

## RELIGIONS AND WISDOM OF THE WORLD

*"In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship – be it JC or Allah, be it YHWH or the Wiccan Mother Goddess... – is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things... then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough. ... Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure, and you will always feel ugly. ... Worship power, you will end up feeling weak and afraid. ... Worship your intellect, being seen as smart, you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. But the insidious thing about these forms of worship is not that they're evil or sinful, it's that they're unconscious. They are default settings. They're the kind of worship you just gradually slip into, day after day, getting more and more selective about what you see and how you measure value without ever being fully aware that that's what you're doing."*

-- David Foster Wallace

In the ancient village of Kapilavastu, India, Kisa's baby was not waking up. She lovingly nudged him and waited for his eyes to open, but he remained still. He had died during the night, but Kisa could not accept this. She had recently lost her husband, and her baby meant everything to her. She picked up the baby and rushed for help. The Buddha was staying nearby, so she went to him for medicine.

The Buddha, seeing that Kisa's son had died, told her that in order to make the medicine, he would need mustard seed from a house that had not known death. Kisa rushed back to the village to find such seed. At each house she asked if they had known death, and each time she heard story after story about loved ones lost. Everywhere, the answer was the same. No house did not know death. She listened to their stories, and she started to understand.

She returned to the Buddha understanding that death is an essential element of life. Instead of trying to comfort her with the idea that all who die go to heaven, he offered instead the idea that learning to understand the true nature of the inevitable sufferings of life could bring her peace, joy, and enlightenment.

This story illustrates the profound similarities in the trials, challenges, problems and paradoxes of life that we all must face by virtue of being human. Consider the following list.

All humans:

- are born incomplete and dependent on others.
- must form social relationships to survive.
- must learn to deal with death and suffering.
- must deal with envy, jealousy, and change.
- encounter a world much bigger and more powerful than themselves and must deal with forces – physical, social, economic, and political – that are out of their control.
- must grow and change physically, emotionally, intellectually, and psychologically as they transition

from childhood to adulthood, from dependency to parenthood, and on into old age and death.

The trials of life along the way are many, and often devastating. A core tenet of all of the major religions is the simple truth of unavoidable human suffering. What can be the meaning of an existence that is so fragile and temporary?

Many people assume religion is simply a superstitious belief system attempting to explain the world based on ancient understandings of the world. Religion is ridiculed for being an outdated science and justification for backwards or regressive morality. While this is certainly true for many people (not only today, but throughout human history), when we immerse ourselves into the religious worlds of different cultures and religions around the world, we also find that religion is doing a lot more than just trying to explain or moralize the world.

In this lesson we will explore what renowned mythologist Joseph Campbell calls the four "functions" of religion:

1. **The Cosmological Function:** It provides a framework for relating to the world in a deeply meaningful way.
2. **The Sociological Function:** It brings people together and gives them guidelines for staying together.
3. **The Pedagogical Function:** It provides wisdom for navigating the inevitable challenges and trials of life.
4. **The Mystical Function.** It allows people to feel connected to something bigger than themselves, giving them a sense of awe, peace, and profound significance.

## UNDERSTANDING DIFFERENT WORLDVIEWS

Unlike the current Christian notion that if you believe in God and accept Christ as your personal savior, you can be saved and live for eternity in heaven, the Buddha did not ask his followers to believe in

anything. Instead, he asked them to practice virtue, understanding, mindfulness, and meditation so that they could achieve enlightenment.

This difference reminds us that starting from a Western perspective on religion can lead us to miss out on a full understanding of how others see the world. In much of the world, religion is not about "belief."

In New Guinea, there were spirits everywhere, and keeping yourself right with them was a matter of life or death. We occasionally brought an offering of pig to different spirits – the spirit of the mountain to our east, or the spirit of that grove down the hill – and invited them to feast. But these spirits were not supernatural to them. They insisted that they did not simply "believe" in them. They were just part of nature. They were not something you *believed* in because they were not something you would ever question. They just were. Therefore, faith and belief were irrelevant to them.

