

Understanding the World's Religions

A Study Guide to Huston Smith's *The World's
Religions*

Gary Kowalski

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About *The Lifespan Series*

The Lifespan Series consists primarily of original programs created by Unitarian Universalist leaders for use in their congregations and districts. These programs address topics of current interest and need. After proven local success, the programs are published by the Unitarian Universalist Association and sold by the UUA Bookstore so that these creative efforts are available throughout the denomination. They have not gone through the usual curriculum-development and field-testing processes, but are available to our congregations faster than would otherwise be possible. In addition to serving as a clearinghouse for locally developed programs, this series includes programs commissioned by the Religious Education Department to address specific needs.

The primary goals of the programs are to deepen understanding of Unitarian Universalism, to explore the implications of Unitarian Universalism for life within and beyond the congregation, to enrich the broader ministry of our religious communities, and to recognize the talents and contributions of Unitarian Universalist religious educators, whether they are directors or ministers of religious education, parish ministers, or lay members of congregations.

If you have written or participated in programs in your congregation that you believe would be of interest to other Unitarian Universalists, we want to hear from you. We are interested in programs and resources for the entire lifespan of religious growth and learning. And as you use programs in *The Lifespan Series*, we welcome feedback on your experiences.

Judith A. Frediani
Curriculum Development Director and Editor of *The Lifespan Series*
Department of Religious Education
Unitarian Universalist Association

Introduction

The world contains a variety of scriptures, prophets, holy cities, and spiritual traditions. There are probably as many reasons to study the religions of the world as there are believers and seekers, doubters and devotees.

One reason might be to bring greater understanding to a planet dangerously divided by competing claims of faith. Religious violence and persecution have escalated to the point where the United Nations now reports that almost half of the armed conflicts raging on the earth at any moment are holy wars, leading some international experts to predict that the major threats to peace in the post-cold war era will come not from conflicts between secular states or ideologies, but from the clash of religious orthodoxies. If we are to achieve peace, it is critical to come to a deeper appreciation of people whose folkways and faithways differ from our own.

Another reason to study world religions might be to learn to relate respectfully to others within our own heterogeneous communities. The days when North Americans could be comfortably classified according to Will Herberg's typology of Protestant, Catholic, and Jew are long gone (if such a time ever actually existed). Our next door neighbors and children's classmates are increasingly likely to be Buddhist or Muslim or Hindu, and we risk becoming parochial in outlook unless we deliberately extend our horizons to embrace the diversity that characterizes our society.

The most common motive for such a study may be more personal, however. Through an encounter with other faiths, it is to be hoped that we will find resources to live with greater wisdom and serenity. Fewer people today are willing to accept uncritically the religion of their parents and past generations. More are determined to explore the teachings and insights of other faiths. This is certainly true for most Unitarian Universalists.

Religious liberals have a long history of interest in other spiritual traditions. Transcendentalists like Ralph Waldo Emerson were among the first of their contemporaries to inquire into the sacred writings of Asia. The Unitarian author Lydia Maria Child wrote one of the earliest histories of the world's religions—*The Progress of Religious Ideas Through Successive Ages*, published in 1855—scandalizing many of her readers with the suggestion that Christianity had no monopoly on divine truth. That perspective is typical of our movement, and continues to inform us. It is the premise behind this study guide.

This is intended as an adult reading and discussion course centered on Huston Smith's perennial classic, *The World's Religions* (first published under the title *The Religions of Man* in 1958). In the decades since it first appeared, this book has remained continuously in print, inspiring millions of readers with sympathetic treatments of Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Islam, Judaism, Christianity, and the primal religions.

One of the great strengths of Smith's approach is that he has made complex and arcane issues accessible to the layperson seeking a brief introduction to major world faith traditions. Some distinctions and details are necessarily lost in such an overview, and for opportunities to go deeper into each faith, see Resources at the back of this guide. Because each chapter is comparatively brief, it is well suited to reading on a weekly basis. This guide follows the text chapter by chapter and offers a list of questions for small group discussion. Page numbers that are cited refer to the 1991 edition of *The World's Religions*, published by Harper-SanFrancisco. Each participant will need a copy of this book to read the relevant material before each session. Participants will doubtless formulate their own lists of questions, but the ones here will provide a starting point sufficient for a one-and-a-half or two-hour weekly session. In addition, a quotation from each of the traditions is included at the beginning and end of each session, which may be used as a focus for an opening or closing meditation. Finally, guidelines for leading dynamic discussion groups follow this introduction.

Our Unitarian Universalist principles observe that our faith draws from many sources,

including “that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit, and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life.” My hope is that this study guide will help others, in some small way, to glimpse that wondrous mystery, in all its manifold disguises.

I close with these words from Mohandas K. Gandhi—a Hindu whose study of the Christian Bible and of Western thinkers like Henry David Thoreau informed his own philosophy of nonviolence, and who in turn inspired countless others of every faith:

“I hold that it is the duty of every cultured man or woman to read sympathetically the scriptures of the world. If we are to respect other’s religions as we would have them respect our own, a friendly study of the world’s religions is a sacred duty.”

