

Table of Contents

1. Where We Are Headed	11
2. Listening to the “Heathen”	17

ISLAM

3. An Overview of Islam.....	27
4. The Imam and the Engineer: Conversations with Muslims.....	43
5. What I Like About Muslims	53

BUDDHISM

6. An Overview of Buddhism	69
7. Ruby and the Reverend: Conversations with Buddhists	81
8. What I Like About Buddhists.....	95

HINDUISM

9. An Overview of Hinduism	113
10. The Software Consultant and the Priest: Conversations with Hindus	127
11. What I Like about Hindus.....	137

CONCLUSION

12. What We Share: Twelve Areas of Similarity.....	153
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— INTRODUCTION —

1. Where We Are Headed

A number of years ago, George Vandeman, then the director and speaker of the “It is Written” television series, wrote an astonishing book which explored the ways that God had been at work in religious groups other than his own. Most libraries catalogue the book with a title of just four words: *What I Like About—*.¹

On the actual cover of the book, these four words are followed by a list of various religious groups: Lutherans, Baptists, Methodists, Charismatics, Catholics, “Our Jewish Friends” and Adventists. Finally, in red letters, this line: “Rescuers of Neglected Truth.”

But there is more. At the very bottom of the cover is an illustration by well-known Seventh-day Adventist artist, Lars Justinen. It depicts six individuals who represent the various religious groups, all facing the same direction, in different postures of worship. One stands, with hands folded, while two are raising their hands in praise. Still another stands more pensively, with a hand on his chin. There is also a smiling man with a moustache who clutches a Bible over his chest. Finally, a woman wearing large pink earrings (which match her pink vest) holds a string of what appear to be rosary beads.

In many ways, the cover provides a summary of the whole book. Vandeman was clearly and unapologetically a Seventh-day Adventist evangelist, but he believed that God had been at work throughout history in a variety of religious traditions. Each of the groups mentioned on the title page had something to offer. According to Vandeman, each helped to “rescue” and preserve some neglected truth. In short, Vandeman took a friendly approach to others and suggested that there was something to like and to learn, even from those with whom he would disagree.

It made sense that Vandeman’s book would specifically deal with Christians and Jews. After all, these were the dominant religious groups in North America at the time. But in the decades since he wrote, the religious landscape in America

1. George Vandeman, *What I Like About—* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1986).

has changed. Mainline Christian denominations have declined in membership while the number of adherents of the world religions has grown dramatically.

No longer is it accurate to think of Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism as foreign religions that exist somewhere “out there” in the world. Today, these are also American religions in the sense that millions of Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus are now fellow citizens, co-workers and neighbors. When we hold an evangelistic series (hopefully, we don’t call it a “crusade”) in a city, Muslims receive our advertising handbills. When we conduct a vegetarian cooking seminar in the multipurpose room of our church, Buddhists may well be there. When Hindu families are looking for a good education for their children, they will visit our schools.

Some see this as a sad tragedy and a direct threat to Christianity and to Adventism. If that is our perspective then our response to the menace, understandably, would be to develop a fortress mentality. Our theological guns would be loaded and always at the ready. Spiritually speaking, we would keep ourselves busy guarding our perimeter and shooting first, saving the questions for later. After all, no one ought to fraternize with the enemy.

But is there another way? As I look again at what Vandeman wrote, I am surprised at his openness. His book could have been filled with criticisms of where other religious systems have gone wrong. Instead it is filled with compliments. He calls Martin Luther “one of the most remarkable Christians who ever lived” and applauds John Calvin as a “brilliant scholar” whose writings have blessed “Christians everywhere.”² Vandeman confesses that “some of my closest friends in the Lord are of the Presbyterian faith”³ and “I also like the Baptists’ style of worship.”⁴

While discussing Charismatics and Roman Catholics, the compliments keep coming. “In a world of material progress and social change, moral values have eroded—but the Roman Catholic Church stands for morality and decency.”⁵ Vandeman also notes that there are many monks and nuns who are “radiant examples of genuine Christian love.”⁶ He continues, “Not until eternity will we know the sacrifices of these unsung heroes.”⁷ He concludes his chapter on Catholicism by telling the moving story of Maximilian Kolbe, a Franciscan priest who was killed in World War II. Vandeman describes him as “faithful unto death. I want to meet that dear saint in heaven.”⁸

2. Vandeman, 18.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, 25.

5. *Ibid.*, 65.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*, 66.

