

Religions for Peace

Episode 2: Understanding the Sacred Across Traditions

Emcee Sister Agatha Ogochukwu Chikelue: Hello. I'm Sister Agatha Ogochukwu Chikelue with *Religions for Peace*, the world's largest interfaith body. Welcome to another edition of our *Religions for Peace* podcast, focusing on Shared Sacred Flourishing. Please see the Discussion Guide for each podcast episode on our website, and we invite you to send us a comment on our website or on our Facebook page.

In our last episode, we explored Shared Sacred Flourishing as a shared ideal across faiths — and the Shared Sacred Worldview beneath it, which grounds the solidarity that religious and spiritual leaders rely on as they face the world's greatest crises: climate change, injustice, and war — and seek to advance the common good.

In this episode, we look more closely at how different *Religions for Peace* members understand the sacred — and the unique ways each tradition names and honors the divine — and how this diversity can be a source of unity rather than division. We explore how these traditions see the world's poly-crisis as the result of neglecting the sacred virtues, such as love, compassion, and the deep connection among all beings. Once again, here is our host, Adam Phillips.



Host: Greetings. I'm Adam Phillips. Welcome back to the Shared Sacred Flourishing podcast. Today, we will take a deep dive into various traditional views of the Sacred from four religious leaders from around the world. Their doctrines and scriptures don't always agree, far from it — and yet you may be surprised at the immense common ground that they share. We'll also hear brief sounds between voices, drawn from each tradition's own ritual life. But first, let's hear again from Sister Agatha of Nigeria, who frames our entire episode with one Bantu word: “ubuntu.”

Sister Agatha Ogochukwu Chikelue: Ubuntu simply means that 'I am today because of you, and you are because of me.' We are one family. We are one. So we need each other. We have to find ways to coexist — and not just to coexist, but to coexist well. That is the essence of Shared Sacred Flourishing.

Host: That's a singing bowl, often struck at the beginning of Buddhist meditation in monasteries, temples, and at home altars. Unlike most other religions, Buddhism does not center the sacred in a creator God, but in wisdom and compassion and the hard human work of awakening.

Reverend Kyoichi Sugino is the president of Gakurin Seminary in Tokyo and a former Deputy Secretary General of *Religions for Peace* International. He offers a Buddhist prayer in Japanese, then English, that expresses this perspective.

Reverend Kyoichi Sugino: May every life be honored. May the Buddha nature within each person shine forth. And through wisdom and compassion, may humanity walk together towards shared flourishing.

Host: Reverend Sugino says this prayer expresses the Buddhist view of the Sacred.

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Reverend Kyoichi Sugino: The Sacred is not distant from ordinary life. It is encountered in life itself — in the deep interdependence that connects us with one another, and with nature, and with the wider world. The Sacred becomes visible not only in what we believe, but in how we listen, welcome others, protect the vulnerable, seek reconciliation, and work for peace.

Host: Some religions speak of an individual human "soul," Buddhists speak of "Buddha nature," which they describe as uncreated and all-pervading throughout the cosmos — including, of course, what we human beings essentially are. Buddhists observe that mostly we're unaware of this, due to our ignorance and habitual patterns of mind. But Reverend Sugino and other Buddhists are optimistic on that score.

Reverend Kyoichi Sugino: The Buddhist teaching of 'Buddha nature' expresses trust in the dignity and transformative potential of every person. It invites us to look beyond fixed identities and judgments, and to recognize the capacity for wisdom and compassion within others.

Of course, different traditions use different language for the Sacred and the sacred virtues. These understandings are not identical, but they can meet in a shared commitment to honoring life and responding compassionately to suffering. So the important question is not only what do we believe about the Sacred. It is also what does our encounter with the Sacred call us to do?

Host: In discerning just what the Sacred "calls us to do," Reverend Sugino says that the cultivation of virtues is critical.

Reverend Kyoichi Sugino: And we have three dimensions: The emotional dimension we call it "Kansei." includes developing the capacity to recognize the beauty of life. And reverence for life. And the intellectual capacity, "chisay," means we have to understand the structure of the universe, and life, and human beings, and... understand the importance of building relationship, and so on. And the third is "hinsei." It's basically modesty, humility, gratitude, So, when we receive and welcome the Sacred and we deepen the reverence for life, humility comes naturally from that kind of awareness.

Host: That is the sound of a shofar, the traditional ram's horn instrument Jews have long used to awaken awareness of the divine and invite reflection and repentance.

Here is Rabbi David Rosen of Jerusalem, a former chief Rabbi of Ireland and a current co-president of *Religions for Peace* International. He recites the three-fold Priestly Blessing from the Book of Numbers, in the original Hebrew.

