



Roads to the Enchanted Kingdom: A Metaphorical Approach to Comparative Religious Philosophy

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As we enter the second decade of the 21st century, we find a convergence of religious ideas that would have been impossible in previous ages. Thanks to the miracle of the internet, spiritually inclined individuals in the far corners of the globe have access to the websites devoted to the most intricate practices of Hassidic Judaism, podcasts of dharma talks by renowned Buddhist teachers, and detailed instructions on how to properly recite ancient Hindu mantras. The proliferation of airlines and flight routes throughout the world, means that anyone with the resources can easily travel to Thailand for a 21 day Vipassana retreat, attend the Hajj in Saudia Arabia, or go to Rishikesh for some intensive yoga training. The varieties of religious practice available now almost mind-boggling when one considers that in a country like India alone there are probably an infinite variety of religious practices from which to choose.

I am convinced that, as we move through the 21st century, we will see a breakdown in traditional religious divisions as more and more individuals begin to sample from the ever-expanding menu of religious options available to them. In my own country, the United States, a recent study of religious attitudes, “The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life,” shows that Americans are more inclined than ever before to move from one religious tradition to another, blend the beliefs of different traditions, and have fairly eclectic attitudes towards religious practice that often are at odds with those espoused by the mainstream Churches. This spiritual flexibility, which is beginning to alter the American religious landscape, has been a factor of life in Europe for some time now, and has led to the breakdown of the traditional forms of Christianity that have dominated the continent since late antiquity.

There are undoubtedly those who would bemoan the passing of traditional forms of worship in the West with their precise metaphysical frameworks and clear moral guidelines. The question that I would like to raise, however, is whether these forms of worship are becoming obsolete because of intrinsic factors that make them incapable of speaking to the deepest needs of human beings in a world where religion itself has become one commodity among the many from which individuals have to choose. If this is the case, then we must also ask whether non-Western religious traditions can provide us with an alternative model of religion that can better speak to the spiritual aspirations of human beings in the

21st century.

To answer these questions, I propose to examine three different models of religion, using a metaphor that is common to almost all traditions—the road to a far-off, perfect land, an “enchanted kingdom” offering its citizens the possibility of unlimited happiness. I first encountered this metaphor in my study of the religious thought of the fourth century Christian philosopher, St. Augustine, and believe that it offers a useful framework for critically examining the underlying assumptions inherent in most religions.

If we begin with Augustine, as a representative of the Western tradition, it is apparent that he shares a basic starting point common to almost all religious thinkers of his day—namely that the universe has been ordered by God in order to promote the possibility of human salvation. We can choose to observe this proper order by loving God for his own sake, absolutely, and unconditionally and loving our fellow man for the sake of God (*Christian Instr.* 1.28-30), and thus attain both temporal and eternal happiness, or not to and suffer the consequences. Augustine’s insight as a Christian thinker was his awareness that original sin not only disorders the proper working of reason to achieve this good, but disrupts it entirely. Indeed, by 396 A.D. Augustine had come to believe that the human will is so bound by the habit of sin that human beings could not by their own efforts prevent themselves from sinning and, therefore, were in need to divine grace in order to be liberated.

In *The Confessions*, his most famous work, Augustine charts his own moral progress to serve as an example to his contemporaries. What we discover in this work is a persistent pattern of moral failure beginning in his earliest life that bespeaks the heavy weight of original sin. In an attempt to free himself from the burdens of moral disorder, Augustine turns first to the secular philosophies of Neoplatonism and Stoicism and the heretical teachings of the Manicheans. The failure of these approaches causes him to return to the Catholic Christianity of his childhood, where, by submitting himself humbly to the authority of the Church, he ultimately attains the liberation that had previously proven elusive.

Volumes have been written on Augustine’s religious philosophy during this period, but for our purposes we can focus on Augustine’s understanding of the relationship between the Catholic faith that he comes to espouse and all other religious options. All legitimate philosophical and religious perspectives, he believes can provide one with knowledge of the goal or end of human striving, union with God, but not necessarily the right way to achieve this goal. Using the metaphor of the road, Augustine writes that other traditions have “some kind of intuition of the goal to which we must strive, however, dimly seen through the obscurities of a subtle imagination... Thus [they] see, to some extent, though from far off and with clouded vision, the country in which we must find our homes, but [they] do not keep to the road along which we must travel.” (*City of God* 10.29) Using a slightly different version of this metaphor, he goes on to say: “it is one thing to see from a mountaintop in the forests the land of peace in the distance and not to find the way to it and to struggle in vain along impassible tracks... and it is another thing to hold to the way that leads there (*Confessions* 7.20-21).

