

---

New Age Movements, Occultism, and Spiritualism Research  
Library: Open Source Alexandrian and Witches' Order of the  
Golden Dawn Collections

MS/150/6/3-001

---

2013

# Metafaith

1<sup>st</sup> Ed.

---

For this and additional works see: <https://vtext.valdosta.edu/xmlui/handle/10428/3270>

UUID: 7C96785E-284E-6094-46AA-B0C0AE9E0B54

## Recommended Citation:

Thompson, Sarah. Metafaith. 1st ed. Cupertino, CA: Circle of Cerridwen Press, 2013. Open Source Alexandrian and Witches' Order of the Golden Dawn Collections. MS/150/6. New Age Movements, Occultism, and Spiritualism Research Library. Archives and Special Collections. Valdosta State University. Valdosta, GA., 2018.  
<https://hdl.handle.net/10428/3281>

This digital asset is a preservation copy authorized by the founders of Open Source Alexandrian Tradition for the Valdosta State University Archives & Special Collections to be part of the Open Source Alexandrian and Witches' Order of the Golden Dawn Collections, of the New Age Movements, Occultism, and Spiritualism Research Library. If you have any comments or concerns, contact [archives@valdosta.edu](mailto:archives@valdosta.edu)

# metafaith

Sarah Thompson

*First edition*

Circle of Cerridwen Press  
Cupertino, CA, USA

Circle of Cerridwen Press  
11147 Linda Vista Dr.  
Cupertino, CA 95014 USA  
<http://cerridwen.st4r.org/>

**metafaith**  
First Edition

This book is released on a strictly not-for-profit basis under a  
Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial Share Alike  
(CC BY-NC-SA) License.

Copyright © 2013 – ownership remains with the author.

For Gina, Philip and Lee.



# Contents

Chapter 1. Introduction	1
1. No Faith, Faith, Interfaith, Multifaith	1
2. Metafaith	2
Chapter 2. Metafaith, Compassion and Religious Freedom	5
Chapter 3. This thing is not like the other	11
1. What does it mean to be equal?	11
2. The Law of Predicates	12
3. This like is not like the other like	12
Chapter 4. Gods, Angels, Dæmons and Other Sundry Spirits	15
1. Corporeal Individuality	15
2. Non-corporeal Individuality	16
3. Counting Angels on the Heads of Pins	17
4. Metafaith metaphysics	19
Chapter 5. Interfaith through a Metafaith Lens	21
1. Metafaith as a Practice	22
2. Metafaith clergy	23
Chapter 6. Multifaith	25
Chapter 7. Metafaith, Science and Atheism	27
1. Metafaith morality	28
2. Exclusion as harm	29
Chapter 8. Conclusions and an Invitation	31
Index	33



## CHAPTER 1

# Introduction

Though it would be more usual to write a book like this from a position of assumed authority, I choose instead deliberately to write in the first person. This is all a matter of opinion – in this case, just my own. I make no personal claims of greatness. No one gave me permission to write this, nor did anyone tell me I shouldn't. I hope that *metafaith*<sup>1</sup> stands up for itself as an idea whose time is now, on its own merits. I ask nothing other than that you take from it what is useful to you.

### 1. No Faith, Faith, Interfaith, Multifaith

Faith is a big deal. Faith is not just a matter of opinion. Faith *is*. I suspect that anyone regarding themselves as a person of faith would find this easy to agree upon. Yet, when two or more people of faith (from the same religion or not) start to compare notes, it becomes immediately apparent that concepts that people hold dear as absolute truth are rarely shared. Anyone who has participated in organized religion is likely to have experienced some version of bitter, hard-fought church politics – faith is really too hard a thing to agree on even within a single, supposedly unified *faith*. So how can *interfaith* possibly succeed? Moreover, how can someone manage multiple concurrent faiths as a *multifaith* practitioner? How can a person of faith have a meaningful connection with someone who identifies as having *no faith* at all?

I have faith in the basic altruism of all people. Few deliberately set out to do the wrong thing, and those who do, usually know perfectly well that they should be ashamed of their actions. People want to do the right thing, for themselves, for their loved ones and for their perceived social group. This is something so fundamental that it serves to define what it means to be human.

I also have a bitter faith in the basic xenophobia inherent in all people. Groups tend to cluster around resources, ideology, language, any shared experience that binds. Disconnection

---

<sup>1</sup>I deliberately write, 'metafaith,' rather than, 'Metafaith,' as a constant reminder to myself and others to take a humble approach and not to regard the idea as representing more than it really represents.



builds increasingly with distance. Disconnection breeds suspicion. Suspicion becomes hatred, hatred incites violence. This is something so fundamental that it serves to define what it means to be human.

Yet, whilst we must all choose between good and evil, our chance to shine, to be more than mundane, lies exactly in our ability to make these choices. Whenever our nature drives us to react, we *can* choose otherwise. Herein lies my hope for the world.

## 2. Metafaith

I'm a mathematician. Or maybe a logician, I'm never sure what to call myself. I hope this doesn't scare you. A book like this should probably have been written by a theologian – a pope, a lama, an archbishop. Last I looked, none of those people were available, so you'll have to make do with me. Mathematicians may or may not think differently to theologians, I can't comment on that, but we certainly express ourselves very differently. In mathematics, we start by defining our terms very precisely, and then make our arguments based on those terms. In this way, the debate hopefully centres on the idea, rather than devolving into meaningless argument as a consequence of the participants thinking each other means something completely different from each other.

So, for our purposes, I'm going to start by defining my terms – nailing down the language, so it doesn't get to wriggle around and breed unnecessary discontent.

Let's start with *Faith*. Actually, let's not. Faith is such an overloaded term that even if I do define it here, no one will agree anyway. So let's abandon the idea of working from the top down, and instead construct a definition of metafaith from the ground up.

**2.1. Axioms.** I'm going to borrow some mathematical language here, quite deliberately:

**Axiom:** A basic, fundamental belief that stands on its own as basic to the person holding it to be true.

An axiom is to the concept of belief what an atom is to the concept of matter – axioms are the basic fundamental building blocks out of which our understanding of the world is constructed. Axioms aren't opinions. Axioms don't need to be supported by arguments. Axioms aren't inferred from anything else by persuasion or by logical argument. Axioms just *are*.

Examples of axioms would be:

- (1) There is only one God.

