INSIGHTS ON THE EVOLUTION OF RELIGIONS AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

Dr. Linda Groff

> *"Our generation has arrived at the threshold of a new era in human history: the birth of a global community. Modern communications, trade and international relations, as well as the security and environmental dilemmas we all face, make us increasingly interdependent. No one can live in isolation. Thus, whether we like it or not, our vast and diverse human family must finally learn to live together. Individually and collectively we must assume a greater sense of Universal Responsibility."*
>
> – The XIVth Dalai Lama

> *"No peace among the nations without peace among the religions. No peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions."*
>
> – Hans Kung

Note: This paper is an updated and expanded version of material in earlier writing, including: Groff, Linda. "Insights on the Evolution of Cultures, Civilizations, and Religions," Part III, in *How Evolution Works*. Bellevue, WA: Foundation for the Future, 2005; Groff, Linda. "The Challenge of Cultural and Religious Diversity and Peacebuilding in an Interdependent World," Part III, in *Futures Research Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (2005); Groff, Linda. "Intercultural Communication, Interreligious Dialogue, and Peace," *Futures: The Journal of Forecasting, Planning and Policy*, Part II (2002); and Smoker, Paul, and Groff, Linda. "Spirituality, Religion, Culture, and Peace," *International Journal of Peace Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (January 1996).

Abstract

This paper covers many topics relating to the evolution of religions, their interactions (both negative and positive) with each other, and the challenge of finding unity amidst the diversity of the world's diverse cultural and religious traditions – past, present, and future. Topics covered include: religion as a force for war or peace; a spectrum of possible perspectives within all religions; changing male-female images of divinity in different religions over time; mythology as a link between our outer lives in the world and the inner life of the spirit; how scriptures of all religions support the "golden rule" as well as "peace"; principles for conducting interreligious / interfaith dialogue between peoples of different faiths; the first versus second axial age of the world's religions; key interfaith organizations and some of their declarations; how to create an interfaith organization within one's own local community; progress in interfaith dialogue replacing interreligious conflict and war; increasing numbers of people encountering other religions in their spiritual journeys; alternative scenarios (worst case, best case, and most probable case) on the future of religions and their interfaith interactions; and final conclusions.

Aperçu de l'Évolution des Religions et du Dialogue Interreligieux : Passé, Présent, et Future*

Dr. Linda Groff

*Cet article est une version mise à jour et élargie à partir de matériel écrit précédemment, incluant : Groff, Linda. "Insights on the Evolution of Cultures, Civilizations, and Religions," Part III, dans *How Evolution Works.* Bellevue, WA: Foundation for the Future, 2005; Groff, Linda. "The Challenge of Cultural and Religious Diversity and Peacebuilding in an Interdependent World," Part III, dans *Futures Research Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (2005); Groff, Linda. "Intercultural Communication, Interreligious Dialogue, and Peace," *Futures: The Journal of Forecasting, Planning and Policy*, Part II (2002); et Smoker, Paul, and Groff, Linda. "Spirituality, Religion, Culture, and Peace," *International Journal of Peace Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (January 1996).

Résumé

Cet article couvre plusieurs sujets relatifs à l'évolution des religions, leurs interactions (négatives et positives) entre elles, et le défi de découvrir l'unité à travers la diversité des multiples traditions culturelles et religieuses--passé, présent, et future. Les sujets abordés incluent : la religion comme force pour la guerre et la paix; un spectre de perspectives possibles à l'intérieur de toutes les religions; les images changeantes male-femelle de la divinité dans différentes religions à travers le temps; la mythologie comme lien entre nos vies extérieures dans le monde et la vie intérieure de l'esprit; la façon dont les écritures de toutes les religions soutiennent la « règle d'or » aussi bien que la « paix »; les principes pour diriger un dialogue interreligieux / multiconfessionnel entre les peuples de différentes croyances; le premier versus le second âge axial des religions du monde; des organisations multiconfessionnelles clé et certaines de leurs déclarations; comment créer une organisation multiconfessionnelle à l'intérieur de sa communauté; le progrès dans le dialogue multiconfessionnel pour remplacer les conflits interreligieux et la guerre; l'accroissement du nombre de personnes rencontrant d'autres religions dans leur parcours spirituel; les scénarios alternatifs (pire cas, meilleur cas, et cas le plus probable) sur le future des religions et leurs interactions multiconfessionnelles; et les conclusions finales.

Recepciones sobre la Evolución de las Religiones y el Diálogo Inter-Religioso: Pasado, Presente y Futuro.

Dr. Linda Groff

Este artículo es una versión ampliada y puesta al día de material en un escrito anterior, incluyendo: Groff, Linda. "Percepciones sobre la Evolución de Culturas, Civilizaciones y Religiones" – Parte III, en *Como Trabaja la Evolución*. Bellevue, WA; Fundación para el Futuro, 2005; Groff, Linda. "El Reto de la Diversidad Cultural y Religiosa y La Construcción de La Paz en un Mundo Interdependiente," Parte III, en la revista "Futures Research Quarterly" Vol. 21, No. 4 (2005), Groff, Linda. "Comunicación Inter-cultural, Diálogo Inter-religioso y la Paz", publicación *Futures: The Journal of Forecasting, Planning and Policy*, Part II (2002);y Smoker,

Paul, y Groff, Linda. "Espiritualidad, Religión, Cultura y Paz" *International Journal of Peace Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Enero 1996).

Resumen

El artículo cubre muchos tópicos relacionados con la evolución de religiones, sus interacciones, ambos de las diversas tradiciones culturales y religiosas del mundo – pasadas, presentes y futuras. Los tópicos que se examinan incluyen: la religión como una fuerza para la guerra o para la paz; una variedad de posibles perspectivas dentro de todas las religiones; las cambiantes imágenes masculino/femeninas de la divinidad en diferentes religiones a través del tiempo; la mitología como un eslabón entre nuestras vidas externas en el mundo y la vida interna del espíritu; cómo las escrituras de todas las religiones respaldan "la regla dorada" al igual que la "paz"; principios para conducir diálogos interreligioso / inter-creencia entre la gente de diferentes creencias; la primera contra la segunda edad axial de las religiones del mundo; organizaciones clave inter-creyentes y algunas de sus declaraciones: cómo crear una organización inter-creencia dentro de nuestra propia comunidad local; el progreso en el diálogo inter-creyente reemplazando el conflicto interreligioso y la guerra; el aumento del número de seres que encuentran otras religiones en sus jornadas espirituales; escenas alternativas (el peor caso, el mejor caso, y el caso más probable) sobre el futuro de las religiones y sus interacciones entre las diversas creencias; y conclusiones finales.

