

Observing the 10th anniversary of  
Kansas City's "Gifts of Pluralism"  
conference

*Are the world's religions  
separate pieces of history and spirituality,  
or do they, viewed together, form a pattern —  
and how can they heal the crises of our time?*

## The World's Religions: Pieces or Pattern?



**DRAFT REVISION**

If you wish, feel free to  
email comments to  
vern@cres.org  
before the Nov 9

**Vital Conversation.**

Your contribution is a part  
of our interfaith conversation.  
Criticisms and even editing suggestions are solicited.

The Reverend Vern Barnet, DMn

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## Dear Reader

SINCE THIS ESSAY APPEARED in 2000, “The Gifts of Pluralism” conference, Kansas City’s first interfaith conference, was held with 250 people from 15 faith groups — A to Z, American Indian to Zoroastrian, six weeks after the 2001 9/11 attacks. From that conference a number of clarifications and new insights have emerged.



And since then many other gatherings and innovations have given us in Kansas City opportunities to deepen our questions, expand our resources, and enlarge our friendships. Indeed, Kansas City itself has been recognized for its interfaith work in many ways, a few major events being —

▶ 2002 — A half-hour CBS network special broadcast focused on our work following 9/11.

▶ 2007 The first national Interfaith Academies, one for religious professionals, one for students, run concurrently, with international participation. Kansas City was selected because of the accessibility of site visits to supplement the classroom instruction, by partners Religions for Peace-USA and Harvard University’s Pluralism Project, cosponsored and held at the Saint Paul School of Theology with the cooperation of the Interfaith Council and arrangements by CRES.

▶ 2007 The Festival of Faiths began its highlighting of interfaith events each fall

▶ 2009 The North American Interfaith Network holds its annual convention here.

These and well over a thousand other activities have added to my understanding of the issues outlined in presenting an overview of world religions and the crises of our time. In addition, many comments, suggestions, and criticisms of this essay have been offered, for all of which I am grateful. You, dear reader are also invited to contribute your questions, responses, and criticisms for future revision. Please send them to me: [vern@cres.org](mailto:vern@cres.org) or Box 45414, KCMO 64171. *Thank you.*

*Vern Barnet*

“At the Pluralism Project, we consider Kansas City to be truly at the forefront of interfaith relations. This is — in no small part — due to the tireless efforts of Vern Barnet, whose work and writings have been an inspiration to all of us at the Pluralism Project.

“In a recent column, he wrote, ‘Community is created not so much by intellectual debate but by people getting to know one another.’ I am struck by the innovative ways the people have gotten to know one another here, from CRES and the Greater Kansas City Interfaith Council to the play, ‘The Hindu and the Cowboy’ and the Gifts of Pluralism conference.”

—*Ellie Pierce, principal researcher for  
The Pluralism Project  
at Harvard University, 2007*

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We are incorporated as

The WORLD FAITHS Center for Religious Experience and Study,  
but our acronym CRES can also mean Community Resource for Exploring Spirituality.

## 1. THE HUMAN CONDITION

### 1.1. *The sacred*

HE TOOK ME to breakfast. He was doubtful about God. Words like religion and spirituality were empty to him. “I just don’t know if I could call anything sacred. What does sacred mean?”

“Can you recall a time when something, even fleeting, captured your attention and brought you a sense of well-being, of fitness, of perfection, of your place in the universe?” I asked.

Immediately he grinned. “I’ll have to explain,” he said. “My wife and I insist that our 6-year old son sleep in his own bed, in his own room. But last night he was so especially wonderful and loving to us, we asked him if we could do anything for him. He asked to sleep with us. So we bent our rule and this once we all snuggled together.

“This morning, I left the house early, and my wife and son were still sleeping. I saw them curled up so peacefully. I had an overwhelming sense of how important they are to me, and that this is what my life in the cosmos is about. I took a deep breath and felt fully alive.

“And yet it was very ordinary—nothing religious about it,” he said.

“But doesn’t the Christian icon of the Madonna and Child, or the ancient Egyptian image of Isis and Horus, arise, at least in part, from similar cosmic parent-child delight?” I asked.

“You tell me,” he laughed.

“Well,” I said, “Religion tends to confuse the symbols for what they represent. We forget symbols and words are reminders of holiness all around us. The sacred is as ordinary and as indispensable as breathing.”

I could have mentioned that first thing one learns in yoga (or relearns) is how to really breath, and that the words for spirit in many languages are related to breathing. The English word “spirit” derives from the Latin for “breath.” English words like “expire” retain this root meaning. “Inspiration,” breathing in, has been metaphorically expanded to refer to what

A excites or enlivens us. And one way of understanding spirituality is what inspires, what moves, what  
B turns us on. Adam came to life when God breathed  
C into his nostrils. An early Hebrew word for “soul”  
D means wind or breath. A similar Arabic term for  
E “spirit” can mean the breath used in kindling a fire. There  
F is certainly spirit in the classic rock song by The  
G Doors, “Light My Fire.” The Sanskrit term for the  
H soul, *atman*, means breath, and the Indo-European  
I root ultimately gives us “atmosphere.” The Greek  
J word for soul from which we derive “psychology”  
K also means breath, life. In Chinese, this vital force is  
L *ch’i*, the breath that informs the world, expanding  
M and contracting, making every being spiritual, even  
N stones.

*Religion begins with experiences that take our breath away.*

J Religion begins with experiences that take our  
K breath away, encounters with the sacred, with tran-  
L scendence, with a sense of the holy. It may be a soli-  
M tary walk through the woods, or holding an infant, or  
N gazing at the stars, or hearing music performed so  
O well you are astonished, or seeing an athlete achieve  
P an unparalleled feat, or giving aid to someone in  
Q need, or a conversation in which you understood  
R your friend as never before, or your friend under-  
S stood you, or communing with a Higher Power. Per-  
T haps things suddenly made sense at the beach or in  
U the mountains or just looking into the fire, or we  
V were surprised by an unexpected realization or sense  
W of fitness within ourselves, or an intimacy with an-  
X other person so strong we felt that we were in some  
Y way one, or perhaps by being part of a larger social  
Z movement or cause of justice or freedom, or even a  
small personal act of unnoticed service to someone  
in need.

T For most of us, love is a trail toward transcendence.  
U In our finitude, we recognize the infinite. Whether  
V we love music, our partner, our vocation, our com-  
W munity, our nation, a trail through the forest or our  
X neighborhood or downtown, the Constitution or do-  
Y ing good for those in distress from a tsunami, we are  
Z enlarged; we touch something beyond ourselves. In  
such moments, we find ourselves participants in a  
pattern of meaning of which we had previously been  
hardly aware but which shapes and directs us, which  
makes sense out of our lives or fulfills them.

Z Such experiences say “Life is worth living.” They  
are available to people whether they think them-

selves religious or not.

Rudolph Otto and subsequent scholars have elaborated theories of the holy as an astonishing and compelling power or powers giving meaning to our lives. As we look at religions of the world, we will ask of them, “Where do you go to find the holy, the sacred, the source of life’s meaning?”

But while most of us have had such transcendent moments, where we sensed our place in the universe in a fresh way, most of us also are acquainted with loss, destruction, disappointment, pain, suffering, death, crime, oppression, violence. It may be tornado or flood, unfair employment situation, divorce, death of a child, poverty and hunger, prejudice or betrayal. Religions have sometimes spoken of loss of harmony (Primal faiths) or illusion (Asian faiths) or sin (Monotheistic faiths). The opposite of the holy or the sacred may be called the profane.

Religions recognize both poles of human experience, the encounter with supreme worthiness and utter worthlessness, the sacred and the profane.

Many of us have grown up with the unexamined assumption that religion is based on belief. But belief is of secondary importance in most religions. Consider Judaism. Traditionally, simply being born of a Jewish mother makes one a Jew. No creedal test is required. Jewish theological positions range from atheism to belief in a coming Messiah. And the Buddha warned against believing even what he taught because tightly held beliefs impair the ability to see the world afresh and accurately. So, as Ed Chasteen is fond of saying, “Who’s right is the wrong question” when getting acquainted with another faith because being correct may not be a parallel concern of that faith at all. Thus it is said that 90% of the Japanese get married in a Shinto ceremony, 90% get buried in a Buddhist ceremony, and 100% send Christmas cards.

