



Reading

Reckless Borrowing or Appropriate Cultural Sharing? Jacqui James

In the past few years there has been an increasing awareness among religious educators of cultural appropriation especially as it relates to spiritual rituals, symbols, and artifacts, so that Unitarian Universalists begin to ask themselves whether they are involved in reckless borrowing or appropriate cultural sharing.

This is a broad and controversial subject for Unitarian Universalists. As our worship increasingly incorporates ritual and spirituality from other cultures, concerns are raised about whether it is possible for Unitarian Universalists to authentically incorporate rituals, symbols, and artifacts from many of the world's cultures and traditions. And we hear concerns about the implications of racism inherent in cross-cultural "borrowing" of various spiritual rituals and traditions.

Our Principles and Purposes affirm that "the tradition we share draws from many sources," including "wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life." And it certainly is true that almost all religions have borrowed heavily from others blending and combining religions or aspects of religions. Over time and with exposure to various religious peoples and ideas our original Unitarian Universalist traditions adopted their present pluralistic theological positions.

Since we as Unitarian Universalists seek to promote justice, equity, peace, and the inherent worth and dignity of every person, we must look at how the integration of rituals, symbols, and ideas of other traditions may be affecting those whose traditions are being "borrowed." It is important that we learn to differentiate between drawing from the wisdom and appropriating rituals, artifacts, and other elements of the spiritual traditions of other religions. In the words of an unknown author:

Our first task in approaching
Another people, another culture, another religion
Is to take off our shoes
For the place we are approaching is holy.
Else we find ourselves treading on another's dream.
More serious still, we may forget...that God
Was there before our arrival.

Sermon

From its very beginnings, Unitarianism has been about integrating new understandings of ultimate reality with what already exists. It's one of the reasons so many of you are here. You want a religion that is open to the world rather than closed away from it or fearful of it. And you want your children to be part of a religion that empowers them to trust themselves and to discern within a loving supportive community, what is right and true. That is why Unitarian Universalism is called a non-

creedal tradition. We expect that revelation is ongoing, its sources infinite, and that every one of us has a part in it. We raise our children and prepare ourselves to be ready to participate in the ongoing creation and understanding of the divine. That is a fundamental part of our theology.

Our history shows that we've been like this for a very, very, long time. Let me give you some examples.

In the 1500s when European scholars got their hands on older translations of the Bible that the church had suppressed, a scholar by the name of Michael Servetus came to the conclusion that the Trinity was a concept not supported by Scripture but created by humans. He integrated that learning into his beliefs about ultimate reality and he put forward a theology of one God, undivided, and without intending to, he planted the first modern seed of Unitarianism.

There are some in our movement who are exploring if Servetus might have been influenced by growing up and studying in Spain, which had a strong history of Islamic influence. Until the Spanish Inquisition, which started a few decades before Servetus was born, there was a large Muslim community in Spain. Although the Inquisition pretty much wiped them out, you couldn't erase the centuries that Christian and Muslim lived peacefully side by side. In Islam, Mohammad is not considered God, but rather a prophet, a human agent of revelation. That is how Servetus came to understand Jesus, as chosen and sent by the one God. Is it possible that Servetus' exposure to Islamic thought influenced the way he interpreted Scripture? If so, then Unitarianism's historical foundation isn't just Christianity, it's also Islam.

Let me give you another example. In the 1830s a Unitarian by the name of Ralph Waldo Emerson brought Transcendentalism into Unitarianism. Transcendentalism was a movement that sought to move away from Scripture based religion to a direct experience of the divine. Transcendentalists looked to nature, to their own senses as sources of the divine. Transcendentalism was deeply influenced by Eastern thought, especially Buddhism. Emerson saw Transcendentalism as integrating Buddhist thought. When Emerson brought Transcendentalism into Unitarianism, it introduced Buddhist thought, at least as Emerson understood it, into our faith tradition. So that means that Unitarian Universalism has already been shaped by Christianity, Islam and Buddhism, and those are just a few. We've also been shaped by Judaism and Humanism.

Throughout our history, we have been what theologians call a syncretic faith. Syncretism is the theological process where you take the ideas and traditions and beliefs that surround you and integrate them into your worldview or religious tradition, and make them your own. In fact, there are some who would say that every religion is syncretic, some religions are just better at admitting it. Hinduism, for instance, with all its gods and goddesses is an excellent example of a syncretic faith. When Europeans tried to convert Hindus to Christianity, they were alarmed when their prospective converts just saw Jesus as one more god, one more face of the god that was behind all gods. Drove the missionaries crazy, because of course for them Jesus was the one god! That's an example of syncretism. When Christian evangelists entered Europe in the Dark Ages, they intentionally built churches over top of sacred Pagan places and adopted the Pagan gods and goddesses as saints.

When the disciple Paul developed his Christian theology he combined Jewish, Greek and Roman understandings of human nature and the understanding of God. Everyone has borrowed from everyone else. There is nothing that is simply pure and untouched. It's impossible.

So why is this important? We are starting a series on World Religions. In order for us to do this right, it's important to remember that religions can't be looked at as isolated complete units that can stand on their own. It's tempting, for instance, to look at each religion in terms of what it believes. Jewish people believe this. Islamic people believe this. Hindus believe this. Books on world religions are a lot like that, one of the reasons I often find them to be so boring. They look at religions as static unchanging things, and if you learn the facts about a religion, then you can understand a religion. But religions aren't things, they are experiences, and they change all the time. Religions borrow from each other, sometimes they steal from each other, and they always influence each other. They are dialogues between individual people and groups of people across time and place. So there isn't just one kind of Christianity, just like there isn't one kind of Buddhism or Islam or Judaism, or even one kind of Unitarianism. We are all responding to different realities of time and place.

