

TOWARDS A WORLD THEOLOGY

A Sermon delivered at the UU Church of Palo Alto
by the Rev. Scotty McLennan, Stanford Dean for Religious Life
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I very much appreciate this opportunity to preach at the UU Church of Palo Alto. I've been a neighbor as the Dean for Religious Life and the minister of Memorial Church at Stanford for a little over a year now. It's an honor to preach in a church of my own tradition for a change, especially as you're considering whether to endorse me as one of your own community ministers.

I see my sermon today as part of a brief series that began with Darcey Laine's sermon last week. She spoke with you of deep ecumenism, and I want to take the next step towards what I call world theology. Is a world theology possible? Could there be one theology that all religious people in the world at least theoretically could sign onto as a statement of their faith? Especially today, with all the religious divisions in the world, often breaking out into war, can we members of the human race ever agree on a common world theology? And what's the distinctive Unitarian Universalist contribution to this effort?

Darcey spoke last Sunday of the importance of a couple of her

teachers at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley in her journey to deep ecumenism. Likewise, I was profoundly influenced in my theological education at the Harvard Divinity School by Professor Wilfred Cantwell Smith. I took a couple of classes with him -- one when he was working on the book Towards a World Theology¹, from which today's reading and my sermon title was taken. I'm indebted to him for a perspective that's informed my 27 years of ordained ministry.

Darcey traced Unitarian and Universalist roots of ecumenism from Unitarian King John Sigismund's edict of religious tolerance in Eastern Europe in the 1500's, through Unitarian involvement in calling the first World Parliament of Religions in 1893, through Universalist minister Kenneth Patton's attempt to create "a religion for one world" emanating from the Charles Street Meeting House in Boston in the mid-twentieth century. She concluded by noting that "the Charles Street Meeting House is now a historical landmark, the world having passed on the option for one religion."

But I'm not willing to give up yet. So here goes. In divinity school I became very interested in scholars who might loosely be called phenomenologists of religion, like Mircea Eliade, Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell. They seemed to be pointing toward a world theology. Campbell's research, as described in

books like The Masks of God², uncovered common mythological archetypes across cultures. His mentor, Jung, wrote of archetypes emanating from a collective unconscious shared by all human beings. These archetypes, central to religion and expressed in behavior, have a universal character across all cultures and times according to Jung.³

Eliade, who spent most of his career at the University of Chicago, claimed that there are patterns in comparative religion represented by timeless and permanent symbolic structures. "There is no religious form," he wrote, "that does not try to get as close as possible to its true archetype, in other words, to rid itself of 'historical' accretions and deposits. Every goddess tends to become a Great Goddess, taking to herself all the attributes and functions that belong to the archetypal Great Goddess...[Every] tribal god...becomes by means of a new epiphany the god of a monotheistic religion."⁴

So, if there are timeless symbolic structures shared by all religions, if there are common mythological archetypes expressed in all cultures, why isn't a world theology not only possible but rather obvious? Here enter historian of religion, Wilfred Cantwell Smith. He criticizes scholars like Campbell, Jung, and Eliade in this way: "I get the impression that some, at least, of

those who call themselves phenomenologists are inclined to hold that symbols somehow carry their meaning in themselves; and hence [are] inclined to posit as it were a Platonic idealism of symbolic forms. My own observations as an historian suggest that...no object is objectively a symbol: that things are symbols only in relation to certain persons, and not to others." He gives the example of a crucifix, which for certain Roman Catholics may represent love, for certain Protestants superstition, and for certain Jews, oppression.

Instead of universal archetypes and permanent symbolic structures, Smith speaks of humankind as having now arrived at a historical moment when we can finally see for certain, if we couldn't before, that all humankind is one -- we are all crew on spaceship earth, our lives are interdependent, and our fate is in our collective hands. He sees an emerging consciousness around the world -- although not necessarily shared by many yet -- that we are all heirs to the entire religious history of the human race. Therefore, we must begin to theologize -- that is to articulate our faith or relation to transcendence -- in terms of that entire history and not just in relation to our own tradition, whether it be Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, traditional indigenous religions, individual spirituality or

something else. Does this sound like Unitarian Universalism?
Smith himself was a Presbyterian minister and a scholar of Islam.

Smith points out how particular groups have always participated in the religious evolution of other traditions. For example, a Hindu like Gandhi affected the thought and actions of many Christians, including Martin Luther King, Jr. Christian missionaries affected Buddhism and Shinto in Japan in ways that helped make possible new religious movements within those ancient traditions. Hell is an idea whose development can be traced from Persian Zoroastrianism through Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The Roman Catholic use of rosary beads was adapted at the time of the Crusades from the Muslims, who used prayer beads (and still do). The Muslim practice actually followed a Hindu use. The Buddhists also took up prayer beads from the Hindus and carried them eastward through Asia and ultimately to Japan.

Historically we are reaching a point of convergence where people from all traditions are starting to become aware of these connections and will more and more participate self-consciously in all traditions. Empirical observation yields a vision of the unity of humankind's religious history in the sense that all religious traditions are interconnected in having grown out of, having been influenced by or having interacted with all others.

However, and very importantly, this is not to say that all people have always been religious in the same way. In fact, religious life has been extremely variegated and diversified. This, I believe, was Darcey's point last week when she insisted that religious differences are real and important. Lowest common denominator religion -- "At root we really all believe the same thing" -- isn't religion at all. Yet, various religious traditions can be understood historically and today only in terms of a context in which the others form a part.

