

Transformation through Spiritual Practices*

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Abstract

The 9/11 event, while tragic in its intent and consequence, has in some ways brought the world together. It has raised awareness about our faiths to an all time high. People around the globe have begun to go beyond belief and explore the spiritual basis of their faiths and actions. Some universities and interfaith organizations are endeavoring to find the points of congruence, intersection and departure among the various faiths leading to better understanding. More recently emphasis is being given to the teaching of spiritual practices from various traditions.

Exposure to the spiritual disciplines practiced in various faiths, in a learning environment, has the benefit of connecting students at a more spiritual level. This intrinsic connectivity provides the stimulus to 1) broaden their relationships based on awareness and experience, 2) develop interfaith understanding, and 3) lessen the bias that may arise in response to the unfamiliar thoughts and practices of people from other traditions. Consequently, teaching, experiencing, and discussing different spiritual practices offers an effective method in the transformation of hearts and minds. Several traditional spiritual practices within the Christian and Hindu traditions are presented along with a Christian theology for interfaith dialogue.

Background

For most of the world, everyday life is full of trials and tribulations and suffering every step in the way. But, the resulting sorrows of life cannot be ended through the emotional feelings of anger, hatred and malice against those who have more or are 'different' from us. These feelings, engaged as a response to any perceived or real injustice or oppression, have the potential to lead to cowardly acts of unlawful activities or even terrorism. In the same manner, the powerful may be driven with an inherent arrogance of doctrinal superiority to justify the use of force to quell any opposition. Each success at the employment of force further adds to the intoxication of strength already filled with lust, greed, and the intention of domination.

There is further polarization between the Haves and the Have-nots, between those who claim to have right on certain land masses and those who actually control those land masses, and between the powerful with access to the impervious bureaucratic machinery and those with no time or resources at their disposal to think or do anything beyond their immediate interests. The notable outcome is that the forces of power and terrorism are at odds against each other, neither side with any clarity of vision for their objectives. The violence from either side has resulted in loss of life and property but has not been able to change the minds of people-at-large.

At the same time, minds are being easily swayed by persistency of advertisement campaigns that appeal to our senses and driven by market economy. The distorted view of the First Amendment has resulted in a society that is complacent to: disproportionate display of sex and violence on television programs, confusion over the extent of parental and teacher control over the behavior and actions of children and confusion on overly emphasized rights exploited by politicians over individual responsibility. Communities all over the world, including within families, have been drawn into the mindset in which the only thing important is 'I' or what is in it for me. Consequently, the measure of trust on the other is based on how much I can be personally helped by the other and therefore, the trust is based on a person's economic wealth, or how much funds they can raise and how well connected they are with the wealthy and the powerful.

While the history is replete with the stories of war and the resulting destruction of life and property, there was something different about 9/11: power of the media. Repeated coverage of airplanes flying into the Twin-Towers of the World Trade Center, the collapse of the Twin-Towers and the resulting loss of life of the innocent people whose only misfortune was that they went to work on 9/11/2001 as usual has made a permanent impression on our minds. The coverage of the subsequent terrorist attacks in New Delhi, London and Madrid and the wars that have followed have also been seen repeatedly on television channels around the world. These tragic incidents have only brought about the loss of life and destruction of property and have bred more of the same kind. Neither the cowardly acts of terrorism nor the excessive use of force by the powerful have brought about the intended change of hearts and minds.

On the positive side, both, 9/11 and its aftermath have left something unsettling in our hearts compelling us to look outside of our material existence to find answers for our actions. They have raised awareness about our faiths to an all time high. People around the globe have begun to go beyond belief and explore the spiritual basis of their faiths and actions. Some universities and interfaith organizations are endeavoring to find the points of congruence, intersection and departure among the various faiths leading to better understanding. More recently emphasis is being given to the teaching of spiritual practices from various traditions with a hope to bring about a change in our cultures. Both, sorrows and arrogance, may be sublimated in the nobler and higher thoughts and experiences germinating from the pure heart.

In order to engage differences that are shaping our schools, police forces, neighborhoods, and even the horizons of our cities with Orthodox churches, domed mosques, Hindu temples,

Buddhists meditation centers, and so forth, we found that our work with university students, exposing them to different religious spiritual practices, offered fertile soil for transformation.

