

# RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

“Like the bee gathering honey from different flowers, the wise man accepts the essence of different scriptures and sees only the good in all religions.”

Srimad Bhagavatam

## Introduction

The ancient verse from the Srimad Bhagavatam, quoted directly above, is a commanding declaration. We could hardly do better than grasping its power and significance. It speaks wonderfully of tolerance, acceptance, and the gift of greater understanding. The responsibility of the true seeker after happiness should be to receive truth, let it come from whence it may. Personally, I am a Christian by religious observance, but I deeply value both the scriptural texts and the religious disciplines of all the world's great faiths.

In the course of my life I have been privileged to travel and enjoy the predominant cultures of many nation states. As a younger man I was all too quick to judge and discount the wisdom of more ancient societies. As I grew in understanding and matured in open-mindedness, my desire for greater insight encouraged me to investigate further.

Over time, I have enjoyed personal experiences in many different countries and with those of diverse background. I've lived in four countries and attended widely different religious ceremonial observances, participating to some degree or another, in the spiritual practice of various denominations of Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish, and Christian adherents. I have also studied other faith-based belief systems and traveled to many ancient iconic worship centers. I provide this background merely to say that my exposure to these things has convinced me that there is a seeker in all of us.

Whether we pursue the sciences, philosophy, a particular religious adherence, explore our own unique spiritual path, or do all of these at once or one at a time, each of us is at some elementary level impugned with a desire to investigate life. This compulsion may take the form of serious questioning of our own religious predispositions, or it may not. But there is something within us that draws us like a magnet towards a greater knowing. When we suspend distracting ourselves from the physicality of life, our brain, mind, heart and spirit, seem to default into a searching for meaning beyond the mundane.

## Similarities Abound

Organized religions and personal spirituality have dramatically impacted the lives of the vast majority of people on the planet. Institutionalized religions are faith-

based organizations that seek to provide structured authoritative answers for questions related to the meaning of life. As a student of ancient history and archeology for some fifty years, it has occurred to me time and again that as we look back through the corridors of history, the core beliefs taught by most of the great religious leaders were amazingly similar.

Whether one looks at the principles of Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, etc., they are frequently analogous. Religious practices, like culturalisms, differ, and sometimes greatly, but the highest values of mankind are universally understood. As an example, let me share with you an extraordinary and amazing phenomenon that took place over 2,500 years ago.

In the sixth century BEFORE Christ, a remarkable evolution took place in the religious and philosophical thought of the world. For a period of about one hundred years centered around 550 BC, there was an unprecedented explosion of intellectual and spiritual insight that would impact virtually every major advanced culture at the same time and all around globe. There is nothing in the previous historical record with which to compare this phenomenon and little since. This remarkable fact of ancient history is so incredible that even today when scholars and history buffs attempt to wrap their mind around the events of the sixth century before Christ it staggers one in its overwhelming implications.

### **The Sixth Century BC**

Hundreds of years before either Christianity or Islam, the world's earliest major religious traditions all seemed to get their spiritual bearings at about the same time. Some scholars refer to the sixth century BC era as the "axial" or fulcrum period of the ancient world. According to renowned Mideastern scholar, Dr. Spencer J. Palmer,

"More of the ... great religions began during this period, affecting a greater number and variety of people throughout the earth, than during any other period in human history."

The prolific 19<sup>th</sup> Century writer H.G. Wells wrote: "This sixth century BC was indeed one of the most remarkable in all history." For Jews, Christians, and Muslims, this was the time of the great Hebrew prophets, Jeremiah, Daniel, and Ezekiel. It was the time of Nahum, Zephaniah, and Haggai. It was the time of the departure of the prophet Lehi from Jerusalem, the opening story of the Book of Mormon. It was the time frame where a great religious tradition was to evolve in the Americas. This was also the pivotal time of the first Diaspora of the Jews, when Jerusalem and the country of Judah were conquered by Babylon, their people taken into captivity to lower Mesopotamia, today's Iraq.

