

Mosaic of the Spirit
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I would like to share with you something I came to understand in a new way in India. Many of you are already familiar with it perhaps. It is a gesture with spoken word that in India, is a greeting, a farewell, and an expression of gratitude. Here is the gesture **[GESTURE]**. The word is **NAMASTE**. Namaste means “I bow to the divinity in you.” And one of the most important aspects of Namaste is that when it is given, it must be returned, the word and the gesture. It is always mutual. **NAMASTE**.

In January of 2008, I had the privilege of travelling to India for three weeks with students and faculty from Lancaster Theological Seminary where I was in my third year of study. The trip was called the Cross-Cultural Seminar. It is required for all Master of Divinity students. The purpose of the trip was for students to experience another culture than their own. And especially, it was to experience ***Christianity*** in another cultural setting.

We visited five cities in three weeks, staying at Christian seminaries and other religious institutions. Our host seminaries and churches were all part of the Church of South India – the major Christian Protestant denomination in India.

For me, one of the highlights of the trip was our three-day homestay with Church of South India ministers. Our homestays took place at the very southernmost tip of India, in the District of Kanyakumari. The ministers who took us into their homes for the weekend had been given very strict instructions. We were ***not*** to be treated as tourists, but as colleagues, and included in their ministries for the weekend. We were all terrified about doing this. So, on a Friday afternoon, in the small city of Nagercoil, seat of the Bishop of Kanyakumari, we were parceled out, two by two, and scattered across the District.

My room-mate Rachel and I were assigned to the Reverend Maher in the nearby town of Colachel. On the way to his house, we stopped to pick up his wife, Deyashadju, who was coming from work, and their eighteen-month-old baby, Johannan, who was in daycare.

We arrived at the church and parsonage well after dark. Deyashadju and Maher immediately set about making dinner. And then after eating, we finally could relax and chat.

My room-mate Rachel and I immediately gave the Reverend Maher the bad news. He had gotten the ***oddties*** of the trip. Rachel is the seminary’s faculty secretary, not a student, and therefore was excused from any ministry activities. And I, though a student, am not a Christian. And my Unitarian Universalist faith is not a Christian faith. Maher took it all in stride.

That evening, Maher asked me in detail about my beliefs and theology. He was very interested in Unitarian Universalist faith and practices. There was much I said that he affirmed and appreciated. And he spoke to me of being a Christian minister in South India and what were the most important aspects of his religious life and service as a minister.

Saturday morning, Maher and I made home visits in Maher's neighborhood. We visited Protestants, Muslims, Roman Catholics and Hindus – mostly families who were middle class or poor and struggling to survive. I saw that Maher was held in great esteem by people of all faiths in his neighborhood.

Maher asked me if I would pray with and bless people who requested it and so I did. Most of the people we met did want a prayer or blessing. I prayed with, blessed and anointed women, children and men. None of the people understood English, nor did Maher translate.

Hindu, Protestant, Muslim and Catholic, they accepted me and what I offered with openness and graciousness. It did not seem to matter that I wasn't speaking in a language they understood. Nor that I did not understand their language.

With the people of this neighborhood, I experienced transcendent moments of connection and grace and humility.

On Sunday evening, we were hosted for a farewell dinner by the Bishop at his residence in Nagercoil. He stopped to chat briefly with each of us. He told me that about two years before, very near to Maher's church, there had been sectarian violence between Hindus and Christians at a Hindu temple. Over 20 people had been killed. Inter-faith tensions remained high in the area. Yet, I did not witness that tension in Maher's neighborhood in the way his interfaith neighbors responded to him.

Over and over again, as our group attended lectures and presentations at seminaries, we heard one main message from the Indian Christian theologians who taught us. This message was of the importance of true religious pluralism. Religious pluralism was presented to us as ***essential*** to the practice of Christianity in India. This message of religious pluralism being central to the practice of Christianity was ***so radical*** that a few of my Christian trip mates could not accept it.

What is the religious pluralism I experienced in India and why should it matter to us as Unitarian Universalists?

Well, there are three paths that relations between religions can take – exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism.

Religious Exclusivism is the assertion that one's own religion is the only true and valid way to understand and relate to what is real and what is ultimate. Those who are non-believers are in some way condemned, in this life and/or in an afterlife. For strong religious exclusivists, the only legitimate form of shared religious activity between different religions is ***conversion***.

For religious exclusivists, their faith is like a stone – rigid and complete. Nothing can be added to it, nothing can be changed. And like a stone, it can be used to wound people. The practice of religious exclusivism is a major cause of the worldwide violence, conflict and oppression that is justified on religious grounds.

Religious Inclusivism is the belief that there may be value in other religious traditions, but that value remains limited. Inclusivists may believe that other religions offer some form of salvation, however defined. But, this salvation remains that of the inclusivist's religion. This is true even if others ***have not heard of*** the inclusivist's faith. That is, for religious inclusivists, people of other faiths are really members of the inclusivist's faith, but just don't know it yet. For religious inclusivists, their religion remains the only true one and is considered the fulfillment of all other religions.

Religious inclusivism is not as potentially dangerous or destructive as exclusivism. Yet, it is patronizing and presumptuous. Inclusivism remains profoundly disrespectful of other people's religious traditions.

