

Stealing* Another's Faith

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An increasingly contentious issue in interfaith work is the adaptation or adoption of material from one tradition by another. For example, many First Nations Peoples wish to preserve their cultural integrity by keeping their ceremonies to themselves and even lie to anthropologists to keep them secret; others wish to share them with others.

Folks with the best interfaith intent think they are

honoring another tradition by imitating its practices, but they may actually be creating offense, even if they understand and replicate the ceremony correctly.

We reprint this essay because it suggests sometimes there are no easy answers as faiths continue to evolve and interact with each other. We also include passages from two distinguished writers which present differing attitudes.

Settled?

Many people nowadays have at least an inkling that Christianity is largely a borrowed, if not *stolen, religion. But does that make it illegitimate or invalid? — or does it thereby acquire greater claim to universality?



The Christian story emerges from the Jewish tradition (for example, “Messiah” is reinterpreted); its ideas (such as immortality through identification with Christ) are largely Hellenistic; its festivals derive from and are enriched by pagan faiths (the sun-god Mithra was reborn on the winter solstice, Dec 25 on the old calendar, commandeered for Christmas, the Christmas tree itself a more recent theft from pagan practices); many of its structures (the Pontifex Maximus, for example) have descended from ancient Rome, and some of Paul’s letters show the obvious influence of Zoroastrianism.

Borrowed or stolen, they are undisputed aspects of Christianity now.

Who owns Hanukkah?

But today the interface between faiths is unsettled. Misunderstandings are common, and within any one tradition there may be different responses to using materials from one faith by those of other faiths.

* Perhaps borrowing can be distinguished from stealing this way: borrowing is acknowledging use while stealing is taking without acknowledging the source.

For example, an increasingly popular practice by many Christians at Easter is to celebrate Seder, a Passover meal. They think they are honoring Jewish friends, but many Jews do not think it is respectful for Christians to make what is a story central to Judaism into an appetizer for a Christian feast. It suggests that Judaism has value only as a precursor to Christianity.

But the development of Judaism did not end with the age of Jesus; on the contrary, its richness and depth continues because it is a living faith, not dependent on Christianity. Its own theologians and extensive literature in the last 2000 years have added greatly to its earlier heritage. Rabbinic Judaism, for example, emerges as a major expression of Jewish life decades after the death of Christ. The Talmud took form in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries. Maimonides wrote in the Twelfth Century. The mysticism of the Middle Ages produced the Zohar, a central book of the kabbalah. Pogroms, emigration to the United States — and Zionism and the Holocaust, two major features of Twentieth Century — have continued to reshape Jewish experience. The development of ritual observances during the last two millennia has continued to the present with Yom ha-Shoah.

When my son was ten, he wanted to light Hanukkah candles. Many Jews resent the attention given by non-Jews to this relatively minor holiday while the major holy days like Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Pesah are so poorly understood. Calling Hanukkah the “Jewish

Christmas” is utterly offensive.

For my son, some suggested that at least the accompanying prayers be altered to recognize that he is not Jewish. Others suggested that he seek an invitation to a Jewish home where he could observe the ceremony.



Does Hanukkah belong only to Jews?

It might be easy to say Yes — except if we recall Billings, Montana, in 1993, when a Jewish family placed a menorah in their window and received a hostile brick breaking the glass in reply. Christians responded to this message of hate by placing images of menorahs in their home and church windows, isolating bigotry with a community testimony that Hanukkah, in a sense, belongs to everyone. Christian cars, homes, and churches were vandalized. Hate against any group is hate against us all.

Who owns Jesus?

While it is perfectly natural for some Hindus to regard Jesus as divine, as an incarnation of Vishnu, the notion that Jesus might be revered as a Hindu god is a problem for many Christians. Since Muslims have always revered Moses, Jesus, Muhammad and other prophets, and protected the practice of the Jewish and Christian faiths, one needs to understand why Jesus can belong to the Muslims without much objection from Christians, but Hindu claims make some Christians uncomfortable — ironic since Gandhi attributed much of his Hindu faith to the inspiration of the words of Jesus.



Some religions maintain strict boundaries between theirs and others' faiths. In some cases (Zoroastrians) it has been difficult for anyone not born into the tradition to adopt that faith.



