

# The Gifts of Pluralism



## Awe is the Cure

From the awesome distance of 100,000 feet above the earth, so to speak, many scholars\* see *three families of faiths*, though each scholar's survey is somewhat different. The overview I favor was worked out in the Concluding Conference Declaration by those attending the Kansas City Interfaith Council's 2001 "Gifts of Pluralism" CRES conference.

An overview is urgently needed because the disease of our secular culture worsens. Our desacralized age is not awe-struck with a sense of the Whole; instead, it is fragmented, competitive, mean, and broken.

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### The Three Families of Faith



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**CRES:** to reverse the endangered environment, the violation of personhood, and the broken community so that we may be restored with nature, the self made whole, community in covenant, and the sacred found afresh.

### A View of Our Desacralized Society and the World's Religions as a Whole System

Crisis	Examples of secularism's crises	Faith Family	Sacred found in	CAVEATS
<b>Environmental</b> <i>Perversion:</i> Superstition	pollution (air, water, sound, light, toxic wastes) overpopulation; loss of diversity of species deforestation; dying oceanic life; climate change corrupt food supply; antibiotic-resistant 'bugs'	<b>PRIMAL</b> Ancient Egyptian, Greek, and Roman; Mayan, Incan, Aztec, Indian and Tribal African; and many others.	<b>Nature</b> (ecological interdependence)	1. Specialization can deprive us of a sense of the Whole. This is a research program aiming to remedy that. 2. With any generalization, exceptions and qualifications abound. Examples: Shinto is Asian but is a nature religion. Sikhism is sometimes called syncretistic, and Marxism may be atheistic. Nonetheless, this scheme may be useful as a starting point for study. 3. This outline does not characterize any particular faith. 4. Religions are dynamic; this summary chart does not limit historical development. 5. Primal faiths can be just as sophisticated as Asian and Monothestic. 6. In any richly developed faith, elements of many other faiths can also be found, though they may not be as frequently emphasized.
<b>Personal Identity</b> <i>Perversion:</i> Narcissism	addiction (substances, consumerism, power) dependencies (handing others' feelings) prejudice (sexism, racism, homophobia) loss of sense of vocation and direction	<b>ASIAN</b> Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Confucianism, Taoism, etc. <i>See note, right, and below for Sikhism</i>	<b>Consciousness</b> (inner awareness, Larger Self)	
<b>Social Cohesion</b> <i>Perversion:</i> Self-righteousness	dividing the public; religion for partisan purposes violence around us, in entertainment; terrorism exploitation (disparity between rich and poor) disengaged citizenry (private over common weal)	<b>MONOTHEISTIC</b> Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, Bahá'í, Zoroastrianism, Unitarian Universalism, Marxism, American Civil Religion, etc.	<b>History of covenanted Community</b>	
<b>The Four Wisdom Treasures — Our task: apply them and find them one.</b>				
<b>PRIMAL faiths emphasize</b>	Nature is to be respected more than controlled; it is a process which includes us, not a product external to us to be used or disposed of. Our proper attitude toward nature is awe, not utility.			
<b>ASIAN faiths emphasize</b>	WHO WE ARE IS DEEPER THAN WE APPEAR TO BE; this means our acts should proceed beyond convention, spontaneously and responsibly from duty and compassion, without ultimate attachment to their results.			
<b>MONOTHEISTIC faiths emphasize</b>	THE FLOW OF HISTORY TOWARD JUSTICE IS possible when persons in community govern themselves less by profit and more by the covenant of service.			
<b>LIBERATION MOVEMENTS show</b>	Those disempowered by a secular age may, through the varied struggles, show THE IMPULSE TOWARD THE SACRED in fresh ways.			
<b>How terms are used</b>				
<i>Secular</i> ► fragmented, broken, partial, divided, unrelated, disconnected, the profane.				
<i>Sacred</i> ► ultimate worth, the network on which all depends; concretion of all values, holy, holistic, wholesome, cosmic connectedness or well-being, sensed in "peak experiences" which shape or direct or give meaning to life, opening us to the Infinite in <i>nature, personhood, society</i> .				
<i>Religion</i> ► arises from the search for, and encounters with, the sacred; we discover how to live in the world; the holy evokes wonder, grows in gratitude, matures in service.				

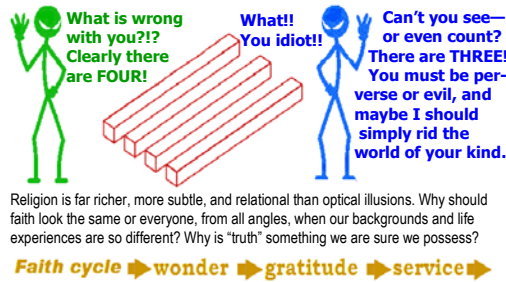
The three chief symptoms of this sickness are

- our environmental crisis,
- the uncertainties of personhood, and
- a destructively partisan, exploitative society.

The world's religions offer healing through awe and wonder in the three realms of nature, selfhood, and community. The three families historically have emphasized respectively that our lives depend on finding the sacred in each of these arenas.

- In Primal faiths<sup>1</sup> we find ecological awe: nature is respected more than controlled; nature is a process which includes us, not a product external to us to be used or disposed of. Our proper attitude toward nature is wonder, not consumption. Our lives depend on nature.

- In Asian religions<sup>2</sup> we catch the awe of genuine personhood as our actions proceed spontaneously and responsibly from duty and compassion, without ultimate attachment to their results.



- In Monotheistic traditions<sup>3</sup>, the awesome work of God is manifest in history's flow toward justice when people are governed less by profit and winning and more by the covenant of service. Our lives depend on community.

