

28 Relativism, Hierarchy, and Encompassing

This chapter prepares for the next chapter about Hinduism. A major theme in Hinduism is relativism, the idea that all religions are valid in their own limited way, or “all paths lead to God”. This idea is wrong although well intended. This idea does not come up naturally in most religions but does come up naturally in Hinduism. Hinduism comes in a big system of ideas focused on the idea of the Dharma. Coming in a big system sets the tone for Hinduism. I use the term “system” for a group of people or a group of ideas. The term “system” is not exactly right, and it has a bad reputation from its use during the 1950s through 1980s, but the alternative is a lot of technical terms for different groups of ideas or people; so “system” is the best choice.

PART 1: Relativism

“Relativism” is the idea that what appears true from one point of view is not as true from another point of view; and what appears false from one point of view has much truth from another point of view. “Moral relativism” is the idea that what is good from one point of view might be bad, or not as good, from another point of view; and what appears bad or not-so-good from one point of view might appear good from another point of view. Relativism looks at true, false, good, bad, practical, and impractical with context and point of view in mind. An economic project that might be bad for a neighborhood might be good for the city as a whole.

Is it less morally bad for a poor mother with hungry children to steal than for a financier to embezzle? Is it alright for a woman to seduce a teenage boy but bad for a man to seduce a teenage girl? Many people who allow relativism for some subjects, such as art and economics, do not allow moral relativism. They insist on universal simple moral principles. They do not always follow their own advice in real life practical matters.

Relativism does not arise from lack of human ability. It is unlikely that any evolved finite sentient-moral being could consistently apply simple principles. The world is not perfectly ordered into better and best, more practical and most practical. What is better or more practical really does vary by situation. At the same time, there really are general principles that we want to apply. It is best to try simple and universal at first; use relativism sparingly in particular cases when we have to; and then return quickly to simple-and-universal when we are done with exceptions.

Sources of Confusion.

I am not sure if the world would be better off if we could decide all questions of “better than” but we can’t. The following issues contribute to not being able to decide. The issues are thoroughly mixed up in practice. Mostly I ignore these issues but I have to state them here to get them out of the way properly.

First, often it is impossible to completely rank items with the information available. Joe prefers apples to oranges, prefers oranges to bananas, but prefers bananas to apples. The Detroit Tigers baseball team

beats the New York Yankees, who beat the Boston Red Sox, who beat the Detroit Tigers. Sometimes this issue can be clarified with repetitions, as when the baseball teams play each other many times and the Tigers get the majority of wins over both the Yankees and the Red Sox.

Second, some preferences are entirely subjective, and no comparisons can be made between people. Frank prefers apples to oranges while Bonny prefers oranges to apples. Tim likes brown shoes while Bob likes black shoes. We can't decide whose preference is best although sometimes we can find patterns for groups. Seventy-five percent of people prefer black shoes to brown shoes but that does not mean Tim is wrong to like brown shoes, 25% of the people are wrong to like brown shoes, or black shoes are somehow better than brown shoes.

Many things have a "kind-of" ranking but not an absolute ranking. Most people would agree that the movie "Gone with the Wind" is better than the movie "Sharknado" but not everybody can agree that "Gone with the Wind" is better or worse than "The Godfather, Part One". "Kind-of" rankings are evident in art and religion. When people argue about rankings in art and religion, usually it is hard to figure out what kind of argument they are asserting other than they usually assert something like "that is what I like, and what I like is best in all situations".

Hierarchical (Superior and Inferior) and Encompasses (Includes).

Something is superior to another thing when the first thing is morally better, practically better, or in some way metaphysically better, at least for the situations at hand. A modern gasoline powered car is superior to a horse drawn wagon, at least for getting around a modern city. The Golden Rule is superior to "instant and total retaliatory vengeance for every perceived insult". When we say democracy is superior to kingship, we mean not only practically but morally and metaphysically. When we say a sports car such as a Porsche is superior to a common sedan such as a Camry, we don't mean just practically – in fact a sedan is better practically – we mean practically in some ways and better in other intangible ways that more than make up for any practical deficiencies; essentially we mean metaphysically. When we say a Cadillac is superior to a Chevrolet we mean practically, socially, for prestige, morally, and metaphysically. It is just the case that human minds tend to think with mixed senses like this. We can separate out the senses, but we tend rather to mix them at first.

Something "encompasses", "subsumes", or "includes" another thing when the first thing has all the relevant features of the second thing, in as much quantity, and-or in as-good-or-better quality. We say that a luxury car, such as a Cadillac or Lexus, encompasses a regular sedan such as a Chevrolet or Camry. The luxury car has all the features of the sedan, and better. A dominating championship sports team encompasses other mediocre teams. A Super Bowl winning team has all the features needed to win and has most of them better than other teams have them. Other teams might have one particular feature better than that particular feature on the championship team – another team might have the best kicker – but the championship team has that feature well enough and is better all around at the other features too. A really good gangster movie such as "The Godfather, Parts One and Two" encompasses mediocre gangster movies. It has all the good features that they do, and it has them all better. A good landscape painting has all the features of a mediocre landscape painting, and it has them all better and better arranged. A well-designed well-ordered well-decorated well-run home has all the features of a sloppy home and it has them better.

Usually Superiority and Encompassing go together. When thing A encompasses thing B, thing A is superior to thing B; and when thing A is superior it encompasses thing B. All the examples above show how the two ideas usually come together. When the French say their cooking is superior to that of other nations, they also imply that French cooking encompasses the techniques of other styles, or could easily encompass them by extension of the techniques it already has. The Chinese think the same of their cooking. When we say a democracy encompasses other forms of government, we mean it incorporates them, changes them, transcends them, and is superior to them.

Relativism sometimes contradicts superiority and encompassing. Relativism says we cannot have a neat hierarchy of superior and inferior, encompassing and encompassed. I leave you to figure out counter-examples to the examples above. If both the French and Chinese believe their cooking is superior and encompasses the cooking of all other nations, can both be right? Perhaps there are two best, and those are superior to, and encompass, the cooking of all others but neither is superior to, and encompasses, the cooking of its main rival. We will see this situation among religions.

