

UNITED WISDOM

Perennialism: Arguments for a Common Ground and the Objections

Traditions and Worldviews

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Epigraph

> *“To what is One, sages give many a title”*

Rigveda, 1.164.46; a short line from Ralph T. H. Griffith's English translation. The hymn.

The hymn names Vedic deities. This line opens a question about unity, but does not itself say that all future religions share the same teaching.

What this article is about

Different books offer similar invitations: loosen the authority of the ego, attend more carefully to another person, and avoid treating a familiar picture of the world as final truth. These similarities suggest an attractive idea: one ground lies behind religious differences. Perennialism makes that idea a philosophical position. But what is supposed to be shared—experience, a teaching about reality, ethical practice, or words chosen for comparison? The answer changes the discussion. This article examines both the strength and vulnerability of searching for unity: the possibility of coming to know another person and of quietly rewriting them in our own language. We follow the movement from recognizing a familiar tone to asserting a common ground, check several specific comparisons, and return to an everyday question: how can we speak with someone of another faith while maintaining closeness without requiring agreement on what matters most?

I. Unity begins with choosing what to compare

Perennialism asserts more than the existence of similar moral advice. In its strong form, it proposes a shared underlying teaching expressed differently across religious traditions. We therefore need to specify the claim's scope first. “We have similar practices of attention” and “we know the same ultimate reality” are different assertions, even when placed next to each other in a conversation.

Imagine three people meeting. One says prayer brought a release from feeling at the center of everything. Another describes meditation in which attachment to the thought of self weakened. A third recalls minutes before a painting when familiar inner commentary vanished. Each recognizes something in the others' accounts. This is an important moment of human contact.

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Yet it does not establish whether their experiences were identical, what caused them, or what meaning they acquired afterward in ordinary life.

Similarity can be sought at several levels. Language offers shared words: silence, depth, the whole. Experience offers similar reported features. Practice involves repeated actions. Doctrine asserts things about God, humanity, and liberation. Ethics concerns how we treat ourselves and others. Agreement at one level does not automatically extend to the rest. Two people may act alike for entirely different reasons.

A good comparative question is consequently narrow enough: what actually agrees here, and what are we still assuming? Narrowness does not impoverish the conversation. It lets it continue beyond the first beautiful formula. If a common feature involves voluntarily limiting one's own power, we can discuss it without first resolving the nature of the absolute. Discussing the absolute itself requires a different argument.

The first discipline of unity thus emerges: identify the object of comparison before drawing a conclusion. Otherwise “one” can alternate between a shared value, an identical feeling, and a single structure of reality. Moving between meanings then produces persuasion while readers think one idea is being tested.

II. Huxley's powerful intuition

For Aldous Huxley, the perennial philosophy connects metaphysics, an understanding of humanity, and a direction for life. In the introduction to The Perennial Philosophy, he discusses divine Reality as the ground of the manifold world and the possibility of knowing that ground. This is an author's comparative program, rather than a neutral report that all religions agree.

Its strength is understandable. Readers face many different rites, prohibitions, and images. Huxley proposes seeking what matters beneath external forms. Such a search can weaken the certainty that another tradition consists entirely of superstition while one's own consists of obvious truths. He invites us to read unfamiliar texts as addressing a serious human possibility, rather than as museum curiosities.

Imagine someone raised where a neighboring community's religion was dismissed in one mocking sentence. Later, reading its prayer, they notice a familiar request: live more attentively, cause less harm, and stop considering oneself self-sufficient. Their attitude has actually changed. That required no proof that the objects of faith were identical. Recognizing the seriousness of another person's appeal was enough.

Huxley's program, however, contains its own criterion of significance. If contemplative knowledge of a single reality is defined in advance as profound, texts readily read that way will appear most persuasive. Ordinary religious life, with its memory, communal responsibility, and

particular history, may seem merely a shell. Yet participants often understand these as ways of being faithful to what they believe, rather than accidental decorations of truth.

