

Going beyond Religion to Spiritual Dimension of Civilization

By

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Abstract

This essay presents an unusual imaginary discussion that involves both fact and fiction. I call it *faction*, where factual information is infused with creative imagination. For a peaceful 21st century, I believe that we should provide a vision of going beyond all religions toward universal spirituality. First, this vision needs to be based on facts about the history or story of the major religions in terms of their origin as well as interpretations by the followers and their zest with which they broadcasted their unique doctrines and second it should be culled with creative imagination involving a dream, which might be construed as a wish or fantasy that is practical and which offers a hope of bringing a peaceful world order for the 21st century.

I begin with my experience of attending an inter-faith conference at one of the universities in the USA where accidentally, I was exposed to and participated in the Hindu, Jewish and Islamic prayers. This chanting of prayers together uplifted me from a mundane experience to something much higher aspired by many but experienced by a few lucky ones.

Taking this chanting of various religious prayers together and making it as a model for inter-faith dialogue, I construct an imaginary journey to the moon. Passengers are representatives of the major religions, who spend three days and three nights, confined in the same space, chanting their prayers five times a day for three days in the company of and in unison with the followers of other faiths, thus realizing the magnifying power of all prayers leading to a higher experience of the source. The reward for all of them is disclosed, when the rocket reaches the moon. As the door opens, all of these faithful come face to face with the founders of their particular religions. In their founders' presence, the faithful have to answer the question as to how they have interpreted and spread their unique religions. This personal encounter with their prophets enlightens and transforms them.

On their return journey to the earth, they start a dialogue among themselves and make a promise to spread the message of their founders, which is going beyond their limited views of religions to a universal spirituality thus bringing all humanity together so that they could enjoy a century of loving care and peace.

Introduction

A few years ago, I was attending an inter-faith conference on religion at one of the universities in the USA. Scholars and practitioners representing various faiths were given lodging in a dormitory at the university. I arrived late in the evening and was assigned a room adjacent to other speakers who had already been there and were resting up.

In the morning when I got up, after my usual cup of tea, I did my yoga exercises and then went on to take my shower. While in the shower, I followed my customary routine by chanting the Hindu *Gayatri Mantra* on *AUM*--the infinite consciousness expressing itself by creating the entire universe including human beings. This was followed by the second *mantra* on *Shanti* invoking peace within, on the earth and in the universe.

While I was absorbed in taking my shower and reciting these *mantras*, I became aware of chants coming from the next two rooms. One of them sounded like a Jewish prayer, while the other a Muslim one. As I recited quietly my *mantras* on creation and peace, I could hear the Jewish and Muslim prayers gently making their way through the small opening between the walls separating the rooms and the ceiling. It was such a gratifying experience that I started to recite the *Gayatri* and *Shanti mantras* aloud to synchronize with the other two prayers.

This was an unusually joyful occasion where I was engaged in the hearing of these three prayers at the same time. As a philosopher and human being, I started thinking about how wonderful it was that through these prayers I was able to lift myself up from the mundane limited ego-self toward the experience of something much higher.

What a delightful occurrence I thought? Would not it be a grand experience if all the religions could pray together in harmony, amplifying the total effect? Since it was possible in a dormitory setting, why not try it on a worldwide basis? Who is stopping us? What are the obstacles? Are these the founders or their books or the preachers or the followers of these religions? Who is in the way of this kind of cooperative prayer toward one almighty force or power or being?

My reading and understanding of the various religions indicated that the founders seemed to be very clear about their message. They were appealing to all human beings irrespective of their color, size, weight, and language as well as economic or social status. Their message was simple and clear: all human beings were created by the same spiritual force with the same brush, in diverse colors. I wondered what had gone wrong or why had we gone astray?

Full of these questions, my imagination offered a beautiful image of a rocket to the moon with such passengers as the Hindu Shankrachariya, the Buddhist Dalai Lama, the Taoist Priest, the head Jewish Rabbi, the Catholic Pope, and the Islamic Ayatollah. The rocket would be offering a free trip to all these advocates of religions, who with their limited understanding, had been faithfully conveying their grasp of the original ideas of the founders of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Taoism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

They were being flown free of charge to the moon. During their journey of three days and three nights, the only requirement would be to pray together five times a day each day for three days. When they would reach the moon, they would be getting a surprise of all surprises. Only if they honestly prayed together with a clean heart and mind, their highest wish would be fulfilled.

All of them wore identical space suits and breathed the air from the same confined space of the rocket. As the rocket lifted off, each one of them had to pray together for a safe lift off, pray together for a safe journey and pray together for a safe landing on the moon. When the rocket left the earth, all of them had to keep their eyes focused on the moon.

Finally, after three days and three nights, they arrived at their designated destination, the moon. To their biggest surprise, as the door of the rocket opened, they saw in front of them the sight of all sights. There on the soft and fluffy surface of the moon, were seated Krishna, Buddha, Mahavira, Lao Tzu, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, the founders of their religions.

Encountering the Prophets

In the back of the founders, there hung a big sign on a rainbow colored quilt with the following message:

“How have you been teaching the religion that I started?”

Since during their flight, they had experienced the weightlessness of their body and lightness of their being, they were feeling unencumbered by the hold of their past religious doctrines. While looking at their respective founding prophet, they felt dumb-founded. Their speechlessness was due to the fact that though they were learned they had understood very little of their founders’ teachings. They had been selfish and self-centered pushing their narrow ideologies on their followers/victims. Realizing that they had been ego-centric in their interpretation and preaching, all of them prostrated

themselves on the ground. While touching the feet of their founders, they asked for their forgiveness for misleading their followers throughout the historical journey of their respective religions.

While grasping only partially the kind of answer that would be appropriate for the question on the quilt behind the founders, the Rabbi looked at the Catholic Pope and Muslim Ayatollah and made the first comment:

“We three seated here represent the Abrahamic religions. Though by our followers, we might be regarded as learned, but because of our limited minds and miniscule grasp of your teachings, we might all be guilty of misinterpreting the word of our founders. We might have been misleading your followers and also might have treated the challengers of our religion unfairly by performing atrocities against them for which we are extremely sorry. How do we go about understanding and working with them?”

Sitting next to Jesus and Muhammad was Moses, who said in a powerful tone of voice; “You, the interpreters, have presented Jesus, Muhammad and I as the chosen ones to whom God had given a task of unifying diverse people, who were mean and hurtful to others by treating them badly and unjustly. You presented us as offering certain laws that were at the core of the human spirit. You also told the public that by following these positive principles of behavior, majority of people would be able to come together to care about each other. But at no time, I or Jesus or Muhammad declared that you should coerce people to follow our books or to put the fear of hell in them if they refused to abide by those rules or decline to read the book.” (Malhotra)

The Pope stood up in his elegant attire and with folded hands, while bowing before Moses, Jesus and Muhammad as well as looking at the Rabbi and the Ayatollah, he said; “We as the representatives of the monotheistic religion thought that we have understood the real teachings that were articulated in no uncertain terms by Moses and Jesus. Based on our education and understanding, we have been telling people that since the truth discovered by you, the founders, has been described in our scriptures, we tried to present your ideas as faithfully as possible. To convince the unbelievers and others, we have declared that our technique to be the only way to achieve a spiritually meaningful life.” (Malhotra)

Jesus, who had listened to the Rabbi and the Pope as well as Moses, spoke candidly; “But look at the fact that in your hearts, you knew that you had only a limited understanding of the truth that was revealed to the founders. However, you still went ahead because you were convinced with your interpretation of the founder’s grasp of truth. You had fought tooth and nail with each other and other religious believers and

are still fighting about your contrived understanding of the truth to convert them. This pronounced exclusiveness of religion as presented by you to the followers has been the basis of innumerable conflicts and carnage throughout the history of humanity. You have misunderstood our teachings and must put a stop to this merciless killing in our name. Look how you the interpreters have presented me (Jesus) historically to my followers that I died for the sins committed by the Romans and others. If you keep offering me in that fashion, I might have to die the second time for all the sins committed by all of my Christian interpreters.” (Malhotra)

Jesus continued; “You should refresh your historical memory. Christianity, which I started was a sect of Judaism during the first century AD and has close to 2 billion followers in 2013. I and my supporters, who constituted this group, were all Jews practicing Judaism of that time. In its beginning stages, my fellow faithful had modeled ourselves after Judaism by getting our inspiration from the Jewish scriptures, views on soul, life, death and beyond, mode of worship, and synagogue as a place of assembly. I intended no clash between the Jews and Christians. But, look at what you have done to this relationship.” (Malhotra)