So for instance, next Sunday we're looking at Judaism. The central story of the Jewish faith is the story of the Exodus. Moses leads the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt, they wander the desert in exile for 40 years, and arrive in the Holy Land after Moses' death. A significant part of the experience of Judaism is about remembering, honoring, and living that sacred story. So the story is retold and relived and translated, often through ritual and interpretation, to give it new meaning, century after century. The Jewish faith is an ongoing relationship with the story of being in exile and finding home. How the Jewish people understood the Exodus changed over time. In times when Jewish people felt safe and accepted, the story became more symbolic. You better believe it no longer felt symbolic during the Holocaust. It doesn't feel so symbolic to many modern day citizens of Israel either.

Next Sunday is also Martin Luther King Day. The story of the Exodus has also been central to the African American community, which has claimed it as the central metaphor for their journey from slavery to freedom. When Martin Luther King said, "I have seen the promised land," in the last speech of his life, he was making a direct reference to the Exodus story. And when he was assassinated it, many related it to God's declaration that Moses would lead the Israelites through the desert, but that he himself would never lay eyes on the Promised Land.

Does this mean that Jewish people and African American people feel a sense of unity because of their common experience? That's a good question and a difficult question because it means looking at the context of each group. It means looking at racism and at anti-Semitism and how they work in both communities. But, it also involves something more, because for some Jewish people, there is the distinct feeling that their sacred stories were stolen to become the foundation for Christianity, which has a pretty bad rap when it comes to respecting Judaism. In fact, it's no surprise that the story of the journey from Egypt to the Promised Land has often been interpreted within Judaism in light of their experience of anti-Semitism at the hands of Christians. So next week we're going to explore the power dynamics of the Exodus story. Who owns the story of Exodus and how? Can you use that story respectfully if you're not Jewish?

The Jewish people are not the only ones who have felt that their religious traditions have been stolen. In the 1960s and 1970s, North America went through an explosive cultural revolution with movements like feminism, environmentalism, and the peace movement, not to mention the civil rights movement. Many of these movements, especially feminism, environmentalism and the peace movement, and later the men's movement and the new age movement, which were largely white, borrowed a lot of religious imagery and rituals from First Nations people - peace pipes, sweat lodges, vision quests, dream catchers, drum circles. Now, many First Nations people are saying that this religious borrowing is an act of cultural theft, that it's a continuation of what white people have been doing since they arrived, stealing. Whether its land or a song or a story or a ritual, its theft and cultural genocide. Things are taken out of context, they're romanticized, the uncomfortable parts removed, changed to fit white value systems.

Let's bring this home. Unitarian Universalism, which has always been profoundly and intentionally syncretic, was deeply changed during the feminist, environmental, peace, civil rights and men's movements. With its historic openness to the ideas of our world, it absorbed, often unquestioningly, the positive and negative energy of these movements like a sponge. This was a time of such energy and so much good stuff came into our free religious tradition, but in the last two decades, we've started looking carefully at what we're doing and why. Is what we are doing respectful borrowing, or is it inappropriate cultural sharing, taking something and distorting it for our own purposes without respecting the tradition it came from?

A few years ago, the Unitarian Universalist Ministerial Association, of which I am a member, decided that it was time to rewrite our Code of Professional Practice. It was out of date, and in the rewrite, a clause was added that basically said we would refrain from any act of cultural appropriation. None of us were prepared for the response. Some colleagues strongly believed that any use of rituals and artifacts not part of your tradition is cultural theft. White people shouldn't do yoga. If you're not Jewish, don't do a Seder. If you're not African American, don't sing spirituals. If you're not Indian, don't pick up a drum. It's not your tradition; you don't have a right to it. On the other side were those who believed that any policing of cultural traditions was a violation of personal freedom and integrity. This provision turned us into big brother. Culture can't be owned. Religion is fluid and changing so deal. Between these polar opposites, the majority of us stood, saddened and unsettled by the anger and righteous indignation. We all wanted to do the right thing. No one wanted to be oppressing someone else. We hoped for a peaceful way that affirmed everyone's basic worth and dignity.

And I have to say that debate affected me profoundly. There's a reason we have never sung "No more auction block for me" which is in our hymnal. I just don't know how a majority white congregation can touch the reality of what created that song. There're other spirituals that we sing often as their words seem more metaphorical to me. Last year we had a Hanukkah service with readings that are nothing like what would actually be said in a Jewish context. And we lit all the candles, even though it wasn't the 8th day of Hanukkah. I had two people come to me, both from Jewish backgrounds. One was deeply moved by the experience. The other found it disturbing and

uncomfortable. As I think back on how I felt hearing both sets of feedback, I'm reminded of the poem in our reading:

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Another people, another culture, another religion
Is to take off our shoes
For the place we are approaching is holy.
Else we find ourselves treading on another's dream.
More serious still, we may forget...that God
Was there before our arrival.*

So, with our syncretic history, and with a desire to be respectful and mindful, we will spend some time these coming months opening ourselves to other religious traditions, knowing that not only can and should we be changed by the experience, but that the places we tread are someone else's sacred home. Sometimes the places we tread will feel like your home. Other times we may feel ourselves not like a guest sitting in our neighbor's living room. I would ask that you let me know if you ever think we've gone too far, taken something out of context, used something disrespectfully, or, if we haven't gone far enough, and out of a fear of offending become stilted, awkward and meaningless.

We're going to close our service with a hymn we've sung many times, "When Our heart is in a Holy Place" and I would ask that we consider this our prayer as we begin this journey, that these words hold us in a place of openness, respect, consideration, and sometimes, discomfort, as we engage what will hopefully be a spiritual process of learning, growth, and deeper understanding. Amen.