

What Our Religions Mean to Us

Pursuing his interest in inter-faith dialogue, David Paterson invited some of his friends to state briefly what their religions mean to them

This is a bit of an experiment. When the Sea of Faith Network was being launched, back in 1987, I was already deeply involved in interfaith dialogue. I saw my conviction that 'God' is a personification of our deepest insights and longings, as a way of accepting the insights of *all* the faiths, and not just one's own.

Recently, the debate between atheistic, secular humanism on the one hand and 'religions' on the other, has become very public, strident and deeply polarised. The religion opposed is nearly always Fundamentalist Christianity (and sometimes Islam) as if that was the only sort there is, and atheists are assumed to be dogmatic and anti-religious. The charges can be valid on both sides. Much religion *is* like that, and the trap is one that atheists can fall into as well. It seems to me that the Sea of Faith Network has a huge role to play in bridging that gap, insisting on the value of religion while having a clear conviction that God, or gods, though important in the development of human thought, do not have an independent supernatural existence.

My experiment, then, was to ask some of my friends to write 300 words on what their religions meant to them. I hoped that, in answering 'what does your religion mean to you?', the pieces would show deep and often inspiring experiences which do not make truth claims, but offer insights which can be shared. Interfaith dialogue at its best is a way of respecting a wide variety of human understanding, not only between different faiths, but also between different individuals of the same faith, and even different circumstances in the same person.

To share in such a dialogue, we don't ask whether what someone says is 'right' or 'wrong'. In respecting their viewpoint, we add our own, expecting that this too will be respected. Not necessarily agreed with, of course; in fact the opening created by mutual understanding is by far the best way to arrive together at a better, more truthful, more compassionate vision of how we might live our lives.

Christianity by Karin Oldham

My religion defines my way of life. As Christians we have a clear role-model in Jesus pointing away from 'self' and insisting that we base our lives on 'love' of God and our neighbour, resulting in a life of service. The Old Testament is a rich and diverse collection of stories and accounts of events – passed down orally before being written down and collected – describing the understanding of 'God' by the Jewish people at various times in their history. The New Testament gives accounts of the life, death and resurrection of Christ and the subsequent activities of his close followers. These accounts vary according to the writer, but some practical guidelines emerge – the efficacy of prayer, the Lord's prayer itself, the institution of the Lord's Supper. When Christians gather to pray, learn and remember they gain support and understanding from each other and a strong sense of community is built. It is important that this does not become inward-looking. We find difficulty in thinking of God in an abstract fashion and thus picture him/her in human form interacting with us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Just as the interpretation of the Bible has altered with time, so my own understanding is constantly changing. God is no longer the kindly father figure of childhood nor the all-powerful creator, but a latent desire for good within each of us, to which we respond – with the help available in the scriptures, the church and other people. We fall short of the ideal, but are assured of forgiveness and encouraged to continue to respond to the power of the love which surrounds us.

Atheism by Dane Clouston

Atheists believe, not in a god, but in the existence of our wonderful and awe-inspiring universe, as revealed by scientific enquiry, and in the urgent need for us to live together in peace and harmony in this our one and only life. They do not know how it started, but think we may come to greater

scientific understanding of that in the future. Atheists believe that we and all the evolved living species on this planet are on our own, without any self-conscious creator of the universe influencing events. Atheism is living without religion, without a god, with hope and good wishes, rather than prayer.

Many atheists meditate at times and experience the so-called oceanic feeling, a mystical sense of feeling at one with a beautiful universe, which they interpret as a subjective experience adding wonderfully to life, but not to belief in a god. Atheists have a great love of truth, as they see it, seeing supernatural stories as lies dishonestly perpetuated by the religious institutionalisation of the scientific ignorance of great moral teachers in the past. They strongly resent the indoctrination of children in these untruths, in spite of all scientific and common sense. Atheists try to base their lives on the moral Golden Rule, broadly shared by all religions, believing that the moral teachings of the great religious figures were only accepted because they were in line with the secular morality at the time. Secular morality precedes religious morality.

In a global world, atheism is a wonderful bond between people of different cultures, allowing instant fearless and unfettered communication of ideas and thoughts, whereas religions tend to divide people unnecessarily, leading to persecution of those of different faiths. Atheists never persecute people for not being atheists.