This gift from three different directions can bring us together to save the person, the society, and the planet. This interfaith promise is nothing less than the restoration of nature, the recovery of the whole self, and the life of a community of love.

Today traditions are encountering each other — by chance and by design. Perhaps we may finally stop saying, “We are all alike” as if we fear, instead of enjoy, our differences.

Let us instead learn that *religious pluralism is not a threat, but rather the gift of salvation.*

Secularism is denial or neglect of the whole, the Holy. *Whole, holistic, health, and holy* derive from the same linguistic root. Secularism is cured by awe, by noticing, by beholding, the three arenas without the blinders of greed, isolation, and thirst for control. Another word for awe is authenticity, re-

<sup>1</sup> The American Indian, tribal African, and Wicca, and the ancient traditions of Egypt, Greece, Rome, the Maya and the Inca are examples.

<sup>2</sup> This family, with very different understandings of the self, each illuminating, includes Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism.

<sup>3</sup> These faiths include Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Bahá'í; and some place Sikhism in this family as well, though it also has similarities to Asian faiths.

sponding with a sense of wonder, unowned by partial claims.

We will perish without authenticity in the three realms of nature, personhood, and community. We are beginning to see that these three realms interpenetrate and compose each other, different dimensions of a single reality, largely hidden from previous generations. Yet our culture is still distracted and benumbed by particular and competing agendas instead of an authentic sense of reality as whole, Holy.

For example, those with corrupted **personhood** deny climate change to profit from certain industries perverting the governance of the **community** and the holiness of the **planet**.

Only with faithful attention can we recover the awe that leads to gratitude, and the gratitude that matures into service. The Tao Te Ching warns, “Where there is no sense of awe, there will be disaster.” Avarice, exploitation, and the lust for power misdirect attention. But Rumi writes,

This way of looking at religions of the world is presented in greater detail elsewhere, such as in *The Essential Guide to Religious Traditions and Spirituality for Health Care Providers*, edited by Steven Jeffers, Michael Nelson, Vern Barnet, Michael Brannigan, Radcliffe, 2013 (p12-16).

The detail of the Three Families of Faith chart is mine, working from hints found in places such as Eliade's 1957/1959 *The Sacred and the Profane*, where he discusses **cosmic, personal, and social** contexts (p93-94), and the **“individual, social, and cosmic”** (p170).

In Roland Bainton's 1964/1966 *Christendom* (Vol 1, p3-4), we find “Judaism is a religion of **history** and as such it may be contrasted with religions of **nature** and religions of **contemplation**.” ¶ Religions of **nature** see God in the surrounding universe; for example, in the orderly course of the heavenly

bodies, or more frequently in the recurring cycle of the withering and resurgence of vegetation. This cycle is interpreted as the dying and rising of a god in whose experience the devotee may share through various ritual acts and may thus also become divine and immortal. For such a religion, the past is not important, for the cycle of the seasons is the same one year as the next. ¶ Religions of **contemplation**, at the other extreme, regard the physical world as an impediment to the spirit, which, abstracted from the things of sense, must rise by contemplation to union with the divine. The sense of time itself is to be transcended, so that here again history is of no import. ¶ But religions of **history**, like Judaism, discover God 'in his mighty acts among the children of men.' Such a religion is a compound of memory and hope. It looks backward to what God has already done. The feasts of Judaism are chiefly commemorative: Pass-

“Awe is the salve that will heal our eyes.” For the morbidity of our times, the awesome disclosure of the sacred in nature, personhood, and community is the cure.



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Center for Religious Experience and Study Box 45414, Kansas City, MO 64171 *an academic and community institute serving the KC area and nationally since 1982*

\*including Mircea Eliade, Huston Smith, Roland Bainton, Robert Bellah, Robert Arkinson, and Brian Carwana. Citations are provided below.

**From**  
 ▶ **the endangered environment,**  
 ▶ **the violation of personhood,**  
 ▶ **and the broken community**  
**bring Pluralism's wisdom gifts that we may be**  
 ● **restored with nature,**  
 ● **the self made whole,**  
 ● **community in covenant,**  
 ● **and the sacred found afresh.**

ver recalls the deliverance of the Jews from bondage in Egypt; Purim, Esther's triumph over Haman, who sought to destroy the Jews in the days of King Ahasuerus; and Hanukkah, the purification of the Temple after its desecration by Antiochus Epiphanes. And this religion looks forward with faith; remembrance is a reminder that God will not forsake his own. The faith of Judaism was anchored in the belief that God was bound to his people by a covenant, at times renewed and enlarged.”

In Huston Smith's 2005 *The Soul of Christianity*, he says that “becoming God” happens **individually, communally, and cosmically**” (p124). Sociologist Robert Bellah's 2011 *Religion in Human Evolution* (p175) notes that meaning obtains in **“cosmos, society, and self”**; this triad appears in varying forms throughout the book, as for example where he claims that music is “related not only to **inner** reality but

to **cosmic and social** reality as well” (p25), and that it can attune “the **individual to social and cosmic** order” (p26); he also uses the triad “**soul, society, and the cosmos**” (p27). He does not relate these terms to the triad of Primal, Asian, and Monotheistic faiths; rather he believes that “Both tribal and archaic religions are ‘cosmological,’ in that supernatural, nature, and society were all fused in a single cosmos” (p266).

Other works could also be cited, such as the scheme developed by The Encounter World Religions Centre in Toronto, the **Balance, Indian, and Middle Eastern** traditions; and Robert Arkinson's three categories of **Indigenous, Dharmic, and Abrahamic** religions in *The Story of Our Time: From Duality to Interconnectedness to Oneness*, 2017.

Emphases mine. uß