Scholars sometimes identify four components of religion: belief, organization, worship and moral codes, sometimes summarized as “the four C’s”: creed, community, cultus, code. The importance of these components varies with the faith. Because of the oversize importance the modern world, influenced by the Enlightenment, places on belief, let’s look at that word’s pedigree. Related to the Latin word *libido*, desire, and the German *liebe*, beloved, the term “belief” in English originally meant trust,

A commitment, engagement,  
B what you love and prize. It  
C did not mean assent to ab-  
D stract theological formula-  
E tions. It’s more “I love my  
F spouse” than “My spouse exists.” Even the word  
G “creed” was originally an experiential rather than an  
intellectual matter. The term comes from the Latin  
H words *cor do*, I give my heart. (“Cardiology” and  
I “donation” are related to these two Latin words; the  
J “car” in “cardiology” comes from Greek, but both  
K *car* and *cor* derive from earlier Indo-European  
L roots.)

*More “I love my spouse,” than “My spouse exists.”*

H With few exceptions until the modern period, religion directed the heart to models for living with beauty, suffering and awareness of mortality. Life’s wonders and horrors were not boxed up into mere strings of words. Saying “God exists” was as unnecessary as saying “Reality exists,” although even the term “reality” and its cognates did not enter European languages until the mid-16th and early 17th centuries; it implied a new distinction and detachment from our most intimate experience. In the modern era, God has been reduced from Mystery to a Being among other beings, from what is beyond discursive language to factual descriptions. Historically, religion has not focused on literal truth so much as it has been in testing what is genuine. One does not have to “believe” in ghosts to find Shakespeare’s play *Hamlet* presenting genuine human experience. Mystics — Christian, Buddhist, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, and so forth — constantly testify to the inadequacy of language to express the experience at the core of their faiths. That is why in many religions practice and the fruits of practice are far more important than static creedal statements. Does a person’s faith help one to grow in love and service?

T Religion at its best offers experiences and communities that guide us so that we can answer the question,  
U “How shall I live my life?” by striving to live in  
V wonder, with gratitude, and by offering compassionate service.

### W 1.2. “Sacred” and “Holy” as technical terms

X THE HOLY is that on which our lives depend. It is  
Y our ultimate concern (Tillich), or ultimate commitment (Wieman), the cornerstone of all values. The  
Z English term is related to words like “health,” “wholesome,” and “holistic.” We sometimes sense the holy in “peak experiences.” Such experiences

*Spirituality is breathing with a sense of what counts.*

shape, direct, or give meaning to all of life, and are the breath of the spirit. These experiences make us vividly aware of what is valuable; they connect us to our deepest selves — and beyond ourselves, to the Infinite, and give us perspective on who we are and what we do. The Holy, the sacred, is what is worth living for, and dying for.

Religion arises from the Holy; religion is the discovery of how to live in the world, an answer to the question: “What is so important that my life depends upon it, and what must I do to honor and share it?”

In philosophy the Holy, the sacred, is called Reality; to use the technical language of information science, it is the Structure of All Data. The sacred is supreme worth, fundamental significance, ultimate value, utmost concern.

The sacred is contrasted with the *profane*, the fragmented, the partial, the instrumental, the means. Our culture often seems profane because it so often avoids beholding the sacred, the whole, and instead seems preoccupied with fragments, tangents disconnected from the Whole. Our problem with the sacred — the source of life’s meaning — is that it usually lies outside our awareness. The trance of our culture places the Holy at the edge of our awareness, instead of at the radiating, nourishing center. Our over-secularistic society distracts us from the Holy, rather than supporting our immersion in it. So religions have developed techniques to bring the sacred from the periphery into focus. One way is worship; the word is derived from Old English *weorðscipe*, worthy of consideration.

Unless we are frequently recalled to the Holy, we lose the perspective, the wholesome energy, and the connection that makes life meaningful. Immersion in the Holy recalls us to reverence, awe, clarity, attention — “beholding.” When I behold, I see without agenda, for having an agenda shapes, deforms what I see, inhibiting clarity. The addictions, compulsions, repulsions, inhibitions, prejudices, paranoias, hang-ups, consumptions, and co-dependencies that characterize our age make beholding difficult. We cannot clearly see who we are, what our situation is, or what we must do. But with the freedom to see clearly things as they are — especially to see ambiguity instead of falsely defined situations — we live a fit, genuine life. In beholding the Holy, we apprehend ultimate worth.

A Such beholding often leads to gratitude, which in turn often leads to a  
B desire to share and be of service as a  
C way of rendering thanks. This is  
D why the sacred opens, organizes,  
E and prioritizes our living, and gives  
F us a power and authenticity that links us to the en-  
G ergy of the universe itself.

E Spirituality is a way of living out our worship expe-  
F rience so that our lives have transcendent meaning,  
G coherence, order, and relationships informed by a  
H sense of the Sacred. Spirituality is breathing with a  
I sense of what counts. To eat or love or travel or lis-  
J ten or work or play or walk through a field or email a  
K friend or attend a concert or a game or heal or com-  
L fort a companion or even breathe with sacred intent  
M throws one into awareness of infinite connections  
N and ultimate dependencies. The world is vivid, we  
O belong in it, and we want to help.

### *1.3 Three crises; three responses*

L THE CHIEF AND DEADLY DEFECT of our profane cul-  
M ture is fragmentation; that is, there is no vision of  
N how all things involve each other, of what things are  
O most important, of what really counts. This means  
P we either live shallow lives or it is difficult to decide  
Q what is worth living or dying for. The word *profane*  
R means “outside the temple,” but even the temple has  
S often become profane, desacralized, in the sense of  
T being disconnected to the rest of our lives; for Chris-  
U tians this means Sunday church has little connection  
V to the rest of the week. “Profane” and “secularistic”  
W point to the fragmentation of our world into various  
X disciplines (in the universities), special interests (in  
Y politics), and social divisions (by class, race, age,  
Z “sexual orientation,” and such).

T The profane is the opposite of the Holy, that which  
U is whole, the network on which all depends. Our age  
V is profane because it has no unifying sense of the  
W Holy (related to holistic, the whole), that on which  
X our lives depend. The profane, the partial, separates  
Y the method from the result, the means severed from  
Z the end. The slogan, “The end justifies the means,”  
is rejected by those who, like Gandhi and King, un-  
derstand that there can be no sacred distinction be-  
tween the two. One does not build a nonviolent soci-  
ety through violence. As Abraham Lincoln knew,  
when violence is necessary, a terrible price must be  
paid. The effects of slavery brought in the New  
World in the 15th Century still have not been healed.

We profane • nature, • self, and • others. In these three domains our brokenness manifests so dangerously.

■ The Ecology.— Our natural environment is being degraded and destroyed. The destruction of rain forests is one example of the environmental exploitation arising from our secularistic means that fragment and profane us and even worthy ends. If we deeply sensed how holy these forests are, and that our survival depends on their well-being, we would not cut them down any more than we would poke out our own eyes.

Our environmental danger is sometimes summarized by the word “pollution,” actually an old religious term denoting ritual desecration and moral corruption. Overpopulation, toxic wastes from the auto, and the loss of diversity of species are signs of this pollution. “Pollution” cannot be corrected by mere technology because it is ultimately a spiritual problem.

■ The Person.— Within the individual, the profane divides us from ourselves and leads to three kinds of failure. The first is addiction. It may be to substances like alcohol and tobacco, or to compulsive behaviors like gambling, sexaholism, and workaholism, or to the kind of consumerism which distracts us from recognizing the sacred in the ordinary. The second is dependency which keeps us from taking responsibility for ourselves by co-dependent relationships, handling others’ feelings, and destructive criticism of others. The third is prejudice — acted out in oppressions like sexism, classism, heterosexism, adultism, age-ism, limiting our spirits and distancing us from others. This crisis can be called the profanation of personal identity.

■ The Society.— Our social order deteriorates, with the extremely rich increasingly separate from the rest of us, the influence of lobbyists and money in our political systems, with the enthronement of greed, the prevalence of arms and violence and even the casual acceptance and exploitation of the portrayal of violence as “entertainment.”

