

My Journey Through the World's Religions

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Readings

“One Song” from the writing of the 13th century Sufi poet Rumi
translated by Coleman Barks:

Every war and every conflict
between human beings has happened
because of some disagreement about names.

It is such an unnecessary foolishness,
because just beyond the arguing
there is a long table of companionship
set and waiting for us to sit down.

What is praised is one, so the praise is one too,
many jugs being poured into a huge basin.
All religions, all this singing, one song.

The differences are just illusion and vanity.
Sunlight looks a little different
on this wall than it does on that wall
and a lot different on this other one,
but it is still the same light.

We have borrowed these clothes,
these time-and-space personalities,
from a light, and when we praise,
we are pouring them back in.

The words of the director of the Center for Action and Contemplation, Fr. Richard Rohr:

Truth is One. If something is spiritually true, then all disciplines and religions will somehow be looking at this “one truth” from different angles, goals, assumptions, and vocabulary. If it is the truth, it is true all the time and everywhere, and sincere lovers of truth will receive it from wherever it comes.

The words of the scholar of religions Huston Smith, from *The World's Religions*:

How do we comport ourselves in a pluralistic world that is riven by ideologies, some sacred, some profane? We listen.

Sermon

Why preach this, my planned sermon, now, at the end of a week that included the riot and insurrection at the Capitol? Wouldn't it be better to address directly this national crisis?

Well, for me, reflecting on the sources of my spiritual grounding and nourishment is critical at challenging times, whether personal, national, or global; and I hope such reflection might serve as an invitation to you to do the same.

Jesus's parable of the houses built on sand and on rock goes like this, in Matthew's telling (7:24-27):

Everyone therefore who hears these words of mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man, who built his house on a rock. The rain came down, the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat on that house; and it didn't fall, for it was founded on the rock. Everyone who hears these words of mine, and doesn't do them will be like a foolish man, who built his house on the sand. The rain came down, the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat on that house; and it fell—and great was its fall.

It was just this week, as I continued my preparations for my upcoming class (“My Journey Through the World's Religions”) that it occurred to me that this parable was one of my few vivid memories from Sunday School at the Presbyterian Church we attended until I was about ten years old.

Why do I remember learning this parable in particular? After all, we no doubt learned many other parables and stories in Sunday School. Why did this one stick?

Whatever the reason, the parable comes near the end of what is usually called the Sermon on the Mount, a collection of Jesus's teachings and wisdom sayings. So understandably enough the usual interpretation is that the wise man is the one who builds his life on the solid ground of Jesus's teachings.

One of my summers as a camp counselor in the Adirondacks my reading included the Bible – including reading Jesus's Sermon on the Mount as if for the first time (in fact, it might actually have been the first time I read straight through it on my own) and being sort of electrified by the teachings: on forgiveness, loving your enemies, turning the other cheek, not judging others, knocking to receive, and so on. Pretty solid rock...

But my journey in philosophy and religion had already begun to take a different, more inclusive path than only Jesus's teachings – beginning to see the teachings of Jesus as just one manifestation of wisdom, rising in one particular culture and tradition.

Indeed, even that summer I'm pretty sure I was also reading Thoreau's *Walden* – Thoreau who had been immersing himself in early English translations of Hindu and Buddhist texts, and including references to them in *Walden*. And back in college I was reading those same texts and others from the world's religious and philosophical traditions.

Awakening to fresh ways of understanding who it is that we humans are, awakened by scriptures such as the Hindu Upanishads. With lines like these, from the Katha Upanishad:

If the slayer thinks that he kills, and if the slain thinks that he dies, neither knows the ways of truth. The Eternal in us cannot kill: the Eternal in us cannot die.

Concealed in the heart of all beings is the Atman, the Spirit, the Self; smaller than the smallest atom, greater than the vast spaces.