In China during the sixth century BC, the revered sage Lao Tzu wrote the "Tao Te Ching," perhaps better known as "The Book of the Way." The religious practice that grew out of Lao Tzu's teachings is known as Taoism. Many from the west are unfamiliar with Lao Tzu, likely the greatest of the Chinese prophet philosophers. However, most of us are familiar with some of his more pragmatic sayings, many of which are erroneously attributed to Confucius. Below are listed a few of Tzu's over 2,000 proverbs written some 2,500 years ago. Some you will likely recognize:

A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.

Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach him how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.

Do the difficult things while they are easy and do the great things while they are small.

Great acts are made up of small deeds.

Great indeed is the sublimity of the Creative, to which all beings owe their beginning and which permeates all heaven.

He who conquers others is strong; He who conquers himself is mighty.

He who controls others may be powerful, but he who has mastered himself is mightier still.

He who does not trust enough will not be trusted.

He who knows others is wise. He who knows himself is enlightened.

He who knows that enough is enough will always have enough.

Until the arrival of Buddhism in China, Taoism was the most important religious and philosophical practice of the everyday population. The philosopher Confucius lived during the same all-important period. Confucius had the greatest influence over China's ruling class and particularly its emperors. China has always had a huge collective population, greater than most empires. So, the religious and

philosophical impact of its two greatest sages, Lao Tzu and Confucius, can hardly be understated. Both of these great teachers lived, taught, and wrote, during the critical axial period of the sixth century BC.

In India, the epic scriptural works called the Upanishads were written in the sixth century BC. Mystics inspired by the ancient Vedas arrived on the scene about this time. They would forever change Hinduism, the subcontinent of India, and much of the ancient world. Today, the philosophy inspired by the great Upanishadic sages has permeated much of the globe's wisdom literature.

Siddhartha Gautama was born in the axial time frame. He would eventually assume the title "Buddha," meaning "Enlightened or Awakened One." Buddhism would divide into three primary schools of thought with many different forms of practice and spread throughout Asia and eventually around the world. People generally believe Buddhism to be a religion although those involved in Zen would likely claim their practice is one of mental discipline and not religion per se. Nevertheless, Buddhism has had, and continues to have, a powerful influence on the minds of hundreds of millions.

In another part of India during the critical sixth century BC, Vardhamana, father of Jainism, took the title name "Mahavira" meaning "Great Hero." Jainism is the religious practice of about a fourth of India's citizens today; an amount greater than the entire US population. The genesis stories of both the Buddha and Mahavira are remarkably similar.

In Greece, Solon founded his Athenian schools, as did Thales, the acclaimed Greek philosopher. Pythagoras, (of the triangle) was a mathematician and spiritual philosopher who developed a religious following of devout adherents at roughly the same time. Socrates and Plato, two of the most famous of the world's philosophers, also established schools of thought and religious contemplation during the axial period. Socrates and Plato have deeply influenced literally hundreds of millions of people all over the world and in all eras since their short time on earth.

In Persia, modern day Iran, Zoroastrianism was founded in the sixth century BC. According to scholars this was possibly the most influential of all the religions in the ancient world. Zoroastrians inhabited the land of Babylon during the Jewish exile. Scholars believe that Judaism, and thus Christianity, were deeply influenced by the Zoroastrians. Buddhism and Islam were similarly impacted by the remarkable "Magi" of Persia. And, who doesn't know the story of *The Three Kings*, called "Wise Men," or "Magi," who, having studied the stars, discovered the signs they had been seeking and left Persia to visit the Christ child? The Zoroasters believed that the Messiah would be born a Jew and for six hundred

years they kept careful records of the movements in the heavens until they observed the signs they sought.

In the movie, *2002: A Space Odyssey*, the haunting classical sound-track was named Zarathustra after the sixth century BC prophet-founder of Zoroastrianism. Many textbooks on astronomy today credit the Zoroasters with creating the Zodiac, which became widely disseminated, thus stimulating serious study of the heavens.

