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Consider the Source(s), Part 2: “The Wisdom of the World’s Religions”

Rev. Erika Hewitt ✧ Live Oak Unitarian Universalist Congregation

It’s become a fun tradition at Live Oak (fun, at least, for me) to create a sermon series every October. I enjoy having the chance to wade into deeper, more interesting waters than the single-Sunday “puddles” we normally splash around in. Last year, I focused my series on our Transcendentalist ancestors of the mid 1880s: the thinkers and writers who shaped that intriguing tributary of Unitarianism.

You might remember the loving tribute to Henry David Thoreau that filled one of those sermons: that civilly disobedient and deliberately alive man whose scientific curiosity, and love for nature, we still learn from. It was only recently that I learned a new detail about Henry’s residence at Walden pond: when he moved into his small cabin, he took a copy of the *Bhagavad Gita*. “In the morning,” he wrote in his journal, “I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhagvat Geeta, since whose composition years of the gods have elapsed, and in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial.” (If you ever find my sermons lacking, just be glad that I write them in more modern plainspeak!)

Henry’s friend and mentor, Ralph Waldo Emerson, was similarly taken with this ancient Hindu text, mentioning it often in his journals, as in this entry: “It was the first of books; it was as if an empire spake to us, nothing small or unworthy but large, serene, consistent, the voice of an old intelligence which in another age and climate had pondered and thus disposed of the same questions which exercise us.”

It might seem strange to imagine the elite intellectuals of New England drinking in the story of Krishna meeting Arjuna on the battlefield, but it’s also oddly fitting. As the inheritors of Thoreau and Emerson’s tradition, we are inspired and guided by sources beyond our own times and outside of our own culture. As Unitarian Universalists, we delight in viewing the “one light” that Unitarians proclaim through the “many windows” that Universalism extols.¹

Today, we return to a different sermon series; last week we explored the first two of our Unitarian Universalist Sources: direct experience of transcending mystery, and the words and deeds of prophetic women and men. Today, we’re plumbing three more overlapping and intersecting Sources (the third, fourth, and sixth), which collectively address the full breadth of religious traditions.

Remember, as we begin, that these Sources are very young, given the centuries-long span of our Unitarian and Universalist histories. Remember that they will change next summer, as the “democratic process” of our movement unfolds at General Assembly (more on that

next week).

Remember, too, what these Sources do: they look backward, honoring our inclusive historical path and reminding us where we came from, as we might trace a river back to the streams and springs that feed it. The Sources also look forward, creating possibility as we define who we are, as a people of faith, and whose we are, as a tradition rooted in covenant.

I invite you, then, to use my reflections as a starting point for a larger dialogue – with yourself, with me, with one another: how do these Sources serve you, in your spiritual development? Where do you chafe for change? Where do they feel exactly right? What more might they offer us?

★ (Source #3) *The Living Tradition we share draws from...Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life.*

I've just suggested that we stand in the good company of our sages and forebears when we discover a truth or inspiration in another religion, and allow it to shape our spiritual life. I'm proud that our tradition has long recognized that there is no single path towards the sacred, or the truth. To find meaning in practices, themes, stories, and nuggets of wisdom from other religions is a clear expression of our inclusivity.

To their great credit, two lesser-known Unitarian ancestors laid the groundwork for our encompassing respect for, and curiosity about, other religions: James Freeman Clarke, a colleague of Thoreau and Emerson's, wrote this country's first study of world religions, "rais[ing] the veil from religions that before had only been known in parody and caricature."² Later, at the turn of the 19th century, Jenkin Lloyd Jones organized the Parliament of Religions, and helped to "expanded Unitarianism beyond a liberal Christian faith to a faith that might best be described not as non-Christian, but as more than Christian."³

Our Universalist legacy deserves credit, too, for casting a net of religious pluralism. In the the 1950s and 60s, a Universalist minister named Kenneth Patton helped shift our "longstanding emphasis on universal salvation to an understanding of Universalism as universal religion"⁴ – one that drew from, and was in sympathy with, other faiths.

And so this Source is a means for us, as UU's, to create room at the table: room for families of mixed religious backgrounds, room for fitting new meanings into the spaces where our spirits long for something more. For example, Live Oak has offered within its walls Buddhist meditation, a Passover Seder, an animal spirit guide class, and Yoga classes – without contradiction.

In addition to learning about other religious traditions, sometimes we weave their elements into our own belief systems – but there’s a small degree of discomfort for some of us, in doing so. This Source – “wisdom from the world’s religions” – contains two areas of danger... whirlpools, if you will, which UU’s haven’t always skirted with enough caution.

The first risk is not asking mindfully, *Are their traditions ours?*... which can lead to a failure to respect the healthy and real differences between “them” and “us.” It might be *interesting* or even *meaningful* to borrow another religion’s prayer or practice, but it’s not always *respectful* to do so. In the words of Forrest Church, the danger of “seeking new guidance from ancient sources for the shaping of our ethical and spiritual lives” is that “we may trivialize the faith of another by trying to appropriate its essence....”

