



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK

Celebrating Mixed Religion: Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Syncretism

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The summer after my freshman year in college, Sarah McLachlan released her album Surfacing. Among the many singles from that album that seemed to be playing on every radio, in every elevator, and in every store was the opening track, “Building a Mystery.” And having spent the past year questioning the conservative Christian theology I had been taught as a child, one line from that ubiquitous song stood out to me — about a man wearing “**a cross**

from a faith that died before Jesus came.”

Those lyrics came rushing back to me almost two years later when I had the opportunity to be part of a six-week travel/study program to Egypt, Jordan, Israel, and Italy. And as amazing as so many parts of that trip were, the experience peaked for me the first day when we visited the Great Pyramids at Giza, the oldest of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. **The pyramids are testimony to a political empire and religious worldview that reached monumental heights more than two thousand years *before* the life of the historical Jesus.** And as I immersed myself in ancient Egyptian art and artifacts, I continually noticed the ankh symbol, which looks like a plain Protestant Christian cross, except there is a loop or handle at the top. In hieroglyphics, the ankh symbolizes “eternal life,” and as I saw many Egyptian deities and pharaohs depicted holding an ankh, I kept hearing in my mind: “*a cross from a faith that died before Jesus came.*”



For me, this pilgrimage to Egypt felt like falling into the depths and scale of “big history.” I had been taught as a child that the life of Jesus was at the center of history — at the center “of life, the universe, and everything.” Indeed, the A.D./B.C. system of our Western calendar turns on an estimated date of Jesus’s birth, reflecting the belief that reality metaphysically shifted in the wake of Jesus's incarnation and resurrection. But as an undergraduate Religious Studies major, I was increasingly immersed in the “History of Religions Analysis,” a school of inquiry that explores the history of all religions from a **secular, multi-disciplinary, cross-cultural perspective**, emphasizing the *historical contexts* in which religions arise, evolve, and fall. In contrast, a “confessional” study of religion is done by **faithful believers from inside a belief system**.

As a child, I was raised within a confessional perspective that encouraged the study of religion and the world (including science) as long as certain presuppositions were taken for granted as articles of faith. But my faith in those presuppositions began to crumble as I reflected on the **origins and development of all religions, including Christianity, from the perspective of 13.7 billion years of evolution and our place in a universe that includes more than 100 billion galaxies**. It turns out that neither Jesus, nor even our planet — much less our species — are at the center of the universe; and I was increasingly wrestling with the implications of quite the opposite being the case: physically, we are profoundly peripheral in the grand scheme of things.

Around this time, toward the end of my sophomore year in college, the campus minister of a relatively openminded Christian organization that I was heavily involved with invited me to lunch to tell me she wanted me to continue to move up in the leadership of the organization, but that doing so required that I sign a Confessional statement that included these beliefs:

1. The unique Divine inspiration, entire trustworthiness and authority of the Bible.
2. The Deity of our Lord Jesus Christ.
3. The necessity and efficacy of the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ for the redemption of the world,
4. And the historic fact of His bodily resurrection.

5. The presence and power of the Holy Spirit in the work of regeneration.
6. The expectation of the personal return of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So I found myself having to look our beloved thirty-something-year-old campus minister in the eye and say, “I feel like I could do a great job in the leadership position you are asking me to fill, but I have to be honest with you that I am finding myself actively questioning all of those beliefs. And if I had to guess, I would say that **in a few months I will probably be even more certain that I don’t believe any of them.**”

From an insider, orthodox perspective, religion is often taught as if there were an original set of teachings and acceptable ways of acting revealed from above — and that any deviation from this original purity is heresy and must be rejected as anathema. In contrast, a close study of history shows that no religion is born in a vacuum. **Rather than an original purity, there is original diversity, original conflict, original messiness.** Religions, both at their founding and over time, are shaped by the vagaries of history and evolving historical contexts.

Related to this dynamic, there is a technical term ‘**syncretism,**’ which means combining beliefs or practices from two or more religious traditions. And when I first heard about syncretism from an insider, orthodox, defender-of-original-purity perspective, I was taught that it is a dirty word to be avoided. The early Church Father Tertullian (c. 160 - c. 220 C.E.) in his treatise “The Prescription Against Heretics,” famously said, “What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? What between heretic and Christians?.... Away with all attempts to produce a potted Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition.” According to Tertullian, Christians should ignore the Greek philosophy of Athens, the secular teachings of the Academy, and the heretics who teach heterodox Christianity. But it turns out the sacred and the secular are an inextricably-linked web from the very beginning.

