

# REFLECTIONS ON OUR COMMON BELIEFS: The Psychology of Interfaith Dialogue

## The Lugano Hypothesis<sup>1</sup>

Stefan Brunnhuber

**Abstract:** Religious beliefs and their impact on science and society have been severely overlooked in modern times. The present text aims to identify and elaborate upon the characteristics of and the common ground for interfaith dialogue. Current inter-religious dialogue is dominated by historical analysis, theological interpretations of texts (exegesis), and disputes concerning the institutional and organizational structures of competency, power, influence and hierarchy within religious administration. However, interfaith dialogue's main object—the common denominator of all faiths—cannot be found (only) in rational, discursive text interpretation (of the Bible or other holy books), nor in organizational and institutional aspects (power, hierarchy and influence). Nor is this common denominator to be found in humanitarian commitment, as religions share this commitment with most secular NGOs. Rather, it is the respective mystical tradition that determines the *differentia specifica* of each world religion. An interfaith dialogue that takes into account empirical findings (on fasting, mantras, mindfulness, and transcending ego states among others) in neurobiology, developmental psychology and medicine can develop real power and leverage, making a substantial and sustainable contribution to both society and personal individuation.

## 1. Introduction

Our current day and age has dire need of interfaith dialogue: not just because people are killed in the name of religion every day, but quite simply because religious belief systems continue to play a fundamental role in daily life. Projections suggest that by 2050, the number of believers following the seven main world religions, each of which believes it holds the only truth, will have

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<sup>1</sup>This Lugano Hypothesis was first presented by the author at an international conference held by the European Academy of Science and Arts and the Faculty of Theology, Lugano, Italy (31 March–2 April 2016), and an advanced version was given as a keynote speech at the Danube University Krems, Austria, on 21 October 2016. It forms part of the general argument of *The Art of Transformation: How We Can Learn to Change the World* (Herder, 2016) as well as a forthcoming book *Psychology in the Anthropocene: The History of the Future* (forthcoming 2017). Further literature is available in these books or from the author.

increased significantly. How can we deal with this situation? Findings in psychology can help to identify the common denominators of and approaches to these religions, fostering a more productive inter-religious dialogue. This dialogue can bring the different world religions together to achieve greater peace, justice, love, sustainability and clearer paths to personal individuation.

Looking at the long history of religious dialogue, one fundamental principle of Hans Küng's 'global ethic' is that *'[t]here is no peace without religious peace. There is no peace between religions without dialogue between the religions. And there is no dialogue between the religions without referring to shared ethical and moral standards.'* Despite rational discussions aimed at identifying the common values that religions share, including love, tolerance, justice and reciprocal understanding,<sup>2</sup> this purely intellectual dialogue has failed to create such a united movement. For example: in the Christian tradition we have an image of God as an old man with a beard, in Buddhism there is no personal God at all, in Hinduism there are deities beyond number, and in Islam there is one God, but Muslims are not allowed to make any images of Him. So how can we bring all of these together? How to come together, knowing that each religion holds rational convictions that are incompatible with the others' principles?<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, certain supposedly 'religious' values have been found not to be specific to religion, as many other non-religious institutions such as NGOs and

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<sup>2</sup> From a psychological perspective, *'being tolerant towards members of other religions'* is ambivalent: *'real'* rational believers are never tolerant, because this would require admitting that their religious commitment is just one truth among many. The equality of different religions would imply the acceptance that one's own religious beliefs are relativistic in nature. The cognitive dilemma is threefold: rational nonbelievers may be perceived as either not fully convinced or too immature to follow *'real'* religious beliefs; the events and convictions of other religions can be regarded simply as fairy tales or interpreted as a curse to mankind; and finally the *'real'* rational believer can adopt an attitude of emotional and moral indifference (*'everybody can do whatever they like to do'*). None of these three attitudes are helpful in overcoming the flaws of current inter-religious dialogue.

<sup>3</sup> S. Freud (1927) interpreted religion as a neurotic symptom, V. Frankl (1987) identified a *'noogenic'* neurosis, the materialistic approach dominant in neurobiology perceives religious experiences as forms of a potential temporal lobe seizure, and cognitive behavioral therapy interprets membership of a religious community as an unspecific coping style and form of re-adapting to the social status quo.

benevolent governments share them. Secular and societal challenges such as alleviating poverty and human rights issues are goals not only in the realm of religion, and in many cases secular NGOs actually possess greater expertise in this field. Here the world religions find themselves competing to make the world a better place with about 1 million NGOs, and their specific contribution becomes invisible.

