

Probing the Religious Dimension

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PROBING THE RELIGIOUS DIMENSION

can awareness of varieties of religious temperament foster interfaith dialogue?

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How would you answer this question?

How much confidence do you have in each of these alternative sources of knowledge about the world?

- (a) direct experience of the world
- (b) received beliefs about the world
- (c) personal intuition

In the same way as your neighbour, or even another member of your family?

In this era of ethnic tensions and global unrest, the desirability of interfaith dialogue should be obvious. Although ecumenism is well established within the Christian community, and Christians and Jews have been in dialogue since World War II, interfaith dialogue between most of the major faith traditions (and numerous minor ones) is sporadic at best. It is important for members of the various faith traditions to be aware of what they have in common with each other, their common humanity as well as their shared interests.

It was in the course of planning a presentation on my own faith tradition (Unitarianism) to an interfaith study group (sponsored by a liberal Catholic organization) that I hit upon the idea of religious temperament as a context for interfaith dialogue. It occurred to me that a partial explanation for the wide diversity among religious faiths in a pluralistic society is individual religious temperament. By religious temperament I am not referring to the hoary Four Temperaments typology popularized in recent years by the Christian Evangelical writers Tim LaHaye and Florence Littauer. By religious temperament I mean the general outlook and attitudes that underlie a person's particular religious beliefs, and I don't assume the validity of any particular typology of temperament.

So why not simply examine those particular beliefs directly in a group setting? As I see it, attempting to examine and compare people's disparate religious beliefs is more likely to result in defensiveness and reluctance to participate than in empathy and enlightenment. Most people are not theologians and become uneasy when asked simply to explain, much less to justify, their particular beliefs to someone who doesn't share them. With the guidance of a skilled facilitator, however, people's general outlook and attitudes can be reviewed in a more emotionally neutral environment that can lead to a focus on commonalities instead of differences.

So I have developed an Inventory of twenty elements of religious temperament constructed in an easy-to-answer format. Here is how it could be used. An interfaith adult program would consist of one or several sessions focussed on understanding the group members' outlooks and underlying attitudes with the objective of discovering their common human needs and experiences. The first task would be for the group to receive individual copies of the Inventory and to take a few minutes to complete them.



Then the group would be asked to select some of the Inventory items for use as discussion starters, the number selected depending on the available time. I would suggest allocating 20-30 minutes for each Inventory item selected, though this parameter will differ greatly from one group to another. Groups should be held to optimum dialogue size, no more than 4 people in each. Larger workshop groups should be subdivided into smaller breakout groups.

The group leader or facilitator is a critical link in the dialogue (note: not “discussion”) process, and at this point in the proceedings the ground rules for dialogue need to be made clear. The purpose of this program is mutual enlightenment through increased understanding of one’s own views as well as the views of others. The conversation is to proceed in an environment of mutual respect, hence there is a prohibition on denigrating others’ views, ad hominem remarks, and explicit proselytizing. Neither aggressiveness nor hostile expression have a place here. Most questions are asked for the sake of clarification because it is understanding, not verbal conquest, that is each participant’s goal. Treat the person who is speaking as a teacher who has something of value to offer. These are conditions of “respectful dialogue” in an interfaith context.

It is acceptable for the participants to ask personal questions as long as they are not designed to put other participants down. For example: “Do you recall the circumstances in which you developed that viewpoint? Was it gradual, or did it develop in response to a particular event (the ‘road to Damascus effect’)?” Or, “How does that [indicated] point of view affect your life? What difference do you think it would make to your life if your point of view was the opposite of the one you actually hold?” The facilitator obtains the group’s assent to the ground rules and then visits the breakout groups to moderate the dialogue just enough to keep it going in a respectful atmosphere while keeping his or her intervention to a minimum. Even within these constraints, a wide ranging conversation can take place that meets all the tests of civility while providing plenty of opportunity for discovery and edification.

At present, there is no facilitator’s manual. That project is in the works and, it is hoped, will become available sometime in 2006. In the meantime, the reader is encouraged to use the Religious Temperament Inventory in interfaith settings, as described above. I would be most grateful for feedback on your experiences as well as any advice you may have on the characteristics and contents of a facilitator’s manual. And if you think this Inventory has overlooked an important attitude or outlook underlying one’s religious orientation, please advise me. My e-mail address is dccampbell@sympatico.ca. More general commentary can be directed to North Wind Press.

*“The most practical and important thing about someone is his
[sic] view of the universe.” -- G.K. Chesterton*



RELIGIOUS TEMPERAMENT INVENTORY

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A partial explanation for the wide diversity among religious faiths in a pluralistic society is individual religious temperament. This inventory explores some of that temperament's dimensions. The survey assesses attitudes, not knowledge, so there are no "correct" answers. **After reading the instructions for each item, please respond promptly. It is your initial impressions that count.**

1. The origin of authority for your religious and moral commitment may be either External or Internal (or degrees of both). Place an "X" somewhere along the line below representing your own relative reliance on the two different sources of authority.

