

## Reading

“On Canaries, Icebergs and the Public Sphere: The Pragmatic Compromise of Religious Pluralism” by Mike Grimshaw. *Khazanah Theologia*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2023, pp. 71-86.

I tend to think of religious groups as icebergs - in that the expressions are only that small percentage (around 10%) existing above the waterline. This expresses what I call the iceberg fallacies of religion. The first fallacy is that of inter-faith dialogue. The second is that of what can be termed problematic and politicized religion. Both are fallacies because what is responded to comprises a very small percentage of each group that represent the wider, submerged iceberg. In the case of interfaith dialogue small, often self-selected groups undertake dialogue with other similar groups, claiming often to represent the wider religion. In many cases, they seek to express perceived, pan-religious commonalities, often in forms of perennial philosophy and denying the realities of strongly felt differences (Taylor, 1979). In such cases the tips of each iceberg of faith have far more in common with each other tip than they do with their own unseen and unrepresented majority - which are themselves deeply divided as to what constitutes the real body of faith and true belief. Yet the tips are the ones allowed a voice in the public square because they are seen to be working toward the goal of a peaceful and controllable pluralistic society.

Yet what is it that they offer? For what occurs is a bland expression. Let me explain with an example. I once attended a National Interfaith forum in [N]ew Zealand as an observer. When I left home to attend, my children knowing there was to be a dinner were most upset and jealous that I would be getting to have some tasty, exotic food as would befit such a pluralistic grouping. However my expectations were cruelly dashed. An official at the meeting proudly announced they had thought long and hard about what type of meal they could offer that would represent the diversity, and explaining that it would consist of rice, pasta, chickpeas and fried onion. My heart - and stomach – sank; for that i[s] what it was: plain boiled rice with plain boiled chickpeas, plain boiled pasta elbows, and a couple of overcooked onion rings - topped off with a squirt of ketchup. They had, it seemed, taken the blandest basics of each culture and designed a dish that lacked interest, spice, taste or meaning. While the interfaithers devoured it, those of us who were observers - from NGOs and other groups - tried valiantly to consume the unappealing concoction. Late that night, after hours of platitudes going back and forth, I escaped and, stomach rumbling, called into McDonalds for a Big Mac. The mass-produced fast food of consumer culture was actually tastier and fuller of flavour than the interfaith offering. And that is an issue of

concern. Because when you go to eat with those who know what their faith means, you will get hospitality and food that is full of taste and flavour. The submerged icebergs know what they are and who they are: what is of flavour and taste to them. The interfaith meal was, for me, a strong expression of the iceberg fallacies of interfaith dialogue in public space. Consider the alternative if each group had brought a dish from their religious culture - there would have been a delicious smorgasbord of possibilities that importantly would have been offered for all to choose amongst. You could try from them all, perhaps not liking some - or having some not agree not with you - but there would have been choice, new possibilities, flavour and meaning. So in considering the iceberg, perhaps we need to stop t[ry]ing to have interfaith dialogue by iceberg tips, for the submerged bodies of the faith-bergs are interacting everyday in the alternative public spaces of the saeculum - at schools, at sports, at work, in shops, in relationships and in expression and consumptions of food and popular culture.

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**Sermon**      “Cultivating Religious Pluralism”    Ostara Hollyoak (she/they),  
CMC Worship Associate

Love— at the center— surrounded by the interconnected values of Interdependence, Justice, Transformation, Generosity, Equity, ... and Pluralism. These are the values lifted up as ones that unite us in the proposed revision to Article II of our Unitarian Universalist By-Laws, to be voted on next month at General Assembly. These seven values have each served as a monthly theme for us in the course of the past year. Our focus in May is on Pluralism, and today we’re exploring religious pluralism within Unitarian Universalism and our own congregation.

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Before we even begin to talk about religious pluralism, and what it is, and why it’s important to us, I’d like to conduct a kind of straw poll to get some sense of religious pluralism in this congregation. This is meant to be an informal, “for fun” kind of exercise. Feel free to refrain from participation, if you’re so inclined. I’m asking for a raise of hands in response to the following questions:

- First, how many of us identify with, or practice more than one religion— which is to say, Unitarian Universalism *and* something else?

- And how many of you would say you are Unitarian Universalist– period?

The next two questions will be for those of us who said we identify with more than one religion. What I'm going to ask is whether the religion you identify with in addition to Unitarian Universalism is a "chosen" or an "inherited" religion.

- How many of you would say that this is strictly a chosen religion, rather than one that comes to you through your family of origin and/or your upbringing in that religion?
- And who, among you, would say that you identify with an inherited religion in addition to Unitarian Universalism?

