

SOURCE #3, WISDOM FROM THE WORLD'S RELIGIONS

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I invite you to turn in your hymnal to the pages just before the hymns start and let's read together the wording of the Third Source of Unitarian Universalism, including the introductory phrase: The Living Tradition we share draws from many sources: and scrolling down the page to the third sentence, Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life.

We Unitarian Universalists draw our religious ideals and values from many sources, one of which is the wisdom of the world's religions. We use this wisdom to inspire our ethical and spiritual lives.

I remember, as a youngster growing up in a small Baptist church under the tutelage of my preacher dad and teacher mom, hearing in Sunday School one day that members of other non-Christian religions were going to hell.

I could hardly believe my ears! Little children were going to go to hell because they were born into a family which was Jewish? My Catholic classmates were going to hell? My Sunday School teacher was pretty adamant---yes, they were going to hell, unless..... Unless what?

Unless a missionary or other person told them about Jesus and how Jesus had died for their sins and that they only had to believe this and then they would go to heaven. That's why we have missionaries and why we are supposed to witness to everyone we meet, he said.

But what if they didn't want to change religions? Well, then, they had had their chance and God would send them to hell. Little kids too? Adults ----I could see the logic there. But little kids?

What if they were too young to understand? My teacher wasn't sure but he said "God knows best" with a look in his eye which said pretty clearly that he thought I ought to be out there witnessing to my Catholic and Jewish acquaintances, though there were few of either in our little town.

I went to my mother with this conundrum and she was somewhat more comforting. No, she said, little tiny children who can't make that decision won't go to hell; God will take them to heaven if they die. But adults, if they hear and reject Jesus' message, they will go to hell, she said. Jesus said "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father but by me". In other words, she assured me, Jesus is the only way to heaven.

I was only in elementary school at the time, maybe 9 or 10, and this didn't sit right with me. Being a well-brought-up little girl and nervous about rocking the religion boat, I didn't question her much further, but the injustice of it all stayed in my mind.

I didn't even know anyone who was identifiably of another religion, unless you did count Catholics. I knew about Jews and a little about the Holocaust and that added more questions. Hadn't the Jews suffered enough? They should also go to hell? in addition to the concentration camps?

And what about other Christians who weren't Baptist? Were they going to hell too? How come everyone was supposed to believe the way we did? And did I really want to believe all this anyhow?

Well, you can see how I've answered some of those questions as an adult and why I am particularly appreciative of Unitarian Universalism's

recognition that the world's religions have great wisdom to offer for our lives.

I knew from an early age that to draw exclusionary boxes around people and religious faith felt wrong and that is one of the threads that has drawn me to this unusual and accepting faith.

What are the religions of the world that have particularly contributed to the theology and values of Unitarian Universalism? Most of us have Judaism or Christianity in our religious heritage, whether or not we were raised as observant Jews or Christians, and we definitely live in a Judeo-Christian milieu. We will explore those roots in December, for the Fourth Source of Unitarian Universalism is the wisdom of Jewish and Christian thought.

Today we will take a look at our Abrahamic cousin, Islam, and the traditions of China and India. If you are not familiar with the idea that Islam is our Abrahamic cousin, let me expound briefly.

The Abrahamic religions are Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, because all three grew out of the original monotheistic religion of the early patriarchal figure of Abraham who lived in about 2000 bce, and is considered the father of the Israelites.

Islam was founded in the seventh century of the common era by the prophet Muhammad, who is said to have received the holy book of Islam, known as the Koran, directly from God, known as Allah.

Muhammad is not considered the founder of a new religion, at least by Muslims, but as the restorer of the original monotheistic faith of Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and other prophets. Islamic tradition holds that Judaism and Christianity distorted the messages of these prophets over time either in interpretation, in text, or both.

The scholar Huston Smith, who has written extensively on the religions of the world, has an interesting theory about the origins of each of the world's religions.

Just as we are interested in the Sources of our faith, he is interested in the sources of the Abrahamic or Western, Chinese, and Indian religious traditions and his theory connects each of these very different religious paths to the natural environment from which they sprang.

The scholar Bertrand Russell has pointed out that human beings are perennially engaged in three basic conflicts: against Nature, against others, and against themselves. These are humanity's natural, social, and psychological challenges and, according to Huston Smith, Western religion has accented the natural challenge, China the social, and India the psychological, all based on their relationship with their "cradle environments" or the part of the earth where they originated.

