these images of spiritual womanhood were gathered together to make up that Mariology which flowered, together with the ascetic movement, in the fourth and fifth centuries. The culmination of this elevation of spiritual femininity was the doctrine of Mary's Assumption, a characteristic doctrine of this period of the Church's history. The doctrine of the Assumption grew up first in Egypt in the early fourth century, in the cradle of Christian asceticism, and spread from there essentially along with the spread of the ascetical movement. In the doctrine of the Assumption, the "Spiritual Woman" was raised to the very heavens, to take her place beside the Jewish Ancient of Days and his Son Messiah who once had ruled from the Cherubim Throne in exclusive patriarchal splendor. An early precedent for this, however, was set within Judaism itself which used the femininity of the word "spirit" in Hebrew to speak of God's Spirit as the "Eldest daughter of Yahweh," "who sits at his right hand." Christianity inherited this tradition in the form of Sophia piety that also merged with Mariology in the Eastern Church.

But in ascetical Christianity this elevation of spiritual womanhood was done at the price of despising all real, living women, sex and fecundity, and the sublimation of the feminine into an ethereal love object for the sublimated sexual libido of the male ascetic. It should not surprise us, therefore, that Mariology has done little for the liberation of women, concretely and historically, when we realize to what extent it was created by and has always been the spirituality of male ascetics, serving as a substitute fantasized love object for a repressed male sexual libido, thereby guarding this from turning back to any real, physical expression of love with the dangerous daughters of Eve! Yet perhaps the task of Christians today is not merely to vilify the inhumanity of this tradition both to the affections of men and the natural somatic persons and full development of women. Rather we must realize how this ideology fits in with a strange but real struggle of mankind for transcendence of their given situation and the achievements of spiritual personhood, which seems to lie behind this aberrant fear of the body and its feelings. Without discarding these achievements, we today must find out how to pour them back into a full-bodied sense of creation and incarnation, as male and female, who can begin to stand as personalized, autonomous selves and therefore as full persons for each other, not merely against the body, but in and through the body.[27]

[27]A fuller exposition of the material of this chapter is found in my chapter on "Misogynism and Virginal Feminism in the Fathers of the Church," in the book edited by this author, *Images of Women in the Judaea-Christian Tradition* (Simon and Schuster, 1973).

(g) CRITICAL QUESTIONS

1. Do you think the androcentric view of women 2. Do you think that Christianity is misogynist? Pro- that Ruether describes persists to this day? Present vide an argument in support of your answer, evidence to support your answer.

14.6 ARE ALL RELIGIONS TRUE?

Suppose there were only one religion in the world. Let's call it the religion of Bliss. Suppose further that most people were Blissians. They participated in its rituals and conducted their lives, for the most part, according to its teachings. There were some dissenters, some anti-Blissians, but very few.

One consequence of this imaginary situation would probably be that the teachings of Bliss would seem true. There would be no real alternatives, no other religions teaching different doctrines or disputing the truth of Bliss. No one would have to worry about what attitude to take toward rival religions. It would not be necessary, Blissians would have a monopoly on religious truth.

We do not live in such a world. Instead we live in a world with diverse religious traditions that have been and are in conflict. We cannot avoid contact with people of other faiths and the very existence of such religious pluralism calls into question the truth of each. In the diverse religious world in which we live, we must develop some view about how our religion, if we profess one, relates to the others.

One possibility is to claim that only members of our religion will be saved because only our religion teaches the true path to salvation. Truth belongs to us exclusively. Another possibility is to claim that, although other religions teach some truth and although others can be saved, *our* religion teaches the *full* truth. It is the fulfillment of what the others have only dimly glimpsed. This sort of *inclusivism* seems more charitable than the *exclusive attitude,* but it is not as charitable as a third possibility, which is often called *pluralism.* According to pluralism, all religions are valid paths to salvation.

