

## World Religions or Worlds of Religion?

*This UU "source" of spiritual wisdom can enrich our faith community or divide us.*

*Can we direct the outcome?*

Sunday, July 18, 2010

by Lorene Hales

### **Chalice Lighting:** (UUFC candle)

Above and below  
hovers the light in beauty  
I am surrounded by it  
I am immersed in it  
I shall walk quietly  
the trail and light and beauty  
in beauty it is begun  
in beauty it is ended.

[from We Light This Chalice Navajo]

### **Opening Words:**

Our opening words today come to us from Arnaud Desjardins, a Buddhist:

'You cannot live sheltered forever without ever being exposed,  
and at the same time be a spiritual adventurer.

Be audacious. Be crazy in your own way, with that madness in the eyes of man  
that is wisdom in the eyes of God.

Take risks, search and search again, search everywhere, in every way,  
do not let a single opportunity or chance that life offers pass you by,  
and do not be petty and mean, trying to drive a hard bargain."

[from Offerings - Buddhist wisdom for every day

edited by Olivier and Danielle Follmi]

### **Reading:** "Counting God"

"God said to Moses, 'I Am What I Am'" - Exodus 3:14

The assured voice on NPR spoke of the man  
who made his lifework to count and name  
all the gods of India -  
every deity of tribe or clan or village,  
each rock and dunghill spirit,

all of the many names for every apparition.  
After many years he had to swear defeat,  
no one can count and name them all -  
there are more gods than Hindus.

Jews and Muslims are appalled  
and vow there is but one God  
to die or kill for.

Christians quite concur,  
but opt to slice Him into Three,  
then bind Him back together.

Some Amerinds know each tree and rock,  
each crawling thing  
is and has the Spirit.

And there are Buddhists who do not care  
if God be one or man  
or even if he be at all.

This quibble over name and number  
engages a murderous passion,  
a lethal zeal and worse -  
stands between Is What Is,  
and us, restless and lonesome.

from: We Build Temples in the Heart: side by side we gather  
by Patrick Murfin

## Sermon

### "World Religions or Worlds of Religion?"

by Lorene R. Hales

"I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true. I am proud to belong to a nation which has sheltered the persecuted and the refugees of all religions and all nations of the earth."<sup>1</sup> (Vivekananda, 2)

These words truly reflect noble sentiments. When you first hear them, or read them in my case, you might think, "Yes, Unitarian Universalism is making its mark In the world and the USA is truly a country to be proud of for offering hope to the down trodden ... despite our current immigration issues. But these words were spoken neither by a Unitarian Universalist nor an American. These are the words and sentiments of Swami Vivekananda as he addressed the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago on Sept. 11, 1893. His religion was Hinduism and his nation, India. We are not the first faith group to promote religious freedom and tolerance nor the first to recognize that, if sought respectfully and with consciousness, wisdom can be discovered residing in many diverse spiritual vessels. It is in recognition of this truth that "wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life" is a valued 'source' of our U.U. religious tradition. Following the identification of the sources comes the statement: "Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennoble our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision."

So, what does it mean that the world's religions are a source of inspiration both ethically and spiritually and that religious pluralism 'enriches and ennoble our faith'? After all, hasn't the diversity of religious belief been the source of much war and bloodshed? Doesn't religious pluralism set one believer against another? Have we not heard, within our own faith community, derogatory remarks made about one faith group or another? Does religion stand alone as independent truth such that any seeker may access it? That is, does it have commonality across cultures and groups of people or does religious belief spring forth from an underlying cultural foundation specific to that

people? And, if this is true, can anyone fully understand and appreciate 'foreign' religions? Are all religions true?

