

Six Sources: Part 3

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Today is Part 3 of our sermon series examining the 6 Sources of our Unitarian Universalist faith. This morning we will be focusing on: “Wisdom from the world’s religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life.”

World’s... religions.

The world... as many of you may already be aware... is a fairly large place. It’s like the size of a planet. And there’s like a bajillion people living on this planet. So as you might imagine, the world has many, *many* religions. According to one estimate there are approximately 4200 religions on earth. And that is NOT counting individual denominations *within* religions. So to clarify by way of example, Christianity is only 1 of the 4200 world religions. But Christianity has over 30,000 different denominations within it. So really, the total number of religious belief systems on earth is exponentially larger than 4200.

So the wisdom of **all** those belief systems represents but *one* of the sources of our Unitarian Universalist faith. And today I am supposed to cover this source—the wisdom of thousands upon thousands of religions—in 20 minutes.

We’d better get started.

1. **Aardvark-ism:** Per “The Aardvarkian Monitor,” the official publication of **Aardvark-ism**, **Aardvark-ists** eschew belief in an anthropomorphic God, and focus instead on the task of living in the here and now.

Service might run a little long today.

Alright. Obviously, I can’t teach us all about the wisdom of 4200 different religions in 20 minutes. Frankly, there’s not enough time left in my own life to study 4200 different religions and do each of them justice. What I can do, however, is *reflect upon what it means to be a faith with a permeable theological membrane that is open to accepting the wisdom and perspectives of other faith traditions, and then perhaps provide some “best practices” to responsibly and honorably engage that which is held as “sacred” by people across the world who are very different from us.*

One of the things that initially attracted me to Unitarian Universalism was how it explicitly embraces *other* faith traditions. I converted to this faith from a relatively conservative brand of Christianity that taught me that there is but-one way to God—and that is through Jesus Christ and the religion of Christianity. *Everyone* else was wrong. And it was up to us to evangelize and proselytize everyone else, to “save” everyone who

wasn't like us, because they were all so very wrong, and we—of course—were so very right.

Now, I don't necessarily mean to disparage this kind of belief too much. I know many kindhearted individuals, who do a lot of good in this world, who happen to believe like this, whether they be Christian, Mormon, Muslim, or something else. I can only speak for myself here when I say that this particular belief—the belief that *my* faith is right and everybody else is wrong—that belief never sat well with me. It seemed to me the world was full of good people with good ideas and good perspectives, and so it would be to my own detriment—to my own spiritual impoverishment—if I did not open myself to learn more about these perspectives and practices—to learn as much as I could, from as many different sources as possible, in the brief time I have here on this planet.

The brand of conservative Christianity I grew up in did not allow me room to think like this. Unitarian Universalism did. So here I am.

For me, the appeal of this more universalist approach to religion is rooted in humbleness and valuing diversity. Humbleness, in that we recognize that we have *some*, but not *all* of the answers... and valuing diversity in that we recognize that other people have different answers that also seem pretty good, so maybe we should all be sharing notes.

If there's one thing UU's do, they value diversity. That's at the core of who we are as a people of faith. To put another spin on it, the value we place on the wisdom of other faith traditions, as articulated in our 3rd Source, might also be called, "Holy Envy." That term, "Holy Envy," applied in this context, was first coined by Swedish Theologian Krister Stendahl in 1985. Stendahl defined "Holy Envy" as "the willingness to recognize elements in other religious traditions or faiths that you admire and wish in some way, could be reflected in your own religious tradition or faith."

I love Unitarian Universalism because of our Holy Envy—because of the value we place on learning from other faith traditions. Many of us here can speak of how our faith—collectively and individually—has been enriched by our exposure to the wisdom and practices of other faiths. *Having Holy Envy—valuing religious diversity—is absolutely, without reservation, an unqualified moral good.*

.... Except when it's not.

The problems with Holy Envy arise when there is a bit too much of it... and/or when we think that Holy Envy—by itself—is all that we need to be good, multicultural, multifaith partners in the world. When this happens, the humbleness I spoke of before transforms into hubris, and our "commitment to diversity" devolves into a "commodification of differences," differences that are adopted, adapted, and appropriated.