My next two questions will be for those of you who claim an inherited religion, and the distinction I'm asking you to make might be a little harder this time. I'm going to ask whether this additional religion that you came to via inheritance is one that you still *actively* and *personally* identify with and practice; or whether you identify with and practice it mainly as your family's religion.

- A show of hands for those who actively identify with and practice another, inherited religion.
- And for those who identify with it or practice it mainly as your family's religion?
- And, last, how many of you would say that you are pretty strongly *influenced* by a religion from your past that you no longer follow?

So, it appears that, alongside our commonality as Unitarian Universalists, we wear some layers of religious distinctiveness– and that's without getting into the diversity of the other spiritualities with which we identify.

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Let's turn, now, to what religious pluralism is. I'd like to approach that question through the back door, by distinguishing it from diversity.

We, Unitarian Universalists, and we, here, at Channing, often express a desire to be more diverse; and wonder why we are not as diverse as we want to be. We'll touch on this again. For now, I'd like to quote from a piece titled, "[From Diversity to Pluralism.](#)" on [the website for The Pluralism Project at Harvard University](#) about the distinction between these two. The article states:

“Pluralism” and “diversity” are sometimes used as if they were synonymous, but diversity—splendid, colorful, and perhaps threatening—is not pluralism. Pluralism is the engagement that creates a common society from all that diversity. For example, on the same street in Silver Spring, Maryland are a Vietnamese Catholic church, a Cambodian Buddhist temple, a Ukrainian Orthodox church, a Muslim Community Center, a Hispanic First Church of God, and a Hindu temple. This is certainly diversity, but without any engagement or relationship among the different groups it may not be an instance of pluralism.”

Later the article describes the imperative of engagement in vivid terms, saying that, “The dynamic of pluralism ... is one of meeting, exchange, and two-way traffic.”

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We see that pluralism requires of us a deeper and more active encounter than is implied when we speak of “diversity.” But how do we cultivate pluralism in our congregations? How do we interact with one another, and conduct our worship, in ways that really invite our diversity to shine? How do we create religious practices and messages that engage all of us in our wholeness, and that represent the best way to start and frame our week in a sacred way?

It’s fairly common in Unitarian Universalist settings to try to include everyone by using language and practices that are neutral and acceptable to all.

Neutral language and practice has its uses, as it allows us to drink from the cup of our common humanity and brings us together around an agreed upon reality.

But there are several shortcomings inherent in this if it is our sole, or perhaps even our main, approach:

First, it may foster discomfort in raising questions about the things we can’t be sure about, which are generally understood to be in the purview of religious discourse. In other words, it can give rise to squeamishness in addressing mysteries, including things of ultimate significance and meaning.

Second, like that so-called interfaith meal we heard about in our reading, religious discourse that tries hard to hew to a middling path is often bland. In our attempt to stick to the universally acceptable, we risk a flattening in our language, and a shallowness in our religious practices. The attempt to remain neutral may drain both our language and

our rituals of power. We want to avoid communicating to people who come through our doors, that, to belong here, they must tamp down who they are in all their complex and colorful wholeness.

And thirdly, what *seems* neutral and is assumed to fit everyone is often, in fact, the language and practice of the dominant culture, not felt as a distinctive medium by most of us because it's the water in which we're accustomed to swimming. Many of us may feel comfortable, but we're making someone at least partially invisible. If we issue an invitation for all comers to express themselves freely, but the channels we present for doing that are solely those of the dominant culture, this is not really pluralism.

Another approach that we, as Unitarian Universalists, sometimes take when we set out to serve a meal of spiritual nourishment is to throw *the whole pot* of spaghetti at the wall, hoping at least one strand of it will stick for every person in the room. We may, for example, put together a string of words like, "God," "Great Spirit," "Allah," "Mother Earth," "the Universe," and add something like, "The sacred, by whatever name you know it."

The trouble with this "list-making" approach lies in the potential pitfall of lumping together things that are not actually interchangeable, which, in their proper context, may hold deep meaning for some people in the room. Asking people in a pluralistic assembly to do a bit of translation is *sometimes* reasonable, but asking people to dip into a sort of polyglot menu and pick out what belongs to them, or "works for them," isn't always a reasonable request.

The question is: Are we indiscriminately equating so many disparate things that none of them hold real meaning anymore? We need to be careful in naming things that aren't ours, and cultivate a humility that helps us recognize when we might be washing over layers of meaning specific to beliefs and practices that *look* sort of alike to us, lest we unwittingly erase spiritual uniqueness that matters to someone.

When a variety of wonderful dishes are brought to a potluck, we can appreciate them all. But if we try to mix them all together, the addition of more ingredients to the pot can't be expected to produce a more tasty concoction.