Historian Mary Boyce claimed that Zoroastrianism did more “to influence mankind directly and indirectly than any other single faith.” It was the state religion of three great empires and dominated much of the old world. The Persian Empire was the largest empire in all of world history up to this point.

We could go on, delving into Sikhism, a derivative-amalgam of Hindu and Islam, or the foundational religions of the Olmeca and Mayan, which were the sixth century BC high cultures of the Americas, but it is enough to say that the entire world was ablaze with a new religious zeal at almost the same time. Of course it may be that this transcendence of thought by highly gifted seers and thinkers was coincidental. Or, it may be that there was a much more significant commercial intercourse between the prominent kingdoms of antiquity than we have heretofore recognized. Whatever it was that drove the incredible shift in intellect and spirituality, it was dramatic and immensely powerful. It would be hard to exaggerate the impact on all of world history that the sixth century before Christ produced. It's as if an inspirational beacon swept across the earth providing light and enlightenment to all those able to receive it.

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Each of the more highly developed nations of the ancient world was dramatically affected at almost the exact same time. Many of the essential core beliefs of widely separated nation states were suddenly, and remarkably, similar. Against this backdrop the Book of Mormon records a revelation given to an isolated group, who claimed to have migrated to the Americas in the sixth century BC by boat:

“Know ye not that there are more nations than one?  
Know ye not that I, the Lord your God, have created all

men ... and I bring forth my word unto the children of men, yea, even upon all the nations of the earth?"

### **Religions and Culturalisms**

From a historical perspective we observe that over time the predominate culturalisms of the separate nations became appended to their various religious philosophies. This made them seem much more different than they originally would have appeared. It is a common occurrence of all religions that over time, their societal traditions eventually become treated with equal authority as their original doctrine.

In the biographies and writings of the great thinkers and religious leaders living within a hundred years of the axial period we learn of their deep sincerity and belief in personal revelation. Whether they called their source of inspiration God, Krishna, Vishnu, Shiva, or Brahma, Mazda, Allah, Elohim, Yahweh, or Jehovah, they all revered the spiritual substance of their being. All these divergent religious leaders taught the principals of gratitude, love, forgiveness, self-acceptance, harmony, peace, personal responsibility, kindness, honor, AND that happiness is to be refined within us.

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Hundreds of years AFTER the critical sixth century BC era, a new Jewish sect would erupt on the world scene and expand to include those not of the Jewish tradition. This would evolve into the largest religious belief system in the world and become known as Christianity. Six hundred years AFTER the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, the prophet Mohammed would rise to prominence in Arabia and reorganize its regional tribalism, Judaism, and early Christianity into a powerful new form of worship called Islam.

As a matter of historical record, both Christianity and Islam share the same religious mother. Both emerged from a much older religious practice generally referred to as Judaism. However, the most ancient monotheistic religious practices track back at least a thousand years before the Jews actually existed as an identifiable people.

It is significant that Muslims, Christians, and Jews, all identify their ancestral forefather to be the patriarch Abraham. From the biblical record we see that one of Abraham's grandsons was named Jacob. Later in life Jacob's name was

changed to Israel. Israel's children and family down-line were known as the Children of Israel, or simply Israelites. Jacob-Israel's fourth born son was named Judah. Judah was the father of those known as Jews. Before Judah was born, the Abrahamic form of monotheism was a well-established religious practice.

### **Religious Atrocities**

Whereas some of the greatest atrocities of history have been orchestrated in the name religion, these are the acts of *men* who hijacked whatever spiritual discipline held sway over the masses in order to manipulate them into do their bidding. Nationalism has always endeavored to influence the entrenched religious bureaucracies that have sprung up based on the prior inspired teachings of a prophet or seer.

