

“What Truth Can Set Us Free?”

Dealing with Religious Diversity

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Slide 1

1. This is the last in the series of presentations in which we have discussed the origins and beliefs of the world’s great religions.
2. We have one more thing to talk about – how should people with sincerely held religious beliefs deal with people whose beliefs are different from their own?

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1. Harvey Cox, a long-time professor of divinity at Harvard, recently wrote: **“Jesus never met a Hindu, a Buddhist, or a Muslim. He left no clear precedents for how to deal with people of other religions.”** Cox, *The Future of Faith* at 130.
2. As a result, Christians, as well as others with sincerely held beliefs, are often unsure how they should view people whose beliefs are different from their own.
3. The Dalai Lama recently asked: **“How does a devout person reconcile the perspective of ‘one truth, one religion’ that one’s own teachings appear to proclaim with the perspective of ‘many truths, many religions’ that the reality of the human world undeniably demands?”** Dalai Lama, *Toward a True Kinship of Faiths* at 158.
4. I will give you my answers to that question and then we will have time for a discussion.

Slide 3

1. As we have seen, the world’s great religions have some beliefs in common.
2. For example, purification by water is important in many religions, from the sacred lakes of the Hindus to Jewish *mikvahs* to Christian baptismal fountains to Islamic ablution pools.

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1. Christians believe an all-powerful God created the universe and intervenes in the lives of people.
2. Hindus also believe in a transcendent and all-powerful God they call “Brahman.”

3. Hindus believe that the soul of every human being is identical to Brahman, a belief somewhat similar to the teaching of Jesus that people should not be looking outside themselves for the kingdom of God **“because the kingdom of God is within you.”** *Luke 17:21.*

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1. Several religions teach that an invisible God makes himself known by sending representatives to earth.

2. Karen Armstrong describes the Hindu belief: **“By making the loving ‘descent’ into his *avatara*, Vishnu revealed himself to be the savior god par excellence, who had laid aside the outward trappings of divinity to help suffering humanity.”** Armstrong, *The Great Transformation* at 449.

3. That is, of course, similar to the central belief of Christianity, in which **“[t]he Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”** *John 1:14.*

Slide 6

1. Buddhists believe that Siddhartha Guatama, who came to be called “the Buddha,” did not have a human father and was tempted by the devil before he began his ministry, ideas that parallel Christian beliefs about Jesus.

2. Buddhists also believe that the sacrifices made by Jesus when he was on earth are consistent with what they expect of a *bodhisattva*, a revered person who sacrifices his or her own interests to help others. Dalai Lama, *Toward a True Kinship of Faiths* at 57.

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1. One of the most famous teachings of Jesus is the so-called “Golden Rule”: **“So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.”** *Matthew 7:12.*

2. The Dalai Lama quotes remarkably similar teachings from all the world’s great religions. Dalai Lama, *Toward a True Kinship of Faiths* at 112.

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1. But, as we have also seen, religious beliefs **“differ from each other in significant respects.”** Cox, *The Future of Faith* at 38.

2. Many of the core beliefs of the world’s great religions simply **“cannot be reconciled.”** Dalai Lama, *Toward a True Kinship of Faiths* at 161.

3. For example, The Jewish, Christian and Muslim belief that God created the universe is irreconcilable with the Buddhist belief that there is no all-powerful God and the universe was not created.

4. The Christian belief that Jesus is the only incarnation of God is irreconcilable with the Hindu belief that Jesus was one of the many *avatars* of Vishnu.
5. And any religion that teaches that God becomes manifest is fundamentally inconsistent with the views of Jews and Muslims, who consider such claims to be a repudiation of the essential nature of God.

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1. Many Christians and Muslims see their primary objective to be gaining eternal life for their souls and avoiding the punishment of hell.
2. Buddhists reject entirely the idea of a soul and see the ultimate objective of their religious quest to be *nirvana*, the total extinguishment of existence.
3. Hindus, believing in a soul that can be reborn in another body, see the objective of life as avoiding continued rebirth and allowing the soul to give up its separate existence and remerge with God.
4. The differences between the core beliefs of the world's great religions are not minor differences.
5. For example, to a Buddhist who seeks the complete extinguishment of existence through *nirvana*, the Christian promise of eternal life is not only unattractive but threatens his or her efforts to attain enlightenment by abandoning desire.
6. For a Muslim who believes that his or her avoidance of hell depends on sticking to the teaching of the *Quran* that God does not have a son, the Christian promise of salvation by believing that **“God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son”** (*John* 3:16) is downright threatening.
7. For Hindus, the Christian claim that God has had only one incarnation slanders the various manifestations of Brahman they worship and pray to every day.

