

“A Religion Both Worldly and Otherworldly”
a sermon by Rev. Preston Moore
Williamsburg Unitarian Universalists
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One evening in the fall of 1937, a Jewish songwriter named Sammy Cahn made his way from the Lower East Side of Manhattan to Harlem. It was a trip Cahn and other Jewish songwriters often made in those days. The purpose was to sit in the back of the Apollo Theater taking in the negro musical acts on offer there. It was a way of soaking up inspiration for their own songwriting. On this particular evening, an act called “Johnny and George” came on. When they started singing, Cahn couldn’t believe his ears. They were singing in Yiddish. The song was “Bei Mir Bist Du Schön” – “To Me, You Are Beautiful” -- written and composed by Jacob Jacobs and Sholom Secunda in the basement of a New York museum for a Yiddish musical that closed after one season at the Second Avenue Yiddish Theater in 1932. “Unbelievable,” Cahn smiled to himself. “We’re schlepping up here to borrow ideas from the negro musicians, and here they are taking a page from our book.”

Cahn badgered his employer, Decca Records, to buy the rights to the song, for which they paid the princely sum of \$30. He then wrote English lyrics for it but kept the Yiddish title, and persuaded an up-and-coming act called the Andrews Sisters to record it. “Bei Mir Bist Du Schon” sold a million copies, giving the Andrews Sisters the first gold record award ever received by a female vocal group. Cahn bought his parents a new house with the royalties, and the rest, as they say, is history.

A piece of the history that Cahn didn’t know in 1937 was that the song had already been recorded in 1935 by an up-and-comer who got her start at the Apollo Theater at one of its amateur nights in 1934. Her name was Ella Fitzgerald. When she died in 1996, Frank Rich eulogized her in the New York Times. That was back before Frank had to worry about things like Sarah Palin’s passport. “Here was a black woman,” he wrote, “popularizing urban songs often written by immigrant Jews to a national audience of white Christians.” Rich recalled Ira Gershwin once said, “I never knew how good our songs were until I heard Ella Fitzgerald sing them.” [pause] In a piece of dark foreshadowing, the closing words of Frank Rich’s 1996 eulogy expressed doubt over whether “our increasingly Balkanized and contentious country could ever again produce a voice as unifying in spirit and universal in appeal as Ella Fitzgerald’s.”

Johnny and George, Sammy Cahn, the Andrews Sisters, Ella Fitzgerald – all these musicians were too wrapped up in their creative destinies to let things like ethnic and racial differences get in the way. In fact, they saw those differences as opportunities for creative ferment. They were on a mission. The word that I believe best describes what they did is “eclectic.”

Now, “eclectic” is sometimes used as a catch-all label for things that don’t fit in any existing category. It’s actually a respectable intellectual tradition that goes back to ancient Greece. To be eclectic is to cull out the best from things, or traditions, or people – from any source of creative inspiration – and then to recombine the borrowed elements into a new harmonious whole.

The word is a cousin of an important Greek word in religion – ecclesia, which means a community of people called out of their ordinary lives to do something extraordinary. People with a mission. It was used to describe the early Christian gatherings, and it’s still a good word today for that kind of religious community.

The calling out into a new community felt by members of an ecclesia and the culling out and harmonious recombining felt by practitioners of eclecticism are close in meaning. An ecclesia needs to be eclectic. Otherwise it becomes a shell of inert beliefs, empty of vitality. Two weeks ago, on water communion day, Jennifer talked about how none of us can see the middle of his own back without help from others. That’s true of entire religious movements too. Other religions enable an ecclesia to gain a perspective on its own religion.

Eclecticism is also essential for an ecclesia to pursue its never-ending search for the most valuable spiritual practices -- defined in terms of the inner or spiritual life. The path into that interior is always changing, because the outer world from which we begin each inward journey is always changing; and because we are always changing. Put another way, if we are not changing, not growing, we don’t have much of a spiritual life.

So the best spiritual practices are a moving target. As Samuel Longfellow wrote in our opening hymn this morning, “revelation is not sealed.” Our inner life depends on a willingness to look outward, to read and visit pages and places other than our own.

Recognizing this, in between this morning’s worship services we flew over this sprawling territory for an aerial view. Eventually, to get us where we need to go, this learning process will have to lead to a much closer encounter with other religions. The airplane will have to land. We will have to deplane. Then, introductions, the breaking of bread together, and much up-close seeing and being seen will have to follow. It is not a journey for tourists.

A mission like this could make a big difference to our ecclesia and to the world, maybe even a transformative one. But it would also involve a lot of work and perseverance. It would mean placing religious education much closer to the center of the life of Unitarian Universalism.