If we adopt a pluralistic attitude, we need some sort of explanation of why the teachings of all these valid religions appear so different and often seem to conflict. One possibility is to argue that the differences are real but relate to trivial matters. On important issues there is basic agreement. Another possibility is to argue that the differences are not real but apparent. On the surface the different religions seem to contradict each other, but when properly understood, they do not. Or one might admit that these are real differences, even on important matters, but claim that these differences do not affect the salvific value of each of the great traditions.

In addition to the attitudes of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism, one might argue that today religions interpenetrate one another. Religions no longer exist isolated from one another, but in mutual relationship. What others believe and do helps us to better understand our own religions.

We live, as it were, in a religious supermarket with competing brand names and products. Suppose we are shopping. How do we decide what to buy? Do we judge all the other religions by the standards of our own religion? Do we judge the other religions by their own standards? Do we develop some neutral set of rational criteria that allow us to judge impartially and fairly the truth claims of each?

Perhaps this whole business of judging the truth of other religions is misguided. Perhaps it simply cannot be done or, even if it could, it misses the point. Perhaps we should concentrate on cooperation among the various religions on important moral and social issues, like helping the poor and stopping violence and war.

Maybe the question, “Are all religions true?” is misleading. It is certainly ambiguous. Does it mean that the teachings of the various refigions are trae? Does it mean that the rituals and rites practiced by the various religions are effective? Does it mean that the social organizations of the various religions are conducive to building community? If we restrict its meaning only to the teachings, does the question mean that before a religion is true all (every single one) of its teachings (however trivial) must be true? Further, the question seems to presuppose that there is some sort of religious truth that humans are capable of discovering. Perhaps there is no such thing as objective, absolute truth. What we call “truth” is nothing more than human constructions and conventions that reflect cultural values and biases. Perhaps truth is localized and relative to particular historical periods. After all, many different religions and societies have managed to flourish and survive on this planet

while responding to the problems of human existence in very different ways. Perhaps what works for each is the only truth there is.*

His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama (born in 1935 as Tenzin Gyatso) is both the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism and the political leader of the Tibetan people. He was forced into exile by the invasion and annexation of Tibet by the Chinese in 1959. Since then he has traveled the world supporting his people, teaching the precepts of Buddhism, and seeking independence for his homeland. He likes to say that he is no more than "a simple Buddhist monk." This "simple monk" won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989.

In his book, *Freedom in Exile: The Autobiography of the Dalai Lama* (HarperCollins, 1990), he defines religion as follows:

> What is religion? As far as I am concerned, any deed done with good motivation is a religious act. On the other hand, a gathering of people in a temple or church who do not have good motivation are not performing a religious act when they pray together....**

'This introductor)' material comes from Gary E. Kessler, *Philosophy of Religion: Toward a Global Perspective* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1999), pp. 529-530. Copyright © 1999 by Wadsworth Publishing Company. Reprinted by permission.
**For more on Tibetan Buddhism, see Gary E. Kessler, *Ways of Being Religious* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Company, 2000).

0 READING QUESTIONS

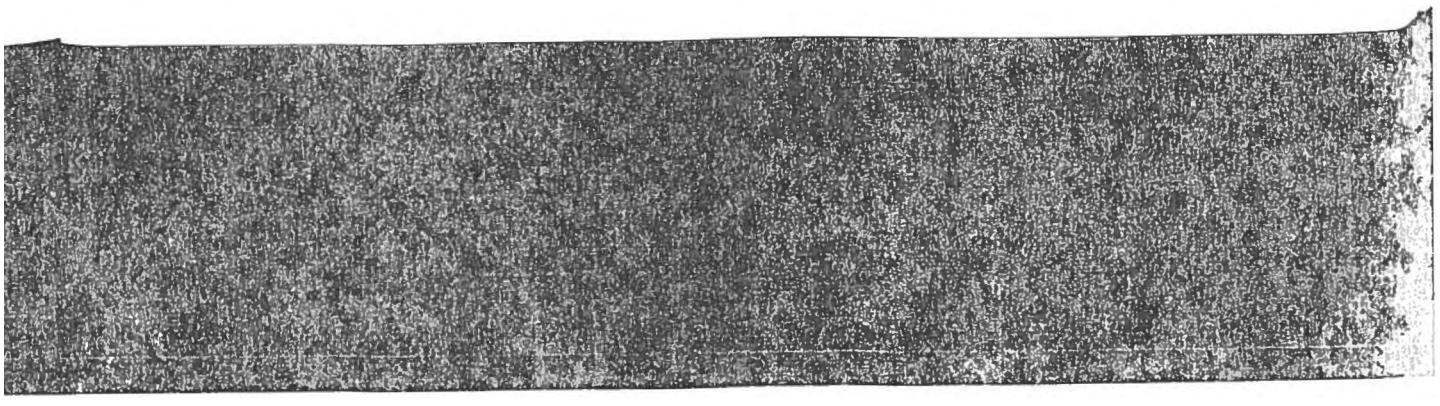
1. What are the two primary sources of conflict related to religion?
2. Why does the Dalai Lama consider religion relevant to the modern world?
3. What is the most significant obstruction to interreligious harmony?
4. Why is dialogue among religions so important? What else is needed in order to overcome religious conflict?
5. How does the Dalai Lama propose to deal with the problems that arise from the fact that different religions all claim to be the one "true" religion?