The second risk of this Source is the centrifugal force that it exerts, pulling us away from a core of “Unitarian Universalist” identity and out into the religious ether. Wisdom of the world’s religions provides us with the gift of breadth, but not necessarily *depth*. When we succumb to that centrifugal force and take a “smorgasbord approach to religion,” we can end up with a “reductionist universalism: a little to much of everything, leaving us with a stomach ache and confused palate.”⁵

* (Source #4) *The Living Tradition we share draws from...Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God’s love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.*

What I find beautiful about this Source is its bold naming of God and its confident assurance of God’s *love* (...which isn’t necessarily the first personality trait that jumps out at you, when God is mentioned in the Bible). Both our Unitarian and our Universalist traditions arose out of Christianity; it is good to remember those roots, however far we’ve come from them. To speak of God isn’t to suggest, wholesale, that all Unitarian Universalists believe in God; rather, it’s a reminder that both the Jewish and Christian traditions contain a loving God, who protects and comforts God’s beloved creation – which I find empowering and healing.

I’m also delighted by that provocative verb – “respond.” Our love doesn’t arise and get put into action, “just because,” this Source suggests; we *respond* to God’s love – we receive the gifts of life – we are blessed by all that is life-giving – and so are we called to share that love with the rest of the human family.

The other hidden assumption in this Source is that “God’s love” is the heart that beats at the core of both Judaism and Christianity. Rabbi Hillel is said to have stood on one foot to summarize the Torah: “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. This is the whole Torah; all the rest is commentary.”⁶ In the New Testament gospel, Jesus is portrayed as a teacher of love, a prophet of radical inclusivity. Both the Torah and Jesus

mention two great commandments, love of God and love of neighbor. This Source chooses to emphasize the latter.

* (Source #6) The Living Tradition we share draws from...*Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.*

This is the newest Source – so new that it’s missing from some of our hymnals! It was added a decade after the first five in order to “explicitly include members with Neopagan, Native American, and other natural theist spiritualities”⁷ (although it doesn’t name those “earth-centered” traditions).

Like the rest, this Source triggers in me both admiration and mental hiccups (tiny wonderings that I keep coming back to). For instance, “instructed” is a strong word; do earth-centered traditions really inform our daily spiritual lives so strongly? If so, what’s asked of us to “live in harmony with the rhythms of nature”? Do earth-centered traditions “instruct” us to know, merely, that the moon is now waxing, and will be full on Tuesday night? Or is this what’s compelling so many of you to drive to Live Oak in Priuses? How, concretely, do we incarnate this Source?

Another “hiccup” has to do with how this Source romanticizes Native American and other earth-centered traditions; indigenous peoples have not always lived “in harmony” with the Earth, although it seems important for many people to believe that they did. Then there’s the hiccup of conflating Native American religious traditions with Wicca and Shamanism: is it fair to combine them on the basis of the slim common ground that they share – “celebrating the sacred circle of life”?

My final hesitation in embracing our sixth Source is this: although it (along with its attendant, our seventh Principle) was added with the most noble of intentions, it strikes me as sounding like the afterthought that it is: drawn out and highlighted as separate from “the world’s religions.” That misgiving is overshadowed by my great admiration for what this Source ultimately represents: it’s a statement of inclusion towards pagans, who had been struggling to have their views validated, and valued, by our larger movement. My colleague Vanessa Rush Southern⁸ explains,

...watching the debate over whether to vote this source up or down was watching a test case of what it means to be always struggling to draw the circle wider. The debate brought to the surface the desire to include as many people as possible, but our fear that we would lose our center. It brought to light our desire to affirm all in their search for truth and meaning, but the embarrassment some folks have at whom you have to welcome when you choose to be welcoming. In other words, the debate

over this sixth source was emblematic of a debate that we will face forever in our movement. It is our cross to bear, our spiritual [discipline], the tension at the heart of who we choose to be and what it pushes up against inside of us.

And so this Source is an expression of theological diversity, but also evidence of how dearly we Unitarian Universalists cherish right relationship, of drawing the circle wide so that no one is left on the outside. Our tradition has, again and again, pushed up against the tension of affirming all, and welcoming all – not perfectly, not always... but well enough that we can look at this Source with gratitude for the process, and for our struggle to live out a choice to be welcoming.

✧ What turn will our Unitarian Universalist faith take next?
How else will we be invited to open, and receive?
Where will we find a need to tread more tenderly?
Who will we choose to be?

May these questions live in our hearts,
and may we be watchful for the answers.

Endnotes

1. Forrest Church's metaphor in "The Cathedral of the World," pp 81-96. *Our Chosen Faith*, by John A. Buehrens and F. Forrester Church.
2. Church, p. 90.
3. Church, p. 91.
4. "Hold on to Your Hats: All of Unitarian Universalist History in Just Under Two Thousand Words," by Rev. Jane Rzepka, Senior Minister, Church of the Larger Fellowship.
5. Church, p. 88.
6. In "Love Will Guide Us" Rev. Phyllis Hubbell. See www.firstunitarian.net/publications/sermon/20050212-LoveWillGuideUs-Hubbell.htm.
7. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unitarian_Universalist_Association
8. In "Pagans Among Us." See www.ucsummit.org/Sermons/VRS/20020317.shtml