

April 1, 2007

## **World Religions: Confessions of a Syncretic Heretic**

### Movement 1:

Welcome, fellow fools! Yes, sometimes I think we all have to be fools to be Unitarian Universalists. It would be so much easier if we just let someone else tell us what to believe but then we would miss out on all the fun of figuring it out for ourselves. Perhaps this is why we are often interested in studying other religions. Sometimes we are rejecting what hasn't been working for us, and sometimes the grass looks greener on the other side. But for some reason our world-view doesn't add up with our religious teachings and we feel like something is missing or not quite right. So off we go, if we are the adventurous, foolish ones, to try and figure out our beliefs and values for ourselves.

For myself, I began looking to other religions not because I was rejecting Christianity so much as wanting to verify Christianity by looking for the essential teachings in other religions as well. I figured if the basic tenets of Christianity were true then those truths would also be a part of other religions because they must be universal. I reasoned that the truth is the truth in any religion. Wisdom taught in one religion must be the wisdom of other religions as well. Thus, if this theory holds true, then the teachings and religions validate each other. I came to the same conclusion many others have had for centuries; that there really are universal truths and it is quite possible we are all talking about the same God. This is sometimes referred to as "oneness".

This is such a romantic ideal I didn't challenge its validity because I liked it! It provides a logic of unity that I find comforting. But then I took a class on Interreligious Dialogue. This was a one time, experimental seminar at Iliff School of Theology offered by our professor of Comparative Religion and it was nothing like I expected. Looking back on it, I think I had a slightly undefined arrogance about Unitarian Universalism. I believed at the time that we are the best at understanding and working with many different religions because we purposefully seek out other faiths and learn from them.

My bubble of idealism was soon to be burst by a Jewish student in my class who pointed out that taking teachings from other faiths was stealing from them and he resented it. I was shocked. This perception had never even occurred to me. I had to admit that he had a good point. This started a long discussion about an issue called "syncretism". Now one definition of syncretism is the melding of two or more differing faiths. This is in the very DNA of Unitarian Universalism! How could that be a problem!?

This doesn't seem like a big deal until we hear from non-Christian faiths that have been harmed by the European Christian culture's use of this as a way to undermine indigenous faiths for missionizing and colonizing them. Examples are numerous: Easter and Christmas, Goddess worship being turned into worship of the Virgin Mary, etc. Our Christian ancestors had the attitude that they were right about religion and everyone else must be converted to their beliefs. Other options were just not considered. As we all know, force, violence and coercion were common tools for conversion. It's no wonder

that non-Christian people, whose faith has been violated in the past, tend to be very suspicious of sharing their teachings. They have good reason not to trust us!

As troubling as this was to acknowledge, I just didn't see how Unitarian Universalism was causing any harm through syncretism. Then a graphic example drove the point home. A professor who is American Indian told us a story when he started to teach some of the practices of his tribe to his students. One woman attended just a few sessions then a few months later opened a shop claiming to be an expert on these American Indian teachings. This was a violation of his faith on many levels. She didn't have enough knowledge to properly understand much less teach this information, and it was completely against the tribe's values to sell sacred teachings. Her actions were a blatant offence to the faith she was trying to represent. Her inaccurate teachings tainted and diluted the tribe's religion by causing confusion from misinformation. This was a different kind of syncretism and I could relate it to my own life all too well.

Movement 2: Embracing our Syncretic selves.

So, I confess... that woman could have been me. Well, sort of. I study many different religions without practicing all of them. In fact, I'm kind of a World Religions junkie. I even study others who have intentionally combined wisdom from many faiths. I frankly can't even trace how all of these influences make up my own world-view anymore! I am the most Syncretic person I know, (aside from my UU friends who are pretty much as Syncretic as I am). I admit I love my Syncretic-ness! Am I supposed to feel guilty about this? Am I supposed to somehow give up my Heinz 57 religious world-view? This is an intrinsic part of my faith and of UUism.

After much thinking and reading on this, here is what I have concluded. There are many religions that do want to share their teachings and practices. And there are many religious people of differing faiths that choose to interact and learn from each other. They are not giving up their faith but they are choosing to be influenced by another religion as a way to enrich their lives. Are they changing? Yes, of course they are! Is anything lost? Yes, they have lost the way they *were* and they have gained the way they *are*. We are all doing this all of the time! This is the nature of change. Faith traditions that do not invite learning and changing need to be respected and left alone. But a religion that is alive cannot be stagnant; therefore it must always be in a state of change and flux. This, by the way, is the essence of our Living Tradition.

Participating with other faith traditions that choose to learn and change is not bad or wrong, but it *is* both destructive and creative. And we must have an honest appreciation and respect for what we are doing. It is disrespectful and unethical to borrow from other religions unless it is welcome. And then we must fully understand the content and the culture the best that we can, then honor both as we share their teachings in a new setting.