We are addicted to violence. Its portrayal often ignores its actual effect on victims and their families, further violating reality. Games like Mortal Kombat engender competition to see who can lop off the most heads in stylized “fun.” With advances in virtual reality computing, it will be possible to actually feel what it is like to cut open someone’s chest and

A pull out the beating heart, with  
B your victim’s warm blood spurt-  
C ing in your face. There will be no  
D immediate consequences since it  
E is just a simulation. But such  
F electronic rehearsals, profaning  
G the spirit, results in actual per-  
H formances. The celebrity status and huge financial  
I rewards that we give writers, actors, and companies  
J that model violence show we have not been effective  
K in shaming them. Our entertainment paradigms are  
L win/lose battles instead of creative, respectful, loyal  
M conflict out of which solutions which benefit all peo-  
N ple emerge. The rough and tumble of political dis-  
O agreement leads to violent language and even assass-  
P ination. And ordinary bystanders are endangered  
Q and murdered by the unleashing of social violence  
R resulting from the loss of a sense of personal integ-  
S rity.

*Our addicted  
society profanes  
nature, self,  
and others.*

Is any aspect of our society more profane than sexuality? Our culture has often disconnected it from spirituality and turned it into a commodity. The frequency of rape suggests that power, rather than mutuality, is society’s theme. Most faiths agree that sex is one possible way to express or explore transcendent love. But there is disagreement whether law and religious rules too often treat sex as a merely physical activity. For example, should the love of partners be expressed in marriage if they are of the same gender? Does a negative answer arise from a physical preoccupation?

If there is an area more profane than sexuality, it may be the exploitation which creates the growing disparity between the very rich and the very poor. This is happening because our disengaged citizenry too often focuses on private matters instead of our common weal. Repenting our selfishness and greed may be more important than tax-cuts.

IT IS DIFFICULT for us to see our situation clearly because we are enmeshed within it. But the world’s religious traditions can provide us with bridges from which we can view the currents of change. Instead of using such bridges to make sense of, or to envision reform of the desacralization of today, two movements have themselves become dangerous vortices.

■ Fundamentalism reacts, a whirlpool of waste. It insists it has the answers to our problems in the exact words of the old texts of the One True Religion.

■ On the other hand, the New Age scavenges. New Age doctrine proclaims that all religions are basi-

cally the same, but its practice sometimes focuses on crystals, astrology, past lives, or ecstatic episodes, more than on fulfilling the claims of faith to do good for one's brothers and sisters.

■ We propose a third response, a response that grows out of an examination of what is sacred in each faith. We believe that the world's religions provide us with the resources to address the three domain, broken in us as individuals, as communities, and as members of a fragile biosphere.

## 2. THE PATTERN OF WISDOM IN THE WORLD'S FAITHS

THE SACRED, that on which our lives depend, is generally located in different realms by the three families of faith.

1. Primal.— With significant variations, the Primal religions, including ancient practices of the Mesopotamians, Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans, the Maya and the Inca, and the almost extinct traditions of the American Indians and tribal Africans, and the Wiccan tradition now being recovered, generally find the sacred in the world of nature.

2. Asian.— The Asian religions, such as the faiths arising in China, Confucianism and Taoism, and the faiths beginning in India called Hinduism and Buddhism, generally locate the sacred in inner awareness.

3. Eschatological.— The Monotheistic religions, including Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (and one might add Sikhism, Unitarian Universalism, Bahá'í, Marxism, and what scholars call "American Civil Religion"), find the sacred disclosed in the history of covenanted community.

This is not to say that the sacred is nature, or is inner awareness, or is the history of covenanted community. Rather, in general, these families locate the sacred in these realms. Of course there are exceptions and variations and subtleties. Shinto is an Asian religion that in our scheme belongs primarily with the Primal faiths. Zoroastrianism is a special case since it greatly influenced the Monotheistic faiths while its origins are not Abrahamic. Most of these faiths are eschatological, that is, concerned with the edge of history. But the scheme we outline, despite its limitations, can be useful in three ways:

■ to provide an overview of religious consciousness throughout history and the world,

■ to guide a "research program" for deeper understanding of the faiths, and

■ most importantly, to show us paths to the healing of the afflictions of our age.

For example, we cannot be rescued from ecological doom only by technical solutions; a spiritual reorientation is required by which we understand our kinship and interdependence with trees, rocks, the air and water, not to be used so much as to be honored.

The insights of each of the three families are easily perverted (as the accompanying chart indicates). The Primal faiths often degenerate into superstition; the Asian faiths into narcissism; the Monotheistic faiths into self-righteousness and militancy. Today dialogue amongst the faiths can lead to mutual purification.

However, even the purest, fullest, human understanding of any separate revelation is no longer sufficient for us as a society because we cannot understand fully any one tradition without being acquainted with others. The additional, urgent project for our age is this: to discover how the several answers to the question "What is sacred?" mutually interpenetrate and inform each other. Unless we do this, the sacred will remain fragmented and our culture will teeter more precariously above a secularistic hell.

### 2.1. *The sacred in the environment*

MANY PRIMAL RELIGIONS behold the sacred in the world of nature. Unlike creationists who fear the notion that we might be related to monkeys, the American Indian celebrates one's bear, fox, or frog lineage, an ancestry which gives one intimacy with nature.

This is why totem poles, family trees, portray one's forebears in animal form.



When we need groceries, the sanitized supermarket is our source, not the wild. But when a brave shoots a deer, he may say, "I am sorry I had to kill you, Little Brother. My children were hungry. My family needs your meat. See, I hang your antlers in the tree. I decorate them with streamers. I smoke tobacco in your memory.

Each time I cross this path, I shall honor your spirit.”

We seldom talk to our food, and even table grace is often an embarrassment to us: our consciousness is separated from the sacred, that on which our lives literally depend. When a woman in the Southwest extracts clay from the ground to make a pot for storing food, she offers a prayer to the earth. Even stones are considered “people.” The streams, the air, the mountains — all are alive with sacred power, and deserve respect as our relatives, not used as objects for selfish ends, outside of a sacred pattern of where everything fits.

The ecological balance we need may be different than the one the hunter or the potter knew, but the Primal religions suggest that our environmental problems cannot be solved merely by technology.

Ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans, the more recent Maya and Inca civilizations, and the still-persisting tribal ways in Africa, Australia, Oceania, and elsewhere have strikingly different ways of understanding nature. For example, the Egyptians understood the sacred in nature as stability, the Greeks as a dynamic order, the Romans as potencies requiring compliance. But they all have understood nature as the fundamental expression of the Holy.

Recent thinkers, some stimulated by encounters with Primal traditions, have begun to recover a sense of the holy in nature, including Thomas Berry, J Baird Callicott, J Ronald Engel and Joan Gibb Engel, Matthew Fox, Roger Gottlieb, Eugene Hargrove, David Kinsley, Delores LaChapelle, Peter Marshall, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Steven Rockefeller and John Elder, Charlene Spretnak, Brian Swimme, and, of course, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.

In sum: Our ecological endangerment cannot be remedied by mere technology. The intimacy Primal peoples have with nature can guide us toward healing.

### 2.2. *The sacred in the self*

MANY ASIAN RELIGIONS behold the sacred in the psyche. A Hindu story: In the forest ten thousand rishis worshipped the god, Shiva, in only one, static manifestation. Shiva decided to appear, to show them that his manifestations are multitudinous; that his personality is many, not one; that he is motion, movement, dance.

But the rishis, whose preconceptions were challenged, rejected him. They called forth a great tiger who ferociously attacked Shiva at his throat. Shiva, with his little fingernail, skinned the tiger and wrapped the skin around him as a cloak. Then the rishis chanted a magic spell, and a great serpent emerged from the ground and, around the body of Shiva, began to writhe and twist and choke. But Shiva disabled the serpent, and cast its long body around his neck as a streamer of garlands. The rishis’ incantations finally caused a demon dwarf to attack Shiva with a mace. But Shiva placed his little toe on the demon’s back and began to dance.



All the gods came to see this dance, in which Shiva took every threat and made them props in his performance, showing us that whatever comes our way, however frightening, can be rendered harmless, even enriching, as we accept it into our

dance — now moving forward, now retreating, now high, now low: the divine personality in many forms, always in process, moving in the eternal dance of the cosmos.

This transforming power within is sacred; from it arises the meaning of our lives. The many dimensions of awareness are celebrated also by Buddhist mandalas. Even the ferocious Buddhist temple guardian figures challenge us to observe projections, and see that what we really fear may reside within us.