Readers can accept Huxley's invitation without accepting his entire answer in advance. Respect for another person's depth is a result in its own right. Shared metaphysics is a separate hypothesis. Confusing them makes criticism of the common ground seem disrespectful, and respect seem agreement with the philosophy. Encountering another tradition can instead broaden our receptivity while showing its substantial differences. Sometimes that encounter is more valuable than a smooth scheme with another person's place already prepared.

III. One experience or several ways of understanding it

A shared language of experience does not provide direct access to another person's experience. We encounter it through narrative, gesture, practice, and later actions. This is no reason to stop listening. It is a reason to avoid replacing listening with a ready explanation of what someone really experienced.

In The Varieties of Religious Experience, the lectures on mysticism, William James identifies reported characteristics of mystical states and separately considers their authority. The separation itself is useful: describing a state and claiming the right to derive a truth binding on everyone are successive questions. Someone may be profoundly convinced by their experience; listeners retain their own work of understanding.

Imagine two friends sitting silently after a difficult conversation. One understands the silence as God's presence; the other as a rare opportunity to stop defending themselves. The circumstances, perhaps some feelings, and mutual respect coincide. But if the first declares the second a hidden believer, they exceed the account. If the second reduces the first person's prayerful experience to psychological relief, they make a corresponding substitution. Both can explore similarity without assigning the other's ultimate meaning.

This distinction also applies to our own experience. First describe what changed: words disappeared, time seemed slower, tension diminished, a sense of connection arose. Then identify the interpretation. Finally ask what conclusions follow. These transitions are permissible, but should remain visible. An account of experienced closeness is not proof that separateness between people is altogether illusory.

Nor should we move too quickly in reverse. Different explanations do not prove that people share nothing in experience. Partial similarity may exist and remain poorly expressed. Holding several possibilities is more useful than choosing between complete identity and complete impenetrability. Another person's experience need not copy ours to matter. We can recognize the structure of a question without appropriating its answer.

IV. Words can reveal and create differences

An account of experience takes place within language and upbringing. It cannot therefore be treated as transparent packaging around unchanging content. But neither can we assume culture produces a person completely, leaving only repetition of ready meanings.

In his overview of the philosophy of mysticism, Jerome Gellman distinguishes perennialism, claims about a common structure of experience, and constructivist positions. This offers a useful map: similarity between teachings differs from the question of how expectations participate in experience itself. We use the map without turning it into a verdict on a particular person.

Readers expecting the subject to disappear in deep practice may attend especially to moments fitting that description. Those promised a personal encounter will seek another pattern. Yet the influence of expectation does not automatically mean invention. Language can help us notice what previously escaped distinction. Musicians hear more in a work than untrained listeners; this does not establish that terminology completely creates what they hear.

Everyday comparison benefits from asking which words a person uses before and after an experience. Has their picture changed? Become more flexible? Did something arise for which earlier concepts proved insufficient? These questions allow change without reducing people to bearers of culture. They also prevent us from treating every familiar word as directly indicating a familiar state.

A perennialist might answer: the language differs, the depth is one. A critic asks how shared depth is distinguished from accounts selected in the same way. This is a strong objection because it concerns verification. If similarities count as evidence while differences are declared superficial in advance, the claim becomes protected from contrary material. For a search to remain inquiry, difference must be able to affect the conclusion. Otherwise another person's speech can enter the scheme under any conditions, even when decisively objecting to inclusion.

V. When sacred texts resist joining the answers

Doctrinal differences sometimes concern the center, rather than an external rite. Translating everything into “love,” “light,” or “source” cannot remove them. A specific text reveals what such translation loses.

Rigveda 1.164.46 places a list of divine names alongside a statement about the One. In John 14:6, the way to the Father is connected to the particular figure of Christ. In Udāna 8.3, translated by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, the unconditioned is discussed as the possibility of escape

from the conditioned. These passages support comparison, but do not convey identical teachings about a personal God, humanity, and liberation.

We might notice a common movement: ordinary existence does not exhaust humanity's ultimate possibility. Even this formula remains our comparative wording. It is broad enough to reveal a related question and too broad to replace each tradition's answer. A participant may reasonably say the decisive element lies precisely in what the formula omitted.

