*We begin this final section with one of the most pressing challenges of our time.- the need for bridging among humanity '5 spiritual traditions, and to recognise that their differences are dwarfed by their deep commonalities. Nothing is more important than bringing more love into the world which is the true goal of all religions.*

InterSpirituality: Bridging the Religious and Spiritual Traditions of the World

William Keepin

“I am a Muslim, and a Hindu, and a Christian, and a Jew — and so are all of you!” Thus proclaimed Mahatma Gandhi in a moment of inspired exasperation, as his advisers were pressuring him not to meet with Muslim leaders during the struggle for India’s independence. Gandhi was pointing to the universal truth of the heart, which is the birthright of every human being and is found in every major religious and spiritual tradition.

A thousand years from now, humanity will look back on our period in history as the pivotal time when this crucial insight of Gandhi’s ﬁnally began to emerge on a broad scale. The hundred year period from about 1950 to 2050 will stand out as one of the most crucial mining points in human history; the time when the urgent work of healing and reconciliation across the religious divisions of the world ﬁnally took place. It could not have begun earlier because this transformation required the improved systems of transport and communication developed in the late 20th century, especially the airplane and the internet. Nor could it have waited until later, because the religious divisions afflicting the human family by the early 21st century were so deeply entrenched, and the available weapons of mass destruction so powerful, that the world was teetering on a global war of catastrophic proportions.

Never in human history has it been more important to bridge the diversity of world religions. Each religion offers a unique doorway to the spiritual truth that dwells within and beyond all beings. Each of these magniﬁcent doors is exquisitely crafted in itself, and our basic dilemma is that we get trapped in worshipping the doors themselves and ﬁghting over which door is most beautiful, rather than actually going through the doorway and merging with the one spiritual reality.

The human heart is crying out for new bridges of love, healing, and reconciliation across differences — not only religious differences, but also racial, gender, caste, and social and class disparities as reﬂected in the Occupy Wall Street movement. Enlightened religious and political leaders are calling for greater harmony and collaboration across faith traditions. “The stakes are higher than ever,” says the Dalai Lama, “not only for the survival of our species but also for the very planet itself and the myriad other creatures who share our home.”

In answer to this call, the world religions are slowly beginning to come together in new ways, despite their vast and rich differences. Teachings of compassion and deep respect for others is universal in all religions, and the ‘golden rule’ is found in every tradition.3 Once, when a group of esteemed Rabbis were confronted with a challenge to teach the entire Torah in a few seconds, most scoffed in disdain at this absurd effrontery. Yet the great Rabbi Hillel suddenly broke the silence, “Love your neighbor as yourself. The rest is all commentary, go study.” Of course the human family admittedly falls far short of manifesting this profound love on a broad practical scale. The reality across the globe today still includes tragic religious strife and conﬂicts that continue to threaten global peace and stability, with the killing on all sides carried out in the name of God. Yet in the end, the only realistic path forward is for the entire human community to live as one family and one species in harmony with millions of other species on this planet.

***Interfaith and Interspirituality***

Spirituality today is rapidly changing around the world. Believers in traditional faith communities are stretching beyond their own traditions for new insights and practices. Membership in many traditional churches is waning, especially in Western countries. Pope Benedict XVI has lamented the weakening churches in Europe, Australia and the USA. “There’s no longer evidence for a need of God, even less of Christ,” he told Italian priests in 2005, “the so-called traditional churches look like they are dying.” A recent cover story in Newsweek magazine proclaims “Forget the Church, Follow Jesus.”° Meanwhile non-traditional spiritual movements are growing rapidly. Independent spiritual pioneers such as Eckhart Tolle, Marianne Williamson, and Neale Donald Walsh are attracting large numbers of followers. Numerous spiritual schools have emerged that focus on speciﬁc esoteric teachings or certain ‘New Age’ writings such as A Course in Miracles. The recent YouTube video, ‘Jesus is greater than religion’, received over 18 million views in less than one month on the internet. Even leading evangelical Christian pastors such as Rob Bell are beginning to question openly the narrow orthodoxy of their traditions. In 2010 the United Nations declared the ﬁrst week of February to be the annual ‘World Interfaith Harmony Week’.

