

Together as Chorus, Now as One

A sermon by Rev. Jackie Clement

Delivered at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Bloomington-Normal, IL

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This morning's service grew out of the concert that the Fell Quartet presented last winter and which included the songs you have heard here today. For me, the diversity of these songs brought home not the differences in the world's religious traditions, but the commonality of sacred music. Music offers a commonality that theology, beliefs, words do not approach because it touches us in ways words cannot and leads us to places where words have no meaning. The very word "music" derives from the Greek goddesses, the Muses. How could it *not* reach toward the divine?

Flaubert wrote that "human speech is like a cracked kettle on which we tap crude rhythms for bears to dance to while we long to make music that will melt the stars." If human speech falls short, then certainly the language of faith is particularly difficult. In the language of faith we are pointing to things that may not exist, don't exist in any concrete way or are in the realm of personal belief and experience that may not be shared by others. Music allows us a commonality of experience that speech does not.

And so, the world's religious traditions have developed their own forms and bodies of music. While the different religions do not have wholly unique relationships to music, neither do they all approach music in the same way. The music of Hinduism grew out of Vedic chants that are thousands of years old and it is the sacred sounds of the Sanskrit words that take prominence over their meaning. Because Hindus do not have weekly corporate worship the way other religions do, music is used more in satsangs (spiritual practice groups) and for festivals. Muslims do gather for weekly corporate worship, but music is generally not included though recitation of the Qur'an can sound very musical. Where music is used in Islam, it tends to be a cappella as instruments are largely forbidden though drums and stringed instruments may be found in some traditions. Buddhist chanting prepares the mind for meditation while the music of mystics from many traditions dissolves the illusion of separation from the divine. Music is integral to Jewish worship where the prayers are sung, and cantors in some traditions now hold ordination and the rights of clergy. Music is so integrated into Christian worship that the Protestant style worship from which we vary little has become known as the "hymn sandwich." Of course, each religious tradition offers a wide variety within itself.

Our own tradition of Unitarian Universalism has also developed a body of music. In fact, some of the hymns written by nineteenth century Unitarians have even made their way into the hymnals of Protestant denominations. In the other direction, just as we welcome the ideas and values of other religions, we Unitarian Universalists welcome their music. This has led to charges of religious syncretism, the melding of practices from seemingly incongruent traditions, a sort of spiritual thievery.

However, I would argue that there is no religion without syncretism, without a give and take of mythologies, rituals, beliefs and practices. Here are just a couple of examples. In the ancient Mesopotamian Epic of Gilgamesh we meet a character named Sargon. Sargon's mother was a high priestess, who hid her pregnancy and the birth of her child. When Sargon was an infant his mother placed him in a basket and floated the basket down the Euphrates River. The basket and child were rescued by Aqqi, the water drawer, who raised the child as his own. Sargon went on to become the king of Sumer. Does that sound anything like the story of Moses floated in a basket on the Nile, rescued by Pharaoh's daughter and raised to become leader of his people?

Here's another one. The ancient near east had many tree goddesses. The one indigenous to Judea and Israel was named Ashera, who gave her name to the tribe of Asher. Ashera was worshipped rather longer than those foreign goddesses, but was eventually downgraded to consort to Yahweh, the god of the Israelites. Here's the thing though, Ashera was typically depicted riding on the back of a donkey led by a lesser male deity and following a bright star in the heavens. Sound familiar?

Another more direct example is Proverbs 22-24 from the Hebrew Bible, which is actually the Egyptian Instruction of Amenemope translated into Hebrew.

It is nothing new, nor anything unusual, that religions merge and borrow from each other. Syncretism is a historical fact as well as a modern reality. It is how, over time and through exposure to many cultures and religious traditions, Unitarian Universalism has become a pluralistic, diverse and inclusive religion. Indeed our very Principles and Purposes affirm "wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life" as one of our primary sources of religious authority.

However, while religious cross pollination is nothing new and can, indeed, be healthy and life-affirming, it can also step over a line into religious and cultural appropriation. In her essay "Reckless Borrowing or Appropriate Cultural Sharing?" Jacqui James writes, "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."

Cultural appropriation is complex and not always crystal clear, but, generally, it means taking possession of some aspect of another culture – their music, art, ritual, spiritual practice – in ways that are uninformed, unethical or oppressive. It is acting in ways that are disrespectful to the originating tradition and without understanding of the historical, social, and spiritual context from which the practice arose. The Reverend Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley defined cultural appropriation as consciously or unconsciously seeking to emulate concepts, beliefs, or rituals that are foreign to a particular framework. This can include the superficial appreciation of a culture without regard to its deeper meaning.