Rabbi David Rosen: Yə-ḥāreḳəḳā ʾĀḏōnāy wə-yišməreḳā. //// Yā'êr ʾĀḏōnāy pānāw 'ēleḳā wî-ḥunnekā. ///// Yîśšā ʾĀḏōnāy pānāw 'ēleḳā wə-yāśêm ləḳā šālôm.

Host: Rabbi Rosen translates the blessing into English, then explains what it means to him, and asks of the rest of us.

Rabbi David Rosen: May the Lord bless you and protect you. May the Lord shine upon you, and be gracious to you. May the Lord lift up His countenance towards you and bestow peace upon you.

'May God bless you and protect you' is understood as a material blessing — physical needs, security guaranteed... And Jewish tradition generally understands 'protect you' as protection against the

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dangers that physical things have. Because you can become a slave to material things and material interests, and then the benefit can be demeaned and diminished.

The second part of the blessing is understood as enlightenment: the enlightenment of God's presence, of God's wisdom, of God's love, so that we may behave accordingly. 'Be gracious to you' is translated often by commentators as 'May He make you be gracious in the way you behave,' inspired by God's illumination.'

And finally is the goal of the blessing for humanity at large through us — that we may be blessings of God's welcome, of God's proximity to us, that we may bring that in our relations to others, so that we may bring blessing to all.

Host: Rabbi Rosen had this to say about the well-known word "shalom," which completes the three-fold blessing.

Rabbi David Rosen: The word shalom of course means more than just the absence of hostility; it means wholeness and completeness. That we are at peace in ourselves, peace in our relationship with one another, peace in our relationship between our communities, peace in the world. May we be blessed with that true divine peace.

Host: For Rabbi Rosen, blessings aren't simple "feel good" sentiments added on top of Jewish life. It is Jewish life, in miniature, uttered in various forms all day long — from blessings for food, for beauty, for a new garment, for news of a death, and other experiences. There is even a blessing a religious Jew makes after using the toilet!

Rabbi David Rosen: What are we doing? We are stopping for a moment to be conscious not only of the pleasure and benefit we are about to derive from whatever it is we are about to consume or to enjoy. But above all, to be conscious of the fact that it is a process of growth, of provision, of providence, that comes from a higher source. In other words, a blessing is an expression of consciousness, of awareness, that we don't take things for granted. In fact, the whole of Judaism may be described as an extensive blessing.

Host: A hundred blessings a day — that's what one Jewish tradition calls for. But Rabbi Rosen is quick to point out that that's not really meant as a quota. He says that to keep score is to miss the point.

Rabbi David Rosen: The idea is that your day should be suffused with that consciousness, with that awareness of the divine, of the Sacred in your life, and above all, in the lives of others, and the life of the cosmos, of the world around you. These are disciplines which seek to invest our lives with the awareness of the divine in every dimensions. The more we are conscious of the Sacred, of the divine in the world, and in the other and in ourselves, the greater we can benefit from the gifts and the beauty and the glory of creation itself.

Host: That's chant, or "kirtan" like one often hears during Sikh worship. Sikhism was born in fifteenth-century Punjab, drawing threads from both Hindu devotion and Islamic monotheism, and weaving them into something entirely its own.

Let's listen to a Sikh prayer uttered with closed eyes by Bhai Sahib Professor Mohinder Singh, a highly esteemed Sikh leader and a longtime member of *Religions for Peace*.

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Bhai Sahib Professor Mohinder Singh: Kut hakur tumpay ardaas. (Indistinct) // Tumat pita hambark tere, tumri kirpa mesuk kenere, koi na jane tumra ant. // Uchete ucha paguhant. Segalsa magari tomare su tartari. // Sumte hoi su adya kari. // Tumri gatmet tumhi jani. // Non kdar sada kurbani.

Host: When asked for an English translation of his Punjabi prayer, Bhai Sahib Ji is hesitant at first; he is concerned that it may dilute or even distort the original meaning. But he obliges.

Bhai Sahib Professor Mohinder Singh: O divine master of existence, infinite God of all, standing before you, I offer this humble prayer. I know that nothing is really mine. Infused with life by you, my body and my being is your creation and property. You are my mother, my father, my kith and kin, my protector and guide. I am your humble, erring child. It's through your divine grace I'm living and receiving your abundant grace. No one can, and will ever, know your infiniteness. You are the boundless master Creator, the highest of the high, the wisest of the wise. You are responsible for universal creation, both seen and unseen, including the sun, the moon, the planets, the air, the oceans, the forest and the 8.4 million life species. All that unfolds comes from your divine will. Only you know your inner mystery and [unintelligible]. To you, I owe my everything. To you, I'm eternally and lovingly indebted.

