

Touching the Elephant

Values the World's Religions Share
and How They Can Transform Us

Nancy J. Thompson

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“I believe that what Jesus and Mohammed and Buddha and all the rest said was right. It’s just that the translations have gone wrong.”

—*John Lennon*

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TOUCHING THE ELEPHANT

*With love to Xiao Chun and Jeson, who keep me on the path,
and to all those travelling on or seeking a path.*



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Introduction

In the beginning of 2017, the Doomsday Clock moved its hands half a minute forward, to two and a half minutes until midnight – global catastrophe – and the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists stated, “Wise public officials should act immediately, guiding humanity away from the brink. If they do not, wise citizens must step forward and lead the way.”

Lately, many people think the world is going crazy. Right wing nationalism, racism, and xenophobia are tipping elections and targeting citizens and non-citizen workers with hate and violence. Syria’s war disemboweled the country and created a hemorrhage of refugees with nowhere to go; around the world, they have been turned away because they are Arab and Muslim. The world is once again concerned about the risk of nuclear war; in January 2018, Hawaiians panicked, believing that a nuclear missile was headed their way (it was not), and their fear was justifiable given rhetoric from North Korea’s leader, Kim Jong Un, that “a nuclear button is always on my desk” and the United States president’s reply that America’s nuclear capability is “much bigger and more powerful.” Such threats coupled with the possibility of Iran once again ramping up its plutonium enrichment program and the possibility of material falling into the hands of terrorists with desire and capability to make a so-called “dirty bomb” means that to some experts, the threat of nuclear devastation being unleashed today is “greater than it was during the Cold War.”¹

Additionally, if we read or listen to the news and preachers and politicians on the topics of God and religion, we might feel as if *we’re* going crazy, and for good reason: we hear that America is a Christian country (which it isn’t), but that religion is responsible for all the evils in the world. We read that God loves us, but God

hates us. We are told that God and religion are stories made up by people to control other people, but angels guard and protect us. We are taught by some that all religions are equal paths to God, and by others that there is only one true religion.

What should people think? What *do* people think?

First, many people don't believe in God. Atheism is at perhaps a historic high. Some sociologists think that there may be as many as half a *billion* self-identified atheists in the world. Even for those who do profess a belief in God, church membership and denominational identification has been decreasing in many parts of the world.

Some reject anything to do with religion because they see it as superstition in a modern age of reason. Many reject religions because they see them as responsible for much of the violence in the world. Like the religious scholar and writer Karen Armstrong, who debunked that notion comprehensively in her book *Fields of Blood*, I think that view oversimplifies matters. However, students of history see that wars have been fought over religion, and people read that terrorists still continue to commit terrible violence under a banner of religion, and it is common knowledge that various cults have traumatized and killed people or incited them to suicide in the name of their religions. Jim Jones and the People's Temple immediately comes to mind, along with David Koresh at Waco, Marshall Hepplewhite (Do) and the Heaven's Gate cult, and others. Can we see correlations between religion and violence? At least on the surface, yes, even when much of that violence is ultimately political or pathological.

On the other hand, many people *do* believe in God. Many people believe in religion and identify as religious. Religious ideas are ancient. Many religions have perished from the earth, but others have endured all over the world for thousands of years. If

religions were utterly without redemption, purely controlling, evil and violent, oppressive and misery-making, why haven't they died out completely, especially as democracy and science and reason have spread? What do they offer people? Why has religion persisted in places that have tried to obliterate it, even when the people who practiced it were persecuted for their beliefs? Further, why haven't reason and science eradicated the social problems – crime, poverty, war, violence?

Let's complicate things even more. How is it possible that people who may not believe in God have strong religious beliefs? That they do is more common than many people might at first realize.

I'm starting with a lot of questions because throughout this book I try to answer them. My goal in writing this book is to bridge two realms: the sacred and the secular. I don't want to convert readers. I am not going to tell readers that they should or must believe in God. I am not going to urge anyone to hurry down to the local church, temple, mosque, or synagogue. Rather, I want to help readers understand an important idea, regardless of whether they believe in God or not. The idea is that the world's diverse religious texts have certain themes and values in common. These themes and values are stressed for practical reasons that matter to us as individuals and societies. The values can mesh to make a beneficial difference in our lives, families, and communities. People do not need to "get religion" to benefit from them.