Idéias sobre a Evolução do Diálogo Religioso e Inter-religioso: Passado, Presente e Futuro.
Dr. Linda Groff

*Este artigo é uma versão atualizada e aumentada de material de escritos anteriores, incluindo: GROFF, Linda. "Insights on the Evolution of Cultures, Civilizations, and Religions" (Idéias sobre a Evolução de Culturas, Civilizações e Religiões), Parte III, em *How Evolution Works*, Bellevue, WA: *Foundation for the Future*, 2005; GROFF, Linda. "The Challenge of Cultural and Religious Diversity and Peacebuilding in an Interdependent World" (O Desafio da Diversidade Religiosa e Cutural e a Construção da Paz num Mundo Interdependente), Parte III, em *Futures Research Quarterly*, Vol. 21, Nº 4 (2005); GROFF, Linda. "Intercultural Communication, Interreligious Dialogue, and Peace" (Comunicação Intercultural, Diálogo Inter-religioso e Paz), *Futures: The Journal of Forecasting, Planning and Policy*, Parte II (2002); e SMOKER, Paul; GROFF, Linda. "Spirituality, Religion, Culture, and Peace" (Espiritualidade, Religião, Cultura e Paz), *International Journal of Peace Studies*, Vol. 1, nº 1 (Janeiro 1996).

Resumo

Este artigo cobre vários tópicos relacionados à evolução das religiões, às suas interações (tanto negativas quanto positivas) e ao desafio de encontrar unidade na diversidade das várias tradições religiosas e culturais – no passado, no presente e no futuro. Entre os tópicos tratados estão: a religião como uma força para a paz ou para a guerra; um espectro de possíveis perspectivas entre todas as religiões; mudança das imagens masculina/feminina da divindade em diferentes religiões no decorrer do tempo; a mitologia como uma ligação entre nossa vida exterior no mundo e a vida interior do espírito; a forma como os livros sagrados de todas as religiões apóiam

tanto a 'regra de ouro' quanto a 'paz'; os princípios para a condução de um diálogo inter-religioso/ecumênico entre povos de diferentes confissões religiosas; a primeira Era Axial das religiões do mundo contra a segunda; importantes organizações ecumênicas e algumas de suas proclamações; como criar uma organização ecumênica dentro de sua própria comunidade local; o progresso no diálogo ecumênico substituindo os conflitos religiosos e a guerra; números cada vez mais elevados de pessoas que encontram outras religiões em suas jornadas espirituais; cenários alternativos (os piores casos, os melhores casos e os cenários mais prováveis) no futuro das religiões e nas relações inter-religiosas; e conclusões finais.

Einblicke in Die Entwicklung von Religion nnd Interreligioesem Dialog: Vergangen, Gegenwaertig und Zukuenftig*

Dr. Linda Groff

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel beschaeftigt sich mit vielen Themen die sich mit der Entwicklung der Religionen, deren Wechselwirkung (negativ und positiv) untereinander, und der Aufgabe Einheit inmitten der Vielfalt der diversen, kulturellen und religioesen Traditionen - vergangen, gegenwaertig und zukuenftig - zu finden, befasst. Folgende Themen sind eingeschlossen: Religion als Macht in Krieg und Frieden; ein Spektrum moeglicher Perspektiven innerhalb aller Religionen; die Wandlung maennlich-weiblicher Vorstellungen der Gottheit in verschiedenen Religionen mit der Zeit; Mythologie als Glied zwischen unserem weltlichen Leben und dem inneren Leben des Geistes; wie heilige Schriften aller Religionen die "goldene Regel", sowie den Frieden anerkennen; Prinzipien fuer die Fuehrung interreligioesen/interconfessionellen Dialogs zwischen Menchen verschiedenen Glaubens; das erste gegenueber dem zweiten Zeitalter der Religionen der Welt; hauptsaechliche interkonfessionelle Organisationen, innerhalb unserer oertlichen Gemeinden; Fortschritt im interkonfessionellen Dialog als Erzatz fuer interconfessionellen Konflikt und Krieg; wachsende Zahlen von Menschen die auf ihrer spiruellen Wanderung anderen Religionen begegnen; alternative Szenaria (schlimmsten Falles, besten Falles, und wahrscheinlichsten Falles) der Zukunft der Religionen und ihrer interreligioesen Wechselwirkung; und Schlussfolgerungen.

INTRODUCTION TO RELIGION, WAR AND PEACE, AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

While much has been written about violence and conflict in the name, at least, of religion (Reychler, 1997; Appleby, 1994; Galtung, 1990; Lawrence, 1995; and Armstrong, 2001) – including the events of September 11th, 2001– it is important to note that much positive interreligious, interfaith, and intermonastic dialogue is also occurring between peoples from different spiritual-religious traditions in the world. It is not an accident that as the world becomes more interdependent, some people feel threatened, while other people from different religions reach out to try to understand each other more and to find areas of common ground. Various interfaith organizations exist, which have issued declarations on common principles for an interdependent world. One positive effect of the events of September 11, 2001, is that increasing interfaith dialogue is also occurring – a positive development, along (unfortunately) with an increase in acts of violence against innocent people on all different sides in conflicts who are living in different parts of the world. Nonetheless, interfaith dialogue is becoming a true social movement by forward thinking people from around the world who realize that it is an essential component for a more peaceful and increasingly interdependent world.