Looking at religious dialogue from a psychological perspective, we can differentiate between three forms of dialogue, each of which serves a different purpose: first, *intra-religious* dialogue focusing on the code of conduct, rituals and ethical standards required of members that explain both the world and the transcendent; second, *religion-to-society* dialogue, which addresses secular and societal issues such as sustainability, poverty alleviation, human rights and justice issues; and third, *inter-religious* dialogue or the dialogue between the world religions. This inter-religious or interfaith dialogue has the objective of emphasizing and outlining commonalities between ALL religions beyond their intra-religious belief systems, identifying some kind of *differentia specifica*, a basis for discriminating between them. If this goal is to be achieved, we will need to use an evidence-based approach from psychology, neuroscience, social psychology, comparative anthropology and developmental psychology to strengthen these inter-religious links. Furthermore, we will need to take account of over several millennia of experience in specific spiritual practices.

## **2. Differentiating Between Religion and Spirituality**

There is a distinction between religious belief and spiritual practice. The former emphasizes rules, codices and guidelines; it presents authorized texts that offer each member support, social cohesion, religious identity and a general comprehensive interpretation of ‘*what the world is*’, ‘*what God is all about*’, and the ‘*nature of human and society*’.<sup>4</sup> Religions are normally defined by their organizational structure (including taxes, administration, sanctions, membership

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<sup>4</sup> In almost all cases, religions offer a hermeneutic framework that tolerates ambiguities, incompleteness, irrationalities and opposites. Modern science, by contrast, is much less tolerant towards such ambiguities. Maybe this is one of the main reasons why humans are more attracted by religious beliefs than by scientific findings.

fees etc.). Psychologically, this generates a so-called ‘in-group effect’: those who are part of the group and those who are not.<sup>5</sup>

The latter—spiritual practice—follows a different goal. From Tibetan Buddhism, Japanese Zen, Jewish Kabbalah, and Islamic Sufism to Christian mysticism, we find a second mystical current that expresses itself in spiritual, rather than religious, practices. Here, spirituality is transmitted by the senses and enhanced by sensomotoric exercises. Instead of presenting intellectual content that is then critically discussed and shared with others within the community, spiritual practices all over the world instead call individuals to distance themselves from the protective function that religious communities offer (including their narratives), urging them towards an ongoing process of de-identification with the mind, the body, the social environment and the society they live in. Whereas a religious person feels legitimated by history, by belonging to an ‘in-group’ and by text exegesis, trying to re-adapt to the social status quo, a spiritual person is pulled by the future, as it were, trying to gain greater authenticity through the experience of the absolute. In this reading, spirituality is less *translative* in the sense that it helps us to understand the world better than *transformative*, as it shifts the gravity of our consciousness towards greater inclusiveness, wholeness and interconnectedness.

Globally, about 95% of believers follow a religion, whereas 5% pursue a more spiritual pathway. Some authors use different terms, differentiating between extrinsic or exoteric religion and intrinsic or esoteric spirituality. This differentiation leads to different mental states and different societal and institutional outcomes and, eventually, to a completely different form of inter-religious dialogue. The following graph summarizes these findings.

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<sup>5</sup> Empirical findings throughout the last decades have demonstrated that physical fitness, drug consumption, crime rate, alcohol abuse, suicide rate, depression, divorce, anxiety, sexual dysfunction, and self-esteem all correlate with religious membership. However, it remains unclear and hypothetical whether the impact of religion modifies human behavior directly, whether religions are socially cohesive, increasing in-group experiences, or whether the hermeneutic variable of ‘how to see the world’ is crucial as an unspecific coping strategy stabilizing the human psyche.

Table 1: Differences between religion and spirituality

### 3. Key Approaches and Unlimited Possibilities

90% of Americans believe in some form of transcendence; patients are more religious than therapists, students more than faculty, women more than men and the elderly more than young people. When examining the commonalities between religions in the sense of spirituality, as defined in the previous section, a number of key approaches are revealed, all of which are supported by empirical evidence from the life sciences. The following paragraphs summarize these key approaches. A growing body of scientific empirical evidence is available on each of them, supporting the general idea that science and spirituality can be reconciled at this level.