The philosopher Emile Durkheim, who connected the ideas of society and religion, wrote that religion "has given birth to all that is essential in society" because "the idea of society is the soul of religion."² To Durkheim, religion was a tribal affair, one that was not at its heart supernatural. Instead, Durkheim said that religion depends on a separation between the spheres of the sacred and

the profane, the profane being our mundane, conventional reality. In our everyday realities, people all have similar basic wants and needs, no matter who they are or where they live. We all need shelter. We all hope to avoid injury. We all want happiness. One of the real benefits that we can gain from looking at where the world's major religions intersect is the realization of what we have in common and what, as Durkheim said, is "essential in society." To do that, we need to become aware of the sacred.

If we think about it, what's most essential in society is that we can live together in harmony. At its heart, that's what society is: orderly community. If we are honest with ourselves, though, we can see that many of our societies today are ill. They are plagued not only by poverty and often preventable illness but with violence of various sorts, such as racial and ethnic violence, youth violence, domestic violence, elder abuse, police violence, and sexual violence, not to mention war, riots, and violence associated with various kinds of criminal and political mischief. The World Health Organization, in fact, calls violence a "global public health problem" and points out that although such violence is pervasive in the world, it can be prevented, and it can be turned around in places where it has already taken root.³

Violence correlates in part to social isolation. More and more, we see people who isolate themselves and their families. Some become survivalists who plan for what they believe is the coming apocalypse and who believe they can survive by protecting only themselves, by withdrawing from the world, by learning basic survival skills. To turn society around from self-destruction and other-destruction, however, we must believe we can; we cannot be apathetic. To do so, we must care for more than ourselves.

To care for others, and to care for ourselves, we can and should cultivate eight specific traits that the world's major religions all

prize. These traits can create abundant transformative good that can heal our angers and hatreds, build healthier lives, strengthen our families, improve our communities, and even mend the world. They can help us rise to the challenge of the atomic scientists and become those wise citizens who can step forward and lead the way.

Rescuing the World

In the summer of 2018, the world watched helplessly as enormous resources were marshalled in Thailand to rescue twelve school-age boys – the Wild Boar soccer team – and their 25-year old coach. They had been trapped on a ledge in a flooded cave, more than a mile from the cave’s entrance, for over a week when searchers found them. Over another week would pass before all were rescued by teams of divers. The rescue was dangerous; one diver died trying to get oxygen to the group.

On social media, two trends became apparent. One was prayers for the group’s safety. The other was recriminations. In fact, it was easy for me to imagine how the scene would have played out in America. Parents would have immediately hired lawyers. Civil charges would be filed against the coach for trauma, reckless endangerment, and negligence; just a few months earlier, in May 2018, an appellate court reconsidered a lawsuit against a baseball coach charged with being reckless and negligent just for asking a player to slide⁴. If a coach brought a sports team into a cave in America and got the players trapped, television stations would be broadcasting fury along with fear.

In contrast, in Thailand, parents sent messages of support and forgiveness. Parents waited together at the cave until all the boys were out; as precious as each boy is, all were precious. A woman whose fields were flooded when water was pumped out of the cave opted not to apply for government compensation, even though she is not a wealthy person.

Despite the fears of parents, their values were clear: compassion. Forgiveness. Generosity. Effort: the rescue effort was massive, and some with no stake at all in it did what they could to help, even if it was bringing food or praying. Despite how frantic so many

must have felt, order prevailed. In fact, order saved the lives of all thirteen.

In contrast, as I sat up the night before the last five were rescued, I was horrified by a story about an incident in California that happened at the same time as the Thai rescue. A 92-year-old Mexican man, who was in California visiting his family as he has done each summer for years, was beaten with a concrete brick by a group of people who shouted at him to go back to Mexico. He sustained fractures to his face and ribs.

What kinds of values did his assailants have? What made them feel emboldened to do such a thing?