Historically, we can observe repeated shifts in doctrinal emphasis by institutionalized religions once they were elevated to official status by a governing state. In effect, many religions ultimately became an extension of government. Even today this scenario is being played out with the Dali Lama who was exiled from his country of Tibet after it was taken over by the Chinese. The Chinese communist party has made it clear that the next Dali Lama will be appointed by their government. How does that work? The senior worldwide leader of Lamasery Buddhism is to be appointed by a government based aggressively on atheism? Hmm... In some ways this situation is not unlike the middle European period when French kings were able to appoint Catholic popes.

From history we observe that as theocratic institutions grow in power and influence they tend towards layered bureaucracy. Over time entrenched belief systems tend to become frozen into creeds for ease of instruction to each upcoming generation. All bureaucracies gravitate towards tighter internal structure, which usually requires expanded rules for all aspects of practice and administration. This in turn breeds inflexibility.

Rules for operation and conduct eventually tend to override the revelatory elements upon which the institution was originally founded. To some degree this will always translate into a loss of focus on inspiration and higher ideals by putting greater reliance upon internally generated rules. Theologies of every sort, once they evolve to a certain size commence to govern by internal rules linked to belief systems - usually referred to as doctrines. Much of the initial beauty and vision of their founders may become subsumed through edicts and dogma.

Radical fundamentalists tend to arise in almost every faith. These are those who insist on their way as being the only right way, based on their interpretation of things. Radical fundamentalists are apt to crystallize their positions based on

what they believe may be wrong with the policies and doctrines of other religious institutions. This approach breeds militancy as certain personality types practice a form of negative spirituality. The situation is quite similar to the negative media campaigning we are exposed to during election periods.

The practice of exclusion creates unhealthy tension between faiths and undermines the peaceful inclusiveness that was a hallmark of the original teachings of most religious founders. To ignore the good in others because of religious prejudice is ignorance by any other name. To be happy requires we give up the ignorance of prejudice. We must learn to observe and enjoy without judging.

### **Science Withdraws**

Our sun is one of many stars, and its near twins exist in great numbers throughout the galaxy. For some reason, many religious institutions find this fact threatening. There is no particular ancient scriptural reason - Bible included, why life should not exist off-world, but many of those interpreting scripture have historically taught that the earth was the center of the universe. In an earlier time, scientific icons like Galileo were placed under arrest and incarcerated for claiming something as outlandish as the earth revolved around the sun. Astronomer Giordano Bruno, a Roman Catholic monk, was put to death for refusing to recant his position after stating he also believed as much.

Bruno was a highly-skilled mathematician. He demonstrated that the sun-centered model of the solar system presented in 1543 by Nicolas Copernicus, (a Catholic Church official from Poland), was substantially more correct than the earth centered model developed by the Greeks many centuries earlier. Bruno was also of the opinion that the universe was incredibly large and that there must be numerous other worlds peopled by God's children. This was thought to be a great heresy by the religious leaders at the time. When Bruno refused to withdraw his thoughts on the subject he was burned alive by the inquisition. A pretty drastic response to a new idea, wouldn't you say?

Galileo Galilei also supported the Copernicus model of the solar system. He wrote his thoughts in a somewhat veiled discourse, published in book form. Obfuscation aside, he was still confined to house arrest until the day he died for daring to question the church's opinion about this matter. Today, Galileo is referred to as the "Father of Modern Science" because of his experimental discipline, his use of mathematics, and his obsession with replicatable (empirical) observation.

The reigning church of the western world once taught that our planet was the literal center of the universe, and notwithstanding Galileo's telescope and the

mounting information to the contrary, it was unthinkable to believe otherwise. Of course, we now know that the Roman Church was dead wrong. The authorities of that time had made a classic error; they had pinned their world views on subjective interpretations of biblical text. The Bible does not say the earth is the center of the universe. That was an opinion arrived at by church authorities who had studied the much earlier works of Aristotle and Ptolemy. It is instructive that the ideas originating with Greek philosophers became accepted as fact by high-ranking religious leaders, and eventually these opinions assumed the power of religious dogma. To challenge church leader's ideas about how the universe was organized was deemed a threat to religious authority, and subjected one to the political power of the Church.