8. *Ibid.*, 71. I have tried to imagine the response from my church today if one of our evangelists were to describe a Franciscan priest as a “dear saint” who was “faithful unto death.” How would we react if a religion professor called some monks and nuns “heroes,” or said “charismatics have contributed so much to the spontaneity and joy of worship” [52]? What if a church leader announced, as Vandeman did, “I am a Charismatic myself, in the Biblical sense of the word” [52]?

When Vandeman wrote these words, his church seemed able to appreciate the wisdom of this friendly approach. At his death in 2000, Adventist News Network described him as a “renowned Seventh-day Adventist evangelist.” Fellow evangelist Mark Finley called Vandeman “a visionary who often was far ahead of his time.” Finley continued, “He had the unique ability to see possibilities where others saw only problems.”⁹

So, are we a church that can still take Vandeman’s approach? Can we listen to those with whom we disagree, or must we only and always defend? Furthermore, is it possible that as we listen we might ourselves be blessed?

I believe the answer is yes. I believe it is possible to grow in my faith as I learn about other faiths. In fact, I believe it is possible to be even more committed to my own religion when I have studied other religions. One of the reasons I say this with such certainty is because I’ve already seen it happen.

For several years now I have been teaching a World Religions class at Walla Walla University, a Seventh-day Adventist institution in rural Washington State. As could be expected, most of my students are Adventist, and many are devoutly so. In class, I do my best to talk about other world religions respectfully, as if a believer of each faith was present with us. I don’t talk about other religions simply to point out their weak spots. I try not to mock, degrade, or attack.

At the end of the term, I ask students to write a short paper which describes how their religious perspective has changed as a result of the class. The first time I received these final papers, I was afraid. I was worried that my approach to other religions would shake students’ faith in Christianity. I wondered if I should have more pointedly critiqued those other faith traditions. Maybe I should have been more aggressive in defending the faith once for all delivered to the saints. Did my attempt to show respect come across as support? Then I read the papers.

Most students reported that their most basic religious beliefs hadn’t changed much, if at all. If they were Adventists at the start of the quarter, they were still Adventists. I was relieved. Then came the joy. As I continued reading, it became clear that something even better had happened. God had been at work. Over and over came testimonies from students that they had actually grown in their faith as a result of studying other faiths!

Here is just a sampling of student comments.¹⁰

In looking at other religions that are so dedicated to the practice and application of religion in their lives, it has made me want to be more dedicated to my own religion, and the God I worship. If I claim to be a Christian, but am not familiar with the Word of God, it is neither smart nor respectful on my part (Danielle Wilson).

9. Bettina Krause, “Internationally Known Adventist Evangelist Dies,” *Adventist News Network*, November 2, 2000, accessed August 24, 2015. <http://news.adventist.org/all-news/news/go/2000-11-02/internationally-known-adventist-evangelist-dies/>.

10. Used with the permission of the students quoted.

Over the quarter there have been a number of different practices of various religions that have stuck out to me as things that I can apply to my personal spiritual practices. . . . As a Christian, praying is something I do. However, I pray when I really feel the need to. I pray when I need God, not because He is my Lord. There isn't much respect in this. I want to pray more regularly (Randy Folkenberg).

One religious practice that I have neglected in my life is Sabbath worship and slightly more specifically, attending church. . . . But now, after learning so much about all these other religions and people's devotion to that religion, I feel inspired to be more a part of my church (Jake Nasholts).

Other students acknowledged that learning about other religions convicted them of their need to pay tithe, give to the needy, appreciate God's creation, memorize the Bible, and stop taking the Lord's name in vain. The list went on and on and on.

I believe that what happened for them can happen for us, too. While this book will spend some time exploring the teachings of other religions, I don't want (nor do I expect) anyone to become a Muslim, Buddhist, or Hindu as result. I don't even expect anyone to become a little bit more *like* a Muslim, Buddhist, or Hindu. Instead, I pray that learning about these other religions will help us to rediscover our own. I believe it will reveal to us areas of our own faith that we have neglected. It will remind us of portions of the Bible that we have skimmed over too quickly. It will help us to be better, more faithful followers of Jesus—one of those who “keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus” (Rev. 14:12, KJV).