The Reverend Gary Kowalski

Guidelines for Leaders

1. Enlist a co-leader to work with. It will be more fun and will relieve you of the pressure to be there if you are ill or otherwise unable to make a session. When co-leaders agree to give each other feedback on their leadership, they often gain increased competence and skill. In addition, participants benefit from experiencing two or more leadership styles and perspectives. *Understanding the World's Religions* can be led by ministers, laypersons, or a combination.
2. Read the appropriate material in Huston Smith's book and in this study guide well in advance of the session. Reading it at least twice and reflecting on it will increase your understanding of the themes and your confidence in leading the discussion.
3. Arrive early to sessions and take care of all logistics, from room temperature to supplies to seating arrangements.
4. Make and keep a commitment to start and end each session on time.
5. Be a facilitator of reflection and discussion, not a lecturer. Resist the temptation to use your leadership role to share all your ideas and opinions. Instead, use your understandings to ask stimulating questions, keep the discussion focused and lively, and provide information as appropriate.
6. At the first session, have participants agree on some basic group guidelines that will help make this experience enjoyable and productive for everyone. For example, participants might agree to:
 - Arrive on time or let a leader know if they will be unavoidably late.
 - Let a leader know if they will not be able to attend a session.
 - Read the assigned material for each session.
 - Speak for themselves in discussions.
 - Reserve the right to pass in any discussion.
 - Share the floor; give everyone an equal chance to speak.
 - Refrain from interrupting others when they are speaking.
 - Keep confidential any personal sharing that occurs in the group.
7. Don't allow one or two individuals to dominate the discussion by talking frequently and/or at great length. It is not unusual for discussion groups to attract people who like to talk more than their share, so consider using one or more of the following strategies to equalize opportunities for all participants to speak:
 - Model brevity. If you ramble, you invite others to do the same.
 - Use a "talking stick" or other object that is passed from speaker to speaker. Only the person holding this object speaks. Two interesting results of this approach are that everyone becomes more aware of how often they speak, and the participants themselves control who speaks next as they pass the object to another person.
 - Use a timed agenda. Although this is an adult religious education program, not a business meeting, a rough agenda of how the group will spend their time together helps everyone to

focus. Post it on newsprint and refer to it if you feel the group is spending too much time on one topic.

- Form small groups. If the group is larger than 12, you may want to spend some discussion time in smaller groups that report their most salient thoughts back to the whole group. Small group discussions give more people more time to talk and encourage less assertive folks to speak up in this more intimate setting.
- Post a list of unfinished business. When someone raises a question or topic that would take the group off on a tangent, suggest that it be listed on newsprint for discussion later in the session or in another session. Be sure to return to these items as promised.
- Ask for a moment of reflection before anyone answers the next question. Then call on someone who has not spoken much. Giving the group this pause before resuming discussion lets everyone collect their thoughts (some people need a little longer than others) and allows you to give the floor to someone other than the most assertive participant.
- Suggest that the group go around the circle and briefly share their thoughts on the topic or question. Start with someone you believe will model brevity.
- Ask the group to agree that they will raise their hands when they wish to speak, and that everyone will refrain from interrupting the speaker. The leader notes the order in which people raise their hands and periodically indicates who will have the floor next. For example, "Mary, John, Bill, then Cathy." Even if this approach seems "juvenile" or controlling, it is worth trying. It is actually very fair, inclusive, efficient, and relaxing because people can concentrate on speaking and listening rather than on competing for the floor and trying to hold it against the threat of imminent interruption. If the facilitator wishes to speak, she or he symbolically raises a hand and adds her- or himself to the list.
- Invite people who have not yet spoken on a topic to speak next.
- Watch for body language indicating that someone wants to speak, but is hesitant to compete for the floor. Call on her or him in an encouraging way.
- Try to avoid making direct eye contact with participants who have been talking too much. It can be interpreted as a green light for them to speak again.
- Invite the group to conduct a five-minute process check toward the end of each session. Ask, "How was our process?" When you introduce this concept, explain that it is not an evaluation of the leader(s), but an invitation to everyone to reflect on their own participation and their experience of the group process as a whole. A process check encourages self-awareness, communicates that everyone shares responsibility for the process, and gives people an opportunity to voice concerns or suggestions.
- When the above strategies fail, and someone is still talking way too much, don't be afraid to interrupt the speaker in front of the group. Not to do so is disrespectful of everyone else. Examples of respectful but firm interventions include, "Excuse me, Frank, but I'm concerned about the time," and, "I'm going to stop you there, Mary, because I'm concerned that we are moving off our focus. Can we put your issue on the unfinished business list?"

- When all else fails, and even direct interventions fail to curtail the excessive participation of a particularly difficult individual, speak with him or her privately before or after a session or at a break. It may be hard to bring yourself to confront someone, but remember that it is the leader's responsibility to take care of the welfare of the whole group. Other participants will not speak up, they will simply stop coming, or decline to sign up for another program. When you speak to the participant privately, keep the following tips in mind:

Use "I" statements to state the problem: "I am concerned about staying on our schedule."
"I am concerned that not everyone has an opportunity to speak when some people speak at length. It is my responsibility to bring everyone into the process."

Name the participant's behavior if they don't own it themselves. Be specific. "Frank, are you aware that you interrupted Mary, John, and Louise when they were speaking? We agreed as a group to listen to each other respectfully."

Give him or her an opportunity to voice his or her concerns. "Mary, how is this group working for you? You seemed frustrated tonight. Is there something you need from me or the group?"