Through yoga, meditation, rites, and other techniques for observing the Self (or, in the case of Buddhism, the not-Self), Asian traditions (including Jainism, Confucianism and Taoism) provide paths for release from the perils of the ego.

In sum: The inner emptiness and disorientation that leads to addiction, dependencies, and prejudice can be healed by insights developed and nurtured by the Asian traditions.

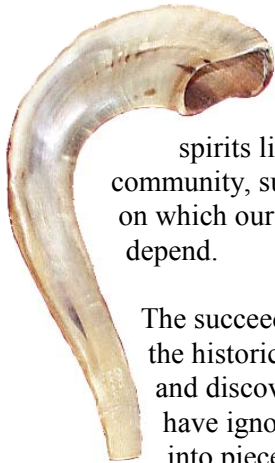
### 2.3: *The sacred in society*

THE MONOTHEISTIC FAITHS behold the sacred in the realm of history and covenanted community, not so



much the tree or the inner light, as in human relations. God is found in our meeting one another. In memory the divine is recalled and welcomed into the present.

Moses, though brought up an Egyptian, felt a strange kinship with the Children of Israel, who had been pressed into bondage. He discovered who he really was by affirming his relationship with them, leading them out of the land of slavery, into the holiness of freedom. The Law provided the way in which Israel could be organized for holy living. In American Civil Religion, that covenant is called the Constitution.



As we relieve the suffering and oppression of our brothers and sisters, so, too, are our own spirits liberated into the vitality of the community, submitting to the commandments on which our lives and well-being as a society depend.

The succeeding Hebrew prophets analyzed the historical forces acting on their nation and discovered divine patterns which we have ignored — our news seems to fall into pieces rather than patterns. Their prophecies were not so much prognostications and predictions as they were social commentaries and warnings; today's prophets are the thoughtful political columnists and leaders of peace and justice movements. The faith that God is working out his will for justice is expressed in what may be the most prized document in American Civil Religion, Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address.

For Jews, the holy community is the mystical Israel; for Christians it is the Body of Christ, the Church; for Muslims the Umma; for Sikhs the Khalsa. Zoroastrianism, Bahá'í, and other faiths have parallels. In the perverted version of Monotheism called Communism (God replaced by economic determinism), it is the Party which saves.

In our time, we must develop a sense of community world-wide. From a shofar, or wherever we hear a call to holiness, we awaken to a spiritual kinship and to duties not just with those of like faith, but with all who live, have lived, and will live.

In sum: Our social disorientation and disintegration, the eviscerated sense of community, the neglect of

A courtesy, the evaporation of service, and the growing concerns for safety can be answered by a recovery and revitalization of the Monotheistic sense of meaning in the process of history, as the human relationships unfold in divine order.

D BUT SINCE MOST OF US in this culture claim a Monotheistic heritage, how did our sense of community become so damaged?

### 3. THE PROMISE OF INTERFAITH ENCOUNTER

#### 3.1 *The American context*

H OF THE THREE FAMILIES OF FAITH outlined and charted above, American culture has been largely shaped by Christianity, a monotheistic tradition which emphasizes the covenanted community. Why, then, has the sense of covenant been broken? Why has it been weakened even in religious institutions?

L Although many believe they worship “the one true God,” our society is so fragmented that we have a *de facto* abandonment of monotheism. We adore power, possessions, pleasure — all of which may be good but become distractions when the vision of how all things involve each other becomes lost.

O The revelation that God works through community now seems strange — from the jokes about committees to our politics debased by special interests instead of decisions for the commonweal. Rather than government as an expression of community, its regulation and taxation seems to threaten the individual which has been transformed from a public person (that is a citizen, a person in relationship with others) into a bundle of desires for consumption. The “happiness” of the Declaration of Independence involved the individual's capacity to affect communal good; now “happiness” too often means selfish satisfaction. In the Citizens United case, personhood has instead been granted by the Supreme Court to corporations!

W America is a “case study” of perverted religious impulse. (See chart on back cover.) The genius of monotheism — to see the sacred working through the history of covenanted community — is distorted by self-righteousness and exclusivity that are typical dangers of this family of religions.

In outline, here are three signs of this desacralization:

1. *The Bottom Line*, severed from a sense of the larger good, seems to be our overarching public value. The bottom line is expressed in pseudo-religious language by Christian extremists who focus on heaven and hell, the results, the pay for our time in this world. Instead of urging us to do good because it is right, we are enticed with the promise of paradise and threatened with the prospect of damnation for our beliefs. This reward-punishment model has us so hooked that many people believe the very rich have a right to billions dollars of private wealth while others starve through no fault of their own, even though extreme wealth is often gained through immoral, and sometimes illegal, practices.

We think of taxation as something the governments do. We are not permitted to regard our contribution to the extremely wealthy as taxation because our money goes to them, rather than to the government. They get to decide how to spend it and influence government decisions, not us. We have little choice but to support products because of predatory ways. Philanthropy is no defense: instead of each citizen controlling one's money, or being represented in government, the very wealthy extort and decide. It is taxation without representation. This is not to judge those of extreme wealth personally; but this is a metaphor for how difficult it is to think about economic justice.

Business is often judged not by whether society is helped but by whether riches result. We have abandoned the idea of vocation as a role by which one contributes to society with a wholesome service — making shoes, doctoring, producing food, settling disputes, entertainment. A fair return on investment is not wrong, but worshipping profit is.

2. *Sexuality* is divorced from spirituality. One cannot be either fully spiritual or sexual without being both. Even celibacy is an intensely spiritual wedding to one's sexual nature. The religious poet William Blake wrote of the genitals as "Beauty," but we regard their portrayal as pornography. What does it mean that we accept the most appalling violence in the arena, on TV, on the screen, and in video games, but restrict the display of love-making?

3. *Violence* is a third sign. Violence arises from, and reinforces, the first two signs of our overly-

A secularistic society. Separating profit from social good and dividing sexuality from the spirit distorts relationships and twists energy into acts of malignity.

C By the mid 60s, community participation measured in many ways and documented by Robert Putnum of Harvard, began a dangerous decline. Air conditioning replaced the front porch swing and neighborly interaction diminished. With each member of the family having one's own TV, the viewing experience loses its social dimension. The investment we made in the Interstate Highway System could have been used instead for a public transportation system that would have avoided minimized the destruction of neighborhoods by the roads which divided or replaced them with the resulting social problems, the advance of urban sprawl, and the degradation of our air and other environmental damage. Recent popular perversions of Asian faiths also justified spirituality as merely an inner concern.

L Christianity has moved from the understanding of the church as the "Body of Christ" and the vision of community the Pilgrims shared to the "Sheila-ism" Robert Bellah identifies as the isolated spirituality of our time. Attendant theological transformations have paralleled the technology in leading us into forms of disconnection or cyber-community. Whether the holistic metaphor of the world wide web's interconnections will redeem the increasing specialization and cyberfication of humanity remains to be seen.

Q With the loss of a sense of bonding, even within families, we have become addicted to violence. A typical American child sees 40,000 "play" murders and 200,000 dramatized acts of violence before turning 18. The link between the portrayal of violence and acting out by the vulnerable is no longer debatable.

U Rather than repeat the appalling statistics, let me focus on how accepted violence has become, so pervasive that we don't even see it. Even gentle comic strips like Peanuts perpetuate our culture of violence. When I took my son some years ago to



Worlds of Fun, a place for “family entertainment,” I discovered their video games scored by lopping off as many heads as you could. What does it say about us that we dismiss this as “just fun, mere entertainment”? Since then, games with rape and mutilation have become even more popular. As a child, I was shocked the first time friends proposed playing Cowboys and Indians. Why would anyone want to play **bang-bang: you’re dead** just for fun? Advertisements for games command: “kill your friends guilt free,” “get in touch with your gun-toting, cold-blooded murdering side.” We praise the ingenuity of special effects — violence as art — while we dismiss their impact on us, the children, and the vulnerable. Actors, producers, and the movie companies should be ashamed of serving their careers and the dollar by modeling violence. They should also be embarrassed at their frequent imaginative failure to create wholesome entertainment.