The Role of Religion in Modern Society

THE DALAI LAMA

It is a sad fact of human history that religion has been a major source of conflict. Even today, individuals are killed, communities destroyed, and societies destabilized as a result of religious bigotry and hatred. It is no wonder that many question the place of religion in human society. Yet when we think carefully, we find that conflict in the name of religion arises from two principal sources. There is that which arises simply as a result of religious diversity—the doctrinal, cultural, and practical differences between one religion and another. Then there is the conflict that

From His Holiness the Dalai Lama, *Ethics for a New Millennium* (New York: Riverhead Books), pp. 219-231. Copyright © 1999 by His Holiness The Dalai Lama. Reprinted by permission.



arises in the context of political, economic, and other factors, mainly at the institutional level. Interreligious harmony is the key to overcoming conflict of the first sort. In the case of the second, some other solution must be found. Secularization and in particular the separation of the religious hierarchy from the institutions of the state may go some way to reducing such institutional problems. Our concern in this chapter is with interreligious harmony, however.

This is an important aspect of what I have called universal responsibility. But before examining the matter in detail, it is perhaps worth considering the question of whether religion is really relevant in the modern world. Many people argue that it is not. Now I have observed that religious belief is not a pre-condition either of ethical conduct or of happiness itself. I have also suggested that whether a person practices religion or not, the spiritual qualities of love and compassion, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, humility, and so on are indispensable. At the same time, I should make it clear that I believe that these are most easily and effectively developed within the context of religious practice. I also believe that when an individual sincerely practices religion, that individual will benefit enormously.

People who have developed a firm faith, grounded in understanding and rooted in daily practice, are in general much better at coping with adversity than those who have not. I am convinced, therefore, that religion has enormous potential to benefit humanity. Properly employed, it is an extremely effective instrument for establishing human happiness. In particular, it can play a leading role in encouraging people to develop a sense of responsibility toward others and of the need to be ethically disciplined.

On these grounds, therefore, I believe that religion is still relevant today. But consider this too: some years ago, the body of a Stone Age man was recovered from the ice of the European Alps. Despite being more than five thousand years old, it was perfectly preserved. Even its clothes were largely intact. I remember thinking at the time that were it possible to bring this individual back to life for a day, we would find that we have much in common with him. No doubt we would find that he too was concerned for his family and loved ones, for his health and so on. Differences of culture and expression notwithstanding, we would still be able to identify with one another on the level of feeling. And there could be no reason to suppose any less concern with finding happiness and avoiding suffering on his part than on ours. If religion, with its emphasis on overcoming suffering through the practice of ethical discipline and cultivation of love and compassion, can be conceived of as relevant in the past, it is hard to see why it should not be equally so today. Granted that in the past the value of religion may have been more obvious in that human suffering was more explicit due to the lack of modern facilities. But because we humans still suffer, albeit today this is experienced more internally as mental and emotional affliction, and because religion in addition to its salvific truth claims is concerned to help us overcome suffering, surely it must still be relevant.