Spectrum of Possible Perspectives Within Any Religion

Within any religion, a spectrum of possible perspectives is possible, including: mysticism, organized religion, and fundamentalism or extremism. (Smoker and Groff, 1996) All religions in recorded history began by someone having mystical experiences defined as "a direct experience of ultimate reality." (Carmody and Carmody, 1996) This experience transcends the five senses and provides a direct experience of the presence of God or spirit in some way. Such individuals later try to share their experiences – and the wisdom about life and its meaning and purpose that they have gained from these experiences – with others, who eventually suggest the formation of a religion around the teachings of that enlightened person. Once religions are formed, the teachings of the "founder" (who usually did not start out to found a new religion) become the foundation of scripture for that religion, and these teachings are passed down from one generation to the next and become part of social learning and culture. When these teachings are dogmatically interpreted by others later or when they lead to extremist behavior, such as violence against others in the name of their religion, they can be called by some "fundamentalist" or especially "extremist" versions of that religion. People sometimes call the mystical aspects of all religions their "esoteric" part (which not everyone is ready for), with the socially-learned part (that gives guidance for everyday life) the "exoteric" part of any religion. It is important to note that ALL religions can potentially contain all of these perspectives. (Smoker and Groff, 1996).

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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│  MYSTICAL/SPIRITUAL___ORGANIZED RELIGION____FUNDAMENTALISM       │
│     TRADITIONS              AND BELIEFS          OR EXTREMISM     │
│                                                                  │
│    (Direct Inner        (Part of Social      (My dogma/beliefs   │
│     experience)         learning and          are right and yours│
│                         culture)              are wrong; also    │
│                                               social learning    │
│                                               and culture)       │
│                                                                  │
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Figure 1: Spectrum of Potential Perspectives Within Any Religion

While there are no doubt exceptions, in general mystics from all religions can understand and respect each other, since they are coming from a direct inner experience of ultimate reality or the divine, not from differences in socially-learned beliefs, which organized religions have often stressed more –especially in the West. Nonetheless, there is some debate about whether mystics from all religions are experiencing the *same* thing or whether their mystical experiences are mediated through their cultures or learning. (Carmody and Carmody 1996) To the extent that fundamentalist or extremist versions of any religion tend to believe that only one interpretation of their scriptures is true, which is *their* interpretation, this view tends to omit the possibility of truth coming from other religions, or indeed, from other perspectives within their own religion. This has led some people to claim that the world needs not only interreligious dialogue, but also intra-religious dialogue – between different sects and denominations within the same religion.

How Different Denominations Emerge Within the Same Religion Over Time

As noted above, new religions emerge around the teachings of someone who has had direct mystical experiences of the divine, which they subsequently share with others. These teachings become the foundation for the scriptures or "holy books" of that religion. Over time, others in that religious tradition (who may not have had the same mystical experiences as the original founder) seek to interpret the meaning of those original teachings and scripture in new ways. As noted in the intercultural communication field, there is a difference between describing vs. interpreting vs. evaluating or judging the behavior of someone from another culture. In short, different people can interpret the same behavior, words, or in this case scriptures, differently, finding different meaning in the same scriptural texts. If these interpretations differ too much from each other over time, a split can occur within a religious tradition leading to the emergence of different denominations within that religion – something that has often happened to religions that have existed for a decent period of time. Times also change and religions, like all aspects of life, must respond to a changing world. Two issues today that are facing religions worldwide, and could threaten to split some religions (or some denominations within a given religion) even further – if not worked out through dialogue and understanding – concern the role of both women and gays in congregations and especially the priesthood of different religions worldwide. These are obviously unresolved issues that are unfolding.

Evolution in Images of Divinity Within Different Religions

It is interesting that religions have evolved over time in terms of how they portray divinity. One can look at the following broad periods in the evolution of religions – for all of which forms of religion and spirituality still coexist in different parts of the world today. These periods, and the forms in which divinity was or is portrayed in each, include: (See Groff, 2005a; Groff, 2005b; and books by Campbell, Gimbutas, and Stone on evolution of changing male-female images of divinity over time, and on evolution of the goddess and female principle in different religions over time, as outlined below.)

PREHISTORY: THE EARTH-BASED RELIGIONS: SHAMANISM & THE GODDESS

Paleolithic Era, Old Stone Age, or Hunting and Gathering Era

During this period of prehistory – variously called the Paleolithic, Hunting and Gathering period, or Old Stone Age – there were not yet any settled communities or writing, so spiritual traditions were passed down orally. Shamanism was the dominant form of spirituality. Certain persons were called to be shamans, who were able to go into altered states where they could contact their ancestors and gain wisdom to bring back to their people. The earth was also seen as the great mother goddess, and everything in nature was seen to be alive with nature spirits. Shamanism exists today in areas of Siberia, Korea, Africa, etc. Native American traditions, as well as Shintoism in Japan, all share certain characteristics in common with such earth-based religions that see everything in nature as being alive and inspirited. Indigenous peoples also had, and still have, different animals as the spirit guides for different individuals, believing animals can be our teachers.

Neolithic Era: New Stone Age, and the Beginning of Settled Agricultural Communities and Villages

The first major technological revolution for early humans was the invention or discovery of agriculture, i.e., the realization that one could plant a seed and it would grow, enabling people for the first time to create settled agricultural communities and villages. The Goddess form of religion arose, in which the fertility of the earth was seen as parallel to the fertility of the female, leading to the veneration of the goddess as the dominant image of divinity, since they all birthed or brought forth new life. Various goddesses arose, were venerated, and became the object of different artifacts found later in places like Crete, Malta, and Old Europe, as documented in the work of Anthropologist Marija Gimbutas. (Gimbutas, 1989, 1991, and 2003). There was also a certain mystery associated with the birth of new life from the earth and from women, since the role of men in procreation may not yet have been known. (Stone, 1978*).*

HISTORY: THE RISE OF THE "GREAT RELIGIONS" OF ANCIENT AND MODERN TIMES

The Rise of Ancient Civilizations and the Great Religions of Antiquity

Following the rise of settled agricultural villages and smaller communities, the great civilizations of antiquity arose, sometimes rather quickly, including in Sumer / Mesopotamia (now Iraq), Ancient Egypt, the Indus Valley (now NW India / Pakistan), Ancient China, and later Mesoamerica and Peru. These civilizations emerged largely around great waterways or rivers, and included the rise of ancient empires, the conquering of other peoples who were often made into slaves (and their surplus production, beyond what was needed for their own survival, was taken over by the conquering power). These civilizations also saw the rise of writing (partly to keep track of the harvest), as well as astronomy (the study of the stars and heavens), and other great engineering projects.

