be seen outside of the umbrella of social justice and politics. For example, the founding of the United States included balancing states rights with national unity—

¹³ See: <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/race/news/2015/05/28/113436/8-facts-you-should-know-about-the-criminal-justice-system-and-people-of-color/>

¹⁴ See <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihadream.htm>.

mirroring the relationship of individuals as part of an interdependent whole. The same is true for the United Nations which was built on the notion that nations are part of an interdependent world body.

Others see striving toward unity in a traditional religious sense by expressing common values such as peace, forgiveness, love....

Others see this unity in a mystical sense. There are many definitions of mysticism, but for me, a simple definition is “the spirituality of the direct experience of God.” Mystics tell us that it is possible to understand oneness beyond an intellectual sense—it is possible to actually have the **experience** of being one with all.

All of these perspectives work for my purpose. Where does this lead us?

The unifying motivating existential problem. I don’t think we can *replace* the existential problems of the world’s religions with a unifying single existential problem. But perhaps we can agree on an *additional* existential problem to rally around:

- ...the false belief that we are separate.

This false belief leads to divisive politics, enemy images, war....

The previously discussed practices of the various religions, including the examples of love, compassion, the Golden Rule, and prayer/meditation—along with other teachings such as forgiveness—are the solution to the problem of the false belief that we are separate.

To me this implies a journey. I don’t expect to wake up one day with the realization, the experience, that all sentient beings are one (although I don’t want to exclude that possibility). For me, oneness/unity is a concept that I believe in, however, I recognize it is an aspiration—a goal. Similarly, I believe in the ideal of “love my enemy” but for now I would be happy if I could recognize that “my enemy” is doing the best he/she can in the current situation and I can accept my enemy as he/she is. Developmental psychology¹⁵ provides a framework and many tools for progress on this journey. Certainly spiritual teachings and practices are meant to lead us on this journey.

Isn’t this negative? Isn’t this just another fear-based question? The statement that we have a false belief that we are separate may sound negative. Why not “spin it around” into a positive statement like “My belief is that we are all one.” If the positive message sounds better to you, go for it. My overall point is to create a message that inspires action—and positive energy for action. In other words, my intent is not to create fear by identifying an existential problem. Instead, my goal is to create a positive flow of energy toward a goal of creating oneness.

¹⁵ Developmental psychology has many names in various fields of study including evolution of conscious, moral development, complexity of thinking, Spiral Dynamics, stages of faith, and staged constructive developmentalism.

So what? What does this look like in the world? Wouldn't it be great if within spiritual conversations we explore how members of the "other" political party are in fact our friends and not our enemies? Wouldn't it be great if within spiritual conversations we explore how we could build more schools and hospitals in the world rather than building more bombs? Wouldn't it be great if within spiritual conversations we could support others in having compassion for themselves and others? Wouldn't it be great if spiritual conversations lead to action?

In summary, Timeless Wisdom identifies the existential problem that ***we have a false belief that we are all separate***. The solution? Many teachings within in the world's religions and of course, many teachings within the secular world. The urgency (not fear!)? Look around!