Imagine two friends discussing trust. For one, trusting means responding to a personal God's address. For the other, it means releasing attachment to a permanent self-image. Both may become less enclosed in themselves. Yet erasing differences would turn their conversation into a statement at least one rejects. Respect is tested by willingness to hear that disagreement, rather than by success in producing a common formula.

Complexity also exists within each tradition: one passage does not represent every school or reading. A sound comparison identifies the location and limit. It can say these texts reveal a particular movement without immediately claiming Hinduism, Christianity, and Buddhism as a whole say the same thing. Precision leaves room for further reading. It also prevents someone with superficial familiarity from telling a practitioner which parts of their faith are genuine and which merely historical casing.

VI. Selecting quotations can quietly become proof

Every anthology creates a visible sequence from much wider material. That editorial work is necessary. Trouble begins when the arrangement is treated as independent confirmation of the idea used to assemble it.

Suppose we want to prove that people across eras always valued silence. Dozens of statements about quiet can be found. Alongside them, however, may stand duties to testify, argue, preach, and convey oral teaching. Excluding these gives readers a persuasive unity without its conditions. The error need not lie in an individual quotation; it lies in the sample's relationship to the whole.

This is a particularly significant risk for perennialism. Texts permitting a common contemplative vocabulary become convenient. Formulations drawing distinctions appear less profound because they obstruct comparison. Their absence then seems to confirm that differences are always secondary. The circle is clear: what agrees is deemed important, and agreement is deemed true because it is important.

Practical work can break the circle. For every parallel, seek a passage where the author draws a boundary. Who is addressed? Which question is answered? What must happen before the state described? Which conclusions does the text itself disallow? This work may weaken an

impressive collection while strengthening trust in it. Readers see why comparison is possible and why it remains bounded.

There is no requirement to read every religious corpus before a first conversation. A more attainable responsibility is to avoid overstating coverage. Three carefully read passages can support a substantive comparison without becoming a census of spiritual traditions. Modest scope declarations help the next reader check the route and offer a countertext. The map of unity then becomes an open working map, rather than a collection whose statements have already lost the right to disagree.

VII. Shared ethics does not require shared cosmology

People can cooperate without sharing an ultimate picture of reality. This is no weak substitute for real unity. Such agreement often has its own value and requirements in everyday life.

Imagine neighbors organizing help for someone temporarily unable to leave home. One acts from religious duty, another from friendship, a third from understanding interdependence. They coordinate timing, needs, and limits. Their metaphysical explanations differ while the work is shared. Success does not establish identical faith. Neither does different faith establish that coordinated action is impossible.

The perennialist intuition helps us recognize that an unfamiliar motive can be morally serious. It becomes less useful when requiring that motive to be explained through a single ground the person rejects. An alliance then gains a hidden condition: we cooperate because, deep down, you agree with me. A sufficiently clear, voluntary shared project needs no such condition.

The question becomes harder when similar words conceal different actions. “Care” can mean respecting refusal or persistent intervention. “Humility” can limit one's own power or demand endurance from someone dependent. Shared values must therefore be checked through what participants will and will not do. Vocabulary alone is insufficient.

A useful common space includes concrete agreements: whose consent is needed, who answers for consequences, when stopping is permissible, and how mistakes will be corrected. Differences remain, becoming visible before turning into hidden conflict. Shared ethics can emerge from different grounds and remain revisable. It need not promise the final removal of every contradiction. Acting together where agreement exists, and honestly recognizing its absence elsewhere, is enough.

VIII. Unity sometimes becomes permission to speak for another

A claim of deep commonality can support openness, but can also distribute power. Someone deciding which of another person's beliefs are superficial assumes the privileged role of translating their truth. This can happen with benevolent intentions.

Imagine an argument. Someone says, “For my faith, this story is an essential event, not a symbol.” The response is, “You still cling to form; deep down we mean the same thing.” The exchange can no longer be equal. Every objection becomes evidence that the objector lacks depth. Agreement counts as maturity; disagreement as delayed development. The claim itself no longer undergoes examination.