Religious Pluralism asserts that all faiths, all paths of the spirit, are equally true and equally valid. It is only through the practice of a true religious pluralism that healthy relationships and a full religious understanding are possible between people of different religious traditions.

I also distinguish between 'true' and 'shallow' pluralism. Religious pluralism is often misunderstood as affirming a type of shallow relativism. This type of shallow relativism says that all religions are essentially the same and at their hearts present the same set of values.

Perhaps you've heard the metaphor of the various religions being like different paths up the same mountain?

Well, I'm a Pagan, Humanist-flavored, Buddhist-inspired Unitarian Universalist who loves Jesus! I'm here to tell you that not only are our paths different, we are **not** on the same mountain! There are deep and real differences and contradictions among various faiths. Differences among their beliefs, their practices, their values and their **aims**. To minimize these differences is to reduce all religions to some lowest common denominator that does not really exist.

A great deal of interfaith dialogue, sadly, does not move beyond emphasizing the similarities among faiths. That's not bad, to seek out the commonalities. Yet it avoids the truly challenging work of understanding and respecting the **differences**. Those differences that can make us so uncomfortable!

At United Theological College in Bengaluru, capital of the state of Karnataka, Protestant theologian the Rev. Dr. K. C. Abraham spoke to us about religious pluralism. He said that true religious pluralism requires two key behaviors:

FIRST, people must be willing to critique their **own** religious beliefs, values and practices. To hold them up to the light of reflection and critical examination.

SECOND, people must be willing to learn FROM other religious traditions about what is real and ultimate for that faith and be open to learning what that might mean for their **own** beliefs.

So, true religious pluralism is about a **willingness** to be transformed in your own self, your own deepest-held values, beliefs and practices. By engaging deeply with the values, beliefs and practices of other faiths.

Religious pluralists believe that it is only through encounters with the religious other that our own faith truly can develop. What is the value of our sense of ultimate reality if it cannot endure the challenge or questions we get through meeting the religious lives of others? How can our relationships with ourselves, all beings and the ultimate reality grow and flourish in isolation?

If there is no genuine encounter with the religious other, **religion becomes like a stone**.

Whether you conceive of what is real and what is ultimate as Goddess, as the Universe, as the collective force of the human spirit, or as something else altogether – you must know that your conception is limited. None of us can know the totality of what is real and what is ultimate.

There is always more to learn. There is always awe and reverence for the unknown Spirit of Life. There is always the Mystery. And this Mystery is necessary. So necessary in our human lives.

I came back from India much stronger and more committed in my Unitarian Universalism. **Not something I expected!** This didn't happen because I went to India and practiced religious pluralism. No, it happened because people in India practiced religious pluralism with ME.

They were willing – **unconditionally** – to have me pray with them, preach to them, bless them and worship with them. They were willing to teach and share what they believed in a non-defensive way and to learn what I believed.

The Christians I encountered in India modeled religious pluralism for me and with me. Their great gift to me was their willingness to be a mirror in which I could see my own faith reflected back to me through their own religious understanding. This was supreme grace, coming from their deep hospitality and what they believe their Christianity demands of them.

Why should this notion of true religious pluralism matter to us as Unitarian Universalists?

We Unitarian Universalists manage some aspects of the inter-religious life very well. We affirm other religions socially and politically. We are champions of religious tolerance and freedom worldwide. This is wonderful. It is important. It is necessary, **but not sufficient**, for true religious pluralism.

As a religion without a religious creed or doctrine, we Unitarian Universalists have an **incredible** opportunity to transform ourselves through the practice of religious pluralism.

All too often, though, we can remain reluctant or unwilling to engage with people of with different religious beliefs and values, **even within our own congregations**. Which are such a rich mosaic of beliefs and practices.

It's as if we sometimes have a **Don't ask don't tell** policy about sharing our religious beliefs and values with one another. To avoid this sharing builds a cage that limits our own growth and our love and respect for one another. Our discomfort also limits how we relate to each other and to the wider world.

Living true religious pluralism, building our rich mosaic of the spirit together here, means saying **yes** to the hard and exciting work of knowing each other as we wish to **be** known. As our most whole and complete selves. Through the sharing of our truths, our values and our sense of what is ultimate and real in our lives.

The practice of religious pluralism is necessary to develop the deep and genuine respect and love that is necessary for community **within** and community **beyond** our walls. The respect and love that are called for in our First Principle and all our covenants with one another.

It is through the practice of religious pluralism that we have the greatest chance of ending the worldwide violence and oppression that come from the practice of religious exclusivism.

Your spiritual homework in the coming weeks, if you choose, is to ask someone in this congregation about their personal religious beliefs, values and practices, however they might define them. Then listen with all your heart to what that person has to say. Please **seek for understanding**. Reflect on what you hear from the other person. And then please ask yourself: ***What did I learn about myself and my own beliefs, values and practices from this encounter?***

In the reading this morning, we are asked to 'bring strange things,' to 'bring new things,' to 'let very old things come into our hands.' These are the strange, and the new, and the very old things we encounter in the religious other. If we 'walk carefully, walk mindfully, walk fearlessly' into the religious lives of others, we will **always** be coming home.

This homecoming will be to our true selves. This homecoming will be to a truer sense of our community as Unitarian Universalists. And as a truly Welcoming people. This homecoming will be to a fuller understanding of how **we** can heal the world.

NAMASTE.