1. **Deep, true thought:** Simply reading the holy texts is transformative in itself; the Hindu tradition calls this *jnana*, while the Western tradition refers to it as true or deep, true thought. This has less to do with arguing, discussing and debating and rather with contemplating, reasoning, thinking and reflecting on spiritual texts, using the *logos*, the *ratio* or reflexive, critical mind. Historical evidence on researchers and scientists (from Galileo to Einstein, from Heisenberg to Albert Schweitzer among others) demonstrates that authentic, scientific thinking, regardless of the topic and the discipline chosen, can lead to changes in the mind and the world. From historical analysis to theological exegesis, from public political talks to the mental capacity to simply switch roles and perspectives, humans have this inner capacity to use ‘rationality’ to achieve a different mind-set. This is true of everyday experiences and of any real, critical, and true dialogue between humans. Hans Küng proposed his ‘global ethic’ in this context of critical and analytical thought. But true critical thought is just one gateway to heaven among several others that are shared by all religions.
2. **Purification techniques:** A body of empirical evidence shows that all religions advocate some form of purification. Fasting is probably the most common purification technique, but there are others, too. Any form of intentional deprivation (sensory input, silence, a hermitic life) has the capacity to effect deep transformation, leading to progressive de-identification and a more integral consciousness, independent of membership of any specific religion.

3. **Unconditional giving:** A substantial body of literature and practice demonstrates the impact of unconditional giving on the mind. Among religions' obvious and prominent features are charity, sharing, grace, gratitude, forgiveness, mercy, service, submission, renunciation, reverence, veneration, discriminating wisdom, reciprocal tolerance, humility, connectedness, empathy, universal pluralism and so on. At its core, this is about achieving a mental state in which traditional ego states and ego functions are transcended towards the alter ego or a bigger whole. Psychologically, the ego state itself is just a fragile, transitory, often dysfunctional and intermediate state. Clinical programs are able to show that gratitude has a therapeutic impact upon depression, as does forgiveness on trauma disorders.
4. **The experience of transcendence:**<sup>6</sup> A further body of work addresses death and the beyond as another prominent topic in each religion. However, dying is not only a matter of rational discourse, but happens every instant, while breathing, in every cell of our bodies, every night, in each social contact we have and in every move we make. The experience of limits can lead to a better understanding of our purpose in life. There is a saying: 'If we learn to die before we die, we will not die when we die.' From a semantic perspective, we are dealing with the future perfect, 'who will I have been', leading to a completely different approach to life and its challenges. K. Jaspers, V. Frankl and Yalom in his existential psychotherapy offer ample clinical and practical evidence of what happens when a candidate approaches their life from the perspective of its limits and borders.
5. **The practice of silence, mantra and mindfulness:** An increasing body of empirical evidence (H. Benson, J. Kabat-Zinn) attests the impact of silence, repetitive mantra practices and mindfulness exercises, both from a traditional spiritual perspective and concerning their effect on mental and physical health. Today there are even standardized programs for different mental disorders.
6. **Physical activity:** Traditionally, most spiritual practices are linked to some sort of physical exercise, especially exercise from the Eastern traditions, such as Qi-Gong, Yoga, Tai Chi and Asian martial arts. The West has secularized these physical activities somewhat. In this context, extreme sports can also lead to a change in mind-set, leading

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<sup>6</sup> Near-death experiences and the experience of limitlessness are difficult to interpret psychologically. They can easily be misinterpreted as mere strategies to compensate for and cope with human suffering. Such experiences do not automatically prove the existence of life beyond death, an absolute deity or transcendental experience in general. The question of whether there is life beyond death remains open. Psychological properties are unable to answer these subtle questions. Personally, I believe in the cyclical nature of birth and death.

to a more integral or holistic view of the world (extreme mountain climbing, marathon running etc.).

7. **Unlimited possibilities:** At their core, all the above mentioned approaches have the potential to lead to a different mind-set, characterized as a spiritual path. However, they are not exhaustive. When spirituality is seen from this angle, day-to-day experience offers unlimited possibilities for transcendence, from cooking, art, sports, and music to flow experiences in vocational activities offering a spiritual gateway.

The following table summarizes the approaches

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Table 2. Six key approaches and unlimited possibilities for inter-religious dialogue

Not only is there a long-standing experiential foundation for most of these practices in each religion; science also provides evidence that they work. Instead of leading a rational debate on ethical and moral standards, inter-religious dialogue should comprise the exchange of experiences in at least one these fields.

These approaches to spirituality represent *some fundamental commonalities* that exist between the different world religions. They offer unlimited ways of bringing the power of contemplative, spiritual practice into our daily lives and differentiate religion from other societal entities. These commonalities are scientifically verifiable and go beyond the traditional rational discourse on religious differences traditionally favored in inter-religious dialogue.