- (2) There are no gods.
- (3) There are many gods.
- (4) My god is bigger than your god, and your god sucks and/or is really some big evil spirit in disguise.
- (5) The earth is 6000-ish years old, give or take a bit of argument about calendars.
- (6) The universe came into being in a big bang umptygazillion years ago, after which it took quite a while for things to cool down enough even for atoms to form, let alone stars, planets and people.
- (7) Evolution is real.
- (8) Evolution is a lie.
- (9) If I have three things, we'll call them  $a$ ,  $b$  and  $c$ , where  $a$  is the same as  $b$  and  $b$  is the same as  $c$ , then it is absolutely, definitely and without any possible shadow of a doubt true that  $a$  is the same as  $c$ .

I'm glad you noticed that some of these axioms fundamentally contradict each other. My axioms are not necessarily your axioms, which are not necessarily anyone else's axioms. Axioms don't necessarily have to remain the same forever for any individual – conversions happen. But for me, my axioms are just as true as your axioms are to you, and just as true as anyone else's axioms are to themselves. Next Thursday, it might be different.

Axioms are always true. Axioms are what 'true' *really means*.

**2.2. Beliefs.** Beliefs are the things we know to be true. In this sense, axioms are beliefs, but beliefs need not be fundamental. If I wanted to make a logical argument about some belief of mine to you, I might first try to figure out what axioms we both happen to have in common, and then construct an argument step by step, leading to the conclusion. In effect, I'd be starting with an axiom, then using that to imply a belief, then using that to imply another belief, then all of that to imply a bigger belief, on and on until the argument is complete. Mathematicians often use symbols instead of words. Logicians often use an arrow  $\rightarrow$  to represent 'implies,' which makes it easier to write things down clearly. So if I have an axiom  $A$  that implies belief  $b$ , I could write this as

$$A \rightarrow b$$

If all of that also implies belief  $c$ , and all of *that* implies belief  $d$ , which implies  $e$ , which implies  $f$ , then we could say

$$A \rightarrow b \rightarrow c \rightarrow d \rightarrow e \rightarrow f$$

Do you see how this forms a neat chain? Truth, at least in the sense of anything that is true that can be supported by a logical

argument, depends on a chain of *proof* like this one. Oh wait, what is that you say? Faith does not depend on proof, and this is what defines the difference between religion and science?

That particular argument is as old as the distinction between religion and science itself. From the point of view of metafaith (remember I said that this was a point of view?), this question can be answered. Let's assume that I believe 10 things,  $a_1$  to  $a_{10}$ , and because I believe them (and vice-versa), I know them to be true. You, the skeptic, asks me to prove it. So I state my assumptions. I know that I can argue the case for  $a_2$  on the basis of  $a_1$ ,  $a_3$  from  $a_2$ , and so on:

$$a_1 \rightarrow a_2 \rightarrow a_3 \rightarrow a_4 \rightarrow a_5 \rightarrow a_6 \rightarrow a_7 \rightarrow a_8 \rightarrow a_9 \rightarrow a_{10}$$

So this tells me that  $a_1$  has to be an axiom, and that I have to *just believe* it in order for the whole chain of proof to make any sense<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, you, the skeptic, will accept my argument if, and *only if*, you also hold  $a_1$  to be an axiom. So who is actually right? Both. Neither. Someone else. It's all a matter of *point of view*. From my point of view, I am right. This is absolutely the case. From your point of view, I might or might not be right, it just depends on whether or not you share the axiom or axioms that my argument depends upon.

**2.3. Metafaith.** If we are prepared to step outside our own private set of axioms and the beliefs that derive from them, and accept the wider truth that truth is *by definition* always relative to our point of view, we are practicing *metafaith*. It's really that simple, though there are consequences. Just as there is a chain of proof leading from an axiom to any belief, embracing metafaith has consequences of its own, which is why this book doesn't just end here on page 4.

Metafaith is absolutely *not* a religion in its own right, and could never be. If I put my logician hat on for a moment, I should point out that, since metafaith seeks to stand *outside* and *around* religion, thereby encompassing all extant and possible religions and the absence thereof, if metafaith was a religion, it would have to be inside itself, alongside other religions, which would make it bigger than itself and therefore impossible. Russell's Paradox. If you don't buy that argument, then look at it another way: the point of metafaith is to create a place between the worlds where we can all visit from time to time in order to create peace and understanding.

---

<sup>2</sup>If I could infer the belief  $a_0$  from some other belief, then  $a_1$  wouldn't really be the start of the chain, there would have to be an  $a_0$ , where  $a_0 \rightarrow a_1 \rightarrow \dots$ . Being the belief at the start of the chain is what 'axiom' really means.

## CHAPTER 2

# Metafaith, Compassion and Religious Freedom

It is fair to say that I have some Buddhist leanings, so contemplation of compassion and its meaning in the world is important to me. Metafaith stands outside religion, by definition, and outside any particular point of view, again by definition, so it is a useful way to think about compassion in the broadest sense: compassion for others, however *other* those others may be.

I'll start, as I prefer, by stating my assumptions:

- (1) Compassion is a really good idea.
- (2) Compassion is *really* nice to have.
- (3) Absence of compassion is very bad, both for the self and for others.
- (4) To practice compassion benefits the self just as much, or even more, than it benefits the recipient.

For this purpose, I'll define compassion to mean the practice of deliberately choosing actions and words that seek to benefit other beings whilst avoiding harm<sup>1</sup>.

If your personal axioms do not align with these, then this chapter will probably not make much sense to you. If they do, then there are some consequences that are worth investigating more deeply.

Much religious strife seems to derive from situations that follow the following pattern:

- (1) Group *A* hold axiom *a* to be true. *a* says that members of group *B* are bad people.
- (2) Group *A* also hold axiom *b*. This axiom says that it is the religious duty of members of group *A* to not be like members of group *B*.

---

<sup>1</sup>Compassion exists on many levels. The Buddhist practice of compassion also has a mystical dimension that is difficult to write about because of the inadequacy of language – it is a *mystery*, not because it's secret, but because it's nearly impossible to express in words. In this chapter, however, we are really considering compassion mundane rather than mystical sense.

- (3) Group  $A$  also hold axiom  $c$ , which says that it is necessary to exclude members of group  $B$  from group  $A$  at all costs.