Agree to Disagree; Tacit Value Judgments.

When people face issues for which they can't objectively decide best, highest, and most encompassing, they agree to disagree. I like Camry and you like Accord, so I buy a Camry and you buy an Accord, and we have fun arguing who got the best deal. You like the Giants and I like the Patriots, and we have fun arguing about which is the best team until they meet in the Super Bowl – and even then we can continue the argument by saying the game did not decide. I like Star Trek while you like Star Wars, and we have fun arguing.

This is not what people have in their hearts. Even while people agree to disagree they do not give up on the secret conviction that they are correct and their opponents wrong. They think their favorite is best, highest, and encompasses all rivals. Anybody who disagrees with them is wrong, mentally deficient, morally deficient, and metaphysically deficient. Anybody who disagrees is inferior and encompassed. "The Godfather" is the best gangster movie, and the best all around movie, and that is the end of it no matter what you say. Benz makes the best cars. Democracy is the best form of government. We see this kind of thinking too among religious believers.

Because what people feel differs from what they say, people fall into self-contradiction and hypocrisy. This result leads us to the difference between good relativism and bad relativism.

Good Relativism and Bad Relativism.

Good relativism happens when people argue about the best movie or best athlete of all time, cannot agree, agree to disagree, know what is in everybody else's heart, and then don't fight over the secrets in their hearts. People appreciate all the movies and athletes even if they don't agree on rank. People do not denigrate any movie or athlete even if they feel the movie or athlete is overrated. Even if overrated, the movie or athlete is still worthwhile, and still has something qualitatively distinct to contribute.

Bad relativism happens when people agree to disagree, secretly believe their choice is best, superior, and encompasses alternatives, look down on others, and secretly fight. Bad relativism occurs when people use relativism to backwardly assert that they are really better and superior.

Whether relativism is good or bad depends on the situation. If people can fight while still pretending to agree to disagree, then relativism is more of a cover for fighting than it is good disagreement. Usually people can't fight when they are under an authority. One dominant member of a group allows other members to disagree as long as it doesn't make much of a difference and does not discomfort the dominant member and the group. The boss allows workers to have their opinion on which movie is the greatest unless the workplace happens to be a movie studio. The boss won't let each worker have an opinion on which is the best sales plan.

Bad relativism can happen when one agent (person or group) really is better than the others but does not come right out to say it and accept the consequences. Sometimes the one better agent does this so the other members can "save face" and so the group can keep the peace, but it is still an odd situation, and it can still go bad. Sometimes the one better agent does it so as to exert power over the others while still keeping up appearances. Bad relativism is like one unusually pretty child saying to all the other children, "oh, we are all just as pretty in our own way". It is like one very good athlete saying to the other children, "oh we are all just as good athletes in our own way, some at golf, some at baseball, and some at table tennis". It sounds good, but it is a cover for being the best, and it is a way of asserting you are the best while asserting there is no best. Only a really confident girl or boy could say this, and they could only be confident if it were not really true.

The one better agent is really using the language of equality and relativism to assert the opposite: the one agent is better, superior, and encompasses the others. It is as if the pretty child said, "Yes, you all have some prettiness but really your prettiness is only a reflection of my prettiness, which is perfect". Or the athletic child said, "Yes you all have some skills but really your skills are only variations of my skill, which is all-around and perfect". Relativism often denies one thing while it asserts that same thing, as in the slogan from "Animal Farm": "All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others". Read the book or see the excellent early animated version.

To assert something while at the same time denying that thing is a form of nonsense. From nonsense, we can derive anything. We have to be careful not to derive silly ideas from nonsense.

Problems with relativism are not obvious or easy. It is not too hard to show that (A) asserting something can deny it at the same time; but it is harder to show how (B) one member of a group (one religion) while asserting something good about the group really tacitly asserts superiority and encompassing, so that the one better agent subsumes all the other members of the group as inferior versions. To see this, we need long examples.

Examples of Bad Relativism.

Honest anthropologists run into the problem of bad relativism and self-contradiction with the doctrine of cultural relativism. The slogan "cultural relativism" asserts several ideas, not all compatible, and not all true. Here, it means all cultures look at the world a bit differently, and each is just as right in its own way.

We should respect other people and listen to them. We should not impose our way. We should allow other people to carry on with their way unless we have compelling reasons to intervene. It is like the "Prime Directive" in Star Trek. This idea is a step forward from the common bad attitude of "we are right, they are wrong, they are a danger to us, we must prevail, so let's get them". In this respect, cultural relativism is a good idea.

The idea flounders when it meets a culture that does not share the idea, is bad toward other cultures, and pursues bad ways. These are the Borg in Star Trek TNG. The common example used in anthropology is the Nazis. We cannot be broadminded about Nazis. Non-anthropologists correctly refer to militant Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. "PC" anthropologists are not supposed to use those examples but apparently it is alright to point out how even mainstream Christianity is narrow-minded and selfish. I refuse to allow relativism to excuse any culture that mistreats women and children. I cannot accept child slavery and sex slavery. I cannot accept the abuse of democracy. I do have some cultural and moral absolutes. Nearly everybody does even if they refuse to admit it openly. We all hope to reach a middle ground where we can reject all bad practices and allow only non-harmful practices. We have not done that yet. We cannot do it as long as we insist on PC cultural relativism.

A group that proclaims cultural relativism without thinking through the issues does the same thing that the pretty child or athletic child did above, and does the same thing that a religion does when it proclaims "all paths lead to God". It says that all cultures are equal at the same time that it tacitly asserts that it is better than cultures that do not officially declare for cultural relativism. It is better, and cultures are not equal, just because it asserts that no culture is better and all cultures are equal. It means well, but it is caught in a logical trap, and there is no easy way out. In asserting that all cultures are equal, it indirectly asserts it is superior, and therefore denies that all cultures are equal. This hypocrisy always bothered me about anthropology and political correctness.