Vivekananda attempted to explain why we disagree, religiously, by telling this story: There was a little frog who had been born, was raised and lived his whole life in a little well. He prospered in his environment becoming sleek and a titch fat. One day another frog, who came from the sea, fell into the well. Little frog questioned him, asking "Where are you from?" To which the other replied, "I am from the sea." Little frog, having no concept of anything outside his well asked, "Is the sea as big as my well" and then leapt from one side to the other. The new frog replied, "How can you possibly compare the sea with your little well?" Little frog, undaunted, leapt again across the well saying, "Tell me truly is your sea this big?" Whereupon the other said in some disgust, "What nonsense you speak, to compare the sea with your well!" Upon hearing this little frog stated, "Nothing can be bigger than my well; there can be nothing bigger than this; this fellow is a liar, so turn him out!" And, this, as Vivekananda expresses it "has been the difficulty all the while. I am a Hindu. I am sitting in my own well and thinking that the whole world is my little well. The Christian sits in his little well and thinks the whole world is his well. The Mohammedan sits in his little well and thinks that is the whole world." (Vivekananda,6-7) We need to break down the barriers that create walls around our little worlds in order to recognize and appreciate other worlds and thus other peoples and their beliefs. This is not an easy task.

William E. Paden, a professor of religion at the University of Vermont, wrote a book entitled Religious Worlds: The Comparative Study of Religion in which he addresses the concept of worlds of belief. In brief, Paden states that pluralism, cultural and religious, is much broader than just social diversity but encompasses how people view their world - the lens through which they see and interpret their universe. This lens defines the "knowledges" we use as a frame of reference when interpreting or understanding a thing. For example, he says, "A chemical lens will only register a chemical world; a poetic lens uncovers a poetic world; a religious lens yields a religious world."<sup>2</sup> (Paden, vii) Paden says that "religious systems are more effectively understood as "worlds" than as "beliefs", and that these worlds are embodied in the languages of myth, ritual, and other expressive forms." (Paden, xiii) Finally, he states that "*World* [ ] is a descriptive word for what a community or individual deems is the "reality" it inhabits, not a term for some single system objectively "out there" that we all somehow share." (Paden, 7)

Religious worlds do not exist separate from the immediate, and historical, environment. That is to say, they are "formed, held together, broken down, and reformed by sets of people or social institutions" across time. (Paden, 55) Religious worlds are not static. Any number of factors help create a world of religion: i.e. cultural and geographic factors, social position within society, language, accepted myth and ritual, everyday realities of living when, where, with whom, and the challenges and opportunities present in that environment. Given the relationship of the religious world to the experience environment that nurtures it, there is no one religious world, not even for all who profess membership in a particular religious faith group. For example, there is no one Christianity but thousands of Christianities. In recognizing this reality the moral of Vivekananda's story about the frog in the well could be expanded to say something like: A Christian sits in his little well and thinks the whole world is his well. While not too far away another Christian sits in his little well and thinks that is the whole world. Not only are there many worlds of major religious groups [Christian, Jewish, Mohammedan, UU...] but within each one are sub-worlds of belief. Paden puts it this way: "Religions do not all inherit the same world, but actually posit, structure and dwell within a universe that is their own. They can be understood not just as so many attempts to explain some common, objectively available order of things that is "out there," but as traditions that create and occupy their own universe." (Paden, 51) However, all is not religious chaos because despite the differences across worlds there are commonalities of "certain general forms of [shared] mythic and ritual behavior" that bind the sub-worlds together in perceived oneness. (Paden, 54)

What does this have to do with our recognition of world religions as a source of wisdom and inspiration? Each one of us is a product of the environment which helped shape us and provides us a "lens" with which to view the world we move and act in. It is critical that we recognize this reality in order to begin to understand others. We must attempt to understand *their* religious expression from within their own "location." As Paden tells his students, "Don't worry about whether other people's beliefs and acts refer to something real in *your* world, but first understand what the beliefs and acts invoke as real in *their* world." (Paden, 54) Failure to do so is to risk totally missing or misinterpreting what wisdom you encounter. It also can cause one to be judgmental of others because we interpret their beliefs and behavior in terms of *our* 'world system.' This causes us, not to 'deepen our understanding and expand our vision' but to put another brick in the walls of our little well shrinking our religious world to a smaller

reality. We must be conscious of the filtering our lens does as we explore other religious worlds - else our assumptions and presumptions will block the light of encountered wisdom seeking to illuminate our vision. But with conscious intent we can pursue greater wisdom by understanding other religious worlds.

