

A Survey of the Religions of the World

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Religion is one of the major elements in human civilisation along with the growth of technology and globalisation. But why is it that we continue to belong to the religion we do in the face of a variety of alternative options offered by the religiously plural world we inhabit? What makes us persist with our own religious traditions in the face of such a wealth of options? Why am I a Hindu or a Buddhist or a Jew and not the follower of another religion? Why do I remain a Christian or a Muslim or a Confucian when for the religion I follow, there are at least six or more other religions beckoning us? Have I felt tempted to convert to another religion? What stopped me?

Though most of us inhabit a religiously plural world in which the riches of all religions of the world are available at our doorstep, but many of us continue to belong to the religious tradition we were born into. In the premodern world this would not have surprised us because the major religious civilisations either existed in relative, if splendid, isolation from one another or nestled in the bosom of another host civilisation. So it was natural to fit into a pattern. But today, in the modern world the impulse to change one's religion comes when it does 'from the demand side'. People change their religion not because they are asked to but because they want to. This, in the contemporary world, is remaining within one's tradition and is as much an act of choice as the choice to convert to another religion.

This book under review is a collection of essays wherein prominent scholars share their experiences as followers of their religions touching on such basic positions as why people believe and why do not. The author, an IAS officer and Birko Professor of Comparative Religions at McGill University in Montreal, begins by presenting Hinduism as a civilisational creativity. Writing the first chapter, the author feels as though he was flirting with his wife. "It had its charms even if the outcome may be too predictable to be exciting." He lists seven differences in Hinduism in relation to other religions and these include:

- * The goal of Hinduism is to convert an empty mind into an open mind.
- * Hinduism searches for the ultimate in metaphysics and for the universal in morality in comparison to the West.
- * Hinduism allows a Hindu to be the centre of his own universe or be single-minded in his devotion without being narrow-minded and judgmental about others.
- * Hinduism assimilates the service of the sole into it whole since Western religious traditions consider themselves unique.
- * Hinduism believes that there is one God and not the only God as other religion believe.
- * Hinduism accepts the distinctive features of other religions.
- * Hinduism is concerned with cause and not the origin of a religion.

Karma Lekshe Tsomo, born Christian but who adopted Buddhism for its philosophy of cognition, writes about the encounter with Buddhism which lays bare the meaning of dukkho or suffering, in a profoundly moving way and revitalises the definition of Buddhism as “transformation disguised as information”.

Sandhya Jam’s discussion of ritual fasting to death infuses life into the understanding of Jainism and sheds light on the tradition’s ties to the Indic religious tradition.

Kartar Singh Duggal’s portrayal of Sikhism is rivetting in that his marriage to a Muslim often viewed as the ‘other’ in Sikh history, is an autobiographical antidote to the historical and infuses history with humanity.

Vincent Shem indicates how a system like Confucianism, in which the personal is the political, casts a spiritual spell.

Bede Bidlack, in his chapter on Taoism, tells us of his magic journey from the mountains of China to the valleys of California.

Jacob Neusner’s chapter on Judaism conveys some of the passion of that traditional search for meaning in history.

Harvey Cose provides a glimpse of how the literal meaning of philosophy-love of wisdom-is transmuted by Christianity into the wisdom of love.

Amir Hussain narrates how his own life incarnates the dialogical possibilities of Islam in relation to Christianity.

The central question that the book addresses is what keeps one believing in one’s religion in a world pulsating with religious pluralism. While celebrating their own faiths, the scholars appreciate how encounters with other traditions have enriched their beliefs. Their contributions affirm that a plural perspective is the alternative and is the path to the meaningful pursuit of religion in our troubled times, says the author.

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