Others (Muslims) consider everyone (at least potentially) a member of their own faith. To be a Jew without a community with which to pray is far more of a problem than the Christian heritage of hermits or the Hindu approbation of forest-dwellers could allow. How can one practice



Shinto without the land and the shrine which makes some forms of that faith possible?

Flesh for faith

The issue here is not forced or urged conversions, but the opposite: a thoughtless though well-intentioned transfer, claiming as one's own that which one has not earned. Is it possible for a life-long American who develops a sudden interest in Shinto to become a Shintoist without also becoming Japanese? Yet Buddhism is now certainly an American religion, and has been for at least a hundred years. What is the difference between Shinto and Buddhism? There is an answer, but it may not be obvious — and it may not hold in the future.



Can one become so immersed in the faith of the ancient Romans that one's religious identity is as a member of an extinct community? How legitimate are the resurgent "Neo-Pagans" in today's urban centers hearkening back to European rural folkways?



Especially problematic are relations between today's minority faiths and a culture which sometimes seeks to appropriate selective aspects of a minority tradition, and thereby produces a sense of loss or even theft within the minority faith which may seek to preserve its uniqueness.

Is there anyone who has thought about it who is not offended by the Kansas City Chiefs football team fans doing the "tomahawk chop"? Tunes ascribed to the

"savages" — Indians, blacks, and others — are not only fake but are disrespectful.

And yet I think of a remarkable young man who has earnestly studied with American Indians. His knowledge is extensive, his sincerity unquestionable, his training earned through authentic teachers. He is a sun dancer, over several years pierced three times. Though he has sacrificed his flesh, he is criticized as a "wannabe" by some who want to keep those rituals solely to themselves.



Nothing new

Of course this sort of thing goes on all the time. The Jews adapted and reacted to Canaanite practices, the story of Noah originates with the Sumerians, and Mosaic law echoes (and dramatically improves) the Code of Hammurabi.

Nowadays nuns are doing yoga and lay Christians are trying zen. I see an ankh, a symbol from ancient Egypt, worn by someone I meet for the first time almost every week. The meaning of the yin-yang image of ancient China is being narrowed into a symbol for Taoism by Westerners ignoring Confucianism and Chinese folk religion. Hindus in America meet on Sundays, lending to a day of secular convenience a spiritual value. Indeed, part of the genius of Hinduism has been its ability to integrate and accommodate what it has encountered throughout the ages, from at least the Aryan invasions to the present. — But then "Hinduism" itself is a Western artifact, a fiction from lumping together varied practices on the subcontinent under one convenient term.



Religions change

The Harvard scholar WC Smith suggests that we should no longer use the term "religion" because it perpetuates the notion that religions remain the same, instead of constantly changing from within by erosion and from interchange at shifting shorelines, sometimes by earthquakes, within a single religious adventure on this planet.

Nonetheless we need to understand why some seek to protect their revealed traditions as the exclusive property of a certain

people. In our own time, Jews, Tibetan Buddhists, and others have witnessed genocidal attempts. Some Native Americans, American Indians, First Nations Peoples — there is no agreement even as to the best term for the survivors — keenly aware of the destruction of their cultures by the Christians, resent "wannabe Indians" who, they believe, as mentioned above, rob them of their sacred traditions and profane the practices of the Elders by taking them into the dominant culture which fails to have the reverence and understanding to be worthy of them. Other Native Americans simply add Christianity to their Native ways, and call themselves Christian Indians, offending some of their own people who identify themselves "traditional."



Religious identity

If I am going to speak, I must speak a particular language. If I am going to be religious, I must follow a particular path. It is true that languages "borrow" words from each other, and English is especially rich for this reason. Still, an artificial religion, created by stealing what others have in the hope of devising a universal faith, is likely to have no more success than Esperanto has had as a universal language.