Slide 10

1. For centuries, believers in one revealed truth have killed those with other beliefs.
2. Today, we are most aware of killings by Muslims.
3. But no religion has a monopoly on killing in the name of God.
4. Hitler claimed killing Jews was doing God's will.
5. Hindus in India killed more than 1,000 Muslims in 2002 and thousands of Sikhs in 1984.
6. In 2013, Burmese Buddhists killed scores of Muslims.

7. Whether religious beliefs are the reasons for the killing or an easy excuse, religious violence depends on the notion that people are defined by their beliefs.

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1. Because of violence against people with different beliefs, recent authors have put religion at the very center of the world's problems.

2. For example, the late Christopher Hitchens, an avowed atheist, wrote: **“Religion poisons everything. As well as a menace to civilization, it has become a threat to human survival.”** Hitchens, *God is Not Great* at 25.

3. Sam Harris, another atheist, writes: **“All [religions] are in perverse agreement on one point of fundamental importance, however: ‘respect’ for other faiths, or for the views of unbelievers, is not an attitude that God endorses. *** A close study of these [sacred] books, and of history, demonstrates that there is no act of cruelty so appalling that it cannot be justified, or even mandated, by recourse to its pages.”** Harris, *The End of Faith* at 13, 73.

4. These so-called “New Atheists” were advocating that religious beliefs should disappear.

5. Religious beliefs are not going away – they are far too important in the lives of billions of people.

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1. What is needed is not for religion to go away, but for our attitudes toward those with different beliefs to change.

2. To eliminate the distrust all of us have for people with different beliefs, we will have to cultivate different understandings of each other – ones like our children have.

3. When Jen and I travel, we try to make contact with the children that we see.

4. Here is Jen with a little girl in a township near Cape Town, South Africa.

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1. Here I am with children in a rural village in India.

2. Like children everywhere, they were delighted to see their pictures

Slide 14

1. We have learned that children are the same all around the world.

2. No matter where they were born, they love to roll old tires.

3. They love to ride with their brothers.
4. But there is something much more important that all children share.

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1. They do not hate or mistrust other people because of their religions and they do not know that others will hate or mistrust them for theirs.
2. These two little boys in the Old City of Jerusalem have no idea that someday soon they will be hated for what they believe or more likely just because of where they were born.

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1. When we saw these children in Aleppo, Syria, in November 2010, they didn't realize that people would soon destroy this mosque because others disagreed with the beliefs of people worshipping there.
2. Why do children, who are so loving and trusting of people of all religions, grow up to fear and even hate those with different beliefs?

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1. Because we teach them.
2. These are the lyrics from "*You have to be taught*" from Rogers and Hammerstein's "*South Pacific*":

**You've got to be taught to hate and fear
You've got to be taught from year to year
It's got to be drummed in your dear little ear
You've got to be carefully taught**

**You've got to be taught to be afraid
Of people whose eyes are oddly made
And people whose skin is a different shade
You've got to be carefully taught**

**You've got to be taught before it's too late
Before you are 6 or 7 or 8
To hate all the people your relatives hate
You've got to be carefully taught**

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1. Some Christian parents teach their children that Jews killed Jesus.

2. What child won't be affected by that message?

Slide 19

1. Some Jewish parents teach their children that Muslims are savages?
2. This sign was placed on buses in New York.

Slide 20

1. And some Muslim parents teach their children to fear both Jews and Christians.
2. They focus on the most hostile passages in the *Quran* and ignore those that promote peace.

Slide 21

1. These messages of fear and hate have occurred right in front of us.
2. A Baptist minister in Avon, Indiana, preached that Islam is not a religion of peace.
3. Fortunately, such blatantly hateful messages are rare.
4. But many parents subtly convey messages that people are different and can be mistrusted because of their beliefs, even if they don't intend to.
5. When Christian parents tell their children the story of the crucifixion of Jesus, they usually don't tell them that Jesus and all of his early followers were Jewish.
6. Most Christian parents don't tell their children that Muslims believe Jesus was born to the Virgin Mary and was God's greatest messenger.
7. And when we focus on the religions of the attackers on 9/11, we don't mention the religion of the bombers at Oklahoma City.

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1. And so, because we teach our children that people can be judged by their religious beliefs, they grow up distrusting people whose beliefs are different from theirs.
2. And they act based on those fears.
3. In some places, they build walls to separate themselves from those with different beliefs.
4. But more often the walls are not physical walls, but they are nonetheless walls because they separate people from each other because of their beliefs

Slide 23

1. Getting rid of the fears that we pass on to our children does not require that we ignore the important differences in our respective beliefs.
2. As the Dalai Lama has written: **“A successful approach [to eliminating conflicts] cannot hide the differences by promoting some vague notion of all religions actually being one, nor can it be a syncretistic attempt to merge their various strengths into some universal faith.”** Dalai Lama, *Toward a True Kinship of Faiths* at 132.
3. Instead, it requires that we try to see people with different beliefs in a way that does not cause us to see them as fundamentally different from us because of those different beliefs.