Paganism by Katy Jennison

Paganism is being aware that I am the incarnation of the Divine. Paganism is having to work out from first principles whether a proposed action would be a good thing to do or not; and then, when I find it wasn't, picking myself up, trying as far as possible to put it right, and learning lessons from it. Paganism is delighting in the complementarity of a Goddess and a God, and realising that humans of either sex can embody both of them. Paganism is dancing barefoot at dawn in the dew. Paganism is the hard work of embedding symbols in my subconscious in order to use them for the all-important work of spiritual self-transformation. Paganism is seeing the Divine in everything in the world around me;

and that includes the pain and destruction and stupidity as well as the beauty and love and compassion. Paganism is setting up my altar and welcoming the powers of the four Directions, which are also the Elements, which are also the faculties of Intellect, Imagination, Emotion and Sensation, and seeking to balance all of these in myself and my life. Paganism is working with my contra-sexual side, and with my Shadow, and with symbols and metaphors and archetypes and personifications, and with the magic of my imagination. Paganism is rediscovering the Old Gods, and realising that I recognise them, because I knew them when I was a child.

I believe it's important to recite in Hebrew

Judaism by Joel Kaye

My religion, Judaism, is not the same as some other people's Judaism, but when I stand to pray with nine or more other men we become part of a whole. Judaism is a mystery to me. I would not call myself a mystic, yet I do see how metaphor is sometimes the best method of explanation. My understanding of Hebrew is limited, yet that is my language of prayer. I am glad that the texts I use are generally bi-lingual, but I believe it's important to recite in Hebrew. Some rituals of Judaism are clearly related to an agrarian society, settled in a hot, dry climate. Nevertheless, even in the spring in the UK, I will recite the prayer for wind and rain, and will celebrate harvest while living in an economy of plenty with year-round products in the shops. Where do all these observances take me? Certainly not out of the world of other peoples. Only last week we read from the prophet Amos that God loves the Ethiopian as the Israelite, Ethiopians there standing for other peoples. More than that, we are enjoined to 'heal the world'. I know massive efforts go into the material aspect of such work, and Jews participate as everyone else, and yet in our morning prayers, at the end of a list of acts which give you credit, both now and forever, the conclusion is: 'but the study of Torah is equal to them all'. I carry on practising but pondering.

Faith by Saheem Wani from a Muslim perspective

In the name of God, Who is Most Merciful, Most Kind.

Faith, like every other thing that is alive, has a life of its own. It has a journey of its own. Often in our walk of life its path crosses ours. Initially, when that happens, you are unsure whether to hide or share your faith with others and often you choose to stay content with the quiet happiness it brings. You start taking this happiness with you, wherever you go. Carrying it along like your arms or legs or sometimes, something less indisposable like a coat with many pockets or a purse with zipped compartments. This is the first stage, when faith means a new-found happiness, a guide with many answers and an answer to much confusion.

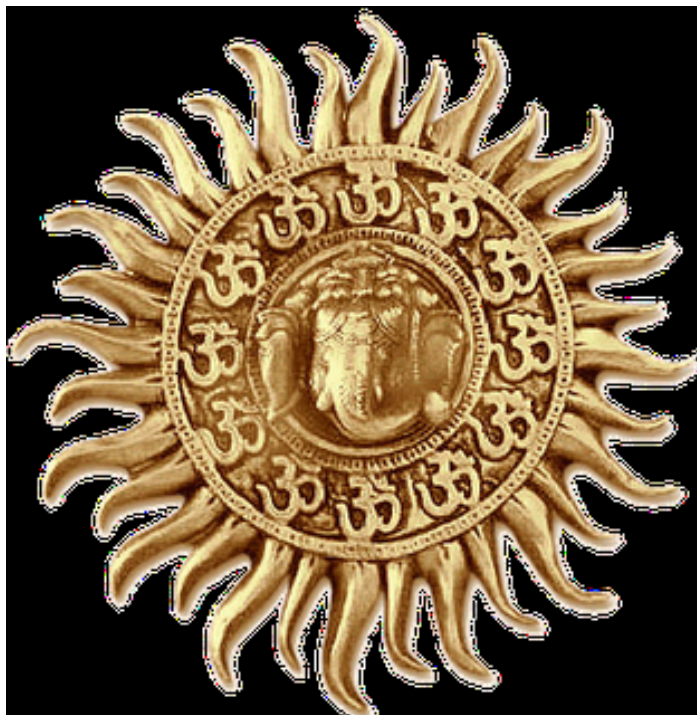
After a considerable amount of time, comes stage two. Your faith grows, falls ill and recuperates. Faith shows you a whole new path to the one you are walking right now. It dares you to unzip the compartments and release what is within. It gently yet persistently pushes you to go beyond the mundane and often pities you for your lack of integrity. You hesitate, torn between the world outside and the one within. But you don't have the strength or conviction to follow faith wherever it takes you. You can't trust it with your life. Not yet. So you resist. And fight.

The 'lovers' stage gone; you argue and fight like a married couple now. And no matter how strong your case is, you always lose. So you zip the purse up and feel a sorrow that the going away of happiness brings. This is the second or struggling to really, really believe stage.