This example is easier for PC people to swallow. A serious form of this problem with relativism arises with a simplistic ideology of the free market ("market worship"). In this ideology, a person should be free to make any deal that he-she wishes, without state oversight, even if the deal seems stupid to us, and even if the deal is obviously hurtful to the person. A person can agree to a loan from a loan shark at 10% interest per day. This idea of making a deal depends on a vision of people as autonomous and free. I like this vision of people. Yet, in a world with this freedom, may a person sell him-herself into slavery, or is it possible for a person sell him-herself into slavery? To freely sell yourself into slavery is to negate your freedom. Once a person is a slave, a slave cannot make any deals he-she wishes, and so that being is no longer a person. If "yes", if a person can sell him-herself, then a free person can make him-herself un-free and so make him-herself not a person. If "no", if a free person cannot sell him-herself, then freedom has limits, personhood has limits, and likely people need the state to defend personhood. This issue might seem like intellectual silliness because people nowadays don't sell themselves into obvious slavery. But people nowadays do sell themselves into debt slavery and do sell their children into real slavery. Because most Americans have never seen children sold, omit selling children. Still, people sell themselves indirectly through debt slavery, especially credit card slavery, but including debt for furniture, cars, gadgets, student loans, weddings, houses, vacations, and showing off. Do not fool yourself. Debt slavery is as much slavery as outright selling yourself and your children, and it is just as bad. Debt slavery can be worse because debtors fool themselves that they are free persons who have choice even while really they are un-free slave second-rate-persons with no choice. Much of the rhetoric

of “choice” in the modern world is really meant to deceive people about choice and to make them into slaves while still wrongly feeling free; slogans promoting choice really mean to allow self-deception, undermine choice, and create slavery. This problem paralyzes Congress and allows financiers to hurt the entire economy.

In many classrooms, and in many “good will” institutions such as Scouts, fraternities, sororities, churches, and political associations, one small clique comes up with most of the ideas, and comes up with plans in which everyone fits in. While it appears as if everyone is equal, equally valued, does an equal share, and contributes equally to public benefit, everyone knows that is not true. The clique that comes up with the plan and runs the plan really is “first among equals”. The clique subsumes the other people and makes them reflections of its greater ability. “Queen Bees” depend on this effect. Although the planner clique might be full of good well-meaning people, everybody else always suspects the planners and holds a little grudge because everybody else knows the not-so-secret implications. This result is so common that now it is even a standard theme on sit-coms and “reality” TV shows.

A Good Religious Case.

My brother-in-law is an adept, intelligent, educated, sensitive Buddhist. Because Buddhism does not have bolstered versions of self, and it uses the illusions of everyday life (picks apart) to make points, Buddhism leads easily to relativism. The fundamental truths of Buddhism are called “Dharma”. One day, my brother-in-law said that nearly all truths were relative to human ways of life. Particular truths were true in certain times and situations. He had in mind what anthropologists call “cultural relativism”. There is no absolute right-and-wrong, and no absolute better culture or religion. This good-hearted outlook is part of Buddhist Dharma. I asked him if he thought the Dharma also was relative. He looked dismayed. A day later, he told me he did not think the Dharma is relatively true but is absolutely true, and so there must be at least some absolute truth beyond human minds. The real question is what we make of it.

Self-Contradiction.

Suppose my brother-in-law had continued to assert there are only relative truths. Even the Dharma is relative. Even the idea that tells him all ideas are relative is relative. What about the idea that all ideas are relative? Is the idea that all ideas are relative itself relative? If it is, then in some cases it must be false (or else it would be absolute and not relative), and so there must be some ideas that are not relative. If it is true of all ideas, then it is not relative, and then it is a case of at least one idea that is not relative. This dilemma is an instance of a class of problems called “the liar’s paradox”, illustrated by the example in which a person says of him-herself “I am a liar”. Nearly all relativism is plagued by this problem. How important the problem is depends on the issue. Usually humans have the ability to laugh off the problem and to see what is important about the particular issue. That ability might be one talent that distinguishes us from machines, at least so far.

People too often tacitly contradict themselves when they assert relativism. People assert relativism when they really don’t mean it, when they really believe their view is better; and this stance is a contradiction. We can feel these contradictions even when we can’t always point them out and explain them. We are leery of people who assert relativism because we feel these contradictions.

Suppose a group of co-workers gets together to decide who is the best co-worker. A co-worker can vote for him-herself if he-she likes. About a fifth of workers do vote for themselves but about four-fifths vote for another co-worker who they really believe is best. One co-worker publicly declares, "I think we are all equally good co-workers. Nobody is best. I can't decide who to vote for. If I have to vote, then I vote against myself because I know my own faults". Nobody really believes this. Everybody thinks this is self-serving crap. By asserting that nobody is best, the person really asserts that he is best because he is so broadminded, fair, and generous. The person negates what he asserts, a version of the liar's paradox. In asserting relativism, and tacitly asserting that he is best because he is so generous, he also asserts that he encompasses the lesser views of smaller-minded co-workers, and that he is superior. He asserts that he is better, superior, and encompasses others. In so doing, he contradicts himself again. Other people feel this ploy even when they can't spell it out.

The same is true for most of the cases of bad relativism described above. When the pretty child says, "we are all pretty", he-she really says, "I am prettiest; I am better, superior, and encompass all you other plain children". He-she contradicts him-herself. When the athletic child says, "We all have sports that we are good in", he-she really means, "I am the all around better athlete and could beat any of you in any sport; I am better, superior, and encompass you other mediocre children". He-she contradicts him-herself. When one culture insists on cultural relativism, it really says, "Because I am so tolerant and open minded, I am really better than all you other cultures that insist your way is best. I am better, superior, and encompass you smaller-minded cultures". The supposedly broad-minded culture contradicts itself. When PC people insist on the same generous relativistic values, they do the same thing.