With utmost reverence, the Pope spoke; “Let me be frank about the history. The hostility between Judaism and Christianity commenced, first, when the Jewish religion did not accept your lordship (Jesus) as a messiah and second, when, we the Christians interpreters held the Jews accountable for the Crucifixion of you--Jesus. We also badgered about other doctrinal issues that contributed to a further schism. We understand that Judaism was a strictly monotheistic religion as stated in the Ten Commandments with JHWH as the only God, who forbade the creation of its images! However, we the followers/interpreters modified this stern monotheism by asserting that the Spirit (God) became flesh through Jesus, our Lord, and salvation was possible only through the person of Jesus. Besides regarding Jesus as the only son of God, who was the messiah and the only way to salvation, we presented our own version of the Bible as the only book and its own methods of Baptism and Eucharist as the only ways to salvation.”(Malhotra)

In his gentle and compassionate voice, Jesus spoke again; “All of you have misinterpreted my teaching as stated by you so far. Moreover, you as interpreters had widened this rupture further when through the Gnostic branch of Christianity you ‘challenged the Jewish God and Old Testament by saying that the God of the Old Testament was not the true picture of God as found in Jesus. Theirs was the God of wrath and judgment whereas your own was the God of Love. This bitterness turned into hatred when in your Gospel, you “placed responsibility for (*My*) death upon the Jewish leaders and crowds who were there for the Passover. This laid the foundation

for anti-Jewish feeling and persecution that has lasted for over two thousand years. (Hopfe, p 383)

Consequently, throughout the history of Christianity (as created by my former interpreters and now you), almost all the Christian countries of Europe put restrictions on the Jews by making them to wear badges, placing them in the Ghettos, expelling them from their land and exterminating them through the most heinous means ever recorded in human history. A number of Jews, who were able to save themselves through the Diaspora, kept on moving from land to land for safety. This homeless wandering of the Jews for more than two thousand years finally ended with the creation of the country of Israel in 1948.

Through this systematic killing and domination of the Jews, you, the interpreters, showed a total disregard for the quintessential teachings of my “Sermon on the Mount,” which had emphasized inwardness, meekness, mercy and non-violence as paths to salvation. This vile and violent mind-set adopted by my so-called interpreters, who became the Christian crusaders and Christian monarchs of Europe, perverted my religion of love, kindness and compassion by turning it into “Christianity without Jesus.” Do you see what havoc you have brought to my gentle and humanistic approach to bringing humanity together so that they could live in peace and harmony and enjoy the gift of life?” (Malhotra)

As Jesus finished talking, Muhammad put in a few words of his own to his Ayatollah, who was the spokesperson for Islam; “As you are well aware, similar to Jesus and his Christianity, Islam is an off-shoot of the Abrahamic religion of Judaism. It started during the 7th century AD with a handful of my supporters, who wanted to unify many different religions promulgated by people of that time. There were more than 330 such religions with idol worship that benefitted the rich businessmen of that time. These businessmen were fleecing the innocent by offering them Spiritual Insurance Scam to tell people that if they bought their doctrine of life, death and after-life, they would live eternally. This was one of the biggest swindles created by these very shrewd businessmen. I wanted to put a stop to it so that all people would come together, live under one god and one code as brothers and sisters. To deal with this scam of polytheism, I offered the people one god-Allah and one messenger, who would unify them and offer them a concrete way.” (Malhotra)

In total awe, the Ayatollah sat down on his knees, while bowing before Muhammad, he said; “There is one God—Allah and you, Muhammad is his Rasul--Messenger. Let peace be on you! After uttering those words of respect, he continued: “We the followers of Islam have made it the fastest growing religion in the world. In 2013, there were more than 1.8 billion followers of Islam throughout the world making

it the youngest, simplest and fastest growing Abrahamic religion. Following the book of Quran, we presented Islam to your followers as a strict monotheism. We adhered to only one God-Allah, called by various names by other religions. Though God had revealed itself ‘to your fellow prophets such as Abraham, Moses and Jesus,’ it was to you, who received the ‘complete and final revelation.’ This had been recorded in the book of Quran, ‘the word of God.’ However, when you were blessed by Allah’s grace; you thought of yourself as an ordinary man and never as divine like the followers of Jesus made him so.” (Akyol: Islam without Extremes)

We do understand that there is a noticeable contrast between how the followers of Jesus advertised him and how we, the followers of Islam, have presented you (Muhammad) to the people: ‘Unlike the image of Jesus in Christianity, who as the Word of God; had existed since eternity and entered into history by becoming flesh,’ you, Muhammad, are just a human being. You are not the Word of God. You are a humble man touched by the Word of God. This is what Quran ordered you to state: ‘I am only a human being like yourselves; it is only revealed to me that your god is One God.’ (Akyol: Islam without Extremes)

The Ayatollah continued in a humble tone of voice; “With due reverence, we the believers presented you as a charismatic leader. We told the followers that you offered a strict monotheism that won the hearts of the ordinary people because your message was conveyed in an easy and understandable language. We simplified this message by presenting the five pillars of Islam consisting of the “recitation of the creed, daily prayer, almsgiving, fasting during the month of Ramadan, and pilgrimage to Mecca.” Since these obligatory principles were presented in an easy to remember language, it spread Islam like a wild fire throughout the world.’ (Hopfe p 446)

As your dedicated followers and interpreters, we presented the creed of Islam as involving only a few easy steps: accepting the Quran as the absolute word of God; reciting a simple daily prayer of ‘there is no god but Allah and Muhammad is his messenger,’ five times a day; an obligatory reciting of passages from the Quran at the time of birth, marriage and death; and believing in the promise of paradise on earth as well as in the principles of equality and freedom. (Malhotra)

After listening to the Ayatollah, Muhammad said in a calm tone of voice; “It was well and good to present Islam by using simple, clear and easy language to reach all the people. Infused with this simple doctrine, some of my proselytes went a bit too far. Some of you with an over-bubbling zeal spread the message of Allah peacefully while others with fanaticism and the force of arms extended it to the far corners of the earth. This extremism has evidently done a great deal of harm by killing a number of innocent people.

Moreover, look at what the interpreters of Christianity and Islam have done to each other and rest of the world. History stands as evidence to the injustice and atrocities done in the names of Jesus and Muhammad. The interpreters of Christianity and Islam have distorted the truth by presenting our religions in the past and even now as being egotistical and territorial.” (Malhotra)

While nodding his agreement with Muhammad, Jesus glanced at the Pope and said; “Look at the history of Christianity! I, Jesus have been presented as the only son of God exclusive of all the past, present and future human beings. This kind of presentation is twisting the facts. If you check out carefully some of the psalms, one of them clearly states that ‘all other human beings along with Jesus are equally the sons of god.’

You have not grasped or have totally ignored the message of St. Augustine, who in his *Confessions* admitted his folly when he uttered the following words; ‘I was walking through darkness...seeking you outside myself, and failed to find the God in my heart.’ Moreover, he confessed; ‘I was wrapped up in the knowledge of the externals—I learned about the books and scriptures but was not wise about the god within.’

“You, the interpreters have played havoc with our books by distorting the truth to fit your selfish desires and goals. To protect your unique territory, you have limited your grasp of the truth and salvation by believing only in your respective prophet, your book, your way, your doctrine, your god, and your outlook on life. If others are not with you, they are against you! However, this was never intended by us. Both of Muhammad and I preached non-violence, compassion, universal brotherhood but you and the former interpreters have done disservice to what we really stood for.” (Malhotra)

“Let’s look at the twisted missionary history of our religions as acted out by the followers of Christianity and Islam. There have been many clashes between the Christian and Islamic missionaries and most of them were not without bloodshed. While in the name of being our followers, these missionaries of the past had converted millions of people into Christianity and Islam, and all those who refused and could not escape, were taxed heavily or put to death. These egotistical crusaders of both of our religions, being high with their bubbling enthusiasm, presented themselves as the messengers of god and in whose name they indulged in bloodshed among all people including followers of competing monotheistic religions. This blind missionary passion pushed aside my meek and non-violent Christianity and left behind the peace-loving Islam avowing universal brotherhood. The Christian and Islamic fanatics of the past had converted our laudable religions into something very different from the way we,

the founders, had conceived them. By ignoring the original mission of both Jesus and Muhammad, the Christian and Muslim cohorts had equally presented to the world only cruel versions of our faiths, by converting Christianity into “Christianity without Jesus” and Islam into “Islam without Muhammad.” What a disaster you, the advocates, had brought to these wonderfully peaceful religions created by two very kind-hearted and decent persons!” (Malhotra)

Taken aback by the truth coming out of the mouths of both Jesus and Muhammad, with hands folded together, the Pope said; “We have been also guilty of hurting not only the followers of other religions but also the scientists whose views we took to be irreverent. Because of our limited understanding we put a few of them to death. Please help us so that we could understand and grasp the views of scientists, who might have been treated unfairly by us because they have been constantly shoving us in a corner.”