These religions also included both male god and female goddess aspects together, showing an honoring of both the male and female principle in their images of divinity, along with their offspring, creating a trinity principle. Behind a diversity of gods and goddesses, there was also usually the idea of One God, with the different gods and goddesses representing, in effect, different attributes of the One God. In Ancient Egypt, for example, every temple had its own god and goddess and their offspring or child, showing an equality between the male and female principle, as well as an honoring of the trinity principle. In the Indus Valley and later in India, one has more a male god (or his later incarnation) along with his female consort (not quite as equal). (See also Dumezil, 1952, and 1986, on the trinitarian nature of Indo-Aryan religions and cultures, for an interesting comparison.)

Other religions also emerged later out of Hinduism, including Buddhism (which later spread over most of Asia), Jainism, and Sikhism, while in China Confucianism and Taoism emerged. The real transition from veneration of gods and goddesses to just gods seems to have occurred, as one example, in Ancient Greece, where over time the relative equality between gods and goddesses in temples gave way to dominance of the male god over the receding female goddess, which then paved the way for the emergence of Western religions.

The Rise of Western Civilizations and Western Monotheistic "Religions of the Book"

Even later, one had the rise of Western civilizations and then religions, including Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Baha'i. These religions all emerged out of the Middle East and are all "religions of the book," based on the scriptures or original teachings of their founders, and based on a monotheistic belief in One God, who came to be portrayed as "God the Father." Worship shifted from prayers and offerings to different gods and/or goddesses to One unified God – who was omnipotent (all powerful), omnipresent (an immediate presence in all things), omniscient (all knowing), and behind all creation. (Meagher, et. al., Eds., 1979, 2600-2601) This unified view of divinity was a very significant development in acknowledging the oneness of all creation and oneness behind this creation. Nonetheless, these monotheistic religions, honoring One God, came to portray that God as "God the Father," which coincided with the emergence of patriarchal social values and institutions in Western civilization. (For more on Western religions

in general, beyond the discussion above on male-female images of divinity, see Armstrong, 1993.)

The Post Modern Age Today

The patriarchal values and institutions, that have characterized the emergence of Western civilizations and religions (above), are only now – in the late 20th and early 21st century – beginning to break down, to be replaced slowly by a greater equality between men and women in the priesthood and clergy of various religions (an unfolding process which is not complete). While some followers of the goddess religion have seen the reemergence of the goddess being tied today, as it was in the past, to a real partnership between men and women as their vision for the future (see, for example, Eisler, 1987), others have seen divinity increasingly portrayed as the divine union of male and female (again the theme of the unity and transcendence of opposites as a common key to the spiritual journey). The latter perspective honors both the male and female principle as coequal parts of a greater whole – a divinity that is ultimately beyond all efforts by humans to describe this greatest of all mysteries of life.

Humans will continue to seek different ways to describe the indescribable, i.e., divinity, and one modern effort to honor both the male and female principles (representing all opposites) behind creation is "Dear Mother/Father God" (as used in the Church of Religious Science). This is one more effort – however incomplete – to describe a presence and mystery that transcends all polar opposites and is basically indescribable. Ultimately, this presence can only be experienced directly.

In summary, people have continued to describe divinity as either male or female or both, at different times and in different locations, and this imagery has no doubt reflected deeper values existing in the culture of the time, including a desire by people to have some kind of personal relationship with divinity through imagery that they can more easily relate to.

Joseph Campbell and "The Power of Mythology" – To Link Our Outer Lives in the World With the Inner Life of the Spirit* (Campbell, 1949, 1974, 1988, and 1990; and Lobell, et. al., 1993.)

Joseph Campbell devoted his life to the study of the different mythologies of the world, finding what he called a common monomyth in all cultures, which he called the "hero's journey" (Campbell, 1988, and 1949 earlier). Not everyone is ready to immediately delve into an inner spiritual life directly, so mythology can act as a bridge or link between one's outer life in the world and the inner life of the spirit. Mythology also provides, via mythological stories, a different, allegorical kind of truth, versus a factual type of truth. He also noted that Western culture, with its scientific/rational focus, had lost touch with this mythological type of truth and needed to reconnect with it, if people were to be able to find deeper meaning and guidance for life that mythological types of stories can provide.

The hero's journey typically has three to five stages (occasionally twelve stages) that one passes through. (Sometimes the first three stages of the five-stage version of the journey are combined into one stage.) These five stages are: 1) First, one must have nothing holding one to one's

current situation in life. In short, one must be restless and seeking something different in life, which requires leaving the comfort, familiarity, and security of one's current situation, to embark on a journey of discovery to find some deeper truth about one's life. 2) One must then find a mentor or teacher to help guide one on one's journey as one leaves one's familiar life behind. 3) One must then find a jump-off place into the unknown – often with the help of one's mentor. 4) One must then be tested in the unknown, to find out who one really is. 5) Finally, if one is able to pass the tests in the unknown, then one can return home to share the wisdom one had gained on one's journey with others.

While Campbell saw a common monomyth, which he called the "hero's journey," in the myths of all cultures, he also saw these myths evolving through several significant, different periods, which correlate with the periods covered in the previous section on "Evolution in Images of Divinity Within Different Religions." These periods, and the nature of the mythologies that emerged in each period, include:

- Hunting and Gathering Period: The Way of the Animal Powers
- Early Agricultural Period: The Way of the Seeded Earth
- Rise of Ancient Civilizations: The Way of the Celestial Lights.
- Rise of Western Civilization and the Modern World: The Way of Humanity (including losing touch with the power of myth as science and rationality took over).

