

**Empathy of the Spokes and Hub –  
A Lay Chaplain’s Integrative Approach to the World’s Religions.**

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I start with the **Question**. As a novice lay chaplain entering the room of a patient, how can I jumpstart a relationship with a perfect stranger that is meaningful, that can best serve them? A stranger who might be an atheist or agnostic, a Catholic, Protestant or even Muslim, a spiritualist, a Buddhist, an evangelical, Jewish, a fundamentalist “end-days is upon us,” someone practicing a Native American tradition, or even a “wizard?”

In the following, I’ll provide an overview of world religions, i.e., on Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Native American, with a focus on their concepts of “sin,” the “afterlife,” and the “golden rule.” And I’ll be doing so through the lens and an application of my approach to jumpstarting relationships with the diverse, perfect strangers we serve. It’s an integrative approach I call, “Empathy of the Spokes and Hub,” greatly influenced by my Apsáalooke (Crow Indians) mentors Tom and Susie Yellowtail and their Rock Medicine Wheel metaphor (with its differentiated but equal “spokes” and ubiquitous “hub”), and by my own healing journeys with cancer and the special gift of “empathy” revealed during the second of those journeys. This integrative approach is described in “When We Walk the Halls of a Hospital – An Integrative Personal Story.” See handout or <https://spokanefav.com/when-wewalk-the-halls-of-a-hospital-an-integrative-personal-story/>.

**Synopsis of Integrative Approach:** As with you, I approach each patient with empathy, attempting as best I can to view and appreciate the patient’s experiences from his or her perspective. With each patient, each a perfect stranger, I then attempt to seek out and appreciate his or her uniqueness, each patient representing an equally vital “spoke” in the Wheel, different from my own spoke. Yet I also seek out, acknowledge and value that within each stranger we have a “shared-in-common” that links us as part of the Wheel’s “hub,” that in fact we are ultimately not so different. It is an integration of divergent thinking, i.e. the differentiated spokes and convergent thinking, i.e. the ubiquitous hub. Attempting to align my words and heart with the patient’s “spoke” and “hub,” I, as with you, seek to offer compassion,

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in part doing so in the words of a poem, of a parable, or of a prayer. With empathy opening the door and compassion opening the heart, the interface of difference and no difference can make all the difference.

**Wheel's spokes.** "The Wheel is made up of many different spokes. The spokes represent the different traditions of the world, each with their own language, own rituals, own way of life. Each built upon and expressive of integrity. While each is distinct and unique, each is equal in importance and worth, none greater than another" (Yellowtail p. 5). The door to a stranger's spoke is opened with empathy, to seek an appreciation of that which is distinct and different in the patient.

In the instance of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, they share in the stories of Genesis and the Prophets, such as Abraham/Ibrahim, who is acknowledged as the father of all three religions. The story of "Abram," meaning "exalted father," is centrally important to each tradition, dealing with the covenant with God. Yet digging deeper, key differences emerge. For Jews it is a story emphasizing migration, of a "journey" with God to the Promised Land and what it means to be the Chosen People. For Christians it is a story focusing on "faith," having faith in God while departing on an uncertain journey, and faith in the willingness to sacrifice your son, Isaac. For the Apostle Paul, as articulated in the "doctrine of salvation by grace through faith in Christ," "faith" is an abiding conviction and key to becoming a Christian (thus opening the door to Jews and Gentiles in the fledgling Christian community of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, as opposed to the Jewish notion of "birthright" as a key to membership). For Muslims it is a story of "submission," i.e., "muslim" means "one who submits to God," and it is a story of submitting to the Allah's call to leave a homeland and to sacrifice your son, Ishmael (who with Hagar, go on to establish the *Kaaba* at Mecca and the first *Hajj*). Submission builds upon the notion of conviction to emphasize action. Note: Jesus is considered one of the great Prophets in Islam.

There seems to be a world-wide sharing in the notion of "sin." From the Latin, *sons* "guilty." Of all the variables that we might encounter with our diverse Gritman patients, some form of "sin" could be "under the covers" of our patients. Likely not coming up in conversation, the concept could predicate a conversation. I'll define "sin" generically as a transgression against the ethical

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and moral teachings of a tradition. While many world religions share this or a comparable concept, once we dig deeper, there too are fundamental differing meanings, with big implications. For example, how sin is conceptualized can relate to how the afterlife is understood, which itself could also be “under the covers” of a patient, in the back of his or her thoughts and feelings. A casual use of the term “sin” can lead to misunderstandings.