And learning the story of the Buddha – so troubled by the reality of human suffering that he left the life of a prince to discover on his own the meaning of it all and the way out of suffering: to name suffering, to see the cause of suffering in all of our grasping, and to chart a way out in his Eightfold Path of right living and understanding and meditation. Further, in a class one semester experiencing the rudiments and challenge of meditation from a visiting Buddhist monk from Thailand. “Just sit” he said. So we sat cross-legged and after thirty minutes sat in pain. “Just sit and watch the pain,” he then said. Which we did for another thirty minutes.

And during those same years first reading on my own and then in a class the *Tao Te Ching* – which begins by affirming that the Tao, the Great Way of life, that can be named is not the eternal Tao, not the eternal name... yet then goes on another eighty chapters with lots of words all about the Tao and how to live a life aligned with it... whatever *it* is!

So many words, so many traditions, yet all seemingly, maybe, pointing in the same direction, as we heard Richard Rohr affirm... towards that sustaining reality (maybe a rock?) which indeed cannot be named.

Well, as my journey through the world’s religious traditions continued from that time to this, it has been not just one straight road, but many interwoven paths.

But... really to the same destination, same rock, same mountain?

After all, always in the background is the reality of the seemingly irreconcilable differences among the world’s traditions... some of which have led to great suffering – oppression of women, justification of slavery, and much else, not least religious wars.

So we might well ask whether all of these sorts of things negate the pearls of wisdom that also seem (certainly to me) to be at the heart of these traditions. I don’t think they do. We simply have work to do to get to the *one* that the religious, poetical, mystical genius Jelalludin Rumi names or points to in the “One Song” passage we heard earlier; or, to put it another way, to open our hearts to the deeper realities that sustain us – “to listen” as Huston Smith enjoined us to do. Which is what I’ve been trying to do for most of the past sixty years.

Okay then: has my spiritual or religious house been built on sand or on rock? Some would say that drawing from the wells of multiple traditions means you’ll never get to the depths of any of them. And indeed there is a danger in dabbling without ever settling. But that’s only if you remain on the surface of each tradition. My affirmation, though, is that there is a common perennial wisdom, grounded in a reality that is hidden and sometimes not-so-hidden within every tradition... if we take the time to seek and look and listen.

And at the same time, there are unique gifts worth appreciating and learning from within each tradition – I know there have been for me. To name just a few examples: The gift of

prophetic witness in relation to social justice in the Hebrew prophets and in the life and message of Jesus; the invitation to the experience of a larger Self transcending our ego, expressed with particular directness and clarity in Hinduism; a path to end or certainly ameliorate our suffering in the Buddhist tradition; a guide to leadership and living aligned with the Way of life in Taoism... and so on.

So I guess over the decades I've been weaving all this and much more together. To mix metaphors (which I've never hesitated to do) solid enough rock for me.

So I am grateful, supremely grateful for these gifts passed along across generations to me, to us, to the human family – spiritual gifts manifesting in love, compassion, kindness, understanding, and at the same time clarity concerning the truth and the right... gifts we need more than ever, don't we? These troubled days we share. And always.

Grateful too, it must be said, for our Unitarian Universalist faith tradition which invites and encourages us to seek and find these gifts of truth from whatever source.

Here, to draw to a close, is one more clear memory from Sunday school: The superintendent of the school, Gladys Floyd, telling the gathered Sunday School classes that God is everywhere. I can still picture her in my mind's eye standing in front of us in her blue robe, as I was feeling quite perplexed by that notion, looking at my folded hands and struggling to imagine God right there.

Anyway, if the God transcending all names is everywhere, this means (as the Quakers put it) that there is that of God in every person... which must also mean in every religion. Just have to look a little more deeply, listen with a little more care, seeing and hearing beyond the names (God, Tao, Brahman, Buddha-nature, Yahweh, Allah, Great Spirit) to one unnamable, yet sustaining Reality in this one life that we share.

Amen. Blessed be.

Benediction

May we – each of us drawing strength and inspiration from whatever spiritual sources nourish us – be among the healers and helpers, the justice-seekers and peacemakers.

So may it be.