

"Inclusivists or Pluralists?"

First Universalist Society

Central Square, NY

David R. Weissbard

October 1, 2017

The READING

It is impossible for us to put ourselves in the places of the members of the First Baptist Church in Rockford, IL whose minister rose in his pulpit one Sunday in August 1870, to say to them:

I have companied with Jews, Jesuits, Mohammedans, Men of the Greek Church, and very many members of what we Protestants represent by our different sects as the Christian Church; I have found in each, the one, identical love, supreme toward God, and unselfish toward men! I have found that under all these aspects of human experience, there runs the pure, deep current of faith in the goodness, mercy, and Salvation of God!! Experiences with which my own spontaneously blended; and, in the sweet, happy harmony the very breath of God's Spirit fell fresh and warm upon us! Many an evening upon the sea, and many an hour upon the land, friends and home left far behind toward the setting sun; amid what we call "alien and outcast faiths," where, as we have been educated, there can only be unbelief, fanaticism, and superstitious forms; 'twas under such circumstances that I was taught that the external names and forms in the religious are but local and fortuitous! For, I met those who, as Monks, Jews, Jesuits, Musslemen [Muslims], Greeks, could lay aside the artificial; the ecclesiastical conformity, rejecting them in every sense of essentiality, and meeting them on the same ground, my religious and theirs brought us into the presence of Him who is the Father and Redeemer of Men!!

Thomas Kerr was a remarkable person. He had come to this country from Scotland as a young man. He had managed to earn a college degree and then a medical degree. And then he became interested in religion and studied by mail for the ministry. And he left medicine to become a Baptist preacher, but he did not check his inquiring mind at the door. He had served the Rockford Baptists from 1860 - 1866 and left to serve a church in Hannibal, Missouri. Three years later, realizing what they had lost, the Rockford Baptists enticed him back. But Dr. Kerr had continued learning and in the intervening period, he had discovered Evolution and obviously a rather radical orientation to religion.

In 1870, while Emerson and some of the other radical Unitarians were saying things like Dr. Kerr did in that sermon, the American Unitarian Association had, in 1865, made it clear that good Unitarians were those who followed Jesus and had no truck with foreign gods. The radicals had formed the Free Religious Association because there was no room for them in the Unitarian Inn. And here was this Baptist expressing the religiously radical view that the things that unite truly religious people are more important than the things that separate them.

THE SERMON

[Dr. Kerr's sermon]

We can hardly imagine how most contemporary Baptists would respond to a sermon such as Dr. Kerr delivered in 1870. His was a congregation which had been taught and learned that "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have eternal life.~. They believed that the only way to the truth was their way, which was based on what they believed to be divine revelations contained in inerrant holy scripture, and those who believed otherwise were the tools of the evil one. That was the frame of reference when their own minister went into his pulpit to tell them that, on the basis of his experience, he had come to the conclusion that the things in which he believed, the really important things, were the same things that Hindus and Jesuits and Muslims and Jews and Buddhists believed.

Certainly Dr. Kerr must have known that morning what he would do that night. He could not have expected most of the members of that congregation to accept that sermon as good Christian preaching. He must have intended it as a swan song - as a farewell tour de force. We don't know if, as he wrote his resignation as minister of that church, he had any clue that forty of its members would resign along with him and that they would join with the remnants of the United Unitarian and Universalist Church to form a new congregation. Certainly he could not have imagined that it would take hold and become one of the leading congregations in that community.

Credit must also be given to the 48 Baptist lay people who followed their minister because they believed in him and were open to the ideas for which he stood.

[how different today?]

Think about it. In how many pulpits in this area could a minister stand up today and say the things that Dr. Kerr said in 1870, and hope to keep his or her job? I would suggest that a number might agree with Dr. Kerr's sermon, but few whose congregations would tolerate such ideas. Most people in most religious groups believe that their religion is unique in that it is God's true religion and that others are in error. [It is clear from Dr. Kerr's writings that he continued to change theologically and moved into an increasingly non-theistic position.]

In one of Chaim Potok's stories, a rabbi who is serving as a military chaplain in Korea goes to Japan where he observes a man deeply in prayer. Potok doesn't say if the man is Buddhist or Shinto, but he clearly isn't Jewish. The rabbi asks a Jewish companion, "Do you think our God is listening to that man's prayer?" His friend responds, "I don't know. I've never thought about it." The rabbi says, "If He's not listening, why not? And if he is, what are we all about?"