While the hero's journey had similar characteristics in all cultures – in terms of the stages one goes through, there was one significant difference between the hero's journey in Eastern vs. Western cultures. In the East, it is common for an apprentice to find a master or guru and follows in the steps and pathway established by one's teacher. In the West, because a strong sense of individual identity is more common, each person typically finds a jumping off place into the unknown at a place and time of his/her own choosing. This Western path is best represented by King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, where each knight enters the forest or unknown at a place of his own choosing, thus having to find his own pathway into the unknown. (Campbell, 1968, 1974, and 1988) (Note: While Eastern cultures are generally more collectivist in their identity, and Western cultures more individualistic in their identity, this has also varied somewhat from one culture, time period, and individual, to another.)

Campbell notes that the hero's journey myth must be adapted and updated for each new age, so the myth remains relevant to the times and to people's lives. George Lucas, who produced the *Star Wars Trilogy* and prequels, was good friends with Joseph Campbell and based his script on the hero's journey, making *Star Wars* one attempt to create a mythology for the space age. Other recent blockbuster books and films involving a hero's journey type of story (whether influenced by Campbell or not) include *The Lord of the Rings* (first published as a novel in 1954) and the *Harry Potter* books and films, as well as much science fiction. (Note: Joseph Campbell found the hero's journey in the myths of all cultures, which he documented in his books, so it is not surprising that various writers throughout history have drawn on this universal, archetypal theme, whether predating Campbell and aware of his work or not.)

Unfortunately, violence has not been eliminated from the human saga in space either (as seen in *Star Wars*), indicating that somehow we need to find other kinds of hero figures beyond just the

military hero or warrior – if we want to find alternatives to violence in the future (for examples of other archetypes of hero figures, see Pearson, 1986; and Pearson, 1991). It is important to remember that we can also battle poverty, injustice, oppression, unequal opportunity, senseless violence, AND one's own inner demons, so that one can also develop inner mastery. In short, there are many noble battles to engage in that do not require physical violence and the killing of innocent life. With the destructive power that exists with modern weapons systems of all types – nuclear, chemical, biological, and conventional – it is imperative that we humans find other ways to resolve our conflicts, short of violence, which if used, could destroy us all. This is one of the greatest challenges facing the future evolution of humanity today.

Religions All Say They Support Peace, as Well as the Golden Rule, But This Is Not Always the Result in Practice

Despite the range of different perspectives and interpretations of scripture possible within any given religion, it is important that *all religions say they support peace.* Examples from different religions include: (Smoker and Groff, 1996)

> *"If a man sings of God and hears of Him, And lets love of God sprout within him, All his sorrows shall vanish, And in his mind, God will bestow abiding peace."* (Sikhism)

> *"A Muslim is one who surrenders to the will of Allah and is an establisher of peace (while Islam means establishment of peace, Muslim means one who establishes peace through his actions and conduct)."* (Islam)

> *"The Lord lives in the heart of every creature. He turns them round and round upon the wheel of Maya. Take refuge utterly in Him. By his grace you will find supreme peace, and the state which is beyond all change."* (Hinduism)

> *"The whole of the Torah is for the purpose of promoting peace."* (Judaism)

> *"To be in harmony with others, you must be at peace with yourself."* (Buddhism)

> *"Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called sons of God."* (Christianity)

> *"Peace...comes within the souls of men when they realize their relationship, their oneness, with the universe and all its powers and when they realize that at the center of the universe dwells Wakan-Tanka, and that this center is really everywhere, it is within each of us."* (From *The Sacred Pipe*, by Black Elk, Lakota Sioux Medicine Man)

> *"Oh, Great Spirit, let us greet the dawn of each new day, when all can live as one and peace reigns everywhere."* (Native American)

> *"The Great Peace towards which people of good will throughout the centuries have inclined their hearts, of which seers and poets for countless generations have expressed their vision, and for which from age to age the sacred scriptures of mankind have constantly held the promise, is now at long last within the reach of the nations."* (Baha'i)

Similarly, *all religions also have some version of the golden rule* that they support, i.e., that people should treat others as they would like others to treat them. A few representative examples follow:

> *"Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find harmful."*
> (Buddhism)

> *"What is hateful to you, do not to your fellow man. That is the entire law; all the rest is commentary."* (Judaism)

> *"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."* (Christianity)

> *"No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself."* (Islam)

> *"Blessed is he who preferreth his brother before himself."* (Baha'i)

> *"Do not do unto others all that which is not well for oneself."*
> (Zoroastrian)

> *"Do not do unto others what you do not want others to do unto you."*
> (Confucius)

> *"Do not to others which if done to thee would cause thee pain."*
> (Mahabharata of Hinduism)

Despite the above commitments to peace and the golden rule, it is clear that people of different faiths have historically and today continue to resort to violence and war at times to settle their conflicts, and justify what they are doing in the name of religion – even though their conflicts are usually about other factors. Some religions, including Western religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) also have a "just war" tradition – that justifies a preemptive use of violence against those who represent an "imminent threat" to one's own security. The Bhagavad Gita of Hinduism also has the god Krishna counseling Arjuna to go to battle. The interesting question is whether this means battle in the external world or whether it could also mean the inner battle to master oneself. Islam has a similar distinction between the greater Jihad (the inner struggle for self mastery) and the lesser Jihad (battle in the external world) – even though the common view

of Jihad in the West is mistakenly taken to be the latter definition – no doubt because of current events involving Islamist terrorism.

So while all religions support peace and the golden rule in their scriptures, it is also clear that in some religions (noted above), scripture can also justify war under certain circumstances. There is also a difference between scripture and historical practice more often than one might wish. This has led some people in interreligious dialogue to state that religions must also apologize for certain past behaviors involving violent policies towards other religions – especially if we are moving into an interdependent world along with a Second Axial Age of the World's Religions (discussed below).

