

# Our Six Sources: Wisdom from the World's Religions

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto  
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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

## Opening Words by Jacob Trapp

Jacob Trapp said that:

Each of the great religions has a distinctive note,  
to be likened to the strings of a harp.

In Hinduism it is the note of the spirit:  
a universe throbbing with divine energy and meaning.

In Buddhism it is the wisdom of self-discipline:  
quenching the fires of desire in the cool water of meditation.

In Confucianism it is reciprocity:  
mutual consideration is the basis of society.

In Taoism it is to conquer by inaction:  
be lowly and serviceable, like a brook; become rich by sharing.

In Judaism it is exodus from bondage:  
the covenant of responsibility in freedom.

In Islam it is the note of submission:  
“Our God and your God is one, to whom we are self-surrendered.”

In Christianity it is that all may become one:  
“This is my body broken for you.”  
“Inasmuch as you have done it to one of the least of these.”

**Time for All Ages** (Story as told by James Baldwin)

There were once six blind men who stood by the roadside every day, and begged from the people who passed. They had often heard of elephants, but they had never seen one; for, being blind, how could they?

It so happened one morning that an elephant was driven down the road where they stood. When they were told that the great beast was before them, they asked the driver to let him stop so that they might see him.

Of course they could not see him with their eyes; but they thought that by touching him they could learn just what kind of animal he was.

The first one happened to put his hand on the elephant's side. "Well, well!" he said, "now I know all about this beast. He is exactly like a wall."

The second felt only of the elephant's tusk. "My brother," he said, "you are mistaken. He is not at all like a wall. He is round and smooth and sharp. He is more like a spear than anything else."

The third happened to take hold of the elephant's trunk. "Both of you are wrong," he said. "Anybody who knows anything can see that this elephant is like a snake."

The fourth reached out his arms, and grasped one of the elephant's legs. "Oh, how blind you are!" he said. "It is very plain to me that he is round and tall like a tree."

The fifth was a very tall man, and he chanced to take hold of the elephant's ear. "The blindest man ought to know that this beast is not like any of the things that you name," he said. "He is exactly like a huge fan."

The sixth was very blind indeed, and it was some time before he could find the elephant at all. At last he seized the animal's tail. "O foolish fellows!" he cried. "You surely have lost your senses. This elephant is not like a wall, or a spear, or a snake, or a tree; neither is he like a fan. But any man with a particle of sense can see that he is exactly like a rope."

Then the elephant moved on, and the six blind men sat by the roadside all day, and quarreled about him. Each believed that he knew just how the animal looked; and each called the others hard names because they did not agree with him. People who have eyes sometimes act as foolishly.

## An Introduction to Scrupling

Good morning. My name is Kate, and I'm here to invite you to participate in an experiment in democracy.

On April 17, members of this congregation will be "SCRUPLING" with 3 MPs and 3 Senators - from all 3 major political parties.

I have 4 reasons for being part of this experiment - my 4 young granddaughters.

I worry about what kind of world and what kind of country we'll be leaving to them.

As Unitarian Universalists we covenant to affirm and promote:

-Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations; and

-The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.

So - What is "SCRUPLING" and what does it have to do with our principles?

Scrupling is an old Quaker practice.

When faced with difficult issues such as war or slavery, Quakers sat with neighbours to listen to each other, & to share in the search for ways to respond to the question:

"What do your scruples / your principles tell you to do about this problem?"

Scrupling was revived by Ursula Franklin and the Toronto Quakers

as an effort to find a way to reach across the barriers of political party or social class - so as to deal in a deep and spiritual way with the erosion of democratic process, which is tearing our social fabric apart.

It is not a debate - but, rather, a serious and heart-felt searching and listening.

We'll begin in silence, and keep silence between speakers.

(difficult though that may be for Unitarians!)

There is to be no reporting of who said what.

This allows everyone, especially politicians, to speak from the heart.

Registration is limited, so visit our table during coffee hour, and bring your questions to our information meeting in this room next Sunday right after the service.