Our language itself is a menace. We talk about fighting cancer more than healing. At my son’s graduation proudly posted was the host’s school song, called — you guessed it, “The Fight Song.” “We are the Shawnee Mission Raiders! We have the team that fights to win. . . . Go Fight, Win!” Why not “Play Well”? Why is winning so important that one must fight to do it? Why a school song based on such a metaphor instead of healing or building or growing or team spirit?

We are so immersed in violence it is hard to see its extent. Because the nature of violence is separation, we need to discover the pattern which can heal the schisms and bring the pieces together. The violence religions have brought against each other comprises a special and ironic history and threat. Bringing faiths together does not mean they lose their distinctions, but it does replace violence with affection.

### 3.2 Questions of Pluralism

#### 3.21. Three attitudes

WHAT ATTITUDES further such dialogue? Targeting Jews for conversion on High Holy Days, Hindus at Divali, and Muslims at Ramadan may appear as silly ignorance or proselytizing arrogance by those who have tasted the fruits of genuine interfaith encounter, but it is a precursor to actual violence.

Thus Pope John Paul II, who pursued interfaith relations vigorously, apologized for horrors through the

ages done by Christians. One evening a panel here in Kansas City on peace for Israel and the Palestinians discussed the prospects for peace. The Muslim leader began by confessing the terrible things done in the name of his faith. The rabbi likewise enumerating evils perpetrated by those claiming to be Jews. The audience was deeply moved by such frank admissions. From such mutuality rather than defensiveness, genuine encounter becomes possible. What a contrast to the mentally violent schemes of condemnation and conversion some have pursued!

1. *Imperialism*
2. *Romanticism*
3. *Mutuality*

Scholars have considered various ways those of world traditions may think about the many faiths. Before outlining my own simple outline, let me acknowledge several others. HUSTON SMITH: Superiority, Identity, Differences without Premature Judgment. DIANA ECK: Exclusivism, Inclusivism, Pluralism. PAUL F KITTER: Replacement, Fulfillment, Mutuality, Acceptance. ELIZABETH A JOHNSON: Fundamentalist (they’re wrong), Relativist (no differences are important), Dialogue (leading to mutual enrichment). JOHNSON also proposes four types of “dialogue”: of life, of action, of theological exchange, and of religious experience.

1. *The imperial path.* While one can believe fervently in one’s own faith, to share it without equal openness in encounter with another may betray unacknowledged insecurity about one’s own religion. The idea that one religion is so superior to all others that all should convert to it fails to acknowledge that most of us follow religious paths shaped by the times and cultures in which we have been born. Most Indians are Hindu. Most Saudis are Muslim. Most Americans are Christian. Even those who adopt a different religion do so usually because of the lens of exposure.

2. *The romantic path.* The attitude that all religions are the same at core, that there is a fundamental unity within them, is also not the most helpful position for honest dialogue. We look to confirm our presumption; and in an effort to accommodate one another, it is easy to edit differences out of our conversation and distort things to regard them as similar. We presume a common identity with others without really getting to know them. More about this path below (3.22).

3. *The path of mutuality.* If we begin, however, as

*All of us need to eat but one person's delight may lead to another's deadly allergic reaction.*

explorers, without too great an eagerness either to sell or to buy, we can make great discoveries about our own traditions and those of others. We may find that our faiths historically have often influenced each other

to such an extent that we may see all of us engaged in one rich religious adventure rather than completely distinct revelations. We may find that our common problems today — in the environment, in the personal realm, in the human community — can draw us into deeper understanding of the sacred, so that our attitude becomes one of mutual ownership of each others' traditions without losing our own paths, just as we all own the highways of this nation even though we live on our own street. We may find that the many paths lead us not to a single sacred spot, but to many manifestations of the holy, from which our service to others as kin may abundantly flow.

Such awareness may help to purify and mutually transform us into that greater witness by which the seductive powers of secularism may be healed. [See Appendix: Four Levels of Engagement.]

### 3.22. *Are all faiths really one?*

WE WANT to stop the violence we see perpetrated in the name of religion. We think if we only recognize that all religions are basically the same, violence will cease. It is a beguiling sentiment. Two examples: All religions believe in God; the Golden Rule appears in all faiths. But neither is true. While Jews, Christians and Muslims worship one God, forms of Buddhism, Jainism, Confucianism, and Taoism are non-theistic, and conceptions of God vary so greatly among many religions that it is confusing to use them to support the first italicized claim. While texts similar to the Golden Rule can be extracted out of context from many traditions, viewing them as like ethical principles violates the integrity of the faiths by forcing them into a Western category of thought.

I once attended (well, actually this sort of thing happens too often) an “interfaith” event where the keynote speaker droned on, saying that what we have in common is so much more important than our differences. The speaker cited her husband as a special person. I wondered why she married that particular man. Since what we have in common is so much

A more important than our differences, why couldn't she have married me or the man in the office adjoining hers or just about anyone, male or female?

C Actually, I like the differences between men and women. I like the differences between Hinduism and Islam. I am grateful that Steely Dan sounds distinct from Mozart. I like how Rembrandt and Robert Rauschenberg don't do the same thing. I don't want French cooking and Chinese and Arthur Bryant's to taste identical.

G You invite me for dinner. In accepting, I tell you that I have a serious allergy to, say, avocados. I arrive. You've prepared an elegant avocado-crab-grapefruit salad. I pick around the avocado. Insulted, you say, “The avocado is food, and like all other food, it is nutritious. You are being silly, focusing on the difference between the avocado and the crab.” But my life depends on noticing such differences. I'd decline your next invitation. To tell a Christian that his faith is really not that much different than a Buddhist's, or that what Jews and Sikhs have in common is more important than any difference between them is as questionable as marrying the next person who gets on the bus.

N A caller once commented on my *Kansas City Star* column which she had just started reading. She said she just loved it. “Why?” I asked. She said she liked my message that all religions are basically the same. I asked her how many religions she was acquainted with. She replied she didn't need to learn about any religion other than her own because they all say the same thing. How would she know?

S In the 15 years since that call, much misinformation about some faiths has multiplied through the internet and by emails, so I can understand why folks would want to say to themselves, “Surely this can't be true. Surely we are basically the same, and all religions must teach peace and justice.” Yes, they do. And all people need to eat.

W But as our tastes may vary, so our spiritual diets may differ. We need not forbid grocers from selling avocados. Buddhists need not be outlawed. You don't get harmony if everyone sings the same note. Instead of fearing differences, let's give thanks for them and learn from them and dig more deeply into our own faiths for treasures other faiths may more clearly manifest.

Huston Smith asks,

How fully has the proponent [of the view that all religions are at their core the same] tried and succeeded in understanding Christianity's claim that Christ was the only begotten Son of God, or the Muslim's claim that Muhammad is the Seal of the prophets, or the Jews' sense of their being the Chosen People? How does he propose to reconcile Hinduism's conviction that this will always remain a 'middle world' with Judaism's promethean faith that it can be decidedly improved? How does the Buddha's 'anatta doctrine' of no-soul square with Christianity's belief in . . . individual destiny in eternity? How does Theravada Buddhism's rejection of every form of personal God find echo in Christ's sense of relationship to his Heavenly Father? How does the Indian view of Nirguna Brahman, the God who stands completely aloof from time and history, fit with the Biblical view that the very essence of God is contained in his historical acts? Are these beliefs really only accretions, tangential to the main concern of spirit? The religions . . . may fit together, but they do not do so easily.

While the mystical traditions within many faiths may be remarkably similar, mysticism is not at the core of many of the world's religions. To say that all religions are alike is like my host saying all food is alike. A religion may be life-giving to one person and toxic to another. A faith that is deeply meaningful and obviously beneficial to one person or society may be opaque or even distracting from the path of wholeness to another.

Religions are alike in that they all originate from experiences of awe, encounters with the Sacred, but the way those experiences are understood or emphasized varies.

So how do religions fit together? Perhaps as the length, width, and height of a room are essential dimensions of the space, the Primal, Asian, and Monotheistic traditions we have outlined are essential expressions of the sacred. Each religion may have some acquaintance with other dimensions; but as it has developed, it may become expert in a particular expression of the sacred.

To blend religions together would produce a dangerous spiritual pabulum, just as reducing the dimensions of an amphitheater to a single point would forgo the expanses which can contain a powerful and

A glorious assembly of diverse people.