Jesus replied unequivocally to the inquisitive Pope; “My fellow Christian brother, listen to the scientists carefully. You can learn something from them. They might be able to provide you with a model so that you can help humanity during the 21st century. My views on the scientists and science are as follows; ‘Science is concerned with discovering the laws of the physical universe, whereas religion is committed to uncovering the laws of the spiritual world. Scientists conduct experiments to ascertain the laws of the external world; similarly, the religionists experiment to grasp the laws of the inner world. As different sciences contribute to providing a partial glimpse into the mystery of the material universe, so are the various religions contributing towards limited insights into the inscrutability of the spiritual world. Even when scientists idealize Newton, Einstein, Heisenberg, Hawking, Green or Higgs, they still regard them as providing only limited perspectives on the physical universe. Moreover, all scientific discoveries are put to the empirical tests and when falsified, scientists will modify them without killing their opponents.

However, you guys, the interpreters of my doctrine have selfishly killed innocent and decent scientists some of whom were as bright as I was. You have to stop this foolishness and learn from the scientists and the sciences. You have a very narrow-minded attitude towards the discovered wisdom. Listen to the scientists and imbibe their model! They openly admit that their discoveries are scratching only the surface of the vastness of the physical universe. When Newton discovered the law of gravitation, the laws of motion as well as grasped the relationship between space, time and motion, the admiring public rushed to congratulate him. Some of them were so impressed and taken in by the power of Newton’s brain that they thought that he had come closest to understanding the mind of God. When an admirer offered his highest accolade to Newton for knowing as much as God, the former said in a humble tone of voice: “with

all the knowledge I have gained, I feel like a small child, who is standing in front of the infinite ocean of knowledge, while picking up a few pebbles. That is humility per excellence!” (Malhotra)

“This kind of humility is also expressed by the most devout and revered of all catholic philosophers, Thomas Aquinas. When on his deathbed, implored by one of his closest friends Reginald of Piperno to finish his monumental works, Aquinas replied humbly; ‘I cannot because all that I have written seems like straw to me. “This is again an example of outstanding humility. You have to learn this from the scientists and theologians like Newton and Aquinas. Let this kind of humility be your model!”

The Catholic Pope and the Islamic Ayatollah were in a shock listening to the truth about the historical journey of their respective religions as presented by Jesus and Muhammad. They were totally taken aback by the fact that Jesus asked them to follow the model of science regarding acquired wisdom.

While they were feeling speechless, the Rabbi stood up and said in a meek tone of voice: “We have been persecuted all over the world: first by the Egyptians from whom Moses got us our freedom, then by the Christians in every country of Europe and then by the crusaders of Islam throughout the Middle East. Even today, these historical animosities are alive and are creating havoc for not only the Jews but all others who want to live in peace and harmony with their neighbors. We have had enough of this religious persecution at the hands of Christians and Muslims bigots as well as kings and monarchs of various countries throughout the world. We are living in the 21st century, where we would love to live in peace and harmony with people of all religions. Please help us so that we could circumvent these religious persecutions and conflicts and move on towards a more livable world.” (Malhotra)

At this juncture, the Buddha turned his compassionate glance towards the Rabbi as well as on all others, who had disembarked from the rocket. In his extremely gentle tone of voice, which could melt the hardest rock, the Buddha said: “Here is a conciliatory way. All of you, the interpreters and advocates of various religions, need to move toward a ‘One-World Spiritual Quest or Universal Spirituality.’ This in my opinion is the quintessence of all religions. The universal laws of the spirit have been revealed by the diverse religions through the revelations experienced by your respective prophets. Your task is to find them. You might be wondering how to reveal and then grasp these common laws of the spirit. Where to find these laws and how to uncover them? As Jesus said earlier, we might have to look toward the sciences. The scientific inquiry may offer a model. Similar to the experiments of the scientists, who discovered the physical laws and put them in the books of science, you can find the spiritual laws in the lives as lived by Krishna, Lao Tzu, Mahavira, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, and I as

well as other prophets. You can also find them in the books that we have left behind for you to read and interpret correctly with candor.

(Malhotra)

Our lives as the founders of these diverse religions reveal that we worked very hard and through our dedication and personal efforts we obtained a direct vision of reality. In this awe-inspiring moment, we realized the power and complexity of the cosmic-spiritual being and at the same time we comprehended our unique connection with and dependence on this spiritual power. Since it was a one-to-one bond with this immeasurable force, we, the spiritual experimenters, contemplated ways to repeat this splendid relationship with our source. Through our personal lives, which were lived in total dedication, we discovered certain laws, which were pathways to reaching this bondship with the ultimate spiritual power. (Malhotra)

In your quest for converting others in your way of half-baked understanding and thinking, you have forgotten to contemplate on the lives of your religious founders. If each one of you tried to live like the way the founder of your religion lived, you would be able to discover at least one important truth/principle relating to the spirit. (Malhotra)

When I presented my thoughts in the *Dhammapada*, I spoke of compassion (*Karuna*) and love for others as the core principle that would bring people together by expressing their genuine humanity. Here is Mahavira, the prophet of the Jains, who devoted his life to teaching people the notion of the sanctity and sacredness of all life and emphasized the acquiring of an attitude of non-violence (*Ahimsa*) and reverence towards all creatures. Guru Nanak of Sikhism had stressed the meaning of life could be found through devoting oneself to the service (*Seva*) of others. Look at Jesus of Christianity, who as the embodiment of compassion-in-action (*Holy Spirit*) took upon himself the sufferings of others. The core message of Mohammad of Islam was the idea of universal brotherhood and patience (*Sabr*). He asserted time and again that all of us were siblings, children of one almighty Allah. Here is Krishna of Hinduism, who offered the path of selfless service (*Nishkam Karma*) as the meaning of life as well as the way to salvation.” (Malhotra)

With a calm demeanor, while agreeing with the Buddha, the Mahavira of Jainism glanced at the visitors from the earth and spoke with soft voice; “You must be wondering how you, who have been so conditioned by your definite interpretation of your unique book, could inculcate these laws of the spirit, which are so candidly presented by the Buddha? Let me give you the example of Gandhi, who not only understood them but put them to practice in all the spheres of his life.

Gandhi had read the basic books of the different religions but took the next major step of grasping the lives as lived by the founders of these religions, which most of you had not done. *By studying our lives as the founders of religions and by identifying himself with us*, Gandhi was able to grasp experientially the truth as we received and lived it. He then went on to adopt this truth of the spirit, which was that of non-violence (*Abimsa*) in thought, action and deed.

Furthermore, he molded non-violence (*Abimsa*) to reach all people by displaying it through political and social reform movements. In his personal and social life, Gandhi abridged all these spiritual principles into two main components. He believed that people come to religion to seek salvation, which was possible through enlightenment and the knowledge of god.

As a social reformer, when Gandhi was asked ‘How can one become enlightened?’ and his answer was ‘By serving everyone.’ And ‘How can one know god?’ His answer was ‘By feeding everyone.’ This, for Gandhi, was the core message of all the religions and their founders. In his personal life, Gandhi adopted the motto of ‘finding oneself, by losing oneself in the service of others,’ which for him was the authentic way to experience the all encompassing spiritual consciousness as displayed by the founders of religions.” (Malhotra)

Listening intensively to all the devoted interpreters and prophets, the Hindu Shankrachariya bowed before Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, Buddha, Mahavira and Lao Tzu, and then prostrated himself on the dusty ground of the moon. While holding on to Krishna’s feet, to pay his respects, he sat down on the ground to speak; “During the past 40 years, I have taught the ideas of the *Bhagavad Gita* to thousands of people indicating that each one of us is born to do a specific task assigned to us by God Krishna, your lordship. We are born on this earth to discover this task, obtain knowledge about it, and perform this task with full passion and love without asking anything in return. I have also made an attempt to follow the central ideas of Hinduism emanating from the *Vedas* that there is only one spiritual reality, people offer various interpretations and there is only one truth, and many paths lead to it.