Concerning the golden rule and other principles in different religions on how to lead a good life, it would be a significant breakthrough today if people from different religions could only realize that in an interdependent world, these common principles in all religions, as well as the principles from each religion's own scriptures that one applies to members of one's own religion, need to be applied to humanity as a whole today. Realizing and implementing this in one's own life could make a significant difference in creating a better world future.

Principles of Interreligious / Interfaith Dialogue vs. Debate

There are a number of principles on how to conduct interreligious or interfaith dialogue between peoples from different spiritual-religious traditions, including the following:
(Summarized from Beversluis, 2000, and other sources)

- Be open and willing to listen without judgment to the spiritual journeys, views, and experiences of people from other religions as opposed to debating which religion is right or wrong, which inhibits real listening, learning, and dialogue in such situations.
- Do not try to convert anyone from his or her religion to yours. This goes against the whole importance of respecting people's diverse religions and being open to learning about them.
- Do not try to create one world religion, but respect the diversity of traditions.
- Let people from each religion speak for themselves, from their own experience, about what it means to practice that religion.
- Allow the possibility of some common spirituality that underlies all the diversity of religions through which that spirituality expresses itself.
- Realize that one can enrich one's own spiritual-religious life by being open to learning from other traditions without having to leave one's own tradition.
- Realize that human beings – throughout prerecorded time and recorded history, in different cultures and civilizations around the world – have sought to reflect on the deeper meaning and purpose of life, to honor the unknown and mysterious, and to connect to something spiritual and eternal beyond this transient material world and life. This search for deeper meaning and connection unites us all.

The key difference between dialogue versus debate is that in dialogue (between religions, cultures, or civilizations), one focuses on listening and creating understanding of, and respect for,

the other person's experiences and perspectives, though not necessarily agreement, while in debate, one tries to make the other person wrong so that you can be right, one seldom listens, and one seeks to win at the other party's expense.

In an interdependent world, with the destructive powers of modern weaponry and technology, it is clear that dialogue, listening, and nonviolence are the only sane responses for dealing with diversity. Dialogue also allows for common ground, as well as love and respect, to emerge, along with a greater appreciation of differences, including what each culture, civilization, and religion can uniquely contribute to the world, for the benefit of all humanity today. The current state of an ongoing battle between terrorists and antiterrorists (however defined) indicates just how far we still need to come, if this goal is ever to be achieved.

First Versus Second Axial Age of the World's Religions

It has been proposed that the world's great religions have gone through one axial age and are currently entering a second axial age. (Cousins, 1992; and Teasdale, 2000) The first axial age was characterized by religions growing up in different parts of the world and being more or less isolated from each other, leading to a focus (when they did meet) on the differences between religions. In more recent years, as the world becomes ever more interdependent and people from different religions are all interacting with each other much more, it is imperative to find areas of common ground that unite and underlie the diversity of different religions, while still honoring the diverse forms through which humanity expresses its faith. This change of focus may be ushering in a second axial age of the world's religions, which is also reflected in the common declarations issued by various interreligious organizations in recent years (see below), as well as in interfaith dialogue emerging as an important social movement around the world, which will no doubt continue to grow in future, since it is part of a larger movement of seeking unity amongst the world's diverse cultures, civilizations, nationalities, races, and religions.

Key Interfaith Organizations and Their Interfaith Declarations

There are a number of organizations involved in interreligious dialogue today, which have also issued declarations on principles that they commonly support – evidence that a Second Axial Age of the World's Religions may indeed be emerging. A few key interfaith organizations and the declarations that they have produced include the following:

Although people from different cultures and religions have always encountered each other periodically – throughout prehistory and history – sometimes in more positive, sometimes more negative ways, modern interfaith dialogue began with the Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions in 1893 in Chicago, where Swami Vivekananda came from India and had a big impact on the gathering. One hundred years later, people in Chicago decided that they should organize a second Parliament, which occurred in 1993 in Chicago and was a huge event with many of the world's religions represented. The 1993 Parliament issued a draft document, "Towards a Global Ethic," on common principles that different religions could support. It was decided that the next Parliament should be in a developing country, Cape Town, South Africa, in 1999, where (like the 1993 Parliament) over 7,000 people from different world religions attended. The 1999 Parliament focused on moving from a declaration of principles (1993) to

action steps (1999) via "A Call to Our Guiding Institutions" (for cooperation with them) and a call for "Gifts of Service" to the world and to South Africa from participants. The next Parliament occurred in July 2004 in Barcelona, Spain, with over 7,000 people attending again. The Parliament also supports a sister-city program, as well as a Goldin Institute that brings people from different countries together to focus on a different issue each time. The next Parliament will take place in Melbourne, Australia, in early December 2009.

Another important interfaith organization is the World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP), where leaders of many world religions are members and meet in regular international conferences. The World Conference has sponsored important interfaith peace efforts in countries like Bosnia, and issued the Riva del Garde Declaration in 1994.

The United Religions Initiative (URI) began with a vision by Episcopal Bishop William Swing of San Francisco, California, in conjunction with preparation for the 50th Anniversary of the United Nations in San Francisco. It was realized that the United Nations Charter made no reference to religions, or to the environment, which led to two separate grassroots movements – for a United Religions Initiative Charter (Bishop Swing's vision, which was signed in Pittsburgh in June 2000), and for an Earth Charter (also completed in 2000). Both Charters had grassroots input from people around the world and deal with broad visions of peace. The United Religions Initiative has evolved into a grassroots organization with self-organizing Cooperation Circles in cities and communities around the world. Each Cooperation Circle must support the principles of the URI Charter, but can then focus on activities most relevant to their local communities, while still linking with others globally. URI has global, regional, and local conferences and meetings. The next URI Global Summit will be in Mayapur, India, in late November/early December 2008.

The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has sponsored three conferences on religion and peace: 1993 in Barcelona, Spain; 1994 in Barcelona; and 1998 in Granada, Spain. The 1994 conference issued a "Declaration on Contributions of Religions to a Culture of Peace," while the 1998 conference created a draft Working Paper on "Religious Education in a Context of Pluralism and Tolerance."

The Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies is another interesting interfaith group, in which much cross-fertilization and learning occurs and where Buddhists have learned about social engagement in the world from Westerners and Christians, while the latter have in turn learned about meditation from the Buddhists, without individuals from either religion having to give up their own religious identity or affiliation.

The above are only a few of the many interfaith organizations active globally, regionally, nationally, and locally around the world today. (See Beversluis, 2000, for more details on most of these organizations and declarations, as well as many others. Information is also available online for all these organizations. Joel passed away a few years ago, and will be greatly missed. His *Sourcebook of the World's Religions* was and still is an invaluable resource.)

Creating an Interfaith Organization in One's Own Community

In addition to the above global interfaith organizations, one can also start an interfaith organization in one's own community. One very useful exercise in meetings – until people get to know each other better – is the Appreciative Inquiry Process developed by David Cooperrider of Case Western University and used in United Religions Initiative Summits. Give people a couple of questions to discuss, have people pair up with someone they do not know well, and give each person equal time to share their answers to the questions on their spiritual journeys. First, one person asks questions and listens with appreciation, and without judgment, to the answers from the other person. Then they switch and repeat the process. Such sharing comes from a deep, authentic level in people and helps build real relationships in any interfaith group. (See Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987; Cooperrider and Whitney, 2000; and Gibbs and Mahe, 2003.)

Progress Towards Interreligious Dialogue and Education Replacing Interreligious Conflict and War

While conflicts, which sometimes escalate into violence and warfare, have always existed between peoples of different cultures and religions at different times historically, there have often been important historical periods when these same peoples lived together more peacefully. When conflicts do occur, there are often other factors involved beyond religious differences, even though parties in conflict often use their religions to legitimize their positions.

Religion itself can become a direct source of a conflict usually only when people within a given religion take a dogmatic, fundamentalist interpretation of their religion and scriptures, and believe only they have truth. In such cases, however, conflicts can also occur not only with other religions, but also with people within their own religion who have more moderate, less extremist views. This illustrates again why not only interreligious dialogue between religions, but also intra-religious dialogue within religions, is so important today.

Today, the world is becoming more interdependent at a rapidly growing rate and informed and concerned people around the world are increasingly realizing that we must reach out to persons of other faith traditions than our own. While violence gets more media coverage than interfaith dialogue, the events of September 11th, 2001, have dramatically illustrated what the future of the world will look like if we do not reach out to people of different faith traditions (or different expressions of the same faith) and create greater respect and understanding between peoples. This must happen in the Muslim world, as well as in the West, and indeed globally. So, as one example, while the September 11th events led some people in the U.S. and abroad to engage in hate crimes and violence against innocent Muslims or people appearing to be Muslims (which governments and religious leaders must strongly oppose), a number of other people participated in interfaith activities and reached out to Muslims and Arabs in their own communities. This trend needs to continue in future, including through interfaith education in our schools, religious institutions, and the media, if positive interfaith relations are to prevail in future over negative ones around the world. This must also occur in conjunction with efforts to address the real unmet needs of vulnerable populations around the world, so that they start to experience that they have a stake in society and hope for their future.

Crossing Boundaries: Spiritual Journeys in Search of the Sacred – By People Who Have Explored At Least Two or More Different Spiritual-Religious Traditions in Their Lifetime (and Done Their Own Internal Interreligious Dialogue)

This writer has been involved with a long-term project of interviewing people who have explored at least two or more different spiritual-religious traditions in their lifetime – many (but not all) of whom she has met through various interreligious dialogue groups, as well as other groups she participates in – both professionally and in the community. Over 110 in-depth interviews have been conducted and are being transcribed and edited. The purpose was to see what motivated all these people – from different cultures, ethnic groups, races, and combinations of different religions from around the world – to explore these different spiritual-religious traditions and to see how they integrated these experiences into their lives. Another purpose was to document all these cases as a counter to all the news about conflict and violence occurring in the world in the name of religion, and to show that constructive alternatives exist that are much more appropriate to our increasingly interdependent world. (See Groff, 1999, for preliminary findings from these interviews.)

Alternative Scenarios on the Future of Religions and Their Interactions

Having looked at the past and present evolution of religions and their interactions with each other, what will the future of religions look like in our increasingly interdependent world. Three scenarios outline worst case, best case, and most probable case situations and the sequence of events that could follow from such initial conditions, as follows:

Worst Case Scenario:

Fear continues to dominate the world, which political actors and leaders perpetuate and use to keep the world divided and at war with each other. This includes using fear of people's religious differences to divide people. This creates continuing tension and the unhealthy siphoning of the resources of nations and people from life-enhancing activities to military purposes and warfare. The possibility of religious terrorists getting nuclear weapons just compounds the dangers and the threat to peace. The increasing competition for world oil, whose global production will peak in coming years, despite increasing demand for oil from countries like China and India, keeps outside great powers intervening in the Middle East, which remains a danger zone for the world. The ongoing instability and violence in countries like Afghanistan, Iraq (which is involved in an internal civil war), and Lebanon, along with outside intervention and even invasion of such countries, makes these countries continuing breeding grounds for terrorists, which both keeps foreign troops there, as well as increases demands of local populations for those foreign troops to leave, since their presence does not seem to have improved the everyday lives and security of people or their opportunities for development. The unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict also keeps tensions high, which often erupt into violence and incursions into each other's territories. Religion gives people something to hold onto in very difficult times, but does not help bring people together, and indeed is used as a justification to continue violence and bloodshed between peoples. Tension between Sunni and Shiite Muslims continues, as well as between Israel and its Arab, predominantly Muslim, neighbors. More relatively 'stable' Middle Eastern countries, such

as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan, also remain targets of Islamist terrorists, such as Bin Laden and his offshoots, since they are perceived as cooperating with Western powers. The dangers of World War III emerging in the Middle East remain a constant threat to world peace.