Because the Abrahamic traditions grew up in the Fertile Crescent, where nature was more hospitable, these traditions, Smith asserts, have an underlying and strong connection with nature, using the seasons, the stars, the moon, and other naturally occurring cycles to develop religious doctrine.

Islam, like Judaism and Christianity, see God as creator of the goodness of heaven and earth and that God has given dominion over the earth to humankind.

Chinese religion, on the other hand, became the social philosopher. Chinese culture was founded on the Yellow and Yangtze rivers, but these rivers are unpredictable and devastating in their behavior, coming to be symbolized in early China by the figure of the unmanageable dragon. Therefore nature came to be revered and respected but not to be used and mastered.

Chinese religious thought developed in times which were tumultuous socially, a period of endemic warfare and anarchy. Therefore the question for philosophers and scholars was “how can we live together without destroying one another?” Chinese philosophy and religion emphasize how humans may be best helped to live together in harmony.

The teachings of Confucius, then, became widespread in China, with the ideal human relationship being thought of as benevolence or simple goodness. This idea was developed into a cultural expectation that society will be held together by the power of moral example. Rulers are to inspire their subjects to want to live together decently and in harmony.

Though today Chinese religious thought has morphed into a variety of expressions, the character of Chinese society and culture has historically emphasized a life of reasonable enjoyment and has rejected the destructive. Chinese religion is, despite the changes it has experienced over the past decades, based on the teachings of Confucius and subsequent philosophers, which emphasize harmonious relationships.

The third great tradition---Indian---also springs from an unfriendly natural environment, the Ganges tropics with its thick vegetation, unbearable humidity and burning heat, plagued by drought and monsoon. The Indian could not govern nature either and it was impossible to understand. And so the Indian relationship with nature became one of mystery, magic, unreality.

At the same time, India was challenged by racism which grew out of language differences and skin color differences between northern Indians and southern Indians. This resulted in the caste system which further perpetuated the problem, and India abandoned hope of solving life’s problems socially. Instead India turned inward, according to Smith, and centered her attention on the psychological, the inner self.

We might remember how, in the 60's and 70's, that New Age of Enlightenment, according to some, pilgrims of various sorts---hippies, celebrities, ordinary people---flocked to India to sit at the feet of yogic gurus, seen to be holders of mystic wisdom from the Hindu scriptures, the Bhagavad Gita and other texts. These scriptures and gurus urged seekers to find peace within themselves, not in externals.

The differing world views of each religion have been problematic in a global society where to believe anything implies that one's own belief is right and everyone else wrong. You'll rarely catch any firm believer saying "this is right for me and it might not be right for you", meaning that my beliefs support my world view and I understand that yours support your world view---and that's okay.

Yet that is exactly what Unitarian Universalism is all about. Our principles state, in part, that we accept each other, encourage each other's spiritual growth, support each other's free and responsible search for truth and meaning, and acknowledge each other's right of conscience. And we strive toward the goal of world community which offers peace, liberty and justice for all.

There's a wonderful analogy in a small book entitled "Our Chosen Faith", written by two of our primary preachers and teachers, the Rev. John Buehrens and the Rev. Forrest Church. They use the visual imagery of a beautiful cathedral, the cathedral of the world, ancient, in a state of constant creation, destruction, and re-creation.

In this cathedral there are windows without number. Some are long forgotten, covered over, others are revered by millions as shrines. Each window is, in its own way, beautiful. Some are abstract, others clearly representational, some dark and meditative, some bright and glimmering.

Each window tells a story about the creation of the world, the meaning of that creation, life's purpose, human nature, death and after-death. And these windows are where the light shines in.

Fundamentalists from both the right and the left claim that the light shines only through their window. Skeptics too can make this mistake, if they conclude that, because there are so many windows, so many variations, so many ways to view the light, that there is probably no light.

But the windows are not the light, they are merely the avenue for the light. The whole light, whether it's called God or Truth or Love or Life or whatever you choose, is beyond our perceiving.

Let me quote one passage: "Every generation has its terrorists for Truth and God, hard-bitten zealots for whom the world is large enough for only one true faith. They have been taught to worship at one window, and then to prove their faith by throwing rocks through other peoples' windows...If you are right, I must be wrong, but I can't be wrong, because my salvation hinges upon being right..therefore...in order to secure my salvation I am driven to ignore, convert, or destroy you."

So what does it mean to us UUs that we are open to the wisdom of the world's religions? How do we use the wisdom of other religions? What have we found in other religions that is valuable and contributes to our understandings of life?