Here's how we will proceed. In the next chapter, I will try to answer the question, “Why should we listen to and attempt to learn from those of other religions?” I'll spoil the suspense by telling you that I believe the answer is simply that the Bible calls us to it. Scripture teaches us that God sometimes speaks to his people through those whom they would consider heathen. If God has done this repeatedly in the past, we should be prepared for him to do the same thing today.

Once this Biblical foundation has been established, I will then explore the basic teachings of Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. There will be three chapters dealing with each of these religions. In each case one chapter will provide a

textbook-style overview of that religion.¹¹ Immediately following will be an interview with adherents of that religion. Next, I will shift into “Vandeman mode” and discuss just a few things that I like about each group. In the final chapter, I’ll share twelve areas where I find commonalities among the religions that we have explored.

Let’s get started.

11. Information regarding the world religions is readily available online and in a wide variety of quality textbooks. Texts that were especially helpful to me as I wrote these overview chapters included: Lewis M. Hopfe and Mark R. Woodward, *Religions of the World*, 12th edition, (San Francisco: Pearson, 2012); Warren Matthews, *World Religions*, 7th edition, (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2013); Robert E. Van Voorst, *RELG: World* (Boston: Wadsworth, 2013); John L. Esposito, Darrell J. Fasching, and Todd Lewis, *World Religions Today*, 4th edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Mary Pat Fisher, *Living Religions*, 9th edition (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2014); Richard C. Bush, Joseph F. Byrnes, Hyla S. Converse, Kenneth Dollahide, Azim Nanji, Robert F. Weir, and Kyle M. Yates, Jr., editor, *The Religious World*, 2nd edition (New York: Macmillan, 1988); and Jeffrey Brodd, Layne Little, Bradley Nystrom, Robert Plantzner, Richard Shek, and Erin Stiles, *Invitation to World Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

2. Listening to the “Heathen”

I remembered him from the previous school year. He often arrived late for class, sat in the back, and didn't contribute much to group discussions. I was surprised, then, when he showed up on my class roster the next school year listed as a theology major. “I wonder what his story is?” I thought to myself.

My opportunity came on the way back from our annual theology retreat in the mountains. I drove and he sat in the front seat next to me. Providentially, there was no one else in the car with us. When the pleasantries were out of the way, I asked him to tell me his story.

He grew up as an Adventist, but in recent years, faith and religion had been slowly pushed aside. He had chosen a career that would make Sabbath-keeping difficult, but he didn't care enough to change his plans. Simply put, he was gradually moving away from the faith of his youth. He shook his head with amazement as he came to the punchline. His Damascus road experience came while he watched a decidedly ungodly movie in a theater. He paid for his ticket, expecting to be entertained and he left convicted of God's calling on his life.

Every school year, I hear the same sorts of stories from incoming ministerial students. How did God reach out to them? How did God call them to service? How has God guided them? For some, it was a mission trip or a week of prayer speaker. But for others, it was a bit messier: a skate board accident, a divorce, a disease, a funeral. And for at least one in recent memory, it was a movie that wasn't pure, holy, or good.

This shouldn't be a surprise to those of us who know our Bibles. Over and over through the pages of Scripture, we encounter a God that reaches out to his children in surprising and creative ways.

Nature is just one of the surprising avenues God uses to speak to his children (Psalms 19:1–4). Besides a general revelation of God's character (Rom. 1:20), the Bible repeatedly calls us to learn specific lessons from animals.

In Proverbs, Solomon urges his readers, “Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise” (Prov 6:6).¹² In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells his listeners not to worry about life and drives the point home by asking them to “look at the birds of the air” (Matt. 6:26). Later, he sends out his disciples with instructions to “be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves” (Matt. 10:16).

GOD SPEAKS TO US THROUGH HIS SINFUL CHOSEN PEOPLE

Thankfully, God doesn’t limit himself to animals as he teaches us. Usually, he speaks to us through other human beings. What is surprising, however, is the sort of people that God uses.

Hebrews 11, for example, recounts a long list of Old Testament characters who are presented as examples of faith. Each person named exhibited characteristics of devotion that we ought to emulate. But honesty requires us to also acknowledge that these heroes had flaws.

