

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“Developing Cultural and Theological Competence”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore March 6, 2016

Call to Celebration

My first personal experience with interfaith dialogue happened over thirty years ago at the First Unitarian Church of Oakland, California. The minister at the time, the Rev. Rob Eller Isaacs, had the great idea of organizing an interfaith gospel choir. He found a young, charismatic and energetic director of African descent to lead it then recruited about thirty people from different religious organizations to join. It was a remarkably diverse group racially as well as theologically.

Singing great gospel music with excellent musicians and vocalists was a wonderful experience. I learned I could memorize the songs (with the help of a cassette tape recorder) since there wasn't any sheet music handed out to guide us. Since we weren't looking at sheet music, the director could draw great dynamics out of us and get us to listen and blend with each other as well as sing LOUD and enthusiastically. I didn't know I could feel so uplifted singing traditional gospel tunes with this motley group of people.

But, as you might expect, we had some problems with the words ... especially lyrics that talked about the divinity of Jesus. No problem singing about our love for God, but devotion to Jesus caused friction with the Jewish lesbians in the group. While Jews and African Americans have a shared history of oppression by Europeans, they don't have a shared understanding of who Jesus was and what his life meant.

One of the questions the group wrestled with was, could the words be changed and not lose the spirit of the song? Is singing about God's love the same as singing about Jesus' love? How much adaptation is okay before the spirit of the music is compromised?

There aren't right or wrong answers to these questions. It is an invitation to dialogue. It is an invitation to growth and development. It is an invitation to develop greater cultural and theological competence.

May our service today inspire our willingness to grow in our appreciation for the value of this kind of dialogue as we join together in the celebration of life.

Sermon

When I hear these biblical verses, they make me mad:

John 3:16 For God so loved the world, that he gave his *only* begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. Acts 4:12 There is salvation in *no one else*, for there is *no other name* under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved. John 14:6 "I am the way, the Truth, and the Life. *No one* comes to the Father *except* through me."

I just can't believe Jesus made such exclusionary statements to his disciples. And if they heard those words, they didn't really understand what he was trying to say.

Jesus was a Jew and Jews don't deify themselves. That would be blasphemy. I strongly doubt John 14:6 are the words of Jesus. More likely, they are the words his followers put in his mouth. They did this because this is probably how they felt about him. They were devotees not historians and theologians. I would go so far as to say these words are a corruption of Jesus' life and teaching that have caused untold harm in the mouths of missionaries. I would venture out on a limb and say these verses are antithetical to Unitarian Universalism.

Believing this way as strongly as I do, I find interfaith dialogue with Evangelical Christians a little challenging. I suspect it might make that dialogue with me difficult for them as well, given the way Evangelicals revere and use these texts, for them, the revealed word of God.

Yet, if we don't talk to each other and dialogue, we are likely to miss an important opportunities to share something we see through our window that the other might benefit from hearing.

There is a similar struggle going on in the world today through increased contact by diverse cultures driven by immigration and globalization. People from European, Middle-Eastern, African and Asian cultures might be in the same work team or live in the same condo complex and be forced to encounter each other and collaborate on a regular basis. Those cultural differences set up misunderstandings and conflict. Intercultural communication competence that comes from education and dialogue can go a long way toward calming the waters and creating a climate of peace. And the roots of those cultural values and differences are often found in religious beliefs.

I'd like to propose this morning that participating in interfaith learning and dialogue can strengthen and widen our own belief systems, as well as help us strengthen and

widen our cultural competence to help us communicate effectively with diverse people. In many ways, Unitarian Universalists are well positioned to do this because we do not claim just one God or one revealed text as our doctrine of faith. Potentially, this should make it easier for us to listen and learn about other religious and cultural perspectives.