How then might we bring about the harmony that is necessary to overcome interreligious conflict? As in the case of individuals engaged in the discipline of restraining their response to negative thoughts and emotions and cultivating spiritual qualities, the key lies in developing understanding. We must first identify the factors that obstruct it. Then we must find ways to overcome them.

Perhaps the most significant obstruction to interreligious harmony is lack of appreciation of the value of others' faith traditions. Until comparatively recently, communication between different cultures, even different communities, was slow or nonexistent. For this reason, sympathy for other faith traditions was not necessarily very important—except of course where members of different religious lived side by side. But this attitude is no longer viable. In today's increasingly complex and interdependent world, we are compelled to acknowledge the existence of other cultures, different ethnic groups, and, of course, other religious faiths. Whether we like it or not, most of us now experience this diversity on a daily basis.

I believe that the best way to overcome ignorance and bring about understanding is through dialogue with members of other faith traditions. This I see occurring in a number of different ways. Discussions among scholars in which the convergence and perhaps more importantly die

divergence between different faith traditions are explored and appreciated are very valuable. On another level, it is helpful when there are encounters between ordinary but practicing followers of different religions in which each shares their experiences. This is perhaps the most effective way of appreciating others' teachings. In my own case, for example, my meetings with the late Thomas Merton, a Catholic monk of the Cistercian order, were deeply inspiring. They helped me develop a profound admiration for the teachings of Christianity. I also feel that occasional meetings between religious leaders joining together to pray for a common cause are extremely usefül. The gathering at Assissi in Italy in 1986, when representatives of the world's major religions gathered to pray for peace, was, I believe, tremendously beneficial to many religious believers insofar as it symbolized the solidarity and a commitment to peace of all those talcing part.

Finally, I feel that the practice of members of different faith traditions going on joint pilgrimages together can be very helpfill. It was in this spirit that in 1993 I went to Lourdes, and then to Jerusalem, a site holy to three of the world's great religions. I have also paid visits to various Hindu, Islamic, Jain, and Sikh shrines both in India and abroad. More recently following a seminar devoted to discussing and practicing meditation in the Christian and Buddhist traditions, I joined an historic pilgrimage of practitioners of both traditions in a program of prayers, meditation, and dialogue under the Bodhi tree at Bodh Gaya in India. This is one of Buddhism's most important shrines.

When exchanges like these occur, followers of one tradition will find that, just as in the case of their own, the teachings of others' faiths are a source both of spiritual inspiration and of ethical guidance to their followers. It will also become clear that irrespective of doctrinal and other differences, all the major world religions are concerned with helping individuals to become good human beings. All emphasize love and compassion, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, humility, and so on, and ail are capable of helping individuals to develop these. Moreover, the example given by the founders of each major religion clearly demonstrates a concern for helping others find happiness through developing these qualities. So far as their own lives were concerned, each conducted themselves with great simplicity. Ethical discipline and love for all others was the hallmark of their lives. They did not live luxuriously like emperors and kings. Instead, they voluntarily accepted suffering—without consideration of the hardships involved—in order to benefit humanity as a whole. In their teachings, all placed special emphasis on developing love and compassion and renouncing selfish desires. And each of them called on us to transform our hearts and minds. Indeed, whether we have faith or not, all are worthy of our profound admiration.

At the same time as engaging in dialogue with followers of other religions, we must, of course, implement in our daily life the teachings of our own religion. Once we have experienced the benefit of love and compassion, and of ethical disci pline, we will easily recognize the value of others' teachings. But for this, it is essential to realize that religious practice entails a lot more than merely saying, "I believe" or, as in Buddhism, "I talte refiige." There is also more to it than just visiting temples, or shrines, or churches. And taking reli gious teachings is of little benefit if they do not enter the heart but remain at the level of intellect alone. Simply relying on faith without understand ing and without implementation is of limited value. I often tell Tibetans that carrying a *mala* (something like a rosary) does not make a person a genuine religious practitioner. The efforts we make sincerely to transform ourselves spiritually are what make us genuine religious practitioners.

