

World Religions: A Preview

Rev. Mark Hayes

October 28, 2007

Unitarian Universalism is said to be a living tradition. That means that we, as religious seekers, recognize that “new light is ever waiting to break through to enlighten our ways” (Charles Howe). That is, revelation is not sealed. Furthermore our tradition is by no means monolithic. That is, the living tradition we share draws from many sources. In fact, you may find in a variety of places (including on these little wallet cards) a listing of some of the major sources from which we do draw:

- Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life;
- Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion and the transforming power of love;
- Wisdom from the world’s religions which inspire us in our ethical and spiritual life;
- Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to love our neighbors as ourselves;
- Humanist teachings which council us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit;
- 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.

This list is followed by the summary statement: “Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision.”

Seven years ago, during my first year here with you, I did a series of sermons exploring each of these six sources. But it occurs to me that the one about wisdom from the world’s religions itself represents an amazing variety of contributions from many times and many places. And so I have decided that it deserves a series of its own, which will play out over the coming months, with one service each exploring several of the world’s great religions.

But before we begin to consider the variety of religions in the world, and why it might be of value to learn something about them, I’d like to say a few things about religion in general. You may have noticed the recent flurry of briskly-selling books questioning the value – and even asserting the harmfulness - of Christianity in particular, and religion in general. There has been *The End of Faith* by Sam Harris, *God Is Not Great* by Christopher Hitchens, and *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins, among others.

I must point out that, although the number of such books currently is noteworthy, this is not a brand new phenomenon. My first encounter with this genre came back in high school in the mid-sixties when, as a teen-aged Christian I came across Bertrand Russell’s *Why I Am Not a Christian*, which was actually written back in 1927. I found that essay a bit shocking, but also a bit titillating. It was a very different perspective than I had been used to.

Russell considered, and disposed of, a number of logical arguments for the existence of God. He also expressed doubt over the historical existence of Jesus and questioned the morality of religion: “I say quite deliberately that the Christian religion, as organized in its churches, has been and still is the principal enemy of moral progress in the world.”

And his critique didn't not stop with Christianity. He wrote:

Religion is based, I think, primarily and mainly upon fear. It is partly the terror of the unknown and partly, as I have said, the wish to feel that you have a kind of elder brother who will stand by you in all your troubles and disputes . . . A good world needs knowledge, kindness, and courage; it does not need a regretful hankering after the past or a fettering of the free intelligence by the words uttered long ago by ignorant men.

I more recently read Dawkins's book, *The God Delusion*, which presents a message very similar to Russell's. Dawkins, however, goes into much greater detail to make his case. And he makes quite a good case for the harm that has been done, historically, in the name of religion. But his conclusion, rather than calling for more reasonable, more humane, more compassionate religion, is to call for the eradication of religion altogether. And there, for me, he takes the argument one step too far.

As columnist Martin Marty advises in the magazine *Christian Century*, in reference to Dawkins and others, "Agree with the authors that in the name of religion horrible things have been done and are being done, but point out that that's not the whole story of religion. Criticism of religion from within is more searching and matters more."

Bertrand Russell may be right that fear is one motivation for human religion, but that also is not the whole story. I consider myself a religious person, and I don't feel like that sensibility grows out of fear. For me, I think the religious impulse emerges from a sense of wonder and awe, out of a deep curiosity about the nature of reality, and from a hunger for meaning and purpose.

I'd like to share with you one positive vision of what religion is, or at least can be. It comes from the Rev. Vincent Silliman:

Let religion be to us life and joy. Let it be a voice of renewing challenge to the best we have and may be; let it be a call to generous action.

Let religion be to us a dissatisfaction with things that are, which bids us serve more eagerly the true and right. Let it be the sorrow that opens for us the way of sympathy, understanding, and service to suffering humanity.

Let religion be to us the wonder and lure of that which is only partly known and understood: An eye that glories in nature's majesty and beauty, and a heart that rejoices in deeds of kindness and of courage.

Let religion be to us security and serenity because of its truth and beauty, and because of the enduring worth and power of the loyalties which it engenders; let it be to us hope and purpose, and a discovering of opportunities to express our best through daily tasks: Religion, uniting us with all that is admirable in human beings everywhere; holding before our eyes a prospect of the better life for humankind, which each may help to make actual.

Religion, at its best, does not give us complete and final answers to the questions that plague us. It does not give answers that ignore the everyday realities of our own life and experience. Rather it gives us a framework and tools to articulate and explore those questions. And when we come together in religious community to struggle with the questions and

challenges of life, our shared religion gives us the inspiration, the courage, the hope, and the strength to build a “better life for humankind” and to be of “service to suffering humanity.” And along the way, we also take some time to bask in the mystery and wonder of it all.

But let’s get back to our focus for today, which is world religions. In considering how the wisdom of the world’s religions contributes to our Living Tradition, I run into two, seemingly contradictory, aspects of the wide variety of religious expression found in 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.

In our reading earlier, Huston Smith attempted to extract some of the commonalities among religions. Those included the notions of the wholeness, the goodness, and the mysteriousness of the world. And yet, the rest of his book goes beyond those commonalities to explore and describe the many particularities of the religions of the world. There are sharp, clear differences in the 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 *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 universal aspect of religion is its existence, in one form or another, across cultures and across the centuries. The very ubiquity of religion contributes to our Living Tradition by giving us the sense of sharing with all humanity in all times a common quest for meaning and understanding.

Religions may not come up with all the same answers, but they do ask many of the same questions:

Who are we? – the question of identity
Where did we come from? – the question of origin
Where are we going? – the question of destiny
Why are we here? – the question of purpose
What ultimately matters? – the question of meaning
What happens when we die? – the question of finality and continuity
How are we to live? – the question of morality/right action

As religious liberals, we acknowledge and respect all who grapple honestly with those questions.

Particularity, though, as well as universality, enriches our religious life. There are those among us who come from various religious traditions. You may or may not still embrace the traditions of your heritage, but you are to some extent products of those traditions. Also, we sometimes seek out opportunities for interfaith dialogue and cooperation, usually based on some common values or purpose. But 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. If we see our beliefs, our answers to fundamental religious questions as partial and provisional, then there is always the possibility of further refinement and broader understanding. I always try to hold my beliefs lightly enough to allow new light to break through when it appears.

I'd like to close my discussion of universality and particularity with an extended metaphor for that dichotomy presented by Forrest Church in the book, *A Chosen Faith*. He asks us to:

Imagine awakening 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.

In that same book, *A Chosen Faith*, John Buehrens speaks to the particularity of differing religious traditions, asserting that “In each of the world’s great faiths there is something authentic to appreciate and to hear.” He then 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.”

I invite you to join me over the coming months in the adventure of exploring some of the great religions of the world. We will seek to understand their differences, their particularities. We will seek to recognize their commonalities, their universality. And we will seek to mine them for nuggets of wisdom to add to our own religious toolkit.

And as we embark on that journey, I leave you with the following advice attributed to none other than Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha:

Believe nothing just because a so-called wise person said it. Believe nothing just because a belief is generally held. Believe nothing just because it is said in ancient books. Believe nothing just because it is said to be of divine origin. Believe nothing just because someone else believes it. Believe only what you yourself test and judge to be true.

So may it be.