Analyzing this from the outside, through a metafaith lens, it is clear that group  $A$ 's behavior is altruistic in the sense that it is intended to keep its members safe from harm. Members of  $A$  are (from their own point of view, since all truth is based on this) acting with compassion to other members of  $A$ . It makes the unstated assumption that the benefits of excluding members of  $B$  from group  $A$  outweighs the harm that this exclusion might cause the members of group  $B$ . Put another way, in this scenario,  $A$  has chosen compassion for  $A$ , and lack of compassion (and possible harm) toward  $B$ . If  $A$  represents an organized religion or denomination thereof and axioms  $a$ ,  $b$  and  $c$  are articles of faith, and  $A$  also subscribes to another axiom  $s$  which states that the right to practice  $a$ ,  $b$  and  $c$  are essential to  $A$ 's religious freedom, then I define  $s$  to be the *axiom of selfishness*.

Let's now look at some concrete examples. In the first example, let group  $A$  be 'law abiding people' and  $B$  be 'murderers.' Here, axiom  $a$  says that murderers are bad people. Axiom  $b$  says that law abiding people shouldn't go around killing people. Axiom  $c$  says that it is a good idea to exclude murderers from the general law-abiding population by locking them up in prisons. And, if you squint a bit, axiom  $s$  might be an article in a constitution that says it is the right of all free, law abiding people to not have to deal with being murdered all the time.

Another example:  $A$  are a subset of conservative Christians who (axiom  $a$ ) believe that gay people are evil and going straight to Hell. Good Christians have a religious duty to not be gay (axiom  $b$ ), and it is a good idea to turn gay people away from their places of worship (axiom  $c$ ). They will lobby politicians at local and national level to uphold their religious right to continue this practice (axiom of selfishness  $s$ ).

Yet another example:  $A$  are a subset of second-wave feminist women who (axiom  $a$ ) believe that transsexual women are really men and should be excluded from women-only spaces. They also believe that second wave feminist women are by definition not transsexual women (axiom  $b$ ), and that they must exclude transsexual women from their spaces at all costs (axiom  $c$ ). Secular groups tend to stop here, but some women's religious groups, e.g. some lines of Dianic Wicca explicitly make  $a$ ,  $b$  and  $c$  an article of faith (axiom of selfishness  $s$ ).

In all three cases, group  $A$  is practicing compassion toward its own members. In all cases, group  $B$  may be harmed by exclusion

and lack of compassion (being incarcerated is certainly harmful by any estimate, and exclusion and shaming of LGBTQQI people certainly causes them harm). Though few would disagree that the benefit of incarcerating murderers outweighs the harm to those individuals, it is far harder to the benefit to group *A* from exclusion of gay or transgendered people from their midst. Moreover, when confronted with the accusation, “Hey, *A*, you are causing harm to these people,” a justification along the lines of, “yes, but it is our axiom-of-selfishness-given right to do so,” does not hold up well.

But wait, no, we’re doing this wrong. I just did what most liberal writers would do in analyzing this kind of situation, which was to impose my own moral compass. My own personal beliefs align with murder: bad, gay: good, transsexual: good. If I do that, it isn’t really metafaith, because I’ve assumed an observer (*i.e.*, me), *C*, with a whole other set of axioms:

- (1) Excluding queer people is a nasty thing to do, and causes needless harm (axiom *d*).
- (2) Including queer people does not cause any harm to the people doing the including, and is always the compassionate alternative (axiom *e*)
- (3) No article of religious freedom that harms another should ever be imposed upon someone who does not consent (axiom *f*, which explicitly states that axiom *s* is false).
- (4) Murder is bad, and having people not murder you or others justifies locking them away, though not killing them, except in self-defense (axiom *g*)

This is still insufficient, because we need to also look at *B*’s axioms:

- (1) Being part of *A*’s world is the right of the members of *B* (axiom *h*)
- (2) Exclusion causes harm (axiom *i*)

*Now*, and only now, do we have a complete picture. Metafaith doesn’t take sides. I’ll say that again: *metafaith doesn’t take sides*. And once more, just to make sure: **METAFaITH DOES NOT TAKE SIDES**. The idea is that it is a framework that stands outside, and to an extent above, all systems of belief, that allows any situation to be looked at without judgement, making it much easier to see the whole picture. I believe (more axioms here, yes, I know) that this is likely to make it easier to deal rationally with disagreements and find the greater compassion that minimizes harm to all beings.

Returning again to our example, let us assume that our intent is to make a genuine attempt to find the greater compassion in the situation. One possible solution that is being used practically in the real world at the time of writing is *radical inclusion*. The term radical inclusion [citation needed] was coined by Bishop Yvette Flunder, founder of the City of Refuge church in San Francisco, USA and the Fellowship of Affirming Ministries. City of Refuge is an astonishing melting pot of ages, shapes, sizes, races, gender identities, sexual preferences and economic backgrounds. Perhaps more surprisingly, it is also a melting pot of religious backgrounds – Bishop Flunder herself describes City of Refuge as ‘Methobaptical,’ but there are many multifaith practitioners in the church, including Wiccans, a large Yorùbá contingent, native Americans, Kemetics, Jews, Buddhists, Sufis and probably many others. From their order-of-service, read every Sunday:

*include quote*

Taking a radical inclusion approach, let’s rewrite *A*:

- (1) Radical inclusion includes everyone, regardless of a long list of characteristics (axiom *a*).
- (2) Group *A* welcomes members of group *B*, or any other group for that matter (axiom *b*).
- (3) Group *A* believes it is always a bad idea to exclude other groups (axiom *c*) and that doing so causes harm.
- (4) Group *A* does not subscribe to the axiom of selfishness (there is no axiom *s*)

This approach resolves the situation very well for either of the latter two examples. City of Refuge’s explicit inclusion of gay and trans people allows its members to show compassion without being judged for doing so, and palpably creates healing for most of its queer members. There is no evidence whatsoever that its straight members are harmed in any way by the church’s inclusive nature. Yet, there is a remaining issue – returning to the first example, would a murderer be welcomed by a group practicing radical inclusion? In principle, yes, actually. A significant proportion of City of Refuge’s membership have had challenging backgrounds, many are in recovery, many are homeless, and many have been incarcerated in the past. Nevertheless, there remains a need to draw the line at members causing harm to other members, so in such cases, people do occasionally need to be excluded. Is this ideal? No. Is suffering reduced overall? Hugely, yes.

