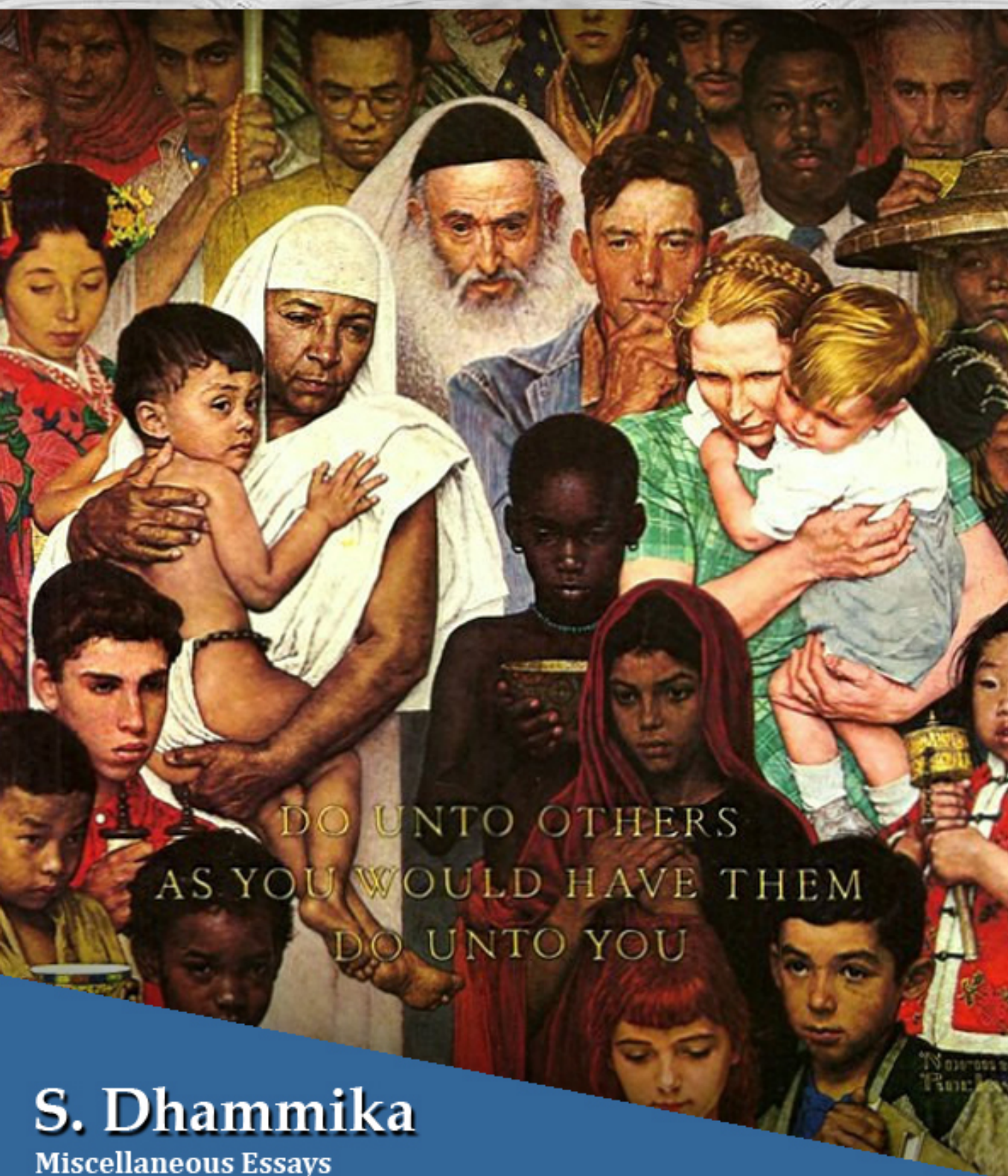


The Principle That Unites Us



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Miscellaneous Essays

The Principle That Unites Us

One often hears it said today that all religions are the same. It is a curious claim given that even a cursory reading of the doctrines of different faiths reveals a wide variety of ideas which have little in common with each other. Some of these are held strongly enough and considered fundamental enough that they sometimes create debate and occasionally even conflict. However, there is one idea that nearly all of the world's major religions contain and would agree on, and that is the so-called Golden Rule. I say 'so called' because the term Golden Rule is a relatively recent one and specifically Christian. It is not found in the Bible and in fact it was first used by the English clergyman Thomas Jackson in 1604. To say that this term is not that old is not to say that it isn't an appropriate one. It is! Just as gold is universally perceived as beautiful and regarded as valuable, so is the principle embodied in the term Golden Rule.

