

Essay on comparing homo religiosus and wisdom

[Life](#)



The exploration of the meaning of life is done through many different ways, one prevalent route being religion. In attempting to determine exactly where we fit in from our perspective in the universe, we have taken a plethora of roads toward that end - some believe that we need to connect more deeply with the universe around us, while others believe we need to be saved through an outside force that can only help us through complete abandonment of our agency. These two different, yet equally compelling, perspectives are outlined in Karen Armstrong's "Homo Religiosus" and Robert Thurman's essay "Wisdom." In this essay, we will examine the views these two texts take on life, religion, spirituality and the ultimate meaning of everything. While Armstrong advocates for an "emptying" of the self which indicates the need to be saved by a powerful external force, Thurman advocates understanding the universe better through enlightenment and giving oneself up to the universe itself.

Armstrong, in her essay "Homo Religiosus," places a great deal of importance on depriving oneself of senses and visceral, earthly experience. Armstrong explains that, for as long as the human race has existed (even as cavemen), we have always been a religious people. Even early cave paintings and other relevant study reveal an ideological system and the persistence of rituals in these early cultures. To that end, it can be conceivably concluded that "the caves were sanctuaries and that, as in any temple, their iconography reflected a vision that was radically different from that of the outside world" (Armstrong).

What all of these early cultures have in common, according to Armstrong, is an innate need to belong, and to find connections between themselves, their

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earthly experiences, and the universe. " Material reality was symbolic of an unseen dimension of existence," as various things people saw around them were given cosmic significance - women, vegetation, fertility, the moon, water, and much more had their own uniqueness and connection to the divine within them (Armstrong). All of these things contribute to homo religiosus, an early species of man which was still concerned greatly with how the spiritual world affected our own, and how we could interact with it.

Armstrong discusses the nature of homo religiosus as perpetually seeking ekstasis, " a 'stepping outside' the norm." In early days, when survival was a much more pressing concern, and took much more time and energy, men and women needed to find other ways to distract themselves, or to find a way to 'stand out' among their peers. To that end, religion was adopted as a way to elevate ourselves behind the immediate and the personal. These creative attempts at exploring their humanity (cave paintings, rituals) was likely their way of expressing 'Being," the intangible transcendence of life. The only way these ancient peoples could process the varying aspects of life and the earth was to frame it through objects and rituals. When early man worshipped a rock, he was instead worshipping Being itself.

In order to educate oneself in the ways of the universe, one had to remove oneself from the equation. the concept of kenosis involves 'emptying' the self so that one could be entirely selfless, and view the universe from a more balanced, nuanced perspective. Using this training and discipline, one can lose their fear, their apprehension and ego, and behave as part of the universe itself. In this way, one does not step apart from the universe and view it from a cold, calculating distance, but becomes part of it, connecting <https://assignbuster.com/essay-on-comparing-homo-religiosus-and-wisdom/>

with that sacred energy in a very profound way. By embracing this nothingness, one adds their own creativity and life to the rest of the universe, and from that have a greater well from which creativity might spring.

According to Armstrong, there are many different problems with considering a Supreme Being to be the 'ultimate reality.' One loses a sense of antiquity to the universe in this view, since the idea of a Supreme Being lends it a rather limiting, reductive and doctrinal form instead of remaining the mystery that it most likely is. By providing answers that are too definitive, a Supreme Being instead cuts one off from true understanding of the universe. (Armstrong). Armstrong's notions revolve around the idea of spirituality and religion being universal and endemic to the human experience, as we always attempt to fit ourselves in a greater whole. By emptying ourselves and using it to abandon selfishness, we can experience nothingness, becoming more creative and less separate from the rest of the universe as a result.

Robert Thurman, in his essay "Wisdom," eschews many of the same principles as Armstrong when it comes to exploring the self and one's relationship with the universe. Thurman advocates facing our inner demons and our own flaws to achieve enlightenment - these aforementioned flaws often keep us from truly understanding ourselves and the world around us. Using Buddhist teachings, Thurman wishes to promote selflessness as a means of reaching said enlightenment.

Thurman begins the essay by asking three questions: "Do you know what your "self" is? Where is it? Can you feel it?" (Thurman). We often do not fully

recognize our 'selves,' and neither does Thurman: " I feel that it's there when I don't look for it, but as soon as I look for it with real effort, it instantly eludes discovery" (Thurman). This is further evidence of his viewpoint (in line with Buddhist teachings) that the self is nothing, and it is always shifting, transient. It is in tune with the universe in a very special, ill-defined way, and the only way to fully achieve enlightenment is to understand this concept.

Thurman speaks about " enlightenment" instead of " redemption" or " salvation." How does " enlightenment" differ from salvation?

When compared to redemption or salvation, enlightenment can seem entirely different. Enlightenment, at first glance, seems like an incredibly selfish practice at first glance - the ancient peoples of Armstrong's text seemed to use it, however, to gain access to the greater part of the universe. By emptying themselves through exstesis or kenosis, they were able to reach a higher plane of existence that lies outside themselves.

Enlightenment means knowing totally and completely where you stand in the context of the universe, unlike redemption or salvation, which asks for personal restitution for one's own sins from a different party. As this implies that the two aggrieved parties are separate, and not part of the universe itself, this seems not to mesh with Thurman's outlook on life.

Thurman focuses greatly on the idea of 'selflessness,' as it kindles the sacred fire of compassion" (Thurman, p. 53). By removing one's ego from the equation in relations with others and the world around us, there are no stakes or benefits in creating animosity between yourself and others. To this end, reconciliation can be more easily met. When compared with the Greek

phrase " Know thyself," Thurman's concept of selflessness has some striking similarities. According to Thurman, selflessness " does not mean that you are disconnected," because we are " still totally interconnected" (Thurman). As a vital part of the universe around us, we are never removed from it unless we remove ourselves through ego - this often entails believing that we are smarter or better than our nature or the world. Separating ourselves from the universe itself is a very selfish action, but it also means we cut ourselves off from the rest of said universe - we only know one part of ourselves. By becoming selfless, we can then 'know' ourselves because we know the whole universe and our part in it. We can then become saved - in this way, enlightenment can become a form of salvation in and of itself.

Armstrong's and Thurman's ideas are both very potent and thought-provoking, dealing with the relationship between man and the Divine.

Armstrong focuses on the inherent religiosity of the human race, and notes people's desires to empty themselves of their souls. Thurman focuses on being selfless and reaching enlightenment through much the same process - removing oneself from the equation. Toward that end, people who achieve enlightenment can also be saved by that same process; joining the rest of the universe and understanding its significance can put one beyond the crimes of the self and into the forgiveness of the whole.

References

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