Try to enlist their help in agreeing to a solution. Affirm them and appeal to their sense of fairness. "Frank, I value your participation in this group, and I need to be respectful of everyone's time and needs. What do you think I should do when someone repeatedly interrupts others?"

Hopefully, they will acknowledge their behavior and modify it in the future. If the behavior continues unabated, it is likely that they are not merely needy or thoughtless, but seriously hostile. Confrontation may cause him or her to leave the group. This is the participant's choice, and if you have treated the person respectfully, you should not feel that his or her decision is your "failure."

Judith A. Frediani

UUA Curriculum Office

Session 1: Hinduism

Reading: Chapters I and II

Although this session focuses on Chapter II, it is suggested that participants also read Chapter I to gain an introduction to Huston Smith's "Point of Departure."

Opening Words

I am the self abiding
in the heart of all creatures;
I am their beginning,
their middle, and their end.

I dwell deep
in the heart of everyone;
memory, knowledge,
and reasoning come from me;
I am the object to be known
through all sacred lore;
and I am its knower,
the creator of its final truth.

I am death the destroyer of all,
the source of what will be,
the feminine powers: fame, fortune, speech,
memory, intelligence, resolve, patience.

Whatever is powerful, lucid,
splendid, or invulnerable
has its source in a fragment
of my brilliance.

—selections from *The Bhagavad-Gita*¹

Questions for Discussion

1. On the basis of your reading, what did you find most intriguing or appealing about the Hindu religion? What did you find difficult to accept or understand?
2. Huston Smith says that "religion begins with the quest for meaning and value beyond self-centeredness" (p. 19). How do we balance the need for healthy self-regard with the Hindu emphasis on self-renunciation and self-transcendence?

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3. Psychologist Abraham Maslow said human beings have a hierarchy of needs: for survival, security, affiliation, self-esteem, and self-actualization. We must satisfy the more basic needs before ascending to the higher, more spiritual values. How is this similar to, or different from, the Hindu answer to “what people want”?
4. Hinduism identifies four “spiritual personality types” (p. 28f). The Myers-Briggs Personality Type Indicator names different personality types, for example, introvert and extrovert. Do you think it is helpful to categorize people according to type? Are the Hindu types illuminating or confusing? What type are you?
5. According to Hinduism, our work and daily responsibilities can become a spiritual pathway when performed with the proper attitude (p. 38). Do you agree? If so, can you give examples from your own experience of how this might be true?
6. Hinduism divides the life journey into distinct stages (p. 50f). Old age is the period especially conducive to contemplation. Should focal attention to spiritual concerns be postponed until the final stage of life, as Hinduism suggests? Erik Erikson, Gail Sheehy, and others also describe stages of adult growth, but offer different road maps to describe the journey through life. How helpful is the Hindu scheme?
7. Smith describes the *sannyasin* as one who has left behind worldly concerns, personal possessions, and social ties to live a life with God (p. 54). How is this different than the monastic ideal in Christianity? Is this a valid lifestyle for some people? Is it for everybody or just a select few?
8. According to the law of *karma*, “everybody gets exactly what is deserved” (p. 64). Do you agree with this philosophy? In what sense is it true or false?
9. In the Hindu view, “all talk of social progress, of cleaning up the world, of creating the kingdom of heaven on earth” is misguided (p. 68). Should religion have a social ethic? Is the point of religion to help us transcend the world or to help us engage more deeply in the struggle for justice and peace?
10. Hinduism claims all religions are routes up the mountain (p. 73). Is it best, like Ramakrishna, to sample various faiths and belief systems, or should one choose a single path and follow it whole-heartedly?
11. What elements of Hinduism seem most compatible with Unitarian Universalist principles? What elements are incompatible? What could religious liberals learn from a deeper encounter with Hinduism?
12. What are your own questions about Hinduism?

Closing Words

Be gracious, O mother of the whole world!
 Be gracious, O queen of the universe! Safeguard the universe!
 Thou, O goddess, art queen of all that is moveable
 and immoveable!
 Thou alone hast become the support of the world,

Because thou dost subsist in the form of the earth!
By thee, who existeth in the form of water,
 all this universe is filled . . .
Thou art Vishnu's energy, boundless in thy valour!
Thou art the germ of the universe,
 thou art illusion sublime!
All this world has been bewitched, O goddess;
Thou indeed, when attained, art the cause of final emancipation from existence on the earth!
All sciences are portions of thee, O goddess!
So are all females without exception in the world!
By thee alone as mother this world has been filled!
What praise can there be for thee? Thou art beyond praise!
—from *The Markandeya Puran*,
translated by Eden Pargiter

Session 2: Buddhism

Reading: Chapter III

Opening Words

Some children were playing beside a river. They made castles of sand, and each child defended his castle and said, “This one is mine.” They kept their castles separate and would not allow any mistakes about which was whose. When the castles were all finished, one child kicked over someone else’s castle and completely destroyed it. The owner of the castle flew into a rage, pulled the other child’s hair, struck him with his fist and bawled out, “He has spoilt my castle! Come along all of you and help me to punish him as he deserves.” The others all came to his help. They beat the child with a stick and then stamped on him as he lay on the ground. . . . Then they went on playing in their sand-castles, each saying, “This is mine; no one else may have it. Keep away! Don’t touch my castle!” But evening came; it was getting dark and they all thought they ought to be going home. No one now cared what became of his castle. One child stamped on his, another pushed his over with both his hands. Then they turned away and went back, each to his home.