I could have followed your command from the *Bhagavad Gita* stating that all people come to you even when they follow diverse paths. It is clearly stated by you in the *Bhagavad Gita* that it does not matter, who you are or what caste you belong to or who you follow, in the end, all human beings come to the Krishna’s abode.

Though I have grasped this teaching and conveyed it to others as clearly and honestly as I could, but I have not put it into practice in my own life. I have followed the caste system as advocated by the Hindu lawgiver, Manu. I have stayed within my

own caste by marrying people from within as prescribed by the laws of Manu. My friends are all from my caste and I have discriminated against the lowest caste and especially the untouchables. There were times when my conscience--the silent self bothered me about the unfair treatment given to the untouchable and others of lower castes by my friends and people of the higher castes. But I did nothing to stop it.

On seeing you in person and touching your feet, my entire being is transformed. Please help me understand what is remiss in my grasp of your teaching so that when I return to the earth, I could treat all castes equally and all people as your children who are my brothers and sisters.”

After listening to the Shankrachariya giving his understanding of Hinduism and the *Bhagavad Gita* but never putting their ideas into practice, Krishna looked at his confused face and said in an understanding tone of voice; “You along with all the Brahmin priests of the past have misunderstood the caste system by presenting it as four water-tight compartments of the society. You have misinterpreted the books of the *Vedas*, and the poem on *Purusha*, the cosmic person with whom you identify me. In this poem, it is stated that all the four castes of the society have been formed out of the *Purusha's* body: the *Brahmins* (scholars) from the head, the *Kshatriyas* (warriors) from the shoulders and chest, the *Vaishayyas* (Merchants) from the belly and the *Shudras* (workers) from the hips, thighs and legs. Like the human body, a society is an organic whole. Similar to the body where all its four parts are essential and equal in importance, so is the case with the four castes of the society. By presenting castes as four water tight compartments of society you have restricted movement from one to the other.

By creating a hierarchy through treating the upper three as higher castes, you have been maltreating the *Shudras* as the lowest caste or out-caste, and have done havoc to this classification of the society. You the *Brahmins* (scholars) along with your upper class buddies, *Kshatriyas* (warriors) and *Vaishayyas* (merchants) have performed heinous acts against the *Shudras* and especially the lowest of them called the *untouchables*. You had been extremely cruel to them by not only not providing any education, but regarding them worse than filth. Though you, yourself, refused to do the dirty work of cleaning your own latrines, picking up dead animals and sweeping the streets, you assigned these filthy tasks to the *Shudras*. Then you took the next totally inhumane step by calling them *untouchables* because they did your dirty work. History stands as evidence to this cruelty because now with a population of 1.2 billion people in India, you have created a class of more than 200 million people, who are without education and are the poorest of poor. This is due to your misinterpretation as well as misunderstanding of the class system as presented by me. You must put a complete stop to this treatment of your own people, who like all of you are part of the body of the cosmic person, presented by you as *Me*.”

Krishna, still looking at the Shankrachariya with probing eyes, uttered a message of utmost importance to him and all the other faithful as follows: “While reading the *Vedas*, *Upanishadas* and *Bhagavad Gita*, you along with all other scholars, got so hung up on information that you forgot that truth was not a matter simply of knowledge but of action. All of you, the faithful interpreters of your respective scriptures, have a similar problem. You might know the truth as stated in the scriptures but do not know how to live this truth intensely. You are as guilty as the fellow interpreters of other faiths.

All of you, who are the interpreters of the various religions, have been propagating and pontificating about knowing the good, which is a laudable goal but vacuous when not converted into action. It is like “talking but never walking your talk.” You talk about knowledge but never live your knowledge. Knowledge becomes wisdom only when you live it otherwise it is like cash sitting under your pillow, which is worthless because it is stagnating.

Let your life be your message! Let you be the change you want to see in others! This is what made Gandhi a great person, bigger than life. That is why he was called the Mahatma, a spiritual being having human experiences. He followed these two messages to a tee by walking his talk and making his life his message. Gandhi, in his own way, followed some of the insights of the life of St. Augustine, who had asserted: “Man is so created that he has no option but to love: to orient his being to some object, principle, person, with ultimate devotion. The goal of this love is god.” (Augustine: City of God)

“But look at yourself! What you have done to this laudable notion! All of you are so self-centered that you have twisted your religious doctrines.

God resides in all of you irrespective of who you are! If you cannot see god in a living child, who is suffering from mal-nutrition, is enfeebled by hunger or lying helplessly on the ground asking for assistance, you have not understood the quintessence of religion. When you ignore this child by going directly to a temple to bow before a marble statue or straight to a Church to pay homage to a cross, you are ignoring the opportunity to get in touch with the real living god in the child. You have ignored this living experience of god, once, twice and many times. Now it has become your habit, which you find very hard to break!

What has gone wrong is the fact that you have been ignoring this lived truth of god’s presence by going towards knowledge of it? Wake up and set your shoulders to the wheel of time! Your life is a hanging bridge that connects your birth with death—a drop in the bucket of time.”

While looking straight at the Shankrachariya, Krishna implored further; “Wake up to the misery and suffering of people. If you want to see *Me* and experience *Me*, you will find *Me* when you relieve the suffering of a dying man, woman or child. Do something by discarding your selfishness and performing a compassionate act toward others. In this very act of concern, you will see the Buddha, Jesus or Krishna. It is the act not the knowledge that opens up the vista of salvation.

Each one of you is born as good. But you have turned this god-given goodness into something lower than good. Sex is naturally good, but it becomes evil when it takes the place of god by becoming the main pre-occupation of one’s life. Similarly when the love is directed towards money, fame and power, it corrupts the person by lowering him from loving god to loving mere matter and a mere reverberation in his mind. This is a self-inflicted wound about which Dante was talking about when he presented man in limbo—stressed out because he is neither here nor there. The 21st century person is caught up in anger, gluttony, treachery and selfishness and therefore unable to separate oneself from these attachments. He is confused about the nature of right and wrong.

This is conducive to conflict between one’s real nature and one’s acquired self constructed by one’s religious and cultural upbringing. The silent one, which is our real self sits, watches and observes the noisy self that is caught up in desiring and acquiring—forever running after various objects of the world—never being satisfied—never content—always stressed out—remaining in the state of limbo.”

‘Let me give you the ancient story of two birds told in the *Upanishad* to convey this very important message:’

“The *Upanishads* tell the story of two identical birds sitting on two different branches of a tree. One bird sits on the top branch, just witnessing by letting the world be whereas the other, enmeshed in the excitement of the tree, jumps from one branch to another indulging in satisfying its inexhaustible curiosity. When the active bird sees a fruit, desires it, rushes towards it, eats it, calls it sweet and enjoys it. Excited by its charm, the bird repeats this experience by jumping to another fruit, bites it, eats it, finds it sour, and though disappointed by its taste, still goes after another. To keep its excitement going, the bird tries out the next fruit that turns out to be tasteless.

As the active bird expends its energy on the sweet, sour and tasteless fruits, it wonders why the bird on the top is not indulging in this excitement. By desiring and tasting the diverse fruits, the active bird keeps moving up. As the energetic bird reaches the top, it is surprised to find the other bird is identical to its own self. The two happen to be one and the same.

The two birds metaphorically depict the nature of a human being to be outwardly a disturbed awareness and inwardly a calm witnessing consciousness. However, you have been brought up to believe the stressed out self to be your real self, which it is not. In actuality, your real nature is the calm-serene-joyful consciousness, also called the silent self. This silent self is the source of all the inner values of love, compassion, patience, fairness and forgiveness that are commonly shared by all human beings. As the history of the various religions indicates, instead of guiding yourselves and your followers to take the inward journey toward the spiritual calmness, you the faithful were guided by selfish motivation of having the largest number of followers for your brand of religion. This led the zealots in each religion to identify their religious beliefs with the disturbed self—the talkative one. This competition for having a huge following also was responsible for numerous fights among the diverse religions leading to the forgetfulness of inculcating the inner values that make up the core of a human being.