Inclusivism:

Have you ever had the experience when you start to tell someone a story in your life and you are interrupted as the other person takes over the conversation explaining how your story is just like something that happened to him or her and then he or she continues with

their own story instead of listening to yours? How does that make you feel? Usually we don't feel heard at all. We might feel invalidated and ignored as this person pretends to understand our experience but your story isn't even heard.

Now consider this, someone is explaining a religious idea from another faith tradition and they are interrupted by someone else explaining that this faith tradition is just like his or her faith tradition. Once again, the one interrupting is not really listening to what is being said. It is a huge temptation to only listen for what we have in common. This is understandable because we connect with what we know. But this isn't really honestly listening. We can't learn about other religions and other ideas unless we listen for the differences as well as similarities. Better yet, let's step out of comparing and just listen carefully to what is said.

The attempt to see an underlying commonality, a 'oneness', can also undermine our ability to see and honor our differences within various World Religions. For instance, Hinduism is just not the same as Islam and to say that it is dishonors both. We hear what we want to hear and if we are listening with an agenda in mind, then we aren't really listening. We must learn to listen deeply and honor the fact that all religions are not the same, otherwise we wouldn't have so many religions! Buddhism just isn't the same as Christianity. In fact, as many of you might know, it takes some serious studying to even begin to comprehend Buddhist teachings on non-attachment because these ideas are so foreign to our Western thinking.

### Movement 3: Our Syncretic Future

Learning another religion is much like learning another language. We first pick up on words that sound familiar and find it odd when those words have different meanings. But to really learn the language it takes many years of dedicated hard work and a knowledgeable teacher. Immersing oneself in the culture works best. I know I just don't have time in my life right now to learn other religions to this degree, but I love reading the latest book from Thich Nhat Hanh or Caroline Myss' new work on the great Christian mystic, Teresa of Avila, or my old copy of the Bagavad Gita. I enjoy attending Sufi meditation retreats and doing Lakota sweat lodges. But I am not necessarily Buddhist or Christian or Hindu or Muslim or American Indian. Yet teachings from each of these faiths are very foundational to my world-view. I can't help it; that is just who I am! And, I know that I am rather typical for not just UU's but many, many people in our society today.

So, I am a Syncretic heretic and also maybe a bit of a hypocrite. Based on the discussions in our seminar I told you about, I know I shouldn't just learn bits and pieces of other faiths because I could be misrepresenting them. I don't want to hurt anyone but we can't avoid seeing that something new is evolving with all of this mixing.

The study of World Religions has been a rather trendy thing to do since the 60's or even before. Unitarians and Universalists began being highly influenced by other religions in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> c. The transcendentalists are the most famous example of this. And the first

World Parliament of Religions was convened at the Chicago World's fair in 1916. This was created by a Unitarian!

Every religion is Syncretic. And, in the long run, many of the faiths are richer for it. Religion at its best should be a relevant reflection of our times. Well our times change so fast that religions honestly can't keep up and instead we struggle to meet our spiritual needs with outdated illogical teachings. If we think about it, our religions can't stay the same and survive. We live in a world of hyper-connectivity, information and communication. Whether you live in Sheridan or Chicago you are going to be around people of other faiths. I call for tech. support and I speak with someone in India! We all have information at our fingertips about basically any religion we choose.

We as Unitarian Universalists, are on the cutting edge of creating new innovations in religion. The process of religious mixing is happening at lightning speed much to the chagrin of some. Is there something being lost, yes of course. But I, for one, have reconciled myself to not apologizing for who I am. And I now know the importance of truly learning the deeper meanings of lessons from other faiths before I even consider internalizing it into my own world-view much less teach it to others.

When we finally let go of the guilt-trip of those who fear syncretism, we find an exciting world evolving out of this extreme mixing of faiths. New ideas and ways of being are evolving out of this mixing. It is much easier to find religious, spiritual teachings that do match up with our world-view. Will there be problems with this, I have no doubt there will. But, we can't avoid it; it is what is happening. And, as UU's this really is right up our alley. We know this world of pluralism. We are able to provide a safe, accepting, and supportive community for those embarking on the discerning path of studying World Religions.

So let's focus on our third principle: *Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations*; and our fourth principle: *A free and responsible search for truth and meaning*. Let's search for and celebrate **all** that feeds our souls. Find spiritual practices that are congruent with each of our beliefs and values, even when those beliefs and values change. Let's deepen our own faith by making these practices a part of everyday life. Let's listen deeply to others and enjoy our diversity by really hearing and honoring differing points of view.

Following our 7 principles, there is another important statement:

*"The living tradition which we share from many sources*

- *Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;*
- *Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;*
- *Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;*

- *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.*

*Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision. As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support.”*

Blessed be; amen.