Host: Bhai Sahib Ji says that all beings have their source in the Divine, which Sikhs refer to as “Waheguru.” The term combines the Persian word for “wondrous” with “guru,” a Sanskrit word often parsed as “from darkness to light.”

For a Sikh, the purpose of all life is to merge once again with Waheguru. However, Bhai Sahib notes that most humans feel unconnected from the Creator. For His Eminence, that's a tragic shame, since we are unique among species in our ability to reason and exercise free will. Indeed, according to Sikh tradition, it can take the soul millions of rebirths to finally achieve human form.

Bhai Sahib Professor Mohinder Singh: You could have been matter, then you became vegetation, you became different animals, then finally you have become human, and now is the best opportunity to merge with God. The spirit... must merge with the big Spirit. The little drop of ocean must get into the ocean, and that's the end of it.

Host: Bhai Sahib Ji has very clear views on virtues and vice. Vice keeps us away from the divine. Virtues bring us close, and eventually help us to merge with it. He teaches that the straightest pathway to the divine runs through prayer, mantra recitation, and the disciplined and the unceasing practice of avoiding vice and embracing virtue.

Bhai Sahib Professor Mohinder Singh: And the vices we have to be careful of are: lust, uncontrolled sexuality; vengeance; followed by greed; followed materialistic attachments within the world. And the last one, very dangerous, is called ‘arrogance,’ or ego. Edging God out.

Through the virtues, we connect up with God: truthfulness, contentment, humility, and love. And let me hasten to say: love demands sacrifice. No sacrifice, no love. That is what it means to me: divine goodness.

Host: That's a traditional conch shell trumpet, blown by a Hindu devotee. Its whose essential message is: Wake up! Pay attention. Be here now.

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Christianity, Judaism, and Sikhism describe the Sacred as a single divine source that invites us into relationship with God who remains in some sense separate from the created world. Hindus see all of reality itself as Divine. Here is Anantanand Rambachan, a Hindu priest and Professor Emeritus of Religion at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota.

Anantanand Rambachan: So... my blessing for you, Adam, is a very traditional Hindu blessing. Om sarve bhavantu sukhinah. May all be happy. Sarve nirahamayaha. May all be free from oppression. Sarava bhadrani pashyant. May all lives be full of goodness. May there be an end to suffering in our world. Om shanti, shanti, shanti. May peace prevail everywhere."

Host: A well-known Hindu wisdom story says that one day, the One Divine Reality chose to manifest itself as apparently separate parts — like you and me, stars, giraffes and pizzas — and then had them to pretend to forget their true divine nature and origin. Professor Rambachan says that all of Hindu ethics flow from that teaching.

Anantanand Rambachan: I am called to see myself in you and in every other being, because we share the same Self. And that is why in our Hindu tradition our greeting is 'Namaste' — 'nama' is to bow. I greet you by bowing to you in my heart and mind, because in looking into your eyes, I look into the eyes of the divine. Because all eyes are the eyes of the divine. All faces are faces of the divine.

Host: The practice of perceiving that presence in everyday life is known by a Sanskrit word: "darshan."

Anantanand Rambachan: Darshan is sacred seeing. Anything I see when I am looking at you now, and I am looking at your image on a screen, your face is also resplendent as an image of the sacred One. That is "darshan." Everything IS this one that exists in you and I and everything else. [It] is the very ground of our selfhood. We speak of it as "Atman."

But to know the One, I don't have to reject the Many. I can see the "play" of the one in the many. We have to learn to love and honor both: the One and the Many — In the taste of water, in the light of the sun, in the soft light of the moon, in our children, in our spouses, in the trees, in the wind, in the sound of the birds... everything is this One.

Host: There is an apparent paradox here. Professor Rambachan's non-dualistic tradition denies the separateness of any aspect of reality from Brahman — the infinite, all-pervading and sacred Oneness just described. If that is true, then what does he make of the traditional Hindu texts that describe thirty-three principal deities, and the popular belief among the Indian faithful that there are 330 million deities? Here is how Professor Rambachan understands it.

Anantanand Rambachan: In the non-dual tradition, the word is 'Advaita.' Advaita means 'not two.' It's a way of describing the relationship between the One and the Many. There isn't a god named Shiva and another god named Vishnu or a goddess named Durga... These are many ways of naming and understanding what is essentially one reality.

Let me give you a metaphor to make sense of this. If you ask me, 'What is the relationship between the water of the ocean, and the waves that I am seeing?' If I told you, 'Adam, they are two,' I am missing something. But if I told you 'they are one,' I might be missing the beauty of the waves.

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Because the water is expressing itself beautifully in these waves that come and go. They are not two, but we should not also simplistically describe them as one.