**Judaism:** “Sin” in Hebrew *hata* “to go astray.” Given an all-powerful God - Yahweh (there is little room for a counteragent of similar power, e.g., the Devil), the focus is on acts of human behavior and on the “here and now” aligned with God. Sin is less focused on the implications for the soul. There is no “original sin” and no baptism. Sin is understood more as a “misstep” away from God, akin to a mistake. As humans are endowed with the ability to learn, to learn from one’s mistakes, humans get repeated attempts at getting it right. As you are the source of bad choices, of evil, you are the one who can learn from them. If cited, Satan is used more as a metaphor for someone’s evil inclination. In seeking not to go astray, the focus in Judaism is on: God as Creator, Revealer and Redeemer; the *Torah* - God’s “instructions,” moral and ethical code in first five books of Bible; and on “Israel” as a living people of a place and land since biblical times. In Judaism, one seeks orthopraxy (correct behavior in social justice and freedom; spare others from suffering) as a means to overcome sin, but it is also an orthopraxy manifested in the “here and now” with other mortal human beings that is important. The ultimate focus is not on an everlasting life in a Heaven per se, though eventually all will reside there (this is debated and rather agnostic).

**Christianity:** “Sin” in Aramaic *hōb* “debt owed to another,” and in Greek *hamartia* “missing the mark.” Given the “Duality of Divinity,” i.e., a loving God, the Father, and Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son, in Heaven, in contrast to an evil Satan in Hell, each in battle for the human soul, sin is an essential part of the cosmology, as reflected in doctrine of “original sin.”

Acknowledging subtle definitional distinctions between Catholics (e.g., affirms state of guilt and distinguishes degrees of sins – venial vs mortal, “seven deadly sins”), Protestants (e.g., affirms state of guilt with all humanity having sinned, a universal moral corruption) and Eastern Orthodox Christians (e.g., not so much a state of guilt as a “terminal spiritual sickness” that

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debases the image of and relationship with God), sin is fundamentally disobedience to God, i.e., “a word, deed or desire in opposition to the eternal law of God” (St. Augustine of Hippo). Sin is an evil act, for many understood as an alignment with Satan. For some adherents, sin is a loss of love for God, elevating self-love in its place. Redemption is pursued through sacramental acts of faith in Jesus Christ of the *Gospels*, such as baptism, confession, communion, acceptance of Christ as one’s personal savior, and in living by the example of Jesus. Consequently, in Christianity one seeks orthopraxy (correct behavior) as a means to overcome sin, and to attain salvation of the soul and everlasting life in Kingdom of God, in Heaven.

**Islam:** “Sin” in Arabic *khatiya* “transgression, iniquity.” Given an all-powerful God – Allah (as with Judaism, there is no all-powerful counterforce, though there are Devils), sin is an act of not following Allah and his teachings, but more specifically, it is an act of forgetting to follow His will. For some, Devils can be attributed to leading one astray. As humans are not born of sin, there is no “original sin” and no baptism. As an act of forgetting, it is through deliberate acts of atonement and repentance that sin is overcome. Atonement comes in acts of submission to the Five Pillars of Islam: 1. Witnessing to the one true God; 2. Acts of ritual prayer five times daily; 3. Charity – sharing one’s wealth, attending to orphans, the destitute and disinherited, performing good deeds; 4. Fasting during the month of Ramadan; 5. Partaking of the *Hajj* – pilgrimage to Mecca. All are anchored in Allah’s revelations via the angel Gabriel/Jibril to the prophet Mohammad, “peace be upon him,” as recorded in the *Quran*. Like Christianity and unlike Judaism, for Muslims one overcomes sin by seeking orthopraxy (correct behavior) as a means for one’s soul to have everlasting life in Paradise.

**Hinduism:** “Sin” in Sanskrit *pāpa* “vice.” As there are multiple views on the routes to divinity (the many *Yoga* paths) and on the nature of divinity (the one God – Brahman, and the 330 million Gods and Goddesses), the term *papa* in the strictest sense refers to actions antithetical to the moral and ethical codes of one’s dharma, actions which bring about negative *karma*, adverse consequences, i.e., re-born into a lesser state of being. Such actions are not directly related to and enshrined in a specific Divine doctrine, nor a violation of God’s will, per se. To avoid sin, the focus is on following one’s *Yoga* path, such as *Bhakti*, *Raja* or *Jnana*, and in

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adhering to one's *dharma*, one's true self and its social, ethical and moral responsibilities at each stage of one's *samsara* or re-births. We see this played out in the unfolding drama between Krishna (the eighth avatar of Vishnu, the preserver God) and Arjuna (a warrior prince) in the *Bhagavad Gita*, and the quintessential command, "act, renouncing the fruit of your actions." The ultimate destination of one's *Yoga* path is *Moksha*, when you are liberated from the continuous cycles of *samsara*, and the burdens and sorrows, the fears and pains associated with the desires of the mortal life. You are liberated into the oneness of the Infinite, into bliss and ultimate joy. You are united with Brahman/Atman (i.e., the ultimate divinity in the cosmos and within the soul). In Hinduism, one overcomes sin by seeking orthopraxy (correct behavior) as a means to *Moksha*, but it is not for personal salvation of one's soul and everlasting life in Paradise.