Today the Roman church has admitted its error, apologized, and become an enthusiastic sponsor of a considerable array of astronomical observations. Catholic Church government enthusiastically supports scientific inquiry and one of its own, Monsignor Georges Lemaître, a Belgian Roman Catholic priest and professor of physics and astronomy, was the original idea man for the Big Bang theory.

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Lemaître applied Einstein's theory of general relativity to cosmology. By 1931 he had secured both Einstein's and Hubble's support for the Big Bang concept. Thereafter the Big Bang theory became a household name. Some Christians believe the Big Bang theory to be in opposition with their faith. Most scholars do not see it that way, including the pope. So, does that make the Big Bang true? No, not necessarily, but having a widely supported scientific model against which physical evidences may be applied is quite valuable. Science is very good at discovering re-confirmable facts and then weaving them into a logical hypothesis that can explain known observations. Thereafter each newly discovered piece of relevant information is weighted against the hypothesis then in vogue. Where new information conflicts with old models, these models must be revamped to include new data, or in more extreme cases the whole model will be junked in favor of a new concept that better addresses all known phenomenon. The process allows for a continuing probe of all currently accepted scientific models whilst theoretically keeping preconceived beliefs off the table. This is supposed to be the scientific method. Suspend judgment and test all feasible aspects of a theory that explains how things have worked in the past and that is able to predict things that come to pass.

**Bullheadedness**

It is troubling to see a repeat of the infamous bullheadedness of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Roman church by many fundamentalist Christian denominations today. The sun centered universe was a hugely heated topic in the early days of the Renaissance. Today, no less a dispute is firing up the passions of men: Darwinian Evolution. Some people feel very strongly about it. They have lots of reasons for why they are sure that the theory of evolution is wrong. Personal opinion aside, the Scriptures are quiet on the subject. To look to the Bible to support a religious bodies' opinion on science is to make the exact same mistake that earlier Roman scholars did to their ultimate humiliation.

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Suspend judgment. In your pursuit of truth it would be unwise to pre-judge information from any source of reasoned insight. You are not required to decide one source is right and the other wrong. It should be clear that neither science, nor religion, has a lock on the truth, and neither does philosophy, psychology, etc. Should we throw one out in favor of the other? Certainly not. Learn and consider. It is not required of you to judge or be certain of any scientific claim, one way or the other. With this thought in mind consider the following true story:

Some 300 years *before* Christ, a Greek scientist, Democritus, demonstrated that the world was a sphere. He did this by observing the difference in the length of shadows cast at noon by stakes placed several hundred kilometers apart. Then using mathematics, he demonstrated that the earth must be round. Democritus correctly calculated the circumference of the globe to within an accuracy of 2 percent almost 1,800 years before scholars would begin to root out the false belief of a flat world. When people believed the world to be flat, they often turned to Scripture to support their point of view. Of course they were wrong, but at the time everyone seemed to agree with them so they were certain that their belief must in fact be the right one.

Up until about fifty years ago, anyone who seriously considered the possibility of life on other planets was scorned by both science *and* religion. Certainly it was true for virtually all scientists, and is still true for some religionists. On a personal note, I vividly remember the derision and utter exasperation of my 8th grade science teacher when I suggested the possibility of life elsewhere in the universe. And heaven help you if you'd have suggested such a thing in most religious circles until more recently!

**Philosophy**

Currently accepted philosophy is the rule against which most humans tend to measure truth. Basically, people repeat what other people say. Wherever there is a consensus of belief, people treat that belief as true. As in, "it must be true, everyone else believes it."

