

“Words, Works and Worship: The Third Source”

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One of the great joys of being a Unitarian Universalist minister is the freedom to draw from many sources for insight, for wisdom, for encouragement in our spiritual lives. In this democracy of ideas, I can draw from text first inscribed on papyrus or parchment or in stone just as I draw from modern voices, such as podcasts streaming into my earbuds, as I create worship services.

A favorite podcast is *This American Life* and one of my favorite episodes is “Who’s Canadian?”, a discussion of the cultural intimacy between the United States and Canada *and* the reality that we are separate countries with different histories and identities. The episode includes an interview with Canadian-born writer David Rakoff who acknowledges the tendencies of Canadian immigrants to the US to obsess about famous people who share their national origins. Rakoff names, “Glenn Ford, John Kenneth Galbraith.” He continues:

But here's the thing about knowing who's Canadian. There is a woman named Shania Twain. She is Canadian. I know that she's Canadian. I do not know who...Shania Twain is. I don't know what she does. And yet, for some reason, I know that she's famous in America and that she's Canadian....I feel there's a chip in my head or something because I simply happen to know that.¹

Like David Rakoff and his “Canadian detecting” chip, as a religious leader in a small denomination, so small Unitarian Universalists could comfortably dwell within a rounding error of the membership count of other traditions, acknowledgement of my religious tradition in the public square gets my attention.

There was a recent moment in American political culture that inspired much discussion and humor among Unitarian Universalist ministers. In Michael Wolff’s book, “Fire and Fury: Inside the Trump White House,” Wolff recalls a moment when Trump’s advisor and son-in-law, Jared Kushner – a practitioner of Orthodox

¹ <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/65/transcript>

Judaism – tells a couple that he can marry them as he is “an internet Unitarian minister.”²

Kushner – or Wolff, incorrectly recalling the statement – clearly confused Unitarian Universalism with the Universal Life Church, an on-line congregation (if you could call it that) that allows anyone and everyone to become legally ordained in less than twenty minutes and for less than fifty dollars. Let it suffice to say that the popularity of this fast track to ordination and the wedding officiant business also generates much discussion but less humor among my colleagues. But that is another sermon for another day.

My colleague, the Rev. Allison Miller, responded to this news about Jared Kushner by Tweeting:

Since Jared Kushner and I apparently share the twin identities of coming from Jewish families and being Unitarian Ministers, I'm thinking of calling him up and talking about how he's managed to breach covenants on all accounts - a collegial conversation to call him back into right relations. Any of my New York City friends & family happen to have his number?

And Unitarian Universalist Association President, the Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray posted:

So...@jaredkushner thinks he's a Unitarian Universalist! I wonder if he knows we openly challenge racism, bigotry, heteropatriarchy and systems of oppression. We have no record of him, but it's never too late to shift your life towards love and justice.³

It is not realistic to think that a senior leader in the current administration would wear the mantle of one called to proclaim the values of universal human rights, environmental stewardship and the free practice of democracy. And anyone who has become a Unitarian Universalist minister - a process that includes at least three years of academic study, nine months of internship, three months of intensive pastoral care training, an in-depth psychological evaluation, a background check, a high-pressure interview by denominational leaders and

² <https://religionnews.com/2018/01/04/jared-kushner-isnt-an-internet-unitarian-but-he-is-ordained/>

³ <https://twitter.com/sfrederickgray/status/948979322521636864>

convincing a congregation's membership to ordain you, never mind a number of other evaluative and bureaucratic hoops – has reason to feel insulted by the idea that this path to ordination and the forty dollar, on-line form process are in any way comparable.

This public discussion of Unitarianism, more accurately “Unitarian Universalism,” offers a window into which we may consider the challenges of living in a spiritually diverse and complex world. I cannot think of anyone who could say, with confidence, that they know every religion practiced by human beings, the distinctions between them and the vast distinctions within each tradition.

Thus, the complexity of the world's spiritual banquet invites us to bring great intentionality to the third Source of Unitarian Universalism: “wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life.” In a near-infinite universe of inspiration, how do we encounter “the world's religions” with greater awareness of religious distinctions than Jared Kushner and greater commitment and integrity than ministers of the Universal Life Church?

This sermon is part of an occasional sermon series, exploring the Six Sources of Unitarian Universalism. As “wisdom from the world's religions” is broad territory to consider, I begin by asking questions about how to engage global religiosity and continue exploring the Third Source next month.

My companions for considering the Third Source are two authors, Stephen Prothero and Peter Kreeft. I chose Prothero's book, “God is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions that Run the World – and Why Their Differences Matter” as an intentional challenge to my understanding “the world's religions” as like being in “a cathedral of the world.” In this metaphor, first articulated by Forrest Church,⁴ each religion or “window” in this house of worship is different but the holy – the “light” – that shines through is the same.

Prothero's book, a deep dive into only eight of the world's religions, reveals the profound complexity within each one, complexity that sometimes leads to significant conflict within the boundaries of one spiritual identity. Prothero's scholarship demonstrates that to say that “all faiths are one,” to group one god, many gods and no god into “one light,” is to ignore distinctions that have

⁴ <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/stub-151706>

significant meaning to those within and outside each tradition. Prothero cautions against “the new atheists” like Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens who advocate, as Prothero says, “putting all the world’s religions in one trash barrel” just as he cautions against those who want to put the world’s religions in “one treasure chest.”

Beholding the world’s religions begins with taking in the big picture, collectively gazing at the light streaming through every window. Prothero argues that the creation of each religion begins with the recognition that “something is wrong with the world.” We humans create, practice and sustain our traditions as a way to diagnose what is wrong with reality and to prescribe what will bring relief.