Thesis

The most effective way to effect a change in a society is by introducing subtle changes in life style. This can be done if the society imbibes moral values and ethical principles of their own accord. Proven methods through the ages are simple spiritual practices that can be adopted by their continuous practice. If followed, the simple practices will result in communities of people with natural inclinations of trust and respect for the fellow man, measurable savings (that would otherwise go into the expenditures toward war) for the governments, hospitals and insurance companies. Intangible benefits of the practice are immeasurable, for example, the building of responsible societies that live in harmony by virtue of their nature assuring safety in our communities and preservation of our human race.

If a certain trek is traversed repeatedly over time, a trail is made. The trail then becomes the choice path for the future travelers. The trek, initially marked over any kind of landscape, brush, mountain, or the desert, becomes visible after a trail has been cut through that landscape. Same is true about any human endeavor, including imbibing human values. Even the human brain works on the principle of repetition. Such is the power of repetition, or simply practice. The importance of sustained spiritual practice is inherent in Hinduism¹ as it is in all other enduring religious traditions.

The Bhagavad Geeta lays heavy emphasis on the need to cultivate stability of mind for spiritual success. Equanimity of the mind is precondition to learning. When the mind does not wander around and becomes stable, only then one can develop understanding. A mind can be made stable by repeated practice of spiritual disciplines. An unstable mind verily is the cause of attachment, whereas the stable mind is the very seat of the spirit. It is not so easy to attain the stable state of mind, but the mind can be controlled through intense practice and cultivation of dispassion as also mentioned in the Bhagavad Geeta².

We learn new social mores or expressions and adopt them in day to day life or in our vocabulary by their repeated practice. We use those expressions to convey certain meaning. Correspondingly, when we use those expressions, we have the context of their meaning in the back of our mind so that the listener is impacted accordingly. Just as repeated practice is important for the adoption of social mores or words, so is it necessary for the adoption of spiritual practices. And just as we employ the new words to convey a certain meaning and the listener is impacted in a certain manner, so also spiritual practices convey certain meaning

¹ Jayadayal Goyandka, *Srimad Bhagavad Gita*, Gita Press Gorakhpur, 1986.

Bhagavad Geeta: (XII, 9) *If you are not able to steadily fix your mind on Me, O Arjuna, then seek to reach Me through Abhyaasa Yoga (intense practice).*

² Jayadayal Goyandka, *Srimad Bhagavad Gita*, Gita Press Gorakhpur, 1986. **Bhagavad Geeta: (VI, 35)** *Lord Krishna said: Undoubtedly, O Arjuna, the mind is restless and difficult to restrain, but it can be brought under control by Abhyaasa (repeated practice with perseverance), and Vairaagya (cultivation of dispassion).*

and people involved are affected appropriately. It is proposed that spiritual practices be inculcated into our day to day lives to witness a social change for living harmonious among different faiths, races and cultures.

Sanaatana Dharma

Sanaatana Dharma (the eternal precept) offers order for the manifested universe for its maintenance and preservation. Consequently, conformity to *Sanaatana Dharma* is order or virtue, and disobedience to *Sanaatana Dharma* is disorder or evil. Whereas, *Sanaatana Dharma* is good at all space-time continuum for all mankind, *dharma* represents practical approaches for adopting *Sanaatana Dharma* in different family traditions, social situations (including interfaith dialog and understanding) and political circumstances. *Dharma* is a conscious choice³ to live in harmony with the rest of manifestation and therefore sustains the entire manifestation.

Any interaction between a human being and his environment (human beings, objects and events) is governed by his behavior and conduct that are nothing more than rendering of his duty consistent with *dharma*. Therefore, ethics is derived from eternal precept and forms the foundation of spiritual practices and life. On a personal level, the purpose of ethics⁴ is to eliminate mental impurities. When ethics is employed in human interaction for social good, it is based on *dharma* or duty to attain the welfare of the society. The pursuit for the highest good is *Sanaatana Dharma* and entails the individual to rid oneself of lust, greed, anger, attachment, hatred, jealousy and selfishness.

