

2014

# For Praying Out Loud: An Exploration of Religious Traditions & Their Prayer Practices

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## Recommended Citation

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FOR PRAYING OUT LOUD  
An Exploration of Religious Traditions & Their Prayer Practices

A senior project submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Bachelor of Arts in Humanities and Cultural  
Studies

By  
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December 9, 2013

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## INTRODUCTION

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Religions and their prayer practices are an integral part of the history of our world and are an important source of community and individual spiritual development. Religions serve as a community resource for compassion and empathy toward others, an organizing force for community wellness and solidarity, and a safe haven to explore one's own spiritual journey and purpose in life. There are emotional, moral, logical, and spiritual aspects to all religious traditions and when we have an understanding of not only that which we believe and practice, but also an understanding of that which others believe and practice, we can begin to see a pattern in what we have in common – at home and across the globe. As noted by Diana Eck, in her “Harvard Thinks Big: Religion in the Age of Pluralism” 2012 address, “Religious literacy is critical, not just for those of us who make a business of it, and not just for those of us who think of ourselves as spiritual or religious, but for all of us, no matter what you intend to do in life or where you intend to live.”

By increasing religious literacy, my project addresses the need for people of many (or no) faiths to come together and create what we might call a multi-faith public square. Two ways of accomplishing this is through scholarly investigation and through sharing insights as a result of religious practices. Whichever means are used, the most important things we can learn *from* people of other religions is *about* people of other religions, in order to develop enriching relationships with them as neighbors and citizens.

This project will combine scholarly research and the sharing of voices and insights through the vehicle of an audio podcast titled “For Praying Out Loud, An Exploration of Religious Traditions & Their Prayer Practices.” The prayer practice portion of the podcast has

the additional potential to provide an opportunity for an interactive glimpse into the variety of ways to access spiritual energy, which may be used and applied in anyone's daily living practices. My research includes the following: a worldview of religions and their prayer practices through philosophical and academic readings; personal insights through recorded interviews with family and friends; and through audio interviews of academic scholars and religious leaders throughout Marin and beyond, including voices of religious leaders from the Marin Interfaith Council's 2013 Annual Prayer Breakfast (which highlighted the Buddhist tradition, the Sikh tradition, the Black Church in America, and the tradition of Islam). Lastly, I will provide an overview of the technical aspects of producing the project as an audio podcast and the steps that are required to bring a project to life from an idea to a fully produced product.

It is important to note what this project is not. I have not set out to answer the questions "Is there a God?" "What is God?" Or even "Why are there religions?" For this treatise I am interested in the fact that there *are* many religious traditions practiced throughout the world, and I thought that if I wanted to know more about them, perhaps others would want to know as well. My purpose in selecting the topic of religious traditions of the world and their prayer practices is to gain, and share, knowledge about the many religious traditions and prayer practices that inhabit our world.

This project is a collaborative effort that includes my professors, advisors, readers and fellow teaching and student colleagues at Dominican University of California (whose ideals are Study, Reflection, Service & Community), the leaders and members of the Marin Interfaith Council (celebrating faith, advocating justice, and building community), my own non-profit, LifeSupportM.org (Young People Making Good Things Happen in the World), and my family and friends.

In thinking about how this project is situated within the humanities, the best words come from the American philosopher Ralph Barton Perry, who says, “To promote freedom it is necessary to enlarge the span of man’s consciousness by acquainting him with the world” with, what Matthew Arnold, the British poet, says, “the best that has been known and thought in the world” (Meyer 6). Therefore, no matter where you are in the spectrum of beliefs and practices, gaining knowledge of and insight into the many religious traditions in the world helps provide insight into the whole of humanity, inclusive of faults and perfection.

### **Worldview of Religions and their Practices**

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Religion is a topic often avoided at parties and the dinner table: passions are aroused, emotions are activated, and tempers flare. Why? Because religion is a very personal concept held dear to our hearts and if anyone disagrees or thinks differently or when someone tries to convince us to think or act in a different way than we were taught or we believe - it can be very difficult to fathom any way other than our own. Oftentimes when a tradition that is taught without the perspective of other existing traditions, the original tradition seems to be the only right tradition, making it a challenge to be open to the idea that other traditions may be just as right as our own.