Cultural appropriation is one of those instances when examples make the definition easier to grasp. Ysaye Barnwell, a member of the musical group Sweet Honey in the Rock, offers the

example that in an African-American spiritual changing the word “Master” to “Father” might make some people more comfortable, but to do so is disrespectful of the original meaning. For an enslaved people to affirm God as their Master over the slave owner was a powerful protest, and for modern people living in freedom to change that protest for their own comfort is to disregard and devalue the original context.

Another example is offered by UU percussionist Matt Meyer. Do you know the song *MTA*, more often called *Charlie on the MTA*? Poor Charlie couldn’t afford the exit fare to get off the subway so he was stuck forever riding from station to station.

*Will he ever return?
No, he’ll never return,
And his fate is still unlearned.
He will ride forever ‘neath the streets of Boston.
He’s the man who never returned.*

It was originally written in 1949 as a campaign song for Progressive Party candidate Walter O’Brien who opposed rate hikes and the complicated fee schedule of Boston’s Metropolitan Transit Authority which required paying exit fees to get off the subway. The fee schedule unfairly taxed those in the inner city in favor of the rich private owners of the day. So although it was a campaign song, *Charlie on the MTA* was really a song of protest about economic exploitation. Well, I think it was about 8 or 10 years ago that the T (as it is commonly known) did away with tokens and went to magnetic strip cards. In a blitz of cultural appropriation they named the cards CharlieCards and turned *Charlie on the MTA* into a marketing campaign. Ironically the move to CharlieCards was accompanied by a substantial hike in fares, but it was the manipulation of the original meaning by the dominant culture for their own gain that made it cultural appropriation and made it clear why we must know and honor the original context before borrowing.

Yet, if we are to be a pluralistic tradition and a diverse community where all are welcome, we need a diversity of music, symbols and ritual. As Mark Morrison-Reed told us when he visited two years ago people need to see themselves reflected in the life of the church in order to feel a part of it. They must see some element of their culture present to embrace the church as their own.

So we do incorporate the music, words and rituals of other cultures and traditions, but we try to do so in ways that are respectful and cognizant of the original meaning and context. That is why we offered the notes with each song in today’s service, to understand and honor something of the song’s origins. But there is another aspect of cultural sharing and, particularly, religious sharing that goes beyond even appropriation. In our search for breadth of experience we must be careful not to sacrifice depth. In an attempt at inclusivity there lies the danger of not sticking with any one thing long enough to make a significant difference. One of my seminary professors used to challenge us not to become so blindly tied to one tradition that we couldn’t see its flaws and yet to know that unless we got on one path and stayed there we would never advance spiritually. The path may be enriched by diverse elements, but the diversity cannot function as distraction from the spiritual goal any more than authentic diversity can be built through misappropriation.

Enjoy the wideness of experience but grapple with it fully. Be true to your path but know it is not the only one. Embrace diversity where it is offered with deference and respect. May we sing, not with only one voice, but with many voices together in chorus.

Namaste.
Por lo tanto puede ser.

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Introductions to the songs sung during the service:

By the Waters of Babylon was based on the biblical story of the Israelites enslaved by the Babylonians yearning to return home to Jerusalem. This story was adopted by African slaves yearning to be free. It was later used by Rastafarians to protest against the oppressive and unjust Jamaican government—the modern Babylon.

Dravidian Dithyramb literally means a wild, passionate hymn from southern India. It captures the wordless, uninhibited joy expressed by some Hindu sects as an “emotional devotion” to their gods.

Be Ye Lamps unto Yourselves is based on words attributed to the Buddha about 2500 years ago, with a tune that dates back to the middle ages. It is said to be the advice that the Buddha gave to his followers as he was dying, on how they should continue on without him.

Ya Hadi Allah is an Arabic song in the Sufi tradition, which is an inner-focused, mystical branch of Islam. This meditative chant is an invocation of love, light and guidance, and celebrates the unity of all things.

Hush! Somebody’s Callin’ My Name is an old Negro spiritual about trying to hear God’s voice, trying to get some guidance in the midst of trouble, pain and death. Spirituals were sung by slaves in America, and were passed down in the oral tradition, so much of their history is lost.

One Voice is a contemporary song that uses music as an allegory for connection, peace and the power of expression. The individual lines are an intricate weaving, going back and forth between harmony, dissonance and unison.