A similar situation can arise between religious and nonreligious people. One is declared the bearer of an unconscious psychological technique; the other a mystic unaware of their real name. Either explanation might be an interesting external hypothesis. It does not become someone's self-description without their participation. Renaming another person's experience does not ensure better understanding.

Protection against appropriation lies in an interpretation's checkable status, rather than a ban on interpreting. We can say a similarity seems present and identify its features. We can ask whether the other person accepts the comparison and preserve disagreement in the final map. Interpretation then remains a proposal rather than a certificate of another's hidden essence.

This boundary is especially useful where spirituality connects with the authority of a teacher, group, or paid program. The harder it is to object, the more important it becomes to prevent promised unity from demanding loyalty. Depth is not proved by the impossibility of doubt. Commonality that survives rejection of a ready formula offers better grounds for trust than commonality where disagreement is already explained as the dissenter's defect.

IX. What could change our confidence

A serious claim permits refinement in response to contrary material. Searching for a common ground is no exception. If we cannot identify an observation that would at least change the claim's boundaries, we have something closer to a profession of belief than a research conclusion.

Several possibilities deserve formulation first. People may have partly similar experiences under different teachings. Traditions may independently develop similar moral practices. Shared formulas may spread through historical contact. Some coincidences may arise through our translation. Finally, a deeper commonality may exist that those alternatives do not sufficiently explain. These possibilities are not always mutually exclusive, but require different evidence.

Imagine a reader finding five texts about the disappearance of self-enclosure. Rather than concluding that religion is one, they ask how each author describes returning to ordinary life. One connects it with fidelity to community, another with release from attachment, a third with a new relation to creativity. The first phase's similarity remains while the entire paths differ. The map has grown more complex. That change is an outcome of inquiry, rather than its failure.

A powerful idea often benefits from narrowing. Instead of “all religions teach one thing,” say these texts support comparing ways of loosening egocentrism. Instead of “mystical experience proves a common reality,” say reported properties of some states make the question reasonable but unresolved. These formulations are less spectacular and better suited to continued inquiry.

Personal conviction can nevertheless exceed public proof. Someone may believe in a common ground without declaring every dissenter an inadequate researcher. They can explain why the belief directs their life and acknowledge where available verification ends. Distinguishing conviction from established scope makes conversation more honest. It leaves room for strong hope without turning hope into someone else's duty.

X. Disagreement can deepen closeness

An encounter becomes substantive when people recognize both similarity and the cost of difference. Another person's commitment stops looking like a strange detail once we understand what an overly convenient translation threatens to take away. It may be family memory, an understanding of responsibility, or the ability to trust something irreducible to personal desires.

Imagine two people discussing forgiveness. One wants to preserve a new beginning; the other wants to retain responsibility for what happened. Declaring both in favor of goodness is easy. Understanding when a new beginning demands forgetting harm, or responsibility indefinitely confines someone to an old mistake, is harder. This discussion requires no common ground proved in advance. It requires each person to let the other make their question more precise.

Unity can here be understood as a quality of relationship. Participants need not reach one answer to remain in shared inquiry. They can share attention to a problem, acknowledge consequences of different decisions, and identify remaining disagreement. This is a more definite connection than declaring everything ultimately identical. Something has actually been done: an argument heard, a boundary retained, one's own simplification changed.

Even this understanding should not be presented as the content of all spiritual teachings. It is this article's practical conclusion: in conversation, commonality may consist in how difference is treated. Some will accept it; others prefer a stricter religious framework. Acknowledging that

possibility completes examination of the position itself. We cannot defend others' freedom of self-description while demanding agreement with our ideal of dialogue.

Perennialism thus remains attractive without becoming a compulsory structure imposed on others' beliefs. It helps begin a search, notice kinship, and ask unfamiliar questions. Countertexts retain complexity. Attention to the person helps distinguish where a beautiful map aids orientation and where it obscures living terrain. Difference then need not oppose unity: it shows which connection we have created and which we still hope to find.