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Just because a lot of people believe something does not make it true. It wasn't all that long ago when physicians were in the business of bloodletting and both scholars and religionists taught the earth was the center of the universe and that the world was flat. Beliefs are simply thoughts that one has thought about until those thoughts achieve status as opinion. Opinions held and defended are beliefs. We must sort things out for ourselves, looking to the underlying motivations for alternative viewpoints.

Is it true, is it loving, is it kind? Is it honorable, is it fair, and is it uplifting? Does it encourage us to become better people? Any of these might be a reliable ruler against which to measure worldly issues.

An absolutism approach shuts down new inquiry, as our ego tells us we already know the truth and that somehow our belief system is the only one that is correct. Some religious organizations have an institutional ego problem. In reality, we rarely know the whole truth of a thing, yet to protect our treasured opinions, we'll take some pretty drastic measures.

Wars are fought over opinions, money, and power. People are killed daily because other people do not value them as fully human. Those who do not value the sanctity of human life without regard to nationality, race, and creed, are certain that their opinions – beliefs, are the ones that really matter. They believe themselves to be the only legitimate repository of truth. The way they think is the only right way.

In general, these types of people excuse themselves and confuse others with slogans and glib excuses for otherwise abhorrent behavior. Unfortunately, the very character traits that make motivated persons so sure they are right are the same traits that often make for electable politicians. We want to rally around those we believe know what they are doing. To be sensitive and thoughtful is not a characteristic much admired of leadership. Instead we tend to idolize clear, no-nonsense action; the do-something-even-if-it-is-wrong paradigm. The extreme of charismatic leadership is seen in the likes of an Adolf Hitler; a man elected and revered by the people at large. It seems a reasonable conclusion that when

leaders make plausible arguments for death and destruction they have become the adversaries of human evolution.

Many traditional institutions of religion, be they Judaic, Hindu, Jain, Sikh, Christian, Muslim, Tao, etc., seem to view their own spiritual convictions as threatened by science (although there are some remarkable exceptions to this rule). But why is this? If we believe in God and believe in God's incalculable superiority to us, why then are we so insistent upon forcing God's methods of doing things into our limited opinions about how such things should be accomplished? In other words, why is it that so many of us insist on God being omnipotent and yet demand that God must have done things the way we believe they should have been done?

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Isn't it vastly more reasonable to believe that God is God because He has perfect knowledge and is therefore all-powerful and that He is absolutely good with no exceptions? (I use the gender specific because it is so widely used.) Isn't God supposed to be the embodiment of light, truth, and love? The biblical scriptures teach forgiveness and claim God is our Father in Heaven; do we dare to believe such things? People committed to a religious creed, rather than godly ideals, will frequently rationalize biblical writings and wrest the scriptures to make them say whatever it is they want them to say. Stay away from organizations that preach divisiveness, lack of tolerance, and hate. These are not spiritual virtues; these negative traits are based on institutional egos.

Is it reasonable to believe that what God does is done within the framework of universal law? Consider that if it were otherwise, God would be a changeable and arbitrary being like the gods of the ancient Greeks. Ought not our personal pursuit of meaning be the pursuit of truth? What do you think? Are you interested in seeking further light and knowledge toward the end of discovering the greater truth not just learning the currently acceptable philosophies of men?

All of us are able to learn truth through common experience, thoughtful contemplation, scientific endeavor, and those flashes of insight we might call personal revelation. In the final analysis though, neither physics nor any other science is able to prove or disprove the truth of religious claims. However, there is a great deal of light now being shed on the topic of spirituality and organized religions. A few of the latter seem to flourish in the bright illumination of new scientific discoveries. These are those religious organizations and spiritual

thinkers that are expansive enough to accept truth regardless of how it is discovered. Science, psychology, religion, philosophy, and personal spirituality, are all mechanisms for discovering greater truth. Do not be deterred. Use them all.

### **Compassion**

When we allow our beliefs to become narrow and exclusive, we tend towards a loss of compassion and love. The New Testament of the Christian Scriptures refers to charity as the true LOVE of Christ. This we are told is compassionate love. The entire 13th chapter of First Corinthians demonstrates that Christians are to focus on charity above all else. Chapter 13:2 says:

“And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge: and though I have faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.”

