

A God Who Is Mine Only

A proprietary claim upon the Truth and divine guidance is commonly promoted by various religious establishments. In this thought pattern, any consideration given to accepting the validity of other scriptures becomes heresy and blasphemy. As if God could be so narrow-minded as to merely follow man's capricious impulses. The desire to be in such secure possession of the Truth—an objective truth that is all ours and only ours—takes away our ability to lose ourselves in the mystery of that truth and all the other truth that is all around us. Our often-misplaced certainty thus becomes the cardinal hurdle to our quest and discovery.

The question then is: Does the Creative Power that brought us into existence really care who possesses a superior brand of religion? The answer coming from the *Bhagavad Gita* (9.29) may be quite the opposite:

I am impartial to all creatures,
and no one is hateful or dear to me;
but men devoted to me are in me,
and I am within them.

While some mutual influence and inspiration cannot be denied, our religions are independent moral philosophies and spiritual paths. While we see similarities, there simultaneously are differences that any theologian can parse to no end. Regardless, we do have to keep in mind that, even in the area of theology and not just in ethical and moral attitudes, the differences sometimes have more to do with form than substance. The theologically irreconcilable differences among the various religions may simply prove the basic teaching they all share: “understanding” the Ultimate Truth is beyond human faculties.

French anthropologist Marcel Mauss pointed out that “societies live by borrowing from each other, but they define themselves rather by the refusal of borrowing rather than by its acceptance.”⁴⁹⁴ Different religions being independent pathways to our spiritual quest cannot be denied. Yet we see similarities in their teachings. A claim to monopoly or uniqueness may reflect one's ignorance of

historical realities. Comprehending the past three thousand years alone tells us that human civilizations, cultures, languages, customs, and rituals have evolved in an interactive fashion, along with those of their neighbors, near or far. (The old Persian and the Vedic Sanskrit languages, for example, emerged from the same source language.)

We may find similarities among different religions because of such influences and also because they may be inspired by a Single Source. In that regard, the *Qur'an* (16:36) points out, “And indeed, within every community have We raised up an apostle [entrusted with this message]: ‘Worship God, and shun the powers of evil!’ And among those [past generations] were people whom God graced with His guidance ...”

Paul Kriwaczek was a British historian and author. In his book *In Search of Zarathustra*, he calls Zoroaster (Zardosht, Zarathushtra) the First Prophet. Kriwaczek added: “A belief in good and evil, angels, the Devil, heaven and hell, the coming of a Messiah, and an eventual end of the world... Every one of those ideas first appeared in Zarathustra’s teaching long before the start of recorded history, a message as influential today as it ever was.”⁴⁹⁵

He goes on to describe an encounter with the minder of a Zoroastrian temple close to Yazd, Iran. In answering Kriwaczek’s question to express the core of the Zoroastrian teaching, the minder responded: “Easily. Our basic beliefs are very simple. Choose truth and oppose lies. And always strive for good words, good thoughts and good deeds.”⁴⁹⁶

During my childhood, my mother introduced me to the Parsee religion (the Zoroastrianism practiced by a small minority in South Asia) and explained that their adherents followed the teachings of Zardosht. I believe she knew virtually nothing about the man or his message.

Surprisingly, though, if I had to make a statement about the core Islamic teaching my mother imparted to me, it would not be much different from the statement of the Zoroastrian temple’s minder. If, as the *Qur'an* says, God has sent prophets to all communities, then Zardosht would indeed be one of those prophets.

The Buddha explained to his disciples that his teachings are not the destination, but rather a means of traveling. In other words, the destination is not exclusive—those following different “means of traveling” may get there too. Following that advice would enable us to benefit from the teachings of our own religion while we recognize the validity of the other’s belief system.

Seeing Our Common Humanity

If an eternal divine message produces no luminous resonance within our limited human consciousness, maybe our own mirror needs polishing. Ego-driven human constructs can cloud human consciousness, thus hindering reflection in one’s thought process. Religious doctrines (created by humans) that place inordinate emphasis on the afterlife at the expense of human conduct in this life provide such an example.

When the pursuit of the afterlife becomes an all-consuming obsession, we entirely forget that the Power that will reward us in the hereafter may measure our qualification based upon our “performance” in this life. Rabi’a al-Adawiyya (also called Rabi’a of Basra, eighth century) is considered one of the cardinal saints in Islam. Her message highlights that a blind pursuit of the afterlife is not the purpose of our spiritual quest in this life:

I carry a torch in one hand
And a bucket of water in the other:
With these things I am going to set fire to Heaven
And put out the flames of Hell
So that voyagers to God can rip the veils
And see the real goal.⁴⁹⁷

ONE COMMUNITY, MANY TITLES

“To what is One, sages give many a title ...”

—Rig Veda I.164.46.