Living with them made me realize that many of the most basic questions we have about religion are culturally bounded and ethnocentric due to this focus on "belief" as the core of religion. For example, most of us would think that the proper question to ask when understanding other religions would be something like, "What god or gods do they believe in?" But this question only makes sense coming from a religious background of the Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). These faiths all focus intensively on faith or belief in a single omnipotent god. But what about all of the other religions – which number in the thousands – that are not based on a single god, or any god, or even on the notion of faith and belief?

Questions based on what people believe are culturally biased because they end up defining other people's religions in our terms. Hinduism, a richly textured religion full of rituals, practices, contemplation, meditation, and stories aimed toward helping people live a balanced fulfilling and meaningful life, is diminished to become nothing more than "polytheism" - belief in more than one god. The

rich world of spirits my friends in New Guinea experience, and the complex rituals and practices they engage in to relate to them, becomes nothing more than "animism" – belief in spirits.

Another problem with focusing on "belief" is that in many languages, there may not be a concept that conveys exactly what is meant by the English word "believe." Anthropologist Rodney Needham documented several examples of this, and notes that early linguists like Max Müller found it difficult to find the concept in several languages when they started documenting indigenous languages in the late 1800s.

This problem with the word "belief" strikes at the heart of just how differently cultures may view the world. As Dorothy Lee notes so powerfully, "the world view of a particular society includes the society's conception of man's own relation to the universe, human and non-human, organic and inorganic, secular and divine, to use our own dualisms." The key phrase here is, "*to use our own dualisms.*" Remarkably, Lee is recognizing that our most basic assumptions are culturally bounded. Other people do not make the same distinctions between the human and non-human or secular and divine that we do. They may not make those distinctions at all. She points out that the very notion of the "supernatural" is not present in some cultures. "Religion is an ever-present dimension of experience" for these people, she notes, and "religion" is not given a name because it permeates their existence. Clyde Kluckohn notes that the Navaho had no word for religion. Lee points out that the Tikopia of the Pacific Islands "appear to live in a continuum which includes nature and the divine without defining bounds; where communion is present, not achieved, where merging is a matter of being, not of becoming."

Furthermore, the division of the world into economics, politics, family and religion is a Western construction. As Lee notes, for many indigenous peoples, "all economic activities, such as hunting, gathering fuel, cultivating the land, storing food, assume a relatedness

to the encompassing universe, and with many cultures, this is a religious relationship."

Our focus on "belief" as the core of religion leads us to emphasize belief over practice, and mind over body. In Christianity you have to *believe* to be saved. Westerners tend to see other religions as different versions on this theme, so we approach the study of religion as an exploration of what others believe. But the Christian emphasis on "belief" is itself a modern invention. A careful textual analysis of writings from the 17<sup>th</sup> Century by Wilfred Cantwell Smith found that the word "believe" was only used to refer to a commitment of loyalty and trust. It was the notion of "believing in" something, not believing whether or not a statement was true. In other words, according to Smith, faith in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century was a matter of believing *in* God (putting trust and loyalty in him) not believing *that* God exists. He turns to the Hindu term for faith, *sraddha*, to clarify what he means. "It means, almost without equivocation, to set one's heart on." Similarly, the Latin "credo" is formed from the Latin roots "cor" (heart) and "do" (to put, place, or give). The emphasis on belief as a matter of truth only became an issue as the belief of God's existence became more fragile and open to question with the rise of science. As a result, most of us are used to wrestling with big ideas about the big everything, and the big question of what to believe looms large in our consciousness.

## **WHERE BELIEF DOES NOT MATTER**

To examine a religion that does not focus on belief in more detail, we can look to the philosophical Hinduism that emerged about 2,500 years ago in India. The fourth Brahmana of the Upanishads, a sacred text of Hinduism dated to this time period, describes the beginning of time as beginning with nothing but "the Great Self" or the "Brahman." The Self was all that there was. Seeing that he was alone, the Self felt afraid, but then he thought, "There is nothing but myself, why should I fear?" But then he felt lonely and he longed for

a companion. So he split himself in two, man and woman, and embraced the woman. From that union, all humans were born.