The hubris comes into play when we begin patting ourselves on the back, congratulating ourselves a *bit* too much, for just how much we *love* diversity. (In this case we're talking specifically about theological and religious diversity, but we could apply this principle to all kinds of diversity, including racial and ethnic diversity). We *love... to love...* diversity. We think loving diversity makes us better people. And maybe it does.... Then again, maybe

it doesn't. We "diversity-loving people" at least feel we are better than those who *hate* diversity, right? *Hating* diversity is horrible, right? And we don't want to be horrible.

But simply loving and "valuing diversity" does not preclude us from also being horrible, in much the same way a white person claiming to love Black people does not preclude that person from also being racist.

Have you ever heard this argument before: "I can't be racist—I love black people. In fact, I once had a black girlfriend."

Finding a black person attractive does not mean you are **not** racist. You know who else found Black people attractive? Thomas Jefferson. Now Jefferson has a complicated legacy, but what is *not* complicated is the fact that he undeniably *owned* black people... and arguably serially-raped a 14-year-old black girl. On the list of "Racist Things You Can Do," those would rank pretty high. So attraction to Black people does not preclude a white person from also being horribly racist... just as attraction-to and valuing-of diversity does not preclude one from perpetuating oppression.

If we deconstruct the idea of "valuing diversity" all the way to its frame and studs, here's what it is: *One party, usually in a position of privilege or power, seeing another party—usually in a position of **less** privilege or power—possessing something of value that the first party does not have, but very much wants.*

Now believe it or not, this situation has actually played out several times over the course of history. And perhaps unsurprisingly, it almost never ends well. For *one* of the parties at least. You can guess which one. You see, instead of the two diverse parties coming together in a spirit of fellowship and co-equal cooperation where a fair and equitable exchange of goods for mutual benefit could occur... most of the time the powerful party just *took* whatever they wanted from the less powerful party, made it their own, and then, if they felt like it, subjugated, enslaved, or killed everyone in the less powerful party.

This is called colonization. And colonization is not simply limited to the plunder of physical goods, like gold, diamonds, land, or people's bodies. Plunder can also occur with regard to less-tangible, but-no-less valuable things—other kinds of property belonging to the *culture* of a people. Perhaps even something as abstract as "religious wisdom."

For the past couple of centuries, liberal-minded individuals in the West have appreciated wisdom and cultures imported from all across the world, but *especially* the Far East. Take for example the Bhagavad Gita. For those who are unfamiliar, the Gita is a Hindu scripture originally written in Sanskrit at least 2000 years ago. It is truly a brilliant, beautiful, and historically significant text, as worthy of study and contemplation as *any* sacred scripture in the world. Henry David Thoreau, whom we UU's are so desperate to claim as one our own, once said of the Gita, "In the morning, I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhagavad Gita, in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial."

Only a total cretin wouldn't love the Gita, right? But the West's love of the Gita, by itself, does not preclude acts of cultural disbelief or not, this situation has actually played out several times over the course of history against Hindus, even despite the West's well-meaning, best-intentions.

Among the Gita's biggest fans was a former British Governor of India, Warren Hastings. Hastings loved the Gita so much that he actually wrote the preface to the first English translation of it in 1785. In that preface he wrote: "I hesitate not to pronounce the Gita a performance of great originality; of a sublimity of conception, reasoning, and diction almost unequalled; and with a single exception, among all the known religions of mankind, of a *theology accurately corresponding with that of the Christian dispensation*, and most powerfully illustrating its fundamental doctrines."

Now I do not hold a Ph.D. in Comparative Religions. But I have studied the Bible for years, and I have read the Gita more than once. And I can tell you pretty confidently that contrary to Hastings's opinion, the Bhagavad Gita does **not** powerfully illustrate Christianity's fundamental doctrines. **To begin with—it's a Hindu text, not a Christian one.** There is nothing Christian about it. It is absurd to suggest otherwise. But this is what all colonizers do: find something of value belonging to another, then take it for themselves and adapt it to their own comforts and purposes.