I've given some of you short reflections to read about some of the world's religions' teachings. If you would, please, stand where you are and at the sound of the chime read your piece slowly, loudly, and clearly. I'll sound the chime in between each reading. It doesn't matter what order you read in.

*Hinduism teaches that religion cannot be religion without compassion to all living beings. To love is to know the nature of the divine.*

Sikhism teaches that compassion, mercy and religion are the support of the entire world.

*A Buddhist chant asks that all sentient beings be free from suffering. Buddhism teaches that the essence of Buddhahood is the great compassionate heart.*

Shintoism says that the divine's body is universal benevolence.

*Chinese philosopher Mo-Tse taught a universal love to end oppression and inequality.*

The Hadith, narratives of the prophet Muhammed, includes this story: A man once asked the prophet what was the best thing in Islam, and the latter replied, "It is to feed the hungry and to give the greeting of peace both to those one knows and to those one does not know."

*Gandhi modeled his teaching, "You must be the change you want to see in the world."*

When we honor, respect, and use the teachings of the world's religions in our own spiritual quest, we are acknowledging that our wisdom as middle class Westerners is not the only wisdom worth noting, that women and men of many cultures and geographies have distilled their life's experiences into ideas and philosophies that have universal meaning and are relevant in our world today.

And many of us have created a personal theology that draws from global sources. We have studied and learned and incorporated wisdom from across the world as well as from within our own hearts and minds. We do not have a one-size-fits-all theology in Unitarian Universalism. We do not have a doctrine based on the supernatural; yet we do not "believe whatever we want to believe".

Each of us is charged with finding a spiritual path that acknowledges and enriches our relationships with ourselves, with each other, and with the Universe. Thinking back to Huston Smith's theory about the origins of the Abrahamic, Chinese, and Indian religions, I am struck by the parallels: Indian religion emphasizes relationship with self; Chinese religion emphasizes relationship with others, and Abrahamic religion emphasizes relationship with the Universe.

On my blog recently I put out a plea for readers to share with me how world religions had shaped their Unitarian Universalism, and one reader offered this whimsical analogy, which I will share in closing:

"My eclectic bag of theology is like a scrappy (dog) who bounds from the Humane Society in purebred pieces of glory. One day I roll in the muddy earth to scratch my pagan itches and then arise amazed and filled with awe at the beauty that surrounds me and sustains me, never failing even in my darkest hours.

“The scent of magic draws me down the next path where I find my daily bowl, my sustenance, the map of all the trails I can explore which have been trod for thousands of years in mindful practice. This grid of kibble coalesces my spinning thoughts into the quiet "thoughtless", thoughtful-ness of the moment, my diverse brand of Buddhist Taoism or Taoist Buddhism, with splashes of Judaism from my favorite Holiday, Yom Kippur, the day of Atonement where I can join with the pack annually to publicly, ritualistically, apologize and forgive myself and others for my lack of skill in living, and my muddy paws.

“My collar is the Mala bracelet which I wear to constantly remind myself to come home, home to the moment, the heart of all joy, peace, and possibility. My leash is the Sangha, my pack of other practitioners who compassionately help with my training and discipline.

“And the heart of my \_dog-eared life, my bed, is the Dharma, comprised of all that teaches me, from the mountains of Tibet, the rice paddies of Vietnam, the back roads of Canada, to just the outline of my muddy paws on the clean floor. What a lucky dog I am.”

The writer of those whimsical, yet powerful, words is Emma Macaillin, who was our visitor for several weeks here on the island in October and sends her greetings to us all.

Savoring the richness of a faith that brings such great meaning into our lives, let's pause for a time of silent reflection and prayer.

HYMN #186: Grieve Not Your Heart (words of Confucius)

BENEDICTION: Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that our wisdom as Unitarian Universalists comes from many sources, including the world's great religions, though their practices and rituals may be very different from ours. May we sort out the meanings that are relevant to our lives and keep that timeless wisdom fresh in our hearts and minds. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.

POSTLUDE (choir)

EXTINGUISH CHALICE\_ I have extinguished our chalice, but its light and warmth will continue in our hearts and minds until we meet again. I invite any of you who would enjoy talking more about the ways world religions have influenced UUism to join me at my home next Saturday night for further conversation and an hour of playing a game which tests our knowledge of world religions. All are welcome. More info is available in the Nov. newsletter.