In order to undertake spiritual practices, Patanjali⁵ recommends five moral principles: Nonviolence (no malice through thought, word and deed to any living being), Truthfulness (speaking of truth in accordance with *Sanaatana Dharma*), Honesty (abstaining from theft), Self-control (detachment from the objects of senses) and Non-possessiveness (non-attachment for any possessions), and five physical disciplines: Cleanliness (external and internal), Contentment (acceptance of whatever comes one's way), Austerity (deliberate and voluntary undertaking of a discipline), Self-Study (studying and sharing of scripture, company of good men) and Devotion (surrendering all actions to God).

One of the aspects of *advaita* (non-dualistic) ethics is that man is *Brahman* (the state of existence, consciousness and bliss) and it is his highest duty to recognize the same oneness in all and that he must live this. The only way he may live this is to consider that all individuals, being of the nature of the spirit, are in essence identical with one another. Correspondingly,

³ Laj Utreja, *Who are we?*, AuthorHouse, 2006

⁴ Swami Nikhilananda, *Hinduism, Its meaning for the liberation of the spirit*, Sri Ramakrishna Math Printing Press, Madras, 1982

⁵ Swami Nikhilananda, *Hinduism, Its meaning for the liberation of the spirit*, Sri Ramakrishna Math Printing Press, Madras, 1982

one must not discriminate and therefore cultivate, love and kindness for all. For example, a husband may love his wife not for the sake of his wife, but for the sake of the spirit which is the same in both.

Consistent with *Sanaatana Dharma*, during interfaith, inter-race, intercultural dialog, we may try to live ethically. At each step, we may ask questions, such as: 'Should I do this, should I not do this, etc. With such ethical practices, we may slowly rise toward being ethical and moral and become a model for the others to follow. Further, sustained spiritual practices will become habitual and finally we'll do them as a sense of duty. Those who believe in serving others may begin to serve without expectation; those who believe in God, may begin to see the world as God's world, and *advaitis* may begin to see the same spirit in all. We may become free of doubt and fear of the other.

Christian Theology

Sustained spiritual practice is foundational to Christianity.⁶ We have listed several traditional spiritual practices at the end of our paper, and two additional personal examples are offered here: St Teresa of Avila (16th century): *Lord, how everything is ruined by the vain habits we fall into and the way everyone else follows them. We have been blessed with wonderful capacities to help us along the way: Reason tells the soul how mistaken it is in thinking that these earthly pleasures are of the slightest value in comparison with what it is seeking. Faith instructs the soul in what it must do to find true satisfaction. Memory reminds it how all of those pleasures come to an end.*

And Brother Lawrence (17th century): *As for my set hours of prayer, they are only a continuation of the same exercise. Sometimes I imagine myself as a stone before a sculptor from which he will create a beautiful statue. Presenting myself before God, I ask him to form his perfect image in my soul and make me entirely like himself. At other times when I apply myself to prayer, I feel all of my spirit and all of my soul lift itself up without any care or any effort on my part. It continues as if it were suspended and firmly fixed in God, as in its center and place of rest.*⁷

The mission of Christian theology today is to develop a compelling spiritual theology that is deeply rooted in spiritual practice and that responds wisely and compassionately to the immense global challenges of our age. A compelling spiritual theology calls us to deep

⁶ **Romans 8:5:** For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. 8:6: To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.

⁷ *Devotional Classics*. Richard J. Foster & James Bryan Smith, editors. NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005.

spiritual formation, vision and service in response to the wind of the Spirit; and a relevant Christian theology is Trinitarian.⁸ Inherent in the core doctrine of the Trinity is the affirmation of dialogue with the other. The Trinity resides and operates mysteriously and dynamically through the relationships of Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer; the Spirit is experienced in the midst of relationship with God's creation and provides an interpretive framework for inter-religious dialogue.

It is in relationship, whether a religion class, a world religions congress, a centering prayer group, worship and Eucharist, or 'where two or three are gathered', that our capacity and openness to transcendence occurs. Knowing that the Spirit cannot be pinned down and cannot be defined, does not mean we do not know her Presence. Honest and genuine dialogue is risky but the fruits are worth the risks involved. Authentic dialogue requires all participants to let go of their own presumed superiority and enter into conversation with openness to where the Spirit is blowing.