B Our age is one which, beset by environmental, personal, and social challenges, can be addressed by the special insights of Primal, Asian, and Monotheistic traditions. We understand ourselves and our own traditions better by encountering others, and engaging in mutual purification of the faiths through respectful exchange.

G We cannot afford to ignore their wisdom, or to live with our own so routinely that we have lost the refreshment of the experience of awe. The peril, despite the promise of the new millennium, is real. If we neglect any of the three dimensions of the Sacred, civilization as we know and hope it to be will end. As the ancient Tao Te Ching says, "Where there is no sense of wonder, there will be disaster."

L Thus our mission of faith, the duty of believer and non-believer alike — to work with all faiths and unbelief to rekindle in our overwhelmingly secularistic, profane age, the sense of wonder.

### N 3.23. *Faiths in dialogue*

O THE CONGRESS of the faiths can best occur by discovery and growth within each tradition, stimulated by mutual encounter, rather than by organizational assimilation or imitation.

R Those with faiths other than our own become our guides to a deeper understanding of the reality beyond words on which we depend, out of which we arise, and to which we return.

T Encounter must occur not only internationally and nationally, but regionally and locally as well. In many communities, religious pluralism is a reality ready to be celebrated, as it is here in Kansas City. Rather than focus on international **leaders**, it may be more productive to develop exchange between and among various faith **communities** within each locality. This is why CRES focuses on our metropolitan area, though we maintain contact with international organizations.

Z Because of complex and unconscious assumptions of identity and difference within faith communities about others, it is helpful to approach mutual study

*Each religion may become expert in a particular expression of the sacred.*

with a generalization such as the three-part pattern here described, a generalization understood as such, with the process of the exchange modifying, challenging, and ultimately abandoning the generalizations as the rich texture of interfaith encounter purifies, transforms, enlarges, and deepens the practices of the participants.

Such faith encounters, by indirection, through conversation, visitation, common worship, shared projects, and significant friendships, may be the best way to discover solutions to the three crises of our secularistic age. The simple three-part pattern we have outlined in this year-long series becomes increasingly complex without falling into pieces.

### 3.3. *Finding the treasury of wisdom*

IN OUR AGE of specialization and fragmentation, in this profane age, this essay proposing a pattern among the world's faiths is out of place. Some may find it presumptuous. But my teacher, Mircea Eliade (1907-1986), regarded as the greatest historian of religion of his time (among his hundreds of publications, he was editor-in-chief of the 15-volume *Encyclopedia of Religion*), urged his students not to fear proposing syntheses to make sense out of the bits and pieces of knowledge that can be gathered as we study what gets labeled "religion" and the manifestations of the sacred everywhere, even in the shadows of thought and culture. He wrote of the discipline he is sometimes credited with inventing, "The History of Religions is not merely an historical discipline, as for example, are archeology and numismatics. It is equally a total hermeneutics being called to decipher and explicate every kind of encounter with the sacred, from prehistory to our own day."

In that spirit, and with that challenge, I have developed the idea of three families of faith and applied their wisdom to the three crises of our time. This is a "research program." not a finished study. Still it does what so many academics decline to do, and that is present a basic framework of the faiths and relate it to the issues of our time.

BUT I AM NOT the first to find three generally distinct approaches to the sacred among the religions of the world. Church historian Roland Bainton, for example, identified as religions of history, nature, and contemplation, which are roughly parallel to my system of Monotheistic, Primal, and Asian faiths:

A Judaism is a religion of history and as such it may  
B be contrasted with religions of nature and relig-  
C ions of contemplation.

D Religions of nature see God in the surround-  
E ing universe; for example, in the orderly course  
F of the heavenly bodies, or more frequently in the  
G recurring cycle of the withering and resurgence of  
H vegetation. This cycle is interpreted as the dying  
I and rising of a god in whose experience the devo-  
J tee may share through various ritual acts and may  
K thus also become divine and immortal. For such  
L a religion, the past is not important, for the cycle  
M of the seasons is the same one year as the next.

N Religions of contemplation, at the other ex-  
O treme, regard the physical world as an impedi-  
P ment to the spirit, which, abstracted from the  
Q things of sense, must rise by contemplation to un-  
R ion with the divine. The sense of time itself is to  
S be transcended, so that here again history is of no  
T import.

U But religions of history, like Judaism, discover  
V God "in his mighty acts among the children of  
W men." Such a religion is a compound of memory  
X and hope. It looks backward to what God has al-  
Y ready done. The feasts of Judaism are chiefly  
Z commemorative: Passover recalls the deliverance  
of the Jews from bondage in Egypt; Purim,  
Esther's triumph over Haman, who sought to de-  
stroy 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. [*Christendom*,  
p3-4]

Huston Smith, author of the most used text on world religions, also presents a parallel three-part scheme: "[B]ecoming God" happens individually, communally, and cosmically." [*The Soul of Christianity*, p124.]

IN THE MANY YEARS of my own teaching, the utility of finding a pattern in the religions of the world rather than pieces seems to have made it easier for folks to approach those of other faiths with open respect. The 2001 Gifts of Pluralism conference concluded with a unanimous Declaration employing this pattern to express hopes for the future. That Declaration was drafted and amended by the 250 people attending, from every faith in the Kansas City area,

including American Indian, Baha'i, Buddhist, Christian Protestant, Christian Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Jewish, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Sufi, Unitarian Universalist, Wiccan, Zoroastrian, and FreeThinker. That all of them found the pattern useful in learning from one another suggests others might also benefit from this kind of overview.

They vividly discovered that rather than threaten, differences can enrich us by disclosing ourselves to one another as well as giving us a clearer sense of the diversity within the Infinite. While we can never fully escape from the limited, the partial, the secularistic, the world's great religions arise from the whole, from experiences of awe and participation in the vitality of the cosmos, from the deep questions — "What is so important that my life depends on it or that I would die for?" and "What may I do to honor and share it?" In other words, "What is sacred?"

The answer to this question may come from one's own tradition. Yet we need the help of others to find that answer in this secularistic age. "He who knows one religion knows none," said Max Müller, suggesting that until we can view our own faith from the perspective of others, we cannot know our own. The import is similar of Kipling's question: "What knows he of England who only England knows?" I know what Kansas City is better by acquaintance with San Francisco and New York and Delhi and Rome. The paradox of these teachings is the key to understanding a favorite story of my teacher, Mircea Eliade:

A PIOUS RABBI named Eisik once lived in Cracow. He was very poor. One night as he slept on the dirt floor of his hovel, he had a dream which told him to go to Prague, and there under the bridge that led to the royal castle he could unearth a great treasure. The dream was repeated a second night, and a third.

He decided to set out for Prague. After many days walking, he entered Prague, and found the bridge that led to the royal castle. But he could not dig. The bridge was guarded day and night. The rabbi walked back and forth awaiting a moment when the bridge might be unwatched and he might dig for the treasure. The captain of the guard noticed him, and went up to him. "I've noticed you walking about here these several days. Have you lost something?" At this, the rabbi innocently narrated his tale. "Really," said the captain of the guard, who was a secularistic,

A modern man, unconnected with his dreams, "Have  
B you worn out all your shoe leather merely on the ac-  
C count of a dream? I too have had a dream, three  
D times, which told me to go to the town of Cracow,  
E and look for the rabbi Eisik, and dig in his dirt floor  
F behind his  
G stove in the  
H middle of his  
I room, and  
J there I would  
K find a great  
L treasure. But  
M dreams are  
N silly supersti-  
O tions."

*Religion arises from the Holy; religion is the discovery of how to live in the world. The Holy leads to awe, then gratitude, then to service — the Holy in action.*

The rabbi immediately understood and promptly returned home, entered his hovel, and dug underneath the heart of his hearth, where the warmth of his own being lay. And there he unearthed a treasure, which put an end to his poverty.

From this tale Eliade draws two lessons. The first is that the treasure which can put an end to our spiritual poverty lies not in another country. It can be found within the heart of our heart, the center of our own tradition. In the house of ourselves it lies buried in our innermost being. The second lesson is the paradox: only after a pious journey to a distant region, in a strange country where someone speaks to us in a foreign accent, can we be directed to the location of that buried treasure.