English speaking people will be most familiar with the Christian version of the Golden Rule principle; "Do unto others what you would have them do unto you" attributed to Jesus at Luke 6, 31. This is regarded quite rightly as the template of Jesus' moral teachings. So well-known is this succinct, memorable epigram that it is sometimes thought to be unique to Christianity. Some have even claimed that the principle was actually first proclaimed by Jesus. Neither claim is correct. The Buddha made this same principle one of the cornerstones of his ethics too some 500 years before Jesus. It occurs in many places and in many forms throughout the Tipitaka. For example, the Buddha said, "All tremble at punishment. Life is dear to all. Put yourself in the place of others and harm none or have them harmed" (Dhammapada 130). And again, "You should make this inference; a person who is angry and speaks angrily is unpleasant and disagreeable to me, so if I were angry and spoke angrily to others I would be unpleasant and disagreeable to them. Understanding this, one should resolve neither be angry nor speak angrily" (Majjhima Nikaya 1,99). And one more time, "Knowing that as I am so being others and as are others so am I, harm none or have them harmed" (Sutta Nipata 705).

To make the so-called Golden Rule central to one's thought and behaviour, several prerequisites are necessary. One must be clear about one's own true welfare; one must be sensitive to and aware of the reactions of others; and one must be detached enough to get out of one's own feelings and enter into the feelings of others. So paradoxically, true empathy and compassion are preceded by mindfulness and detachment. Here are some other examples of the Golden Rule from a variety of religious traditions.

Do not do to others what is injurious to yourself. Zoroastrianism, Iran (6th century BC) *Shayast-na-Shayast* 26.

Do not to your neighbour what you would take ill from him. Pittacus, Greece (640-568 BC), *Fragment* 10.3.

Avoid doing what you would blame others for doing. Thales, Greece (624-546 BC).

Never impose on others what you would not choose for yourself. Confucius, China (5th century BC), *Lun Yu* XV.24, also at V.12 and VI.30.

The sage has no interest of his own, but takes the interests of the people as his own. He is kind to the kind; he is also kind to the unkind: for Virtue is kind. He is faithful to the faithful; he is also faithful to the unfaithful: for Virtue is faithful. Lao Tzu, China (5th century BC). *Tao Te Ching*, chap. 49.

Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbour as yourself. Jewish, Israel (5th century BC), *Leviticus*, 19:18.

What you wish your neighbours to be to you, such be also to them. Sextus the Pythagorean, Greece (4th century BC).

Do not do to others what would anger you if done to you by others. Isocrates, Greece (436-338 BC), *Nicoles* 6.

I will ask you a question. 'Is sorrow or pain desirable to you? If you say "yes it is", it would be a lie. If you say, "No, it is not" you will be expressing the truth. Just as sorrow or pain is not desirable to you, so it is to all which breathe, exist, live or have any essence of life. To you and all, it is undesirable, and painful, and repugnant. Jainism *Acaranga Sutra*, India (3rd century BC - 3rd century AD?).

Do to no one what you yourself dislike. Jewish, Israel, (2nd century BC), *The Book of Tobit* 4,15.

Just as pain is not agreeable to you, it is so with others. Knowing this principle of sameness treat other with respect and compassion. Jainism, India (2nd century BC), *Suman Suttam* v.150.

One should never do to another which one regards as injurious to one's own self. This, in brief, is the basis of Dharma. India (2nd century BC – 3rd century AD). *Mahabharata*, Anusasana Parva, cxiii, v.8.

A person should wander about treating all creatures as he would like himself to be treated. Jainism, India (1st cent BC) *Sutrakritanga* 1.11,33.

That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the whole of the Torah; the rest is commentary. Now go and learn. Hillel, Israel (1st century BC) *Talmud*, Shabbat 31a.

Do not do to others what you know has hurt yourself. Tiruvalluvar, South India (2nd century BC) *Tirukkual* 30.

Treat your inferior as you would wish your superior to treat you. Seneca the Younger, Rome (approx. 40 AD)

The suffering you hope to avoid do not impose on others. Epictetus, Greece (1st century AD), *Encheiridion*.