The 21st century human being, who is the product of this religious up-man-ship is fixated on a deep craving for name, fame, fortune and power by identifying himself with the noisy self consisting of one's beliefs and values including the religious ones. All this emphasis on the outwardly power has produced the most stressed out human being in history. One of the major outcomes of being in stress is to exist in limbo where one lives a lie that one is self-created, self-sustained and self-dependent which is not the case.”

While continuing with a firm tone of voice Krishna spoke; “When we look at the history of each religion as practiced by the followers, I see a pattern. In the name of their prophets whether it is the Buddha, Mahavira, Lao Tzu, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad or *Me*, you have been playing selfish-games. You have played them in the guise of name, fame, fortune and power. Through domination and winning, you have converted many followers to your way of perceiving the truth. You have played these finite religious games for your selfish pleasure involving selfish gain and self-aggrandizement. To win as many followers over to your way of believing, you have inflicted pain on those who did not give their accent to you. At a social level, you have fought wars to subjugate others to your way of thinking and believing. While inflicting pain on others, you had totally forgotten that you were born not to dominate others but to form an I-Thou relationships by treating others as your brothers and sisters, who have the same feelings, goals and aspirations. They are like you in seeking happiness while avoiding pain. It hurts them as much as it hurts you when someone inflicts pain on you. These selfish-finite religious games are played for winning and when one wins the game ends. But your history as the interpreters of religious beliefs shows that you were never tired of playing these finite games through which you converted many people by using non-violent or violent or other devious means.

But these selfish finite games were not intended by your prophets. When they had their mystical/enlightening experience, they gained a universal/infinite perspective that involved growth and openness leading to progressive and continuous game of life. They wanted you to help each other through inter-subjective cooperation by forming positive relationships to enhance the entire organic structure of society as well as humanity to reach new and constructive heights for all humanity.

Social roles are played as part of the organic whole where each part is essential and makes up the total family or the fabric of humanity. These roles are for the enhancement of others and in turn, the society will enhance the individual. They are played not for the love of power but through the power of love to improve each other. He, who plays this role selflessly, emerges as a person, who is a part of a family, which in turn is a part of a community and that in turn is a part of humanity. (Roger Ames: Keynote Speech, ASDP, Houston, March 2014)

Your prophets wanted you to be guided by the selfless principle that ‘when I want to make progress, I should first help you to make progress. When I want to be recognized, I should first help you to become recognized. When I want to become famous, I should first help you to become famous. Their motto was: ‘I am when you are. I depend on you and you on me. We depend on each other.’”

Krishna continued; “I want to convey to all of you that you have mistakenly given extraordinary prominence to reason. Reason though important is only part of the totality of human experience. You needed it to make progress from the darkness of the Middle Ages to the light of the new age. Reason was a wonderful light of hope to open up a window of light to see beyond the all enveloping path of darkness. It was like a firefly that provided the much needed light for a few years to guide you through the darkness of human history of the middle ages. Though it was much needed to dispel the darkness, some of the outspoken followers of it have made it monopolistic--by giving it an exclusive place—one part controlling all other parts of the human experience. I think that it reduced a human being by defining it only in terms of rationality. It is a philosophical fallacy where reason becomes the monarch dictating its terms to all other aspects of experience—that is working through the logic of contraries telling all others either you are with me or against me. Either follow my way or take the highway.” (Roger Ames: Keynote Speech, ASDP, Houston, March 2014)

“When, you the followers of a religion, understand reason in this manner, you make it ‘the be all and end all of all discourse and relationships.’ This leads to total selfishness and self-centeredness where you ask every follower to pray through your book and your savior as well as pay homage to your way of life thus stratifying and

splintering the *organic unity* of which your prophets were the living embodiments. This fallacy of the followers of each religion is similar to the imaginary struggle within the human body where: when the apple, the hand, the mouth, the teeth, the esophagus, and the stomach start arguing with each other about who is the most important for the well being or survival of the person. The stomach feels that it is doing all the work and is most important irrespective of the contributions made by the apple, the hand that picked it up and brought it to the mouth, the teeth that chewed it, the tongue that moved it and provided the saliva, the esophagus that made a passage for it to the stomach and then the stomach that soaked it with the chewed mesh by flooding it with its juices to produce the vital energy for the life of the human being.

If any of the components of this organic relationship stopped, the process of creating life-giving energy would also stop. All of them have contributed to producing this energy so that the human being could live. Each one has played a uniquely essential role, which is interlinked to making the body healthy. If any of them stopped doing its work, the entire organic inter-relationship of life and its growth would stop and the organism would die. Thus the message of your prophets has been that each of you is unique in providing life to the social organism. There is no isolated individual. All of you are in it together. Therefore, all of you should see to it that you let the boat of life float and not sink.”

The Taoist Priest, who had been patiently listening to all other advocates of various faiths and had remained silent, stood up. With a smile on his face, he said; “We had two founding grand masters, who understood this bickering among people of faith long time ago. However, I am delighted to see in person our great Master Lao Tzu, whose company I am fortunate to grace on the surface of the moon. So far what I have heard from Krishna’s enlightening speech and rest of you, reminds me of an astute thinker of India, who confronted a similar situation long time ago.”

Here is his story that is pertinent to this august gathering; Vivekananda, a great sage-scholar of India, was invited to attend an inter-faith dialogue in the USA. Various speakers representing the monotheistic religions stood up to speak passionately about salvation only through their savior, their book and their method. Vivekananda listened to their fanatical speeches attentively. When his turn came at the end, he stood up to tell the following story: ‘Once there lived a frog in a well. He would move around from one side to the other with great ease. He knew when the sun rose and light flashed into the well, when the sun was high at noon and when it set in the evening. It was comforting to know the world of the well in which the frog lived. One day, a traveler, who was passing by felt thirsty. He dropped the empty bucket into the well to fetch some water. When the bucket was full, he pulled it up. The frog was trapped in the

bucket. As the stranger saw the frog in the water, he picked it up and threw it on the side of the well, drank his water and walked away.

The frog, who was never out of that well, found himself in the new surroundings. Though exciting, it was a frightening new world that was much larger than the one he knew throughout his life.

He was energized to see the world extended from the well to infinity as far as the eye could see. But it was also frightening for him because of the unknown territory that lay ahead of him. He was tempted to discover it but also anxious to get back to the security of the well.”

Lao Tzu, who was just observing and watching and who had also not said a word, finally spoke: “This frog story is our story. It is the story of each of our religions. We are all brought up in our own narrow tradition like the frog in the well. But when we come out of our well that confines us, we would see that the world outside the well offers infinite possibilities. Though they are frightening, yet they are exciting. We are thoroughly knowledgeable about a small territory, which is comforting but confining. When we feel the freedom, it opens up startling new possibilities of a promise of immeasurable nature with infinite secrets! We then experience the boundless *Tao* beyond a restricted perspective that we impose upon our view of reality.”

Addressing to Moses, Jesus, Mohammad, and the Buddha, Lao Tzu continued: “All of you, the respected prophets, who are present here get my reverence in regard to your contributions to humanity, and yet I think that when you were growing up in your specific geographic environment, you were limited by it. All of you were learned people but not wise. It is when Moses experienced JHVH in the burning bush and got the ten commandments, when Jesus was enlightened through Christ and got inspiration for his Sermon on the Mount, when Muhammad through the Angel Gabriel, composed the Quran, and when the Buddha was enlightened under the Banyan tree, these experiences moved all four of you from being *learned* to *wise* because you went through an extraordinary event. When it hit you, you were going through a colossus experience that of infinite spiritual consciousness. This is the experience of the *Tao*, which I have been talking about. But the talk is futile because the *Tao* is metaphorically an un-carved block—the *Te* within each person. You may call it the silent self, who is always watching and sending instructions to be good and nice to each other as well as enjoy life and nature, which are full of secret lessons. Most of you, the faithful, do not listen to the advice of this silent self (*Te*) because you are overwhelmed by the noisy self contributed by your religion, society and culture.

All your learning constitutes this noisy self. But to be learned does not make one wise and to be wise does not make one learned. A well-frog cannot visualize the great vastness of the waters of the ocean, just like a summer insect is unable to envision the ice. Similarly, a scholar who is trapped by the network of his concepts (learning) is far-removed from the experience (wisdom) of the *Tao*. Please bear in mind the following as guiding principles; ‘Knowledge comes from understanding others, whereas wisdom comes from understanding oneself and second that you are ordinary like other ordinary people but keep in mind that you are centered on the *Tao* rather than on yourself.’ Adhering to these principles might help you to get away from selfishness towards understanding of and uniting with fellow human beings.”