In the case of the office workers, it is just a fact that some co-workers are better than others. Yet once the first person has declared that nobody is a better worker than anybody else, everybody else has to go along or else they will seem narrow minded and selfish. They have to go along even when they know it isn't true. This trap adds to the bad feelings in such cases. This trap springs in all the other cases too, such as the pretty child, athletic child, cultural relativism, and PC, and adds to our consternation in those cases as well.

Of course, it is possible to say "everybody is just as good as everybody else", "we're all pretty", "be fair to other cultures", and "all paths lead to God", and to really mean them. Some people really do have good simple hearts and really do say these things out of the true goodness of their simple hearts. Some people might know what they say is false, and might even know that they are better than others, but want to keep the peace and keep good relations. That is a good motive even when it deals in falsehoods and is self-contradictory. We have to develop a sense of when people are sincere or not sincere about such things. Evolution likely gave us the basic tools for this job.

"All Paths Lead to God".

The idea "all paths lead to God" is religious relativism. It says no one religion is better than all others, all religions have major truth, each religion has some truths that it expresses best, we should not denigrate any religion, and we should learn about other religions. It is hard to argue with that intention.

People mean "all paths lead to God" in three ways. In the first, people say one religion is better for some things, some issues, some people, in some situations while another religion is better for other things, on

other issues, for other people, in other situations. Buddhists often told me that Christianity was better for social issues while Buddhism was better for personal salvation. A variation is: the religion into which people are born is good for them while other religions are good for the other people who are born into those religions: Protestantism is good-and-true for born Protestants while Roman Catholicism is good-and-true for born Roman Catholics.

The second kind of relativism says that all religions are good-and-true in their own way, each has strengths and weaknesses, each finally gets to God, and no single religion is clearly the truest and best. In either case, because no one religion is best, you might as well stick with the one you are born with unless you want to convert. For this chapter, you can take “all paths lead to God” either way but keep both in mind.

The third kind of relativism says that all religions are good-and-true in their own way but our religion is best. More particularly, all religions except Hinduism are merely good-and-true in their own way but Hinduism is best and encompasses other religions. Other religions are lesser versions of Hinduism. Other religions are not bad as far as they go but they are not Hinduism. I defer this topic until the next chapter. For now, focus on the first two kinds of religious relativism.

The idea “all paths lead to God” is factually wrong. It is only possibly true when limited to traditional “high” religions such as the ones described in this book. Even then, it is only possibly true when we insist those religions stick to the best moral principles. That is what many people really mean when they say “all paths lead to God”: all religions can get us to act well when they teach their best ideas. Most people don’t think “all paths” is true of belief in ghosts, demons, the devil, spirits of dead flowers, enchanted frogs, zombies, and other superstitions. Most people would not like “all paths” to be true of religions such as voodoo even when voodoo does little harm, or true of variants of Hinduism that practice violence such as Thugs and worshippers of bad Kali. Most people would not like “all paths” to be true of religions that claim you get to heaven by chanting the name of a deity over and over. Most people would not like “all paths” to be true of religions that say you go to heaven by suicide bombing or by killing innocent children in a shopping mall. We don’t want it to be true of religions that say girls should not go to school.

If we want “all paths lead to God” to apply only to religions when religions uphold best moral principles, then why don’t we just say, “following the best moral principles leads all people to God”? In fact, that is what I have been saying throughout the book. I don’t dwell on it again here.

The idea of “all paths lead to God” is like the cases of relativism from above, in particular the cases of bad relativism. The religion that first says “all paths” claims the “moral high ground”. Even while appearing to say all religions are the same, in fact, it says it is better, superior, and encompasses all other religions because it sees that “all paths lead to God” while other religions do not. It contradicts itself. It asserts its superiority while pretending to assert equality. The religion that proclaims “all paths” is the pretty religion among other plain religions. It is hypocritical. I have the same uneasy feeling about “all paths” that I do about cultural relativism and political correctness. I would much rather we are honest about differences and that we focus on the best general moral principles. I would much rather we see how all religions can be interpreted to lead to the values that serve the modern democratic pluralistic world.

Most people want “all paths” to be true in that sense and to lead to good things too. To appreciate what people want with “all paths”, we have to see the alternative. Unless we are careful, the alternative is religious intolerance, which quickly leads to ethnic, political, social, economic, and gender intolerance. People use religion as an excuse to look down on others, oppress them, take advantage of them, and hurt them. If it is a choice between mildly hypocritical “all paths lead to God” versus intolerance and badness, then we should choose mild hypocrisy every time. Who knows, maybe by indulging in mild hypocrisy, we take advantage of tolerance and peace to actually learn about each other. Maybe we learn the good points of each other’s different beliefs. Maybe we learn the best moral principles and we begin to live by those. If we can actually live by the best moral principles then the details of belief don’t matter that much. That is how I promote the idea of “all paths”.

In dwelling on differences in religious beliefs, I hope I have not promoted intolerance but instead gotten people beyond differences to the best moral principles.

Many people want “all paths” to be true in another sense. This sense is a little self-serving but it also does little harm, and so I don’t mind much. People vary in their basic character, their basic “true you”; usually a particular character does little harm; often a particular character adds to the diversity and fun of life; and we want to encourage the expression of individual character in all ways rather than discourage it in any particular way. Different people want to pray, chant, give alms, meditate, do Tai Chi, sing in the choir, practice random acts of kindness, teach small children religious lessons, work in the community center, practice mindfulness, wear particular items of clothing, etc. They don’t want to think they have to give up these practices, take up meditation, or eat only a “kosher” diet or “hallal” diet. They want to think God enjoys the traditions of their ancestors, and to think the traditions of their ancestors lead them closer to God. They want to think that these various practices all have a value, and that no practice has much more value than any other. This is all fine with me. Most of these practices have value to society and they help people think about goodness. No practice actually takes a person directly to God, but nothing does that, the practices do little harm, and they do some good.