Even what may seem a lighter topic, prayer, can be a hot button in one's circle of family and friends – and even in political circles. Bring up the topic of prayer in school or prayer in the workplace and voices will rise up to a fevered pitch in less than two seconds flat. It is often best to save the topics and activities of religion and prayer for the privacy of one's own mind, church, synagogue, masjid, or round house. Creating a platform of pluralism that allows for conversation about religions and prayer practices, in a way that is informing rather than conforming, seems to

be one of life's most challenging tasks. Perhaps when we have an opportunity to know more than only our own way or tradition we will be able to appreciate both the spiritual and historical value of all the religious traditions in the world.

Diana Eck, in answering the question, "What is Pluralism?" on Harvard University's Pluralism Project website, asserts that pluralism is not diversity alone. It is not just tolerance and it is not relativism. It is "energetic engagement with diversity" and "active seeking of understanding across lines of difference." She goes on to argue that pluralism is the "encounter of commitments" and is based on dialogue - speaking and listening, criticism and self-criticism. It is a "commitment to being at the table - with one's commitments." It is obvious that being more than just tolerant is often difficult for humans. We are constantly cut off and disconnected by our shortsightedness and unwillingness to reach outside our comfort zone.

Whether we are in a toleration mode or willingly exploring with open eyes, religions do exist and there is usually some sort of prayer practice involved. Prayer comes in many forms: spoken word, song, dance, writing, chanting, pilgrimage, and quiet meditation, among others. Be it through song, dance, or words, "prayer is action that communicates between human and divine realms" (Zaleski 5). This conscious changing activity helps lift us out of our worry, fear, and over-compensation and gives us the ability to understand that we are connected to each other and the universe at a frequency that we cannot hear or access on an everyday level.

How do Buddhists keep their center about them without need of a God? What does a Sikh prayer sound like? What is it like to experience singing a Black Church hymn? What does it mean to be so devoted to Allah that one would pray five times a day? It is possible that finding answers to these questions might help one discern what it is that one is connected to and to ascertain where one's beliefs are in the spiritual continuum – and how it all fits together in a

symbiotic union of varied mutuality. Huston Smith, in *The World's Religions* says, "What a strange fellowship this is: the God-seekers of every clime, lifting their voices in the most diverse ways imaginable to the God of all men. How does it all sound to Him? Like bedlam? Or, in some mysterious way, does it blend into harmony?" (2). Perhaps this diverse lifting of human voices and prayers to the divine is a cacophonous noise, but looked at in a different way, isn't the song of a flock of birds, the howling yowl of a pack of wolves, and the gushing and rushing of the wind a cacophony of the thriving, living, breathing sounds of life as well?

### **Personal Insights**

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I, myself, am interested in and fascinated with the many religious traditions that exist in the world because throughout my life I have been involved in many and exposed to many more. As a child I was christened Catholic, attended a Black Baptist church, and learned about Judaism, Hare Krishnas, and Rastafarians. As an adolescent I was baptized Mormon and as a young adult I practiced Buddhism and eventually professed Atheism. In adulthood I embarked on a journey to find out my true spiritual identity and explored many more traditions, including Scientology, Brahma Kumaris, New Age, and even Twelve Step. This varied spiritual journey helped me come to the realization that I am a multi-faith person who is fascinated with the intricacies of all religious traditions and who strives to practice inclusivity and understanding above all else. "The modern study of religion, in describing the forms that religions and symbolism express, gives shape to the language of life - the language of images and actions. If we can understand the themes that recur throughout religions, then we can more clearly decipher the meaning of life around us" (Smart 28-29). There is a certain power in the scientific method of

observation, and the experiences of my spiritual journey proved to be an excellent petri dish for me to peer into for the discovery of new worlds, new ways of thinking, and new ways of understanding how people connect with one another and with what many call the heavens. I never gave it a second thought that there were many religions and that while I may not agree with some of the actions and tenets of each, I appreciated that they all were formed and founded by the needs of the communities and people in which the ideas sprouted.

### **Academic Scholars, Religious Leaders, and the Marin Interfaith Council**

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Hearing voices and stories from faith tradition leaders helps us form our thoughts and see how each tradition may open the door to communication between cultures and, most importantly, between our own humanness and the divine. “We are [all] spiritual travelers so our destination and our roots are in fact the same” (“Nishkam”, *The Source Project*, 2013). Raising one faith and denigrating another does not seem to make sense in this time of growing population and globalism. Coming to a recognition that religions and traditions can co-exist is a necessary step to living peaceably and gracefully with one another. Recognizing and embracing a realization such as this presents a transformative opportunity for humankind to step out of religious isolation and self-righteousness and into an inclusive “multi-faith community” (Lynch 2013) with “a single planetary heritage” (Novak 2013). Our beliefs share more in common than we realize.