After listening to the gracious Krishna, Buddha, Mahavira, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, and Lao Tzu as well as the Pope, Rabbi, Ayatollah, Taoist Priest and Shankrachariya, the Dalai Lama stood up. With folded hands, he said *namaste* to all of them indicating through this symbol that they were all siblings in whom the same blood flowed. With a gentle smile on his face, the Dalai Lama said; “I have a suggestion that might help us to grasp and resolve these religious conflicts by going beyond them. In my humble opinion, I believe that the 21st century needs to move from a particular religious consciousness towards an all-encompassing spiritual-consciousness by making selfless service to humanity the goal of each religion. In the development of this kind of humanitarian consciousness lies the hope of a new one-world-spiritual-peaceful-order in the future.”

“In my short life span, I have tried to reach as many people as possible from different religious persuasion. Through the spoken and written word, I have tried to bring humanity together. In my most recent book on *“Beyond Religion: Ethics for a Whole World,”* I have attempted to offer my humble insight into spirituality for the 21st century. Though I am a political head without a country, Nobel laureate professing peace and a Buddhist monk practicing non-violence (*Ahimsa*), I propose *a universal ethics for the whole world that transcends all religions, conceptions of god and yet offers a moral plan for all humanity.* Since globalization has brought people out of their isolation by creating interconnectedness and multicultural societies, ethics based on a particular religion, would not appeal to some of us or not be meaningful for all. Instead, our century needs an ethics that ‘makes no recourse to religion’ and yet appeals to all faiths and those without any: *a secular ethics that will serve the inner needs of all humanity.*”

Dalai Lama continued with his humble offering; “After listening to all of you, my views may seem ‘strange coming from someone who from the very early age has lived as a monk in robes. Yet I see no contradiction here. My faith enjoins me to strive for the welfare and benefit of all sentient beings, reaching out beyond my own tradition, to those of other religions and those of none.’ I propose a secular ethics inclusive of all

people with or without faith, because ‘all human beings are basically inclined or disposed toward what we perceive to be good, appreciate kindness of others and oriented toward basic human values of love and compassion.’ It is my ‘firm opinion that we have within our grasp a way, and a means, to ground inner values without contradicting any religion and yet, crucially, without depending on religion.’”

“Furthermore, I am proposing the development and practice of a new vision that promotes ‘the need for secular ethics and inner values in the age of excessive materialism.’ Since grounding ethics on a particular religion (with due respect to all of you) is no longer adequate in the 21st century, we need to think about spirituality and ethics beyond religion.

I have been the most unusual guest in India, residing there since 1959 when the Chinese took over Tibet. I admit that I had been brought up both physically and spiritually on Indian food and the writings of the Indian Buddhists.

In order to find the most inclusive secular ethics for the 21st century, I delved into the Indian and Western views on secularism. I model my secularism after the Indian King Ashoka, who in 261 B.C. emphasized the importance of interfaith dialogue by regarding all human beings as the children of one god. Following its unique historical background, today’s India adheres to secularism that implies ‘mutual tolerance and respect for all faiths as well as for those of no faith.’ In contrast, the Western secularism developed as a scientific rational movement clashing with religious superstition where the two regarded each other ‘as belonging to opposing positions—leading to considerable suspicion and hostility.’ As a man of religion, I opt for the Indian view of secularism, which is inclusive of all human beings, and thus closer to my heart.

While I have only limited understanding but still I believe that though human beings can manage without religion, they cannot live without inner values emanating from spirituality. In my opinion, spirituality has two dimensions: first relates to our innate human nature predisposing us towards compassion (*Karuna*), kindness and caring for others and second hails from religious beliefs and practices towards life here and now and life after. The difference between the two dimensions is like between water and tea. Ethics and inner values without religion are like water that is essential for life whereas when you color it with religion it is like tea that garnishes the water. We can live without tea but not without water. Thus I humbly assert: ‘we are born free of religion but not born free of compassion.’ Therefore more fundamental than religion is our basic human compassion or spirituality.

In order to cultivate spirituality, I believe that we should look into human nature carefully. Here we will find that our shared humanity of aspiration to happiness and

avoidance of pain and our interdependence as human beings are the two pillars of secular ethics. Our desire for happiness depends upon three factors of wealth, health and companionship. When pursued selfishly, all these three bring about only temporary external gratification. However, for lasting inner fulfillment and peace, we need to cultivate these by sharing our riches with others, promoting others health and offering them friendship.

Such personal qualities as patience, contentment, self-discipline, generosity and the delight of charitable giving that enrich the inner values could be cultivated through daily meditation in action. My hope as a Buddhist and as a humble human being is that these qualities belonging to the heart could be infused in the education of the younger generation of the 21st century, thus leading to a moral world for all humanity.

During this time of religious turmoil where more people are turning to *spirituality* by getting away from organized religions, with the grace of the Buddha, I wrote this book on “*Beyond Religion: Ethics for a Whole World.*” Though the book is a good start toward making clear the vision of *one-spirituality* for all, it will require well- tried-out meditative methods to take humanity from belief in exclusive hold on truth toward inclusiveness. Moreover, it will necessitate breaking one free of centuries of conditioning imposed by the preachers and followers of each religion to look upon their religious faith as offering only one among many paths leading to the realization of this *universal spirituality.*”

Dialogue among Faithful

The Hindu Shankrachariya, the Buddhist Dalai Lama, the Taoist Priest, the Jewish Rabbi, the Catholic Pope and the Islamic Ayatollah, observed each other with a fresh look and like frogs out of their wells, started talking to each other.

The Pope was the first one to speak to the group: “Let’s start a dialogue with an open mind and an open heart. Let’s also consider seriously the two central issues offered to us by our founders. As I understand it, the issues were as follows: ‘Our prophets conveyed to us in no uncertain terms that we were members of a single humanity whose goal it was to live together in peace during the 21st century and after. This was to be accomplished first, through scrutinizing our scriptures the way scientists view their acquired wisdom and cooperating with them and second, by going beyond all our specific religions in the direction of universal spirituality. To accomplish these tasks would require soul-searching and reflection so that we could make a move from exclusiveness toward inclusiveness.’”

With a gentle tone of voice, the Hindu Shankrachariya pointed out that in the Vedas, this idea of inclusiveness was conveyed through the statement: “*Ekam Sad Vipra Bahuda Vedyanti,*’ meaning that truth is one whereas scholars will offer various interpretations or there are different paths to the same truth. This idea is at the basis of the human spiritual quest. Just as all the rays of light are linked to the sun as their source and all the rivers flow toward the waters of the earth’s ocean, all humanity is connected inextricably to its spiritual source.”

The Rabbi joined in the dialogue by speaking in a humble tone of voice; “Finally my eyes are opened up! Now I can see clearly. When Moses had heard God speaking to him from behind the burning bush, when Jesus was touched by the Holy Spirit and Muhammad was visited by the Angel Gabriel, all of them experienced the touch of infinity, the spiritual source. It was unlike the rational finite experience, which you and I live with each day. This revelatory experience of the infinite spiritual source raised our founders from the mundane to a colossal-experienced perspective. During those moments, they not only touched the Holy Spirit but became the Infinite Spiritual Consciousness. This vision, by breaking all the limited barriers, offered them a universal view of interconnectedness of all finite things having the same source as their origin. This unified view must have been so intense that they like the lover felt the entire universe and people in it as their beloved that needed to be loved with the same intensity as their beloved.

Furthermore, they must have felt that they were the children emanating from the same source. As brothers and sisters, formed from the same guts, bones and blood, they were powered by the same Holy Spirit. In this mystical moment their finite being must have participated in the delight of not only feeling identity with but also becoming the infinite spiritual source.

Now, I understand more clearly, what God was trying to convey to Moses when he said; “I am that I am.” Through this statement/experience, God was transmitting to him that the “I” was the spark of JHVH—within each human being as their silent self—their *conscience*. This *conscience* was made up of the ten-commandments, the revered moral laws residing in each human being as their guiding principles. Now I have a clearer perspective on when Jesus was touched by Christ, he must have also experienced the infinite spiritual self expressing itself through the words he uttered during his “Sermon on the Mount.” Like Moses’ Ten Commandments, Jesus must have had a revelation that these principles resided at the core of each human being, making up the substance of the silent self or one’s *conscience*. This is also evident in Muhammad’s revelation when touched by God. He too must have experienced the moral principles as part of the *Rub-the Holy Spirit*.