Most people use the common practices of their religion to justify their search for success. They have a family altar, give to certain charities, support a church, read particular scriptures, and ask for guidance in their business. People don’t want to think their practices are not crucial to their success, don’t like to think the practices of other religions are more likely to support success, and don’t like to think they have to switch. (People do switch during times of religious change, but that is another issue.) The idea of “all paths” does not really support the quest for success but espousing the idea at least prevents eroding your hope that your religious practices are alright in the eyes of God.

Some gifted people interpret “all paths” in the following way. We will see that Hinduism interprets it this way. People have different temperaments. Some people approach God through heart while others go through the mind. Some people can approach God through the intellect, some through moral actions, some through community action, some through devotion and worship, and some through meditation and yoga. There is no reason to believe any of these approaches is better than any other. All can lead a person to good moral principles and a correct view of nature and human life.

Some Specific Objections to “All Paths Lead to God”.

If it is worth putting up with the hypocrisy of “all paths lead to God” to gain tolerance and peace, and to allow human diversity, then why do I make such a big deal about the idea? Why do I pick on Hinduism as an example of what makes me uneasy?

First, people need to be clear about what they are doing. People need to see the whole situation around religious relativism. The slogan “all paths” gives an excuse not to think.

Second, the idea of religious relativism annoys me. It is factually not true, and I would rather people face up to facts first before deciding they have to make an end run around the facts. The self-contradiction and hypocrisy in the idea bother me in the same way that they bother me about cultural relativism and political correctness.

Third, the idea allows people to be complacent about their religion and about bad practices. Not all points of all religions are great. Some points really are bad. We need to search our religion for the deep best moral principles. If necessary, we need to push our religion to be more faithful to those moral principles. If we find bad ideas, bad principles, bad interpretations, bad acts, and lies, we need to be sure those are not part of our religion. We need to get after the bad people.

Fourth, once the idea of “all paths” got “into the air”, then all religions had to take it up or else sink back to militancy. It is like the co-workers above. Religions have to say it even when they don’t believe it and would rather go after domination. Suppose one truth modest religion says in contrast, “Wait, we are not all equal and alike. Some things in my religion are not very good just as some things in your religion are not very good. Let’s sort this out.” That religion gets branded falsely as a reactionary militant bad guy seeking domination when that religion is in fact the most reasonable. This is one of the bad result of the hypocrisy and self-contradiction latent in the idea.

Fifth, I don’t like the result that religions that proclaim “all paths lead to God” tacitly assert they are better, superior, and encompass other religions. If you want to assert you are better, superior, and encompass other religions, then do so openly, and do so on solid grounds. The idea of “all paths lead to God” is not enough to make this claim.

Relativism and Not Knowing God Fully.

People cannot know God fully and completely, not even mystics, not through intellect, emotions, intuition, or devotion. The prophets do not give a full picture of God. If we could know God fully now, we would not need to meet him after we die. Even after death, I doubt that meeting him is all about knowing him fully. Thus all religions are only approximations. How does this belief differ from “all paths lead to God”? How is this belief not faulty relativism?

This belief differs in all the ways described above. Even if we can’t know God fully, we do have good enough principles of moral action. We know what to do. That is a good enough start. We don’t need to know in other ways. We are not prevented from using our imaginations.

While no single path knows God fully, still, some paths are better than others, and some attitudes are better than others. Any path that emphasizes the best moral principles is better than any other path that

does not. Any path that consistently accepts truth, especially scientific truth, is better than any other path that does not. Any path that leads to honest, decent, interesting, useful people is better than any other path that does not. Any path that is leery of “all paths lead to God”, and does not use it to tacitly assert its own superiority, is better than any path that falls into line behind “all paths” and uses it to assert its own superiority.

My belief is a weak form of relativism, weak enough so I don't worry about it. Other relativism is strong enough to worry about.

PART 2: Systems, Especially Systems of Ideas.

Some idea systems are small, and are aimed mostly at situations that occur in a limited world, often daily, such as the shop manuals for a mechanic or textbooks on how to program apps for smart phones. Some idea systems are big, and aim to cover as much of life as they can such as the legal code for the United States. Mostly this difference between big and small is intrinsic and marks the character of a system. It is hard to extend a shop manual to encompass all of American life, and it is hard to make an app to cover all aspects of life although app writers appear aiming at that goal. A lawyer can specialize in “family law” or “business law” but all kinds of law eventually have to fit together into a total system of law under some general principles.

Big systems tend to be “idea systems that eat the world”, that is, they explain everything in their terms and they explain away what they cannot explain in their terms. Small systems do not. Big systems and “systems that eat the world” do not exactly coincide but I can't go into differences here. For here, take all big systems as idea systems that eat the world.

Recall that true science is not a system that eats the world. True science is open to testing in ways that big systems that eat the world avoid. From convenience, daily science often is a self-validating big system that eats the world, but scientists know the difference, and know how to get out of that rut into true science when they need to. I do not deal more with science here.

The famous anthropologist Clifford Geertz said all cultures are idea systems that offer a total way of life to their people, and that the ideas are encoded in symbols, rituals, art, religion, etc. “If you're a Jet, you're a Jet all the way, from your first drawn breath to your last dying day”. In my terms, a culture would be a big system that eats the world. After him, anthropologists tended to see in religion the core code for culture. If you are a Thai Buddhist, you are a true Thai; you can only be a true Thai if you are a Thai Buddhist. I don't think Geertz' idea can be always true. Some cultures are intrinsically less comprehensive than other cultures. The “small” cultures get along well in their world but they can't take in the whole world and especially they can't take in the whole modern world. They do not offer big idea systems that eat the whole world and that would appeal to people of other cultures. Beautiful as it is, a culture on New Guinea is less likely to take in the whole world and to appeal to a Chinese person than Chinese culture aims to take in the whole world and might appeal to a non-Chinese. The culture of a small radical Protestant church might be beautiful and good for its people as long as they stick to the limits of their world but it is not as big as the culture of Roman Catholicism and likely appeals to fewer people. Wonderful as they are, Italian cooking is not French and Thai cooking is not Chinese. This idea is not politically correct but it is true just the same. Anthropologists sometimes mislead themselves by treating every culture as if it

were one of the great comprehensive cultures of the world, and treating great comprehensive cultures of the world as if they were another tribe. For this book, assume that a big system is bigger, aims to be total and closed, and aims to take in the whole world.