We come to see the overriding importance of genuine practice when we recognize that, along with ignorance, individuals' unhealthy relationships with their beliefs is the other major factor in religious disharmony. Far from applying the teachings of their religion in our personal lives, we have a tendency to use them to reinforce our self-centered attitudes. We relate to our religion as something we own or as a label that separates us from others. Surely this is misguided? Instead of using the nectar of religion to purify the poisonous elements of our hearts and minds, there is a danger when we think like this of using these negative elements to poison the nectar of religion.

Yet we must acknowledge that this reflects another problem, one which is implicit in all religions. I refer to the claims each has of being the one "true" religion. How are we to resolve this difficulty? It is true that from the point of view of the individual practitioner, it is essential to have a single pointed commitment to one's own faith. It is also true that this depends on the deep conviction that one's own path is the sole mediator of truth. But at the same time, we have to find some means of reconciling this belief with the reality of a multiplicity of similar claims. In practical terms, this involves individual practitioners finding a way at least to accept the validity of the teachings of other religions while maintaining a wholehearted commitment to their own. As far as the validity of the metaphysical truth claims of a given religion is concerned, that is of course the internal business of that particular tradition.

In my own case, I am convinced that Buddhism provides me with the most effective framework within which to situate my efforts to develop spiritually through cultivating love and compassion. At the same time, I must acknowledge that while Buddhism represents the best path for me—that is, it suits my character, my temperament, my inclinations, and my cultural background—the same will be true of Christianity for Christians. For them, Christianity is the best way. On the basis of my conviction, I cannot, therefore, say that Buddhism is best for everyone.

I sometimes think of rehgion in terms of medicine for the human spirit. Independent of its usage and suitability to a particular individual in a particular condition, we really cannot judge a medicine's efficacy. We are not justified in saying this medicine is very good because of such and such ingredients. If you take the patient and the medicine's effect on that person out of the equation, it hardly makes sense. What is relevant is to say that in the case of this particular patient with its particular illness, this medicine is the most effective. Similarly with different religious traditions, we can say that this one is most effective for this particular individual. But it is unhelpfiil to try to argue on the basis of philosophy or metaphysics that one religion is better than another. The important thing is surely its effectiveness in individual cases.

My way to resolve the seeming contradiction between each religion's claim to "one truth and one religion" and the reality of the multiplicity of faiths is thus to understand that in the case of a single individual, there can indeed be only one truth, one religion. However, from the perspective of human society at large, we must accept the concept of "many truths, many religions." To continue with our medical analogy, in the case of one particular patient, the suitable medicine is in fact the one medicine. But clearly that does not mean that there may not be other medicines suitable to other patients.

To my way of thinking, the diversity that exists among the various religious traditions is enormously enriching. There is thus no need to try to find ways of saying that ultimately all religions are the same. They are similar in that they all emphasize the indispensability of love and compassion in the context of ethical discipline. But to say this is not to say that they are all essentially one. The contradictory understanding of creation and beginninglessness articulated by Buddhism, Christianity, and Hinduism, for example, means that in the end we have to part company when it comes to metaphysical claims, in spite of the many practical similarities that undoubtedly exist. These contradictions may not be very important in the beginning stages of religious practice. But as we advance along the path of one tradition or another, we are compelled at some point to acknowledge fiindamental differences. For example, the concept of rebirth in Buddhism and various other ancient Indian traditions may turn out to be incompatible with the Christian idea of salvation. This need not be a cause for dismay, however. Even within Buddhism itself, in the realm of metaphysics there are diametrically opposing views. At the very least, such diversity means that we have different frameworks within which to locate ethical discipline and the development of spiritual values. That is why I do not advocate a super or a new world religion. It would mean that we would lose the unique characteristics of the different faith traditions.

