

Article for the Centre Daily Times
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The country of India has been on my mind lately. Many of us watched in horror a few weeks ago as a handful of vengeful young men terrorized the people of Mumbai. Such violence seems so irrational, so cruel. We felt it on our own shores back in 2001. And our response as a country was to begin a war that was a distraction and diversion from going after the real enemy. So one of my prayers now is that India does not do the same. Instead of lashing out at their historic enemy of Pakistan, I pray that the leaders of both countries will be able to discern the real enemy at this time and forge a new solidarity against the terrorists.

But that brings me back to the other reason I have been thinking about India. Years ago, I had the privilege of taking classes in the ancient Vedic traditions of India by Professor Diana Eck. Honestly, I was mesmerized by those classes. She's an excellent scholar and teacher, but beyond that, the material is so fascinating. I am a Christian, born into a family of Christian faith, making my own confession of faith as a young person, spending years of study probing the depths of my own faith tradition. And yet, at that period of my life, about 25 years ago, I found myself deeply moved and intrigued by this multifaceted and beautiful tradition we call Hinduism.

So how is it that a Christian can be spiritually nurtured by the texts and rituals of a faith tradition so different from her own? I was brought up to think that Christianity was the only "true" religion – that people from other faith traditions needed to become Christian in order to be "saved." I was told that only Christians would go to heaven – that Jesus alone was the way to God. And yet, the more I thought about this, and quite frankly, the more people I met who were from other religious traditions, the more I questioned this premise. And so, 25 years ago, sitting in that classroom with Professor Eck, I was ready to listen – not just with my mind but with my heart.

The Rig Veda from Hindu tradition says, "Truth is one; the wise call it by many names." So what does this mean? Are all religions therefore basically the same? Aren't they all about love and the Golden Rule? My professor didn't think so, and I agree with that. The Christian view of reality and the Hindu view of reality are very different. The Buddhist view of reality is different from a Muslim view of reality and a Jewish view of reality. So while these various traditions do have similarities, to say that they are "the same" is really to trivialize them and diminish their distinctive insights. If you are interested in reading a wonderful description of these differences by someone who has great respect for all faith traditions, I suggest you read Diana Eck's book, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras*.

But one might still ask: “Even if each tradition has within it gems of truth, are not some of them better than the others?” And here, I would have to agree, but perhaps not in the way you expect. For surely, we cannot put the religion of David Koresh (who led the Branch Davidians to their death in Waco) on the same plane as that of the Dalai Lama. Surely, the religion of Jim Jones, whose followers committed mass suicide, is not equal to that of Mahatma Gandhi. And the racist Christianity of Nazism cannot command equal respect with the healing Christianity of Mother Theresa. To say that all religions are equally viable stretches credulity. There has to be some way to discern and discriminate among them.

And that is why Jesus said that religious leaders and ideas should be judged by the fruit they bear. The bitter fruit of a Jim Jones deserves to be cast on the trash heap of history, while the sweet fruit of a Mother Theresa or the Dalai Lama deserve to be savored and shared.

The fact is that there are a number of historic faiths which have produced good, nourishing, sweet fruit. Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Taoism, Confucianism, and Baha’i are among these. Yes, there are extremists in each who bear bitter fruit – from the Muslim terrorists who took down the Twin Towers in New York to the Christian terrorists who kidnapped people in Africa and brought them to America as slaves. But at their best, each tradition has produced good fruit, made human life more livable, and helped us look beyond our finite lives to the Eternal.

And as many of us have come to realize, the God we proclaim from our pulpits each Sunday, is bigger than any one religion. As Paul Tillich wrote, “The message of Christianity is not Christianity, but a new creation.” So we don’t need to be hierarchical in our assessment of these traditions – fighting over which one is “better” or closer to the truth than the other. We simply need to be situated in one tradition that has a depth of ritual and image opening up the possibilities for drawing closer to God in word and deed. Just as someone who is multi-lingual will always have a native language, so too, most of us in our appreciation for other religious traditions, will still draw most heavily and regularly from the well of our own faith.

I’ve been thinking a lot about India. My husband and I have plans to visit there this coming year. We’re so eager to go and experience for ourselves some of those places we’ve only read about. And then, following that, it’ll be so good to return home. In the meantime, for all my fellow Christians, I wish for you a very blessed Christmas! And goodwill and blessing to friends of other faiths as well.

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