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The term ‘Interspirituality’ was coined by the late monk Wayne Teasdale, and refers to the common heritage of humanity’s spiritual wisdom, including the sharing of resources, practices, and dialogues across the traditions. Although the religions of the world exhibit great differences, these outer disparities are dwarfed by the vast and universal truths that dwell in common at the mystical core of every religion. Reverend Cynthia Brix provides a helpful distinction between interfaith and Interspirituality. “At their core, religions are one, and this oneness defines a universal or interfaith mysticism. Interspirituality joins the teachings from two or more traditions, through study and practices, to create an actual new spiritual path. The term ‘interspirituality’ also serves to open religion up more broadly for people who are deeply spiritual, but don't necessarily identify with any of the world traditions, and provides a place for them to sit in the circle.”

Interspiritual and interfaith organizations are expanding rapidly, building bridges and dissolving rigid barriers across the world’s religious traditions. In 1945 there were three interfaith organizations in the world. Today there are over 2,000 interfaith organizations in the United States alone, half of which have appeared since 2003. The World Alliance of Interfaith Clergy lists ten interfaith seminaries, including four in New York alone, and one each in Canada, UK, Mexico, and one forming in the Netherlands. Taken together, these seminaries collectively graduate approximately 250 interfaith ministers each year, who are forging a new vocation of interfaith.

Interspirituality is also growing in several other directions. Seekers within existing faith traditions are expanding their spiritual identities to include two or more religious traditions. Christians for example are training intensively in Buddhist meditation or Hindu Vedanta, or joining Suﬁ communities. This phenomenon of ‘multiple religious belonging’ is becoming more widespread and gradually more accepted.“ In truth, such mixing of traditions is nothing new, and cross-fertilization between religions has a rich history. Zen is a blend of Buddhism and Taoism. Sikhism emerged from the reconciliation of Hinduism and Islam. Place the Jewish Shema (love of God) alongside Hillel’s teaching cited above, and you get the twin commandments of Christianity. The Bahai faith upholds the unifying truth of nine world religions.

“Love is the answer. You are the question.” Thus reads the byline on the ‘spiritual but not religious’ website, representing a growing community of seekers that includes between 50 million and 70 million people in the United States alone, according to organizer Steve Frazee. Other pioneering organizations include the Order of Universal Interfaith, founded to fulfill the dream of Wayne Teasdale to create an independent interspiritual fellowship that serves as an open ecclesiastical umbrella organization for many new and emerging spiritual initiatives. The Parliament of World Religions, founded in 1893 and resurrected a century later, now brings some 8,000 people of all religious faiths together every five years. The Global Peace Initiative of Women organizes international conferences to bring together senior religious leaders from multiple faith traditions, and to inject their collective wisdom into leading political spheres. Taken together, these multiple new threads are weaving a new spiritual fabric in society at large.

A unique breakthrough in the ﬁeld of interspirituality is the Snowmass Conference founded by Father Thomas Keating, which brought seasoned religious leaders together from nine major world religions including: Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Islamic, Tibetan Buddhist, Native American, Russian Orthodox, Protestant, and Roman Catholic. Meeting over the past 30 years, this diverse group developed eight ‘Points of Common Agreement’ that form the basis for a kind of universal spirituality, although they did not name it as such.” Having established this remarkable common ground, and becoming good friends in the process, these leaders then proceeded cautiously to explore their religious differences. To their surprise and immense delight, they found that the widely divergent perspectives and practices within their various faith traditions became a source of deep insight and mutual inspiration. In the end they bonded even more over their differences than they had over their similarities.

The eight points of common agreement are the following:

1. The world religions bear witness to the experience of Ultimate Reality, to which they give various names: Brahman, Allah, Absolute, God, Great Spirit, etc.