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1. When Jen and I traveled to Egypt and Syria and Morocco, our guide was Chahinda Karim, a professor at the American University in Cairo.
2. Chahinda is a thoroughly modern woman; she is also thoroughly Muslim.
3. One day Chahinda and I were talking about religion.
4. She said something that I will never forget: “If I had been born in America, I would probably be a Christian.”
5. And, as Jen and I later discussed, if we had been born in Egypt, we would probably be Muslims.
6. Our religions, like the languages we speak, are **“largely a matter of the circumstances of [our] birth and upbringing.”** Cox, *The Future of Faith* at 38.

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1. Many of you have seen variations of this slide – “welcome” in many languages.
2. We recognize that the language people speak indicates only where they were born.
3. We don’t ask which one of these ways of saying “welcome” is true.
4. We don’t fear people because of the language they speak.

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1. Just as we get used to the idioms of our language, we get used to the idioms of our religious beliefs.

2. Our beliefs seem natural to us, but the beliefs of others seem like a foreign language, all but incomprehensible.
3. For example, the other day Jen and I saw a pick-up truck with the message—“Covered in the blood of Jesus.”
4. Christians around the world see nothing strange about that idea, but imagine how it sounds to a Hindu or a Buddhist.

Slide 27

1. Because of what we get used to, we reject propositions in other faith traditions that we accept without question in our own.
2. For example, most Christians are skeptical, if not outright dismissive, of claims that Muhammed received revelations from God.

Slide 28

1. But most Christians take at face value the identical claim of Paul, who said that he received revelations from Jesus, whom he never met on earth.
2. One claim seems so natural that we rarely question it; the other so alien that we may reject it out of hand.

Slide 29

1. Many Christians can't imagine how Hindus could seek protection from their *murti*, often portrayed with four arms.
2. But many Christian seek the protection of angels represented as having wings.

Slide 30

1. Every year at Christmas time, Christians around the world repeat Luke's words that the angel told Mary that Jesus would be called the **“Son of God”** because God would **“come upon”** and **“overshadow”** her. *Luke 1:35*.
2. Muslims, not used to the idiom, see sexual imagery in these words that most Christians never see.

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1. Our religious beliefs seem natural for the same reasons our languages seems natural to us – we were born into them.
2. The Dalai Lama was born in Tibet and was selected at an early age as the incarnation of a famous Tibetan *bodhisattva*.

3. He writes that after visiting India: **“I could no longer live in the comfort of an exclusivist standpoint that takes Buddhism to be the only true religion.”** *Id.* at 6.
4. So, he concluded that **“for me Buddhism is the best, but this does not mean that Buddhism is the best for all.”** Dalai Lama, *Toward a True Kinship of Faiths* at 158.
5. He added: **“[I]f one believes that the entire cosmos, including all sentient beings within it, is a creation of one all-powerful and compassionate God, the inescapable consequence is that the existence of faith traditions other than one’s own are also God’s creation.”** *Id.* at 159.

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1. We have no problem with the idea that God intends that people speak different languages and the language they speak says nothing about their characters.
2. In fact, some people accept as true the story of the Tower of Babel in which God created all the languages and assigned them to people in different places.

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1. But the idea that views of the divine that are fundamentally different from ours can be God’s creation is hard for many of us to accept.
2. We are all wired to believe that our understanding of the divine is true; no one would ever accept or teach views they believe are not true.
3. And if our beliefs are true, surely beliefs different from our own must be false.
4. It is exactly that idea that threatens to devour the world in fear and hate.
5. As Sam Harris, one of the so-called New Atheists, writes: **“Certainty about the next life is simply incompatible with tolerance in this one. * * * We are, even now, killing ourselves over ancient literature.”** Harris, *The End of Faith* at 13, 73.
6. It is not our beliefs that are the cause of distrust and even hate, but our certainty that our views are the only ones deserving of respect.
7. That certainty is founded on human conceit – that we as mortals can see clearly the image of the divine.

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1. If we as mortals could see the divine with absolute clarity, it almost certainly wouldn’t be the divine.
2. As Karen Armstrong writes: **“There are important differences between Brahman, Nirvana, God, and Dao, but that does not mean that one is right and the**

others wrong. On this matter, nobody can have the last word. All faith systems have been at pains to show that the ultimate cannot be adequately expressed in any theoretical system, however august, because it lies beyond words and concepts.” Armstrong, *The Case for God* at 320.

3. She argues that certainty about God amounts to idolatry. *Id.* at 321-22.
4. Michael Novak, an award-winning and very thoughtful Christian theologian and philosopher, agrees: **“The atheist does not see God—but neither does the believer. If there is a God such as Jews and Christians and many deists have held there to be, such a God cannot be reached by eyes, ears, taste, touch, or scent. Not by imagination or memory either. * * * Direct empirical knowledge of God could only be of a false God.”** Novak, *No One Sees God* at 274.