The third and final stage: A few of us who

don't give up in stage two reach stage three. It's no longer what you should and should not do, it's what you can and cannot. You cannot go on lying to yourself, convincing yourself that a wrong path is the right one. You see faith's wisdom. You see how true, how beautiful its journey is. You are convinced because now it all makes perfect sense. Like at the end of a movie where all bad guys die and the good ones live happily ever after. You leave your pointless journey willingly, and join faith in its. Your life, your thoughts, your actions everything becomes a whole, unbroken chain. Consistent in its beauty, its truth. You know where you came from and you know where you're going. And you thank God for giving you a life that you never knew existed. And a friend who'll never leave you, no matter what.

The Advaita Vedanta School of Sanatana Dharma (Hinduism) by Giri Rajagopalan



Religion, for me, is not about God but a journey to find out who am I? During my early childhood religion meant two things. Firstly Festivities where one enjoyed good food, and received new clothes, and secondly meeting relatives. School days were a problem. There was conflict between what the nuns at the catholic schools I went to said about religion and what my family taught me about God.

Like many young adults in the seventies and eighties, religion became unimportant and was replaced by a single question: who am I? The journey to answer this question became my religion and the beginning of my exploration into Advaita philosophy, which is not a philosophy in the traditional Western academic sense, but a way of life/living. It does not deny or affirm the existence of God. It denies variety but does not

affirm unity, it is not monism, pantheism, atheism, agnosticism or any ism. All it does is makes a very bold statement. There is nothing other than Brahman.

Advaita Philosophy teaches that renunciation of my ego and my desire for the fruits of action, whilst performing my duties, will lead me to the realisation that this Brahman is me. The odd thing about my attempts at renouncing ego is that it has brought me closer to God. It is as if I am removing the layers, one at time, covering the God in me. In a world of relationships, my journey is to become compassionate, emotionally calmer and mentally disciplined.

Buddhism Mark Leonard

I'm a Buddhist who doesn't believe he has a religion. Many Buddhists in contemporary western society see Buddhism as an introspective science, believing that consciousness is an embodied emergent phenomenon and that the mind is snuffed out at death. But I feel that this position places causal significance on matter so that the material substrate exists independently and a mental substance arises from it. I don't believe mind is embodied; I believe that experience arises out of embodiment but that mind is non-local. That could be called a spiritual belief, but it doesn't require any religious rite. It does, however, inform meditation practice. I see meditation as a process of investigation into the nature of my own mind; aspects of which are what are conventionally thought of as 'me' and others are not. This can be a social activity, just a communal investigation into the nature of mind via introspection, rather than 'religious'.

Religious rites have two functions. One is to connect to the supernatural, and some find this in Buddhism, but generally this would be thought of as a decadent understanding of practice, or a practice given by monks to laypersons for social reasons. The other is to conduct rites which have religious social functions. Buddhists meet for practice and have institutions of authority and rituals. These rites exist in a cultural context. I don't share a cultural context where religious rites from traditional Buddhist cultures are relevant to my life living in the West.

Sikhism by Balkar Singh Gill

Firstly, I am not sure if 'faith' describes the path I am on. I walk this path, without seeking meaning from it, without a need to understand it. I walk this path, with an innocent joy, I enjoy it. I am not sure if my 'faith' means anything to me, rather my 'faith' is me. If faith is trust, and trust brings surrender, if surrendering to the moment gives birth to new moments; whatever the moment reveals to me, and whatever I reveal to the moment. I seek not meaning from these moments, only to fully experience each one, to let every part of each moment know all of me, for every fibre of me to know each and every moment. This wisdom came to me by the grace of the Guru; this is what I live for, this is what I would die for.

Sikhism by Davinder Singh

My faith is Sikhi faith. In Sikhi faith Sikh means a learner. To me being a Sikh means following my Ten Guroos and the Guroo Granth Sahib Ji's message, sacrificing and surrendering my self to their teachings. We believe we are always at a learning stage, regardless of age, learning about different religions, cultures, aspects of education and history as well of Sikhs' own history. Guroo Nanak Dev Ji's message is crystal clear: true earning, sharing, and meditating on God's name.

If I don't follow these rules and call myself a Sikh then I am not being faithful to myself and my Guroos. When I go to the Gurudwara (Sikh worship place) and bow down to Guroo Granth Sahib Ji (the Holy Book), this means that I accept everything that is in the Book and continue to learn from it. May the Guroo Granth Sahib Ji bless me with his wisdom so I can become pure of the purest. I should lead by example, not preach what I don't practise. Bad deeds can take over any human being very quickly. So I spend more time praying, praying, praying. My heroes are within the Sikhi, my ten Guroos are all martyrs. They have given their life for humanity and for others. This leads me to say Vaheguroo, Vaheguroo, (Vaheguroo means God).

David Paterson is a SOF trustee and runs the Oxford SOF group.