Life in a Big System.

Life in a big system differs from life in a small system. Not all small systems are the same and not all big systems are the same, but big systems do have some features in common, and do share some common feelings.

To get across the feel of life in a big system, I compare small systems to small businesses such as “mom and pop” groceries in a big city, small farmers, and professional people such as dentists while I compare big systems to large business firms (“corporations”), universities, and whole professions such as “the law”. Any anthropologist who reads this would “cry foul” but I can’t describe a real large system so I have to use what I can. I don’t think the problems are so big that they invalidate the comparison. I deal in idealized abstracts here. To avoid lawsuits, I do not use real names, and I avoid allusions to real firms. So don’t read anything into this.

A small grocery store does not stock everything, and the owners don’t have to know everything about all the items they stock. A large department store with a supermarket has to stock a much greater variety and the buyers for the chain have to know a lot about the produce, grains, dairy products, fruit, clothes, and shoes that they buy. So you might think an employee in a big store would have a broader outlook than in a small store; but this is not so. Each employee in a small store might not know everything about every product but he-she knows something about a lot of products. Employees in a big chain only know about their specialty. A shoe clerk knows about shoes, not about rice. Managers don’t know everything about shoes and rice, they know about the people who know about shoes and rice. Paradoxically, people in big systems often have a smaller scope than people in small systems even though the big system tries to encompass everything. Farmers brag they have to know plumbing, carpentry, electricity, mechanics, computers, air conditioning, biology, and all skills. People in big systems are specialists while people in small systems are generalists.

Contrast the watch counter at a big chain super store with a store that sells watches. To the employee in the big store, watches are merely items. They differ in price and in details but they have little character. Any item outside the watch counter has no character. To an employee in a watch store, each watch is distinct, and some watches are works of art. Watches have character.

Employees in large chains sometimes recognize repeat customers but they rarely get to know them and the customers rarely get to know the employees. For a small store, personal relations are often the key to success. Even if the small store can’t give regular customers much of a discount, still the employees get to know the customers, and the customers get to know the employees. In a small system, relations are between persons. In a big system, relations are between kinds. In the army, all officers are officers while all enlisted people are enlisted people. For the most part, all majors are majors and all sergeants are sergeants. On a football team, it matters a lot who plays quarterback. In a big store, relations are between customer and check-out clerk; stocker and night manager; day manager and retail clerk; check-out clerk and stocker; producer clerk and dairy clerk; and etc. Relations in a big system are like the

feeling that students have at football games. The students of one school see the students of the other school only as “them” and as rivals. Relations in a small system are like the feeling that students have when they meet other students as fellow engineers at a convention or like fellow competitors in a chess tournament.

The most important relations in a big system are variations of power. Who ranks above and below, who has seniority, and who has any ownership, are the key distinctions. There is a “chain of command”. It is a good idea to keep power relations in mind and never to break the chain of command. In a little system, while power is important, personal relations are added to the formal chain of command. A fun example of this is in the TV show “Pawn Stars” on the History Channel.

It is not possible for an employee in a big department store, university, law firm, or corporation, to know everybody. Instead, people focus on techniques that help their personal success. Their personal circle shrinks within the big circle of the system. They get to know a small clique. The members of the clique mutually support each other. The members of the clique think of other cliques as their natural enemies even when the cliques are in the same store, school, or firm. The natural unit of social life in a big system is the clique. Nobody outside the clique is “one of us”. Small towns are cliquish too but life there can be a bit better than in an institution. Small farmers are natural competitors but they compete indirectly so they are also natural friends. Farmers get to know other farmers. They share information, friends, and even share help in hard times. They can learn to trust each other and treat each other as persons. Any other farmer, or any resident of the associate local town, can be “one of us”.

Cliques in big systems treat other people badly and don’t seem to care much. I have seen professors in a clique scuttle the good work of a person outside the clique for no reason other than he-she was not “one of us” and might get money that we might want but didn’t have yet. Cliques rationalize this behavior by saying the system will take care of all people so they personally don’t have to take care of other people. If Joe doesn’t get the money we want, then Joe will get some other money when we don’t want that other money. If I stop Susie from a promotion now, Susie will get a promotion later. If we get Ted demoted in our section, he can move to another section. This kind of behavior, and the self-deceptive rationalization, is meat for all the lawyer shows on TV. People in small systems might treat other people badly but they can’t fool themselves that the system will make up for what they do or that they are blameless. In small systems, even moderate competitors tend not to treat each other badly and tend to help out as long as they don’t hurt themselves. A clock store that sells Citizen but not Rolex might really send a customer to a nearby Rolex store. A wheat farmer will tell a corn farmer of a disease to watch out for. If you don’t help a neighbor douse a fire, you have nobody to blame but yourself.

Big systems, the parts in big systems, and the cliques in big systems, feel superior to small systems and feel they can encompass small systems even when the small systems show superiority in some aspects. A supermarket is bigger than a “mom and pop” grocery store, and encompasses it because the big store stocks every item in the mom and pop store, often at a lower price. Chain stores encompass local stores by setting up franchises, or turning local stores into franchises. A law firm that specializes in family law can beat and encompass the local “general practice” lawyer.

Big systems make small actors and small systems relative in the same way that they encompass them. The work of a big construction firm becomes the backdrop against which you hire plumbers, electricians,

cement men (people). You evaluate the small contractors in reference to the big construction firm. You evaluate the local doctor by reference to the clinic or hospital in the big city. More exactly, you evaluate the work of the local doctor by reference to the clique of specialist doctors at the big teaching hospital across the state. You evaluate ideas about salvation from the local preacher by reference to doctrines from Thomas, Luther, or Calvin. You evaluate the teaching of the local community college professor by the ideas of the clique at the big university somewhere.

