

Multiculturalism: Melting Pot, Salad Bowl, or What?

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February 11, 2007

What happens when cultures collide? Is it inevitable that one will prevail and the other submerge into invisibility or irrelevance? Or might there be a melding or merging into a new culture, drawing on both, but different than either? Or might each culture continue and maintain its own identity while coexisting with the other? What happens, in fact, in our complex world is probably some combination of all of these. And the result is a whole set of difficult issues and tensions with which we must somehow come to terms.

What makes these issues so important is that our culture provides us with an important part of our very identity. How we understand ourselves and our place in our family, our community, our world, is determined largely by the cultural values that shape our upbringing. What makes these issues so difficult is that the values by which we evaluate and judge other cultural traditions are the values of our own specific cultural tradition, and may not be as objective as we would hope.

In our national history, the history of the United States, there has been an ongoing conversation – sometimes debate – on this issue of how we create or define some kind of unity out of our cultural diversity. One piece of that conversation has been the attempt to find the right metaphor to capture our complex reality. One metaphor that has been in play since the beginning of our nation's history is that of the melting pot. According to Laura Laubeova, in the *Encyclopedia of the World's Minorities*:

The term melting pot refers to the idea that societies formed by immigrant cultures, religions, and ethnic groups, will produce new hybrid social and cultural forms. The notion comes from the pot in which metals are melted at great heat, melding together into a new compound, with great strength and other combined advantages. In comparison with assimilation, it implies the ability of new or subordinate groups to affect the values of the dominant group.

Ideally, the new alloy created in the melting pot reflects the best or strongest aspects of all of its components, with the added benefit of cultural unification. Presumably each component culture must relinquish a part of its own identity in order to fit into the new amalgam, but the resulting shared sense of belonging for all should more than make up for the loss.

As an idealistic abstraction, I find this image attractive. It seems to describe a democratic process of give and take, of compromise, leading to a society greater than the sum of its parts. But in the real world, I see some problems with it. Subordinate, minority cultural groups are likely to find little of themselves in the final product. It is more likely to feel like simple assimilation into the majority culture. That is, some will end up giving up much more than others, and being swallowed up by the dominant culture.

Also, if you consider some more specific aspects of culture, the metaphor breaks down. Think about language. Does the melting pot idea imply that some hybrid language should emerge out of the plurality of languages represented by a diverse population? And what about religion? Religious traditions and convictions lie at the very core of people's value systems. Even as America has considered itself a melting pot, it has simultaneously embraced the idea of

freedom of religion. Religious pluralism, while not embraced by everyone, is protected by the Constitution and the law of the land.

If religious pluralism is a good idea – and I think it is – then what about a broader cultural pluralism? The notion of multiculturalism recognizes that within a complex society such as we have here in the United States, there are numerous cultural subgroups. And each of those subgroups is deserving of some measure of recognition and respect. This means not expecting or requiring rigid conformity to some particular set of cultural norms that is somehow supposed to apply to everyone.

Perhaps some would prefer a salad bowl to a melting pot. In the metaphor of the salad bowl - a more multicultural, pluralistic approach - the idea is that each ingredient retains its integrity and flavor, while contributing to a successful final product. Diversity is not merely tolerated, but embraced as a positive value. People are not expected to give up those parts of their cultural identity that give meaning to their lives.

I've come across some interesting variations on the salad bowl metaphor as well. One calls for the recognition of some set of shared common symbols or values – the dressing, if you will – to provide some sense of unity in diversity. Symbols like the flag or the national anthem; values like those expressed in the American Constitution.

There are other metaphors that try to capture that elusive unity out of diversity as well. There's the pot of stew, which falls somewhere between the melting pot and the salad bowl. All of the ingredients maintain some part of their own individual identity, but also blend together, giving each other a bit of their own flavor. Then there is the image of a quilt, made up of fragments of different material, but fashioned into one blanket.

Whatever metaphor is used to describe it, my own bias is toward some form of multiculturalism, as opposed to a homogenized monoculture in which cultural differences are submerged in the interest of unity. I take this position for two primary reasons. First is my reluctance to ask anyone to simply let go of those values, customs, and practices that have shaped their identity from birth. And second is the recognition that cultural diversity can enrich American life and experience. Another metaphor that comes to mind is a rainbow. I find the multi-colors of the rainbow much more interesting than the homogenized gray that would result from their blending.