Host: One God, many creatures. God as Reality itself. No need to mention God at all. Three strikingly different answers to the question of what the Sacred is. And yet each tradition asks of its people: love, compassion, justice, humility and sacrifice.

Dr. William Vendley is *Religions for Peace's* Secretary General Emeritus, and a principal architect of the Shared Sacred Worldview and Shared Sacred Flourishing frameworks.

Dr. William Vendley: Shared Sacred Worldview has the humble goal of emphasizing not sameness, but resonance that we can feel across our different heritages. And therefore, because we are open to the Sacred, those are the basis of our common care.

Host: At a recent gathering of senior religious leaders in Mauritius, he framed the Shared Sacred Flourishing ideal in relationship, beginning with society.

Dr. William Vendley: Societies don't have parts. Society is a potential whole of whole people! And I use the word 'society' for all forms of association. Societies don't have parts. So think of a family. Does a family have parts? No. A family has participants. Each person in that family is an expression of the wholeness of the family itself. So too, the guiding star for what a good society would be. A good society would support people to unfold their virtue, and then have common good structures that will assist them. We move on to the Earth and its Web of Life. We are relational potential wholes. We move on to the Earth and its Web of Life. So we don't just "do environmentalism." We bring that into the sacred and how that calls us.

Host: These goals may seem a bit abstract. But *Religions for Peace* expects its members to put these ideas to actual practice, often in the midst of suffering and crisis. Secretary General Dr. Francis Kuria offers an example from Sierra Leone's Ebola epidemic.

Dr. Francis Kuria: So, in Sierra Leone, during the Ebola outbreak, they were still wanting to wash the bodies. There are ceremonies around bodies before burial especially in the Muslim community and among traditional believers. And those ceremonies were actually a danger. *Religions for Peace* worked with the Ministry of Health and the World Health Organization to create an understanding, so they could stop touching the bodies and allow the medical and emergency disposal of bodies in a way that respected the religious rites but also stopped the spread of Ebola at a critical stage. There are many examples of the work of *Religions for Peace*."

Host: A similar multi-faith effort played out in Iraq, where war had left many children orphaned and wounded. Reverend Sugino and *Religions for Peace* helped bring together religious communities from Iraq – Shia, Sunni and Christian – whereas before, they had faced each other only as adversaries.

Reverend Kyoichi Sugino: And *Religions for Peace* convened them in Japan, Japanese and Koreans working together to welcome Iraqi religious communities. And they didn't agree on anything at the beginning. But finally, they agreed to provide services and support for war-injured children across different religious and ethnic communities. So this is the project. But at a deeper level, virtue and the Sacred and virtue are embodied.

Host: Multi-faith religious leaders have also intervened directly in political violence. Dr. Kuria describes a coup in Burkina Faso that came close to a bloodbath in Ouagadougou.

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Dr. Francis Kuria: The president who was being deposed remained in the presidential palace with a big force of fighters who were ready to defend it while the streets of Ouagadougou had been captured by the new government. And there was a real danger that the new leaders, led by Abraham Traore, were going to storm the palace and there was going to be a bloodbath. And religious leaders in Burkina Faso intervened and they negotiated a safe passage for the deposed leader to leave the country without any bloodshed in the streets of Ouagadougou. And that was another example of religious leaders intervening.

Host: *Religions for Peace* has developed a new Shared Sacred Flourishing Toolkit religious leaders can use when a crisis lands on their doorstep or when seeking the common good. For its creation, Dr. Francis Kuria sought the active input of religious leaders from throughout its more than 90 nation membership.

Dr. Francis Kuria: *Religions for Peace* has launched a new framework for analyzing the issues they are dealing with – not just on the immediate issue, but also the root causes, the problem behind the problem – in addressing their local solutions, solutions that express the deep sacred being at the center of our people. And not just seeking solutions that are in the marketplace, that are popular, but solutions that over time will build a feedback mechanism of virtues and the building of common good institutions that are sustainable over the long term."

Host: In the next episode, we'll open up that Toolkit — and learn how it was designed, how it draws on stories like the ones you've just heard, and how it will help religious leaders respond with joy, effectiveness and sacred purpose to concrete crises within their own communities and beyond. For *Religions for Peace*, I am your host, Adam Phillips.

Sister Agatha Ogochukwu Chikelue: I'm Sister Agatha Ogochukwu Chikelue. That concludes Episode Two of our series on "Shared Sacred Flourishing" podcast series. *Religions for Peace* gives thanks to our guests, Dr. Francis Kuria, Rabbi David Rosen, His Eminence Bhai Sahib Mohinder Singh, Professor and Anantanand Rambachan, Reverend Kyoichi Sugino, and Dr. William Vendley. And thank you for listening. See you next time.