For Augustine, the end to which all human beings strive, union with God, can only be achieved by traveling along the “narrow path” of Christ and his Church. The best that those who travel along other paths can achieve is to see the goal to which they are striving without ever being able to reach it. To use Augustine’s own language, they have knowledge of destination, the *quo* of ultimate liberation, but don’t have the means, the *qua* to get

there because they are traveling along a road that can only lead them astray by enflaming their sinful pride.

Returning to our metaphor of the road to the enchanted kingdom, Augustine's approach might be called the "Authorized Road" approach to religion. We have to imagine that we, like everyone else, are driving to the enchanted kingdom on endlessly cloudy days (the clouds, of course, representing the spiritually debilitating effects of original sin). The problem is that there are numerous roads available to take, but we have already been forewarned that only the authorized road will actually enable us to arrive at our destination. Even if we manage to get on the right road, the way is still fraught with peril unless we put our trust in the supremely wise Superintendent of Roads who watches over the traffic (Christ) and traffic police that he has authorized to keep things running smoothly (his Church). As long as we follow the directions of the traffic police, we keep moving forward, but as soon as we arrogantly begin to place too much faith in our own superior driving abilities, we inevitably fall off into some kind of deep ditch, and are forced to wait until the benevolent Superintendent decides to assist us (Christ's grace). As we drive on, we occasionally glimpse the enchanted kingdom from the distance, but arduousness of the journey means that we won't be able to settle into first class accommodations until our long and perilous trips is completely over. Still, we are better off than those unlucky many who either keep trying to travel the authorized road on their own (the proud) or who having foolishly chosen to take one of the many alternative roads that will never lead to the enchanted kingdom (practitioners of all other faiths no matter how sincere they may be).

Although Augustine is perhaps the most famous representative of the Christian tradition—both Catholics and Protestants claim him as one of their own—the "authorized road" approach that we have just examined is applicable to most forms of Judaism and Islam as well. The difficulties of this approach, therefore, represent the limitations of the religious outlook of each of these traditions, which have arisen from the Middle East. Each of these traditions presumes that there is one goal to be achieved—knowledge of God in this life and eternal happiness with him in the next—and that their faith represents the only "authorized road" to arrive at this end. Those who for one reason or another travel along a road other than the authorized one are in mortal error and must be considered infidels, heretics, or apostates, and treated accordingly. The results have been centuries of sectarianism, dogmatism, and conflict, culminating in endless hostility between Jews and Muslims, Muslims and Christians, and among the liberal and conservative factions of each of these faiths.

The tension and conflict created by the "authorized road" approach to religion with its emphasis on an exclusive possession of eternal truth, was noted in the 19th century by the great Hindu sage, Vivekananda. In his "Idea of a Universal Religion" Vivekananda begins by asserting that there is a "tremendous life-power in all the great religions of the world." (*World Teacher* 35) that has enabled almost all of them to continue to prosper down through the ages. The attempts by one religion or another to bring humanity to its way of thinking about spiritual matters, he goes on to say, have always been doomed to failure. All this has done is to create more sectarianism, which he intriguingly maintains has been a good thing for mankind, creating a vibrant clash of religious ideas that inspires "the differentiation of thought, that awakens thought. . . . Thinking beings must differ; difference is the first sign of thought. If I am a thoughtful man, certainly I ought to like to live among other thoughtful persons, where there are differences of opinion." (*World Teacher* 37-39).