Scripture is clear in demanding that we love our neighbor, and that loving neighbor is the action of loving God, that Christian salvation depends on this action, and that Jesus, most explicitly in the parable of the Good Samaritan, commands the broadest definition of neighbor to include those outside Christianity, and even our enemies. Luke 10:25-37 presents the soteriological question to Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus responds that eternal life rests upon the two commandments, and is clear that love of neighbor exemplifies loving God.

Therefore Christians are called to align their lives with the 'way of Jesus'⁹, the way of love without limits or conditions. Specific directions are given throughout the New Testament (particularly all four Gospels, Romans, Galatians, and James) on this major theme of love of God and love of others. This is the dominant work of the Spirit in Jesus, the early church, and the age to come: extending love to others, even the enemy.

Traditionally, Christian religious communities orient themselves in either exclusivistic, inclusivistic, or pluralistic stances. Today, leading theologians are offering a fourth option for understanding and approaching the diverse religious realities of our world. Asian theologian, K.P. Aleaz's "Pluralistic Inclusivism", provides a terminology and application

⁸ Robert D. Hughes, III. "Starting Over: The Holy Spirit as Subject and Locus of Spiritual Theology" in *Engaging the Spirit: Essays on Life and Theology of the Holy Spirit*. Robert Boak Slocum, editor. NY: Church Publishing, 2000.

⁹ John Cobb. *Transforming Christianity and the World: A Way beyond Absolutism and Relativism*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 1999). Cobb's response to the biblical text, is that we must choose between two images of the Way. One is to consider the Way as a blueprint, a fixed set of guidelines, to which we must conform ourselves. This, says Cobb, is the way of legalism and is to be rejected. The second image is that of trusting in the Spirit that leads us into all truth, responding to opportunities as they arise, opening ourselves to criticism from others, testifying to the truth, always seeking to learn more. This, he contends, is the Way of Christ. He recognizes that while we believe that our own Christian tradition has grasped important aspects of reality, reality in its entirety is always more.

that is fundamental to a theology of interfaith dialogue. The application of these concepts in next few years needs to be closely observed and shared as part of the on-going discussion.

Pluralistic Inclusivism utilizes the language of economics to uphold just distribution of religious resources. Aleaz claims that imposing one's own faith on others is the only religious injustice, and that the Abrahamic religions as well as the colonial rulers have resorted to this in some areas and periods in the past. All religious people should proclaim the liberative elements in other religious tradition, when such elements are destroyed by vested interests. For example, rather than pointing out defects in other faiths to be corrected by ones' own, the theologian is to proclaim the gospel that the caste factor can be corrected through the resources from within Hinduism itself. He/she proclaims that the serious problem of Dalit oppression can be countered with Advaitic resources. Advaita Vedanta stands for a rejection of caste system. Swami Vivekananda explains: "One who is established in the bliss of the Infinite will feel the whole sentient and insentient world as one's own Self. Then that person cannot help treating all people with the same kindness as he/she shows towards him/herself. The Atman is absolute, all pervading and infinite and each individual soul is a part and parcel of that Universal Soul. Therefore in injuring one's neighbor a person actually injures oneself. Thus the theologian should uphold the liberative elements in other faiths to fight against the evils manifested through a misrepresentation of those faiths. The right interpretation of the tenets of other religions, to remove social evils, is an important aspect of an ecumenical theologian's duty and mission."¹⁰

Aleaz claims that we "must all seek forgiveness for the damage done to other religious faiths by way of destruction of the local religions and cultures as well as by misinterpretations. It is a sin to deliberately misrepresent other religious tenets. The early missionary undertakings were accompanied by the exploitation of indigenous people, genocide, land theft, slavery and oppression."¹¹

Foundational to our teaching is the question: Does one stay within one's own religious universe of meaning or does we enlarge our vision, to engage the person most different from

¹⁰ K.P. Aleaz, *The Struggle of Christianity to come to Terms with Inter-Faith Reality* (The Asia Journal of Theology, Vol. 19, No. 1, April 2005), p. 3-13.