Some would look at that assault and the expressions of hate and violence in the world and dismiss it as “human nature” or with the pronouncement that “God is dead” and this is the proof. I don’t believe God is dead, although perhaps God is also not “alive,” at least not in any conventional sense. I do believe that we can benefit if we stop arguing about what God is and whether God is and whose idea of God is the “right” idea of God. We can benefit if we stop insisting that people *should* believe in God. We can benefit if we focus instead on the shared spiritual values that shape human society. We can benefit if we will admit that there *are* beliefs and actions that can beneficially bind human society together and work to cultivate them.

We can see examples in the world around us. What makes a place “happy”? Despite what we might think, it’s not endless money, rampant materialism, and loads of fame. An article in *National Geographic’s* travel website focused on some of the countries rated as happiest in the U.N.’s *World Happiness Report*. It concluded that “All possess a winning formula of good governance, strong sense of community, respect for fellow citizens, and general high quality of life.”⁵ Among the countries highlighted

in the article, Iceland values integrity; Australia values respect for people's dignity; New Zealand values effort to protect the environment; tolerance and kindness are Dutch values.

I use the word "values," and I want to define it, because the word is too often used in vague ways today (such as the common "family values," which could conceivably mean anything from watching television together to insisting on abstinence to using corporal punishment on children who disobey). In sociology, values are a culture's shared beliefs about what is beneficial/desirable and harmful/undesirable. For example, early Christianity valued martyrdom. Early Judaism valued justice and law. Sometimes values endure, and sometimes they change; Christianity, for example, no longer places such a premium on martyrdom that people are encouraged to seek it.

Today, at least eight values prized by all the world's religions and that have endured in the world's religions help us to live happily together. Our ability to live together in societies has enabled human survival and spread since the earliest appearance of humankind. Without being able to join forces and cooperate, our species most likely would have perished quickly from the earth. Human babies are helpless for years. Threats to babies and adults alike were numerous even after civilization developed, not to mention before. Until they invented weapons, humans had few defenses against predators such as bears and saber tooth tigers. Joining together helped our human ancestors to increase their defenses and to spread risk.

The problem is that humans and their societies are inclined to self-advancement, and humans have proven to be quite willing to sacrifice fellow humans to achieve it. The history of humanity is the history of sacrifice and murder. The oldest known human sacrifice in Africa, found in Sudan, dates back 5,500 years,⁶ and the

theorized murder of Otzi the Iceman likewise dates back over 5,000 years. Groups routinely kill members of other groups, even today. Society can thus both protect us and threaten us.

The obvious secular answer to this paradox of our helping and hurting each other is that the rule of law helps humans live together. That's true in part, but it's not the whole story. The United States provides an illustration. The country has laws against homicide and assault, but the CDC still reports over 15,000 homicides in a year plus 1.4 million emergency room visits for assault.⁷ At the end of 2012, the country reeled from just one such homicidal assault that killed 20 small children and eight adults at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, despite laws against murder and trespass. Law did nothing to save those lives. Nor did laws victims from death and injury in the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing, a 2015 mass shooting at Inland Regional Center in San Bernardino, California, a 2016 mass murder at Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida, or from the many other senseless acts of violence that are either reported or ignored in the news each day.

Some people might not want to think about values from religions because they believe that religion, too, contributes to violence. The world's religions give people a group identity, and those group identities can become so fixed and so dogmatic that they lead to conflict where and when they collide. For example, Islamic fundamentalist entities as ISIS and the Islamic State have enacted terrible violence. In 2017 and 2018, the world even witnessed supposedly non-violent Buddhists persecuting Rohingya Muslims, to the extent that the persecution might qualify as genocide.⁸ Violence can indeed be spurred by religions, but it also transcends religion.

The fact is that much of what humans do—both good and bad—is born of ideology. We follow political leaders, military

leaders, and social leaders because we believe in abstract ideals like economic systems (such as capitalism), political systems (such as democracy), and social concepts (such as liberty and the pursuit of happiness). Humans have shown themselves to be willing to kill and be killed for abstract concepts, both secular and religious. Blind, unquestioning, unthinking adherence to anything is dangerous. For example, faith in political systems and economic systems can bring great wealth and freedoms, but can also cause great catastrophes: totalitarianism, war, and even famine.