The woman hid herself as a cow, so the man turned into a bull and embraced her, and all cattle were born. She turned herself into a mare, and he into a goat, and all goats were born, and so on until all the creatures of the world were created. "And thus he created everything, down to the ants." In contrast to the story of Genesis, in which God stands outside of creation and creates the world, the Hindu Self (Brahman) has become everything everywhere. The Brahman is the ultimate reality that permeates all of reality. It is beyond all dualities and cannot be properly named, because to name is to make distinctions between this and that. As the Upanishads say, "He who worships him as one or the other, does not know him."

As a result, the core problem in Hinduism is not to believe in God, have faith in God, or to form a relationship with God as an external being. It is instead to recognize one's own divine nature within. The world of separate things is an illusion called Maya, and as long as we are trapped in this illusion, we are trapped in Samsara, the endless cycle of death, rebirth, and reincarnation.

Since the divine oneness was fractured by the original fear and desire, this means overcoming fear and desire to recognize one's oneness with all of creation. The core problem is not salvation, as it is in Christianity. The core problem is how to achieve enlightenment by transcending the illusory dualities of the world.

One cannot achieve enlightenment by knowledge or belief alone. One must actually experience the unity of all things. In one of the most famous stories of the Upanishads, a young man comes home after studying for many years. He is very proud of his knowledge until his father asks, "Svetaketu, my child, you are so full of your learning and so censorious, have you asked for that knowledge by which we hear the unhearable, by which we perceive what cannot be perceived and know what cannot be known?"

The boy was humbled and asked to learn more. The father told him to put some salt in a glass of water and come back

tomorrow. When he returned the father asked him for the salt. Svetaketu noted that the salt had dissolved and no longer existed. His father asked him to taste the water. "How does it taste?" he asked. "Salty," he replied. "Now taste from the bottom," his father asked. "Salty," he replied again. "It is everywhere, though we do not see it. So it is with the Self. It is everywhere, though we do not perceive it. And thou art that."

That line "thou art that," translated by Alan Watts emphatically as "You're it!" is the key idea of Hinduism and Buddhism. It means that all is one and all is divine, but it is not a doctrine to believe in dogmatically. It is an experience that one must constantly work to achieve through practices such as meditation, overcoming selfish desires, and serving others.

## **THE COSMOLOGICAL FUNCTION**

Religious cosmologies can be so profoundly different as to constitute entirely different visions of time and space. Let's dive into the terraced landscapes of Bali to get a glimpse into a worldview that allows the people to relate to their world in a way that is good for the environment and the people.

The terraced rice landscapes in the mountains of Bali form some of the most beautiful landscapes in the world. Look closer, and you will see a landscape permeated with religion. Every rice farmer in Bali has a small shrine where irrigation water enters his fields. At this shrine he carries out daily offerings and rituals. A little upstream, there is a small temple where the irrigation canal first enters the local region. Groups of farmers meet here to perform collective rites and hold meetings. Still further upstream there is yet another temple, where the irrigation canal splits off from the main channel. And at the very top of the system there is the main temple at Lake Batur, dedicated to the supreme goddess of water, Dewi Danu, as well as 146 other deities. Water is essential to rice farming, and therefore to the health and vitality of the people, so in addition to these temples

there are additional shrines and temples at every pond, lake, spring, and the headwaters of every river. There are additional temples downstream, positioned not to worship water but to act as defense against pests and other threats to the harvest. Together, this pan-regional network of temples creates a religious landscape permeated with the notion of water bringing life and vitality from upstream against the forces of death and destruction that might come from below.