Small systems are not all wonderful. As anybody knows who has lived in a village or small town, the lack of privacy is maddening. Big systems have their good points, including privacy, variety, and the comfort needed to get something done. People can be happier in cities than small towns. Big systems offer a sense of security and comfort. They give some people a clear world.

It is not the case that all big systems are totalitarian nightmares made up of horrible selfish people like the robot of market-worship capitalism while all small systems are like "The Andy Griffith Show". It is more a case of how to draw the line between "us" and "them", and how to act across the line sometimes. People in small systems can learn to draw the line more widely and can learn to be nicer across the line. That is what Jesus and other teachers wanted to show: draw the line more widely as you would with people in a small town. You should act nicely to many other people as the residents in one small town act toward the residents in another town, even when the two towns play each other in football. Sometimes people in big systems can learn to draw the line widely because they are safe in their clique and because they are more used to strangers, but not often.

Hierarchy, Policy, and Actual Behavior.

In almost all enduring human groups, people depend on each other. Often they depend on each other because one person does one small part of a whole job while another person does another small part of a whole job, and they need each other's small jobs to do the whole job. They use what economists call "division of labor" and they are what old anthropologists called "functionally differentiated and mutually dependent". In a hunting party, some people "herd" the deer while other people wait to shoot the deer. In a garment factory, some people cut large pieces of cloth stacked in many layers while other people sew the pieces together.

In a big system, an important division is between management and everybody else. Management almost always has more power, and the chain of command goes from workers up through layers of managers to a top level of a few people. Usually this arrangement is good because it is not possible to run most big organizations democratically. Even worker-owned firms need managers. Managers get paid more, for reasons I don't go into. There is a strong line between workers and managers. Although workers are different, and some workers see themselves as more important than others, the line between managers and workers is always bigger than any line between workers.

All organizations have to balance realities: the organization as a whole has to go on if anybody is to gain from the organization; everybody needs everybody else; but management has more power and gets paid more; and the line between workers and managers is the biggest line. If the people in an organization accept that the organization is made up of other persons like themselves, then the organization also has

to put that fact in the balance. Usually “common humanity” goes in the balance on the side of “everybody needs everybody else”.

Organizations find their own balance in many ways. Almost always the ways include some hypocrisy because all the facts can't be perfectly reconciled. People learn to live with that. In modern business firms, and other large modern organizations such as schools, the balance gets expressed in a policy with a formal policy statement. Rarely can organizations live up to the policy. Instead, organizations develop a pattern of balances of real behavior that the people in it can live with. Not everybody is equally happy with the pattern of real behavior, and it is rarely perfectly fair, but people still live with it. So there is a gap between formal policy and real lived policy. Idealists might lament this reality of the human situation but we have dealt with it for a long time, and the ability to deal with it is likely part of our evolved nature.

I have noticed we can divide these situations into roughly two kinds. The kinds are similar to the division between big systems and small systems but not exactly. It is not worth going into the details here.

In the first kind, the organization has a general policy, usually an idealistic statement about how we all depend on each other. The policy is beautiful but vague, so people in the system don't have to live up to it, and, in fact, don't live up to it. Higher people use the vagueness to keep power while excusing what they do and while giving lower people tokens to mollify them. Management uses the vagueness to maintain its position while asserting the policy symbolically. Management says: “we are all in it together”; sacrifices are recognized and appreciated; a person is better off in the firm than out of the firm despite any inequalities; the firm must have some inequalities; when the firm benefits, the people at the top benefit more but everybody benefits some; and “a rising tide floats all boats”. The ideology is much like the national ideology of induced economic growth. When things are going fairly well, this situation can result in a good feeling, as with big business firms in America in the 1950s and with some tech companies from the 1990s through today (look up “good places to work” on the Internet). When things are going poorly, people feel exploited but locked into the system, and fear leaving the system even when they are exploited, much like workers in a “one factor town” and much like the American middle class has felt since about 2000. The more that managers talk about freedom, choice, and working together, the less people believe them. People pretend they are all equal, and because they pretend, they are far from equal, likely far less equal than if they didn't pretend.

In the second kind, people accept differences but try hard to work across them. People take the policy to heart even when they know it is not fully realistic. People offer specific acts and relations to keep the situation better, to help people feel more like people, yet that do not undercut the ability of the system to keep going, and do not undercut everybody's benefit. In business, people offer specific acts and relations to help workers and managers to get along without undercutting the ability of the firm to make a profit and so without undercutting everybody's job. They look only for modest levels of benefits, and they work to reduce health care costs. When the firm profits, they expect all to benefit too, and to benefit fairly; they do not expect the owners to take all the increase. Because people accept that they are not equal, they achieve more real equality than if they pretend they are. This situation irks somebody committed to strong democracy and equality, and it sounds like an excuse for petty fascism, but it is still true. It helps to read Anthony Trollope's short good novel “The Warden”.

We see the first kind in political correctness. We see it among leaders of Black and Hispanic rights. We see it in schools which adopt high-sounding policies about racial equality and students having a future but which graduate few students and which give little real education even to students who do graduate. We see it in America since about 1980 with rising income disparity and no sense of national commitment by rich people. We see it in big business firms that call everybody by a nice sounding name to make them feel as if they are a part of the firm when really they are just an employee, terms such as “sales associate” and “repair technician”. These firms hire as many part-time “temporary” employees without benefits as they can so as to avoid any real commitment, and they give skimpy benefits when they do give benefits. They do not match employee contributions to retirement and charities. They brag about how many employees advance up the ranks while overlooking how many quit, how many employees they have in total, and how many do not advance up the ranks. They make up ranks to advance in, such as “first and second assistant floor manager”, like some martial arts schools make up many colored belts with different steps in each color.