If you are interested in exploring this topic more deeply, a recent accessible book is [In Praise of Mixed Religion: The Syncretism Solution in a Multifaith World](#) by William H. Harrison (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2014). Accordingly, a major point I’m building to is that **Unitarian Universalism invites us to see syncretism as not only normal and inevitable, but also as good and healthy** (x, 199). We are intentionally a “big tent,” pluralistic community,

which draws explicitly from six diverse sources that include all the world's religions, balanced with the insights of modern science.

And as we begin to dive more deeply into examples of syncretism from the world's religions, I invite you to hear a playful satire of resisting and embracing syncretism: **"The Christians and the Pagans"** by the singer-songwriter Dar Williams:

Amber called her uncle, said "We're up here for the holiday,
Jane and I were having Solstice, now we need a place to stay."
And her Christ-loving uncle watched his wife hang Mary on a tree,
He watched his son hang candy canes all made with red dye number three. He
told his niece, "It's Christmas Eve, I know our life is not your style," She said,
"Christmas is like Solstice, and we miss you and its been awhile,"

*So the Christians and the Pagans sat together at the table,
Finding faith and common ground the best that they were able,
And just before the meal was served, hands were held and prayers were said,
Sending hope for peace on earth to all their gods and goddesses.*

The food was great, the tree plugged in, the meal had gone without a hitch, Till
Timmy turned to Amber and said, "'Is it true that you're a witch?" His mom
jumped up and said, "The pies are burning," and she hit the kitchen, And it was
Jane who spoke, she said, "It's true, your cousin's not a Christian," "But we love
trees, we love the snow, the friends we have, the world we share, And you find
magic from your God, and we find magic everywhere."

*So the Christians and the Pagans sat together at the table,
Finding faith and common ground the best that they were able,
And where does magic come from? I think magic's in the learning,
'Cause now when Christians sit with Pagans only pumpkin pies are burning.*

When Amber tried to do the dishes, her aunt said, “Really, no, don't bother.”
Amber's uncle saw how Amber looked like Tim and like her father. He thought
about his brother, how they hadn't spoken in a year,

He thought he'd call him up and say, “It's Christmas and your daughter's here.” He
thought of fathers, sons and brothers, saw his own son tug his sleeve, saying,
“Can I be a Pagan?” Dad said, “We'll discuss it when they leave.”

So the Christians and the Pagans sat together at the table,
Finding faith and common ground the best that they were able,
Lighting trees in darkness, learning new ways from the old, and
Making sense of history and drawing warmth out of the cold.

The good news is that it is easier than ever to find open-minded Christian churches; indeed, **here at UUCF you can be a Christian and a Pagan!** I will go into more details in next week's sermon about “The Christians and the Pagans,” but for now, notice that in Dar Williams's song you can hear concern about syncretism — of paganism infecting the perceived purity of orthodox Christian practice — in the son's question “Can I be a Pagan?” and the Dad's anxious response, “We'll discuss it when they leave.” But the pagans, Amber and Jane, don't share that concern for good reason. They say, “Christmas is like Solstice, and we miss you and its been awhile.”

I suspect, however, that to repress the reality of syncretism, Tertelluian, would have met Amber and Jane at the door, refused them entry, and said in a Grinch-like voice, “What has Christmas to do with Solstice?!” But as it turns out, **Christmas has a lot do with Winter Solstice!** We don't even know with certainty the year in which Jesus was born, much less the day. But as Christianity became ascendant in the Roman Empire, new adherents “baptized,” so to speak, various pagan holidays to claim them for Christianity. As a study of the history of religions regularly shows, it is much easier to change *language* than it is to change *practice*. If you try to tell people that they have to stop the cherished Winter Solstice holiday celebrations their families have done for untold generations, you are unlikely to be successful. But if you tell

people that they can keep celebrating Winter Solstice — take the same time off work, eat the same good food, do the same rituals — but that they just have to call it something different, you will get much less resistance. As a result, Christians celebrate Jesus’ birthday — the archetypal coming of “the divine gift of light into a dark world” — near Winter Solstice, the darkest day of the year. Consequently, **Christmas is not only about Christ, but also retains many pagan trappings from yule logs to feasting to decorating evergreen trees that pre-date the historical Jesus by millennia.** Similarly, the word **Easter comes from the fertility goddess Oestre; hence, the carried-over, syncretic, pagan practice of decorating eggs and having children take pictures with oversized bunnies (both fertility symbols) on the occasion of Jesus’s Resurrection.** Both Christmas and Easter have many syncretic elements that are like “*a cross from a faith that died before Jesus came.*”