What this means in practice

Choose a particularly persuasive parallel, such as release from self-enclosure in two familiar traditions. Record two specific passages, rather than authors' names alone. Describe the similarity in one sentence recognizable to participants in both traditions. If decisive words had to be removed, note that the comparison has already grown broader than its source texts.

Then add a difference. Specify the object of faith, goal of practice, community's role, or understanding of humanity—whichever the passages actually address. Avoid filling the gap with guesses about an entire teaching. What is missing can remain a question for further reading. A good map can contain blank space. It becomes unreliable when every blank must immediately be covered by a general formula.

Offer the parallel to another person as a possibility. A useful phrase is, “I recognize a related question here, but am unsure I understand your answer the same way.” It permits both closeness and correction. If someone objects, retain the objection in the final description rather than explaining it as insufficient depth. This checks one's openness without requiring abandonment of one's faith.

Identify a shared action separately, if one exists. Reading together, helping a neighbor, honoring an agreement, and respecting refusal are concrete connections. They need no proof of a single cosmology. Even without shared action, conversation can remain valuable: you learned which question matters to another person and why familiar translation distorts it.

Finally return to the initial intuition. It may have become more precise, weaker, or deeper. All are permissible outcomes. Perennialism usefully invites the search for connections while retaining the right of a countertext and another person to change the map. Unity then ceases to end an encounter with a formula and becomes a way of continuing it.

Key quotation

> *“No authority emanates from them which should make it a duty for those who stand outside of them to accept their revelations uncritically.”*

William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience, lectures XVI–XVII, conclusion on mystical states, point 2, printed pages 422–423; checked against the 1902 English text.

James discusses the distinction between a state's personal persuasiveness and its binding force for another person. The quotation retains that boundary, rather than refuting the value of mystical experience.

Connections between traditions

Comparison	Basis for connection	Boundary
Rigveda 1.164.46 ↔ Huxley's program	Varied expressions invite a question about unity.	The Vedic hymn does not formulate a theory of all world religions; Huxley proposes his own comparative metaphysics.
Huxley ↔ James	Both take transformed experience seriously.	Huxley asserts a common ground; James separately limits a mystical state's authority for outsiders.
John 14:6 ↔ Udāna 8.3	Ordinary human existence is not described as the ultimate possibility.	The way to the Father through Christ and escape from the conditioned are not interchangeable teachings.
James ↔ the constructivist question	Accounts and meanings of experience need examination.	Recognizing cultural influence does not automatically make every experience wholly produced by culture.
Vedic plurality of names ↔ contemporary interfaith conversation	Different names need not prevent attentive comparison.	Permission to compare does not authorize assigning hidden agreement with our explanation.

Primary sources and research

1. Rigveda, hymn 1.164, translated by Ralph T. H. Griffith, 1896. The hymn and context of verse 46 were read; source of the epigraph and an example of limits on extending a Vedic formula.

2. Aldous Huxley, Introduction to The Perennial Philosophy, in Complete Essays, vol. V, edited by Robert S. Baker and James Sexton, 2002; PDF pages 27–31. The introduction was read, not the whole book; source of Huxley's perennialist program.

3. William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience, 1902, lectures XVI–XVII. Passages on characteristics and authority of mystical states were read; basis for distinguishing experience from a binding interpretation.

4. John 14:6, King James Version. The verse was read; a specific counterexample to replacing religious content with a general formula.

5. Udāna 8.3, translated by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, with notes. The complete short text was read; the unconditioned is not used as an equivalent of the Christian God.

6. Jerome Gellman, Mysticism, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, sections 6–8. The debate sections were read; an academic map of distinctions, not primary testimony of experiences.

Tags

perennialism, perennial philosophy, Huxley, James, mysticism, religious experience, common ground, unity, difference, interpretation, language, context, constructivism, essentialism, Rigveda, Udāna, Christianity, Buddhism, comparative philosophy, metaphysics, ethics, interfaith dialogue, authority, anthology, agreement, freedom of belief, testimony, boundaries of comparison.

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