The same is true of religious ideals. Blind adherence to religious beliefs can have dangers, but we are perfectly capable of considering and using ideas and values from those religions without being married to the entire system that accompanies them. The world's religions offer us ideals that will benefit ourselves and our societies if we put them into practice, but that doesn't mean we must "become" one religion or another to benefit from them. We just have to focus on what "right" is and do it. As actor Viola Davis insisted at the women's march in Los Angeles in 2018, "time needs to be helped by every single moment doing right."

THE ELEPHANT

This book takes its title from a parable in which six men set off to see an elephant, although all the men are blind. When they find the elephant, the first man feels the elephant's side. He determines that the elephant is like a wall. The second explores the tusk, which prompts his belief that the elephant is like a spear. The third, grasping the trunk, is convinced that the elephant is like a snake. The fourth gropes until he feels the elephant's knee, at which he pronounces the elephant to be like a tree. The fifth examines only the elephant's ear, so he decides that an elephant is like a fan. Finally, the sixth happens upon the tail and declares that the rest,

who are now arguing, are all wrong. The elephant is like a rope, he insists, and he joins the argument. The irony is that all six men are correct, yet they are all wrong. Each is limited by his insistence that what he feels is all there is.

I've talked to many people about the idea of the Infinite. What I've learned is that you can put a dozen people in a room, ask them all about their concept of it, and get twelve different ideas about what that is. If the Infinite can be symbolized as an elephant, maybe our problem is not that we "feel" just one part of the elephant, like the men in the parable did. Instead, maybe the problem is that we see a whole elephant, but we imagine nothing more than the elephant we know. If I conceptualize the Infinite as a bearded man in a white robe, and another person conceptualizes the Infinite as emptiness or as enlightenment, we might have difficulty understanding each other. We may be unwilling to look beyond what we think we know. Our challenge, then, is to imagine what others imagine, to feel what others feel, and to see what others see. Doing so allows us to consider the commonalities amongst the world's sacred texts.

There's a reason to care what the texts have in common, even if we don't believe in any religion. The texts are from diverse cultures in various parts of the world. They span lengthy time periods. Each text had its own purpose. The cultures that gave birth to them had little in common. The main ideas in them are often unrelated. For example, nothing in the sacred texts of Judaism suggests that Jesus is the Messiah. Nothing in the New Testament refers to the Dao. Hinduism believes in a personal soul, but Buddhism doesn't. However, despite how different these texts are, their common values directly relate to the concerns that all humans share. The commonalities can help us understand our human existence. This is crucial, because if human existence is utterly meaningless, then

anything goes. That “anything” can get ugly. Focusing only on what separates us can also get ugly, as wars, genocides, racism and prejudice, slavery, and other destructive behaviors have shown the world.

In contrast, the ideas that are treasured in common by the world’s spiritual texts have the potential to bring us together rather than separating us. The different texts and their stories are a cacophony of many voices, a kind of Babel. Deep beneath their surface is quiet yet steadfast truth that has the power to transform our lives, our families, and our societies.

WHY CHANGE?

Throughout this book, I compare spiritual texts from Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Daoism and Confucianism to show the values they share. At least three important sources of resistance can arise when examining and comparing spiritual texts. One source of resistance is that the texts are all just a bunch of superstitious rubbish that come from “pre-scientific” times, and that they are nothing more than the attempts of early peoples to make sense of the universe and their place in it. Such a stance is really limited. It assumes that there is absolutely no wisdom to be found in the texts purely because they are ancient, mythological, and spiritual. That stance overlooks the usefulness of the texts in providing guidance for groups of people and the staying power of the texts. Clearly, plenty of old texts have been abandoned. Most people today, for example, don’t argue over the Code of Hammurabi or the ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts. What in *these* texts makes them endure? What purpose do they serve? Those questions are worth exploring.

Another source of resistance, as mentioned earlier in the chapter, is that people may find it difficult to look beyond their own

spiritual or religious concepts. If I believe in something called the Dao but not in something called God, and you believe in something called God but not the Dao, then I will be inclined to dismiss what your text says because I don't believe in the authority of it. Likewise, you will dismiss what my text says because you believe that yours is the authoritative one.

