

## The Perennial Philosophy: What Is It, and Does It Exist?

Many religions over time, place, and culture claim exclusivity. As recorded in the Hindus' Gita three thousand years ago in South Asia, god Krishna claimed that those who practiced *his* preaching would be released from their karma. As reported in the Christians' Bible, Jesus in the Middle East during the first century of the Common Era claimed that but through *Him* no one could get to God the Father. According to the twentieth-century American texts of Dianetics, only via Hubbard's auditing methods can humans re-connect with their godlike natures, so believe Scientologists. These are but three examples of many on a continuing spectrum. Can they all hold the key that will unlock heaven's gate? This presentation will explore The Perennial Philosophy, a notion that harmonizes the disparity. Included herein is a summation of perennial philosophy's meaning, a discussion of its applicability to various schools of thought, and a display of views that seem to support its existence versus others that can be used to refute it. The conclusion as to whether it stands as the common theme behind all religions, thereby imbuing all of them with the element of Truth, will be left for the reader to decide.

The Latin phrase *philosophia perennis* was coined by German philosopher Leibniz centuries ago (Huxley vii). It refers to the existence of an ultimate and divine Reality behind all human knowledge, one that is both eternal and universal. For it to be so would mean that this Reality has no beginning or end and that it is applicable to all persons throughout all time. As succinctly outlined by Shear, based upon teachings of the prominent English philosopher Aldous Huxley, perennial philosophy encompasses four core suppositions . . .

Perennial philosophy can be seen as the driving force behind man's quest for cognitive understanding, but many see it as the uniting factor behind all religious tendencies as well. Despite apparent incongruity among sects' beliefs and rituals, scholars world-wide from a variety of disciplines maintain that a common thread, a golden one, cannot be denied. The Aryans taught over three thousand years ago . . .

As previously noted, the existence of a common perennial philosophy needs not only be argued from a perspective of religious dogma. Morality in general, per the eighteenth-century Prussian philosopher Immanuel Kant, is governed by the Categorical Imperative, "the moral law within" (Pals 8), which is based on an inner sense of duty, an unspoken obligation to do that which is right. It can be said to stem from the transcendental ground at the foundation of perennial philosophy. It also can be said to grow like a winding vine through the Collective Unconscious spoken of by Carl Jung in twentieth-century Switzerland. From his psychological perspective, "the totality of one's existence revolves" around a "quest for wholeness" (C. Smith 96), a merging of the Collective and the Personal Unconscious into a united Self. Proponents of a perennial philosophy see clearly the parallel between Jung's theoretical aspects of the psyche and the phenomenal ego's striving to identify with the transcendental Self. "Jung's conception of the collective unconscious is a more scientific attempt to examine this common imaginative experience of humanity" (Armstrong 233). His is an early theory that can tie science to perennial philosophy as the uniting factor of all religions. Contemporary scholars, too, can be cited as support from a scientific perspective . . .

Thus far, arguments *for* the existence of a perennial philosophy have been offered from cognitive, moral, psychological, and scientific perspectives. Legitimate sources have been cited from varying time periods and geographical locations. Though not as prolific in academic publication, arguments *against* the idea of an existing perennial philosophy have also been constructed, are no less valid, and will presently be presented . . .

Dr. Steven Katz, a twentieth century American author and religious studies professor, outright asserts that there is no perennial philosophy. His claim is based on the fact that mystical experiences vary by culture (H. Smith 553-54). A Catholic baby at the baptismal font does not resemble a Muslim man in the act of lesser *Jihad*. Huston Smith counters by saying that Truth underlies experience and is used intellectually to explain one's experience, not vice versa (554). There are common "principles that pervade" all experiences (H. Smith 555). In Katz's corner was Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein who "insisted that agreement in judgments means agreement in what people do and say, not what they believe" (H. Smith 559). Katz continues the argument and further defends his contention by using another simple and obvious point—religions are based on doctrines and among various religions, they are different. Katz sees no reason to complicate the matter; religious dissimilarity abides. "The doctrines derive from metaphysical intuitions, and it is to these that the perennial philosophy appeals," Huston Smith contrarily persists (554), while American philosopher Richard Rorty maintains into the twenty-first century Katz's view that a perennial philosophy does not exist . . .

This list of opponents to the perennial philosophy also includes English poet George Barker. He described Huxley, one of the most well-known perennial philosophers, as "one man

with a religious mania” (Barker 350). Such craze as Barker accused has no place in an argument concerning perennial philosophy. To the contrary, if one is to discuss a metaphysic that pervades all knowledge and religious thought, a level of objectivity is required to surpass the bias that subjective reasoning is apt to call forth. States a Jungian critic, “[A]n objective view of the world is impossible” (Willeford 208). Every individual displays his own unique bias and to suggest that there is a common link to all thought systems, to those who reject a perennial philosophy, is folly.

As stated at the outset, religions tend to claim exclusivity—a blatant display of bias. Which of the religious leaders holds the key to heaven’s gate? Is it Krishna, Jesus, Hubbard? There are thousands more from which to choose. “Religious differences often underlie social and political conflict and war” (Thomas 86). One method of abatement is the adoption of the perennial philosophy, which would offer syncretism to harmonize the disparity. But, as advised by the faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill on their website, “the goal of any paper in religious studies should not be to demonstrate or refute provocative religious concepts.” As with any faith-based claim, admission or denial must be left to the individual. Religious studies encompass all other disciplines, and many were touched upon here. It is now left to the reader to decide for himself whether there exists a perennial philosophy and whether it is the uniting factor behind all religious tendencies.

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