

**“The Sources of Our Faith:
Wisdom from the World’s Religions”**

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March 21, 2010

Many windows, one light.

Many waters, one sea.

This is the radical idea behind our way of religion.

It’s not unique to us, but it is ours,

this bold affirmation that the light is one, the holy is one, truth is one,

filtered through all the ages and places and cultures of the world,

shining out differently and beautifully

through all the religions of humankind.

And we go further, to say part of our religious way

is to claim for each person the privilege

of engaging with and claiming as our own

whatever religious texts and practices speak to us

and touch our deepest essence.

For us, looking out on the religions of the world,

it’s as if we’ve stepped into a magnificent library

full of wisdom and insight.

And we all get a library card,

but it doesn’t come with no strings attached.

We have to put down a deposit—

a deposit of *respect* for what we find within,

and for the peoples that gave birth to it all.

Nor is everything available for borrowing from this library.

Some peoples have asked

that their traditions *not* be available to everyone.

I’m thinking of many Native peoples of this land

who have said it’s not appropriate for other people

to practice their rituals,

given the history of genocide and dislocation they have endured.
The ground rule of this library of world religions is,
we have to respect the people who created a teaching
and try to understand that not everything is meant for us.
But so much is open to us.
So many traditions look out on the world and say,
this knowledge is for everybody who seeks it,
everybody who needs it.

And our religion tells us, go for it—seek, learn,
discover what whispers to your heart,
what challenges your mind
and overthrows everything that is false and foolish.
And wherever this journey takes you, you have a home here.
Because ours is a church, and a movement, that has claimed the right
of every person to believe what they cannot help but believe,
the right of every person to follow their heart and mind and spirit
and embrace what *they* believe to be true and good and holy.
We believe truth exists.
We believe every person has the right and the responsibility
to seek the truth.
But we are mindful that our human understanding of the truth
is always limited, bounded by our languages, our cultures,
the very shape of our human consciousness.

So we don't think truth can ever be put into words
we can accept as true for all time and all people.
We *do* teach about what those who came before us,
the words and ideas they used to try to express that Truth
with a capital T that all of us, at times, can intuit—dimly,
through a glass darkly,
feeling more than knowing,
sensing more than speaking.
We seek to put words and concepts
to our own intuitions of the truth.

But our tradition cries out against any attempt to claim any one person or group's version of truth is *the* truth forever, for all people and all beings.

And that's why, right here in this room, we have people who believe in God, people who are atheists, people who don't think "God or not God?" is even the right question.

Right here in this room we have UU Christians, UU humanists, UU Buddhists, UU Pagans, and any number of others.

Everybody is welcome to make a home here.

We have found, I think, that this mix of beliefs and practices is exciting, thought-provoking, soul-stirring.

It can get complicated to try to explain what we're all about to someone who's never been here before.

But for a very long time now, a big part of who we are as a people is this: we *love* the diversity of religions in our world.

We love that there are Sikhs and Muslims and Christians and Buddhists in our community,

Hindus and Jews and Pagans and Baha'is and so many others.

Last year a number of us took part in a class

we called "Our Religious Neighbors,"

where we visited people from eight different religions.

We saw how they worshiped; we talked with them about their beliefs, and what their faith meant to them—and it was so exciting.

I felt in myself, and others too, I think, this great delight and joy just in being in the presence of people with paths to the holy different from ours but so obviously beautiful and powerful.

It feels so rich, so wonderful to see and experience even just a few of the numberless ways human beings have found to seek truth, to touch the presence of the holy.

This is not a new thing for us as religious people, either.

For almost as long as there have *been* Unitarians and Universalists

in this country, going back over 200 years,
we have been fascinated and delighted
by the different religions of the world.

As a matter of fact, the very first book ever published in the U.S.
on comparative religions, back in 1784,
was written by a Unitarian woman named Hannah Adams.¹
At that time,
Unitarians were much more curious than most Christians
about different religions, and more respectful toward them too.

In those days, Unitarians still believed
their religion was superior to the world religions they studied.
But just a few years later,
Transcendentalists like Emerson and Thoreau
were reading the Hindu scriptures—
the Vedas, the Bhagavad Gita, the Upanishads—
and what they found there was absolutely transformative—
for their own spiritual lives and for our movement.

The earliest Unitarians still believed the Bible should be the ultimate
authority on any religious question.
But now here's Emerson reading about Brahman—
the Hindu word for ultimate reality, pure being,
like our ideas of God only not a person at all—
and he's pondering this and coming to believe
that in every person there is a divine essence, a spark of the holy—
he called it the Oversoul—²
which is the source of our conscience and our wisdom,
our best and safest guide—and he was so persuasive
that in a single generation, the entire Unitarian movement
came to embrace the individual conscience

¹ George Huntston Williams, "The Attitude of Liberals in New England Toward Non-Christian Religions, 1784–1885," *The Crane Review* IX:2 (Winter 1967), pp. 61–63.