However, eating mulligatawny soup does not make me Hindu, or latkes make me Jewish. My own faith is not compromised by tasting and digesting. How can enjoying them be judged disrespectful? ANSWER: *if I steal them.*

But can it be said any longer that Shakespeare belongs only to the English, or Caravaggio to the Italians, or Beethoven to Europe, or the Beach Boys to California, or Mu Chi to the Chinese? Can we say that Gandhi belongs only to the Hindus, or Moses only to the Jews, or Spider Woman only to the Navajos, or Chuang Tzu only to Taoists, or Nagarjuna and the Dalai Lama only to Buddhists, or Ibn Arabi only to the Muslims? Perhaps they are all a part of a shared human history, a complicated and problematic quest for the holy.

This is not to say that Beethoven is the Beach Boys or that Mahavira and Muhammad taught the same thing. The differences are profound, and should be preserved because each tradition is enlarged by genuine *encounter* — not necessarily *agreement* — with the others.



The lure of the Holy

It is too easy to dismiss, or condemn, or romanticize those who experiment with other faiths. True, digging one 60-foot well is more likely to produce water than digging a dozen 5-foot wells. Yet even a drink of water brought from afar can refresh, and a shallow pool can reflect the moon as well as a deep one.



But we are not as impressed with a swimmer who remains in the shallows as with one who has coursed the full channel. We can insist that those who head into the deep do so with more than sincerity, more than academic knowledge, more than decorative arrangements or enhancements to their thinking. We can insist that the substance be revealed in how they live their lives. And when we find those who, fully at terms with their own culture and faith heritage, are able to experience the Sacred in other ways, let us see the possibility of renewal for all of us.

Indeed, if we are to understand our own faith, we must know about others. “What knows he of England who only England knows?” asked Rudyard Kipling. “He who knows one religion knows none,” said Max Müller. Learning about other faiths in order to deepen our own is not stealing or corrupting. It is a respectful way for the Christian to become a better Christian, the Muslim a better Muslim, the Buddhist a better Buddhist.

Just as allegiance to any nation must now be placed in the context of a more basic commitment to the planet and all of its people, so commitment to the manifestations of any single faith must be placed in the context of our most urgent devotion to the Holy.

Today more than ever, pilgrims chart the spaces between the traditions. Explorers now range into foreign lands, learn new languages, and chart what was once strange terrain. Respectful of what they find, they are especially gifted in helping the rest of us understand regions strange to us. We may not learn as much from the gawking tourist as from the pilgrim who explores, perhaps with the sincerity of advancing on bleeding knees. And to learn who we really are, can we fail to offer hospitality to those open to the richness of kinship with us?

In the fragmented, violent, unfair world today, the stranger of faith, the wayfarer, the pilgrim, may be the companion we need on the path — even around the block. Even that short trip may be problematic, for the territory itself is undergoing change, and stumbling is almost inevitable.

Yet with good will we can pick each other up when we meet. In the time we travel together, we can be pulled, supported, and renewed by the lure of the Holy through an unrelentingly profane age.

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Are all faiths the same?

How fully has the proponent [of the view that all religions are at their core the same] tried and succeeded in understanding Christianity’s claim that Christ was the only begotten Son of God, or the Muslim’s claim that Muhammad is the Seal of the prophets, or the Jews’ sense of their being the Chosen People? How does he propose to reconcile Hinduism’s conviction that this will always remain a ‘middle world’ with Judaism’s promethean faith that it can be decidedly improved? How does the Buddha’s ‘anatta doctrine’ of no-soul square with Christianity’s belief in . . . individual destiny in eternity? How does Theravada Buddhism’s rejection of every form of personal God find echo in Christ’s sense of relationship to his Heavenly Father? How does the Indian view of Nirguna Brahman, the God who stands completely aloof from time and history, fit with the Biblical view that the very essence of God is contained in his historical acts? Are these beliefs really only accretions, tangential to the main concern of spirit? The religions . . . may fit together, but they do not do so easily.

—Huston Smith



A universal awareness?

Theologians recognize today a kind of universal religious consciousness which assumes disparate if overlapping forms. They see that although a theologian, like any human being, brings his own history and that of a people into any situation, he can no longer think and write exclusively in terms of one community of faith. This would confine him to a pre-planetary past. The Christian must consciously respond to Moslems and Hindus — to a larger, highly diverse, indeed world-wide family of faith. . . . Some of the most forceful religious pioneers of our century would not have made the impact they did if they had not crossed over and drawn heavily on another tradition. Gandhi’s use of Christianity and Martin Luther King’s of Hinduism exemplify this borrowing process.



