

Spirituality, Religions, and Governments

“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 above, is a commanding declaration from the sacred scriptures of Hinduism. The better known Bhagavad Gita is an introduction to spiritual life, while the Srimad Bhagavatam serves as higher, deep-level study. We could hardly do better than considering the significance of the opening verse above. It speaks wonderfully of tolerance, acceptance, and the gift of greater understanding. The responsibility of a seeker after greater enlightenment, joy and happiness, is to receive truth, let it come from whence it may.

In the course of my life I have been privileged to travel and enjoy the 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've lived in four countries, and visited many more. I've attended widely different religious ceremonial observances, participating to some degree or another in the spiritual practice of various denominations of Christianity, and those of Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, and Jewish, adherents. I have studied other faith-based belief systems, ancient and modern, and traveled to many ancient iconic worship centers along with visiting over a hundred Olmec, Mayan, Zapotec, Mixtec, and Teotihuacan temple complexes throughout Mesoamerica. 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, 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 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 over sixty years, it has occurred to me, time and again, that as we look back through the corridors of history, the initial 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 differ just like culturalisms. Sometimes they differ greatly, but the highest values of humankind 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 around the world. Amazingly, this happened at almost the exact same time. 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 enhanced 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 19th Century writer H.G. Wells wrote: "This sixth century BC was indeed one of the most remarkable in all history." 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 evolved in the high cultures of 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 and 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. And yet, Lao Tzu was likely the greatest of the Chinese prophet philosophers. Most of us are familiar with some of his more pragmatic sayings, many of which are erroneously attributed to Confucius. Below are a few of Tzu's over 2,000 proverbs written some 2,500 years ago.

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. Yoga, for example, is deeply embedded in the Upanishadic scriptures.

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. 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, was a widely known mathematician and spiritual philosopher who developed a religious following of devout adherents at roughly the same time. Pythagoras had great influence on Socrates and Plato, two of the most famous philosophers in world history, who each established schools of thought and had religious adherents 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 likely 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 Zoroaster’s 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, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the haunting classical soundtrack 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. 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 the axial point in history.

We could go on, delving into Sikhism, a derivative-amalgam of Hindu and Islam, or the foundational religions of the Olmeca, Zapotec, 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 exact 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.

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 of Israelites, 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 spiritual inspiration.

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, 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. And yes, all of these religious disciplines were at times corrupted by the power of narcissistic men to kill and invade others in the name of their predominate religious order.

Hundreds of years AFTER the critical sixth century BC era, a new Jewish sect would erupt on the world and expand to include many others not formerly 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, better known as the Muslims.

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 hundreds of 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. Jacob, or Israel as he later became known, had twelve sons. Their collective family down-line were known as the Children of Israel, the twelve tribes of Israel, or simply Israelites. Israel's fourth born son was named Judah. Judah was the father of those known as Jews. Judah's family line out produced those of his brothers eventually creating the largest of the twelve tribes and the

one best known. Before Judah was born, the Abrahamic form of monotheism was well established as a religious practice.

Religious Atrocities

Whereas some of the greatest atrocities of history have been orchestrated in the name of religion, these are the acts of the men and women who hijacked whatever spiritual discipline held sway over the masses. Then narcissistic powerbrokers manipulated the churches, temples, mosques, or synagogues into doing 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. The initial founders of a given religious organization were likely dedicated believers of virtue. Many believed strongly enough to forfeit their lives for the good they believed they were engaged in doing.

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. England fought a war with Spain ostensibly over creation of the Church of England. Of course the real reasons for the war were political and the church issue was a cover for Spain to invade England.

Buddhism is technically passivist at its heart, and yet it was the hierarchy of Buddhism within Japan that supported their invasion of China, Singapore, Indonesia, the United States, and other surrounding countries. 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 dictatorship based on atheism? Hmmm.

In some ways current religious structures are not unlike the middle European period when French kings controlled the Vatican and appointed Catholic popes. Today, Russia is a prime example of this corruptive travesty. After outlawing Christianity under the Communist manifesto, when Putin took control of Russia some three decades ago, he resurrected the Russian Orthodox church and appointed KGB agents as its priests and placed them in all the major administrative positions. Unbelievable, and yet it has been confirmed through numerous document hacks from the Kremlin. Is it any wonder why the Russian Orthodox church supported Putin's invasion of Ukraine?

