Comparing religions requires identifying points in common, so as to highlight the contrasts between and among them. Without shared traits religions subject to comparison yield observations lacking consequence. If all religions concur that the sun rises in the east, what generalization do we learn about all of those religions that clarifies their shared character? And what follows for the particular characterization of any one of those religions? For religions bear distinctive traits. What they share by definition is commonplace, outweighed by what distinguishes them from one another. The more widespread a shared trait among religions, the more it lacks consequence for any particular context.

I propose that a proposition common to a number of religions bears no consequence for the description, analysis, and interpretation of any one of those religions in particular: what is common produces the commonplace. That proposition requires the analysis of a set of religions that share a proposition. It demands an estimate of the importance of the shared proposition in those religions, respectively. But how are we to demonstrate that a trait shared by numerous religions does not play a differentiating role in any given religion? That intuitive proposition requires a test, which I shall carry out here.

The test requires describing the encompassing traits of a religion and its propositions. These propositions are to be shown to form a system of ideas—not random and episodic observations about this and that but a coherent composition. Then the role of the Golden Rule in the articulation of the system is to be assessed by appeal to the logic that sustains the system.

A religious system will appeal to a particular logic. Hypothetically reconstructing that logic will permit us to predict what the religion will say about a topic that is not articulately expounded. Such a system will generate solutions to problems not addressed in the formative writings of the religion: if we know this, what else do we know? Thus from the proposition, “two apples plus two apples equal
four apples,” the system invites the hypothesis, “two” (anythings) plus “two” (anythings) equal four (anythings). That illustrates what I mean by a religious system. It is a mode of thought or logic characteristic of a set of religious ideas that generates new truth, accommodates fresh data, permits us to make predictions concerning what must follow from a given proposition. The logic of the system then is brought to bear upon the new truth and self-evidence enters in.

That returns us to the task of comparing religions through what is alike and what is different. What is common among several religious traditions does not fit well with what is particular to any one of them. The distinctive logic of a given religion will be obscured by what can just as well fit a competing system. Religions cannot affirm everything and its opposite. So if religious systems coincide, that upon which they concur cannot maintain a consequential, differentiating proposition but only a commonplace in both senses of the word: what is common to a number of systems, what makes slight difference in any of those systems. And my thesis here is as follows:

\[ a \text{ proposition that is shared among several religious systems will not play a major role in the construction of any particular religious system.} \]

Religions by their nature differ. They conflict. When they agree, therefore, it is because the point of congruence is systemically neutral to the systems that concur—episodic, not systematic, and commonplace, not consequential.

To test that proposition, I take the Golden Rule, which represents what is common to a variety of religious systems, and I invoke classical Judaism and its canon, which here stands for a coherent religious system. A review of the representation of the Golden Rule in the formative canon will allow us to assess the importance attached to it. We consider its position in the Judaic religious system and measure its generative power. What I shall show is that the Golden Rule is parachuted down into classical Judaism and plays no systemic role in the construction of that system.

The Golden Rule is called the encompassing principle of the Torah, but when the system undertakes to generalize, it ignores the Golden Rule. The faithful are admonished to go, study the generative data of the Golden Rule, but when the system invokes the Golden Rule, it does not elaborate and extend it, analyzing its implications for fresh problems. To state the proposition simply: in classical Judaism the Golden Rule is inert, not active, inconsequential.