² See "Passage to India: Hinduism and American Literature," online at <http://hinduism.about.com/library/weekly/aa120799.htm>; also Christopher L. Walton, "Unitarianism and Early American Interest in Hinduism" (1999), online at <http://www.philocrites.com/essays/hinduism.html>.

as *the* most reliable source of religious authority,
more reliable than any scripture, even the Bible.
This is something we take for granted now—
most of us probably assume we've always been this way—
but we haven't. This was a gift that came to Unitarianism early on,
and it was inspired largely by Hindu philosophy.

Even then most Unitarians didn't realize
they were reading Hindu philosophy when they read Emerson.
It took a few years longer for our tradition
to really embrace other religions of the world for themselves.
Probably *the* milestone here
was the 1893 Parliament of the World's Religions, which was held
in conjunction with the enormous world's fair in Chicago.
The Unitarian minister Jenkin Lloyd Jones, who by the way
was also the uncle of Frank Lloyd Wright, the architect,
helped organize this gathering of Christians, Jews, Buddhists,
Hindus, Muslims, Jains, Zoroastrians,
Confucians, Taoists, and Shinto practitioners.³
It was the first time so many different religious people
from all over the world had ever been together in one place.

One of the honored guests at the Parliament
was the world-famous Hindu teacher Swami Vivekananda.
He spoke about his dream that all religions
would grow to see themselves as growing out of one universal spirit,
one universal religion that encompasses all teachings,
all practices, all faiths.
Unitarians and Universalists heard and took this idea to heart.
Ever since then, that has been our way.
We have come to honor and appreciate and love
the glorious diversity of religions, all the manifold ways
human beings praise the source of everything

³ Joas Adiprasetya, "The 1893 World Parliament of Religions" (2004), online at http://people.bu.edu/wildman/WeirdWildWeb/courses/mwt/dictionary/mwt_themes_707_worldparliamentofreligions1893.htm.

and align themselves with what is just and true and beautiful.
Over time, we've drawn on the teachings and practices
of other religions to enrich our own faith.

And mostly this is a wonderful thing. On the other hand,
we've been known to make some clumsy mistakes too.
In the first half of the 20th century,
a lot of progressive folks on the Universalist side of our tradition
believed Universalism was the religion of the future
for everyone in the world,
a Universalism universalized and transformed
into a sort of global fusion of every religion known to humanity.
They believed Universalism was big enough to absorb *all* religions
and everyone around the world, in every culture,
was destined to become a Universalist.
Well, this was a grand vision, but it didn't happen.
In a nutshell, the problem was,
people of other religions didn't *want* to become Universalists.
They didn't *want* their religion to dissolve into a global synthesis.
So the dream of a global, universal Universalism was not meant to be.

Now, chastened but wiser, we are so much more aware
that we need to respect other religions in their integrity.
It's very similar, actually, to what our country has been going through
around cultural and ethnic diversity.
We used to hold up the great melting pot as our ideal.
But as we've come to see
the beauty in immigrant cultures preserving their own traditions,
and the suffering that's been caused by forced assimilation,
our country has come up with a new metaphor
for who we are together: the mosaic.
Many pieces, all beautiful, all distinct, all valued.
Many windows, one light.
Many waters, one sea.

I love our own historical tradition with a passion.
I resonate so deeply with the Unitarian affirmation
that we should be free to use our minds in matters of religion,
and that we have a responsibility to develop ourselves as moral and
spiritual beings as best we can—
and the Universalist faith that *all* people
are loved and cherished infinitely.
The Unitarian Universalist tradition is my heart's home.

But I would never give up the profound and precious teachings
I have received from other traditions.
Buddhist teachings about interdependence and compassion—
I need them; I could never give them up.
The fearless openness of the Hindu tradition
to dark and destructive images of the divine—
there is deep wisdom there that I have needed deeply.
The teachings of Native peoples that the animals and plants
are our sisters and brothers, our equals;
the mystical poetry of the Tao Te Ching that invites us
to lay down all our weapons and trust in the great unfolding life—
I could not give that up.
These teachings have changed me.
Mark Morrison-Reed tells us,
*[A]lone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen.*⁴
We need the teachings of other religions
to show to us our blind spots, our errors,
all the ways we have not yet seen clearly.
The windows are not the Light,
but through them the light shines.

Joy and peace be upon all people.
May all who seek find their heart's desire.
Amen.

⁴ *Singing the Living Tradition* #580.