—from the “Yogacara Bhumi Sutra” in *Buddhist Texts Through the Ages*, edited by Edward Conze

Alternative Opening Words

Mind is the forerunner of all actions
All deeds are led by mind, created by mind.
If one speaks or acts with a corrupt mind, suffering follows,
As the wheel follows the hoof of an ox pulling a cart.

Mind is the forerunner of all actions.
All deeds are led by mind, created by mind.
If one speaks or acts with a serene mind, happiness follows,
As surely as one’s shadow.

“He abused me, mistreated me, defeated me, robbed me.”
Harboring such thoughts keeps hatred alive.

“He abused me, mistreated me, defeated me, robbed me.”
Releasing such thoughts banishes hatred for all time.

Animosity does not eradicate animosity.
Only by loving kindness is animosity dissolved.
This law is ancient and eternal.

—the first four verses of *The Dhammapada*:
The Path of Truth, translated by the Venerable Balangoda Ananda Maitreya,
revised by Rose Kramer

Questions for Discussion

1. On the basis of your reading, what is the most appealing or intriguing feature of Buddhism? What seems most difficult to accept or understand?
2. Gautama's search for enlightenment begins when he first confronts the realities of sickness, old age, and death. Is personal crisis a necessary prelude to spiritual exploration?
3. The first noble truth of Buddhism holds that life is suffering and that even our most blissful moments hold a subtle residue of unhappiness. Is this an accurate description of the human condition?
4. The second noble truth states that the source of suffering is desire or craving. Would "addiction" be a good synonym for the Buddhist term *tanha*? Why or why not?
5. Buddhists believe that the primary problem we face is ignorance of our own essential nature. For Christians, the root of our predicament is sin or willful disobedience to our own essential nature. Which causes more trouble, ignorance or malice?
6. "The ego is an illusion." Is this true?
7. Buddhists include "right livelihood" among the Eightfold Path. Are certain professions incompatible with spiritual growth? Are some jobs more conducive to enlightenment than others? Why or why not?
8. Strict Buddhists, like most Hindus, hold to an ideal of nonviolence toward other sentient beings. What is their rationale for protecting animal life? Does it make sense?
9. According to Einstein, the most important question that can be asked is, "Is the universe a friendly place or not?" How do Buddhists answer that question? How would you answer it?
10. Of the Buddhist schools Smith describes—Theravada, Mahayana, Vajrayana, and Zen—which is most (and least) appealing to you?
11. What is your understanding of *nirvana* or *satori*? Is Smith's distinction of God and Godhead (p. 114) helpful?
12. "Sex is the divine in its most available epiphany," according to Smith (p. 141). How do you understand the relation between sexuality and spirituality?
13. According to Huston Smith, Buddha preached a religion devoid of authority, ritual, tradition, and the supernatural, stressing self-effort and trust in personal experience. Unitarian Universalism is also suspicious of ritual, tradition, supernaturalism, and ecclesiastical authority, stressing the individual search for truth. In what ways are the two religions similar to, and different from, one another? What could religious liberals learn from a deeper encounter with Buddhism?
14. What are your own questions about Buddhism?

Closing Words

I like to walk alone on country paths, rice plants and wild grasses on both sides, putting each foot down on the earth in mindfulness, knowing that I walk on the wondrous earth. In such moments, existence is a miraculous and mysterious reality. People usually consider walking on water or in thin air a miracle. But I think the real miracle is not to walk either on water or in thin air, but to walk on earth. Every day we are engaged in a miracle which we don't even recognize: a blue sky, white clouds, green leaves, the black, curious eyes of a child—our own two eyes. All is a miracle.

—from *The Miracle of Mindfulness*

by Thich Nhat Hanh

Session 3: Confucianism

Reading: Chapter IV

Opening Words

Chi-Lu asked about serving the spiritual beings. Confucius said, “If we are not yet able to serve humankind, how can we serve spiritual beings?”

“I venture to ask about death.”

Confucius said, “If we do not yet know about life, how can we know about death?”

—from the “Analects of Confucius” in *The Great Asian Religions*, edited by Wing-Tsit Chan

Questions for Discussion

1. What do you personally find most engaging about Confucius and his philosophy? What is most difficult to accept or understand?
2. Huston Smith refers to the “democratic tenor” of Confucius’ thinking (p. 154). In what ways is Confucianism democratic? How would Confucius respond to the democratic dictum that “all people are created equal?”
3. After his death, the figure of Confucius underwent a process of glorification. “He is the sun, the moon, which there is no way of climbing over” (p. 158). Other religious teachers have been similarly exalted by their followers. Is hero worship an element of all religion? Is it healthy or unhealthy?
4. Huston Smith contrasts the philosophies of the “Realists,” who advocated the use of force to bring about social order, and the followers of Mo Tzu, who looked to love as a panacea. What was Confucius’ response to these two viewpoints?
5. Imagine that you are a modern day Confucianist, hired by a “think tank” to develop policies that would address the pressing ills of contemporary society. What kinds of reforms would you recommend?
6. “For nearly two thousand years, the first sentence a Chinese child was taught to read was, ‘Human beings are by nature good’” (p. 171). Do you agree with that premise?
7. What is Confucius’ concept of a fully realized human being? What is your concept?
8. How would you defend the importance of “the rectification of names?” Is the misuse of language a cause or a symptom of social pathology?
9. Confucius refers to “five constant relationships” in human life (p. 175). In a period when we are redefining family and many other cultural institutions, can we venture to say that there are any “constant relationships” among people? If so, what are they?
10. “By poetry the mind is aroused; from music the finish is received. The odes stimulate the

mind.” How did Confucius see the relation between religion and the arts? How do you see it? Can we be “saved” through art?