Before we move on, it is still necessary to reiterate that metafaith still does not take sides on this. It is a tool, a framework if you prefer. I sincerely hope that it is used in the spirit that I intended – striving always for the greater compassion in any situation.





## CHAPTER 3

# This thing is not like the other

In the previous chapter, I hope I managed to demonstrate that truth is not absolute, and that it is relative to the point of view of the observer. In this chapter, I'd like to show that equivalence can also only be understood in relation to point-of-view. I'm going to start abstractly, then give some concrete examples, but don't cheat and jump forward, because understanding equivalence is essential to understanding metafaith.

### 1. What does it mean to be equal?

Human language is awful at talking about equality. What does *equal* mean? Equal rights? Equal access to services? Equal right to religious practice? An equal amount of money in two bank accounts? For the purposes of metafaith, I prefer to use the term *equivalence* instead, because it's not so overloaded with political meaning.

If I said that  $1 + 1 = 2$ , pretty much everyone would agree that this was true. But, what if I claimed that  $1 + 1 = 10$ ? You might think I was wrong, crazy, stupid or, at the very least, my claim was false. To a mathematician, however, my claim is *either true or false* depending on how you interpret it. If you assume that the kind of numbers I'm using are decimal, then my claim is false. But, if the number system is binary, then it is indeed the case that  $1 + 1 = 10$ , because 10 is how two is written in that system<sup>1</sup>. Basically, what I just demonstrated here is that even something as well understood and well agreed upon as the mathematical concept of '=' can mean something different based on the point of view of the observer. Woolier human ideas of equivalence aren't going to do any better, but for some reason we are particularly bad at intuitively understanding this.

For the purposes of metafaith, it is really important to grasp this issue – if you are happy with the idea that truth is relative to the observer, it follows that deciding whether two things are the

---

<sup>1</sup>An old T-shirt joke says that there are 10 kinds of people, those that understand binary and those that don't.

same or not (something that is either true or false), is inevitably also relative to the observer.

I grew up in north east England in the 1970s. I went to a not very special state-run Church of England school. Nearby there was a Catholic school. At the time, it was impressed upon me whether I liked it or not that *those Catholics* were very different to me and that I should stay away from them. All I could see were those much-pushed differences. I drifted away from the Church of England in my teens and didn't have much to do with mainstream Christianity for some time. Years later, what really struck me on looking again was just how nearly identical the two religions seemed. Yes, there were differences, but looking on as a non-Christian, the sameness far outweighed the differences. In this case, one person making the same judgement – sameness or otherwise between the C of E and Catholicism – made dramatically different conclusions because their point of view changed over time.

So, are the Church of England and Catholicism the same? The answer is inescapable: either yes or no depending on the point of view of the person making that judgement. Since dealing with these kinds of question is exactly the point of metafaith, it is always necessary to think hard about whether we are approaching a question from the standpoint of our own background, assumptions and, I hate to say it, prejudices, or whether we are making an adequate attempt to look dispassionately from the outside.

## 2. The Law of Predicates

Any statement that, when evaluated, has an answer that is either *true* or *false* is a *predicate*. Metafaith defines a *law of predicates*, as follows:

THE TRUTH OR FALSEHOOD OF ANY PREDICATE  
DEPENDS ON THE POINT OF VIEW OF THE OBSERVER.

This is the fundamental axiom of Metafaith.

## 3. This like is not like the other like

Just as equivalence depends on the observer, and possibly also upon when the observation takes place, it is also important to understand that there are many kinds of equivalence, and our intuition about this will frequently trip us up.

*A chef sends their assistant to the pantry to get some containers to store some leftovers. The assistant, confused, returns to ask for advice. "Boss, there are so many different jars in there, what should I bring?"*

*“Oh, get me an empty jar of marmalade. Or an empty jar of jam.”*

*“What’s the difference?”*

This little mathematical parable is actually representative of an argument that went on between set theorists for many years. If I have a set of elephants (which could contain anywhere between zero and lots of elephants), and a set of giraffes (which again could contain anything between zero and lots), then it’s pretty clear that if I have 3 elephants in my elephant-set, and 4 giraffes in my giraffe-set, then I have two different sets. If I have 6 elephants and no giraffes (*i.e.*, an elephant-set with 6 members and a giraffe-set with 0 members), it’s also pretty clear that I have two different sets. But, what happens if I have an empty set of elephants and an empty set of giraffes? Are they the same, or different? It turns out that, in mathematics, the way you decide to answer this question gives you two very different kinds of set theory, each of which often have quite different answers to seemingly equivalent questions. So what *is* the difference between an empty jar of marmalade and an empty jar of jam? As usual, it all depends on your point of view. If you aren’t worried about a little bit of marmalade odour, refilling the jar with jam would be fine. But, a marmalade purist might insist that such jars are only ever refilled with more marmalade.

In piecing the ideas behind metafaith together over the last years and months in contemplation and in conversation with others, one question that has been asked several times is whether metafaith could ever be considered a religion in its own right. After some thought, I realised that the answer was *no*, and that I could prove it. The argument goes as follows:

- (1) Metafaith is, by definition, the union of all possible religions and none.
- (2) If metafaith is a religion, then by definition (1) it must contain itself.
- (3) Let’s assume that, before metafaith, there are  $n$  religions.
- (4) From (1) and (3), it follows that the count of the set of religions comprising metafaith must also be  $n$ .
- (5) Once we found metafaith as a religion, then there are now  $n + 1$  religions.
- (6) This makes metafaith strictly bigger than itself, *i.e.*,  $n + 1 = n$ , which is clearly false.

In mathematics, this is called Russell’s Paradox, after the philosopher Bertrand Russell. Returning to our previous example with the elephants, giraffes and jam jars, I mentioned that there were two broad kinds of set theory. As it turns out, one kind allows you

to express Russell's Paradox, and the other doesn't. If one of your axioms has it that an empty jar of marmalade is fundamentally different to an empty jar of jam, then Russell's Paradox is impossible. An effective way of avoiding the paradox is by making a rule that sets have to have well-defined *types* – if your marmalade jar can only ever contain marmalade, then there is no possible way you could ever put *jars of marmalade* inside it, so you just can't express the paradox at all. If you can't put jars inside the jar, then you certainly can't put the jar inside itself either. Because it's a jar, not marmalade.

METAFaITH IS NOT, AND CAN NEVER BECOME, A RELIGION.