What Hastings has done here is not dissimilar to what the Western world did by taking an ancient Middle-Eastern Jewish Rabbi and transforming him into a blonde-haired, blue-eyed, white-skinned, American-flag waving Christ. Or, to hit a little closer to home for some of us, how many in the West over the past several decades wittingly or unwittingly did the same to thing to the Hindu/Indian practice of yoga.

Now hold on a second—I know I have just committed the unpardonable UU sin. I just blasphemed the Holy Spirit of Life: *I said a negative word about yoga*. But I beg of you: hold on just a minute and hear me out.

I am not suggesting that people in the West ought not practice yoga. Far from it. It's a beautiful and powerful spiritual practice that can and should be appreciated by many. But there's a right way to engage an ancient spiritual tradition belonging to another culture... and there's also a wrong way. In a recent essay, Professor Shreen Gandhi critiqued what she called the Western "Yoga Industrial Complex," by which she means a multi-billion dollar industry created by taking an Eastern spiritual practice, completely divorcing it from its cultural and religious context, and transforming it into a profit-generating commodity targeting upper-middle-class White people looking for an exercise class.

When Dr. Gandhi first published this essay in December, it upset a lot of people. I think that's because those people didn't read all the way to the end. Dr. Gandhi (who, by the way, holds a Master's Degree in Theology from Harvard Divinity School) is quite clear that she is not condemning *all* yoga practices in America. She notes that there *are*, **in fact*, *respectful, responsible, and culturally-accountable ways to practice yoga outside of India and Hinduism*. But, *there are also many ways to practice yoga in the West that perpetuate colonization because the philosophies buttressing the "Yoga Industrial Complex" stand in stark opposition to *everything* yoga meant to its creators and original practitioners.

So as UUs, we must ask ourselves this: How do we ensure that we do not abuse the freedom we give ourselves to explore the wisdom and practices of other faith traditions? How do we ensure that we engage not in cultural and religious *appropriation*, but a healthy form of cultural and religious *appreciation*?

We must recognize that simply “valuing diversity” is not enough. We must also be committed to learning **how** to *respectfully* and *responsibly* engage other people and other cultures that are different from ourselves. In other words, we must decolonize the way we approach our 3rd source.

This is a huge topic with a lot of complexity and very little clarity. The line between cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation—particularly when it comes to religion—is blurry at best. So I don’t claim to have all the answers. But I would like to give us 3 ideas to consider whenever we choose to engage the wisdom, beliefs, traditions, or practices of other faith traditions.

- We must recognize *to whom* the tradition primarily belongs, and honor and respect them. Cultural and religious ideas and practices do not belong equally to everyone. Believing that we, as outsiders, have as much of a claim to someone else’s property as they do is where all colonization starts.
- We have to do our homework. That means to study in-depth the faith tradition we are engaging. Learn how it is understood and practiced by those to whom it belongs. Understand its history, its development, its evolution, its internal schisms, its competing theologies within the tradition itself. And we ought to note especially how those who practice their tradition feel about outsiders engaging it. For example, there are some Native American practices where all are invited to partake. And there are others practices that are open only to those who are a part of the tribe.
- Finally, if at all possible, we ought to be in relationship and accountable to someone or some group that belongs to the faith tradition we are exploring. Remember, we don’t know what we don’t know. So they will often be able to help us avoid inadvertently mis-applying or profaning what they hold sacred.

Simultaneously exploring the wisdom of other faith traditions while also being mindful to do so in a respectful manner that avoids colonization and cultural appropriation is hard work. But nobody ever said that Unitarian Universalism is easy. I try to teach my daughters that doing things the right way is almost *always* harder than doing them the wrong way. UUism is not a faith for the weak-willed or those who will turn around at the first sign of personal discomfort. We serve a transformative faith calling us to engage in fair, equitable, and authentic *relationships* with people who are different than us. More than simply *valuing* the diversity of those who are different from us in the abstract, our faith is calling us to actually be *in relationship* with them. *That* is quite possibly a revolutionary idea. Because the love and the power generated by such unions could turn the world upside down. And therein lies the true power of our 3rd source.

May it be so. Blessed Be.