I have a lot to say on the topic of interfaith dialogue which would require far more time than we have together this morning. Since you may have other plans for your afternoon than listening to me and are not like our Baptist brothers and sisters down the street who are fine with being in church for several hours, I'll be talking more about ways to dialogue in a class that starts tomorrow night that you are all welcome to attend. This morning, I want to open up the topic of dialogue with you and show you why you might want to find out more.

One of the biggest barriers to interfaith dialogue is the exclusionary tribalism found in many religions. Barriers like these beliefs: Our one, supreme God loves us (Jews) best and rejects your faith in lesser gods as blasphemy. Our God has given us a God person (Jesus). Our God has given us a teaching (the Gospels and the Quran) that replaces what you currently believe. Our God calls you, right now, to abandon your old Gods and beliefs. You must accept our God and our sacred text to guide your life to salvation ... or miss out on eternal life ... or worse ... face eternal damnation.

Having an interfaith dialogue from these exclusive positions is rather challenging. Their listening is driven by the goal of conversion or at least the subjugation of the other side. In a sense, I don't have anything to learn from you because what you believe is wrong. I need to show you the right way to believe and correct your errors. I am the way the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but through me.

Or, if something inspiring does get through my filters and causes me to turn my head and see what my blinders are preventing me from seeing and feel some sense of appreciation for another religion, it is still inferior. Whatever value might be found in other religions, ours is the fulfillment of your lesser understanding which is but a precursor to our greater truth. I'm sad to say that was the perspective of nineteenth century Unitarian minister James Freeman Clarke in his book [*Ten Great Religions*](#) published in 1871. (The book was innovative and forward thinking for his time, but patronizing for our own)

A popular way, today, many liberal theologians engage in interfaith dialogue is called the **mutuality model**. Basically, the model proposes there are many different paths up the mountain but they all end up at the same place. All the world's faiths are

historically and culturally unique. They were developed in different languages and influenced by different prophets, revelation, philosophies and beliefs. Those diverse courses of development have shaped unique systems of belief. But if we really unpack them, we'll find a common core that unites them, not perfectly ... but essentially.

There are [three different ways](#) commonly used to do that unpacking that can build a bridge between different religious traditions.

The first is the philosophical-historical method. The key idea here is what British theologian [John Hick](#) calls a [Copernican revolution of faith](#). Rather than seeing the universe orbiting around Jesus and his Resurrection that changed everything, God is the center of the universe and Christianity is one of the galaxies. Each religious tradition is its own galaxy that is part of God's limitless domain.

For Hick, the core of each religious tradition, of God's being is what is Real (with a capital R). Our God language isn't what is real but points to what is real. And that really Real center is beyond our knowing, much like science cannot fully describe all of what is true because of the limitations of our ability as human beings to sense, describe and test what is true. Our knowing will always be incomplete but we can point towards what might be complete.

The second method comes from the limitations of the first, called the religious-mystical bridge. Though we may not be able to figure everything out analytically with documented evidence and elegant proofs derived from first principles, we just may be able to know intuitively what is true through interior, mystical experience. Fasting, ritual, meditation and prayer may open new windows that reveal insights that cannot come to us through our very limited sense experience. [Raimon Pannikar](#) is an example of a Catholic priest who went to India and discovered he was a Hindu, returned a Buddhist and claims to have never left Catholicism. His interior life has guided that journey through powerful mystical experience. ([The Window](#) video link)

This method proposes that the inward experience of the divine has a common core. That core doesn't have a language that we can all agree on. In the mystical experience however, one can wordlessly experience a connection to that common core. That individual experience points to a common reality. The theologians argue with each other endlessly while the contemplatives sit together in silent agreement, so the saying goes.

The last method is the ethical-practical bridge. Stepping away from the big ideas of the philosophers and theologians and the intense experiences of the mystics, just how do

the different religions act out their beliefs in the world? Start with what religions tell us to do, then work backwards to the beliefs and experiences. This might be the most compatible bridge for Unitarian Universalists.