Notions of time are also different, and organized around this cosmology. They have a complex system of three calendars. First there is the 210 day calendar called Uku, which is broken up into 30 seven-day weeks and six 35-day "months," matching the length of the growth cycle of their first rice planting. The second is a lunar/solar calendar, in which each month is directly tied to the moon, and an extra month is added once every two or three years to keep it in line with the solar calendar. Brahman priests oversee the coordination of the calendars, and make the decisions about when to add an additional month.

Each year, the high priest of the central Batur Temple sends a formal invitation to the 204 regional temple congregations to a special festival to mark the full moon of the tenth month. Each temple is instructed to bring specific items as offerings to the water goddess and other deities. This is no small matter. The priests must carefully plan this event to match the growth cycle of the rice. Rice needs a lot of water as it is maturing, followed by a great deal of sun as it reaches maturity. Ideally, a rice harvest comes to maturity right at the end of the rainy season.

For many decades, outside researchers thought that the water temple network was based merely on religious superstition and served no practical purpose. Even worse, it was thought that the priestly requirements to plant at certain times and to not plant at others was likely detrimental to maximizing rice yields.

In the 1970s, scientifically engineered planting strategies known as the "Green Revolution" were adopted by the Indonesian

government. The power of the water temple priests was stripped away. They continued their rituals and offerings, but they no longer controlled the water. Soon, pest populations soared, along with the spread of diseases. Imported pesticides were used widely to contain the problem but also killed eels, fish, and according to local hospital reports, some farmers as well.

Within a few years, there were widespread calls to put the priests back in charge. Anthropologist Stephen Lansing ran a computer model to demonstrate how the priestly system of water management worked to maximize yields while minimizing pests. What he found was that the short fallow periods dictated by the priests starved pests and contained disease. These fallow periods had to be carefully coordinated and synchronized across a wide area so that the pests could not just go from one farm to another. Lansing's computer model showed that not only was the priestly system effective, it was the most effective solution possible.

Lansing ends his study of the Balinese rice fields with a haunting image showing the contrast between the competing systems of the priests and the scientists.

*Downstream, foreign consultants dispatch airplanes to photograph Bali's rivers from above, and draw topographic maps of new irrigation systems. Upstream, a group of farmers drop frangipani flowers in their canals before beginning a new ploughing. The new subak prepares for the dedication of its Ulun Swi temple, two subaks arrive at the master water temple for advice on dealing with the brown plant-hoppers which have destroyed half their crop, and half a dozen men with picks and shovels shore up the sides of a field that has produced two crops of rice each year for the past eight centuries.*

## THE SOCIOLOGICAL FUNCTION

Traditionally, Australian Aborigines spent much of their time roaming wide areas of land, hunting and gathering their food. They

lived in small family groups and rarely encountered other people. The landscape itself was sacred. Every rock formation, valley, and river were the footprints and marks left behind by the culture heroes of the Dreamtime, the time before time when all was created. People find their way by singing ancient songs which sing the stories of these culture heroes. The songs are like maps showing the way. "If you know the song, you can always find your way across the country," wrote Bruce Chatwin in his book *Songlines*.

But sometimes Aborigines came together in larger groups for a large ritual. We all know the feeling of gathering in large groups of people for a special event like a big game or concert. As Emile Durkheim famously described these gatherings of Aborigines, "a sort of electricity is generated from their closeness and quickly launches them into an extraordinary height of exaltation. Every emotion expressed resonates ... echoing the others ... like an avalanche that grows as it goes along." He uses the term "collective effervescence" to describe this feeling, which is one that can lift a person so high as to feel a brief moment of something akin to enlightenment – a true lightness of being – or ecstasy – a feeling of being outside of one's self. This collective effervescence is a key element of ritual, and something all humans continue to seek out, even if they are not religious.

That humans everywhere can experience this kind of "collective effervescence" is a sign of our shared humanity, a product of our social nature. Such experiences help us build or repair social bonds and communities, overcome conflicts, and work together to survive, thrive, and find joy in our lives.