[Dr. Eck's project]

When I was in the Midwest, I was on the steering committee for an annual Institute that was sponsored by Meadville/Lombard theological school. One year, our speaker was Dr. Diana Eck, a professor at Harvard Divinity School, and one of America's most highly regarded experts on Eastern religion. Since 1991, Dr. Eck has been heading a research team at Harvard University to explore the new religious diversity of the United States and its meaning for the

American pluralist experiment. The Pluralism Project has been documenting the growing presence of the Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Pagan, Sikh, Jain, and Zoroastrian communities in the U.S. The theme of the Institute was "America's Religious Pluralism: Theological, Cultural, and Political Changes." Dr. Eck was one of the most knowledgeable and articulate speakers I've encountered. She is a Methodist, but she is the kind of Methodist that Dr. Kerr was Baptist in 1870.

She pointed out how hard it is becoming to refer to ours as a Christian nation. In the typically midwest city of Rockford, there is a Buddhist Temple, a Muslim Community Center, an active Hindu community, and a Bahai congregation. Even Dr. Kerr might have been surprised.

[religious diversity in America]

Dr. Eck demonstrated with slides how the face of America is changing. There are full scale Hindu and Buddhist and Jain temples, Islamic Mosques, Zoroastrian Centers, Sikh Gurdwaras and Shinto Shrines. The Pew Research Center estimates 3.3 million Muslims in the United States today, and they are growing. In Houston, one of the cities studied by the Pluralism Project, there were 40,000 Hindus, 50,000 Buddhists, and 60,000 Muslims. In the Chicago metropolitan area there is a Jain Temple in Bartlett, a Sikh Gurdwara in Palatine, and Hindu Temples in Lamont and Aurora. In the Washington DC area, on New Hampshire Avenue there is a Cambodian Buddhist Temple, a Muslim Community Center, a Ukranian Orthodox Church, a Hindu Temple, a Unitarian Universalist Church, and a Disciples of Christ church in close proximity to each other. In Boston, the Unitarian Universalist Mecca, there are 20 mosques, a Hindu Temple, a Sikh Gurdwara, a Jain Temple, and a variety of Buddhist Temples for Koreans, Cambodians, Chinese, Vietnamese and European Americans. The slides the Pluralism Project has gathered demonstrate to the eye in no uncertain terms that the religious landscape of America is not what it used to be.

Remember the old joke about having to be quiet in a certain part of heaven because that was where the Catholics were, and they thought they were the only ones there? [I suspect that the story today would be told about Southern Baptists rather than Catholics.] Well, it is easier to believe you have all the religious answers when you are not confronted on a daily basis with the reality that there are other people out there, real people, good people, who have a very different religious perspective. Like the rabbi in the Potok story, when you observe the religious devotion of other people, the question must be asked, "Does my God hear their prayers? If not, why not? And if so, what is the meaning of that for me?"

Dr. Eck suggested there are three fundamental ways of reacting to religious diversity.

[exclusivists]

One is the traditional **exclusivist** approach which maintains that our religion alone has the keys to heaven. "We have God's revelation. We know the truth and everyone else is wrong." We know, for instance, that some Christians believe that only those Christians who believe just as they do, will be saved. Episcopalians have had their doubts about Methodists who have been unsure about Baptists, and the people at the Assemblies of God are confident that they know where everyone else is going. A Missouri Synod Lutheran minister was kicked out of his denomination for participating in an interfaith service after 9/11. I am not suggesting that exclusivism is just a Christian phenomenon - it is shared by segments of virtually every religious persuasion.

But, as I said, exclusivism is challenged by encounters with good people of other faiths. It is a challenge to maintain belief in a God who will condemn other people to Hell for not

worshiping according to a particular formula. [Such beliefs can be maintained, but it is hard if you are in any sense aware.]

[inclusivists]

Some people, therefore, adopt an **inclusivist** view. That's the position that says, "My God is so open that he will accept you, even if you don't quite understand how he is supposed to be addressed." That view acknowledges the existence of many religions, of many understandings of God, but it assumes that those who believe differently are not bad, just a little confused and God is not put off by their confusion - He is, after all, tolerant and forgiving, and if we love them enough, they will come to see it our way.