2. Ultimate Reality cannot be limited by any name or concept.

3. Ultimate Reality is the ground of inﬁnite potentiality and actualization.

4. Faith is opening, accepting, and responding to Ultimate Reality. Faith in this sense precedes every belief system.

5. The potential for human wholeness — or in other frames of reference, enlightenment, salvation, transformation, blessedness, nirvana — is present in every human person.

6. Ultimate Reality may be experienced not only through religious practices but also through nature, art, human relationships, and service of others.

7. As long as the human condition is experienced as separate from Ultimate Reality, it is subject to ignorance and illusion, weakness and suffering.

8. Disciplined practice is essential to the spiritual life; yet spiritual attainment is not the result of one’s efforts, but the result of the experience of oneness with Ultimate Reality.

The Snowmass Conference demonstrates the essential oneness of all religions, and also reveals how the myriad differences among the world religions can be a source of mutual inspiration and illumination, rather than conﬂict. What the Snowmass Conference achieved on a small scale serves as a powerful beacon of light for what is possible in reconciliation among the world’s religions on a larger scale.

*Religious exclusivism and the struggle for supremacy among religions is contrary to the teachings of every tradition.*

***The Interspiritual Path of love***

Love is a supreme and unifying principle in all the world’s religions. Striking parallels exist, for example, in the foundational teachings of Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism - which taken together point to the possibility of a universal path of love across the faith traditions. These deep parallels are remarkable and inspiring, yet sadly often go unnoticed, because excessive emphasis is placed today on the differences between religions — differences that are generally far less profound than the similarities.

In exploring these parallels, it is important to be mindful of key differences so we don’t superﬁcially fuse distinct traditions or theologies that do not belong together. Nevertheless, it is also important to allow for the possibility of a universal truth or foundation which all traditions reveal, but which may appear differently across the faith traditions because it is rendered through dissimilar theological concepts and frameworks.” Recent developments in the interspiritual path of love, summarized below with a few brief examples, are working through these issues and pointing the way toward a universal path of love.

Religious exclusivism and the struggle for supremacy among religions is contrary to the teachings of every tradition. Scriptures from each major religion include injunctions that call for respect of other religions.“ Yet during religious conﬂicts, spiritual truths common to both warring parties are generally trampled underfoot. As the great Indian poet Kabir lamented in relation to conﬂicts between Hindus and Muslims, “O brethren! Allah and Rama are but different names for one and the same Being. The entire world is laboring under a great harmful delusion. One swears on the Veda, and another on the Qur’an. There is really no difference between these two paths. The two ﬁght each other over a name, and perish. The true Reality neither knows!”

Spiritual parallels between Hinduism and Islam are plentiful and deep, as reﬂected in the respective scriptures, the Bhagavad Gita and the Qur’an. The concept of the Godhead presented in these two scriptures is virtually identical, as is the injunction to worship only God, and none other. The parallel teachings are so numerous, and so strongly outweigh the differences between the two traditions, that scholar Pandit Sunderlal concludes “in regard to the basic duties of human life... and how to prosper in this life and attain salvation in the world to come, the Gita and the Qur’an hold but one and the same view.”1°

Terrorism and violence are against the teachings of every major faith tradition, and violence in all scriptures is admissible only as a last resort, and then only in self-defense. The ‘support’ for violence or war that is ascribed to both the Qur’an and the Bhagavad Gita can only be understood in the historical context when these scriptures were written. In both cases war was the last resort of a people facing total annihilation from an enemy bent on their destruction. Even Mahatma Gandhi, the great advocate of nonviolence, said that “where there is only a choice between cowardice and violence, I would advise violence... I would rather have India resort to arms in order to defend her honour than that she should, in a cowardly manner, become or remain a helpless witness to her own dishonor. .. But I believe that nonviolence is inﬁnitely superior to violence. ” Both the Gita and Qur’an teach the same. Contrary to widespread popular belief, the notion of Jihad as ‘Holy war’ appears nowhere in the Qur’an. Jihad means ‘effort’ required to advance spiritual development and social harmony, and except when facing a mortal danger, Muslims are commanded in the Qur’an to repel evil with something better, so that their enemy will become an intimate friend.