So, metafaith can't both be a religion and the set of all possible religions, because that would make it bigger than itself, which is impossible<sup>2</sup>.

---

<sup>2</sup>I make no criticism of Unitarian Universalism here, which does much fine work. Yet, it is interesting to note that it might well be fundamentally impossible to create a truly all-encompassing religion-of-all-religions.

## CHAPTER 4

# Gods, Angels, Dæmons and Other Sundry Spirits

If you've read the last three chapters, you should already be familiar with the idea that metafaith deliberately takes an abstracted view, allowing people to believe whatever they like for whatever reasons, providing a common framework that makes it possible to reason about those similarities and differences without getting bogged down in differences of personal belief.

This chapter is probably the most important in the book. Here, I'm going to present a unifying framework for all spiritual experience – a model big enough to wrap around all possible views of spirituality. Admittedly, this is a very big idea, but we can borrow some mathematics to make it surprisingly simple to explain. I'll be building on concepts from previous chapters, so if you've skipped ahead to here, you might want to consider going back and reading what you missed.

I'm going to present a view of spirituality that you most likely won't believe. At least, you are not likely to believe all of it. This is, actually, the point. Depending on your axioms, you will believe different bits of the model and not others. This is as it should be. Bear with me to the end, it's worth it. Here goes.

### 1. Corporeal Individuality

You and I are distinct individuals. You are not me. I am not you. Our biology does not allow us to merge or overlap, particularly with regard to our consciousness. Consequently, telling us apart is rather easy. Given a person  $A$  and another (different) person  $b$ , it's pretty easy to get a solid answer to  $A = B$ . Well, mostly. Remember our previous discussion on equivalence? It makes sense to be a little bit more specific about what I really *mean* by equivalence. Here, I'm really talking about individuality. Am I you, are you me? Unless we are conjoined twins, this is easy to answer: unless I'm talking to myself, the answer is no.

For any corporeal entity, intelligent or not, individuality is a concept that nearly everyone implicitly shares the same axioms about, without ever really having considered why.

## 2. Non-corporeal Individuality

Establishing the individuality of non-corporeal beings is rather trickier, but as I'll demonstrate, this concept is key to creating a unifying framework.

A hard materialist-atheist would typically have it that no non-corporeal beings exist in the universe. This fits perfectly well with metafaith – there is no conflict, they are free to believe that the set of all non-corporeal beings is empty. Establishing the individuality of non-corporeal beings for such a person is rather trivial, because for them, there are no beings to compare.

A (very) strict monotheist might believe that the set of all non-corporeal beings contains exactly one deity, and nothing else. A less strict monotheist might believe that the set of all non-corporeal beings contains exactly one god, along with possibly many other classes of being, including but not limited to angels, dæmons, spirits of the dead, etc. A duotheist<sup>1</sup> might believe that the set contains exactly two deities, one male and one female, along with various and sundry lower spirits. A hard polytheist might believe that the set comprises a specific list of deities, again possibly also including other classes of entity. Someone who practices ancestor worship might believe that the set comprises the sum total of all of the spirits of the dead that have gone before them. An animist with an immanent view of spirituality might regard the set of all non-corporeal entities to comprise the spirits of everything and everyone that exist on the material plane. There are probably as many ways of defining this set as there are people.

If we can accept that people may have different views of what comprises the set of all non-corporeal entities, it is also necessary to accept that, for many people, the concept of individuality when applied to non-corporeal entities is often blurred. Many Christians believe that Jesus is both God and the son of God. Many Christians believe in a Holy Trinity, with God comprising a Father, Son and Holy Ghost. And many Christians don't agree with either of these, yet they typically have a reasonably compatible intuitive understanding of the Abrahamic God known as Yod He Vav He, and a fair idea what they all mean by Jesus. I'm using Christianity as an example, here, but most traditions have this kind of characteristic associated with their view of spirituality. If we try to

---

<sup>1</sup>Duotheism isn't widely discussed in mainstream theology, but is very common in the modern neopagan movement.

apply corporeal standards to individuality of non-corporeal entities, unless we are a very strict hard polytheist, hard monotheist or hard atheist, the concept breaks. A general model must, then, admit the idea that non-corporeal entities might not be distinct, *i.e.*, that they can *overlap*. Moreover, we also have to accept that given the same pair of noncorporeal beings, two people might have quite different ideas about what individuality (equivalence) actually *means* – in fact, this is really absolutely central to the way that metafaith deals with spirituality.

### 3. Counting Angels on the Heads of Pins

As a little aside, let's talk about counting. We all (or, at least most of us), learn to count as small children and then never really challenge what counting *means*. Indeed, it's possible to go quite far into studying mathematics formally without ever challenging those assumptions. However, for a logician, counting isn't basic. It's not an axiom. It's actually derived from another, far more basic axiom, variously known either as the *axiom of choice* or the *axiom of replacement*.<sup>2</sup> The axiom of choice/replacement is basically mathematics' version of needing to deal with the concept of individuality.

So, how do we count? How do we *really* count, and what does it *really mean* to count?

Ok, here goes:

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, . . .

Easy, wasn't it? Not so fast! To go from 1 to 2 you are actually depending on the concept that 1 and 2 are *distinct*. If 1 and 2 might not be distinct (*i.e.*, because they overlap, or because they are actually the same), counting explodes in your face. You just can't do it reliably. You need an axiom like this: given  $a, b$  and  $c$ , if  $a = b$  and  $b = c$ , then  $a = c$ . I won't go into the technicalities, but this actually nicely locks everything down so numbers don't get to squirm around.

To get you a little more used to thinking in this new way about numbers, I'll take you on another little digression. How many numbers are there? Can you count them all?

Ok, let's start. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, . . . You can keep going like that for as long as you like. There is no biggest possible number – for any  $n$ , there is always an  $n + 1$ , so you can walk along that chain as

---

<sup>2</sup>Strictly, these are different axioms, though each implies the other. You do need to choose to believe at least one of them, though. A mathematician friend from my time at Oxford, Dr. Catherine Greenhill, used to like to joke that mathematics is the only religion that can actually *prove* that it's a religion, and that she prayed every night that the axiom of choice is really true.



far as you like. But, let's say you walk along the chain infinitely far, so you reach  $\infty$ . Some people believe that you know you have got to  $\infty$  when you add 1 and still are at  $\infty$ , but this is really a misunderstanding. It's better to think of  $\infty$  as being the smallest number<sup>3</sup> that is strictly bigger than all of the numbers you can get to by starting at 1 and counting upwards.