In 1993, a World Parliament of Religions was held in Chicago to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the first such parliament in 1893. I had not understood the underlying assumptions of at least some of the leaders of the first Parliament. Dr. Eck shared with our conference some of the words of John Henry Barrows, the leading organizer of the 1893 Parliament.

The invitation to participate, which was sent to 10,000 religious leaders around the world, said:

Believing that God is, and that he has not left himself without witnesses, and convinced of the truth that God is no respecter of persons, but that in every nation he that feareth Him and worketh righteousness is accepted of him, we affectionately invited the representatives of all faiths to aid us in presenting to the world at the exposition of 1893, the religious harmonies and unities of humanity and in showing forth the moral and spiritual agencies at the root of human progress.

The language of that invitation is taken from the New Testament Book of Acts. In fact, the Parliament began with the singing of "Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow, which, of course ends, "Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost." The devotions each morning at the Parliament included the Christians' "Lord's Prayer" recited as if it were universal -- on the last day of the Parliament, a rabbi led it! The first World Parliament was indeed open to all people, and those with diverse ways were included, but the underlying assumption was that the way of understanding God was, of course, the Christian way. There was no assumption that the Christians had anything to learn from the Hindus or Muslims or Buddhists or Jews. Everyone was welcome under the Christian umbrella.

Even today, the Bahai's depict themselves as open to people of all religious traditions, and they are - Buddha and Mohammed, Moses and Jesus - bring your own tradition and you will be welcome, but what they fail to mention is that all of the previous leaders are seen as precursors of the final and greatest prophet of them all Baha'ulla - their prophet, to whom God finally spoke. "We will respect your tradition but you must accept that it has ultimately been superseded by our view of the world." This, like the 1893 World Parliament, is an inclusivist approach. It beats exclusivism, but it still leaves much to be desired.

[pluralists]

The **Pluralist** approach acknowledges the existence and the validity of a variety of perspectives on religion, assumes that each of us is capable of learning something from the interaction with others, and that we will all be changed in the process. Dr. Kerr's 1870 sermon was more pluralist than it was inclusivist. He asserted, on the basis of his experience, that the underlying truth of religion transcended the particularities of its forms of expression.



The Rockford church's Rehnberg window is an expression of pluralism, or it can be interpreted to be. Inspired by my predecessor Tony Perrino and executed by Frank Houtkamp, while featuring the Unitarian Universalist flaming chalice in the center, it shows the Christian cross, Muslim star and crescent, the Farsi symbol for the Hindu Ohm, the Jewish Star of David, the Taoist Yin and Yang, and the Buddhist Eight Spoked Wheel, surround it as sources of religious truth upon which we draw. Some mistakenly assume this means that congregation celebrates all of these equally, which is not an accurate description of the congregation's practice. It is a visual statement of respect, but there is, however, a tension between

Pluralism and inclusivism of which we need to be aware. There is a danger of trying to create what Diana Eck referred to as an "Esperanto" of religion - a kind of syncretistic collection of bits and pieces from here and there that is lacking in an integrity of its own. Esperanto is a language developed in an attempt to have a universal language which all could speak - except that it has never caught on and shows no signs of doing so because it isn't anyone's real language.

What that window says, as I understand it, is that Unitarian Universalism, which is our center, is able to draw on insights of the world's great religions, and each can draw on others, but there are boundaries between them - they do not just flow into each other.

[appropriation]

Diana Eck described an encounter at an interfaith women's conference at which a pagan leader led a worship service in which she was using an eagle feather and sage from the Native American tradition. A Native American woman who was present bristled at this. She was indignant. What right had this European American woman to steal from her tradition? "Whites," she said, "have stolen everything from the Native Americans - their land, their resources, and now their religion. It was, in her eyes, an act not of respect but of disrespect to appropriate a sacred element of her religion into another context.

At the Institute, a seminary student from a Hindu background led us in a chant which included elements from many religions. Included was a reference to Yahweh, the Hebrew God. One of the participants with a Jewish heritage pointed out how offensive this was to her in that it is a central tradition in Judaism that the name of Yahweh not be spoken.

There is a fascinating debate on the internet at present. Some African American members of UU Churches complain that the music we use is too white and does not make them feel valued. On the other hand, there are some who complain that we have no right to use music from the African American tradition - it is, they say, "cultural appropriation."