We see the second kind in firms that hire and train employees so as to keep them, have full time long-term employees, give as good benefits as they can consistent with survival of the firm, and keep safe pleasant working conditions. They match employee contributions to retirement and charities. They listen to workers. They adopt employee suggestions. Employees listen to managers and trust them. People know the firm has a leader, and the leader sometimes has to “kick ass”, but people respect that and value it. They handle conflicts with face-to-face meetings in conditions designed to give everybody a say. We see this pattern also sometimes in small schools or “pilot” schools. Keeping an organization like this was the point of the movie, xxxxxxx, starring Chris Farley and David Spade.

We see this same difference between, one the one hand, religions with good policy statements about how everybody is valuable under God or the Dharma but which do little specifically, and in which privileged people are able to interpret policy to maintain their privilege, versus, on the other hand, religions that encourage people to go out and do specific things to make life better.

Rule of Law and Other Good Institutions.

To have the rule of law, we cannot treat everybody as a distinct individual and we cannot respect all their personal connections and status. We have to treat people as persons but not as any particular kinds of persons. We have to treat people as the same. This sounds like the big business firm with the beautiful but deadly policy, yet it is not. We should not confuse the platitudes of equality-within-an-institution with the rule of law in a democracy. On the other hand, we also have to respect natural kinds of persons such as “child”, “parent”, and “old”. We have to accept that differences in nature and differences in wealth and power can lead to injustice, and call out for redress. If not, the rule of law has little practical benefit. So we have to find a balance between “people are all the same” versus “people are different”. In finding the balance, we run into all the problems from above. We have to not use platitudes to make ourselves feel good while overlooking specific problems. In redressing any grievances, we have to not give any group too much power, and so undercut the ability of the system to help everybody. This is the balance that the West has sought, starting from its roots in the teachings of Jesus and in Greek thinking. Only if a culture-society finds this balance can it develop good institutions. The rule of law begins with the idea of similar persons, and it depends on this balance with different persons.

Two Kinds of Religion.

All major religions except Taoism and Zen developed big ideological systems that eat the world. (Some versions of magical Taoism developed big ideological systems that eat the world and Zen inherited such systems from Mahayana.) The most organized big system for Christianity likely is "Thomism", the thought of Saint Thomas of Aquinas, in Roman Catholicism; but it is not the only one. Protestant Existentialism amounts to such as system. The Christian system of God, the Trinity, Jesus as the Emanation of God, archangels, the Devil, angels, eternal souls with almost total free will, Justification, etc. amounts to a big ideological system that can easily be borrowed when theologians want to build their own rigorous system. Christians built it as a combination of Neo-Platonism and Gnosticism. Marxism developed a wonderful system which fairly closely goes along with the Christian system. Islam developed big systems also by borrowing from Classical philosophy. Judaism developed the Talmud(s) because it needed to regulate life to survive. Judaism also borrowed from Classical philosophy and, I think, Gnosticism. Mahayana and Hinduism are good examples of big idea systems that eat the world. Hinduism is likely the best, fullest, and most beautiful example.

Major religions develop big systems that eat the world because they have to compete with other religions, they want to convert and hold people, and being able to explain everything makes believers feel powerful. Likely the biggest reason religions develop big idea systems that eat the world is because it goes along with, and directly serves, the state. Once people accept a big system that eats the world, they find it hard to think in other terms and to leave the system. Judaism began to develop such as system after Israel rose in power under David and Solomon. Christianity developed systems after it became the semi-official religion of the Roman Empire under Constantine. Islam developed big idea systems after it became the official religion of governments around Baghdad, Alexandria, and Tehran. I do not explain how states and big idea systems that eat the world go together. Religions that did not develop big idea systems would be at a competitive disadvantage.

Although all major religions developed big idea systems that eat the world, not all major religions began that way. The deistic religions in the Judaic tradition, including Christianity and Islam, did not begin with a big idea system but with small clear ideas about a single moral God. Theravada began in a context of big systems but gave them up for a small clear idea about life not being worthwhile. Taoism never needed or developed a big system. For the most part, Zen got rid of big systems.

Mahayana and Hinduism began in big systems and then solidified the systems. Big systems, and the way of life in big systems, are intrinsic to Mahayana and Hinduism, and natural to them.

Sometimes people in big systems rebel against the system and form small systems within the big system, at least for a while. I do not go into whether this is the same as a clique. Something like this happened with Protestantism within Roman Catholicism until Protestantism developed its own big systems. This is the feeling that the "Mad Max" movies tried to convey, as when groups called themselves "tribes". Small-within-big also happens in Hinduism but Hinduism is able to make revolts relative and so to neutralize and absorb them.

Americans where I grew up intrinsically distrust big systems for all the reasons above. They also distrust small tight societies but I am not sure if their distrust of small societies equals their dislike for big systems.

Americans dismiss big systems as “bureaucracy”, “government”, and “church”. Their dismissal is ironic, and all-the-more warranted, because America has among the biggest bureaucracies and government structures in the world. Maybe American dislike of big systems is one reason why we are attracted to Taoism, Zen, and, sometimes, to Buddhism.

Among all major religions, Christianity seems best able to maintain the behavior typical of small systems while in the middle of a big system. Christians were taught to treat their neighbors in all contexts much the way good citizens in villages treat their neighbors, and Christians have preserved the ability despite the growth of large systems. They can extend the line, and work across the line, better than can believers in other religions, most of the time. Christians have the attitude of the small system generalist. They tend to see other people as people and not as mere roles; at the same time, they respect duty and do not let personal relations overcome duty. I am not saying Christians are perfect and do not suffer from the faults of both small and large systems. I am only saying Christians were able to overcome faults well enough often enough to build good institutions.

This distinction of Christianity might be why Jesus still appeals to Americans even though they do not like big systems. They see in the lived value system of Jesus the values that they like even if Americans are wary of values that were added to Christianity when it became a big institution serving the state. Taoists, followers of Zen, and some Buddhists in the West seem to strive to set up and keep this “small system” feeling in their temples and communities. That is one reason why they appeal to Americans. It can be fun to go to a Taoist, Zen, or Buddhist “school”. To me, it seems Taoists, Zen followers, and Buddhists are blending Christian ideas with Taoist, Zen, and Buddhist ideas; and that is a good thing.