As an interesting digression, it is fun to figure out how many even numbers there are. Clearly, there are an infinite number of them, but is this a bigger or smaller infinity than the infinite number of natural numbers we just counted in our thought experiment? The trick is to count them in pairs, e.g.

$$(1, 2)(2, 4)(3, 6)(4, 8)(5, 10)(6, 12) \dots$$

which basically proves that, because there is a strict one to one correspondence, there are exactly the same number of even numbers and natural numbers! This is called a *counting argument*.

But what about fractions? How many fractions are there? The answer to this is, in its own way, even more surprising than the answer for even numbers. Counting arguments don't work for fractions, because they have an interesting property: given two fractions,  $x$  and  $y$ , if  $x$  and  $y$  are different, there is always a  $z$  that is half way between them. This means that for any  $x$  and  $y$ , you can keep subdividing the space between them as many times as you like, forever. Or, putting it another way, there are an infinite number of numbers between  $x$  and  $y$ , so much so that if you try to count them one at a time you get nowhere. Technically, there are a *countably infinite* number of natural numbers, but the number of fractions is *uncountably infinite* – in this sense, one infinity is actually strictly bigger than the other.

The reason for these digressions is that I wanted to show that, even if the axiom of choice holds and numbers are being well-behaved, then it isn't always possible to count the members of a set. Without an axiom of choice, which is the state you're in when numbers can overlap or otherwise act up and misbehave, counting doesn't even have a well-defined meaning. So, how many gods are there? How many angels are there? How many dæmons? The answer to these and all similar questions inevitably, then, is that it depends on how you define equivalence (identity) between non-corporeal entities, and (importantly) that it may well be the case that counting them might be unreliable or even impossible, depending on that definition. Moreover, when people with different ideas of equivalence, when presented with exactly the same

---

<sup>3</sup>If you wanted to be really strict, you might say that  $\infty$  is really a *limit*, not a number as-such at all.

set of beings they may distinguish them wildly differently, whilst still having worldviews that are completely consistent with their own axioms.

#### 4. Metafaith metaphysics

Since most mathematicians run screaming rather than consider the possibility of life without an axiom of choice, I need to enter dangerous territory, because to encompass all models of spirituality, it's necessary to find a way to cope with this.

In physics, it is accepted that all objects can be subdivided and subdivided again only so far – eventually you hit the physical limits of the universe and can't divide further. Originally, people thought the atoms were the limit, but nowadays we regard the limit as being a variety of subatomic particles that, together, make up atoms. I'd like to suggest that the spiritual world has a similar property, in that it can also be subdivided and subdivided again, until you end up with *mota*,<sup>4</sup> which can not be subdivided further. It doesn't really matter whether you believe this literally or simply use it as a mental sleight of hand, the approach still works.

So, the spiritual plane (or whatever you prefer to call it) is comprised of an arbitrarily large (possibly infinite) number of *mota*. Non-corporeal beings, therefore, are comprised of (probably large numbers of, but at least one) *mote*. In the corporeal world, we don't get to share atoms. Physical laws get in the way, so it just doesn't work. But, on the spiritual plane, entities can share *mota*. Looking at it the other way around, in the corporeal world, an atom may be part of at most one conscious entity, but in the non-corporeal world, a *mote* may be part of many entities. Since *mota* are distinct and indivisible, they obey an axiom of choice (i.e., if I have two *mota*, *a* and *b* I can always determine with certainty whether they are the same or different). This trick neatly unbreaks mathematics, whilst also making it a bit easier to conceptualise metafaith.

We can now define exactly what we mean by *sets of non-corporeal entities*.. Since a non-corporeal entity is comprised of a set of *mota*, then what we have are sets of (possibly overlapping) sets of *mota*. Mathematics is just fine with this.

What if you don't believe in the idea that deities could overlap, or this crazy notion of *mota*? This doesn't actually break the model. Let's assume that you believe that, on the spiritual plane, there exists exactly one god, and exactly one devil, and that they are absolutely distinct and there is no possible overlap between

---

<sup>4</sup>*Mota* is atom backwards – I like to use *mota* as the plural, and *mote* as the singular.

them. We can deal with this by defining the spiritual plane as consisting of exactly two mota, one of which corresponds directly to your concept of god, and the other of which corresponds directly to your concept of the devil.

As another example, let's assume that we are considering a dialogue between a soft polytheist, who is entirely comfortable with the idea that deities can overlap and show different aspects to different people at different times, and someone who believes in exactly one god, exactly one adversary, and no other spiritual beings. Superficially, it would seem that these models are completely incompatible, but this is not so. For the polytheist, they might regard the montheist's god and adversary as two entities within a vast menagerie of beings. The monotheist might regard all of the polytheist's deities as aspects of their own adversary (which probably requires them to admit that the adversary, at least, may be comprised of more than one mota). Many self-described monotheists believe that all the distinct deities perceived by polytheists are actually aspects of their one god. A hard atheist, effectively believes in a spiritual plane containing exactly zero mota. A Kabbalist believes in a spritual plane subdivided into the sephirot of the Tree of Life<sup>5</sup>.

So there we have it. A single, unified model that you can view however you like, regardless of your spiritual background or lack thereof. Or, putting it another way, it depends on how you define angel, and how you define pin, and there are no rules that say we need to agree in order to still have a meaningful discussion.

---

<sup>5</sup>Depending on tradition, this may mean dividing it into 10, 32, 40, 128 or some other number of pieces. Though fascinating, a more detailed discussion of Kabbalah is well outside the scope of this book.

## CHAPTER 5

### **Interfaith through a Metafaith Lens**

Interfaith, as typically practiced, involves members of one faith reaching out to members of other faiths in order to better understand one another. This is a laudable practice, something that is necessary to create checks and balances that prevent society from fragmenting into xenophobic hatred. When interfaith fails, the results are universally very bad indeed – harm is caused to everyone along the line of fracture, fueling further isolation as the altruistic tendency to protect the people closest to us causes us to withdraw further. This is human nature. We are all xenophobes. Yet, we are all better than this. We all have free will, and we all have the capacity to find a greater compassion that lets us define *us* far more broadly.

