

Sacred Texts of the World's Religions

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In my experience, one of the great strengths of Unitarian Universalism as a religious movement is its pluralistic approach to religion. Not having a narrowly defined creed or a particular set of sacred scriptures, we are free to draw from an endless array of sources for wisdom and inspiration. Our Principles and Purposes state explicitly that “The Living Tradition we share draws from many sources,” and that “we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision” because of the “religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith.”

One of the sources specifically mentioned in those Principles and Purposes, and the one I'd like to focus on this morning, is “Wisdom from the world's religions which inspire us in our ethical and spiritual life.” And I'd like to do that by considering some of the sacred texts of those world religions.

Before I go any further, I want to issue a disclaimer. I will not be able to be all-inclusive. If I omit one of your favorite religions or religious texts, I apologize. There may be an opportunity in the future for you to share with us about it, and I will welcome that. Meanwhile, I will draw from and describe a sample of texts from some of the major world religions, with the understanding that the sample is by no means exhaustive.

There are three things that I hope I can do this morning, or at least begin to do. One is to say a bit about why and how the wisdom of the world's religions can enrich our own religious life. The second is to name and describe – very briefly – the sacred texts of some of the world's major religions. And the third is to share some brief passages from several of those texts. Probably the best I can do with the time I have is to whet your appetite. But if there is sufficient interest, there is the possibility of deeper exploration in the future, through either additional Sunday services or through Adult Religious Education programming.

In considering how the sacred texts of the world's religions contribute to our Living Tradition, I kept running into two, seemingly contradictory aspects of the wide variety of religious expressions found through the history of the world. Those are universality and particularity. By universality I mean the degree to which various religions seem to express the same insights, the same truths. By particularity I mean the ways in which various religious texts stake out sharp, clear differences in world views, beliefs, and approaches to religious practice.

And so an important question arises: Are all religions essentially the same, with only incidental cultural differences? Or are they fundamentally different in their very essence, with only incidental commonalities? My answer, based on my own exposure to some of the world's religious wisdom, is “yes”.

The eastern religions, such as Taoism, call into question our tendency to break everything down into simple dualities: black and white, good and evil, male and female, universal and particular. In the most sacred text of Taoism, the *Tao te Ching*, Lao-tzu writes:

When people see some things as beautiful,
other things become ugly.
When people see some things as good,
other things become bad.

Being and non-being create each other.

Difficult and easy support each other.
Long and short define each other.
High and low depend on each other.
Before and after follow each other.

To which I would add: “The universal and the particular reinforce each other.”

One frequently-cited instance of universality across world religions is the principle of reciprocity, more commonly known as the Golden Rule. In fact, some version of the Golden Rule does appear in the sacred texts of virtually every major world religion. In the Christian Gospels we read “All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye so to them.” The Jewish Talmud says “What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow man.” Taoism instructs us to “Regard your neighbor’s gain as your gain, and your neighbor’s loss as your own loss.” Confucius says “Do not do to others what you would not like yourself.” In almost the same language, the Hindu Mahabharata states “do not unto others what you would not have them do unto you.” Buddhism teaches us to “Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.” And finally from Islam: “No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself.”

This unanimity may say something to us about the central importance of the principle of considering the needs of others as well as ourselves. Several of us viewed a video-taped lecture by Karen Armstrong last Thursday in which she discussed primarily Islam, but she made a general observation about world religions based on her twenty years of study. That observation was that at the core of every successful religion is the concept of compassion, of identification with the other. Of course that is the ideal, not always lived up to. Much uncompassionate behavior has occurred in the name of religion. And yet compassion is a central value, always to be striven for.

Before I leave the Golden Rule, though, I do want to mention one chink in its wall of universality. About a hundred years ago, George Bernard Shaw was quoted as saying “Do not do unto others as you would that they should do unto you. Their tastes may not be the same.” And this sentiment has led to a revision known as the Platinum Rule, which says “Do unto others as they would have you do unto them.” This may be an example of the notion that revelation is not sealed – that there is room for continuing refinement of religious wisdom. For what the Platinum Rule suggests is that in order to treat others kindly, we must know not only our own wants and needs, but we must truly *know* others in order to consider their wants and needs.

Particularity, as well as universality, can enrich our tradition. There are those among us who come from various religious traditions. They may or may not still embrace the traditions of their heritage, but they are to some extent products of those traditions. Also, we often seek out opportunities for interfaith dialogue and cooperation. And if we are ready to listen to and deeply engage with those who were raised in, or who continue to embrace other traditions, our own understanding may be expanded. Differences we encounter can serve the purpose of requiring us to question and re-examine our own views. Such questioning may end up reaffirming our views. But if we see our beliefs, our answers to fundamental questions, as partial and provisional, then there is always the possibility of further refinement and broader understanding.

