During the 20th century, many eruptions of violent international friction were rooted in secular problems. The two World Wars, the Korean War and the Vietnam War were founded on political and national differences.

Since the 1970s, however, international violence often seems rooted in religious differences, in attempts by members of one religion to control or get back at members of another. While these broad generalizations have multiple exceptions, many people now see religion as the primary source of conflict; with John Lennon, they want to imagine a world in which religions do not provide humanity with a heaven and a hell (or anything else) to fight for.

Is it possible to get rid of religions? No, not really. Centuries after the intellectual Enlightenment pushed religion off its throne by elevating human reason above divine revelation and creating the sciences, religion is still around. Many had hoped and even predicted that religion would disappear. Religion was likened to a mental illness, and, in line with Sigmund Freud’s "talking cure," once patients recognized it, they would be healed of the affliction. That has not happened, obviously.

So, if we want to live in a world where religious beliefs do not spark conflicts, what approach should we take? In an recent op-ed piece in the New York Times, "Many Faiths, One Truth," the Dalai Lama argues that the world’s people need to practice tolerance of other people's religions. After admitting that every religion has its core, unique elements, the Dalai Lama argues that the key theme of compassion runs through all religions. Tolerance, he implies, is the emphasis of similarities, and learning from each religion in the area(s) where they are similar.

Certainly the Dalai Lama is correct in identifying compassion for others-in both suffering and their joy-as a concern shared by many, if not all, religions. Indeed, one could generalize that most religions share their central moral values. They all possess a version of the Golden Rule; they are concerned about families and the interrelationships of their members; they are against murder and theft, promote equal justice for all, and so on.

Shared moral values might serve as a basis for the peaceful interaction of members of different religions around the world, if it were not for one thing. In each religion, those values are supported and legitimized by what is distinctive to that religion.

In 1997, I created a Web site called Exploring Religions which looked at five world religions. In it, I put forward the idea that each religion identified a core problem with humanity's existence. The religion then laid out a process for individuals that would resolve this human problem, a process that usually involved divine help. In Christianity, the problem was sin; in Buddhism, the human problem was suffering; in Islam, the problem was "forgetfulness" of God (Allah). Each religion shaped its theology and its central practices to help people overcome the human problem and achieve humanity's ultimate goal.

For each religion, the human problem and its solution is the religion's central feature. As Shrek's Donkey might say, it is the innermost core of the onion when all the layers are removed. Moral values form one of the layers, and thus belong to the religion, but they do not comprise its core.

If tolerance among religions is ever going to come about, it will only be when it understands and accepts the differences between the religions. While the Dalai Lama wants to emphasize the similarities-human compassion and other moral values-it is the acceptance of and respect for religious differences that constitutes true tolerance. As Boston University religion professor Stephen Prothero recently observed, "One of the common misconceptions about the world's religions is that they plumb the same depths, ask the same questions. They do not." Accepting that and still getting along is where true tolerance lies.

**Note:**

The Exploring Religions Web site can be found at: [http://uwacadweb.uwyo.edu/religionet/er/](http://uwacadweb.uwyo.edu/religionet/er/).


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