Each tradition has its own specific manner by which it approaches its relationship with God (or no god – in the case of Buddhism), but each follows a path toward some sort of individual and communal connection to the divine and seeks a place of solace that can often only be accessed through putting oneself into a state of bliss, focus, or intention. This can also be understood as being in the state of prayer. "Prayer fulfills the need humans have for God, for



inspiration, for affirmation of our own spirits. In prayer, we communicate with the essence of everything that exists, including our own essence" (Ruiz 3). Slowing down our bodies, our breathing, and our thinking, with the activity of prayer and meditation clears a space for new energy and "refreshment" (Brewster 2013) of our soul and mind.

Religious traditions permeate every part of society from the most orthodox of practices to widespread secularization. In running in the Run-or-Dye 5k foot race in the United States one might be surprised to find that there is a tradition of throwing colored powders in the Hindu tradition in celebration of the changing of seasons and the vanquishing of one god over another in their religious tradition. In the *Cambridge Illustrated History of Religions*, John Bowker says, "There is no known society in the world in which religion has not played a part..." (28-29). Whether it comes in secular form or pure orthodoxy, religion permeates every culture across the world and it connects us to one another whether we know (or like) it or not. One would hope whether it is the liberation theology of the Black Church, the oneness and inclusiveness of Sikhism, the devotion to Allah of Islam, or the attainment of Nirvana in Buddhism that, as David Wolpe says in *Faith Matters*, "Religion teaches kinship of all human beings, which should tie us together" (54). There is no doubt that humans have a desire to be connected and build communities. Religion and prayer provide a centering focal point for both small and vast communities to become synchronized in thought and purpose for the good of the whole community.

The rituals, rites, and codes of religious traditions and their practices of prayer can be looked at as a path to access one's own personal relationship with spirituality, both individually and communally. Surely, compassionate understanding of the ways and beliefs of others is an

important factor in situating the self in the world and the cosmos. As the Buddha put it, “Your suffering is my suffering and your happiness is my happiness” (28).

### **Technical Aspects of Producing an Audio Podcast**

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For this project I conducted eleven individual one hour interviews, both in person and via telephone. All of the interviews were recorded with the use of a mixer and computer using Adobe Audition as the recording software. A Smartphone connected to the mixer with sound cables was used for the telephone interviews. Three main locations were used for the interviews: my home recording studio (telephone interviews), Marin Interfaith Council conference room (in-person and telephone interviews), and at Dominican University of California’s radio station, Penguin Radio (in-person interviews, both on live radio and off-air recordings). The four religious tradition segments, Buddhist, Sikh, Black Church, and Islam, were recorded live at the May 2013 Marin Interfaith Council Annual Prayer Breakfast. The Buddhist tradition piece evolved from an on the spot microphone check, as the Buddhist tradition piece was not actually on the program for the day, but the prayer that was sung during the microphone check was so clear and inspiring, that I decided to include the Buddhist tradition in my project.

The individual interviews were a highlight of the project and I enjoyed putting the questions together and conversing with scholars, experts, students, and friends about a crucial subject, that, as I noted earlier, is often avoided so as not to create conflict. One of my interview subjects sent me a note later saying that it was the first time in her life that she had ever talked about religion with anyone and that she came away satisfied and uplifted from the experience.

Regarding research materials, over sixteen books were used as references, as well as multiple free song websites, YouTube, and my personal music collection to help gather additional sound and voice clips for the production. Each individual interview included one hour of preparation time, and two to three hours of post-production time in addition to the actual interview time. The two hour prayer breakfast necessitated a three hour preparation time and over twenty hours of post-production. It was essential to listen and re-listen, several times again and again, to select the best clips and sound bites for use in the project. In many cases editing for vocal pauses or exterior sounds was needed. In total, it took over one hundred hours to research, write, record, and produce the audio podcast portion of this project.

As you can see, audio project production is a very time consuming and focused activity. I was often in the studio late into the evening and then early in the morning to record, edit, and re-edit bits of clips of voices and sounds. It takes a great deal of preparation, production and problem solving to create an audio presentation; there are layers and layers of sound, just as in religious practices there are layers and layers of nuanced rituals and beliefs. The reading, writing, library crawling, internet treasure hunting, and audio editing efforts take great planning, patience, perseverance, and concentration. I will even venture to say that the concentration that it takes to produce an audio podcast for one's senior project is akin to religious fervor and the transformative nature and transcendent power of prayer.

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