**Meditation**

“You say that you are sent to instruct us how to worship”  
by Sagoyewatha ("Red Jacket," Chief of the Seneca)

*These are the words of Sagoyewatha ("Red Jacket", Chief of the Seneca) to the missionary Reverend Cram from the Boston Missionary Society at Buffalo Creek 1805.*

You say that you are sent to instruct us how to worship the Great Spirit agreeably to His mind, and, if we do not take hold of the religion which you white people teach, we shall be unhappy hereafter. You say that you are right and we are lost. How do we know this to be true?

We understand that your religion is written in a book. If it was intended for us as well as you, why has not the Great Spirit given to us, and not only to us, but why did He not give to our forefathers the knowledge of that book, with the means of understanding it rightly? We only know what you tell us about it.

How shall we know when to believe, being so often deceived by the white people? Brother, you say there is but one way to worship and serve the Great Spirit. If there is but one religion, why do you white people differ so much about it? Why not all agreed, as you can all read the book? Brother, the Great Spirit has made us all. . . we do not wish to destroy your religion or take it from you. We only want to enjoy our own. . . you say you have not come to get our land or our wealth but to enlighten our minds. . . you have been preaching to the white people in this place. These people are our neighbours. We are acquainted with them. We will wait a little while and see what effect your preaching has upon them. If we find it does them good, makes them honest and less disposed to cheat Indians, we will then consider again of what you have said.

Brother, you have now heard our answer to your talk, and this is all we have to say at present. As we are going to part, we will come and take you by the hand and hope the Great Spirit will protect you on your journey and return you safe to your friends.

**Reflection**

Tahirih Vejdani

When Dallas asked me if I wanted to come work for him as a resident musician at his Unitarian church, it was a no brainer for me. I was singing at an Anglican church last year and although the music was beautiful, I found as a Baha’i, there were many aspects of the service I found interesting but also challenging. With the little knowledge I knew of Unitarianism at time, I was more than happy to jump ship.

And I must say, I immediately felt welcomed by the members of this community and found myself more than comfortable in this environment.

Baha'u'llah, the Prophet founder of the Baha'i Faith, speaks of "music as a ladder for the soul, a means whereby they may be lifted up onto the realm on high;" For me, I try to focus all aspects of my music making towards this goal. And I find singing in the various choirs that I sing in, from The Nathaniel Dett Choral, Univox, FirstU and the Toronto World Unity Choir all contribute to this musical ladder.

I know my time here has inspired me to continue to work towards the development of music within my own community and this community, by writing songs with the children, by contributing to the pool of Baha'i-inspired music and by starting a database of Baha'i choral music; the latter being the foundation towards a future goal of mine of studying the role of music within the Baha'i community in relation to the role of music in other faith communities. Thus, my work both here and at the Anglican Church have provided me with contexts and experiences from which I can draw upon in the future.

I am thankful for the friendships I have garnered here, the lessons I have learned, and the music we share in together and it brings great joy to my heart to be able to share some prayers and writings of the Baha'i Faith through song with you all today.

### **Sermon: "Wisdom from the World's Religions"**

Before you put your hymnals away, will you turn with me to Hymn #1—  
and then turn back one page toward the front of the hymnal?

There before you are—with a few typical American spelling errors—  
the Seven Principles of both the Canadian Unitarian Council  
and the Unitarian Universalist Association.

Halfway down the page begins the list  
of what are known as our Six Sources—  
the six major wellsprings from which we in this faith  
draw our inspiration and authority.

Where many other religions of the world look to the authority  
of specific scriptures or their own particular history,  
the living tradition of Unitarian Universalism draws upon six

broad and unbounded sources for our inspiration and guidance.

If you want to follow along with the text, these are:

- Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;
- [the] Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion and the transforming power of love;
- Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;
- Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbours as ourselves;
- Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit;
- [and] Spiritual teachings of Earth-centred traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

(You may now tuck your hymnals away, if you wish.)

If you've been paying careful attention in recent weeks, you've noticed we are in the midst of a sermon series on these six sources.

Two weeks ago I preached about the direct experience of mystery and wonder as keys to a life rooted in worship.

Last Sunday, Allison Barrett spoke about the challenge and inspiration that has come down to us in the prophetic words and deeds of women and men throughout human history.