¹¹ Ibid. Note: Aleaz clarifies that Christians should learn that in the Rig Veda (1.164.46), 'Sat' (translated Truth, Being) is one, but sages call it by different names (monism); rather than the incorrect but prevalent understanding that Hinduism is polytheistic. Other Christian misinterpretations of Hinduism have to do with the criticism raised, that it does not give sufficient importance to the historical dimensions of human life, and however the Bhagavad-Gita reveals that "history is time open to God and on the move, maturing towards its own wholeness which is already present in the presence of its Lord within its heart. The road of death is samsara, which is cyclic-time and the path of life, is history, which is time open to Krishna's love and ripening into life with him." In Advaita the ecological, historical and social dimensions are theologically asserted and thus the ontological understand of the structure of being is properly related to the problems of life on earth, of life in relation to the earth. Nirguna Brahman does not mean Impersonal Absolute; rather it corresponds to the Christian notion of God. Nirgunam only means that the attributes, which relate the Infinite to the finite, are not necessary to his/Her being. It denotes the Fullness of all perfections in absolute simplicity. By affirming interpretations such as these, theology has the responsibility to "assure our Extra-Christian brothers and sisters that we will no more be unchristian destroyers and manipulators."

us, even the enemy? I suggest that the emerging fourth option affirms the plurality of particular cultures, each opening up a different facet of God's gifts of social intercourse, communal organization, linguistic and artistic expression, intellectual and technical exploration, and is not something that should be resisted, but rather joyfully celebrated. This may offer the theological piece needed to illuminate and call to action what it means to be a Christian in today's diversity and interconnectedness across religions, peoples, cultures, and land, all sharing one tiny biosphere, and all breathing the same ineffable Holy Spirit.

Christianity has the opportunity to become a global leader in this effort, because friendship and solidarity with others is the great commandment blasting each of us from every Gospel, and in Romans, Galatians, and James, commanding us, that loving God means loving our neighbors. Christians of deep faith and belief are called to offer radical hospitality especially to those who are not like us. In this 21st century, faith, belief and one's religious and cultural tradition inform us about what matters, and those radical 'others' feel similarly about who they are and their culture, ancestors, religion, and beliefs. In the presence of the holy and in the tradition of Diana Eck, I take off my shoes in humble respect and acknowledgment of the Spirit's mystery that I, too, have experienced in sharing with another a sacred mosque, temple, synagogue, church, or Buddhist shrine.

In conclusion, I offer two critical tasks for continued consideration in the theology and pneumatology for interfaith dialogue and conversation: the tasks of integration and inspiration. By integration, I mean that contemporary theologians must delve deeply into the issues of our time, and embrace them in ways that connect us 'now', with 'then' (anamnesis), and always in light of scripture, tradition, experience, and reason. By inspiration, I mean that religious leaders and teachers should be people of deep spiritual praxis (commitment to one's own spiritual tradition and an understanding of at least one other religious spiritual tradition), and be able to speak out from an undivided wholeness of head/cognitive and heart/affective.

Conclusion

Our worldviews and cultural paradigms have been forever reconstituted by the legendary Apollo snapshot of our small blue planet floating in immense space, and by 9/11. For religions to remain silent in response to our great need for solidarity leads to culpability in the violence, hatred, and fear of the 'other' that is rampant in our midst. Serious global problems, and the common fate we share with all humanity and the rest of creation on our small planet, implores religious leaders to offer compelling theological formation that takes seriously the necessity of training and forming faith communities in the skills of inter-religious dialogue, cooperation, and mutual understanding. Religious leaders from all faith traditions could lead the way in extending hospitality and friendship to people of diverse religious traditions in their cities, and actively engaging in theologically educating their communities about the religions and cultures of people in their towns, schools, synagogues, mosques, temples, churches, and neighborhoods.

The great challenges of our day mean that each of us must find our niche and do this work of sustained spiritual practice and dialogue and together we can create more understanding, more peace, and a more harmonious planet.

It is our view that teaching spiritual practices in a class room setup has the added benefit of connecting all students in a learning environment. They feel togetherness and connected because the practices have their basis at the level of the spirit. Spiritual practices stabilize the mind of the students and therefore the spiritual practices provide the stimulus to: 1) broaden interfaith relationship based on their common awareness, 2) develop interfaith understanding as to why different faiths do what they do, and 3) lessen the bias that may arise because now the reason is known for that practice by people from the other traditions. Consequently, teaching and discussion of spiritual practices offers an effective method in the transformation of minds. Spiritual practices of some Christian and Hindu traditions are presented.

