

One Gem, Many Facets
Greenville UU Fellowship
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Reading: <https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/adults/newuu/workshop1/cathedral>

And so we come to the third source of our Unitarian Universalist faith: Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life.

The Cathedral of the World is such an evocative image, with windows and light and the idea that there are so many angles from which we experience the sacred, but one source of that sacredness. In some sense, there is nothing new under the sun – all human beings interpret the world around them, tell stories, connect with archetypes, and discover universal truths. And at the same time, there are distinct and separate characteristics, practices, and beliefs associated with different religious traditions.

Religion is simply a structure that binds a group of people together. It is a framework within which we gather to make meaning together. Most religions have a set of beliefs and norms that are prescribed and set forth for all practitioners to engage. Unitarian Universalism, of course, points each of us toward our personal search for meaning. So we are a religion (though some might argue with me on that point) that does not prescribe beliefs, and that religious pluralism does more than simply tolerate that there are many paths to the truth. True religious pluralism celebrates our differences and is curious about our similarities, honoring the totality of possibility in each source of inspiration.

This source has always felt tricky to me, and it's taken me a long time to get clear on how to engage it. At first, I thought of the sources as a sort of buffet, where I could choose different ideas from different religions and cobble them together into something that made sense to me.

And then I learned about cultural appropriation, and I got confused. According to the UUA website, "To appropriate means to take possession of specific aspects of someone else's culture in unethical, oppressive ways. Cultural appropriation is acting in ways that belie understanding or respect for the historical, social, and spiritual context out of which particular traditions and cultural expressions were born.

The Reverend Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley defines cultural appropriation as consciously or unconsciously seeking to emulate concepts, beliefs, or rituals that are foreign to a particular framework, individual, or collective. It is incorporating language, cultural expressions, forms, lifestyles, rituals, or practices about which there is little basis for direct knowledge, experience, or authenticity into one's being. It is also the superficial appreciation of a culture without regard to its deeper meaning."

But wait! Unitarian Universalists draw inspiration from many sources, including other religions, right? Well, yes. And. The world's religions are not like toppings at the FroYo bar. They are distinct traditions that developed in a particular cultural context (or contexts). They have their own beliefs and practices. And we are inspired by them, for sure.

But how do we draw inspiration from other religions without co-opting or misusing its traditions and disrespecting its practitioners? Because if I am not a Muslim, and one day I suddenly decide to start praying 5 times a day facing in a particular direction, without any context for that decision except that I find this Islamic practice to be compelling, I am co-opting a central practice of a world religion in an inconsiderate way. A Passover seder will be experienced and inhabited differently by a Unitarian Universalist who is *also* Jewish than by one who is not.

For example, few weeks ago, at Barbara Gill's memorial service, her family wanted to honor her Jewish heritage and their personal faith by including some Jewish ritual elements of mourning. In theory, I could easily have accessed those elements and used the words – the internet is a strange and wonderful thing – but instead, we invited the Rabbi to participate in the service. It was about basic respect and honoring the authenticity of a particular tradition.

Here are the things that I think about when trying to understand the nuances of this question:

The difference between inspiration and adoption. The difference between wisdom and practice. We are inspired by wisdom, and we must only adopt practices respectfully and with an eye to power dynamics and the lens of colonization.

In the words of Paul Oakley, "...this source calls on us to do two things: to be intellectually humble, open to the world of difference as well as similarity, and to apply what we encounter to our spiritual life and the crafting of our personal and communal ethics. It leads us not to assume that there is a single mountain, a single goal. World religions are not our source, but intellectual and spiritual openness to difference in our approach to ethics – that is our source."

So how do we actually do this? Here is one way that I've found useful. Since I went to a Christian seminary, one of my required classes was Systematic Theology. Systematic Theology is an orderly and rational study of the meaning of specific areas or categories of Christian belief. Examples are Soteriology – or the study of salvation, ecclesiology – or the study of the church, Eschatology – endtimes, Pneumatology – the holy spirit. The specificity of the topics in this framework isn't useful to Unitarian Universalism as a whole, because Christianity is a creedal faith – the purpose of systematic theology is to explain about the different aspects of doctrine.

But the practice of systematizing beliefs seemed really useful, especially in a non-creedal faith that calls us to a free and responsible search for meaning. If we are to seek and understand our personal beliefs, it would help to have some guidance about how to codify them. So I created a list of questions to help us do that.

I call the list The Big Questions:

What are your sacred scriptures?

What do you believe (or not) about God?

What is the purpose of religious community (church)?

What happens when we die?

What is the nature/purpose of humanity?

What do you believe about Jesus and other prophetic figures from world religions?

What is the nature of good and evil?

Why do people suffer?

These questions, of course, are not multiple choice, and they are not easy. They are essay questions, the work of a lifetime. Nonetheless, they are a structure upon which we can hang our personal beliefs, and there are scriptures, poetry, midrash, and many other interpretations of answers to the same questions found in religion and spirituality across the world. So we study, we explore, and we are inspired – by our experiences, by other people, and by world religions.

So, maybe we are seeking paths up one mountain. Or perhaps there are many mountains, many paths. Maybe we see light refracted through many windows, and perhaps that light comes from one sun, or from many stars. Metaphors, of course, are limited, and I have yet to find one that works perfectly when tested from all angles or perspectives. So I have come to think of this source as a pile of gemstones. Some refract or reflect light, some are in shadow, and some shine as if they are lit from within. And as the light moves, or as I move, different perspectives and characteristics become visible.

May it be so.