Where does religious and moral authority come from?

INTERNAL

(e.g., personal experience, conscience, reason, intuition)

.....

EXTERNAL

(e.g., holy scripture, the Church, a guru, a charismatic leader)

2. Three alternative sources of knowledge about the world are listed below. (In this context, "the world" means everything outside of yourself: the natural environment, all life, human behaviour and institutions, etc.)

You have 10 points to divide among these three sources, reflecting your relative confidence in each source. You may assign a weight of 0 points to one or two sources, if that reflects your low confidence in them. In any case, do not assign more than 10 points in total.

How much confidence do you have in each of these alternative sources of knowledge about the world?

Weight (points)

_____ DIRECT EXPERIENCE OF THE WORLD (including both one's own and others' experience, human history)

_____ RECEIVED BELIEFS ABOUT THE WORLD (e.g., from the Church, a holy book, a religious leader, traditional beliefs embedded in your culture)

_____ PERSONAL INTUITION, instinct, insight, mystical experience

10 [Total points]



3. To what extent do you see your life and the world as containing truly random events, as opposed to being completely determined? Place an "X" in the box below representing your judgment as to whether your life and the world are subject to randomness or are completely determined (or divinely planned).

Is there real, unexplainable randomness in life?

- YES, our life contains some truly random, unexplainable events.
- NO, everything in our life is determined (or divinely planned).

4. Moral judgements and decisions can be seen as being simple and clear-cut or complex and uncertain. Place an "X" in the one box below that best reflects your view of the moral dimension of life, even if you are not wholly in agreement with the statement you prefer.

How clear-cut and straightforward are moral judgements and decisions?

- Basically, moral decisions are pretty straightforward if you just abide by the established moral principles.
- Sometimes moral decisions are difficult to make because the rules seem to conflict with each other.
- Moral decisions often seem to depend on the particular ^{EXTERNAL} circumstances of a situation that differ even among outwardly similar cases (e.g., holy scripture, the Church, a guru, a charismatic leader)
- Moral decisions are usually easy to make because they're just based on personal opinion, anyway.

5. Our earthly life can be seen as filled with hope and possibility or as fundamentally disappointing and incomplete. Place an "X" on the line below representing your relative confidence in this earthly life. Note: This judgment should reflect your underlying view, not simply your mood at this moment.

Is this earthly life fundamentally hopeful or hopeless?

HOPEFUL HOPELESS
 upbeat, rewarding, well worth living frustrating, a torment, a downer

6. Is religion so sacred and personal that it should escape secular study? Place an "X" in the box below that best reflects your opinion on that matter.

Religion is too sacred and personal to be an appropriate object of scientific study.

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Agree strongly	Agree somewhat	Can't decide	Disagree somewhat	Disagree strongly

7. How does faith (on the one hand) and non-spiritual understanding (on the other) compare as supports for your sense of security in this world? Place an "X" on the line below that represents the relative importance of your faith and your non-spiritual understanding of the world in sustaining your sense of security in life.

My sense of security in the world is sustained by:

The certainty Of God's love and abiding Presence	----->	My non-spiritual understanding of how the world works
---	--------	--

8. We human beings are both similar to AND different from each other. But which of those characteristics is more important? Place an "X" on the line below that represents the relative importance of human similarity and difference.

Fundamentally, how important are our similarities compared to our differences?

Similarities are more important	----->	Differences are more important
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9. Religious faith or commitment has a number of potential benefits. Which of these is most important for you? Place an “X” in the one box below which best reflects your own priorities. (If “Other”, please specify briefly.)

The most important benefit of religious faith or commitment for me is:

- The prospect of eternal salvation.
- Receiving instructions for living.
- Being a member of a religious community.
- The feeling of spiritual security.
- The encouragement to reflect on life’s difficult questions.
- Insight into myself and encouragement of my personal growth.
- Renewal of my ability to meet life’s challenges.
- Deepening my sense of connection with my fellow humans, nature and the world.
- Other (specify): _____

10. Acting morally may involve following explicit rules (such as the Ten Commandments), applying general principles (such as the Golden Rule), anticipating likely consequences of one’s actions, or some combination of these three. Place an “X” in the one box below that best reflects your view of the nature of moral behaviour, even if you are not wholly in agreement with the statement you select.

What is involved in acting morally?

- (a) Moral behaviour consists in following explicit rules that cover each situation.
- (b) Moral behaviour consists in applying general principles to each situation as it arises.
- (c) Moral behaviour involves an assessment of the likely outcomes of each option followed by the selection of the best option.
- (d) Moral behaviour involves a combination of (a) and (b).
- (e) Moral behaviour involves a combination of (b) and (c).
- (f) Moral behaviour consists in following the dictates of one’s conscience.
- (g) The morality of behaviour is not an issue.



11. There are many possible spiritual paths. Place an "X" in the one box below that best describes your current situation, even if you are not wholly in agreement with its wording.

