

## Personal spiritual perspectives on the Big Religious Questions:

Forward: One of the UU's national campaigns a few years back was something like "UU's, we have questions". In preparing this presentation I was hoping to shed some light on religious tolerance and religious pluralism. After struggling with the topic, I'm afraid all I really ended up with is a lot of questions. If you are looking for answers you will have to provide them yourself, or look elsewhere. Sorry.

Today's children's story has a very murky history. Versions of this tale seem to have originated in India, China and even Africa. There are versions from many religions and viewpoints. Each version has been used to teach slightly different points.

The Jainist version teaches that depending on our view point we each have some truth. They use it to teach tolerance of other views.

In the Buddhist version, the Buddha sent the blind men as an object lesson for some quarrelsome priests. We each cling to our view and only see one side of anything.

The Sufi Hindu version uses the story to teach reconciliation of contrairities.

The Islamic version is used to show that the blind men disrespect and abuse the sighted. The seer is reviled by those who don't have vision.

One Christian version suggests we are all like blind men, and Jesus was the sighted one who will save us from our narrow perspectives if we follow him.

The discordian version related by the Reverend Loveshade is perhaps my favorite. After the blind men examine and start arguing, gaining followers and eventually starting wars about the elephant, a self declared blind discordian oracle came along to settle the dispute. After taking the time to examine the entire elephant and figuring out that it was simply a large interesting animal, the oracle made this pronouncement:

"The elephant is a great tree, on this tree grow leaves like great fans to give most wondrous shade and fan the breeze. And the branches of this tree are like spears to protect it. For this is the tree of Creation and of Eternal life and the great serpent hangs still upon it. Unfortunately it is hidden behind a great wall, which is why it was not discovered until today. However I in my wisdom have discovered a most holy rope by which the wall may be climbed and if one touches the tree in the proper manner, which I alone know, you will gain eternal life."

The oracle then named an exorbitant price for his knowledge, since eternal life doesn't come cheap.

The moral of the story is that anyone can lead blind men to an elephant, but a discordian can charge admission.

I included this version first for the humor, but also to make this point. Anyone who follows any prophet be it Jesus, Mohamed, Buddha, Joseph Smith, or Jim Jones without questioning, run the risk of paying an exorbitant price for the privilege.

Religious exclusivists are like the blind men of the story, insisting on their version of the truth. For them, tolerance (if they profess to have it) simply means treating with respect those they disagree with. It emphatically does not mean admitting others might be even a little bit right.

A few questions to ponder: Is tolerance simply allowing others to have their own opinions, or is it truly an open mindedness to other possibilities? What are the limits of tolerance? Should you tolerate beliefs you strongly disagree with? When is it OK to be intolerant?

I suggest that the answer to these questions determine how we relate to the world. I suspect we all fall on the bell curve of where we draw the line, and that most all of us are within the standard deviation. At one end of this spectrum we have folks like Randall Terry, the founder of "Operation Rescue". He was the one that preached-- "I want you to just let a wave of intolerance wash over you. I want you to let a wave of hatred wash over you. Yes, hate is good...Our goal is a Christian Nation. We have a Biblical duty, we are called by God, to conquer this country. We don't want equal time. We don't want pluralism." At the other end of the spectrum there are those who believe, "multiple religions or secular world views are legitimate and valid. Each is true when viewed from within it's own culture." At the extreme, these would argue that slavery, mutilation, public flogging, and stoning of rape victims for being raped are legitimate and valid for their culture. Most of us are somewhere between these two extremes.

Many UU's came to this community as a refuge from another church. There was something in those other religions we couldn't tolerate. So we wound up here where we could explore our spirituality without the dogmatic constraints coming from our previous church. Even though our principles draw from many traditions, and the third principle states: "Acceptance of one another, and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations." Are we really a group of tolerant people?

It is interesting that we use the term acceptance and not tolerance. This implies to me that we strive to do more than simply passively tolerate others views. The third principle directs us to be a bit more active and to accept other views. Which brings me to religious pluralism.

Religious pluralism has a number of meanings.

1. Religious diversity. This definition is simple statistics. Recognizing the fact that there are many different faith groups co-existing in a nation.
2. Religious Tolerance. Harmonious co-existence between adherents of different religions or denominations. This definition is implicit in the United States Constitution, which grants the right of freedom of religion.

3. Religious ecumenism. Promotion of some level of unity, co-operation and improved understanding between different religions or denominations.
4. Religious inclusivism. The worldview that one's religion is not the sole and exclusive source of truth. Some truth and true values exist in other religions.