The third source of resistance focuses on God. Many people perceive the Infinite as God. However, even within any one religion (say, Christianity or Judaism or Islam), believers have differing and often competing images of God. God might be seen as a warrior, as a father, as compassionate, as a tyrant, as a miracle worker, as unknowable, and so on. Some readers might dismiss the values found in texts such as the Bible or the Qur'an *not* because the values are faulty, but because they see God as cruel or authoritarian or capricious. They might also reject the ideas simply because they don't believe in God.

Despite all that, it's important to talk about God. Talking about God helps us understand how other people think and act in the world. One can be an atheist and study theology: that's no contradiction. Oxford's Dr. William Wood, a University Lecturer in Philosophical Theology explained why in an article in *The Atlantic*: "theology is the closest thing we have at the moment to the kind of general study of all aspects of human culture."⁹ When we study each other, we better understand each other. At a time when we too often don't understand each other – witness the rise of hate crimes in the United States and the rise of violence around the world – better understanding each other has tangible benefits. In fact, examining the world's spiritual texts encourages us to be aware of an important constant: our shared humanity.

To think that people around the globe are intrinsically different from each other because of where they live is a mistake.

Yes, cultures have their own social customs and norms. Yes, they may practice indigenous rituals and religions. However, beneath the layers of social identity, all people have commonalities. In the 1940s, Abraham Maslow proposed his famous theory of the hierarchy of needs. The basic needs of all people everywhere are physiological, Maslow argued. To survive we must have food and water. We must be able to maintain homeostasis. We must be able to breathe. We must be able to have sex because reproduction is an essential drive of all living beings. Before we can be concerned about anything else, those most basic needs must be met. Once they are met, the next level of needs that all people try to satisfy is security. The drive to be secure and safe—to know that no one will creep into where we sleep at night and steal our treasures or bop us over the head or flee with our children—prompts us to create order and to strive for control. Security comes from social relationships and order.

We cannot begin to think about higher needs, such as friendships, romances, families, the need for self-esteem, or the drive to reach our own individual fullest potential, unless those first two basic levels of physical and security needs are met. All over the world, whether rich or poor, whether a country dweller or an urbanite, whether an indigenous person or a migrant, we have the same basic needs for survival and safety. The world's spiritual texts reflect those needs. Although many ideas in the texts are specific to the cultures that gave birth to them – Indian, Chinese, Middle Eastern, and so on —we can find many ideas in these texts of how humans can ensure their security, safety, and basic survival. We learn too about love, fealty, how emotions can affect us, duty, and more.

In examining the texts, one other caution is useful. We should beware of delusions. Delusions are all around us and within us,

and it's important for us to be aware of them because they so easily lead us to distort information. To be deluded is not to be psychotic or naïve. Delusions are simply mistaken ideas that arise from a whole host of factors. How we were raised by our parents, the work experiences we have had, how we have been treated at the hands of others, the advertising inducements and judgments we are fed, and the subtle and not-so-subtle messages of the media all are examples of factors that contribute to delusions. Many women in America, for example, do not consider how the pictures that confront them daily of happy, smiling size zero women on billboards, in newspaper and magazine ads, and on television programs are fabricated. Therefore, they labor under the delusion that they must be a size zero to be beautiful. When delusions are projected onto text, we can misunderstand it. We can, for example, become angry at the surface message of a story, and thus not dig for the deeper meaning, the more complex understanding of the text. That can be a real stumbling point for those who have been taught to read texts such as the Bible literally.

Recognizing our delusions and getting past our resistance to consider what the texts share has important benefits. These ideas can help us change our own lives and improve the lives of others.

The central idea of this book is that the wisdom that the world's spiritual texts share can help us improve ourselves, our families, our communities, and the world. Such a position assumes that our families, societies, and the world have problems that need to be addressed. I believe that's true. To understand why we should want to create change, it's useful to examine where we are.