A little mixing in the name of inclusivity might be okay— even commendable— but I believe we do best to use these kinds of phrasings judiciously, and to be mindful when they become habitual.

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But why is focussing on pluralism important? Aren't we better off just looking to our commonalities? After all, we wouldn't want to hear all the beautiful voices of a choir each singing a different song at the same time. We expect a choir to be harmonious! ... But harmony also doesn't happen by all the members singing the same notes at the same time. No choral arranger would arrange a piece where all the voices sing the same part.

Perhaps our struggle with diversity is partly due to a less than full-hearted embrace of pluralism. When we keep our differences at bay, isn't some of the air let out of the balloon of our worship's power to engage us in our diversity and in our wholeness?

Let's return to one of the metaphors from our reading by Mike Grimshaw– the one about the iceberg tips, and, specifically “interfaith dialog,” where “the tips of each iceberg have far more in common with each other tip than they do with their own unseen and unrepresented majority....”

-“On Canaries, Icebergs and the Public Sphere: The Pragmatic Compromise of Religious Pluralism” by Mike Grimshaw. *Khazanah Theologia*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2023, pp. 71-86.

My assumption is that those of us who gather here on Sundays tend toward being this kind of iceberg tip. Some pieces of us may be submerged, and some of us may have more of ourselves above the surface than others. But we are, at least in part, an “iceberg tip church.” And, as such, we won't attract those who are mostly or entirely submerged. And that's fine.

And, if we're just iceberg tips, it's perfectly appropriate to relate to one another just as iceberg tips. But we can't expect, then, to attract anyone else who isn't happy to relate to people, and to practice religion, only on that level. That diminishes our pluralism and may be a barrier to diversity.

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So, what do we do to *practice* pluralism?

In our Sunday services, I think we can commit even more to an approach that I think we're already *fairly* committed to here at Channing. This is a practice of “turn-taking,” wherein everyone gets something that resonates with them profoundly *some of the time*. When a given service turns out to be someone else's turn, we tacitly agree that we'll help hold the sacred space, listen openly, and participate in whatever ways we can. The understanding here is that everyone gets their turn, and no one feels

disrespected, because they, too, will get their turn. We also agree that we won't willfully engage in something that leaves any of us standing entirely outside the fence.

The success of this approach relies on everyone making their needs and desires known. And I invite you all to consider pushing the envelope a little in making your spiritual needs and desires known here, and in giving what speaks to someone else a try, even when it may not be the cup of tea you would have chosen from the menu.

This turn-taking approach can be combined with engaging *some* language and practices that we presume can be embraced by everyone— keeping in mind, of course, that we might be only making an assumption of universality. I think many UU churches strive for this most of the time. Here, at Channing, I believe we strive for this *some* of the time. And this is good, because we do need to engage in some things that unite us all.

I've asked you to try pushing the envelope a little in connection with services here, at Channing. I'm going to ask you, also, to push the envelope a bit when it comes to your personal encounters here. I'd like us to take some personal risk with how much of ourselves we wear on our sleeves— to risk revealing our spiritual selves at a little deeper level; and to really listen to one another— to listen for differences and follow your curiosity, asking questions like: What does that *really* mean? And, what does that mean to *you*? I've doubtless expressed some things, over my years here, that some of you think are Not The Right Answers— responses that don't even show up on the exam sheet. But you've heard me out.

Before I wrap up, I'd like to quote from Rev. Susan LaMar, our former minister. In a sermon titled, "Our Faith or Interfaith?" delivered on June 5, 2005, Rev. Susan spoke of "Walking Together in the Spirit of Mutual Love." She wrote:

This 'walking together ... is our core practice as Unitarian Universalists. But it is not walking in silence. It is walking in conversation. The Spirit of Mutual Love is an engagement with others walking beside us, not mere silent accompaniment.

It is a gross oversimplification of Unitarian Universalism to say that what happens here is for individuals to say, well, I am Hindu, you are Muslim, and we are walking along together. That is not what Unitarian Universalism is. Unitarian Universalism is engaging in conversation with the person walking beside you, fully expecting to be changed in some fundamental way. Yes, that is the hardest part. That willingness to be

changed, to undergo profound transformation because of who you are walking with.

She's right. This *is* the hard part. And that's part of why I'm here. I need to be changed. And I change more profoundly if I'm in conversation with people whom I know to be different from me. This is why I value, and choose to cultivate, pluralism among us.

And, so, I challenge you, today, to share with someone here something about your personal religion or spirituality that you think they might not know.

Here, at Channing, we cherish those commonalities that bind us together as a spiritual community– the “soup” in which our flavors are blended together. But underlying that fusion are the special “spices” brought by each of our unique spiritual background, experience, and perspective. Let's bring them to the table.

May it be so.