Some people, it is true, hold that the Buddhist concept of *shunyata,* or emptiness, is ultimately the same as certain approaches to understanding

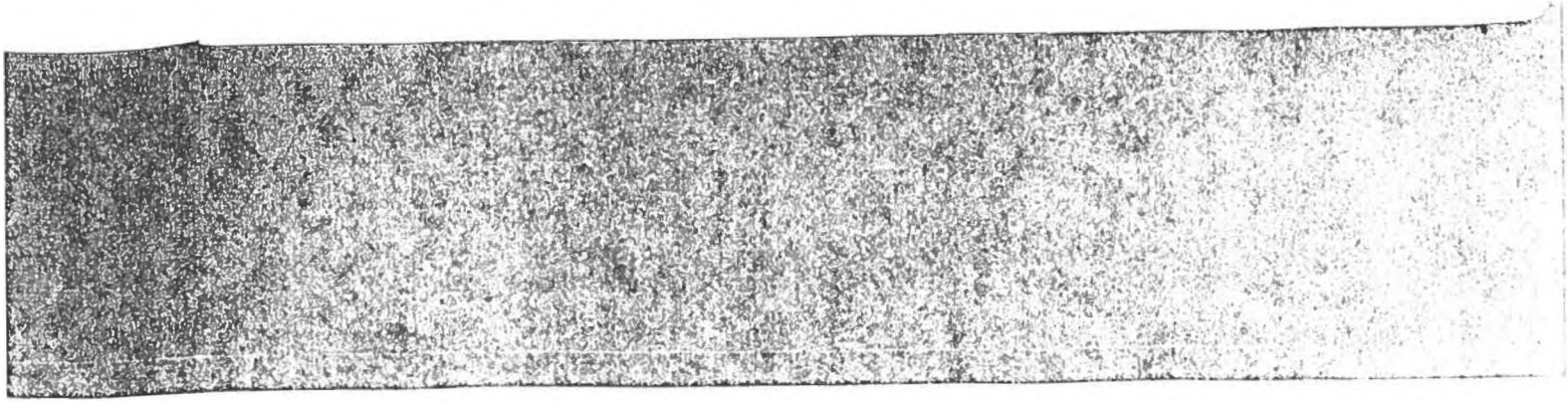
the concept of God. Nevertheless, there remain difficulties with this. The first is that while of course wc can interpret these concepts, to what extent can we be faithful to the original teachings if wc do so? There are compelling similarities between the Mahayana Buddhist concept of *Dhcir-makaya*, *Sambogakaya*, and *Nirmanakaya* and the Christian trinity of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But to say, on the basis of this, that Buddhism and Christianity are ultimately the same is to go a bit far, I think! As an old Tibetan saying goes, we must beware of trying to put a yak's head on a sheep's body—or vice versa.

What is required instead is that we develop a genuine sense of religious pluralism in spite of the different claims of different faith traditions. This is especially true if we are serious in our respect for human rights as a universal principle. In this regard, I find the concept of a world parliament of religions very appealing. To begin with, the word "parliament" conveys a sense of democracy, while the plural "religions" underlines the importance of the principle of a multiplicity of faith traditions. The truly pluralist perspective on religion which the idea of such a parliament suggests could, I believe, be of great help. It would avoid the extremes of religious bigotry on the one hand, and the urge toward unnecessary syncretism on the other.

Connected with this issue of interreligious harmony, I should perhaps say something about religious conversion. This is a question which must be taken extremely seriously. It is essential to realize that the mere fact of conversion alone will not make an individual a better person, that is to say, a more disciplined, a more compassionate, and a warm-hearted person. Much more helpful, therefore, is for the individual to concentrate on transforming themselves spiritually through the practice of restraint, virtue, and compassion. To the extent that the insights or practices of other religions are useful or relevant to our own faith, it is valuable to learn from others. In some cases, it may even be helpfill to adopt certain of them. Yet when this is done wisely, we can remain firmly committed to our own faith. This way is best because it carries with it no danger of confusion, especially with respect to the different ways of life that tend to go with different faith traditions. Given the diversity to be found among individual human beings, it is of course bound to be the case that out of many millions of practitioners of a particular religion, a handfill will find that another religion's approach to ethics and spiritual development is more satisfactory. For some, the concept of rebirth and karma will seem highly effective in inspiring the aspiration to develop love and compassion within the context of responsibility. For others, the concept of a transcendent, loving creator will come to seem more so. In such circumstances, it is crucial for those individuals to question themselves again and again. They must ask, "Am I attracted to this other religion for the right reasons? Is it merely the cultural and ritual aspects that are appealing? Or is it the essential teachings? Do I suppose that if I convert to this new religion it will be less demanding than my present one?" I say this because it has often struck me that when people do convert to a religion outside their own heritage, quite often they adopt certain superficial aspects of the culture to which their new faith belongs. But their practice may not go very much deeper than that.

