

## Awe is the Cure

For the Cultural Competency Collective of Greater Kansas City (Oct. 25) and the Dialogue Institute (date pending), I'm presenting an overview of the world's religions. 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 Council's 2001 "Gifts of Pluralism" sessions.

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

The three chief symptoms of this sickness are ● our environmental crisis, ● the uncertainties of personhood, and ● a destructively partisan, exploitative society. These world's religions offer us healing through awe and wonder in the three realms of nature, selfhood, and community. The three families historically have emphasized respectively that our life depends on finding the sacred in each of these arenas.

- In Primal faiths 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. (The American Indian, tribal African, and Wicca, and the ancient traditions of Egypt, Greece, Rome, the Maya and the Inca are examples.)

- In Asian religions we catch the awe of genuine personhood as our actions proceed spontaneously and responsibly from duty and compassion, without ultimate attachment to their results. Our lives depend on the true self. (This family includes Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism.)

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

Now traditions are encountering each other — by chance and by design — through local organizations

such as the Greater Kansas City Interfaith Council, and through groups with planetary scope like the Parliament of the World's Religions. 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 a gift of salvation, not a threat. It is the gift that, 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.



Secularism is denial or neglect of the whole, the Holy. *Whole, holistic, health, and holy* derive from the same linguistic root. For example, climate change is denied by some who profit from certain industries rather than considering the holiness of people and the planet.

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, responding with a sense of wonder, un-owned 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.

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, "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. —Vern Barnet, [www.cres.org](http://www.cres.org)

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\*including Mircea Eliade, Huston Smith, Roland Bainton, Robert Bellah, Robert Arkinson, and Brian Carwana. See reverse.

The Three Families of Faith



**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; American Indian and Tribal African; and many others.	<b>Nature</b> (ecological interdependence)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Specialization can deprive us of a sense of the whole. This is a research program aiming to remedy that.</li> <li>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.</li> <li>3. This outline does not characterize any particular faith.</li> <li>4. Religions are dynamic; this summary chart does not limit historical development.</li> <li>5. Primal faiths can be just as sophisticated as Asian and Monotheistic.</li> <li>6. In any richly developed faith, elements of many other faiths can also be found, though they may not be as frequently emphasized.</li> </ol>
<b>Personal Identity</b> <i>Perversion:</i> Narcissism	addiction (substances, consumerism, power) dependencies (handling 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	violence (in movies, games, real lives); terrorism exploitation (disparity between rich and poor) disengaged citizenry (private over common weal) using religion for political or partisan purposes	<b>MONOTHEISTIC</b> Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, Bahá'í, Zoroastrianism, Unitarian Universalism, Marxism, American Civil Religion, etc.	<b>History</b> of covenanted community	

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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.

**The Four Wisdom Treasures — Our task: apply them and find them one.**

<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.

How terms are used
<b>Secular</b> ► fragmented, broken, partial, divided, unrelated, disconnected; the profane.
<b>Sacred</b> ► ultimate worth, the network on which all depends, cornerstone 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 <b>nature, personhood, society.</b>
<b>Religion</b> ► 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.

Chart adapted from Vern Barnet's *Thanks for Noticing: The Interpretation of Desire*, La Vita Nuova Books, 2015, page 210; ISBN: 978-0692494370 — LCCN: 2015911786

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

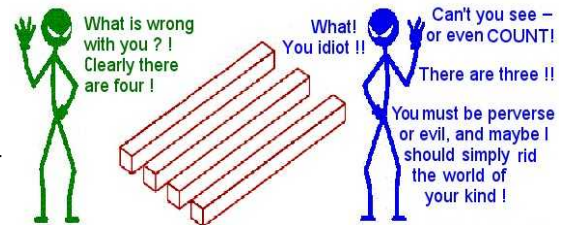
union with the divine. The sense of time itself is to be transcended, so that here again history is of no import. ¶ But religions of **history**, like Judaism, discover God 'in his mighty acts among the children of men.' Such a religion is a compound of memory and hope. It looks backward to what God has already done. The feasts of Judaism are chiefly commemorative: Passover 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.

All emphases are mine.



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Religion is far richer, more subtle and relational than optical illusions. Why should faith look the same for everyone, from all angles, when our backgrounds and life experiences are so different? How can we be so sure that we possess the truth?