**Buddhism:** "Sin" in Sanskrit *pāpa* "vice." As a religion not adhering to a personal God or Supreme Being per se, sin stands for the pursuit of thoughts and actions that cloud and undermine clarity of mind, leaving a person susceptible to "attachments," e.g., love of self, love of possessions, love of a profession, etc. As with the Hindu doctrine of *samsara*, one seeks to move from the continual cycles of suffering at each reincarnation, to a state of *Nirvana* and *Sunyata* (similar to but not exactly like *Moksha*). In *Nirvana*, desires are "extinguished" (the fuel is taken away), and one is liberated and released from suffering. In *Sunyata*, one attains "emptiness," all is extinguished (the fire itself is taken away), and one enters a transcendent state of "boundlessness," like "a drop of water in the great endless ocean." Though it does not mean "nothingness," as the "self" is dissolved and reconstituted into the Infinite. To avoid sin and gain *Sunyata*, one seeks to follow the "Four Noble Truths": 1. *Dukkha* – acknowledging suffering as the condition of human life; 2. *Tanha* - greed, hatred, ignorance, attachment is the cause of *Dukkha*; 3. *Dukkha* can be abated by following the Eightfold Path, which focuses on the clarity of mind being attentive and awake to all, on acts of compassion and non-violence for all living beings, and through the mind, on truth and overcoming ignorance; 4. When *Dukkha* is abated *Nirvana* and *Sunyata* are actualized. For some adherents, Buddhism is more of a philosophical than a spiritual path. While the Buddha, the Eightfold Path, and Divinity can get you to *Nirvana* and *Sunyata*, upon arrival, there is the realization that there is no Buddha, no

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Eightfold Path, no God. In Buddhism one overcomes sin on one's journey to *Sunyata* by disavowing selfishness and attachments, and by promoting attentiveness and compassion. In contrast with other religious traditions, because of the Buddhist's primary focus on the mental state, orthopraxy (correct behavior) is not so much a means but a consequence of the journey to *Sunyata*. As with Hinduism, in Buddhism there is no personal salvation; no everlasting life in a Paradise.

**Native American:** "Sin" in Apsáalooke *áannutche* "to take the arm of another," in Niimiipuu *qepsi'iswit* "to be mean toward another," in Schitsu'umsh *hnh'esn* "wrongdoing toward another." Sin entails acts violating the moral and ethical code embedded in the kinship system, expressed as harming another person and acting selfishly, with greed. It is an act that will inevitably come back to harm the doer or his or her family, similar to the Hindu notion of negative *karma*, but occurring in the more immediate, not in a next life. There is no "original sin," no battle between God and Satan for the soul; sin is not understood as a violation of and disobedience to God's will. Rather, sin originates out of and is operationalized within the structure of ethical and moral social relationships. In this regard it is akin to Hinduism. Along with "coming back to you," there are social responses to and social consequences for committed acts of sins. To avoid sinful behavior, one must act aligned with the *Miyp* "teachings" of the Animal-First Peoples, such as Coyote, Salmon, Sedna, Changing Woman, and Raven, who were themselves brought forth by and are extensions of the Creator – Akbaatadía (Apsáalooke; the one and the many divine conceptualization comparable to Hinduism). The teachings are conveyed in the oral narratives, retold periodically and enshrined in the geological typography of the landscape. For Native Americans, these cherished stories are the equivalent in stature and importance to the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Torah*, *Gospels*, or *Quran*. One seeks orthopraxy (correct behavior) as a means to overcome sin, and, as with Judaism, what is significant is the orthopraxy's manifestation in the "here and now" with other mortal human beings. There is no Heaven, nor Hell. Upon death everyone's spiritual being journeys on and resides in "the lands across the river," re-joining with all the departed ancestors, comparable to Judaism.

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“As the religions of the world are innumerable, each unfathomable, learning about them is a life-long endeavor. With each new stranger encountered, perhaps the best we can do is but bring to bear an awareness and appreciation of the unfathomable depth and richness of each religion encountered, as we engage each with human etiquette, respect and all our empathy, and with whatever level of competency thus far mustered” (p. 19).