#### **4. Conclusion: Where Science meets Spirituality**

The mystical approach to achieving greater peace, justice, sustainability and a better world for each individual is both smaller, bigger and more indirect than what exists currently. *Smaller*, because greater humility is required in the face of a purely rational narrative explaining the world. *Bigger*, because of the link to transcendence, the divine, the absolute, or emptiness. And more *indirect*,

because the shared mystical practices lead to a change in consciousness, enabling peace, unconditional giving and love, protecting the environment, and fighting injustice, lies and untruth—beyond rational discourse.

Rational discourse on the common values religions share is a prerequisite for inter-religious dialogue and the creation of a united religious movement. However, these discussions alone are not sufficient and must be followed by shared mystical practices, some of which have long traditions and an evidence base in each world religion. This interchange of spiritual practices is more likely to help us achieve the fundamental values of each religion and lead us into another world and another life.

In this context, we can perhaps differentiate once more between our three different forms of discourse: firstly, an intra-religious discourse offering stability, orientation and resilience for its members. Secondly, a religion-to-society discourse that applies to social and environmental issues (such as poverty, global warming or justice), and thirdly, an interfaith dialogue, which provides the platform for the exchange of the experiences that the spiritual gateways offer each individual. This exchange constitutes an indirect but significant change and contribution to the two other forms of discourse mentioned in this text. The *differentia specifica* of each religion are therefore determined more by its spiritual than by its religious institutional pathway and more than ever are characterized not only by rational thought and humanitarian commitment, but by the search for transformation and authenticity and by the identification with the whole.

We are used to starting from the individual and extrapolating to society and nature as a whole: *'Everything that is good for me might be good for society and the whole.'* This is often wrong. However, the opposite is true: *'Everything which is good for the whole is good for each part.'* If religions become more contemplative, transrational, sacred in the manner described in this text, they will become more whole, leading to the *'spiritual aggiornamento'* required in the 21st century and a reconciliation of science with spirituality. Science and spirituality are not opposites or exclusive of each other, but rather complementary and non-reductionist. If religions become more spiritual in this



sense, science can offer abundant evidence of how our brains and our minds, how our social life is transforming, becoming more peaceful, fair and sustainable, changing our consciousness, creating a wider, broader, more inclusive and deeper self. The *how* (the practice we choose) is determined by each individual; the *what* (the content) taking place in each individual is given by the whole or the absolute.

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## 6. Tables:

Religion	Spirituality
narrative, storytelling, hermeneutics, translational, interpretation	sensomotoric, repetitive practice, evidence, transformative for body, mind, behavior
collective in-group experiences, solidarity	individual experiences
legitimatizations, sanctions, rules, fees	individual authenticity
belonging to a socio-cultural entity	consciousness of wholeness and unity
relation is outward bound	inward-bound relation
causal, historical perspective	systemic, non-linear, fractal, final perspective
educative, informational	ongoing de-identification with mind, body, society
containing, holding, dialogic understanding	post-conventional affective states (humility, grace, mindfulness)

Table 1: Differences between religion and spirituality

deep, true thought	exegesis, critical thinking, ethics and morals, scientific experiments, mental role shifts and changes in perspective
purification techniques	askesis, fasting, via negativa, renunciation, giving in
unconditional giving	charity, post-conventional emotions, transcending ego functions (gratitude, forgiveness, relative/absolute affective states)
experience of transcendence	borderline experiences in time, space and ego, purpose of life experiences, future perfect: 'Who will I have been', 'If I learn to die before I die, I won't die when I die.'
mindfulness and mantra	concentration, mindfulness, repetitive mantras, prolonged experiences in nature (Attention Restoration Theory, ART)
physical activities	extreme sports, breathing techniques (Tonglen, holotropic breathwork), dancing, yoga asanas, Asian martial arts
unlimited possibilities	music, art, sex, cooking, flow experiences, day-to-day experiences

Table 2. Six key approaches and unlimited possibilities, representing topics and shared experiences in inter-religious dialogue, backed up by empirical scientific evidence

## **7. Author:**

Stefan Brunnhuber, Prof. Dr. Dr. M.A., endowed Professor for Psychology & Sustainability, Medical Director and Chief Medical Officer in Psychiatry and Psychosomatics at the Diakonie Kliniken, Saxony, Germany. For further information, please visit [www.stefan-brunnhuber.de](http://www.stefan-brunnhuber.de)