The foundations for this approach are ethical questions. How should we behave toward one another within our faith tradition? How should we behave toward those outside our faith tradition? What does our faith teach us about wealth and poverty? What does it teach about fairness and justice? What about how we should be in relationship with our planet? These are quite fruitful areas of interfaith dialogue because this is where we commonly encounter each other publicly when advocating on issues like women's rights, environmental protection, personal security and now the right to die.

This kind of interfaith dialogue can parallel more secular intercultural communication differences. Our cultures have philosophical as well as religious foundations that express different values. For example, America values the individual far more than Asian cultures do, as they put a higher value on harmony between people. We value egalitarianism and they value social hierarchy. There is a common core of valuing the individual as well as valuing the community, equality and fairness, but expressed very differently. Human needs are valued in both cultures, just fulfilled using different strategies.

Yet, not all cultures are equal, just as not all religious perspectives might be valid. We've decided as a world community through the United Nations to reject slavery as part of a nation state. We've decided that every person has certain inalienable human rights that a society cannot abridge. And hopefully, through dialogue, we'll agree to reject the idea that only one religious tradition can be true. No religion is complete and perfect alone. All of them can learn and grow from contact with each other through dialogue.

One must be very careful in this interfaith encounter with how we listen and how we speak. It is quite easy to speak and hear within one's own religious framework and force the other to fit into it. I know I've been guilty of this as I listen. An example is listening to a Christian talk about heaven and wanting to place their idea of heaven within the Buddhist understanding of 30 some heaven realms (all of which I hold with a grain of salt by the way). It is truly difficult to listen and not be a religious imperialist.

The most difficult problem, at least for Christians, when encountering the mutuality model is their need for exceptionalism. Jesus is the way the truth and the life. No one

comes to the Father but through me. Putting Jesus on an equal playing field with Mohammed, Buddha and Krishna just doesn't work for many of them. Their hearts just will not allow it based on the power of their personal relationship with Jesus, the one Lord of all.

And yet, how different is this feeling than the stresses Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Christians experience when they must work together in the same workplace, share the same school, social club or neighborhood? How do we get along with each other when our cultures and religions collide with each other? Can we have real exchange and dialogue when we live and believe in different universes?

These collisions parallel what happened inside our religious movement as the Transcendentalists challenged the Christian Unitarians of their day over 150 years ago. It happened as our Unitarian one God perspective attracted liberal Jews into our fold who believed in God but not in Jesus. It happened yet again as Humanists recognized our shared ethics and values but not a belief in God. We've been doing interfaith dialogue in our congregations before they even invented the term!

And maybe we've learned a thing or two along the way about the value of doing it that has led to our growth and development as we search for truth and meaning.

Being very mindful of the risk of relativism and religious imperialism, I do believe there is a common core that drives our religious journey. At the very bottom level, it is our shared humanity, our shared biology, our shared planet, that provide the ground for our religious exploration. Religious truth isn't bound to only one religious tradition. Each one is a window through which we can gain a more expansive view of that which we can never fully comprehend. The practices of different religious traditions offer us access to greater experience that also teach us and expand our knowing. And the ethics and values of the world's religions can help us build a healthy and supportive world community.

This I believe is what Unitarian Universalism is striving to figure out how to do right now. We think we can do it best without doing it by claiming any one historical revelation but by drawing from them all, following the map of faith and practice that already resides in our hearts.

I encourage you to come explore this more deeply with me on Monday evening.

Benediction

David Smock writes:

I strongly feel that it is only when there is a deep understanding of one's own religious beliefs and commitments that progress can be made in achieving true understanding and respect for the religious values and beliefs of others. Engaging in interfaith dialogue does not in any way mean undermining one's own faith or religious tradition. Indeed, interfaith dialogue is constructive only when people become firmly grounded in their own religious traditions and through that process gain a willingness to listen and respect the beliefs of other religions.

If we want to live peacefully in a pluralistic world, may we both deepen our understanding of our own beliefs and commitments and be willing to be in respectful conversation with those who don't share them.