And, Peter Kreeft argues, in his book “Between One Faith and Another: Engaging Conversations on the World’s Great Religions” that this “prescription” comes primarily through three means, “words” – sacred texts, “works” – actions that promote social healing and personal growth and “worship” – ways of devotion. As we consider engaging the world’s religions in service to our ethical and spiritual lives, do we draw from the “wisdom” of sacred texts alone or – as with meditation and yoga - do we also draw from works and spiritual practice? Is it appropriate or even possible to separate the three, to draw from them outside of their indigenous cultures and context?

Kreeft also defines spiritual perspectives in three ways, as “exclusivist” – “there is one truth”; “inclusivist” – “all faiths are one” and a non-evaluative view, “pluralist” – “the religions of the world are different.”

The Third Source is a tangible sign of Unitarian Universalism’s rejection of exclusivism. To draw from “the world’s religions” is to recognize meaning in more than one place. Before I read Prothero’s book, I might have described myself and my Unitarian Universalism as “inclusivist” – “many windows, one light in the cathedral of the world.” Yet, Prothero converted me to pluralism with his affirmation of the contradictions within faith traditions. I only need to think of my ancestral faith, Roman Catholicism, and see that the broad circle of that tradition includes the anti-war activism of the Berrigan brothers and Pope Francis’ advocacy for the earth and the world’s poor along with the brutality of the European crusades and the institutional protection of pedophile priests. Prothero argues that we cannot choose what we like of traditions and ignore the rest. The

moral poles of peacemaking and sexual and physical violence are far from being one and the same.

Reflecting on the world's religions through the lens of the Third Source makes me aware of limitations on our spiritual freedom. For as elements of different traditions inspire and inform our lives, we are cautioned to not focus on just that one thread but to understand the larger picture of that tradition. And, when this larger picture comes into view, are there elements we wish to ignore? Who are we to "cherry pick" what resonates with us and to set aside what we reject? After all, we speak of the "cathedral of the world," not the "cafeteria of the world."

And the freedom within Unitarian Universalism only goes so far. I remember meeting with a young family, a husband, wife and their toddler. They were looking to have a ceremony of welcome for their son. As the father was raised Jewish but didn't practice and the mother was a nominal Christian, it made sense that they turned to the broad theological tent of Unitarian Universalism for this rite-of-passage.

However, when I met with the couple, it became clear that they wanted something I could not offer. Like many of us, the mother wanted her son to feel free to practice the faith of his choosing as he grew older. So, she wanted me to conduct a blessing that would allow him to be accepted into any faith tradition. Sort of a sacramental "all access pass." I had a hard time explaining that our theological openness is not transferrable; her son might choose a tradition that does not recognize a child Dedication as comparable to their birth rituals. While Unitarian Universalists may be open to wisdom outside this tradition, we are not necessarily welcome to draw from other traditions or accepted as legitimate by them. It was interesting to me that when I did my three-month chaplaincy internship, even though I received the sacrament of baptism as a baby – all that was required by the hospital to baptize newborns – as I did not identify as Christian, I was not permitted to conduct this ritual.

Similarly, a Unitarian Universalist colleague, leading a program about the challenges of drawing from different cultures without misappropriation, once shared an illuminating story. One December, after the congregation he served kindled the menorah for Hanukkah in worship, a member of Jewish heritage engaged the minister, saying when he was growing up he was taught that the

menorah was to be lit at sundown and in a private space, like a home. Lighting the menorah in a morning public worship service felt inappropriate.

The minister reached out to three local Rabbi's to learn more, from the Reform, Conservative and Orthodox branches of Judaism. The leaders of the more liberal congregations agreed with the member; lighting the menorah in worship was misappropriation. Yet, the Orthodox Rabbi had an interesting response: "these rules are for Jewish people; Unitarian Universalists can do whatever they want!" This Rabbi's response taught me that part of his deep commitment to his tradition was recognizing the line between his faith and the other religions of the world and that there was no way a Unitarian Universalist and Orthodox service could be confused for one another. Like US and Canadian citizens, even if they share cultural elements, they are not the same.

Today's reflection began with consideration of a hypothetical wedding, a ceremony to be officiated by the Rev. Jared Kushner, minister of the Universal Life Church. As I think about the cultural convention of weddings, this ceremony serves as a metaphor to how I have learned to intentionally navigate the Third Source.

I see approaching a tradition outside my own the same way I would consider attending a wedding ceremony. I would not attend a ceremony without an invitation and I would not receive an invitation without a relationship. Faiths are best represented by the people who practice them, who regularly engage in their "words, works and worship;" it is through these human connections I learn the most. And this is why, when I explore another tradition in a Unitarian Universalist service, I try to find a practitioner of that faith to tell the story as it is not mine to tell.

When I attend a wedding, I do not come empty handed. I come offering a gift, something of myself, a contribution. While Unitarian Universalists have a strong ethos against evangelism, where there is openness I offer something from my faith. Through such an exchange, wisdom is not just gained but shared.

As Allison Miller alluded in her Tweet to Jared Kushner, Unitarian Universalism is not a creedal but a covenantal faith, a faith built on promises, promises made between human beings. These promises bind us together as congregations and

serve to bind us to other people of the spirit. Through these connections and where permission is granted to learn, to practice and explore, this is where drawing on the Third Source begins.

Susan Frederick-Grey is right; “it’s never too late to shift your life towards love and justice.” As we seek to ever-strengthen our ethical and spiritual lives, may we use the spiritual freedom we have found with care, mindful of the diverse expressions of the spirit and of the delicate places where we tread. May we be mindful too of our own boundaries between what is truth and what is unacceptable. And may we bring our full selves to our faith and may our faith be enough to “let [us] sleep at night, despite sure death.”⁵

⁵ http://clfuu.net/quest_archive/quest/2005-07.html#zoll