
From the Pastor's Desk

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MAY 2016

Learning from Each Other

One of the things that I covet for Christianity from another religion is the psychological insight of Hinduism. The great religion scholar Huston Smith (born a Methodist, by the way) calls the ancient sages of Hinduism “the first psychologists.” Their religious writings, such as the *Upanishads* or the *Bhagavad Gita*, indicate great insight into both the depth and variety of human consciousness.

The *Gita*, for instance, describes three different paths of faith, based not on our free choice but rather on our *inborn* way of approaching life: our personalities. The message of the *Gita* (vastly oversimplified) is that it is not our task to make our own way, but rather to discover the way that has been given to us. Each of the paths requires discipline and attention (in Sanskrit, yoga), so it does require effort on the believer's part, but each of us will have his or her own appropriate sort of discipline.

The three disciplines are: *bakhti yoga*, *karma yoga*, and *jñana yoga*. *Bakhti* is the path of adoration, deeply felt worship. *Karma* is the path of action, serving God by serving earth and its inhabitants in tangible ways. It is doing your best in the areas of your own giftedness. Finally, *jñana* is the path of contemplation, of meditative exploration of the soul. *Bakhti* is generally expressed in groups, karma may be pursued in groups or alone, and *jñana* is largely a solitary quest.

I don't necessarily agree with everything that Hindu writings say about the three-fold path. I don't think that we are necessarily confined to just one path exclusively, for instance, and I think that following one's giftedness is not enough by itself. (To illustrate: at the conclusion of the *Bhagavad Gita*, the great warrior Arjuna, who had not really wanted to go to war inasmuch as he liked and respected those in the enemy camp, decides that his path, his *karma*, is to do his best in his area of giftedness, which is killing people. So he goes off and slaughters the enemy.) What I do covet in all this is simply the recognition that we don't all experience or serve God the same way, and *that's all right*.

Christians don't seem to have figured this out. We have the same personality types in our faith, but we show less tolerance for those whose paths differ from ours. For instance, we have churches that focus largely on the experience of worship, each week hosting deeply emotional worship experiences in which crowds sang and wept and responded to God with fervor. In short, we have *bakhti* churches. We also have churches who measure themselves by their service to others, by the hungry they have fed, the lonely who have been comforted, the sick who have been visited, and so on. Or, in other words, *karma* churches. And far, far too often the *karma* churches consider the *bakhti* churches shallow and useless, while the *bakhti* churches roll their eyes at the emotionally stunted, legalistic *karma* churches.

In my sermons in May, beginning on the eighth, I will be exploring some of the different ways that we express our faith, claiming each as a valid path, and hoping to increase both our understanding of each other and the depth and variety of our own journey. And maybe when we listen hard enough, we can learn from each other.

(p.s. And except for a small subset of Roman Catholics, Christianity has never figured out the path of *jñana*.)