Deep spiritual parallels also hold between Christianity and Hinduism, where remarkable correspondences between the teachings and lives of Christ and Krishna are found but rarely highlighted. Both Jesus and Krishna are proclaimed as human Incarnations of the Divine. Jesus is one with God the Father, and Krishna is one with Purushottama, the Godhead. Each speaks in the ﬁrst person with the authority and word of God.

Both Christ and Krishna proclaim themselves to be the exclusive pathway to God. Jesus says “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes unto the Father except through me.” (John 14.6). Krishna makes a very similar proclamation in the Bhagavad Gita, e. g. “I am the Way, the Supporter, the Lord. I am the Father of the Universe” (9.18, 17). Yet there is no contradiction here. How can this be? The ‘I am’ that Jesus speaks of is ego eimi, the name that God declared of Himself to Moses. It is the eternal Divine voice that speaks through all prophets and saints in all cultures across the ages. This is why Jesus says “I am before Abraham was,” (John 8:58), even though Abraham lived centuries before Jesus. Krishna makes virtually identical anachronistic statements in the Bhagavad Gita. In the one case, Christ-merged-with-God speaks in the ﬁrst person through and as Jesus, and in the other case the Purushottama (Godhead) speaks through and as Krishna, who also uses the personal pronoun ‘I’. As theologian Ramon Panikkar explains, “Christ is the Christian symbol for the whole of Reality” and other religions use different names for this same Reality.” Christ and Krishna each affirms, in his own time and manifestation, the unique pathway to oneness with the Divine.

*A unique Interspiritual cross-fertilization takes place when two or more religions come together, and this is the vital work so urgently needed today.*

***Toward a Universal Path of love***

The examples presented above are but a small sample of many spiritual parallels to be found among Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam.”

We need not concern ourselves here with why these parallels exist, or what their origin is, although these are certainly legitimate questions. The point here is that these spiritual parallels are readily found by anyone who delves deeply into the respective traditions and scriptures, rather than be satisﬁed with the superﬁcial representation of religions presented in the media and certain academic and clerical formulations.

Different religions can be likened to the trees in a forest, which are completely alike and totally different at the same time. They are alike because they all have one trunk and multiple branches, they all sink roots into the same ground and draw water from the same invisible source, they all stretch vertically upward toward the one dazzling light above. Yet they are different because some have leaves, others have needles, some are deciduous, others are evergreens, and so on. Yet despite their many important and wonderful differences, trees are ultimately far more alike than they are different. So too with religious.

Important new bridges are being established here - between diverse religious traditions, between West and East and Middle East. These bridges span the enormous chasms of radically different cultures, traditions, and historical epochs. This gives new meaning to the (Christian) teaching that “Where two or more are gathered in My name, there I am also.” A unique interspiritual cross-fertilization takes place when two or more religions come together, and this is the vital work so urgently needed today. As Mirabai Starr puts it, “By saying yes to the best of our own heritage and entering the holiest grounds of one another’s faith traditions, we may be able to usher in an age of love.”

Taken together, the spiritual parallels outlined above point to a universal path of love that unites the human soul with the Inﬁnite. This resplendent path of the heart is found within the religious traditions, yet is ultimately independent and goes beyond every religion. The path is open to all, through the gateway of the heart. The religious traditions did not create this path; rather, the fact of this path precipitated the creation of the religions. The purpose of the traditions is to lay out this path clearly, and to support the soul in taking up the journey, nothing else. The religious traditions themselves are but pointers to the path. The actual journey can only be taken by the aspiring soul.

“God is humanity's secret. Humanity is God’s secret. This is the secret of secrets.” Ultimately we must each discover this secret ourselves, and take the plunge ourselves into ‘the dark silence in which all lovers lose themselves’ (Ruysbroeck). For in that dark silence is the Real, the Beloved, the One without a name — and never can we rest until we merge in union with That.