Noah built the ark. He also lay naked in a drunken stupor in his tent after the flood. Abraham left Ur in obedience to God’s command, and he also married his half-sister, lied about it repeatedly, fathered a child with a household employee named Hagar and then continued to produce offspring with his unnamed concubines (see Gen. 25:1–6).

It should be sobering for us to consider that many of these heroes of faith could not be members in good and regular standing in our church. So, as we retell their stories to our children, we discreetly skip the sleazy details.

Yet the Bible tells us the whole story. We read about the lack of honesty, the binge drinking and the questionable sexual behavior. These sinners are still God’s people, warts and all, and their stories are recorded for our benefit. Their sin does not totally obscure God’s voice.

GOD SPEAKS TO US THROUGH THE “HEATHEN”¹³

It is one thing to acknowledge that God speaks through animals. It is another to suggest that God speaks through his sinful, chosen people. But are we prepared for the possibility that God sometimes speaks to his chosen people through those of other faiths? The Bible tells us that this is indeed the case.

Following the death of Solomon, the nation of Israel split into two separate kingdoms: Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Both kingdoms suffered under the rule of wicked and wayward kings. The Biblical record of their misdeeds includes murder, idolatry, sorcery, witchcraft, and burning their own children as sacrifices to other gods.¹⁴

In the midst of this depressing history is the hopeful account of Josiah. He became king of Judah when he was only eight years old. Josiah removed places

12. Unless otherwise noted, Bible passages are from *The Holy Bible, New International Version*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984.

13. Here I use the term “heathen” in its traditional sense to refer to those who are not considered to be followers of the God of the Bible.

14. See 2 Chron. 24:21; 25:14; 28:24, 31; and 33:6.

of idolatrous worship and restored the temple. He pledged “to follow the LORD and keep his commands, regulations and decrees with all his heart and all his soul, and to obey the words of the covenant written in this book” (2 Chron. 34:31).

Unfortunately, the story doesn’t end well. “After all this, when Josiah had set the temple in order, Neco¹⁵ king of Egypt went up to fight at Carchemish on the Euphrates, and Josiah marched out to meet him in battle” (2 Chron. 35:20).

Neco responded by sending messengers to Josiah to clarify that he was planning to attack Babylon, not Judah. Neco finished with a warning. “God has told me to hurry; so stop opposing God, who is with me, or he will destroy you” (2 Chron. 35:21).

We should linger over this last detail. Neco, Pharaoh of Egypt, announced that God was with *him*. If Josiah opposed him, Josiah would be destroyed by God. Neco had the audacity to give a mini-lecture to good king Josiah!

We can understand why Josiah did not listen. Neco was of a different nation, culture and religion. Josiah saw him as an enemy. Why should the righteous king who destroyed idols listen to the pharaoh who worshipped idols? Why should the one who had pledged to keep God’s commandments pay any attention to the command of a pagan king whose full throne name meant “Carrying out the Wish of Re [the Egyptian god of the sun] Forever”?¹⁶

So Josiah ignored Neco’s warning, disguised himself and went into battle anyway. In the battle that ensued, the word God had spoken through Neco was fulfilled. Josiah was shot by archers and died.

Josiah was clearly a great king who was receptive to God’s voice. Earlier in his reign he had been open to God’s voice through a woman, Huldah, and he responded positively to God’s written revelation which was discovered in the temple. But Josiah had his limits. He could not stoop to obey the word of God delivered through a pagan king.

Ellen White reflects on Josiah’s tragedy, saying:

The man who had been so greatly honored by the Lord, did not honor the word of God. The Lord had spoken in his favor, predicted good things for him; and Josiah became self-confident, and failed to heed the warning.¹⁷

Josiah’s story establishes God’s willingness to speak to his people through the heathen. But is this an isolated case, or part of a pattern?

In 604 BC, only five years after Josiah’s death, Nebuchadnezzar reigned as king in Babylon. One night, he had a dream of a great image made of different metals. At the end of his dream, a rock struck the statue and grew into a mountain that covered all the earth. According to Daniel, it was “God in heaven” who showed Nebuchadnezzar “what will happen in days to come” (Dan. 2:28, 45).

15. Neco is also commonly transliterated as Necho or Nekau.

16. Peter A. Clayton, *Chronicle of the Pharaohs* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 195.

17. Ellen G. White, Manuscript 163-1903, also quoted in the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol 2, ed. Francis D. Nichol (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1954) 1039.