The borrowing we need today, however, should not mean that the historical particularity of a living religion is dissolved in some universal pabulum. Theology should discard both the ideal of an abstract universal science and that of a global religion unsullied by the strain of concrete history. Religion at its best is one of the guardians of human eccentricity. So theology must move back and forth between the particular tradition in which it arises and the heterogeneous religious consciousness of mankind. . . .

We live during a historical period in which a new religious sensibility is struggling to be born. It is far too easy to criticize this barely emergent new expression of the spirit, because at this stage it seems diffuse, vague, or eclectic. . . . Those who ridicule “eclecticism” as superficial or stupid express their own bias. The most “successful” religions in history have all been syncretistic. The difference is that previously the fusing of old traditions occurred at a civilization level. Today we can do it on a much smaller scale.

. . . The symbolic treasures of the full sweep of human history are available to us — everything from the oldest cave drawing to the newest image of utopian hope. They are available, furthermore not just to be catalogued and observed but to be shared and used. . . .

Imagine what kind of world it would be if instead of merely tolerating or studying them, one could actually be, temporarily at least, a Sioux brave seeing an ordeal vision, a Neolithic hunter prostrate before sacred fire, a Krishna lovingly ravishing a woods full of goat girls, a sixteenth-century Carmelite nun caught up in ecstatic prayer, a prophet touched by flame to go release a captive people. One need not be a follower of Carl Jung and believe that all these figures are already present in our archetypal unconscious waiting to be awakened, though that might very well be true.

Even if it is not, we still have enough records, cave scrawlings, memoirs, amulets and oral reports to help us find our way into these people's lives, it we would let ourselves. And we still have, in however precarious condition, people's religions, the infinitely valuable unabsorbed traces of forms of consciousness that are older, richer and more complex than ours. . . .

. . . I will not write off Zen or the Taj Mahal or druidic worship or the Qur'an as "theirs." They are mine too. My ancestors have been mostly Protestants, but that does not have to delimit me. I will not let the Catholics keep St Theresa or the Unitarians have Michael Servetus or the Jews have Martin Buber or the Hindus have Lord Krishna all for themselves. I live and work in a miscellaneous pandemonium of Marinis, Kennedys, Stefanskys, Bronsteins, Eichfelds, Arugos, Fosters, and Chos. Everything I enjoy in life depends on pluralism, variety and crossbreeding. Within a span of weeks I have sensed the presence of the holy at an Apollo temple in Delphi, a Toltec pyramid in Xochicalco, and a Moslem mosque on the island of Rhodes. . . . We celebrate a Seder at Passover. We often attended Catholic Masses, never missing on Christmas Eve. A straw Mexican Indian crucifix blesses our living room, and a Jewish mezuzah enclosing a text from the Torah stands watch at our doorway. A serene Buddha gazes down from just over the inside win-

dowsill of our front room. Nearby stands Ganesha, the elephant god, who is the Hindu patron of sagacity and worldly wisdom. . . .

. . . In this sense most of the world's faiths are moving not toward secularization but toward what I would call "terrestrialization"; that is, they are becoming alternative ways of deepening and symbolizing human existence on earth I doubt, however, that these changes will ever create some syncretistic world church. I hope not, for in religion as in everything else both truth and survival are better served by heterogeneity and variegation than by unification and uniformity. But the current "liberation" movements in the world religions will assuredly provide a point for dialogue and for mutual conversation. This planetary pole reminds the theologian whose particular pole is Christianity that his own ideas of liberation are in no sense ultimate, that they have arisen within a particular cultural climate whose overtones they carry.

. . . The particularistic pole is important too. Without it a theologian sloshes around in an oozing swamp of vague global religiosity, just as without the universal pole he sits locked into a stifling provincialism. Like the juxtaposition of different melodies,

the two poles keep theology attuned and attentive. No future theology can avoid moving between both poles, especially if it is to serve the genuine liberation of *homo sapiens*, not just of Western man.