- I am still in the faith group that I was raised in, and I do not expect to leave it.
- I am still in the faith group that I was raised in, but I am open to change.
- I am in a faith group different from the one I was raised in, and I am reasonably satisfied with my current faith.
- I am in a faith group different from the one I was raised in, but I am open to change again.
- I am in the process of looking for a suitable faith group.
- I am not drawn toward being a member of any faith group.

12. There is a wide divergence of views concerning the essence of true religious faith. A number of these views are listed below. Rank in order the alternatives in the following list to reflect your own views, using "1" for the highest-ranked alternative, "2" for the second-highest, and so on until you have ranked all the alternatives in the list.

For me, the essence of true religious faith is:

Rank Order

- _____ Self-discipline or obedience
- _____ Compassion and generosity of spirit
- _____ Steadfast, unreserved belief
- _____ Serenity and peace of mind
- _____ Dedication to social justice
- _____ Courage to live by one's moral principles.

13. Are human beings inherently good, bad, or neutral? Place an "X" in the box below that best represents your opinion on this question.

In my view, human beings are inherently:

- Good
- Bad
- Neutral
- Both good and bad (but not neutral)



14. There are various possible religious or moral objectives toward which we strive throughout our lives. Place an "X" in the one box below representing the most important objective of our religious or moral striving. (If "Other", please specify briefly.)

Our religious or moral striving should focus primarily on:

- Achievement of profound serenity and enlightenment.
- Continuing growth of moral character.
- Developing a steadfast faith.
- Becoming, and remaining, worthy in the eyes of God.
- Making wise and just choices.
- Other (specify): _____

15. We human beings are distinctive in many ways. From the list below, select the one most important characteristic of human beings. (If "Other", please specify briefly.)

The single most important characteristic of human beings is:

- The fact that we make moral choices.
- Our differences from the animals.
- Our ability to reason.
- Our relationship to God.
- Our immortal souls.
- Our ability to love.
- Other (specify): _____

16. How much confidence do you have, overall, in the scientific approach to understanding and explaining the world? Place an "X" in the box below that best represents your degree of confidence.

The degree of confidence I have in the scientific approach to understanding the world is:

- | | | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| No
Confidence | Not Much
Confidence | Moderate
Confidence | Considerable
Confidence | High
Confidence |



17. In a situation in which human law (the civil law) apparently conflicts with a higher or divine law (as you understand it), how would you be most likely to resolve this conflict? Place an "X" in the one box below which best reflects your most likely response. (If "Other", please specify briefly.)

- In most cases, I would follow the higher law in preference to the civil law.
- I would try to reconcile the two apparently conflicting laws, but would comply with the civil law if I couldn't reconcile them.
- In most cases, I would follow the civil law.
- Other (specify): _____

18. It is natural for us to have some feelings of responsibility to others, but are these "responsibilities" obligations expected of us or commitments freely chosen, or some portion of each? Place an "X" on the line below reflecting your opinion on that question.

The responsibilities that we feel we have toward our family and the community are:

Obligations (expected of us) +-----+ Commitments (freely chosen)

19. What is the place of doubt in religious faith? Place an "X" in the one box below which best reflects your view, even if you are not wholly in agreement with the wording. (If "Other", please specify briefly.)

What is the place of doubt in religious faith?

- There is no acceptable place for doubt in a true religious faith.
- Doubt is a common failing, but it needs to be overcome through faith.
- Some doubt is both normal and acceptable within a mature religious faith.
- A mature religious faith should always contain an element of doubt.
- Other (specify): _____

20. Is religion a divine creation or a human development? Place an "X" in the one box below that best reflects your opinion on that question.

What is the ultimate source of religion on earth?

- Religion is a divine institution created by God to serve His purposes.
- Religion is a human institution that has developed over time to meet human needs.



* * *

Note: Items 1 and 2 were inspired by the work of the Rev. William R. Jones, emeritus professor of religious studies, Florida State University. The author is grateful for this inspiration.

If you are curious about how each question is categorized, below is the list I created:

Religious Temperament Inventory Dimensions

No.

1. – The Locus of Religious and Moral Authority
2. – Confidence in Alternative Sources of Knowledge About the World
3. – Tolerance for Explanatory Uncertainty
4. – Tolerance for Moral Ambiguity
5. – Confidence in This Life
6. – The Sacredness of Religion
7. – Faith as a Source of Security
8. – The Significance of Human Similarities and Differences
9. – The Benefits of Religious Faith
10. – The Nature of Moral Behaviour
11. – Current Place on One's Spiritual Journey
12. – The Essence of True Religious Faith
13. – The Moral Predisposition of Humankind
14. – The Objects of Religious Striving
15. – The Fundamental Characteristic of Human Beings
16. – Confidence in the Scientific Understanding of the World
17. – The Primacy of God's Law
18. – Obligation vs. Commitment
19. – The Place of Doubt
20. – The Source of Religion



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