## **THE PEDAGOGICAL FUNCTION**

Religions also give wisdom and guidance for the challenges and changes of life. One of the most dramatic changes all humans must go through is the transition from dependency in childhood to the state of independent adulthood. In many cultures this transition is

marked by an initiation ritual. These rituals show remarkable similarities across cultures, capturing some deep wisdom about what it takes to be a successful adult.

Though initiation rituals vary greatly, they all flow through three primary stages which Arnold Von Gennep identified as separation, liminality, and incorporation. The stages represent the movement of the initiate from one stage of life to another. In the separation phase, they are removed from their childhood. This often involves a dramatic removal from the mother and is accompanied by symbols of death, representing that the child is "dying," to be reborn as something new. The initiate is then placed in a secluded place with other initiates as they enter the stage of liminality, a stage marked by ambiguity and disorientation. Initiates are meant to feel as if they have lost their place in society and now stand apart, not knowing who they are or how they should act.

College serves this function in modern Western societies. Each year, millions of teenagers leave the familiar surroundings of their childhood homes to live alone for the first time. On college campuses they take on some adult responsibilities, but not all of them, thereby living in a state betwixt and between childhood and adulthood. It can be a turbulent time as they try to figure out who they are and how they want to emerge as full adults. In the meantime, their relationships with parents can become strained due to the ambiguity between their continued partial dependency and their emerging adulthood. Like initiates all over the world, they are no longer classified as child and not yet classified as adult, so there are no clear roles or rules to follow.

In indigenous rituals, the old child-self is now "dead" to ordinary society, so they are sometimes treated as a corpse would be treated, indicating the death to their former selves. They might be buried or required to lay motionless. But at the same time, they are about to be reborn, so they may be treated as embryos or seedlings. Among the Min groups of New Guinea, initiates have their hair made into a bun that resembles a taro tuber, representing a seed that will grow. With

symbols of both death and birth, the secluded space itself is often thought of as both tomb and womb.

Before they can be reborn, they have to endure trials and tests to see if they are ready. The Satere-Mawe of Brazil put on gloves filled with stinging bullet ants and have to dance with the gloves on, enduring the pain until they pass out. The Kaningara of New Guinea must lie still while their elders cut hundreds of deep cuts into their bodies, covering them in their own blood, and then endure stinging nettles that make the gashes swell into lasting scars. By the time they heal, their skin looks like the scaly flesh of the crocodiles they revere. Painful body modification is common in initiation rituals, providing a test to demonstrate their ability to overcome fear, quell their desire for comfort, and show that they are ready for the challenges and sacrifices of adulthood.

In the final phase of incorporation, the initiates are revealed to the society and announced as full adults. There are often images of rebirth. For example, in some New Guinea societies, initiates crawl through the spread legs of the elder men as if to be reborn into society. They emerge from the "womb" of the initiation as a new man.

These rituals can have a profound effect. For example, among the Kalenjin of Kenya, the male initiates are required to endure a painful circumcision without anesthesia. Their bodies are covered with dried mud so that if they flinch even the slightest bit, the mud will crack to reveal their weakness. If this happens, the initiation is considered a failure. They are not real men and are not allowed to marry. Some have suggested that this ritual is the reason why Kalenjin are so strong and able to endure pain. The Kalenjin are world-renowned long distance runners. Consider that only 17 Americans have ever run a marathon in under 2 hours and 10 minutes. Thirty-two Kalenjin did it in just one month in October 2011. The Kalenjin make up only .06% of the world population, yet they consistently dominate long distance running events worldwide.

If initiates are able to overcome fear and quell their desires, the secrets of adulthood are revealed. Sometimes the revelations are profound and overturn everything they thought they knew. For example, the Keraki of New Guinea grow up hearing terrifying monstrous sounds emanating from the forbidden regions of the forest. They are told that these are the sounds of the great crocodile spirit. During the initiation, their eyes are covered by senior men as they wait for the spirit to come. They hear the terrifying sound come closer and closer until it is right upon them and about to swallow them up. Then the men uncover their eyes to reveal that it is the men themselves spinning bull-roarers that makes the sound. They are then appointed keepers of the secret and protectors of the bull-roarers, which are not viewed as "tricks" but as sacred divinities in their own right.