**Side Note:** The greatest challenge I’ve had in teaching a seminar on world religions is not in getting my students to appreciate the overt differences in practice and doctrine between Islam, Buddhism and Christianity, for example, but in getting students to understand what all world religions actually have in common, but which is fundamentally different from their own the ontological and epistemological foundations. Most students have difficulty in comprehending the meaning and implications of the spiritual reality upon which all world religions are contingent, even for those students who profess being Christian (i.e., an issue of equivalency). The prevalence of Cartesian Dualism (the irrevocable separation of Mind/Thought and Body/Material) and Aristotelian Materialism (physical reductionism and denial of spiritual causality), implicit in most of my students’ worldview, greatly hinders an appreciation of world religions. In contrast, a spiritual ontology and worldview are premised in Monism (unequivocal interconnectedness of Thought and Material) and Transcendancy (Plato’s Allegory of the Cave and spiritual efficacy). It is this fundamental difference, between my students’ worldview and a spiritual worldview, that is the greatest challenge in teaching a seminar on the world’s diverse religions.

**Wheel’s Hub** – the shared-in-common. “We should not let the spoke’s different as different could be, its glare, blind us and get in the way of discovering what is right in front of us” (p. 20). “All the different spokes radiate from and are anchored to a singular source, the hub. While the spokes are each specific and defined, the hub is necessarily non-specific, is inclusive, all encompassing, that which connects all, that is in all, is ubiquitous. The hub makes all possible, is renewing, is life-giving, is transformative, coming from the spirit and the material, coming from the heart and the mind and the body, coming from inside and from out, from the Infinite”

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(Yellowtail p. 5).” The door to a stranger’s hub – the shared-in-common – is opened with empathy, to seek an appreciation of that which is shared-in-common with the patient.

Besides a spiritual ontology, another possible shared-in-common among the world’s religions is the “ethic of reciprocity” found in the Golden Rule. As stated by Barbara Brown Taylor (in *Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faiths of Others* 2019:77), “It can be argued that all great religions have [the Golden Rule] as a benchmark on what makes them great. They ask the members of their tribe to use humanity as the benchmark for how to treat those outside the tribe.” The “Golden Rule” is itself expressive of what can be considered at the heart of the teachings of all great religions – empathy and compassion – love. Like “sin,” the “Golden Rule” too could be “under the covers” of a Gritman patient, though not specifically coming up in a conversation, but predicated in it. It is intriguing to note that these two pivotal religious components, “sin” and the “Golden Rule,” are fundamentally antithetical.

In Judaism, hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful. “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your kinsfolk. Love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD,” *Leviticus* 19:18.

In Christianity, “All things, therefore, that you want men to do to you, you also must likewise do to them,” i.e., do unto others as you would have them do unto you, *Matthew* 7:12. And “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself,” *Matthew* 22:37-39,

In Islam, “None of you [truly] believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself,” i.e., love your brother as you love yourself, *An-Nawawi's Forty Hadith* 13 (p. 56).

In Hinduism, “this is the sum of duty, your *Dharma*: do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you; treat others as you treat yourself,” *Mahābhārata Shānti-Parva* 167:9.



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In Buddhism, “One who, while himself seeking happiness, oppresses with violence other beings who also desire happiness, will not attain happiness hereafter,” *Dhammapada* 10. *Violence*. And “Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful,” *Udanavarga* 5:18.

In Native America, as expressed in the Apsáalooke term *ammaakée* "give away" and the Niimiipuu term *té-k'e* "to give and share [food] with others," there is the ethical responsibility to help all others who are in need, as they would help you when you're in need. It is nicely illustrated in the Rabbit and Jack Rabbit narrative.

“As a Lay Chaplain, with empathy having opened the door and now standing or seated beside the bed of someone less a stranger, I continue to listen with deep attentiveness. My hope is that the patient might feel welcomed and safe to share something, if only bits and pieces, of his or her own unique story, now in crisis. To do a little of their own *basbaaliíchiwé*. We continue in spoken and occasionally in unspoken dialogue; so much can be said in silence, as through the eyes. And I seek to bring to bear a helping hand, seek to provide some compassion. Eventually I'll offer the words of a poem, or of a parable, or of a prayer, as best I can, words aligned with and appropriate to the patient's spoke yet cognizant of our shared hub. And if those gently spoken words bring a calming, a reassurance, a hope, if they touch the heart, there just might be seen on the face of someone no longer a stranger – a sparkle in an eye, a glimmer in the corner of a lip, or an eyelid closing in restful peace” (p. 23).