11. According to Confucius, “apart from human relationships there is no self” (p. 180). How does this differ from the Buddhist doctrine of *anatta* or no-self?
12. What are some admirable aspects of Chinese society that spring from Confucian roots? What are some disagreeable offshoots of Confucianism?
13. Is Confucianism an ethic or a religion? What is the difference?
14. Which elements within Confucianism are most compatible with Unitarian Universalism? Which are least compatible? What can religious liberals learn from a deeper encounter with Confucius and his followers?
15. What other questions do you have about Confucianism?

Closing Words

When complete sincerity is attained, hearts are amended.
When hearts are amended, persons are cultivated.
When persons are cultivated, families are established in order.
When families are established in order, states are set in order.
When states are set in order, the world is at peace.
From rulers to people, the cultivation of persons is the root.

—“The Great Learning” in
The Way for This Journey by Kenneth Patton

Session 4: Taoism

Reading: Chapter V

Opening Words

Without opening your door,
you can open your heart to the world.
Without looking out your window,
you can see the essence of the Tao.

The more you know,
the less you understand.

The Master arrives without leaving,
sees the light without looking,
achieves without doing a thing.

—from the *Tao Te Ching* by Lao Tzu,
translated by S. Mitchell

Questions for Discussion

1. What do you find most appealing or intriguing about Taoism, based on your reading? What do you find difficult to accept or understand?
2. Huston Smith says that *Tao* is “the way of ultimate reality” (p. 198). It is also “the way of the universe” and “the way of human life.” What is your understanding of the *Tao*? How is the *Tao* different than, or similar to, the idea of God?
3. *Ch'i* is the generic Chinese term for vital energy, and Taoism advocates various techniques for increasing the flow of *ch'i*, for example, through nutrition, tai chi chuan, and acupuncture. Is there any Western equivalent for the concept of *ch'i*? How do diet, exercise, and health practices affect your own spiritual well-being?
4. Popular Taoism, according to Smith, includes many elements that might be considered magical, for example, astrology, divination, and psychic healing (p. 205). Do you believe in magic? Why or why not?
5. “Creative quietude” or *wu wei* is at the essence of philosophical Taoism (p. 207). What is your understanding of *wu wei*? Can you offer examples from your own experience of the power of “creative quietude”?
6. Define *yin* and *yang*. Is it a help or a hindrance to speak of “masculine” and “feminine” spiritual energies?
7. Smith says that “in the Taoist perspective good and evil are not head-on opposites. The West has tended to dichotomize the two, but Taoists are less categorical” (p. 215). Are some

actions intrinsically good and others intrinsically evil, or are all values relative and contextual?

8. According to Smith, the symbol for Taoism is a circle, suggesting that “life does not move onward and upward toward a fixed pinnacle or pole. It bends back upon itself” (p. 215). Is the life journey one of forward progression toward a goal, or one that ventures outward only to return to its own origins?
9. Humor and play seem to be an important part of Taoist teachings (p. 217). Can you think of any other religious traditions that place a high value on being lighthearted?
10. What elements in Taoism seem most and least compatible with Unitarian Universalism? What could religious liberals learn from a deeper encounter with Taoism?
11. What other questions do you have about Taoism?

Closing Words

There was something formless and perfect
before the universe was born.
It is serene. Empty.
Solitary. Unchanging.
Infinite. Eternally present.
It is the mother of the universe.
For lack of a better name,
I call it the Tao.

—from the *Tao Te Ching* by Lao Tzu,
translated by S. Mitchell

Session 5: Islam

Reading: Chapter VI

Opening Words

Heaven and hell are states, not localities. Their descriptions in the Koran are visual representations of an inner fact, i.e., character. Hell, in the words of the Koran, is “God’s kindled fire which mounts above the hearts”—the painful realization of one’s failure as a man. Heaven is the joy of triumph over the forces of disintegration. There is no such thing as eternal damnation in Islam. . . . Hell, as conceived by the Koran, is not a pit of everlasting torture inflicted by a revengeful God; it is a corrective experience which may make a hardened ego once more sensitive to the living breeze of Divine Grace. Nor is Heaven a holiday; Life is one and continuous. Every act of a free ego creates a new situation, and thus offers further opportunities of creative unfolding.