As horrific as some of these rituals may sound, they serve all of the religious functions. First, they serve a sociological function of creating social solidarity and providing roles and rules for living together. In this case, the process itself is a strong bonding experience for initiates, and the end of the process gives them a firm understanding of themselves as adults and establishing their role for the rest of society. Second, rituals and religions serve a pedagogical function of teaching people how to live and endure the inevitable challenges and changes of life. In this case, the ritual lays out the rules and expectations of adulthood while teaching the initiates important lessons about how to overcome fear, quell desire, and live up to their full potential. Third, rituals and religions serve a cosmological function, providing a comprehensive worldview that explains why the world is the way it is. In this case, the rituals reveal secrets of the world that can inform their lives and bring meaning to it. And finally, there is also a mystical function served by such rituals. The ritual provides a time to sit with and contemplate the mysteries of being and the awe of existence itself.

## **THE MYSTICAL FUNCTION,**

## **THE PERENNIAL PHILOSOPHY, AND "REAL FREEDOM"**

Despite the remarkable diversity of religious traditions around the world, some mythologists, philosophers, and anthropologists propose that there are some profound similarities shared across all traditions, especially in how they all inspire a sense of profound awe and can lead to religious experiences of intense wonder and ecstasy. This perspective is most prominently known by Aldous Huxley's collection of religious texts and statements from all over the world, which he called *The Perennial Philosophy*.

Huxley arranges the texts into 27 sections to demonstrate 27 core ideas or themes that all religious traditions address in similar ways. When laid out as such, it is remarkable to consider the similarities. Nearly all human groups everywhere have religious objects which are worshiped, create sacred spaces, have cosmological notions of good and evil, a philosophy of grace and free will, emphasize the importance of self-knowledge, recognize the inevitability of human suffering, engage in prayer, ritual, and other spiritual exercises, and encourage charity.

According to Huxley, the Perennial Philosophy can be simplified into five statements that all major religious traditions adhere to philosophically:

1. There is a transcendent something bigger than us.
2. We are or seem to be separated from it.
3. We can re-unite with it.
4. This unity is the ultimate purpose of our existence.
5. There is a law, dharma (sacred teaching), or way that must be followed to achieve this end.

Huxley proposes that the ultimate goal of the major wisdom traditions is for humans to recognize their inherent connection to the world. He uses the phrase "Thou art that" from the Hindu salt water

story as the central tenant of this idea. The basic human problem is that we do not feel this sense of unity with God or the universe. We feel fundamentally alone, separate, and vulnerable.

In the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, we were once living in a heavenly paradise, but we ate of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and were expelled from the Garden. The imagery is a powerful portrayal of Huxley's vision of original unity followed by separation from God. Each tradition offers a pathway to build a relationship back to God.

In Eastern traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, the problem is slightly different. Humans are not separated from God, but are actually made up of the same stuff as the divine and really are divine in themselves. However, we do not feel that sense of divinity. We make distinctions into this and that and identify with somethings and not others. We live in a world of illusions (*maya*) in which we see ourselves, others, and the things of this world as separate, failing to see that we are actually all connected and united as one. We have to engage in certain practices to "wake up" to our "true self." The "true self" is the one true self that makes up the entire universe, the *Atman*.

While Abrahamic and Eastern traditions differ in how they conceptualize transcendent reality, both suggest that we are somehow separate from it but can be re-united with it through divine love, divine union, or awareness of divinity within us.

Widely regarded as one of the greatest writers of our time, David Foster Wallace demonstrates how these core ideas from the world's wisdom traditions can inform our everyday lives in a graduation speech which has become one of the most popular graduation speeches of all time, watched millions of times on YouTube and published as a bestselling book called *This is Water*.