In the case of a person who decides after a process of long and mature reflection to adopt a different religion, it is very important that they remember the positive contribution to humanity of each religious tradition. The danger is that the individual may, in seeking to justify their decision to others, criticize their previous faith. It is essential to avoid this. Just because that tradition is no long effective in the case of one individual does not mean it is no longer of benefit to humanity. On the contrary, we can be certain that it has been an inspiration to millions of people in the past, that it inspires millions today, and that it will inspire millions in the path of love and compassion in the future.

The important point to keep in mind is that ultimately the whole purpose of religion is to facilitate love and compassion, patience, tolerance, humility, forgiveness, and so on. If we neglect these, changing our religion will be of no help. In the same way, even if we are fervent believers in our own faith, it will avail us nothing if we neglect to implement these qualities in our daily



lives. Such a believer is no better off than a patient with some fatal illness who merely reads a medical treatise but fails to undertalte the treatment prescribed.

Moreover, if we who are practitioners of religion are not compassionate and disciplined, how can we expect it of others? If we can establish genuine harmony derived from mutual respect and understanding, religion has enormous potential to speak with authority on such vital moral questions as peace and disarmament, social and political justice, the natural environment, and many other matters affecting all humanity. But until we put our own spiritual teachings into practice, we will never be taken seriously. And this means, among other things, setting a good example through developing good relations with other faith traditions.

Q CRITICAL QUESTIONS

1. Do you agree that "it is unhelpful to try to argue on the basis of philosophy or metaphysics that one religion is better than another"? Why, or why not?
2. Do you think that it is important to develop a "genuine sense of religious pluralism"? Present reasons in support of your answer.
3. What, from the Dalai Lama's point of view, is the "whole purpose of religion"? Do you agree? Why, or why not?

14.7 ARE ALL RELIGIONS THE SAME?

You may have had conversations with friends or relatives about whether all religions are essentially alilce. If you have, the discussion sooner or later probably got around to the issue of in what ways they may or may not be essentially the same. Someone might have said, "Oh, all of them believe in God." And someone else might have asserted that they basically teach the same moral code. Perhaps someone else claimed they are the same in some respects and not in others. Maybe some used the popular image of a mountain with one summit but different religious paths leading to that summit. Whatever positions people staked out about religious sameness and difference, all most likely agreed that religious tolerance was a good thing and deplored religious intolerance.

We tend to think that if we acknowledge the sameness or near sameness of all religions, then we are promoting religious tolerance, which is something the world sorely needs in an age when religious conflict can too quickly turn into religious violence. Of course we know that there is little sense in being asked to tolerate a re ligion very much like your own. That is easy. Tolerance becomes a virtue only when it requires you to grant the same rights and privileges as you wish granted to your own religion to other religions that are very different from your own.

One difficulty that many face when they get into conversations with others about religion is ignorance. Many Americans know very little about religions other than Christianity and Judaism. They also know very little about the differences within their own religious traditions. It is easy to be either tolerant or intolerant with respect to religions you know next to nothing about beyond their name.

Stephan Prothero, Professor of Religion at Boston University and author of the best selling book, *Religious Literacy*, is the author of the next selection taken from the introduction to his latest book, *God is Not One*. He argues that claims about the sameness of all religions mask the many differences that exist. He also argues that it is dangerous to deny religious differences. Why? Read and see.