Best Case Scenario:

Increasing numbers of political and religious leaders and people around the world realize that increasing interdependence requires that we all reframe how we relate to each other, including to the diversity of the world's cultures and religions. Cultural and religious education helps people to realize that humans everywhere have common spiritual needs, even though they have many different paths for expressing and fulfilling those needs. Efforts are made to recognize where people of different faiths actually have areas of common ground, based on their own scriptures, including support for the golden rule (to treat others as one would like to be treated oneself), peace (which all religions say they support), and seeing the spiritual light residing inside all people, just waiting to be awakened. More moderate religious leaders also gain the upper hand and help people work through their fears about people of different cultures and faiths. Interreligious dialogue takes off as a necessary global movement that will create greater understanding between people and bring the world's peoples closer together, while still honoring their different religious and spiritual paths. People also discover that they can enrich their own spiritual-religious traditions via interacting with peoples from other traditions. It becomes increasingly unacceptable for political leaders to go to war or initiate conflict in the name of religion. Global interdependence, based on both the unity and the diversity of the world's cultures and religions, becomes an accepted framework for living life in the 21st century.

Along with this worldview comes increasing assistance by more developed countries and international organizations in helping developing countries meet the needs of their own people – including for education, jobs, development, and even greater democratic participation within their own societies, where people begin to see real hope for their futures, instead of dangers, in an interdependent world. Excessive global competition for Middle Eastern oil – which furthers outside intervention in Middle Eastern countries and destabilization of their societies – is also alleviated by a global commitment to develop different alternative energy resources around the world, based on local resources, which also creates new industries and jobs for people. As people's opportunities in life increase, so does their hope for the future, and with that their openness to dialogue with people of other cultures and religions on how we might all help each other in creating a better world future for current and future generations.

Most Probable Case Scenario:

The world is currently undergoing a battle between the forces of moderation and extremism, with each side using religion to justify – rightly or wrongly – their positions. Underlying extremist views is fear of a changing world that their followers do not understand or see how they will fit into it. These fears exist in developed countries, as well as in developing countries. Real global educational efforts become necessary to turn the current tide of extremism into more moderate views, where people everywhere are able to see that an increasingly interdependent world can indeed improve their everyday lives, and that interacting with people of diverse cultures and religions can be a positive experience that enriches their lives, while still allowing people to

maintain their own spiritual-religious traditions and even enrich them through dialogue with people of other faith traditions. Before people can really be open to intercultural and interreligious dialogue, they must also see that their lives will benefit from this. Ongoing global poverty and lack of education and job opportunities continues to provide breeding grounds for terrorists. Thus educational and antipoverty, development efforts must go hand in hand with interfaith efforts. This transition will take real commitment, effort, and time, by many forward-thinking people, governments, NGOs, and international organizations. The interfaith dialogue movement is still relatively young and many people are not aware of its existence, let alone experiencing its benefits. To bring the world together in the 21st century, interfaith efforts must be combined with educational efforts and development programs, so that people can experience directly the benefits of an interdependent world in their own lives.

Note: If humans on earth ever encounter intelligent extraterrestrial life, then intercultural and interreligious dialogue may need to occur on even larger system levels involving even more diversity of cultural and religious traditions. It is interesting that science fiction has even touched on this possibility, as in an episode of *Babylon 5* – the television series. Perhaps such a scenario would even bring humans on earth closer together, as they encounter the even greater diversity of other "alien" species (whether perceived as friendly or not) – another theme covered in science fiction. Nonetheless, it can be hoped that humans on earth will be able to find common ground and greater unity and interdependence with each other globally, while still honoring their diverse cultural and religious traditions, without having to wait for encounters with intelligent, extraterrestrial life for this to occur!!

FINAL CONCLUSIONS

This paper shows that religion has always been an important part of people's lives, providing a sense of deeper meaning and purpose to their everyday lives. Religions have also had a very mixed track record historically – on whether they have been used as a force to justify conflict, violence, war, and indeed hatred of others (Smith-Christopher, 1998) or whether they have been a force for reconciliation, love, healing, and more peaceful, cooperative, nonviolent, and mutually beneficial relations that bring people together across their cultural and religious differences, which the interreligious / interfaith movement is seeking to do today. The world is currently trying to reorganize at a larger, globally interdependent system level, while honoring both global and local needs of people, and both our unity, as well as our diversity, including of cultures and religions. Such transition periods are always difficult for some people, and require more forward thinking people to aid other people in addressing their fears about the increasing diversity they are encountering, and how their needs will still be met in this increasingly diverse and interdependent world. That is the challenge currently facing the world – including its political, economic, and religious leaders. Anti-globalization movements – from both the right and the left, for different reasons – show how difficult this transition process can be, and also indicate that people's perceived needs are not all being met as this globalization process proceeds. Because we live in a nuclear age, this transition to a globally interdependent world also poses particular challenges today – especially if terrorists get a nuclear weapon and are willing to use it.

The Iraq War has also greatly polarized the world, since it was seen by many as self-serving and a war of choice, not a preemptive war against an "imminent threat" by Iraq to U.S. and U.K. national security. It has also increased tensions between Islam and the West. Healing will not occur as long as this war continues, with little signs of success and with great cost in terms of resources, national budgets, and loss of human life, while still not improving the security of Iraqi citizens, the Middle East (since Iraq has become a breeding ground for terrorism), or the world. Not just political leaders, but religious leaders, must speak out against unnecessary war and violence and in support of diplomacy and nonviolent ways to resolve our conflicts, if this very dangerous situation is not to escalate even further. In short, violence usually leads to more violence in a vicious circle. Interfaith dialogue must be supported wherever possible as a healthy bridge between peoples that can help to humanize a conflict and lead to increasing positive interactions.

If humanity can get through this current transition, then it is possible (as science fiction seems to be intuiting) that opportunities to encounter even greater cultural and religious diversity may await us, as we move out into the universe and possibly encounter other intelligent, extraterrestrial beings, each with their own cultural and religious traditions. In short, the evolutionary journey is ongoing and continues. Stay tuned as it unfolds!!

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See also an unlimited source of writings on different world religions, which is far too extensive to begin to cover here. In addition to endless books and articles, much information is also available online about different world religions. A search on Google or Yahoo for "religion" will bring up many online sources.