There is a danger in the assumption that in our dabbling in the faiths of other traditions, we can claim to really understand them. You don't get to be a Zen Buddhist by reading a book or two on Zen Buddhism. Going to a workshop on Native American spirituality does not give you the right to claim understanding of Native American Spiritual traditions. Sometimes when we believe we are honoring someone by lifting up and celebrating something from their tradition, we may, in fact be dishonoring them.

On the other hand, there is a Unitarian Universalist minister, James Ford, who is also an ordained Buddhist priest - trained and certified in that role in the traditional way. Diana Eck

referred to two Jesuit priests who have undergone similar training and acceptance. But it takes years of intensive study - not a weekend workshop here and there.

Abhi Janamarchi, minister of the UU Cedar Lane Church in Bethesda Maryland says of his ministry:

“As a minister, I share my own religious journey, not because it is more important than anyone else’s, but because it is part of building and sustaining relationships. I consider myself a UU-Hindu; flavored by the Islamic heritage of my father, Buddhist spiritual practice, and the study and exploration of other world religious traditions. My Unitarian Universalism helps me be a better Hindu, a better human being. It celebrates my identity as a religious hybrid and a theological crossbreed.

[valuing diversity, but not empty]

What Diana Eck stressed in our Institute was that the new religious landscape in our country will demand some real engagement from all of us, and that there is a sense in which Unitarian Universalists are in a position to make a significant contribution to the process. Pluralism is a tradition among us. The true valuing of diversity rather than the mere toleration of difference has long been a part of whom we are -- there was, at the Institute, a Sunday School curriculum on appreciating world religions which the American Unitarian Association had produced at the turn of the 20th century.

Before the Buddhist Temple was organized in Rockford, the Buddhists used the UU church for some of their festivals because they recognized that they would be welcome there. The Hindu community and the Muslims recognize the UU Church as one in which they and their traditions are respected.

But the awareness with which we need to live is that Unitarian Universalism is not simply an amalgam, a pastiche. We are open but we are not empty. We don't go to a religious smorgasbord with an empty plate and pick a little here, a little there. There is already something on our plates - a tradition which is ours. We, as Unitarian Universalists, are open to religious dialogue. We engage with others in the hope that we will learn from them, but not with the assumption that we are free of our own biases, which is to say that we may also have something to teach. But need to guard against the inclusivists' delusion that we, after all, represent the ultimate in religion - that everyone will find meaning under our roof. What true pluralism is about is the acceptance of the reality that people are different, that their religious needs are different, and that what has meaning for one may have no meaning for another. I believe there will always be religious exclusivists and inclusivists in the world, because some people need what I would call the delusion of their own rightness, but we need to guard against that delusion in ourselves, the conviction that we have, finally, achieved perfect knowledge.

[the challenge of resurgent exclusivism]

We are, of course, living in “interesting times.” There is a resurgence in our nation of a movement toward defining ours as a “Christian nation,” in spite of our clear history as a secular state. The current president, his cabinet, and many members of the Congress truly believe that those who do not define themselves as Christian are less American than they. Look at the President’s ban on Muslim immigration – it was not all about terrorism - it reflected his base’s fear that America was becoming too diverse. Judge Roy Moore, who was chosen this week as Republican candidate for the Senate from Alabama, has explicitly stated that he does not believe Congressman Keith Ellison, a Muslim, has a right to be in Congress. Moore is among those who believe that the Bible should be the basis of American law, just as Muslim

extremists want to see the Koran as the basis of the laws in the countries in which they are the majority. As I suggested once in the past, we have our own version of the Taliban, and their influence is growing.

Our Unitarian Universalist tradition is a blessing, but it also presents a challenge. It confronts us with the responsibility of engaging actively in the religious dialogue which may, in fact, not always be a priority for the people with whom we would like to be in conversation, but it is our charge to continue in pursuit of dialogue remembering, as Diana Eck warns, "Dialogue does not mean we will like what everyone at the table says. The process of public discussion will inevitably reveal much that various participants do not like. But it is a commitment to being at the table -- with one's commitments." Our tradition calls upon us to stand up and challenge those who would transform our nation into something our founders clearly rejected. We dare not ignore this challenge, or the freedom of religion which we cherish could be lost..