In the same text, Vivekananda goes on to raise a significant objection to this confidence in religious pluralism. How can two religions be equally valid if they express contrary opinions? (*World Teacher*, 39) The answer he gives is that, although the external forms of these religions may differ, their “internal soul” is the same. By internal soul Vivekananda means the goal to which religion points—or unity with God. Although he uses the term universal religion, it is clear that the universal element that about which he speaks refers to the goal, not the way of the great religions (Augustine’s *quo* rather than his *qua*). “The end of all religions,” he confidently states, “is the realizing of God in the soul. That is the one universal religion. If there is one universal truth in all religions, I place it here—in realizing God. Ideas and methods may differ, but that is the central point.” (*World Teacher*, 68) On the other hand by external forms Vivekananda means the specific philosophy, mythologies, rituals and language used by religions. These, of course, vary tremendously among different religions of the world

Variety of religious expression offers the opportunity for different people to find a religious outlet. “In a hotel, where there are all sorts of food,” he writes, everyone has a chance to have his appetite satisfied.” (*World Teacher*, 42). One major problem with the authorized road approach to religion, Vivekananda recognizes, is that it treats all human beings as essentially of the same kind. But some people are of a more rationalistic bent and ritual means absolutely nothing to them; others may be more artistic or devotional in temperament and are likewise unmoved by rational argumentation. “Seeing that we are so various in our natures,” he continues, “the same method can scarcely be applied to any two of us in the same manner. We have idiosyncrasies in our minds, each one of us; so the method ought to be varied....If there were only one method to arrive at the truth, it would be death for everyone who is not similarly constituted. Therefore the methods should be various.” (*Complete Works*, Vol 4, 16)

As a disciple of the Hindu mystic Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, like his master understood that, although there are numerous spiritual paths one might choose to take in life, they all lead to the same goal—union with God. Whether one chooses to worship God in incarnate form—in the person of Krishna or Christ—or attempts to realize him in his formless nature, the reality to which the spiritual adherent aspires is essentially the same. (gos 210). Although Ramakrishna realizes that each spiritual road is distinct, he recognizes them as being equally viable options to individuals depending upon their specific temperaments “God has made different religions to suit different aspirants, times, and countries,” Ramakrishna proclaims. “All doctrines are only so many paths; but a path is by no means God Himself. Indeed, one can reach God if one follows any of the paths with wholehearted devotion.” He then goes to far as to suggest that, even if the path that one has chosen is filled with error, God will correct these errors if the aspirant is sincere.” (*Gospel* 336)

Although Ramakrishna believes that all roads to God are valid, he also acknowledges that the path of knowledge is difficult for most people in the present age, and that, therefore, the path of devotion is preferable “The path of knowledge leads to Truth, as does the path that combines knowledge and love. The path of love, too, leads to this goal. The way of love is as good as the way of knowledge. All paths ultimately lead to the same Truth. But as long as God keeps the feeling of ego in us, it is easier to follow the path of love.” (*Gospel* 156)

Using our metaphor of the road to the enchanted kingdom, the approach that Ramakrishna and Vivekananda take to religion might be call “multiple roads” approach. Let’s

imagine several travelers all on a journey to the same enchanted kingdom. One traveler is interested in getting to the kingdom as quickly as possible and so he takes a superhighway overseen by wise and benevolent traffic cop who can offer him assistance and guidance, using the route laid out by the supremely wise superintendent of roads. Others might choose to proceed along more difficult roads, traveling through the barren desert, or along deserted country bi-ways. Each traveler proceeds along his own road and is given very different travel directions along the way, but it all works out in the end. As long as the travelers persist on the road that is best suited for them, they will all end up in the same enchanted kingdom.

The “multiple roads” approach has certain advantages for religious practitioners in the 21st century that would seem to make it preferable to the “authorized road” approach we examined earlier. By allowing for a variety of possible roads to the same end, this approach implicitly recognizes that one size in religion definitely does not fit all and that diversity of religious perspective, far from being a liability is a great strength. The appreciation of the importance of diversity in religious outlook, likewise, would seem to lend itself to greater tolerance for differences of religious perspective and far less rigid dogmatism than in the authorized road approach. These are all definite advantages in a world that is becoming increasingly multicultural and interconnected.