Through encounters we have with the strangers of other faiths we can discover our own faith. Through a far pilgrimage we can know ourselves and our home and be saved. It is through the mutual purification of faiths meeting each other that the three crises of our time can be healed. The religions of the world fall not into pieces but compose an infinite pattern from which we can be restored to nature, to ourselves, and to one another.

Appendix One  
*Four Levels of Engagement*

► 1. Many people now know the dangers of religious prejudice. They believe that *everyone has the right to one's own religion, or none*. This is the first, most superficial level of engagement with other faiths. It is an advance from the days when people were forcibly converted to another faith or denied opportunities because of their traditions. Home associations can no longer prevent Jews from buying in their areas. While Wiccans and other minorities still encounter discrimination from time to time, we have come a long way.

But are their deeper levels of engagement with faiths other than our own?

► 2. We can move from respecting not only others' right to their own faiths *to respecting their faiths* as well. This is a subtle but crucial distinction. It is one thing for me to agree you have the right to have whatever painting you wish in your living room, and it is another thing for me to learn why it is beautiful to you, even if I do not want it in my living room.

► 3. We take another step toward deeper understanding when we *participate* in interfaith exchange. I need a mirror to see myself. When Christians discover why Jesus is so revered by Muslims, when Tibetan Buddhists and Jews tell their stories of suffering, when Hindus and American Indians share dances, all can see their own heritage more clearly with the mirror of the other.

► 4. But there is an even fuller engagement. The mirrors of faith transmit and reflect the holy from many angles. Bringing and focusing them together, a powerful, curative light can shine to heal the three great crises of desacralization: *we can apply the wisdom of the world's faiths to the endangered environment, the violation of personhood, and the broken community*.

Is this the key religious task of the new millennium?

Appendix Two  
*Questions for Interfaith Conversations*

The key to interfaith understanding is simply building relationships. Books and travel can help, but relationships are the key. Relationships can be furthered by asking questions designed for sharing experiences rather than argument.

How can you listen to others without feeling they are trying to convert you, and how can you present your own faith without appearing aggressive?

Can two people with different levels of knowledge about religious matters have a discussion on an equal basis?

The answer to these questions is yes — if the conversation focuses on not who is right and who is wrong but rather on personal stories. You cannot dispute someone's own life experiences.

A structured exercise can get the process going. In a conversation between you and your friend, start with five minutes each to speak without interruption as the other listens.

It is sometimes helpful to begin with question.

Here are some examples:

1. Can you tell me a story when the universe seemed to make sense to you or when you were overcome with a sense of awe?

2. What experiences have you had that point to the ultimate source of life's meaning for you?

3. Was there a turning point in your life as you considered spiritual questions that helped shape who you have become?

4. Can you tell a story or describe a situation when your faith was especially meaningful to you?

5. When have you felt closest to God or when has life or the universe made the most sense to you?

6. What assumptions do people make about you that give you pause?

7. What is it like to be different?

8. What do you like and dislike about your tradition?

9. What holidays and practices of your faith do you especially like or dislike?

10. How did you become an adherent of your faith?

11. How do you view other traditions? What



would you like others to know about your faith?

12. Are particular foods or dietary practice meaningful to you? Do members of your faith have a distinctive dress code?

13. Who are people in your tradition of whom you are proud?

14. How does your faith affect your family life?

15. Has your faith ever guided you in dealing with a problem or opportunity in a personal relationship? Does it guide you in getting along with others? Has it ever inspired you to help or intervene on behalf of others?

16. How has your faith shaped your views about peace? about the environment?

17. When does your faith help you feel close to others and when does it make you feel distant?

18. How does your faith help you deal with suffering, your own and of others who have done nothing to deserve their agony or misfortune?

19. Have you ever seen a painting or heard music or walked on the beach or in a forest or played sports or seen a sunrise or learned about science or worked a math problem or held a child or made love when you felt lifted out beyond your ordinary sense of self?

SUCH QUESTIONS welcome atheists, agnostics and humanists as well as believers into the conversation.

In listening to someone answering such questions, it is important just to listen. It is not useful, even in your head, to criticize your friend's choice of words or theological framework.

What you want is to understand the experience as a genuine expression of what is precious or even sacred to your friend.

Spiritual ideas cannot be fully comprehended except as they are embedded in stories. Religious terms can mean one thing to you, another to your friend. By listening to how your friend uses words in the context of your friend's experience, your own ability to use the languages of faith will be expanded.

Religion is really about stories. There are the stories in the sacred texts, and there are the stories of your own and your friends' adventures in seeking to find guideposts within the overwhelming mystery of existence.

It can be a privilege and a treasure when you and a friend exchange intimate details of that adventure.

### *Questions for Folks of All Faiths and None*

**Personal.** Is my life fulfilling and useful? Do I really know myself? Where is my greatest love? How do I

A fit into the larger scheme of things?

B How do I find peace of mind? How should I deal with disappointment and betrayal? What do I do with feelings like guilt and shame, devastation or elation?

C On whom or what do I ultimately depend? What does it mean when I'm overcome with a sense of beauty or transcendence beyond the ordinary?

E How can I be less judgmental — or when should I be more judgmental?

F **Social.** How do I deal with people claiming to have answers they want me to accept but that I don't understand or that don't work for me?

H How should I evaluate political issues from a cosmic perspective?

I What is the right amount of wealth I myself should enjoy and how much should I give to benefit others?

J How can I believe in a universal moral order when wicked people prosper and good people suffer unjustly?

L **Environmental.** Do earthquakes, floods, tornadoes and other natural disasters\* arise from forces beyond nature? And does the beautiful day I wanted just happen or am I being rewarded?

N How can I be responsible for protecting the environment for future generations when I live in a culture mostly consuming instead of renewing the environment?

### Appendix Three

#### *Where to Find Additional Resources*

R Local and world-wide resources are listed and many accessible from the CRES website, [www.cres.org](http://www.cres.org). See especially the "Eight Interfaith Primers: Articles by David Nelson and Vern Barnett" in the Archive section.

### Appendix Four

#### *The Gifts of Pluralism Conference*

V Summary prepared for the Civic Council in 2002  
W Kansas City's First Interfaith Conference:  
A Success — A Model for the Future

X Overview.— The "Gifts of Pluralism" conference, held Oct. 27-28, 2001, on the Ward Parkway (State Line) campus of the Pembroke Hill School, marked the metropolitan area's first interfaith conference and set the stage for future collaboration among representatives of all faiths. Never before have so many

people of so many faiths gathered here to learn from each other and to plan for the future.

Participation.— Over 250 people participated in the two-day event representing 15 faith groups — American Indian, Bahá’i, Buddhist, Christian (Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox), Free Thinkers, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Sufi, Unitarian Universalist, Wiccan, Zoroastrian.

Congressman Dennis Moore and Congresswoman Karen McCarthy opened the conference, held on State Line. Proclamations from Governors Graves and Holden and area mayors were acknowledged.

Although the conference was focused on Greater Kansas City, several out-of-town, out-of-state, and foreign visitors learned about it and were drawn here.

About two dozen high school and college students were involved. Students were represented on each of the three Saturday panels. The Pembroke venue was used to emphasize that we are all students learning from each other.

Eighteen civic leaders such as Beth Smith and Bob Stephan had provided early planning advice. Program.-- A goal was to focus on the diversity in Kansas City, so out-of-town celebrity speakers were not engaged. The resources within our own area were displayed in many ways, including the Saturday evening of drama, dance, and music.

A process called “Appreciative Inquiry” was used throughout the two days to help people, one-on-one and in small groups, encounter each other in the depths of their faiths quickly and with mutual respect.

With preparation by four focus groups held last summer, three Saturday panels of religious leaders addressed (1) environmental, (2) personal, and (3) social failings of our time in the context of Kansas City, with the resources of their respective traditions. On Sunday a panel on the role of religion in Kansas City with leaders from government, media, business, and the non-profit sector was featured, and a final panel discussed “Where do we go from here?”

Many faith groups held pre-conference open houses on Friday, and workshops were offered on most faiths on Saturday. Sunday began with an interfaith worship service. Throughout the conference, faith groups had displays and information for registrants.

Concluding Declaration.— A 500-word declaration, edited from comments posted on a wall throughout

A the conference, was unanimously adopted and signed in a ceremony using the conference logo and water  
B from rivers around the world and from area foun-  
C tains from Independence to Olathe.