Similar ancient pagan religious echoes are buried in our words for the days of the week:

- Sunday - Sun’s Day after *Sunna*, a sun god in Germanic religion
 - Monday - Moon’s Day, a god in some Germanic religions
 - Tuesday - Tiw’s Day, after a god in the Norse and German religions
 - Wednesday - Woden’s Day, after the high god in the Germanic pantheon
 - Thursday - Thor’s Day, after the Germanic god of thunder
 - Friday - Frigg’s Day, after Woden’s wife
 - Saturday - Saturn’s Day, one of the earliest and most powerful Roman gods
- (11-12)

We could similarly explore the ancient pagan roots of our names for the months of the year, the planets, and the constellations. Or to name another highlight from that travelstudy adventure I mentioned earlier: when I was in Italy toward the end of the trip, I had the opportunity to visit the Sistine Chapel. And if you take a moment to reflect, **Michelangelo’s depiction of God and Adam almost touching fingers makes God look a lot like the pagan Greek god Zeus, the later Roman version Jupiter, or Santa Claus for that matter!** Syncretism is widespread.

Moreover, in parallel to the relationship of both Christmas with Winter Solstice and Easter with Spring Equinox, **the Shia Muslim country of Iran still celebrates ancient *Persian* festivals that predate not only Islam, but also predate Zoroaster (c. 1700 - 1500 B.C.E.) —**

such as “Nowruz”: “a three-day extravaganza during which everything shuts down and the people eat a lot, dance, recite poetry, and build fires that they jump back and forth over....celebrated around the spring equinox” (3). Neither strict versions of Islam nor Christians taking over the pagan Roman Empire could fully eliminate the impact of ancient syncretic influences.

In addition, there are fascinating ways in which **enslaved Africans resisted the colonialism of their oppressors by interpreting figures in the Christian tradition through the lens of traditional African theology.** (For more detail, there is an excellent chart in the book Syncretism in Religion: A Reader, 113, 118-121.). Similarly, Buddhism syncretically blended with Daoism in China (Harrison 128), with Shintoism in Japan, (4-5), and with western psychology, pragmatism, and egalitarianism here in the West.

At its best, syncretism results in “hybrid vigor” — what scientists call “outbreeding enhancement” through introduction of new traits that increase chances of survival as opposed to “inbreeding depression,” which increases the likelihood of extinction (9-10). At the same time, I will readily grant that there are times when syncretism is regrettable — such as the way Jesus’s solidarity with the poor has, through a syncretism with Capitalism, devolved into “Prosperity Gospel” televangelists, who — to be frank — are con artists, frauds, and charlatans (131-135). Likewise, although I am a strong supporter of “Pragmatic Buddhism and Westernized Dharma” for the twenty-first century, I also recognize that there are ways that the syncretism of Buddhism with Capitalism has resulted in some groups seeing Buddhism as only good for helping increase worker productivity and time management, whereas Buddhism is about so much more (137).

If we had more time, it would be important to go into the related issues of **Colonialism and Cultural Misappropriation**, which we have explored previously. And, indeed, we must proceed sensitively, compassionately, and with caution in light of the lessons of the past. Nevertheless, my takeaway from studying the broad sweep of religious history is that **syncretism is both inevitable and in many ways desirable**, increasing the likelihood of celebrating differences, experiencing cross-cultural understanding and cultivating cosmopolitanism. Indeed, Unitarian Universalism is what you get when you syncretically combine two groups that are outgrowths of liberal Christianity (the Unitarians and the Universalists), add in the world’s

religions with a heavy dose of modern science —then mix and stir with the passage of time. And one major reason I am a Unitarian Universalism is that **our multifaith, mixed religion is one of the best approaches I have found for seeking to understand and heal the pluralistic, postmodern, globalized world in which we find ourselves.**

For now I will conclude with a passage from the UUA Bylaws, which follows the listing of our Six Sources and gives shape to how we seek to create Beloved Community amidst our diversity: “*Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision.* As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our *mutual trust and support.*” May it be so more and more as we seek to live together in peace on this one planet.

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