Of course multiculturalism does not come without its own set of challenges. But before I address a couple of those, I want to take a moment to toot the horn of Unitarian Universalism, which provides a model – perhaps a microcosm – of religious pluralism within one denomination, and even within individual congregations like ours. We recognize the value of many sources of religious wisdom – not just one particular set of scriptures. We recognize a variety of theological orientations, and have adherents of many of them within our own local religious community: atheist, agnostic, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, humanist, mystic, pagan, and probably others.

And yet our religious “salad” enjoys the unity that comes from the “dressing” of shared values as expressed in our principles, and our respect for one another's differences. I think our continued existence, and the strong sense of community that so many of us find here, prove that a religious community does not need a common creed or set of dogma and doctrines in order to survive or even to thrive. In the words of Unitarian Francis David 450 years ago, we need not think alike to love alike.

Enough of patting ourselves on the back. What about some of the challenges of multiculturalism? For the most extreme advocates of multiculturalism, there is a belief that all

cultural expression is equally valid. As such, cultural practices, both within our country and around the world, must not be judged on the basis of our own cultural values or biases. I am not prepared to take that extreme a position.

For me, there are some overarching values that supersede that of cultural tolerance. For instance, I would find it impossible to condone such cultural practices as human sacrifice, or forced sterilization, or forced clitorrectomy. On the other hand, I disagree with forced cultural conformity in many other areas of life, as practiced by governments and missionaries in this country and abroad. For instance, prohibitions on the use of one's native language, or the wearing of veils or head coverings in public places.

Then there is the very large gray area of various forms of gender inequality, arranged marriages, polygamy, and so on. While I disagree with such practices, I hesitate to be too judgmental as an outsider who may not fully appreciate their full cultural context. Before I judge, I feel obligated to engage in cross-cultural dialogue and to try and understand.

That brings up another challenge, which is that cross-cultural dialogue and understanding can only be fully productive if it is a two-way street. It is difficult, if not impossible, to fully respect the convictions and practices of someone who does not return the favor. But since I cannot force anyone to respect or understand me, the best I can do is respect your rights up to the point where they infringe on mine.

The challenges of multiculturalism don't all grow out of a lack of mutual respect or appreciation. In fact, one important challenge has to do with how we express our appreciation for different cultures and their expressions. I'm speaking of the problem of cultural misappropriation. Sometimes, out of an interest or fascination for another culture, we might borrow from that culture in an inappropriate way. In a way that trivializes or takes out of context a cultural practice that has deep meaning for its original practitioners. Many of the examples that come most readily to mind relate to Native American culture and religion, which is somewhat ironic considering our history of cultural annihilation.

For instance, the traditional sweat-lodge, or traditional Native American dance, if practiced by the uninitiated, actually shows a lack of respect for the culture. It takes what is deeply meaningful out of its meaningful context, thus trivializing it. It's like pretending to be something you're not.

This raises particular difficulties for us as Unitarian Universalists, since we explicitly recognize a wide variety of sources for our religious tradition. We must be careful to distinguish between appropriate cultural sharing and reckless borrowing. One way to stay on the right side of that line, while still appreciating and learning about different cultural practices, is to be clear that you're talking *about* cultural practices, and not pretending to engage in those practices in an authentic way.

Another way is to seek knowledge and experience of another tradition directly from people deeply entrenched in that tradition. In one former UU congregation, I experienced a typical Hindu worship service led by a Hindu. It was a good experience, but I could never lead such a service myself. I don't feel I have the right. Similarly, I participated in a combined Hindu/Christian wedding here a couple of years ago, but all the Hindu portions of the ceremony were performed – and explained – by a Hindu spiritual leader. Again, I couldn't have done it with authenticity.

Next month we will be celebrating our annual Freedom Seder, a cultural borrowing from the Jewish tradition. There are some who consider such services in UU congregations to be cultural misappropriation. That may be the case if they are not handled with sensitivity, and with

the participation and blessing of people of Jewish background. I think our Seder passes those tests, and I encourage all of you to come and participate in what has been a meaningful event for several years running.

I alluded earlier to my conviction that multiculturalism, or cultural pluralism, enriches the life of our society. I think it has the potential of enriching each of our individual lives as well. But I'm not going to preach this part of the sermon; you are. Following a Musical Interlude, we will have a time for Congregational Response. I look forward to hearing what you have to say, particularly about these two questions:

- How have you been enriched by cross-cultural experience?
- How can cross-cultural interaction or communication be encouraged?

Please take some time to reflect on those questions, and in conversation with one another, let's explore how we can maximize the benefits that can come from a multicultural world, while minimizing the potential difficulties. May we always strive to use our differences as an opportunity to share with one another and to learn from one another.

So may it be.