D The Declaration begins, “This is an historic mo-  
E ment because never before have people of so many  
F faiths in the Kansas City area convened to explore  
G sacred directions for troubled times. Especially after  
H the events of September 11, the need for our support  
I for one another and the larger community is clear  
J and commanding.”

K Evaluation.— The formal evaluation instrument and  
L informal comments have been overwhelmingly fa-  
M vorable.

N Participants valued opportunities to build rela-  
O tionships, to learn about other faiths, to experience  
P the “Appreciative Inquiry” method, and to come to a  
Q better understanding of our community.

R A Nov 1 Kansas City Star editorial began, “If  
S other communities want an example of how to con-  
T duct interfaith dialogue in this tense time among fol-  
U lowers of different religions, they should look at the  
V recent ‘Gifts of Pluralism’ conference in Kansas  
W City.”

X Organizers.— This conference represents the coop-  
Y eration of many organizations which understand the  
Z importance of faith in the life of the community.

“The Gifts of Pluralism” was conceived by the  
Kansas City Interfaith Council, a program of CRES,  
and under CRES auspices, direction, and support.  
Vern Barnet, president of CRES, was conference  
president. Larry Guillot is CRES Board Chair.

Co-sponsors were KC Harmony, NCCJ, and  
Spirit of Service. Churches with world headquarters  
here (Community of Christ, the Church of the Naza-  
rene, Unity School of Christianity) were official ob-  
servers at Interfaith Council planning meetings and  
participated in the conference.

A list of some 80 leaders and presenters (Clyde F  
Wendel, Stumbling Deer, Bill Tammeus, Bilal  
Muhammed, Saraswati Shanker . . . ) is available on  
our web site or by request, along with the members  
of the Interfaith Council.

Funding was provided by the Bank of America as  
Trustee of the George and Elizabeth Davis Trusts,  
the Ewing M Kauffman Fund for Greater Kansas  
City, DST, the Norman and Elaine Polsky Fund, the  
Bank of Blue Valley, and Community Christian  
Church, with smaller gifts for scholarship funds from  
numerous individuals. The facility was provided as  
an in-kind gift from Pembroke Hill School. The

conference fee was \$75 (including all meals); donations made student scholarships and other subsidies possible.

Additional information (including extensive press coverage, the Concluding Declaration, and detailed program and participants) is available on the CRES website ([www.cres.org](http://www.cres.org)). Conference notebooks (120 pages) with each faith's section prepared locally, are available for \$22 each from the address below.

POSTSCRIPT. Since this report was prepared in 2001, new activities directly growing out of the conference have blessing our community, including the play, *The Hindu and the Cowboy and Other Kansas City Stories* and the nationally recognized *Interfaith Passport*. In 2002 network CBS did a half-hour special on Kansas City because of other work growing out of the conference, and in 2007 the nation's first "Interfaith Academies," with partners including the Pluralism Project at Harvard University, Religions for Peace-USA at the UN Plaza, the Saint Paul School of Theology, and the renamed Greater Kansas City Interfaith Council, with CRES providing local arrangements and Vern serving on the international faculty.

#### Appendix Five

#### *Concluding Conference Declaration*

This is a historic moment because never before have people of so many faiths in the Kansas City area convened to explore sacred directions for troubled times.

Especially after the events of September 11, the need for our support for one another and the larger community is clear and commanding.

As members of the greater Kansas City community and guests, we have assembled October 27 and 28, 2001, and worked together, worshipped together, enjoyed each other, and learned from each other. Receiving suggestions made throughout this meeting for enlarging and improving this statement, we celebrate the gifts of pluralism we have begun to offer to one another.

A We do hereby declare our resolve to work towards  
B making Kansas City a model community, where interfaith  
C relationships are honored as a way of deepening one's own tradition and spirituality, and  
D where the wisdom of the many religions successfully  
E addresses the environmental, personal and social crises of our often fragmented world.

F ¶ *The gifts of pluralism have taught us that nature is to be respected rather than controlled; nature is a process that includes us, not a product external to us to be used or disposed of. Our proper attitude toward nature is awe, not utility.*

G ¶ *We have also learned that our true personhood may not be the images of ourselves constrained by any particular social identities. When we realize this, our acts can proceed spontaneously from the duty and compassion, and we need not be unduly attached to results beyond control.*

H ¶ *Finally, when persons in community govern themselves less by profit and more by the covenant of service, the flow of history toward to peace and justice is honored and advanced.*

O  
P We declare that through our encounter we  
Q have discovered that clearer directions for  
R our several faiths and for our society at large are  
S needed and possible. In the names of our faiths too often prejudice and injustice have been perpetuated, and we know that bias and bigotry continue.

T The work we have done this weekend is a turning  
U point to overcome the misunderstandings that separate persons and communities of faith. We resolve to  
V deepen our commitments to our own faith communities and to enlarge our understanding of kinship by  
W honoring the faiths of others. This conference, "The Gifts of Pluralism," is thus the beginning of an expanded conversation by which we may show both  
X our humility and our gratitude in offering service to  
Y that which is Infinite and Ultimate, which we call by  
Z many names but identify in our hearts as the Source

from which come, to which we return, and which holds us in this present opportunity.

[SIGNATURES]

Approved unanimously at the end of the Conference with each person ceremonially adding his or her signature while receiving the waters of the world mingled with waters from fountains of the Kansas City area to take home to water a plant to grow as a way of reminding us to help the community grow with the wisdom and relationships from the Conference.

A  
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*The heart/fountain logo of Kansas City, MO is part of the logo for "The Gifts of Pluralism: In a World Without Direction We Find the Sacred" conference*

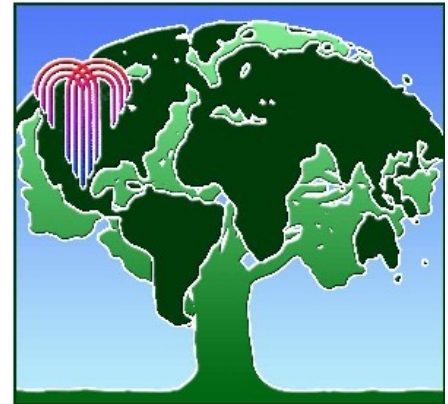


PHOTO CREDIT, page 8: Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City. Shiva Nataraja. 13th century Indian, Tamilnadu. Bronze 34 1/4 x 27 1/2 x 13 inches (87 x 69.85 x 33.02 cm). Purchase: Nelson Trust, 34-7. Gallery 228.

**A Way of Looking at Our Desacralized Society and the World's Religions as a Whole System**

Crisis	Examples of secularism's crises <small>19-Oct-11</small>	Faith Family	Sacred found in	Perversion
<b>Environmental</b>	pollution (toxic wastes, as from the auto) overpopulation; loss of diversity of species deforestation; global warming damaged and dying oceanic life	<b>PRIMAL</b> <small>Ancient Egyptian, Greek, and Roman; Mayan, Incan; American Indian and Tribal African; and many others.</small>	<b>Nature</b> (ecological interdependence)	Superstition
<b>Personal Identity</b>	addiction (substances, consumerism, power) dependencies (handling others' feelings) prejudice (sexism, racism, homophobia) loss of sense of vocation and direction	<b>ASIAN</b> <small>Hinduism, Buddhism Jainism, Confucianism, Taoism, etc. See note, right, and below for Sikhism</small>	<b>Consciousness</b> (inner awareness, Larger Self)	Narcissism
<b>Social Cohesion</b>	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> <small>Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, Bahá'í, Zoroastrianism, Unitarian Universalism, Marxism, American Civil Religion, etc.</small>	<b>History</b> of covenanted community	Self-Righteousness

**CAVEATS**  
 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 Monotheistic.  
 6. In any richly developed faith, elements of many other faiths can also be found, though they may not be as frequently emphasized.

**The Four Wisdom Treasures — Our task is to apply them and find they are one.**

		How terms are used
<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>Secular</b> ► fragmented, broken, partial, divided, unrelated, disconnected; the profane.
<b>ASIAN faiths emphasize</b>	WHO WE ARE IS DEEPER THAN WE APPEAR TO BE; this mean our acts should proceed beyond convention, spontaneously and responsibly from duty and compassion, without ultimate attachment to their results.	<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>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>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.
<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>Spiritual</b> ► breathing with a sense of what really counts.

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