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. All bureaucracies gravitate towards tighter internal structure, which usually requires expanded rules for all aspects of practice and administration. This in turn breeds inflexibility.

The rules that govern church organizations eventually override the revelatory elements upon which the institution was originally founded. That is not to say that their founders were not inspired and virtuous. To some degree organizational structure 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 rules linked to belief systems usually referred to as doctrines. Much of the initial beauty and vision of their founders becomes subsumed through edicts and dogma.

Radical fundamentalists tend to arise in almost every faith and political belief system. These are those who insist on their way as being the only right way, which in turn is 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. In other words they define themselves by what they are opposed to. 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 ourselves without judging others.

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 scriptural reason why life should not exist off world, but many of those interpreting scripture 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 the earth went around the sun.

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 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 simply 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 personal world views on 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.

The Roman church eventually admitted its error, apologized, and became an enthusiastic sponsor of a considerable array of astronomical observations. Catholic hierarchy now enthusiastically supports scientific inquiry, and one of its

own, Monsignor Georges Lemaître, a Belgian Roman Catholic priest and professor of physics and astronomy, presented the original idea for the Big Bang theory.

Lemaitre 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. Why would that be? Narrow thinking, and closed mindedness. Most scholars do not see it that way, including the pope. So then, does that make the Big Bang theory true? No! However, having a widely supported scientific model against which to test physical evidence has value. The Big Bang theory may be wrong, and at a minimum the James Webb telescope has already shown us that astronomical evidence does not support the model currently being taught in schools. Textbooks will need be rewritten eventually.

Science is very good at discovering re-confirmable facts and then weaving them into a logical hypothesis that can explain known observations. Each newly discovered piece of relevant information is weighed against the hypothesis then in vogue. Or it should be. 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. This 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. In other words, suspend judgment and test all feasible aspects of a theory that explains how things have worked in the past, and that should be able to predict things that come to pass.

Bullheadedness

It is troubling to see a repeat of the infamous bullheadedness of the 16th 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. No less a dispute has fired up the passions of men more than 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, scriptures are quiet on the subject. To look to the Bible to support a religious opinion on science is to make the exact same mistake that earlier Roman scholars did to their ultimate humiliation.

All of us would be wise to suspend judgment. In our pursuit of truth we must not prejudge information from any source of reasoned insight. You are not required to decide that 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. And he did this 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. Just because lots of people agree on a theory does not mean it is correct.

Up until about fifty years ago, anyone who seriously considered the possibility of life on other planets was scorned by both science *and* religion. The American religious exceptions were the Mormons, the Seventh Day Adventists, and the Theosophists. 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."

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. It is wise that we suspend judgement and consider the underlying motivation for any particular belief.

Is it loving? Is it kind? Is it honorable? Is it fair? Is it uplifting? Does it encourage us to become better? Any of these simple questions might be a reliable ruler against which to measure worldly issues. Virtue is coherence.

An absolutism approach shuts down new inquiry, as our egos tell 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 their equal. Those who do not value the sanctity of human life without regard to nationality, race, and creed, are certain that their opinions, their beliefs, are the ones that really matter. In effect, 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 for their abhorrent behavior and confuse others with slogans and glib excuses.

The 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 once revered by people at large. 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 done? 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? Isn't it vastly more reasonable to believe that God has perfect knowledge, and we don't, so judging what we see as God's intentions is a complete fallacy?

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. We must 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 and are corruptive to our personal growth and progress. Our personal pursuit of meaning ought to be the pursuit of truth. Are we interested in seeking further light and knowledge toward an end of discovering greater truth, instead of simply mouthing the currently acceptable philosophies of men?

All of us are able to learn truth through common experience, thoughtful contemplation, scientific endeavor, along with those flashes of insight we might call inspiration. In the final analysis though, neither physics nor any other science is able to prove or disprove the truth of religious claims. Thankfully, 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 13th 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 them. 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. (My sister claims that television is the “opiate of the masses.”)

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 resonant 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.”