Over the next three weeks, we will explore our relationship

to Jewish and Christian teachings,  
to the insights of Humanism and science,  
and the learnings that have been passed to us from Earth-centred traditions.

But, today, as you've surely guessed,  
we look to the wisdom we receive from the world's great religions.

It's worth asking just how we got here.  
How it is that we would even consider the teachings of other traditions  
as part of our own faith.

How it is that we would explore taking up the Quaker practice of Scrupling  
or invite a visiting choir to share with us music from the Baha'i Faith.

As you might imagine, there are a many converging streams  
that have led us to where we are today.

A significant thread of this story comes from our Universalist heritage—  
which, more than two centuries ago, rejected the notion  
that a loving God would or could condemn people to hell.

Universalists thought such a notion dishonoured God.

Instead, they believed that, in the end, God would save everyone.

At first, by everyone, they mostly meant other Christians,  
but in time, this view grew to encompass all people.

From there, it wasn't long before the value of other religious paths  
started to be questioned, explored, and then seriously entertained.

Eventually, Universalists—and Unitarians, who,  
starting with Emerson in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, were studying eastern religions—  
began to conjure a vision of a more universal religion.

It's not coincidental that Unitarians and Universalists were central  
to the planning of the World Parliament of Religions in 1893,  
the first global effort to bring together people from differing faiths.

Held in conjunction with the Chicago World's Fair,  
the conference drew Buddhists, and Jews, and Jains,  
Confucians and Taoists,  
Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and Zoroastrians.

It was the first time people representing so many of the world's religions  
had ever been in one place.

One of the keynote speakers was the Swami Vivekananda,  
who held out the promise of people being united in a universal spirit—  
in a universal religion that embraced all teachings, all practices, and all faiths.

His vision was for a universal religion that, in his own words:

. . . would hold no location in place or time,  
which would be infinite like [the] God it would preach,  
whose sun shines upon the followers of Krishna or Christ;  
saints or sinner alike; which would not be the Brahman or Buddhist,  
Christian or Mohammedan, but the sum total of all these. . . .

This conference, held near the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,  
sparked feelings of great hope—  
for the birth of a new era of religious cooperation around the world.  
Unitarians and Universalists took up this interfaith work,  
and many embraced with gusto the idea of a universal religion  
in the years and decades to come.

One of the most exciting yet short-lived experiments with such a vision  
was known as the Charles Street Meeting House in Boston.

In existence between 1959 and 1971, this congregation  
sought to embody the idea of “a religion for one world.”

This was physically evident in the heart of their meeting house.

On one end of their sanctuary, called the auditorium,  
was a huge, dramatic painting of the Andromeda Galaxy,  
and at the other a mobile depicting the intimate structure of the atom.

Between these two cosmic and elemental points,  
the people sat in pews arranged in a circle around a large image of the earth  
inlaid in the floor at the centre of the room.

On the walls were bronze sculptures of the symbols of various faiths,  
and on the chancel, a bookshelf containing the holy books of the world's great religions.

In the midst of this grand experiment,  
the congregation's minister, Ken Patton asked:

“Is it possible to create a form of worship so wide in its humanity,  
so inclusive in its symbolism, its resources in art, literature, and music,  
that it can encompass the whole drama of [humankind's] religious quest?”

He certainly tried.

For a host of reasons, that congregation lasted a mere twelve years,  
but many of its ideas have shaped our modern understanding of Unitarian Universalism—  
particularly our view of ourselves as a cross-roads, a nexus, and sometimes even a synthesis of  
world religions, even though that isn't really accurate.

In recent decades, both within and beyond our religious communities  
has been heard a popular notion that all religions are essentially the same,  
that they're all working toward the same goal,  
that they are all guided by the same spirit.

It's a beautiful but seductive idea.  
And it's not particularly true.

While there are certainly some common elements or ideas to be found,  
the more we study world religions, the clearer it becomes  
that there are also some significant and meaningful differences.

Sometimes, standing around the proverbial elephant  
(described in this morning's story),  
the religions of the world really are trying to describe some shared reality,  
even if their perspective is only partial.

And, at other times, the world's religious traditions really are pointing

to profoundly different things: to a tree trunk, a bit of rope, a spear or a snake.