To wrap up my discussion of the universal/particular dichotomy, I offer the following extended metaphor from the Rev. Forrest Church, which appears in the book, *A Chosen Faith*:

Imagine awaking one morning from a deep and dreamless sleep to find yourself in the nave of a vast cathedral... Welcome to the cathedral of the world... In the cathedral of the world there are windows without number, some long forgotten, covered with many patinas of dust, others revered by millions, the most sacred of shrines. Each in its own way is beautiful. Some are abstract, others representational; some dark and meditative, others bright and dazzling. Each tells a story about the creation of the world, the meaning of history, the purpose of life, the nature of humankind, the mystery of death. The windows of the cathedral are where the light shines in.

Fundamentalists of the right and left claim that the light shines through their window only. Skeptics can make a similar mistake, only to draw the opposite conclusion. Seeing a bewildering variety of windows and observing the folly of the worshippers, they conclude that there is no light. but the windows are not the light. The whole light – God, Truth, call it what you will – is beyond our perceiving.

And so, the sacred texts of each world religion represent single windows all receiving their light from the same source, the same ultimate reality – but each from its own particular angle or vantage point, and through its own particular filters.

Also in the book *A Chosen Faith*, John Buehrens asserts that “In each of the world’s great faiths there is something authentic to appreciate and to hear.” And he quotes his friend Jacob Trapp, who writes:

Each of the great religions has a distinctive note, to be likened to the strings of a harp.

In Hinduism it is the note of spirit: a universe throbbing with divine energy and meaning.

In Buddhism it is the wisdom of self-discipline: quenching the fire of desire in the cool waters of meditation.

In Confucianism it is reciprocity: mutual consideration is the basis of society.

In Taoism it is to conquer by inaction: be lowly and serviceable like a brook; become rich by sharing.

In Judaism it is exodus from bondage: the covenant of responsibility in freedom.

In Islam it is the note of submission: “Our God and your God is one, to whom we are self-surrendered.”

In Christianity it is that all may become one: “This is my body broken for you.” “Inasmuch as you have done it to one of the least of these.”

And so each religious tradition has its own particular gifts for the seeker and for the world. And at this point I would like to mention some of the specific sacred texts that represent some of the major world religions, and offer some brief passages from them.

In the case of Christianity and Judaism, the primary sacred texts are the Hebrew Bible, also known as the Old Testament, and the Christian Scriptures known as the New Testament. I won't say more about these now, since I devoted an entire service to each earlier in this church year.

In Hinduism, the scriptural bedrock of the tradition are the Vedas or “sacred knowledge.” The Vedas were sacred hymns chanted by specially trained priests as much as four thousand years ago. The doctrines usually associated with Hinduism, such as karma, reincarnation, and yogic practice, appeared much later in the Upanishads. And finally, what may be the most important and influential of the Hindu scriptures is the Bhagavad Ghita, which took shape between 400 BCE and 400 CE. Its basic message is that “each human life has but one ultimate end and purpose: to realize the Eternal Self within and thus to know, finally and fully, the joy of union with God, the Divine Ground of Being (Brahman).” [*The World's Wisdom*, p. 24]

The introduction to our meditational chanting earlier was an example of a Hindu text, coming from the Upanishads.

The sacred texts of Confucianism consist largely of a number of works attributed to Confucius himself, but also include several texts known as the Ancient Classics, many of which were well-known even before Confucius's birth. Those included the Book of History, the Book of Poetry, the Book of Change, and the Book of Rites. The remainder of the canon, attributed to Confucius himself, consist of the Spring and Autumn Annals, The Great Learning, The Doctrine of the Great Harmony, the Mencius, and the Analects.

Confucius was different than most spiritual sages. He was primarily an educator. According to Philip Novak in *The World's Wisdom*, “He is a learner and a teacher, a person-in-community who encourages nothing less than the full moral maturity of the entire body politic.” I offer the following excerpt from The Great Learning:

[The Great Learning] consists in manifesting the clear character, loving the people, and abiding in the highest good.

Only after knowing what to abide in can one be calm. Only after having been calm can one be tranquil. Only after having achieved tranquility can one have peaceful repose. Only after having peaceful repose can one begin to deliberate. Only after deliberation can the end be attained. Things have their roots and branches. Affairs have their beginnings and their ends. To know what is first and what is last will lead one near the Way.