—from “Six Lectures on the Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam” by Sir Muhammad Iqbal in *Islam* by Alfred Guillaume

Questions for Discussion

1. What do you personally find most intriguing or appealing about Islam, based on your reading? What is most difficult to accept or understand?
2. Huston Smith suggests that Islam is the most misunderstood of all the world’s faiths, at least for Westerners (p. 221). Why would this be so?
3. Smith suggests that because Islam taught “respect for the world’s incontrovertible order” it was a faith unusually welcoming to the scientific spirit (p. 227). Does any one religion seem to you to be more in tune with scientific thought than others? Why or why not?
4. The Koran was received by Mohammed during “trance-like states” in which he heard a number of voices taken to be angelic messengers (p. 232). What do you make of “channeled writing” of this kind?
5. “Muslims see monotheism as Islam’s contribution not simply to the Arabs but to religion in its entirety” (p. 236). On what basis could you argue that monotheism represents a culmination or high achievement in human spiritual evolution?
6. “Abraham is by far the most important figure in the Koran,” says Smith, “for he passed the ultimate test of willingness to sacrifice his own son if that was required” (p. 240). Yet modern social workers might indict Abraham of child abuse, or worse. Is Abraham a paradigm of faith or a religious fanatic?
7. The five pillars of Islam are creedal confession, prayer, charity, fasting, and pilgrimage (p. 243f). Which of these spiritual practices has greatest meaning for you?

8. “Islam joins faith to politics, religion to society, inseparably,” says Smith (p. 249). Can society be wholly secular or maintain itself without some common faith or religious reference point?
9. The Koran does not teach turning the other cheek, or pacifism, but sanctions the use of force for defense and correcting injustice (p. 254). Is Islam more real-istic in this respect than some other religions?
10. Smith attempts to defend the status of women in Islamic society. Does he make his case? What are your feelings about polygamy (or polyandry)?
11. In what ways is Sufism different from, and similar to, other forms of mysticism we have encountered in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism? Are all mystics describing a common experience?
12. What elements in Islam seem most and least compatible with Unitarian Universalism? What might religious liberals learn from a deeper encounter with Islam?
13. What are your own questions about Islam?

Closing Words

To worship God is nothing other than to serve the people.

It does not need rosaries, prayer carpets, or robes.

All peoples are members of the same body, created from one essence.

If fate brings suffering to one member

The others cannot stay at rest.

—“To Serve the People,”
excerpted from *Bostan* by Saadi

Session 6: Judaism

Reading: Chapter VII

Opening Words

A story is told about a Rabbi who once entered heaven in a dream. He was permitted to approach the temple of Paradise where the great sages of the Talmud, the Tannaim, were spending their eternal lives. He saw that they were just sitting around tables studying the Talmud. The disappointed Rabbi wondered, “Is this all there is to Paradise?” But suddenly he heard a voice, “You are mistaken. The Tannaim are not in Paradise. Paradise is in the Tannaim.”

—from *Quest for God: Studies in Prayer and Symbolism* by Abraham Joshua Heschel

Questions for Discussion

1. What did you find most appealing or intriguing about Judaism, based on your reading? What was most difficult to accept or understand?
2. “In the final analysis, ultimate reality is more like a person than like a thing, more like a mind than like a machine” (p. 273). Do you agree? Is this what it means to believe in a personal God?
3. In the book of Genesis, God not only pronounces the world “very good” but gives human beings dominion over creation (p. 279). Does Judaism encourage reverence for creation or encourage human exploitation of nature?
4. In spite of their divine origins, human beings constantly “miss the mark” and make destructive choices (p. 281). Is “sin,” as Smith defines it, a useful construct or an accurate description of the human situation?
5. In regard to “meaning in history” (p. 283), should religion help us change the world or transcend it?
6. “The Ten Commandments constitute the moral foundation of most of the Western world,” says Smith (p. 286). What is your opinion of the Ten Commandments? Are they absolutes? Minimal prerequisites for social order? Or merely (as some Unitarian Universalists say) “the Ten Suggestions”?
7. The Unitarian Universalist theologian James Luther Adams stated that religious liberals affirm the “prophethood of all believers.” What does it mean to be a prophet?
8. The prophet known as “second” Isaiah introduces the idea that suffering can be redemptive, a concept that is carried forward with even greater emphasis in Christianity (p. 296). In what ways, if any, can suffering be a redemptive experience?
9. “Jews are united more by what they do than by what they think,” says Smith (p. 300). Jews have no single creed. In what other ways are Judaism and Unitarian Universalism similar? In

what ways are they different?

10. “Without attention, the human sense of wonder and the holy will stir occasionally, but to become a steady flame it must be tended” (p. 302). Judaism seeks to hallow life through prayer, ritual, and tradition. How do you personally fan the flame of reverence and wonder?
11. Has messianism—the hope for a God-appointed liberator or savior—been a positive or negative force in human affairs?
12. Have the Jews, as a “chosen people,” been held to higher standards of conduct than their neighbors in the Middle East? Should they be?
13. What might Unitarian Universalists learn from a deeper encounter with Judaism?
14. What are your own questions about Judaism?

Closing Words

A young rabbi complained to the rabbi of Rizhyn: “During the hours when I devote myself to my studies I feel life and light, but the moment I stop studying it is all gone. What shall I do?”

The rabbi of Rizhyn replied: “That is just as when a man walks through the woods on a dark night, and for a time another joins him, lantern in hand, but at the crossroads they part and the first must grope his way on alone. But if a man carries his own light with him he need not be afraid of any darkness.”