Diana Eck developed the pluralism project at Harvard University in the 90's to study the growing diversity of religion in the US. She points out ... "plurality is simply diversity plain and simple – splendid, colorful, maybe even threatening. Such diversity does not have to affect me. I can observe diversity. I can even celebrate diversity as the cliché goes. But I have to participate in pluralism ... pluralism requires the cultivation of public space where we all encounter one another." 1.

So pluralism, for her, is not just simple diversity or tolerance but implies active engagement with other religions. Ecumenism and inclusivism. Accepting other religions validity. This seems to be the intent of our third principle. This does not necessarily mean agreeing wholeheartedly with other religions, but it does mean allowing others to have their beliefs, and to engage with them. To be open to their ideas. And to be willing to share your ideas with them.

Janelle talked about Barbara Bradley Hagerty's book, "Fingerprints of God". Hagerty is a Christian who is struggling with pluralism. In her book she asked Sophy Burnham who had spent years delving into Eastern religions why she finally came back to the Episcopal church. Sophy said she was surprised too, but thinks that each religion for her is like the spokes of a wheel. You must immerse yourself in the religion and follow it all the way to the hub. Hagerty disliked this analogy and so do I. Hagerty was unnerved by this "interfaith Kumbaya". She had found Christ, and was uncomfortable that there might be other ways.

But what if the religion I choose to follow turns out to be a discordian's joke? By their very nature most religions ultimately end up relying on the faith of their followers. Anyone who is too skeptical to take that leap of faith will be left with their doubts. I choose not to live this way. I like being able to sample other religions, trying to glean what truth I can find wherever I find it. For me UU is just that. A safe haven to explore my spirituality. I used to worry that I would be doomed to never reach the hub. I have come to believe the hub is an illusion. The hub if there is one is all around us. We live there. Heaven and hell exist only in this life and only for the living.

"Some theologians argue that an omniscient deity, such as god, created all of the religions in order to speak to people in ways that most appeal or relate to their circumstances in life. As such, even though their customs are different, they are all from the same source. As a theological argument, religious pluralism suggests that if all religions are from the same original source, then all must be possessing of a similar truth. This argument stresses the similarities between religions, often citing common stories, figures and doctrines." 2.

This argument is similar to the analogy of the wheel. It touches on the fact that different cultures have different religious beliefs. Perhaps the goal of seeking similarities in religions is laudable, but for me at least, the idea that an omniscient god deliberately laid down disparate religions to help with communication is laughable.

So far, I mostly have been passively looking at other religions. It has been enough to have the support of this community in that quest, trying to learn how best to live my life. I suspect more active interaction with other religions would help broaden my view. Maya recently accepted an invitation to visit a mormon church with a friend. She reports that she was a little baffled, (I think mostly by the incoherent message) but not repulsed. Is that the response someone would get from visiting us? I suspect it might be. Our principles seem straight forward, but they are a lot harder to assimilate than the ten commandments, or better yet, the golden rule.

For many, this lack of a clear, compact, even dogmatic teaching is a failing of UU-ism. Diana Eck wrote – “Finally, pluralism is not simply relativism, but makes room for real commitment. In the public square or the interfaith council, commitments are not left at the door. On the contrary, the encounter of a multi-cultural society must be the encounter of commitments, the encounter of each other with all our particularities and angularities. This is a critical point to see clearly because, through a cynical intellectual sleight of hand, some critics have linked pluralism with a valueless relativism – an indiscriminating twilight in which all cats are gray, all perspectives equally viable and as a result equally unconvincing.” 1.

Methinks these critics are threatened by questions, and respond to threats with attacks. But I must admit that I understand the sentiment. It is tough to maintain focus and understand the commitments of your own church, let alone trying to make sense of others. Especially when those others have less than concrete beliefs.

As to her suggestion that pluralism means engagement, I believe she is on to something. Engagement in the wider world is what makes any religion relevant beyond the walls of that church.

Religious pluralism is often taken to mean building a personal spiritual doctrine on a wide variety of traditional religious beliefs. Rather than subscribing to one particular religious sect, pluralists pick and choose which beliefs resonate for them, regardless of the source. Sometimes pluralists believe in relativism, which suggests that all possible explanations of religious beliefs must be equal, as no conclusive evidence proving one idea right has ever been found. Pluralists may attend many different spiritual services, and rituals with traditional churches, or they may choose to focus on an individual spirituality. 2. Or, like me they may find a church that allows and encourages spiritual growth through exploration of all the world’s religions. For me, there is no other way. Lots of questions, very few (if any) solid answers. I love it.

1. The Challenge of Pluralism by Diana Eck Nieman Reports “God in the newsroom” issue volume XLVII, No 2, summer 1993
2. Wise Geek.com “What is religious pluralism”