Some Hindu Spiritual Practices

Hindu spiritual practices fall within a system of *yoga* (the union of the individual soul with God or the Supreme Reality). There are four major types of *yoga* practices: *Karma Yoga* (*yoga* through service of others), *Bhakti Yoga* (*yoga* of devotion to personal God), *Gyaana Yoga* (*yoga* of self-knowledge or impersonal God), and *Raja Yoga* (*yoga* of self-control). Many others practices in *yoga* are: *Hatha Yoga* (*yoga* of postures), *Kriya Yoga* (*yoga* of mind-control through techniques), *Jaapa Yoga* (*yoga* through chanting), and *Kundlani Yoga* (*yoga* through energizing psychic centers). Most *yogas* are discussed in the Bhagavad Geeta¹² including *Buddhi Yoga* (*yoga* of intellect), *Sannyasa Yoga* (*yoga* through renunciation), and *Samatva Yoga* (*yoga* through equanimity of mind).

The *yoga* practices described above are good for anyone irrespective of their religious beliefs, race, faith, culture, gender or age. The practices result in relaxation of mind and stress relief. That in itself brings about gradual transformation to imbibe ethical and moral principles. The practice also results in concentration and focus. Their sustained practice results in acceptance of others, trust, honesty, kindness, and love required to bring peace and happiness.

Some of the above *yoga* practices are complex in understanding. One of the above *yoga* practices and two other simple spiritual practices are described below:

Karma Yoga

Karma Yoga includes actions performed as service without expectation. One way to facilitate these actions is if they are performed as an offering to the Lord. Sustained practice of this discipline leads to perfection in action, because there is no bondage when an action is

¹² Jayadayal Goyandka, Srimad Bhagavad Gita, Gita Press Gorakhpur, 1986

performed out of love for the Lord. Everyone is compelled to perform actions by virtue of nature. All actions (including those of eating, working, talking, sitting, walking, sitting quietly, and sleeping), if performed for the Lord would have only the purest of intentions. Therefore, every action performed as an offering is intrinsically ethical and moral.

Karma Yoga is a process of changing the very nature of action. Generally, one performs actions expecting some result in mind. This produces bondage with the world, the very seed required to ensure our continuity in the world. But through *Karma Yoga* that bondage is broken and one becomes free. Each action or mundane work is transformed into spiritual practice. Whatever the result, success or failure, pleasure or pain is to be received with equal grace because the action is performed for the Lord and the result is for the Lord as well.

Karma Yoga is doing every action as a duty. It involves both action and equanimity of mind for not reacting to the result, nay, not even expecting a result. The desire for the result of the action goes away and the mind becomes calm. Normally, there is a desire for the fruit that drives us to perform an action. If we give up desire, what moves us to action? It is the sense of duty. *Karma Yoga* subdues the mind, clarity of vision sets in one begins to accept and love everyone.

Greeting Gestures

Namaste is a popular Hindu gesture of greeting each other. The gesture entails placing the palms of the two hands together with the two thumbs held vertically up and touching the region of the heart. One may slightly bow his head before the other while greeting. One may also say (though unnecessary) the word, *namaste*; the gesture itself conveys that meaning. *Namaste* is a synthesis of two Sanskrit words: *Namah*, meaning bow (I bow or my salutations) and *Te* means you (before the person in you or to you). Therefore, *namaste* literally means I bow before you. The gesture connotes recognition of the soul in both individuals. In that sense, the two individuals intentionally express that their bodies are not theirs but belong to the higher soul. Therefore, bowing before the other implies recognition of the higher soul in that person. There are many other connotations to the word, *namaste*.

Namaste conveys many symbolic meanings. The gesture suggests a sense of submitting oneself to another, with complete humility. Correspondingly, it is accepted as a humble greeting from the heart and is reciprocated accordingly. It is also an acknowledgment that the two individuals come together in friendship on equal terms. In that sense, it is a voluntary rejection of any egoism related to the individual status. The two individuals, willingly having folded the hands, express a spirit of surrender to each other. Therefore, the gesture undoubtedly is an expression of gratitude and respect toward the other.