—from *Tales of the Hasidim* by Martin Buber

Session 7: Christianity

Reading: Chapter VIII

Opening Words

When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, he will sit in state on his throne, with all the nations gathered before him. He will separate men into two groups, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep on his right hand and the goats on his left. Then the king will say to those on his right hand, “You have my Father’s blessing; come, enter and possess the kingdom that has been ready for you since the world was made. For when I was hungry, you gave me food; when thirsty, you gave me drink; when I was a stranger, you took me into your home; when naked, you clothed me; when I was ill, you came to my help; when in prison, you visited me.” Then the righteous will reply, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and fed you, or thirsty and gave you drink, a stranger and took you home, or naked and clothed you? When did we see you ill or in prison and come to visit you?” And the king will answer, “I tell you this: anything you did for one of my brothers here, however humble, you did for me.”

—from the Gospel of Matthew 25 : 31–41
in *The New English Bible*

Questions for Discussion

1. What elements of Christianity did you find most intriguing or appealing, based on your reading? What was most difficult to accept or understand?
2. One of the notable aspects of Jesus’ ministry was miraculous healings and exorcisms (p. 320). What is your opinion of faith healing?
3. Huston Smith distinguished “the historical Jesus” and “the Christ of Faith.” From your own reading, what is known about the historical Jesus?
4. The ethical teachings of the Christian Scriptures, for example, turning the other cheek, taking no thought for the morrow, and giving away possessions, are sometimes judged to be perfectionistic or incapable of fulfillment. Is the Sermon on the Mount a realistic moral guide or an impossible ethical ideal?
5. What is your understanding of the “Kingdom of God” that Jesus proclaimed? A place of psychic serenity? A human community of justice and equality? An otherworldly afterlife?
6. “We are given too few details to know exactly what happened after the crucifixion,” says Smith (p. 329). What do you think might have happened?
7. What is the essential message of the “Good News” proclaimed by Christians? How does the “Christ of Faith” differ from the “historical Jesus”?
8. Christians, including Martin Luther King, Jr., Oscar Romero, and others, have tried to change

the world through *agape* or unlimited, unconditional love. Do you share King's belief that "unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality, that right, temporarily defeated, is stronger than evil triumphant"?

9. Central theological doctrines of Christianity include the Incarnation, the Atonement, and the Trinity (p. 339f). Which of these concepts, if any, holds meaning for you? In what way does your understanding of these doctrines differ from that of traditional Christians?
10. The notion of "sacrament" is woven into Roman Catholic theology. What is a sacrament? Are there sacraments within Unitarian Universalist worship and practice?
11. How would you answer the question, "Are Unitarian Universalists Protestants?" Do we affirm what Smith calls "the Protestant Principle" (p. 359)?
12. Which elements of Christianity seem most and least compatible with Unitarian Universalism? What might religious liberals gain from a deeper encounter with Christianity?
13. What are your own questions about Christianity?

Closing Words

Lord, make us instruments of thy peace.
Where there is hatred, let us sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light;
Where there is sadness, joy.
O Divine Master,
May we not so much seek to be consoled as to console,
To be understood as to understand,
To be loved, as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
And in pardoning that we are pardoned.
It is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

—Saint Francis of Assisi

Session 8: Primal Religions

Reading: Chapter IX

Opening Words

Hear me, four quarters of the world—a relative am I! Give me the strength to walk the soft earth, a relative to all that is! Give me the eyes to see and the strength to understand, that I may be like you. With your power only can I face the winds.

Great Spirit, Great Spirit, my Grandfather, all over the earth the faces of living things are all alike. With tenderness have these come up out of the ground. Look upon these faces of children without number and children in their arms, that they may face the winds and walk the good road to the day of quiet. This is my prayer; hear me!

—from Black Elk, in *Black Elk Speaks*,
edited by John G. Neihardt

Questions for Discussion

1. What elements within the primal religions do you find most appealing or intriguing, based on your reading? What is most difficult to accept or understand?
2. Primal religions are sometimes considered to be more “primitive” or “childlike” in outlook than the other major historical faiths. Is this an unfair assessment?
3. Many religions (including Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, and Islam) speak of a “golden age” when human beings were in harmony with nature and the world of spirit. Was the Neolithic period in some sense that “golden age”? If so, what constituted the “fall from grace”?
4. Smith observes that many primal peoples model their lives on the mythical deeds of archetypal heroes and heroines (p. 367). Do modern people also employ archetypes to create their self-image? What archetypes do you see active in our own society (for example, the Rebel, the Sex Symbol, and the Artist)?
5. The Dream Time of the Australian aborigines is cited as one example of “primal” religious experience (p. 368). What is the Dream Time? How does it differ from our own dreaming, fantasy life, or subconscious experience?
6. Smith suggests that the invention of writing was both a blessing and a curse (p. 368). Do you agree that preliterate people grasp reality in ways that may not be possible for those living in literate cultures? How will the communications revolution continue to shape our mental and spiritual world?
7. Huston Smith notes that many primal peoples feel that “human beings and nature belong to a single order” (p. 375). Animals and other living beings are looked on as close relatives of the human species, with wisdom to share. In what ways are other animals similar to, different from, or inferior or superior to human beings?

8. How do the primal religions differ from historical faiths in their attitude toward time?
9. Smith feels that the primal religions are inevitably on the wane, yet many people are attempting to revive and restore these vanishing traditions. Is it possible for “post-modern” people to appreciate and carry on the perspectives of primal hunter-gatherers?
10. What elements within the primal religions seem most and least compatible with Unitarian Universalism? What might religious liberals learn from a deeper encounter with primal traditions?
11. What other questions do you have about primal religions?