Taoism emerged during the same period as Confucianism, namely around the sixth century BCE. The primary sacred text is the *Tao te Ching*, or “Book of the Way and Its Power,” attributed to Lao-tzu. It consists of eighty-one brief chapters, said to have been composed in three days. They characterize the universe as a living process governed by the interplay of opposites, symbolized by yin and yang. One of my favorite passages is chapter 81:

We join spokes together in a wheel,
but it is the center hole
that makes the wagon move.

We shape clay into a pot,
but it is the emptiness inside
that holds whatever we want.

We hammer wood for a house,
but it is the inner space
that makes it livable.

We work with being,
but non-being is what we use.

The youngest of the world's major religions is Islam, which began with the revelation received by the prophet Muhammad, which became the Qur'an, the holy book of Islam. The other basic source for Islam is a set of *hadiths*, or "traditions" of Muhammad, sayings and deeds of the Prophet reported by those who knew him.

One verse of the Qur'an I'd like to share with you is often cited to correct the mistaken impression that Islam advocates conversion by force. It reads:

There shall be no compulsion in religion. True guidance is now distinct from error. He that renounces idol-worship and puts his faith in God shall grasp a firm handle that will never break. God hears all and knows all.

Buddhism was born some 2600 years ago with the spiritual enlightenment of Siddhartha Gautama, known as the Buddha. The sacred texts of Buddhism consist of a very large number of sutras, or scriptural narratives. These are traditionally regarded as discourses of the Buddha himself, although many were undoubtedly the creation of later followers. Their main aim is to help point the way for others to attain spiritual enlightenment.

In bringing this talk to a close, I share with you the following story attributed to the Buddha:

A man walking along a highroad sees a great river, its near bank dangerous and frightening, its far bank safe. He collects sticks and foliage, makes a raft, paddles across the river, and reaches the other shore. Now suppose that, after he reaches the other shore, he takes the raft and puts it on his head and walks with it on his head wherever he goes. Would he be using the raft in an appropriate way? No; a reasonable man will realize that the raft has been very useful to him in crossing the river and arriving safely on the other shore, but that once he has arrived, it is proper to leave the raft behind and walk on without it. This is using the raft appropriately.

In the same way, all truths should be used to cross over; they should not be held on to once you have arrived. You should let go of even the

most profound insight or the most wholesome teaching; all the more so, unwholesome teachings.

And so may we seek wisdom wherever we find it, mining all of the world's wisdom traditions for nuggets of meaning and understanding. And when we find wisdom, may we use it prudently, and when the time comes, let it go.

So may it be.

Readings

From Huston Smith's "Foreward" to the book, *The World's Wisdom*:

[R]evelation has shaped human history more than any other force besides technology. Whether revelation issues from God or from the deepest unconscious of spiritual geniuses can be debated, but its signature is invariably power. The periodic incursions – explosions, we might call them – of this power in history are what created the world's religions, and by extension, the civilizations they have bodied forth. Its dynamite is its news of another world. Revelation invariably tells us of a separate (though not removed) order of existence that simultaneously relativizes and exalts the one we normally know. It relativizes the everyday world by showing it to be less than the "all" that we unthinkingly take it to be, and that demotion turns out to be exhilarating. By placing the quotidian world in a vastly more meaningful context, revelation dignifies it the way a worthy setting enhances the beauty of a precious stone. People respond to this news of life's larger meaning because they hear in it the final warrant for their existence.

From Philip Novak's "Preface" to his book, *The World's Wisdom*:

Religion shows an ugly face to many contemporary eyes. In-group prejudice, violence perpetrated in its name, sexism, commercialism, and quackery – these crude surfaces often blind us to the liberating wisdom that courses far below. Let us readily admit that not all aspects of these wisdom traditions are enduringly wise. Their cosmologies have been overtaken by modern science, and their social blueprints, drawn for times now gone, need revision in the light of changed circumstances and the continuing quest for social justice. But while jettisoning their chaff, we should continue to sift for wheat. "The telling question of a person's life," Carl Jung once wrote, "is whether or not [she or] he is related to the infinite." [My] animating conviction . . . is that these great wisdom traditions remain our most resourceful guides to the Infinite – to that "Beauty so ancient and so new [Christianity]," "Eternal [Judaism]" yet "closer to us than our jugular veins [Islam]," vouchsafing the "unshakable deliverance of the heart [Buddhism]" and the "End of all love-longing [Hinduism]."