On further reflection, it is clear to me that Muhammad was not talking about himself as a messenger in his physical form but as a *Rub*-the *Holy Spirit*, which in and through him communicated the commandments of: one God Allah, the *Rub* or the *Holy Spirit* as the messenger of universal brotherhood; patience or *Sabr* in all matters and service to all human beings; prayer toward the creator five times a day; and visit to the holy land once in one's life time."

The Ayatollah, who was undergoing his own soul searching, spoke in a gentle tone of voice; "After meeting our founders and all of you, I feel I have been awakened from deep slumber. Now, I am also able to see more clearly! Moses, Jesus and Muhammad were the three messengers of the same *Holy Spirit* teaching about the moral laws they had experienced during their enlightenment. They not only touched this truth but assimilated it in their own beings. On the other hand, we the followers, calling ourselves the learned ones, created the scriptures by offering interpretations that we enforced on others. Those who refused to follow us were tortured. We changed the founders' infinite mystical, unifying, laudable experience into finite, divisive and painful one. This deviation from the original experience of our masters is clearly evident in the history of our respective religions resulting in violence, hatred and domination. We need to transcend these differences by staying very close to our founders' insights."

At this juncture, the Dalai Lama spoke with gentility: "Our face to face encounter with our founders has awakened us to our ignorance as manifested in our interpretations of their teachings. Let's go back to our source of inspiration—the emphasis on the moral laws. It is time to understand them, follow them and teach them to ourselves and to all human beings. Because we have seen our prophets, I see in the eyes of all of us, enthusiasm and care, overflow of love and compassion, devoid of all selfishness and self-aggrandizement. We are willing and ready to spread the message of universal spirituality by going beyond our specific paths. Let's pledge that we are going to unite all humanity by giving them universal laws of the spirit, which as displayed in the life's of our prophets are: love, compassion, understanding, patience, universal brotherhood, fairness, justice and forgiveness. Let's further take a promise to live by these moral laws ourselves and offer them to all human beings inhabiting the earth who are not only our siblings but brothers and sisters."

Deeply touched by the sentiments of unity as expressed by the Hindu Shankrachariya, the Pope, the Rabbi, the Ayatollah and the Dalai Lama, the Taoist Priest, showing exhilarated excitement and humility as if the drama of the universe was unfolding in front of his eyes, spoke; "I pay my due respects to all of you, who spoke so eloquently about the insights of the founding prophets of your respective religions. I see a commonality of this extra-ordinary experience among Moses, who heard JHVH's voice behind the burning bush, Jesus being touched by Christ and Muhammad by Allah.

All of them, when experienced this ineffable source, tried to capture this extraordinary experiential occurrence through the network of ordinary concepts and category. Since this was the experience of the indescribable Tao, they tried to grasp it through the language of their respective cultural heritage by calling it JHVH or Christ or Allah.

All these linguistic attempts at conveying the essence of the ineffable Tao were genuine efforts and they indicated a direction toward this infinite spiritual source. Though these were laudable attempts, they were incapable of capturing the real/eternal Tao. However, these extraordinary experiences transformed the lives of the prophets, which they tried to convey to their followers.”

The Taoist Priest continued: “Through their extraordinary experience, these founders provided us with three basic insights: first, there is one infinite reality or truth or spiritual source of all. Prophets, who experienced this reality, were transformed by it and tried to describe it while capturing only a slice of it through their description; second, this spiritual source resided in each human being and was variously described as the ‘signature of the creator,’ ‘divine spark,’ ‘stamp of the creator,’ ‘Atman,’ ‘Purusha,’ ‘Ruh,’ ‘Holy Spirit,’ and ‘Voice of JHVH,’ and third, this spiritual resident within each human being was the abode of all moral laws, to guide our journey on this earth.”

The Rabbi spoke with candor, while trying to relate it to the prophets; “After my encounter with Moses, I have been thinking about the essence of his ten commandments, which to me turns out to be ‘treating all human beings as belonging to a caring and loving family where all of us should help each other to realize the togetherness that Moses had experienced.”

The Pope added his understanding of the essence of the spiritual message experienced by Jesus when he delivered his ‘Sermon on the Mount:’ “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Perform acts of kindness for others as you would like to have acts of kindness done to you. Furthermore, when you replace the love for power with the power of love, you will bring peace to the world.”

The Ayatollah, who was all spirited up added what he thought Muhammad might have felt coming out of the cave after 40 days and 40 nights. He summed up Muhammad’s spiritual experience as conveyed through his *conscience* as follows: “There is only one ultimate power of the universe called Allah but is called by many names and where everyone and everybody is part of its creation. We, the human beings, constitute a family of brothers and sisters. Since we are all siblings with similar needs, goals and aspirations, we need to be patient and help each other in becoming part of a happy, healthy and spiritual family. Like the bees, we are all connected together to produce the

most flavorful honey of unity and peace so that each one of us could enjoy the nectar of good life together on earth and hereafter.”

Philosopher’s Attempt at Synthesis

After saying farewell reluctantly to their esteemed prophets, the faithful return to the rocket that was to bring them back to their home, the earth. As they put on their space suits to get seated in their appropriate spots for their three days and three nights journey, the captain spoke; “I welcome you back to the rocket after your surprise of surprises. You are the only ones on our sacred earth who had the once-in-a-life-time opportunity to meet with your founding prophets in person. You also had the time together with other spiritual leaders to discuss and start an inter-faith dialogue. Hopefully, this would lead to a united peaceful world where all people could enjoy the bounty of the blue planet, our revered earth, our common home for all human beings from the remote past to the present leading into the future.

I have listened to your prophets, their questions and comments regarding your grasp of their teachings and how you have been propagating their wisdom. Moreover, their mandate to all of you was to work on creating a unified world order where all human beings were to be treated as brothers and sisters.

During this retreat to the moon, arranged through my help, you were able to meet with the builders of your religion. It is a great luxury desired by all humanity but realized by a few of you because I, as a philosopher, wanted to see you in action before your founders. I must say that you were respectful, humble and marvelous in listening to your originator and each other as well as were indicating different levels of transformation due to your encounters.

I am not only the captain of this rocket and a philanthropist, who arranged this free trip for all of you to the moon but also a philosopher, who was seeking wisdom about this interfaith-dialogue between you and your prophets. All of you get my humble reverence because you revealed to each other and me your understanding of the religious predicament of the humankind. Since you are the spokespersons of the major religions and I had the privilege to listen to your answers to questions about your understanding of the faith as well as the steps you are going to take to bring the entire human community together spiritually during the 21st century, I have a few of my observations to make as a philosopher.

Let me start with the Pope. He was correct in his understanding of the two main concerns offered to you by your religious leaders which were:

“Our prophets conveyed to us in no uncertain terms that we were members of a single humanity whose goal it was to live together in peace during the 21st century and after. This was to be accomplished first, through scrutinizing our scriptures the way the scientists view their acquired wisdom and to cooperate with them and second, by going beyond all our specific religions in the direction of universal spirituality. To accomplish these tasks would require deep soul-searching and reflection so that we could make a move from exclusiveness toward inclusiveness.”

All of you during your dialogue with each other focused on the second part regarding universal spirituality and ignored the first part about viewing your scriptures the way the scientists view their acquired wisdom as well as to start a dialogue with them. I am a philosopher, who has studied all the major religions and practiced some of them in depth as well as have delved into the sciences. Through my study, practice and reflection, I have come to the conclusion that a constructive dialogue or even cooperation is possible between the antagonistic disciplines of science and religion.

Scientists are looking for the laws of nature, knowing which they would be able to grasp the mind of the creator of these laws which in religious terminology is God, in scientific language is nature and in philosophical lingo is the infinite consciousness. As a philosopher, I see it as follows: when I grasp these laws of nature as discovered by the scientists, I am probing into the mind of God of religion or infinite consciousness or the spiritual principle. On the other hand, when I dig into the mystery of religion and try to probe into the laws of the spirit as displayed in the lives of the various prophets as well as in the scriptures of the various religions, I am wonderstruck to find that these are moral laws that are embedded in the silent self or the *conscience* part of a human being. This silent self is nothing more than the infinite spirit expressing itself in a finite way through the finite body-mind structure of the human being. I find no contradiction in bringing the two together.