Interfaith, as typically practiced, is ultimately limited, because it is practiced through the lens of the faiths of the people concerned. A Christian trying to understand a Buddhist might get bogged down in trying to figure out how the Christian god and Jesus fit with the Buddhist's view of deity, and completely miss that the Buddhist's spiritual focus is really quite different, thereby missing an enormous opportunity for personal growth. A Catholic trying to understand a liberal Protestant might get stuck on one of the many small differences in their paths, because when the paths are naturally close together, the tendency is to see the differences rather than the commonality.

Interfaith is also widely *not* practiced. There is a tendency amongst many people to want to avoid exposing themselves (or the people close to them) to ideas and concepts that contravene their beliefs. Some do so from fear that such actions might offend their own deity, others because they want to make sure that their children grow up believing the same things that they do. Though it is, of course, everyone's right to make such a choice, it is a barren approach to life that when practiced en masse does nothing to prevent the fracture of society.

Metafaith isn't equivalent to interfaith. In and of itself, it is just a philosophical approach to understanding faith, and the absence thereof, as practiced by anyone and everyone. It doesn't inherently *do* anything, nor should it. But, used as a tool in order to better practice interfaith, it might be very powerful.

### 1. Metafaith as a Practice

I've, I hope, already demonstrated that metafaith isn't a religion, and can never become one without losing its essential perspective as standing outside all religions. It is not a religion-of-religions, nor does it require you to believe anything that is contrary to your own faith, unless you have a peculiar fear or hatred of mathematics. Nevertheless, there is no particular reason why metafaith can not be *practiced*.

So what might this look like? Let's start, as I hope becomes traditional, by stating our assumptions:

- (1) Bringing many faiths together, to work together, eat together, to experience one another's practices, builds friendship and compassion.
- (2) Friendship and compassion always defeat xenophobia when given the chance to do so.
- (3) Exposure to ideas and concepts not of one's own tradition is beneficial, and can ultimately only ever enhance one's spiritual experience.

So how might this actually be achieved? I dream of a place where many faiths come together, to share a space with one another, yet retain their distinct identities. Where the door is always open to anyone who wants to see, to experience, to take part, or just to better understand. Where interfaith is something that people *do*, not just aspire to, but that does not require them to give up their spiritual identity.

A *metafaith center* would be a building that at any instant in time might be a church, a mosque, a temple, a grove, a circle, but always a sanctuary, always a safe place, always open to all, and I really *mean* ALL. Somewhere that Christians can hold services, where Wiccans can circle, where Moslems can answer a call to prayer, where Jews can honour their observances together. Where a Christian, curious about Buddhist practice, can go and see for themselves, to take part if they wish, or just to observe if they don't. Where a neopagan can help someone from a more established faith conquer their apprehensions, and overcome past

teaching that came from a place of fear, rather than one of knowledge. Where just being regularly present becomes an interfaith education<sup>1</sup>.

In order for this to work, there is a price to pay for all of the participants, but I believe that the rewards far outweigh the sacrifices that must be made. Any group participating as a co-member<sup>2</sup> of a metafaith center must accept the following laws as a condition of participation:

- (1) ALL INDIVIDUALS HAVE THE RIGHT TO THEIR OWN AXIOMS.
- (2) NO ONE HAS THE RIGHT TO IMPOSE THEIR AXIOMS ON ANOTHER WITHOUT THEIR CONSENT.
- (3) WHERE AXIOMS DIFFER IN A WAY THAT IS INCOMPATIBLE, A COMPROMISE WILL BE FOUND, MINDFUL THAT ALL AXIOMS AND THEREFORE ALL TRUTH IS DEPENDENT UPON THE OBSERVER, THAT MINIMIZES HARM AND SEEKS ALWAYS THE GREATER COMPASSION.

All of these rules are necessary. Without (1), we would not have religious freedom. Without (2), we can not be free from oppression. Without (3), we have no commitment to resolve our differences, to help one another, or to learn from one another.

## 2. Metafaith clergy

Metafaith is not a religion, but it needs clergy all the same. For its promise to be fulfilled, there is a need to teach its principles to people who seek to participate. Such a person would not be a priest (though they might happen also to be a priest of a particular tradition), but they would certainly be a teacher. Yet, metafaith needs to refuse the temptation to slide toward becoming a religion in its own right, because that way inevitably lies its own dissolution. Consequently, metafaith stakes no claim within the territory of organized religion – it would not be appropriate, for example, for a metafaith teacher to perform marriages or funerals, though they might if they were also a priest of a tradition that does involve itself with such practices.

---

<sup>1</sup>The concept of a metafaith center started from an idea of Gina Pond's, and grew to its present form in contemplation and through many discussions with the author, Lee Whittaker and Philip Tanner.

<sup>2</sup>Ideally, a metafaith center should be held equally by its participating groups, so no group is in the position of being subordinate to another



## CHAPTER 6

# Multifaith

It is usually overlooked that many individuals practice more than one faith – they are *multifaith* practitioners. Metafaith has some potential benefits for such people, both in resolving conflicts between their paths and in helping them to deal with others who perhaps only share one path, and who are disturbed that someone might also follow another.

I recently visited City of Refuge church in San Francisco<sup>1</sup>. Gina Pond led an interfaith service, bringing in a number of multifaith practitioners within the congregation, each of which telling their stories and sharing their experiences. Though I had visited the church previously, I'd only really seen its Christian focus, but in Gina's service, she basically gave the congregation permission to be who they really were. The inescapable impression was that multifaith is actually far from rare – it was astonishing to see just how many people were deeply moved by the service because, for them, they had little or no history of their true spirituality being acknowledged by a priest.

Metafaith's advice to a multifaith practitioner is exactly the same as its advice on interfaith:

- (1) ALL INDIVIDUALS HAVE THE RIGHT TO THEIR OWN AXIOMS. Consequently, you can believe anything you like.
- (2) NO ONE HAS THE RIGHT TO IMPOSE THEIR AXIOMS ON ANOTHER WITHOUT THEIR CONSENT. No one has the right to tell you that following more than one path is wrong – it is purely a matter for your own discernment. Putting it another way, no one has the right to tell you that you *can't* believe anything you like.
- (3) WHERE AXIOMS DIFFER IN A WAY THAT IS INCOMPATIBLE, A COMPROMISE WILL BE FOUND, MINDFUL THAT ALL AXIOMS AND THEREFORE ALL TRUTH IS DEPENDENT UPON THE OBSERVER, THAT MINIMIZES HARM AND SEEKS ALWAYS THE GREATER COMPASSION. Where the beliefs taught by your paths disagree, you may choose to resolve these

---

<sup>1</sup>City of Refuge is a Christian church with an extremely diverse congregation



differences as you see fit. If in doubt, choosing the path of least harm and greatest compassion to yourself and others is always preferable.