Karen Armstrong, a prominent religious scholar, in her book The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions<sup>3</sup>. speaks of the Axial Age and its sages. This period of time, from approx 900 to 200 BCE, is so named because of its revolutionary change in many areas of thought, including religious thought. It radically influenced the spiritual development of humanity and we have yet to surpass the insights of that time. It was during this period that the great world traditions, that still flourish, came into being: Confucianism and Daoism in China, Hinduism and Buddhism in India, monotheism in Israel, and philosophical rationalism in Greece. It was the period of Buddha, Socrates, Confucius, and Jeremiah, the mystics of the Upanishads, Mencius, and Euripides. (Armstrong, 7) In Armstrong's opinion the sages of this period were so advanced in their thinking that no one yet has been able to go beyond them. Later generations watered down their insights in order to grasp them. Rabbinic Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all stemmed from a later revisiting of the Axial Age. There is yet much more to gain from returning to this period for guidance in dealing with today's world and issues. (Armstrong xvi-xvii)

It was uplifting to see the roots of our own faith tradition in the Axial Sages thinking. They did not view creedal propositions, doctrine or metaphysics as important. They discovered a 'transcendent dimension in the core of their being', ...which was not necessarily supernatural. Religious teachings were not to be accepted on faith or second hand but should be questioned and tested against personal experience. (Armstrong xvii-xviii) Sound familiar?

Karen explains, "What mattered most was not what you believed but how you behaved. Religion was about doing things that changed you at a profound level... They still valued ritual, but ... put morality at the heart of the spiritual life. ... [One must] live a compassionate life. Indeed religion *was* compassion." (Armstrong, xviii) As she speaks of the future potential of our world of today caught in all the turmoil caused by egotism, greed, violence and unkindness, she feels the only way we will move forward, instead of destroying ourselves is to look anew at the Axial ethos and recognize that we must branch out beyond our own narrow window on reality. We must 'learn to live and behave as though people in countries remote from our own are as important as

ourselves.... [And recognize that there is ] unanimity of the spiritual quest of the human race.' (Armstrong, xiv) The good news is that as we explore these other worlds of religion we will find that our faith is deeply in accord with others and that this is very affirming. Armstrong declares that "Without departing from our own tradition, therefore, we can learn from others how to enhance our particular pursuit of the emphatic life." (xiv)

Adlai Stevenson, a Unitarian, is reputed to have stated:

"I think that one of our most important tasks is to convince others that there's nothing to fear in difference; that difference, in fact, is one of the healthiest and most invigorating of human characteristics without which life would become meaningless. Here lies the power of the liberal way: not in making the whole world Unitarian, but in helping ourselves and others to see some of the possibilities inherent in viewpoints other than one's own; in encouraging the free interchange of ideas; in welcoming fresh approaches to the problems of life; in urging the fullest, most vigorous use of critical self-examination."<sup>4</sup>

In describing the "wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life", Forrester Church, a UU minister, used a metaphor of the world as a "vast cathedral ... with [stained glass] windows without number". Each window is different from every other window, but all are beautiful, and each can be viewed from many angles to obtain new insight into it's message. Church says, "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 world are where the light shines in." Vivekananda would probably equate the windows to separate wells each representing a different religious world. Paden might go further and ascertain that as the window represents one religious world the many angles from which it can be viewed and which alters the overall vision and light would be the sub-worlds of that religion. Church then states that "...the same light shines through all our windows, but [ ] each window is different. The windows modify the light, refracting it in myriad ways, shaping it in different patterns, suggesting different meanings." (88) If we were to slowly move from window to window exploring each from many angles at some point it would surely come to us that we were always viewing the same light through different lenses.

Ultimate Truth would not change but there are many approaches by which it can be attained.