We would have to get beyond mere intellectual interest. We would need to go through the wisdoms and spiritual practices of other religions to identify what might be valuable to borrow. Our UU ecclesia already struggles with embracing any set of wisdoms and spiritual practices, even on a “for the time being” basis. We would have to

look upon our encounters with other religions as opportunities to work through this difficulty.

Without this depth, eclecticism is mere dilettantism – dabbling and pretending to know with depth; and there is more than a little dilettantism in our ecclesia’s history.

Last year I told you a little bit about a Universalist minister named Kenneth Patton. From 1949 to 1964, he was the minister of the Charles Street Meeting House, an experimental church created by the Universalist Convention to re-establish a Universalist presence in Boston. It was innovative in a variety of ways, including aesthetically. Commenting theologically on the aesthetics, Patton declared,

[A]t the Charles Street Meeting House, . . . we have gathered the symbols and art of the world’s religions to adorn our place of religious celebration. Thus we declare that they all belong to us, but by the fact that they are all there, with all their mutual contradictions and identities, we declare that we belong to none of them, nor to any selection or combination of them.

Without giving themselves to practices they deemed worthy of borrowing from other traditions – at least on a trial basis – this Universalist group made mere ornaments of those other traditions and mere dilettantes of themselves.

This historical influence is still with us, reflected in how we relate to what have been called the Sources of Our Living Tradition. These appear as part of our Principles and Purposes. World religions are on the list, but nothing from these sources is evident in our Principles or Purposes. Rather, the sources are more like a religious pedigree that can be used to claim equal dignity and legitimacy with other religions. It’s like saying, “our ancestors dug deep and wonderful wells in these places, but now the wells are dry.” It’s a very different message from the one conveyed by the story Jennifer told on water communion day about that well in Death Valley.

John Buehrens, a former UUA president known to some of you, noted this tendency in his recent book, Understanding the Bible. He quoted a little parody song called “Forward Through the Pages,” written by a UU minister and set to the tune of Onward Christian Soldiers. It goes, “Forward through the pages, never read a line. Honor all the scriptures, think them all just fine. Books of differing sizes, spread across our shelves. We will never read them. We think for ourselves.” Too much pedigree, not enough pedagogy.

On September 1, our Commission on Appraisal announced the completion of two years of work new draft of the Principles and Purposes, including the six Sources. The deadline for UUA member congregations to comment on the draft is October 15. WUU will have a café conversation on the draft on Sunday, October 12 at 6pm here in the sanctuary. There is publicity about this new draft on the UUA website, and there will be more publicity coming about the café conversation, through the usual WUU communication channels.

For this morning, focusing just on the section of the draft concerning the “sources of our living tradition,” there have been some wording changes that can be read as privileging Christianity and Judaism over other world religions. But the seven principles still give no indication of anything specific incorporated into Unitarian Universalism from any of the world religions, including Christianity and Judaism.

The sources section includes a new statement that “Unitarian Universalism is not contained in any single book or creed.” From a review of the rest of the draft, including the principles, it clearly is also true, at least in the view of the Commission on Appraisal, that Unitarian Universalism is not contained in any combination of books, creeds, or other materials from the “sources of our living tradition,” including world religions.

Thus, in terms of its sources, the Unitarian Universalism reflected in the draft looks very much like the view expressed by Reverend Kenneth Patton of the Charles Street Meeting House, which I described earlier. All of the world’s religions are verbally on display in the new draft. They all belong to the Commission’s version of Unitarian Universalism, but that Unitarian Universalism belongs to none of them and belongs to no combination of them either. No new harmony is being created out of whatever might be borrowed from these other religious traditions. There is no real eclecticism held up here. We’re still doing the dance of dabbling and diletanting.

Seedlings of eclecticism can be found in the practices of UU churches like our own, which does bring significant Pagan and Jewish observances into its worship and educational practice. On October 5, for example, we once again will have a worship service that looks at the relevance of the Jewish High Holy Days to our UU context.

And the UU Principles themselves do provide some foundation on which to build an eclectic ecclesia. The fourth principle upholds the value of a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Eclecticism absolutely depends on that value, but such a search will only lead to eclecticism if the ecclesia is committed to creating something new out of whatever is found. Otherwise, it winds up treating questioning itself as the answer.

Our Commission on Appraisal entitled its 2005 Report “Engaging Our Theological Diversity.” I think it’s the world’s theological diversity we need to be engaged with – for the sake of creating a new harmony out of its old discordancies and Balkanizations. We need to read and visit pages and places other than our own. I think the world needs us to do this because we bring hard-to-find gifts to this challenge. In the reckoning of the world’s religions, we’re practically lost in the rounding. Our place in that world looks like Whoville in Horton Hear a Who. I think we need to find out what 250,000 committed religious eclectics can do. The world might be surprised at the big noise coming out of Uville.

AMEN.