So, what does this mean for us—if we are to look to the wisdom of the world’s religions for inspiration in our own ethical and spiritual lives?

I think that it requires that we be guided by our fourth principle, which calls us to “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.”

That we seek to understand the world’s religions more as “mosaic” than “melting pot,” to use an enduring Canadian understanding of our diversity.

Unitarian minister Linda Horton-Ludwig sets this out in such a clear and clever way:

For us, [she says,] looking out on the religions of the world,  
it’s as if we’ve stepped into a magnificent library  
full of wisdom and insight.

And we all get a library card,  
but it doesn’t come with no strings attached.  
We have to put down a deposit—  
a deposit of *respect* for what we find within,  
and for the peoples that gave birth to it all.

Nor[, she adds,] is everything available for borrowing from this library.

Some peoples have asked  
that their traditions *not* be available to everyone.  
[especially the] many Native peoples of this land  
who have said it’s not appropriate for other people  
to practice their rituals,  
given the history of genocide and dislocation they have endured.

The ground rule of this library of world religions is,  
we have to respect the people who created a teaching  
and try to understand that not everything is meant for us.

But so much is open to us.  
So many traditions look out on the world and say,  
this knowledge is for everybody who seeks it,

everybody who needs it.<sup>1</sup>

And, so, a responsible search for truth and meaning in this great library challenges us to understand and appreciate the qualities of difference, as much as we seek to celebrate the things that are held in common or that we find personally and spiritually compelling.

It can be quite the challenge, then, to undertake this dance in the time and place in which we now live.

Diana Eck, one of my professors from Divinity School, explains that there are three basic approaches we can take to engaging religious diversity.

The first is the Exclusivist route—the favourite of fundamentalists everywhere—which proclaims the one true faith, and then pronounces all others as being, quite simply, false.

The second route is known as Inclusivism. “Everyone is invited in, . . . but on our terms, within our framework, under our canopy, as part of our system. . . . The inclusivist attitude is, of course, much more open than the exclusivist, but the presupposition is that in the end ours is the truth wide enough to include all. Ours are the terms in which truth is stated.”

I don’t know about you, but I think that one hits pretty close to home for Unitarian Universalism.

The third approach, and the one which she champions, is Pluralism. It is rooted in genuine humility, and begins by acknowledging that our particular worldview is so much smaller than the world itself.

Eck says, “The Copernican revolution is a good image for dramatizing the revolution in religious understanding that we are now experiencing. It is as dramatic as Copernicus’s discovery that what we thought was at the center of our universe turned out not to be. . . .

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<sup>1</sup> The Rev. Laura Horton-Ludwig, “The Sources of Our Faith: Wisdom from the World’s Religions,” First Unitarian Universalist Church of Stockton, March 21, 2010.

No tradition can claim the Holy or the Truth as its private property.”

Eck goes on to say that, “Pluralism is the dynamic process through which we engage with one another in and through our very deepest differences.”

The approach of Pluralism is akin to the Canadian idea of the mosaic—  
an idea that challenges us to engage and honour our differences  
rather than trying to ignore or dismantle them.

To draw upon the wisdom of the world’s religions for inspiration, then,  
can be a rich and rewarding spiritual practice if we undertake it with humility and respect,  
and what I would call a holy curiosity.

That is not to say that all religious teachings are equal.  
A responsible search for truth and meaning requires that we employ  
the tools of reason and the tests of experience to gauge what holds enduring value.

But, in this, may we be guided by a spirit of generosity and gratitude.

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Along with their belief in universal salvation,  
our Universalist forebears held what’s called a “Universalist Eschatology.”

That is, they held a vision of an all-inclusive heaven to come  
where all people would dwell with God in love.

With that vision for their future,  
they figured we might as well learn to get along in the here and now.

That is our work, whether we believe there’s a heaven still to come, or not.

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One of the most stirring sights amid the many popular demonstrations in Northern Africa  
this winter took place in Egypt on February 4<sup>th</sup>.

On that Friday, when Muslims fell to their knees in prayer,  
they were encircled and shielded by a ring of Christians.