"Where we are," of course, varies from country to country. In the United States, certain problems rise to the top of citizens' concerns. For example, people are dissatisfied with the healthcare system. Many are still uninsured, and access to healthcare is not

equitable. Many citizens are concerned about race relations; in recent years, police killings of African American males have made headline news and sparked riots and protests.¹⁰ Wealth inequality is a global concern; in early 2015, Oxfam released a report that indicated that the wealthiest one percent of the world's population would control half the world's total wealth by 2016.¹¹ This inequality is evident in the United States, where families at the top of the net worth ladder have seventy times more wealth than those at the bottom.¹² The World Economic Forum included concerns about government, the economy, unemployment, and income disparity in its *Global Risks 2014* report along with food and water crises and "profound political and social instability."¹³ Certainly, those concerns bore fruit in various parts of the world in 2014 as Ebola threatened western African nations, ISIS cut a swath of violence and terror across parts of the Middle East, and California staggered under a historic drought.

Signs of unease and distress can also be found on a more local and personal level. For example, heroin and opioid use has been increasing amongst Americans. Over the twelve-year period from 1991 to 2013, the number of opioid prescriptions almost tripled and the United States became the world's almost sole consumer of opioids such as Oxycodone. Over the seven-year period from 2005 to 2012, the number of heroin users in the United States rose by 176%.¹⁴ In January of 2017, *The New York Times* reported that the addiction rate was continuing to increase: in 2015, the *Times* reported, deaths from heroin overdose had surpassed gun homicide deaths for the first time in American history, destroying the lives of 33,000 users.¹⁵ Drug addiction is not the only problem. The Centers for Disease Control reported that suicide rates in America in 2014 were the highest they had been for the past 25 years.¹⁶ In the second half of 2014, the *Washington Post* reported on the CDC's National

Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, which indicated that over 30% of American women have been battered by partners and almost 20% have been raped.¹⁷ The voices of many women who have experienced sexual violence are now being heard in the #MeToo and Time's Up movements.

Sexual violence is not limited to America. It happens around the globe. So does extremism. In America, a white nationalist movement has experienced a resurgence, and it has quickly resulted in violence and death. In fact, the Anti-Defamation League reports that in 2017, "white supremacists were 'directly responsible' for 18 out of 34 United States extremist-related deaths"; in contrast, only nine deaths that year were attributed to Muslim extremists.¹⁸

Around the globe, people are suffering too from environmental mayhem. The United States, presumably a major contributor to global climate change, has pulled out of the Paris Agreement. Weather is becoming more extreme in the United States, but it is also changing around the globe, impacting the agricultural output, flood patterns, storm patterns and survival of people from the Arctic to coastal areas.

Not all of our suffering is as dire as poverty, hurricanes, rape, war, and other pains. Often, we are just unhappy. We are lonely. Our relationships fail. We measure ourselves against the successes of others, and we think we are coming up short. We work longer and harder. We become more stressed. We become convinced that we are competing in a "dog eat dog" world, and we snap up whatever opportunities we perceive, whether they are "poisoned meat" or good for us and regardless of whether we are snarling at others. We may immerse ourselves in various vices: prostitution, alcohol binging, gambling. We may suffer from illness. We may immerse ourselves online, oblivious to the findings that being online tends to make us unhappier.¹⁹ We buy too much or try to create

new income streams; we get into debt. Debt increases our stress. The cycle continues.

Because we are under so much stress, we might not think about how we can help each other. We might make the wrong kinds of effort. We might become selfish, angry, addicted, prejudiced, self-protective, and our families, partners, and friends might suffer. We might do things we regret. We may lash out at others; we might even try to intentionally hurt others to gain whatever we think we will gain.

One indicator of how disconnected we are can be found on news blogs and websites that allow readers to make comments. Frequently, the unkindness and mean-spiritedness of comments are shocking. People wish death to people they've never met. They bully strangers who have had losses and experienced deaths. They clamor for executions of people not even convicted of crimes and damn them to hell. The worst, "trolls," have been associated with a variety of psychological issues including sadism.²⁰ The deep unhappiness, envy, fears, and narcissism that is often expressed in such comments should concern us; they indicate a violent kind of mob thinking.

The good news is that the world's spiritual texts help us learn how to change. We can make ourselves healthier and happier, and we can make our societies healthier and happier. We can see in the news how determined people armed with weapons can make enormous changes in the world. My goal with this book is to show how determined people armed with knowledge and compassion can also make changes. What the world's religious texts have in common is that knowledge and compassion. The following chapters explore eight values religions around the world share, and how they can help transform us. It starts with effort, including our own effort to want to learn how and why we can transform ourselves.