. . . What we need now are communities of shared symbol and decisional power that are non-exclusive in character and global-local in focus. By "global-local" I mean we need a universal church that will correspond to our growing awareness that the only adequately inclusive religious community is human kind itself. But this universal church must at the same time nurture the growing re-emergence of human community at the local level, the one where we exist daily in neighborhood and *polis*. . . .

. . . What I am predicting, or maybe hoping for, is a form of political and religious life that is both local and universal, with reasonable stages in between but with our sense of belonging refocused to the two ends of the spectrum. I foresee a new religio-political form that gives maximum freedom to those who interact at the most continuous level of life (local) and that really does include all people universal).

—HARVEY COX,
The Seduction of the Spirit: The Use and Misuse of People's Religion, 1973

The Three Families of Faith



A View of Our Desacralized Society and the World's Religions as a Whole System

| Crisis | Examples of secularism's crises | Faith Family | Sacred found in | CAVEATS |
|---|---|--|--|--|
| Environmental <i>Perversion:</i> Superstition | pollution (air, water, sound, light, toxic wastes) overpopulation; loss of diversity of species deforestation; dying oceanic life; climate change corrupt food supply; antibiotic-resistant 'bugs' | PRIMAL Ancient Egyptian, Greek, and Roman; Mayan, Incan; American Indian and Tribal African; and many others. | Nature (ecological interdependence) | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Specialization can deprive us of a sense of the whole. This is a research program aiming to remedy that. 2. With any generalization, exceptions and qualifications abound. Examples: Shinto is Asian but is a nature religion, Sikhism is sometimes called syncretistic, and Marxism may be atheistic. Nonetheless, this scheme may be useful as a starting point for study. 3. This outline does not characterize any particular faith. 4. Religions are dynamic; this summary chart does not limn historical development. 5. Primal faiths can be just as sophisticated as Asian and Monotheistic. 6. In any richly developed faith, elements of many other faiths can also be found, though they may not be as frequently emphasized. |
| Personal Identity <i>Perversion:</i> Narcissism | addiction (substances, consumerism, power) dependencies (handling others' feelings) prejudice (sexism, racism, homophobia) loss of sense of vocation and direction | ASIAN Hinduism, Buddhism Jainism, Confucianism, Taoism, etc. <i>See note, right, and below for Sikhism</i> | Consciousness (inner awareness, Larger Self) | |
| Social Cohesion <i>Perversion:</i> Self-righteousness | violence (in movies, games, real lives); terrorism exploitation (disparity between rich and poor) disengaged citizenry (private over common weal) using religion for political or partisan purposes | MONOTHEISTIC Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, Bahá'í, Zoroastrianism, Unitarian Universalism, Marxism, American Civil Religion, etc. | History of covenanted community | |

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The Four Wisdom Treasures — Our task: apply them and find them one.

| | |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| PRIMAL faiths emphasize | NATURE is to be respected more than controlled; it is a process which includes us, not a product external to us to be used or disposed of. Our proper attitude toward nature is awe, not utility. |
| ASIAN faiths emphasize | WHO WE ARE IS DEEPER THAN WE APPEAR TO BE; this means our acts should proceed beyond convention, spontaneously and responsibly from duty and compassion, without ultimate attachment to their results. |
| MONOTHEISTIC faiths emphasize | THE FLOW OF HISTORY TOWARD JUSTICE is possible when persons in community govern themselves less by profit and more by the covenant of service. |
| LIBERATION movements show | Those disempowered by a secular age may, through the varied struggles, show THE IMPULSE TOWARD THE SACRED in fresh ways. |

How terms are used

Secular ► fragmented, broken, partial, divided, unrelated, disconnected; the profane.

Sacred ► ultimate worth, the network on which all depends, cornerstone of all values, holy, holistic, wholesome, cosmic connectedness or well-being, sensed in "peak experiences" which shape or direct or give meaning to life, opening us to the Infinite in **nature, personhood, society**.

Religion ► arises from the search for, and encounters with, the sacred: we discover how to live in the world; the holy evokes wonder, grows in gratitude, matures in service.

Chart adapted from Vern Barnett's *Thanks for Noticing: The Interpretation of Desire*, La Vita Nuova Books, 2015, page 210; ISBN: 978-0692494370 — LCCN: 2015911786