Multifaith has a long and ancient tradition – most of the older faiths grew to their present forms in part by absorbing concepts along the way, and since traditions are comprised of individuals, this process can only occur by individuals practicing some form of multifaith.

Misunderstanding and fear of multifaith practitioners is extremely common. It is also usual for multifaith practitioners to have difficulties reconciling their own beliefs. I sincerely hope that metafaith can help with both of these.

## Metafaith, Science and Atheism

It is fair to disclose that, though I am a priest in my own tradition, I am not clergy by profession – I am actually a professional scientist. I'm a theorist-engineer-mathematician, which is how I earn my living. I have often been asked how I reconcile science and religion. This has actually never really been a problem for me, because I've never felt that religion and science conflict with each other. For me, religion starts where science ends, and both are good at what they do. Science has little to say about my spiritual experience, and I've never found religious teachings very effective when attempting to solve engineering problems.

From a metafaith point of view, science is a belief system, just as religions are belief systems. Mathematics is *definitely* a belief system, and can prove that it is. In a real sense, we are all mathematicians if we count. We are all scientists if we interact with the material world, and of course, all corporeal beings do exactly that. We all intuitively know that if we put a flame under a pot of water, eventually it will get hot and most likely eventually boil. We all intuitively know that if we throw a baseball into the air, it will come back down again. The axioms that underpin this intuition are essentially scientific, whether or not we happen to remember theories of thermodynamics or gravity from our school days. We are all mathematicians. We are all scientists.

Hard atheists, who believe that all existence is essentially corporeal, admitting no possible spirituality, then, are the only people who genuinely practice a single faith. Everyone else – *everyone!* – are multifaith practitioners.

For some, this is a problem. When one adopts the teachings of a faith as axiomatic, if those teachings contradict the axioms we gather as a consequence of our scientific experience, then something has to give. We need to make a choice. We need to decide whether to retain the religious axiom or the scientific axiom. Neither is more true than the other, because truth can only ever be decided from our own point of view. If I accept it as axiomatic that the universe began billions of years ago, then for me, this is *true*. If you hold that it is only a few thousand years old,

for you, this is also *true*. This is not a conflict, unless we decide for some misguided reason to do battle with each other over our differences.

It *is* a problem, however, if I try to hold two incompatible axioms at the same time. This is, by definition, a *crisis of understanding*. If these axioms are spiritual, then it is also a *crisis of faith*. Such crises can only be resolved through contemplation and by seeking spiritual direction, or, possibly, scientific direction, if that is what's necessary. Though, rarely, individuals resolve this by choosing to adopt both axioms but never simultaneously, usually it is necessary to choose one over the other. Either choice is valid, though it is inevitably harder to choose a spiritual axiom over a scientific one, because the material world will continuously remind you of its own physical truths. In extremis, this tends to result in withdrawing from the world in self-protection, something that is very frequently damaging to the individual, and in furthering the fracturing of society, something that is damaging on a wider scale.

### 1. Metafaith morality

Metafaith has little to say directly about morality, because morality is a concept that can only be discerned relative to our own personal axioms. As much as many faith practitioners would like there to be a universal, shared, divinely given morality, there is little evidence for this existing in a well-defined form across all cultures. It is, however, much easier to agree on what *harm* means, and on the benefits of *compassion*.

From a metafaith point of view, everyone has their own morality, informed by their axioms. In that sense, if everyone really is free to believe whatever they like, then it is an inescapable conclusion that they are also free to believe that any particular thing or action is good or evil or somewhere between based on those axioms. Putting it another way, I can believe anything I like, and in and of itself, this can not possibly harm anyone. Harm can only be caused when I act.

The Wiccan tradition commonly adopts a principle known as the *Rede*:

AN IT HARM NONE, DO AS YOU WILL.

This is best understood as saying that if you are not causing harm, then you may do whatever you wish. I'd personally add to this that it is always preferable to act in a way that aids the greater compassion. Since metafaith is concerned with aiding people from diverse backgrounds in resolving their differences and in working together, this seems to be pretty good advice for anyone.

## 2. Exclusion as harm

Excluding someone from a group causes harm to that person. We all know what it feels like to be excluded from participation in something that is important to us – in extreme cases, this feeling of exclusion creates isolation, which contributes to depression, suicide and death. Excluding someone who is already at the edge of society because of their race, gender orientation, sexuality, disability, etc., greatly multiplies the potential of harm. The flip-side of this is that, for those same individuals, the benefit of inclusion is also greatly multiplied. The greater compassion that can be found in the *radical inclusion* that is deliberately blind to difference is the most powerful compassion of all, and of the greatest benefit both to the recipient and the giver of that compassion.

Though exclusion is sometimes necessary to maintain safety, such exclusion must be practiced mindfully and as compassionately as is still possible.



## CHAPTER 8

### **Conclusions and an Invitation**

This is a deliberately slim book. I set out to explain the metafaith idea as straightforwardly as I could, on the basis that if it's something that can be read in no more than an hour or so, cover-to-cover, it's far more likely to reach people, and therefore be of benefit.

Nevertheless, this is the first step on a long and winding path. I hereby invite you to take this journey with me and to contribute to the body of knowledge that metafaith hopefully can become.

I give this book freely<sup>1</sup> to anyone who may benefit from it. Feel free to copy it and redistribute it however you see fit.

I dedicate this book to the glory of all the gods and the absence thereof, and for the benefit of all beings. May the greater compassion be found in all of us.

Sarah Thompson,  
Cupertino, California  
12th January 2013

---

<sup>1</sup>Or, in the case of the print version, at cost, incurring no financial profit to myself.



# Index

Absolute truth, 11

**Axiom**, 2

**Belief**, 3

**Equality**, 11

**Equivalence**, 11

Faith, 2

**Faith**, 1

Bishop Yvette Flunder, 8

**Interfaith**, 1

Metafaith, 4

**Metafaith**, 2

**Multifaith**, 1

Radical inclusion, 8

Relative truth, 11

Truth, 11

absolute, 11

relative, 11