The 13<sup>th</sup> chapter closes with these words:

“And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.”

Respect and tolerance, or perhaps more correctly the lack of same, particularly as it relates to religious interpretation and ethnic preference, now tends to shape and define countries as much as their historical precedents. For example, consider that of the fifty-four predominantly Muslim countries and territories, repressive governments rule all but three. In other words, kings, dictators, warlords, or militant clerics, administer virtually all of these. Tolerance for competing political ideologies or religious views, other than those perpetuated by the state and their power-brokers, are almost always condemned in these countries.

Just as Christianity was hijacked by feudal warlords in the middle ages to enhance their power and justify their actions, so has Islam become the tool of political leaders to gain and maintain control in underdeveloped Middle Eastern and African countries. These acts are not about religion; they are about power. Karl Marx, the author of the Communist Manifesto, maintained that religion was the “opiate of the masses.” Although it pains me to give him credit for real insight, there is merit in the statement.

Despots of every kind have played on ignorance and mixed it with the passion of religion to gain power over the masses. Unfortunately, they have done so all too often without the average person discovering their deceit; at least until after the

tyrant had solidified his control. Interestingly, the atheism that Karl Marx preached bore all the hallmarks of the state-sponsored, radical, religious fundamentalism that we see in a number of Muslim countries today. Yet, just like the Bible, the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Yoga Sutras, the Bhagavad Gita, and a host of other scriptural works, the Muslim Qur'an teaches gratitude, love, peace, goodness, and forgiveness. Unfortunately, that isn't the spin put on it by those anxious to condemn or control others.

Radical fundamentalists of every political or religious persuasion tend to have in common a lack of tolerance for the thoughts, ideas, and opinions of anyone who does not act or think the way they do. This is the diametric opposite of charity; loving compassion. It seems that no matter how valid or vital one's belief system might be, one undermines that system, and ultimately negates it, whenever one becomes rigid and dogmatic in its adherence. Most of us know active members of various faith-based groups who spend their time putting down other religions. This is misguided spirituality. Instead of extending compassionate love to others not of their particular religious faith, those engaged in this kind of practice are focused on criticism. If unrequited they will become mean-spirited and project the belief that they are better than others because they somehow have the only truth. That is not a Christian principle, nor does it resonate with most of the world's core religious values. On the other hand, it is clearly reflective of a psychological rung on the ladder of our personal evolution. This is the religious level where the ego is in charge.

Prophets and teachers from all over the world during many periods of time, and from many different religious backgrounds, have sought inspiration and dared to seek answers to the world's great questions. Consequently, many inspired men and women have found deeply satisfying resolution to life's perplexing puzzles. Looking back through history it appears that no single group has ever had a complete franchise on perfect insight and inspiration. But, be careful to not throw the baby out with the bathwater. To observe critically that no single institution has it all, does not negate the value that devotion provides. Dedication to your own spiritual evolution is paramount and for most of us, an organized religious organization will help facilitate the journey. To rise above the day-to-day fracas of the mundane on to the refining of real happiness within, is the very hallmark of spiritual evolution.

At some point in each of our lives we will likely confront ourselves with questions like these: Shall we live a life of self-centeredness and never quite be happy because we are so wrapped up in ourselves that we cannot appreciate quiet beauty, the good, and the Now? Or, will we embark upon the highest spiritual quest, the love that leads to a state of happiness?

In my personal view, anything we do to evolve ourselves and improve the lives of others, is consistent with the core principals of the vast majority of religions. In a work entitled *Ocean of Wisdom*, the Dalai Lama said this quite eloquently:

“Every major religion of the world - Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Sikhism, Taoism, and Zoroastrianism – has similar ideals of love, the same goal of benefitting humanity through spiritual practice, and the same effect of making their followers into better human beings.”