There is another symbolism conveyed by the gesture. *Namaste* recognizes the duality (inherent in the manifested world) in the sense of the two hands: the two individuals, the individual soul and the Lord. The gesture suggests an intentional effort on our part to bring the two together into a non-dual state of oneness. It symbolizes a resolution of conflicting

ideas by bringing the two in harmonious unity. Therefore, the gesture affords a conducive environment to promote health, peace and happiness maintaining preservation of different *varna* (the heterogeneous groups of professions, races, faiths, cultures and genders) in a community.

Continuous practice of the gesture renders a profound physical and mental effect on the individuals displaying the gesture. At the physical level it binds the person with folded hands not to raise his hands against the other. The verbal uttering of the word *namaste*, while bowing down, reaffirms submission, just as the chanting of *mantras* do for the Lord. At the mental level, the gesture of total surrender creates a subtle environment of the self-surrender in devotion before the Lord. The physical action of bowing down with folded hands symbolically conveys, 'The God in me greets the God in you.' The significance behind the physical action is that our *karma* (actions and their consequences) must be in harmony with the knowledge of the omnipresence of the Lord prompting us to think and act correctly.

Interfaith introduction of this gesture, therefore, would develop interfaith relationship, interfaith understanding, and lessen the bias that arise before responding to unfamiliar thoughts and actions of people from the other traditions.

Prayer

Prayer is a process of bringing our thoughts to the attention of someone higher than us, in who we trust. Prayer begins with a thought and culminates in a ritualistic action. The thoughts, in the form of a desire, goal or worship, may be expressed mentally or verbally. The desire may be the form of a need to attain health, wealth and prosperity or to attain secular or self-knowledge. The goal may be material or spiritual and the worship may be to glorify God. We pray because we believe that our prayer will be heard and granted. Therefore, in praying there are two factors involved: our belief in God or some higher power, and 2) our trust that we'll be heard and our wishes will be granted.

Prayer is a practical means of purifying the mind. It is deliberate and voluntary acknowledgement of our spiritual nature or God. By prayer and meditation we and think of God and thus uplift ourselves. By worshipping the Creator, our mind is freed from sinful thoughts. The sinful thoughts of lust, anger, greed, attachment, jealousy, hatred and pride turn even the saints into sinners. The real sorrow lies in forgetting God; whereas the mere thought of Him is true happiness.

Prayer reflects our attitude to arouse our causal divine nature covered under the veils of our material selfish nature. In doing so, the divine takes control of the material nature that directs us for selfish pursuits in our daily life. Constant practice of prayer eventually reduces self interests, promotes the welfare of others and therefore quiets our mind against the selfish pursuits in favor of service oriented thoughts.

Prayer can be both individual and collective. Every individual can offer his prayers by himself or with the members of his family. But traditionally people may congregate once a week for collective prayer, thereby one gets benefit of good association. In a collective prayer, common aspirations and ideas are promoted. Collective prayers, especially among the interfaith groups generate a feeling of brotherhood and trust among the faiths praying together, stereotypical views the other's traditions are alleviated and instead confidence is developed and faith isolationism is removed. Interfaith collective prayers, therefore, would develop interfaith relationship, interfaith understanding, and acceptance of different traditions.

Most of the Hindu common prayers are spoken in Sanskrit. One of the most common group prayers for the welfare of all is:

**Sarve bhavantu sukhinah sarve santu niraamayaah,
Sarve bhadraani pashyantuu maa kashchid dukh bhaag bhavet.
Om shaantih shaantih shaantih**

O Lord! In Thee all may be happy. May all be free from misery, may all realize goodness, and may no one suffer pain. Let there be peace, peace, peace.

Some Christian Spiritual Practices

Four are explained below and include walking the labyrinth, lectio divina, centering prayer, and the spiritual exercises of Ignatius of Loyola.