Closing Words

May the earth continue to live,
May the heavens continue to live,
May the rains continue to dampen the land,
May the wet forests continue to grow;
Then the flowers shall bloom
And we people shall live again.

—“Hawaiian Prayer” by David Malo

Session 9: A Final Examination

Reading: Chapter X

Opening Words

Men and women started to worship gods as soon as they became recognizably human; they created religions at the same time as they created works of art. This was not simply because they wanted to propitiate powerful forces; these early faiths expressed the wonder and mystery that seem always to have been an essential component of the human experience of this beautiful yet terrifying world. Like art, religion has been an attempt to find meaning and value in life, despite the suffering that flesh is heir to. Like any other human activity, religion can be abused, but it seems to have been something we have always done.

—from *A History of God* by Karen Armstrong

Questions for Discussion

1. Which of the faiths we have studied has the most appeal for you? The least appeal? Why? Is any one path clearly superior or inferior to others?
2. William James, quoted in Huston Smith's book, tells us that "in its broadest terms, religion says that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in rightful relations to it" (p. 319). Is this an adequate definition of religion? If not, what would your definition be?
3. Are there any "core teachings" or ethical insights that all the world's religions agree on? If so, what are they?
4. Smith suggests that all religions share the metaphysical claim that (a) reality is more integrated than it seems, (b) reality is better than it seems, and (c) reality is more mysterious than it seems (pp. 388–389). Is the universe indeed better, more integrated, and more mysterious than appearances suggest?
5. Some theologians, such as Paul Tillich, say that all people have some form of faith, even if they consider themselves to be completely nonreligious. Would you agree that there is a universal religious impulse in humankind? Is modern secularism a faith alternative, or an alternative to faith?
6. Many people claim to be "spiritual" but not "religious." Based on your survey of world religions, do you think there is a difference between religion and spirituality? If so, what?
7. As Unitarian Universalists, we espouse tolerance and respect for all faiths. Are there any religious practices so repugnant that we cannot tolerate them (for example, animal sacrifice or female circum-cision)? On what basis or authority can we criticize or cast judgment on teachings we find offensive? Is tolerance enough in a world where religious zealotry and intolerance is so pervasive?

8. It is often said that there are greater differences within the world's religious traditions than between them. For example, Christian fundamentalists, Muslim fundamentalists, and Jewish fundamentalists may have more in common with each other than they do with other adherents of their own faiths. Liberals likewise share many values, whether they are Christian, Hindu, or Buddhist. Which is more important, and more difficult—to foster interfaith conversation or to promote dialogue among religious liberals and religious conservatives?
9. What might Unitarian Universalism gain from a deeper encounter with all the world's religious traditions? What can you do to foster interfaith dialogue within your own congregation and community?
10. What are your own questions that have arisen from this course?

Closing Words

Some years ago a famous novelist died. Among his papers was found a list of suggested plots for future stories, the most prominently underscored being this one: "A widely separated family inherits a house in which they have to live together." This is the great new problem of mankind. We have inherited a large house, a great "world house" in which we have to live together—black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Moslem and Hindu—a family unduly separated in ideas, culture, and interests, who, because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to live with each other in peace.

—Martin Luther King, Jr.,
quoted by Diana Eck in *Encountering God:
A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras*

Resources

Books

Many of these titles are available from the UUA Bookstore, 1-800-215-9076, or your local bookstore or library.

Armstrong, Karen. *The History of God: The Four Thousand Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. New York: Knopf, 1993.

Boucher, Sandy. *Opening the Lotus: A Woman's Guide to Buddhism*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1997.

Eck, Diana. *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1995.

Ford, James Ishmael. *This Very Moment: A Brief Introduction to Buddhism and Zen for Unitarian Universalists*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 1996.

Gross, Rita M. *Feminism and Religion: An Introduction*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996.

Hanh, Thich Nhat. *The Miracle of Mindfulness: A Manual on Meditation*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1975.

. *Being Peace*. Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1987.

. *Peace Is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life*. New York: Bantam Books, 1991.

Klein, Anne Carolyn. *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen: Buddhists, Feminists, and the Art of the Self*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1995.

Novak, Philip. *The World's Wisdom: Sacred Texts of the World's Religions*. San Francisco: Harper-SanFrancisco, 1994.

Smith, Huston. *The World's Religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991.

Waskow, Arthur. *Seasons of Our Joy: A Modern Guide to the Jewish Holidays*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1982.

Other Resources

Senghas, Robert Tokushu. "The World's Religions by Huston Smith: A Book Review." Includes particular consideration of the chapter on Buddhism. The article, or a copy of the issue in which it appeared (*The Mountain Record*, Winter, 1992), is available from Dharma Communications, Mt. Tremper, NY. Phone: (914) 688-7995. Fax: (914) 688-7995. Email: dharmacom@mhv.net.

Sparks, Irving Alan. *Exploring the World's Religions: A Reading and Writing Workbook*. As the subtitle suggests, this study guide is closely tied to the content of Huston Smith's book, and is

classroom-oriented in style. It could be a helpful supplement to this study guide when used with either senior youth or adults. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991.