Wallace points out that our everyday experience leads us to make three false assumptions:

1. *I am always right.* We tend to live with a perpetual certainty that we are right and others have it wrong. We have

remarkable abilities to confirm our biases by seeking out only friends and information that confirm us and avoiding truly listening to and understanding other ideas and perspectives.

2. *I am the center of the universe.* We see through our own eyes, feel through our skin, and hear through our ears – all of which gives us the constant visceral experience of being the actual center of the universe. The evidence bombards us at every moment of our lives. When we allow the assumption to guide us we close ourselves off to empathy and the ability to imagine our way into another person's perspective.
3. *I don't need to think about how to think.* Most of us rarely stop to think about how we think or where our thoughts come from. This lack of reflection keeps us locked inside our assumptions and stunts our growth.

Together, this trio makes up what Wallace calls "our natural default setting." They are constantly operating on us, unconsciously, in the most mundane experiences of everyday life – sitting in traffic, shopping in a crowded supermarket, waiting in a checkout line. Wallace points out that it is easy to experience these inconveniences through our automatic default setting as being "all about *me* ... about my hungeriness and my fatigue and my desire to just get home, and it's going to seem for all the world like everybody else is just in my way."

But, if we really learn how to think – how to be open to others and their experiences, how to consider alternatives to our own assumptions – we can experience these situations differently. We can imagine our way into the perspective of others. When we are initially annoyed by a screaming kid in the checkout line, or a big SUV blocking our way in traffic, or some form of bad behavior, we can

use our capacities of imagination and empathy to see them as fellow humans struggling through many of the same struggles that we have.

Echoing the words and ideas of the great wisdom traditions, Wallace notes that, "It will actually be within your power to experience a crowded, hot, slow, consumer-hell type situation as not only meaningful, but sacred, on fire with the same force that lit the stars: love, fellowship, the mystical oneness of all things deep down."

In this lesson, we have explored how moving past our own moral assumptions or our own likes and dislikes in music can lead to greater understanding of others and may even offer us a richer and fuller experience of life by opening us up to enjoying different kinds of music. By digging in and exploring ourselves and our own tastes, values, and ideals a little more deeply, we can move ourselves toward what David Foster Wallace calls "real freedom" – the "real freedom" to open ourselves up to other people, challenge our own biases and assumptions, and live richer and fuller lives.

"It is unimaginably hard to do this," Wallace concludes, "to stay conscious and alive in the adult world day in and day out." But, he says, "that is real freedom. The alternative is unconsciousness, the default setting, the rat race, the constant gnawing sense of having had, and lost, some infinite thing."



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by Huston Smith
- ❖ God is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions that Run the  
World, by Stephen Prothero
- ❖ Light at the Edge of the World: A Journey through the Realm  
of Vanishing Cultures, by Wade Davis
- ❖ The Serpent and the Rainbow  
by Wade Davis
- ❖ Perfect Order: Recognizing Complexity in Bali  
by Stephen Lansing



## Challenge Seven: The Other Encounter

Your challenge is to understand and empathize with somebody as different from you as possible, preferably with religious, political, or identity differences that are especially difficult for you to understand.

Objective: Practice the art of seeing your way into another person's perspective. This requires seeing your own seeing to move past your assumptions, seeing big to see the historical and cultural conditions that led to your differences, and seeing small to see the specific details of your differences.

1. Find an other. This may be someone in your class or someone you know or meet outside of class, but they should have beliefs, ideas, or ideals that you find **very difficult** or even impossible to understand. *This exercise works best when you really challenge yourself by meeting with an other whose beliefs really bother you in some way.*
2. Big Talk. Set aside at least one hour to have a very deep conversation with them. Select questions from the list at [anth101.com/challenge7](http://anth101.com/challenge7) to get you started.
3. Reflect on all you have learned about who they are and who they are becoming, where they have been and where they are going, what they have done and what they will do, who they have touched and who they will touch.
4. Take a picture together or an artistic portrayal of what you learned and share your experience. #anth101challenge7