1. Guided Meditation
2. Centering Prayer
3. Breath Prayer
4. Praying The Rosary
5. Lectio Divina
6. The Labyrinth
7. African American Spirituality
8. Practicing the Presence - Carmelite
9. Praying The Psalm
10. Praying With Icons
11. The Spiritual Exercises Of Ignatius Of Loyola
12. The Practice Of Silence
13. Mendicant Spirituality
14. Eucharistic Holy Hour
15. Keeping the Sabbath

1. Walking the Labyrinth - A labyrinth is a pathway to aid walking prayer or mediation. It is an archetype, a divine imprint, and is found in many religious traditions in various forms through the world. There are Roman labyrinths, the Cretan style labyrinth, Chartres labyrinth, and the Chakra-vyuhā labyrinth in India to name a few. The labyrinth has only one path in and out; there are no tricks or dead ends, as in a maze. Walking the winding path becomes a mirror for where we are in our lives; it touches sorrow and releases joy. One walks the labyrinth with an open mind and open heart, letting go the details of life and

quietening the mind. It allows you to be guided by Spirit to discover the sacred space within and become empowered to take the next step on the spiritual journey.

2. *Lectio Divina*- Guidelines: Place yourself in a comfortable position and allow yourself to become silent. Some Christians focus for a few moments on their breathing; others have a beloved 'prayer word' or 'prayer phrase' they gently recite in order to become interiorly silent. Then turn to the text and read it slowly, gently. Savor each portion of the reading, constantly listening for the 'still, small voice' of a word or phrase that somehow says, 'I am for you today.' Next take the word or phrase into yourself. Memorize it and slowly repeat it to yourself, allowing it to interact with your inner world of concerns, memories and ideas. One learns to use words when words are helpful, and to let go of words when they no longer are necessary. God is with you in both words and silence, in spiritual activity and inner receptivity.

3. *Centering Prayer* - Centering Prayer is a method designed to facilitate the development of contemplative prayer by preparing our faculties to cooperate with this gift. It is an attempt to present the teaching of earlier time (e.g. *The Cloud of Unknowing*) in an updated form and to put a certain order and regularity into it. It is not meant to replace other kinds of prayer; it simply puts other kinds of prayer into a new and fuller perspective. During the time of prayer we consent to God's presence and action within. At other times our attention moves outward to discover God's presence everywhere. Centering Prayer Guidelines: (a.) Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within. (b.) Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within. (c.) When you become aware of thoughts, return ever-so-gently to the sacred word. (d.) At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes.

4 *Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola*- Examination of Consciousness: The Examination of Consciousness is a simple form of prayer directed toward developing a spiritual sensitivity to the special ways God approaches, invites and calls. It should be done at the end of each day, though it can be done more frequently, as the person feels drawn to it. The more frequently one does it, however, the more natural it becomes. Thus it becomes a way of conscious-ness, a way of growing into an ever-closer relationship with God. It can take anywhere between five and fifteen minutes. It really doesn't matter how long one spends; the important thing is that he opens himself to recognizing and responding to God's movements within. Ignatius suggested five steps to the Examination of Consciousness. It is important, however, that the person feels free to structure the Examination in a way that is most helpful to him. There is no right way to do it; nor is there a need to go through all of the five points each time. A person might, for instance, find himself spending the entire time on only one or two points. The basic rule is: Go wherever God draws you. And this touches upon an important point: the Examination of Consciousness is primarily a time of prayer; it is a 'being with God.'

The five points Ignatius proposes are: 1. Recall that you are in the presence of God: You are before God who loves you and welcomes you, who enlightens and guides you. Embrace the God who dwells in you, the God ever at work in you.

2. Give thanks to God for his many gifts: Give thanks to God for what he has allowed you to do this day and for what you have received this day, the pleasant and the difficult, for the word of encouragement and the generous gesture, for your family and friends, for all those who challenge you to grow.

3. Examine how you have lived this day: What has happened to you in your life and relationships? How has God been at work in you? What has God asked of you? And how have you responded: with generosity or self-centeredness, honesty or deceit?

4. Ask for forgiveness: Ask pardon for your failures to understand or respond to others in their difficulties and pain. Ask pardon for not loving God in every part of your life.

5. Offer a prayer of hope-filled re-commitment: For example, I am aware of my weakness, yet am confident in God's strength. I renew my commitment to follow the path that God offers me to be a source of light for all creation. *If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; the old has passed away. See, everything has become new.* (2 Cor. 2:17)