I've had the good fortune to live or travel extensively and study in countries whose dominant religions were Buddhist, Islamic, Hindu or Daoist to experience in their own environment what these religions represent. I came to the same realization as Karen Armstrong that at the core, each religion is about love, compassion, and benevolence as the way to achieve our maximum humanity. In seeking the wisdom of other world religions we do not need to convert nor to be converted. Religions are tied to culture and the overall environment and by changing any of these factors the religious world changes. For example, those persons in this country who convert to Buddhism are in fact creating new forms of Buddhism - American Buddhism - which is different than the Buddhism of Korea or India and so on. Many Americans like the concept of the 'exotic' as they seek a religious group with which to affiliate. In recognizing the 'world of religion' and its dependence on the cultural environment, I agree with Forrest Church that "For each of us to grow in faith and understanding, we can do no better than to cultivate and develop the particular meanings reflected in our own traditions and cultures." (Buhrens & Church, 88) Many people might surprise themselves if they were to study Christianity with the same respect and intent to find the inner core of that faith that they expend in learning about Buddhism, Shintoism, Islam, Daoism and so on. By seeking wisdom close to home, as well as the wisdom of other world religions, they might find that what they are seeking has always been present in some form but the lens through which we view it has become dirty, thus distorting what we view through it. We can polish our lens without throwing it away for a new one. Some people don't approve of exploring "foreign" religious groups and/or their spiritual practices for fear that we'll trivialize that faith by trying to appropriate its essence. They claim it is disrespectful to usurp a ritual for our own use that belongs to another group. I do think that we need to be respectful by being open to understanding the lens, as best we can, of that group and recognizing the possible distortions created by our own lens. But I also believe we can expand the scope of our own faith and enhance our own traditions without being disrespectful or trivializing the other. Just as Truth does not belong to any one group or person nor is it owned by one person or group. We are all fellow travelers on the path seeking Truth (capital T). And as such, there is much we can learn from and share with each other to help us all along the way.

Therefore as we continue to seek wisdom from the world's religions to inspire us in our ethical and spiritual life may we remember that "the light refracted through other windows when mingled with that which shines through our own can enhance our vision, and expand our faith." (Buhrens and Church, 93) Let it be so.

Sources:

- <sup>1</sup> Vivekananda, Swami. Chicago Addresses; Chicago: Nabajiban Press, 1992.
- <sup>2</sup> Paden, William E.. Religious Worlds; Boston: Beacon Press, 1994.
- <sup>3</sup> Armstrong, Karen. The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions; New York: Anchor Books (Random House), 2007.
- <sup>4</sup> Buehrens, John A. and Church, F. Forrester. Our Chosen Faith; Boston: Beacon Press, 1989.

**Closing Mediation (Words)**

As we leave this religious community today, let us take with us the words of a hymn as expressed by Vivekananda:

*'As the different streams having their sources in different places all mingle their water in the sea, so, O Lord, the different paths which men take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee.'*

May your spiritual journey be rich and may you embrace it with enthusiasm. Please greet your fellow travelers.

*Order of Service*

**Sunday, July 18, 2010**

**World Religions or Worlds of Religion?**

Welcome and Announcements: Board Member

Prelude: "Adieu to the Piano" by Ludwig van Beethoven

Chalice Lighting: "Above and below ..." Navajo

Opening Words: "You Cannot Live Sheltered ..." by Arnaud Desjardins, Buddhist

Opening Song: #189 "Light of Ages and of Nations"

Reading: "Counting God" Patrick Murfin, UU

Sung Response: #193 "Our Faith Is but a Single Gem"

Sermon: "World Religions or Worlds of Religion?"

Reflective Music: "Menuet" by G.F. Handel

from Sonata III for flute and piano - revised by Robert Cavally

Spoken Response

Candles of Joy and Sorrow / Offering

Closing Song: #295 "Sing Out Praises for the Journey" (verses 1 & 2)

Closing Words: from Chicago Addresses by Swami Vivekananda, Hindu

Closing Song: #295 "Sing Out Praises for the Journey" (verse 3)

Celebrant: Lorene Hales and Marianne Dengler

Pianist: Nancy Haldeman

Flautist: Uta Hussong-Christian