While recognizing the benefits of the “multiple roads” approach, it is also important to recognize its limitations as well. Like the “authorized road” approach, the “multiple roads” approach has an otherworldly orientation that could lead practitioners to deny the significance of this life in the pursuit of transcendent goals. The approach also presumes that all religions share the same ultimate goal, but the Catholic Church for one has gone out of its way to dispute this claim, particularly when it applies to religions like Buddhism, which seems to aim at the extinction of self rather than union of self with God. The final difficulty with this approach is that it provides no real guidance as to which forms of religion are able to lead one to the enchanted kingdom. Are all religious traditions equally valid or only certain traditions? If the latter is the case, upon what basis do we determine that certain traditions are more legitimate than other? Vivekanda seems to make longevity the deciding factor, but this would seem to discount any possible evolution in religious consciousness.

A third option that I would like to present is what I would call the “recreational roads” approach to religion. Let’s assume that the “multiple roads” approach is essentially correct in its belief that there are numerous possible avenues to self-realization. A recreational traveler might very well decide to explore a wide variety of these roads as he travels to his supposed destination—the enchanted kingdom. His goal, however, is not to arrive at the enchanted kingdom as quickly or as efficiently as possible, but to take time to savor the journey itself. Being a seasoned traveler, he is not afraid to travel along the superhighway, taking advice from the traffic police there. But he is also more than willing to leave the highway and travel along more remote roads, which he begins to notice interconnect quite nicely with one another. After many months of traveling, he begins to become something of an authority himself on the ways of the road and spends a great deal of his time assisting travelers having difficulties and reconciling conflicts between less gifted drivers on the road. In the end, our intrepid recreational traveler has such a wonderful time exploring these different roads, he completely forgets his ultimate destination—the enchanted kingdom—because whatever road he is traveling on at any given time has become an end

in itself.

Although the term “recreational” might seem to trivialize religion, etymologically the term itself literally means to “create anew.” In authentic re-creation the goal of experimenting with different religious philosophies, mythologies, and rituals is to constantly recreate oneself and as a result to grow as a human being. As Ramakrishna puts it using the analogy of food, “Why should I lead a monotonous life? I enjoy my fish in a variety of dishes: curried fish, fried fish, pickled fish, and so forth! Sometimes I worship God with rituals, sometimes I repeat His name, sometimes I meditate on Him, sometimes I sing His name and glories, sometimes I dance in His name.” (*Gospel* 425) Vivekananda goes even further when he writes, “it is good to be born in a church, but it is bad to die there. It is good to be born a child, but it is bad to remain a child. Churches, ceremonies, and symbols are good for children, but when the child is grown, he must burst the church or himself.” (*World Teacher* 68). Religious exploration and experimentation in this sense becomes, not a sign of mindless dilettantism, but the ultimate hallmark of spiritual maturity.

The goal of the “recreational roads” approach, furthermore, becomes totally immanent, focused on this life and on the human relationships within it. Its success is measured not in the attainment of some otherworldly vision, but in the development of those virtues of interconnectivity that bind human beings to one another and to all sentient life. “Love and charity for the whole human race,” writes Vivekananda, “that is the test of true religiousness. I don’t mean the sentimental statement that all men are brothers, but that one must feel the oneness of human life.” (*World Teacher* 68). In the same vein, in *Ethics for a New Millennium*, the Dalai lama makes the distinction between religion, which he argues is concerned with “faith in the claims of salvation in one faith tradition or another and spirituality,” and spirituality, which he describes as a concern for the well-being of others and a transformation of oneself so that one is more readily disposed to do so. He goes on to say that it is possible to have this sort of spirituality without any religious belief systems at all (22-23).

The transition to an eclectic blending of religious practices for immanent rather than transcendent purposes is already becoming a fact of life in the West. For the past fifty years, Americans and Europeans have embraced tai chi and yoga practice to become more in touch with their bodies, Buddhist mindfulness practice and Hindu mantra recitation for a deeper sense of peacefulness, and zen meditation practice to develop a heightened sense of concentration and an appreciation for the present moment. Throughout the United States, former Catholic retreat houses and seminaries are being transformed into Centers that offer Americans a taste of these kinds of practices and provide more intensive spiritual training for those who are so inclined.

While there are some who might see this transition to a “recreational” model of religious practice as cause for alarm, there is no doubt that the trend towards religious eclecticism along with the rejection of transcendent aspirations has already become a fact of life in the West. Only time will tell if this approach offers a more tolerant, inclusive, and life-affirming model for religious life than its alternatives.

SOURCES

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