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1. The conclusion that no one can see the divine clearly is not a new idea.
2. Gerald Schroeder, who has a PhD in nuclear physics from MIT, writes: **“Almost a millennium ago, the medieval philosopher Moses Maimonides wrote that we can know *that* God is, even though we cannot know *what* God is. * * * Even in the closest of encounters, the face of God remains hidden.”** Schroeder, *The Hidden Face of God* at 187.

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1. In explaining why most Hindus have given up trying to comprehend the incomprehensible nature of Brahman, Huston Smith writes: **“To expect our minds to corner the infinite is like asking a dog to understand Einstein’s equations with its nose.”** Smith, *The World’s Religions* at 60.
2. He could as well have been speaking about the inability of any human being to fully comprehend the divine.
3. Because everyone’s view of the divine is confined by the limits of human understanding, those views can all be true even though different.
4. You may remember the story of the blind men describing the elephant – within the limits of what they could perceive, their different views of the elephant were all correct.
5. People in India use this story to illustrate their view that religious truth can take many forms.

Slide 37

1. Modern science also teaches us that certainty of the divine is beyond our capacity as mortals.

2. From the *Upanishads* to the teaching of the Buddha to the Bible to the *Quran* to the *Guru Granth Sahib*, religions have equated their image of the divine with light.
3. Scientists studying light have found something startling.

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1. Sometimes light looks to us like a wave – other times it looks like a particle.
2. The observations are contradictory – but they are both true.
3. As Albert Einstein said: **"It seems as though we must use sometimes the one theory and sometimes the other, while at times we may use either. We are faced with a new kind of difficulty. We have two contradictory pictures of reality."**
4. If the light that we *can* see presents itself to us in contradictory ways that are both true, surely we can learn to respect more than one image of the divine that we *cannot* see.

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1. There is, however, one image of the divine that everyone should be able to agree is true.
2. No matter where these children were born or what religion they may eventually adopt, these children **are** the image of the divine.
3. So, how do we begin seeing each other, no matter what our religious beliefs, in the same way that we see these children and in the same way these children see us?
4. How do we discover the essential humanity of all people that sets us free from fear and hate?

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1. We have to follow the best traditions of our faiths and interact with the people we have been conditioned to fear.
2. We can eat and drink with people of other faith traditions.

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1. We can go to others' places of worship.
2. We can become aware of the sacred literature of other faiths.

Slide 42

1. People have told me they refuse even to touch a *Quran* because they believe it is the work of the Devil.

2. But there are things in the Quran that everyone can agree with, including this: **“O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise (each other)).”** *Surah 49:13.*

3. While we are studying, we could take a look at our own sacred writings and see if we want to be judged by every word in them.

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1. When we learn about images others have of the divine, we do not have to give up the image of the divine that we have found to be true, any more than being exposed to another language causes us to forget our own.

2. Hinduism and Islam and Judaism and Sikhism won't rub off on us.

3. Perhaps, like learning another language sometimes helps us understand English better, learning about the beliefs of others will help us better appreciate and understand our own beliefs.

4. Most important, interacting with those holding different beliefs can eliminate the fear that comes from the unknown.

5. With interaction comes an elimination of distrust and even hate.

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1. I know that is true.

2. In 2007, when Jen and I got on an Egypt Air plane in New York for the flight to Cairo, Jen admitted that she was uneasy

3. All of the media reports of 9/11 focusing on the religion of the hijackers had made her afraid of the people on the plane because of how they looked.

4. But we went and we interacted with the people of Egypt.

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1. We came to see them as people whose religious beliefs no more defined them than the language they speak or the clothes they wear.

2. The trip changed our lives.

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1. If you want an opportunity to meet people of many faiths and learn more about their beliefs, I invite you to attend the third annual Festival of Faiths on August 30, 2015, at the War Memorial Plaza downtown.

2. The event is being hosted by the Center for Interfaith Cooperation, which articulates a vision of **“a community that pursues peace through interfaith understanding and cooperation.”**
3. We would be delighted if you could join us.

Resources:

Armstrong, Karen, *The Case for God* (Alfred A. Knopf 2009)

Armstrong, Karen, *The Great Transformation* (Anchor Books (2006)

Cox, Harvey, *The Future of Faith* (Harper One 2009)

Dalai Lama, *Toward a True Kinship of Faiths* (Doubleday Religion 2010)

Harris, Sam, *The End of Faith* (Norton 2004)

Hitchens, Christopher, *God is Not Great* (Twelve 2007)

Novac, Michael, *No One Sees God* (Double Day 2008)

Schroeder, Gerald, *The Hidden Face of God* (Touchstone 2001)

Smith, Huston, *The World's Religions* (Harper San Francisco 1991)