Smith has a number of corollary observations and theories which begin to provide the underpinnings for a world theology. He has a principle of verification that no statement about the faith of a group of people is true which cannot be accepted, agreed to, and appropriated both by practitioners of that tradition and by people outside of the tradition. At a minimum, any religious statement must be intelligible both to insiders and to outsiders.

Smith sees "faith" as a human universal the way love is. Most people, although not everyone, experience it at some time in their lives. Faith is the capacity to perceive life as meaningful. It is the experience of wholeness and integrity, in contrast to nihilism and despair. It comes in a variety of forms like Jewish, Buddhist, Taoist. It differs in form, but not in

kind, from one individual to the next, from culture to culture, from religion to religion.

A world theology cannot be a Christian or Hindu or Muslim theology of the "other religions." It would not be valid if it were not seen as genuinely Christian, Hindu, Muslim, etc.

(As an aside, there's a problem I think we Unitarian Universalists get into sometimes with a kind of potpourri, grocery store, pick-and-choose religion that isn't well grounded in any historical tradition. I, for example, affirm myself as a Christian Unitarian Universalist, in communion with historical Christianity through the ages, but I love being in a religious movement where I can rub shoulders with and learn from Jewish UU's, Buddhist UU's, pagan UU's, humanist UU's and so on. My hope for each of our UU churches is that they provide meaningful help and support to people seriously following specific spiritual traditions which have lasted for millennia and had billions of followers -- as well as to people bushwhacking alone. My problem with our movement comes when there isn't significant encouragement, resources and respect provided to people trying to follow particular, historically developed, richly nurtured paths up the spiritual mountain. I cringe at the joke about crossing Jehovah's Witnesses and UU's -- They ring your doorbell, but when

you open the door, they have nothing to say).

Back to world theology. It cannot be a Christian or Hindu or Muslim theology of the "other religions," but it must at the same time be at least Christian, Hindu, Muslim, etc. This world theology must be written by theologians who know people from all traditions, but also know them as members of one world community - a community in which he or she also participates. The task of such a theology is to interpret and to intellectualize our multiform faith. Unitarian Universalists could be ideally suited to this task, if only we know the great world religions and spiritual traditions in depth, and with true empathy and understanding.

Behind my hope for a world theology is what I see to be an emerging general awareness through globalization of the history of other religious communities and of world history as a whole. Eventually each group could self-consciously participate in the religious history of humankind as the context for faith. Christians will not cease to be Christians nor Buddhists to be Buddhists, but each will come to understand the dynamic concept of a Christian strand or a Buddhist strand in the religious history of the world; hence, they will participate self-consciously as Christians and Buddhists in a world process of religious

convergence. They will participate in what is ultimately the only true community -- the world-wide and history-long community of humankind.

O.K. If you're still following me, you're probably saying, "Right, McLennan! This is pie-in-the-sky as Jews and Muslims kill each other in the Mideast, as Hindus and Buddhists continue to battle in Sri Lanka, and the former Yugoslavia has been drenched in the blood of Muslims, Catholics and Orthodox Christians. Not very realistic," you say, "when you think concretely about Sunday mass, or Saturday morning Jewish services, or Friday afternoon Muslim prayers. Very academic. Very Stanford. Very heady -- head in the clouds, that is."

Please note, however, that theology has never been the province of the majority of religious people. First of all, in practical terms it has always been unrealistic for any Christian or Muslim thinker, say, to suppose that he or she could write a theology acceptable to all Christians or to all Muslims. Generally it's only been intelligent, informed, academically-oriented Christians and Muslims who have read or studied theology anyway. Nonetheless, writing a theology intended for all Christians or all Muslims has been valid as an ideal. Similarly, a world theology, when constructed, should be cogent for and

acceptable to all humankind as an ideal.

It's now possible, and therefore now requisite, to say that we human beings on earth are diverse but not incongruous. We have a solidarity as well as a particularity, and recognizing this solidarity is part of our self-transcendence. The truth of all of us is part of the truth of each of us. Moreover, we can begin to see that it's blasphemous to speak of God or spiritual energy less comprehensively than in terms of God's or spiritual energy's diverse involvements with all of humankind.

A world theology must emerge from a new common, and critical, self-consciousness. It must do justice to the facts of all of human religious history, objectively verified. It must do justice to the faith, experience and insight of people from each religious tradition. It cannot emerge from any one of the traditions alone.

It can be developed only by regularized, multilateral conversations among all religious communities, confronting world issues side by side, rather than confronting each other face to face.

Historically, the moment of challenge for a world theology is here and now for the human race, really for the first time ever, and, if we don't seize it, perhaps for the last time ever. The challenge is to collaborate in building a common world. This must

not only be the kind of world in which we can all live together,
important as that is, but also one of which we can jointly
approve. It must be a world for which, in its building and
sustaining, the faith of each of us provides effective and lasting
inspiration. The time for a world theology is now.

CLOSING WORDS

(The closing words are those of John Murray⁵, known as the founder of Universalism in America:)

Go out into the highways and by-ways. Give the people something of your new vision. You may possess a small light, but uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men and women.

Give them not hell, but hope and courage. Preach the kindness and everlasting love of God. AMEN.

NOTES

1. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Towards a World Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981).

2. Joseph Campbell, The Masks of God: Creative Mythology (Arkana, 1995).

3. See, for example, Carl G. Jung, Man and His Symbols (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1964).

4. Mircea Eliade, Patterns in Comparative Religion (University of Nebraska Press, 1996).

5. John Murray, as "Benedictions and Closing Words" #704 in Singing the Living Tradition (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).