Scientists believe that these laws of nature are created by some higher force. Through scientific inquiry, scientists are able to discover them. This scientific knowledge or discovered wisdom about the natural laws is constantly under scrutiny by other scientists and if falsified it could be improved. The more accurately the scientists are able to discover these laws, the better equipped they will be to grasp this higher force or the mind of God of religion or the absolute principle of philosophy. Similarly, the more we are able to grasp the moral laws of the inner spirit as disclosed to us by the prophets of the past, who received them from God, the more we will be able to understand the mind of God. By combining our resources of the scientific wisdom and religious wisdom, we will be able to understand the mind of God or higher principle more accurately.

In my understanding, both science and religion are coming closer to the view that like the human being, nature is an organic whole. Everything on our earth as well as in the solar system, the galaxy and the universe is interconnected. All these pieces of the universe fit into each other like a big puzzle governed by unbreakable natural laws.

Let's take a concrete example. In the human body, there are billions of cells that are working separately to provide nourishment to each organ and together to the total person. Similarly all human beings along with other forms of life and non-life are cells on the body of this earth; the earth along with all the planets make up cells on the body of the sun; our sun along with all the other solar systems constitute the cells on the body of our galaxy; our galaxy along with all other galaxies comprise cells on the body of the universe; our universe along with all the other universes make up the cells on the body of the multi-verse and these multi-verses are mere cells on the infinite body of the original infinite source called variously in science as higher force, in philosophy as infinite consciousness, in religion as God and in the 21st century lingo as the God-particle.

This above scientific view of the inter-connective-eco-logical balance of the universe can be applied to the human organism and its connection to the earth. When scientists, religionists and philosophers grasp these laws of nature, they would have the understanding and access to the mind of God.

A close religious parallel to this scientific view is presented in the Hindu mythology where the word *Shiva* is used for this infinite spiritual source, which is regarded as the cosmic dancer. The entire universe is identified with the dancing body of the *Shiva* and the dance as its creation. Since the dance and the dancer are indissolubly connected, the entire universe of galaxies, stars, solar systems and the earth along with all of its life forms is organically interrelated. Therefore, all human beings are interconnected with the universe as well as with each other.

These parallel views of the science and religion might have a close affinity to the philosophical vision of the ultimate reality as infinite cosmic consciousness. Underlying the entire universe is this consciousness, which could be compared to an infinite circle where the universes, galaxies, stars, solar systems and the earth along with each object, animal and human being, are its concrete centers through which it (consciousness) expresses itself. In human beings, this infinite consciousness manifests itself as their inner self or the silent witness. Each human being thus is a miniature fountain of creativity just like the infinite consciousness.

Since all life is a gift of this infinite source, the birth of a human being is an opportunity to get in touch with this infinite consciousness, which is a joyful-creative-

force within. It resides in each of us as our *conscience*, which can act as our spiritual mentor. This *conscience*, which is our inner sacred spiritual space, can be tapped through the regular practice of meditation. Once one gains access to it, like the prophets of each religion, one would be able to connect with all other human beings through the genuine feeling of bondship by regarding them as one's brothers and sisters. (Malhotra)

Concluding Remarks

After the captain gave his summary of philosophical wisdom gained during the encounter with the prophets and leaders of religious faith, he wished all of them a safe journey home. He also instructed them to pray five times a day together, each day for three days and three nights during their journey home. As he finished saying those words, the final message from their prophets appeared on the screen as follows:

Message from the Prophets

“We, the founders, are not here to punish you but to help you to understand our wisdom and our lives through which we experienced the truth. We are here to offer the correct information, knowledge and wisdom so that all people can have a happy, contented and fulfilled life. Look here and bear in mind that all human beings including you are created in the image of your creator and thus you are all equal. The trinity is constituted of the sun, the moon and the earth. This is the only eternity you will ever understand, experience and enjoy. The beautiful earth is without any distinctions or demarcations. It is the only paradise or heaven you will ever recognize. Similar to all the rivers of the world that end up in the waters of the great ocean surrounding the earth, all religions that you propound are mere pathways to the one and only *one spirituality*. Treat your fellow human beings as your very dear brothers and sisters!

All of you have come out of the same spiritual source, which put life into Adam and Eve, who in turn provided the seed to procreate you or as the scientists have put it, you have come out of the original star dust that created all the universes, including the solar system and the earth of which you are a part. Keep in mind that all of you will dissolve into this same source at the end. Now go back and spread the message of universal brotherhood and sisterhood, help each other by feeding everyone, clothing everyone, educating everyone, serving everyone, and helping everyone but remember to do all of this with loving care. When you would live under the umbrella of this *unified spirituality*, you would make the earth your heavenly abode by realizing that there never was any hell because it was the creation of the limited and selfish human mind.” (Malhotra)

Now, this imaginary rocket circling around the moon with the supreme leaders of each religion starts heading towards the earth. Inspired by this face to face encounter with their founders, the leaders of each faith observed the earth with unbiased eyes. This was the first time they were seeing the earth as a blue and white jewel floating in the space as the abode of all humanity. In front of their naked eyes, they saw no geographical, national or religious boundaries or demarcations on this beautiful globe. No one, even their founders have had such a grand vision of the earth from a distance of quarter of a million miles.

After being huddled together in the tiny space of the rocket for three days and three nights while chanting their prayers together five times a day for three days, they felt the amplified energy of their common human spirit. The chanting of their specific prayers with others offered them a uniquely augmented experience unlike anything they had ever experienced before. The confined space of the rocket was reverberating with unparallel sonorous sound revealing the camaraderie of the human hope, desire and aspiration to be with their creator.

During those moments of chanting, they felt the lightness of being. The combined experience of the harmony with all others helped them forget their narrow selves. While they were undergoing the feeling of the weightlessness of their bodies and the lightness of their minds, it helped them to get a glimpse into the silent self that resided inside each of them as their *conscience*, the abode of the moral laws.

This was the first time in their lives, these advocates of different religions felt that each one of them was a divided being: a noisy self as well as a silent one. It was the noisy-chattering self that was full of their religious values and made all the sound whereas the silent self (*conscience*) stood quietly watching this drama being enacted by the racketing one.

After they completed their chanting together for three days and three nights, they got a glimpse into something within them that was higher than their ordinary social-moral-noisy self that separated them from others. The Pope had a glimpse into this “silent self as the experience of Christ within,” the Dalai Lama felt it as the “an-atman or no-self at the core of his being;” the Shankrachariya realized it as “Krishna;” the Rabbi felt it as the voice of JHVH, ‘I am that I am,’ the Taoist priest experienced it as the “Te, the mark of Tao” and the Ayatollah, got a peep into “*al-Ruh al-Quds*,” the Holy Spirit.

The bodily weightlessness and mental lightness, emptying their entire being of the cultural baggage, gave them a fresh outlook on their mundane limited ego-self, which was doing all the babbling by setting them apart from each other and offered

them a close look at the higher-silent self that they shared in common with other human beings.

Though this ride presented the experience of the weightlessness of the body and emptiness of the mind, however, in a strange way, it also offered the experience of fullness. What was this emptiness that was also fullness? Was it the strange experience of being in a rocket or was it the experience of the lightness of being? Or was it the threshold of the higher self--the silent witness that was observing the chattering self, which had declared itself to be the owner of the person? Or was it the spiritual energy flowing into each one of them who was undergoing the emptying of their bodily and mental baggage? They were not sure what was going on within their own being because they had never experienced such a feeling before. They were undergoing the feeling of losing their previous sense of having bodily weight and now having none of it. Also it was the feeling of losing quickly all the mental clutter similar to a bad excruciating headache suddenly gone. This produced a sense of the lightness of being never experienced before, *offering a glimpse into who they really were and not what they thought they were*. Though it was an uncanny feeling of emptiness, it was also a feeling of relief and freedom never experienced before.

Before all these faithful were about to disembark the rocket to step foot on the earth their home, another message from the founders appeared on the screen of the rocket reminding them once again: “You are like the frogs, who have come out of your respective wells. Now start twittering together through a respectful dialogue. The collective wisdom gained by all of you needs to be conveyed to all humanity. Since you are the blessed ones, who got this opportunity to talk to us the founders of your faith, now go back to the earth and be truly human and kind spokespersons of one-world-spirituality.”

As the rocket was heading for landing on this beautiful earth, energized by the encounters and dialogues with their prophets and fellow religious faithful, all of them were glad to be coming back to embrace all human beings as their brothers and sisters belonging to one single family where with one voice, they would be spreading the word of universal spirituality, their human essence, the hall mark of the united humanity.

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